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The Absence of Aspiration in the Era of Accountability

Mary R. Martinez
Loyola Marymount University, mrosem13@gmail.com

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The Absence of Aspiration in the Era of Accountability

by

Mary R. Martinez

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

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The Absence of Aspiration in the Era of Accountability

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By

Mary R. Martinez

Loyola Marymount University
School of Education
Los Angeles, CA 90045

This dissertation written by Mary Martinez, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

_____8 / 15 / 2015_____
Date

Dissertation Committee

_____
Antonia Darder, Ph.D., Committee Chair

_____
Rebecca Stephenson, Ph.D., Committee Member

_____
Fr. Stephen Hess, Ph.D., Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

The Absence of Aspiration in the Era of Accountability

by

Mary R. Martinez

Reforms early in the 21st century purported to close the achievement gap between White students and students of color, to provide accountability and transparency to taxpayers, to implement meaningful consequences for low-performing schools, and to create the workforce for the century. In this study, I investigated the effects of school reform on the lived experiences of students who graduated from high school in 2014 by inquiring into six young people's perceptions of their schooling. I sought to better understand whether participants were aware of the existence and intent of school reforms, and how or whether their aspirations for their futures had evolved over the course of their formal schooling in concert with the expressed goals of those reforms. The data set consisted of narratives from six recent low-income male and female high school graduates of color. Analysis revealed striking similarities between their experiences despite the variety in outcomes. The narratives indicated that school reforms have had little impact on students' lives other than to graft the go-to-college imperative, onto the young people's inherent aspirations. Young people remained alienated from their education, and outcomes continued to adhere to racist, classist, and gendered expectations.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

I have been a high school counselor for 12 years and work in an urban district with high levels of poverty. The following conversation is typical of the conversations that I and other school counselors have with our students every fall and spring when we meet with them to review their progress to diploma and plan their courses for the next year:

"So, what are you planning to do after high school?"

"Go to college?"

"Ok . . . to do what?"

"Um . . ."

Following is another typical exchange:

"What are your plans for after high school?"

"I'm going to college!"

"Oh! What are you going to study?"

"I want to be a doctor."

"Ok, so that means you'll have to take a math class over the summer so you can take the math course required for college next year."

"Wait. I don't like math. Maybe I'll just go to community college."

Despite my best efforts, most of my students leave high school unprepared. From the high-achievers to those barely getting by, they simply are not ready to answer, or even address, the subtext to the questions above. That is: what do you want to do with your life? Who—and what—do you want to be or become?

This study focused on the lack of student voice in determining individual educational outcomes—a stand-in for aspirations—as well as the lack of student voice in the larger context of the educational process. The quantitatively-driven measurement of outcomes prevalent today denies students, particularly working class students and students of color, the opportunity to formulate individually meaningful goals within a society and system that marginalizes them. Instead schools, and school districts, focus on meeting externally determined goals measured by assessments with a very narrow focus. Coupled with this *accountability* drive from the federal government has been the larger vision of education as the means by which the US has maintained its hegemonic role on the geopolitical stage (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; National Research Council, 2007). This is an instrumentalist view of the role and benefit of education that exemplified the banking model explained by Freire (1993) and interpreted through the lens of U.S. society by Darder (2012a), Lampert (2013), Apple (2012), and others. It is dehumanizing in practice and the antithesis of *conscientization*, which conceptualizes education as the practice of becoming free.

How students might begin to answer questions on understanding self and framing aspirations has not been a concern addressed by educational reforms of the last 15 years. The *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB) attempted to ensure that all public school students were provided comparable educational experiences by establishing employment criteria for staff and requiring schools to conduct yearly self-evaluations based on the results of standardized assessments. More recently, the goal of Race to the Top (2009) a competitive, federally-funded grant awarded to states that expand aspects of the NCLB legislation included making sure that high school graduates were ready for college and career. But what does that mean?

The research basis of the college and career readiness metric has used a very narrow measure, which includes completion of certain high school courses such as Algebra II and acquisition of some job readiness skills, such as the ability to communicate verbally and technological competence, as benchmarks of college and career readiness (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012; Pathways to Prosperity Project, 2011). The larger questions of identity and aspiration have not been included as part of the initiative, nor were they of concern to earlier neoliberal reform debates of the 1980s associated with *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)*,* which paved the way for the current educational reforms. Indeed, the drivers for these reform efforts seemed to have come principally from the needs of the labor market and the marketplace (Molnar, 1996; Olssen & Peters, 2007) and the need to enhance the global competitiveness of U.S. businesses in general (National Research Council, 2007). That is why there has been a push to improve science and mathematics achievement. Not only has the US lagged significantly behind other industrialized countries in achievement in these areas according to international comparison data, but the technology industry has purported to lack enough skilled workers in areas considered pivotal to maintaining U.S. political and economic global dominance (National Research Council, 2007).

Historical Roots of the Current Educational Context

Although public education has long been the subject of heated debate in U.S. political and ideological discourse (Owens & Valesky, 2011; Symcox, 2009), the last 30 years have seen a steady progression of federal initiatives and policies, building on one another irrespective of party politics. Gains made in the 1960s and 1970s in civil rights legislation that translated into more inclusive pedagogical attitudes and practices (Darder, 2012a) seemed to have mobilized

neoliberal forces into a backlash that could be understood to have begun with the publication of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983). This report warned of the imminent danger to the U.S. polity posed by the failure of the public educational system to adequately prepare students in the US to compete with youth in other industrialized countries. This ideological debate has taken place primarily in the academic sphere, pitting economists against educators (Owens & Valesky, 2011) while the policy initiatives emanating from the federal government have been remarkably consistent across party lines in their movement toward greater standardization and greater control exercised by the federal government in a sphere that traditionally was reserved to the states.

Consistent with improving overall student achievement as measured on international assessments has been the growing emphasis on college for all (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2013; Obama, 2009; Rosenbaum, 2001). Attainment of admission to a four-year university has become a kind of shorthand for a way to measure improvement in the K-12 public system. President Ronald Reagan's disdain for the public sector along with alarm about the state of public education supported movements to privatize public education first through vouchers, then through charter schools (Ravitch, 2010; Symcox, 2009). Less controversial, but more persistent, has been the push to develop standards in education. First promoted during George H. W. Bush's presidency in his education initiative America 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 1991), then expanded through Bill Clinton's *Goals 2000 Educate America Act* (1994), states were urged to develop curriculum standards for all grades in all areas of study, coupled with federal incentives and coercion. Again, this could have been read as a reaction to the challenges to the status quo that had been part of popular culture beginning with the civil

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rights movement of African Americans, through the feminist movement, and on to the United Farmworkers protests that mobilized Mexicans and Mexican Americans to join in the fight for recognition and fair treatment.

By the time George W. Bush was elected in 2000, those movements were a distant memory while the neoliberal infrastructure for educational reform was well and truly established. Although school vouchers, which gave parents a voucher for the amount the federal government would spend on their child's education to use at any school they chose, including those with a religious orientation were rejected by the electorate in most areas of the country, charter schools became a growing presence. *Choice* was the watchword; and to that was added accountability with the introduction of Bush's NCLB (2001).

NCLB (2001) was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) that funded public education. However, NCLB greatly expanded the coercive power of federal government funding by instituting various mandates, including teacher qualification and student achievement, which made federal government funds conditional. The purported intent was to improve school quality for all students, as students in the US were not only falling behind students in other industrialized countries, but there was also a marked and growing *achievement gap* between White students and students of color. The irony was that, as Berliner (2012) and Darling-Hammond (2010) have pointed out, the gap had been closing for years until the imposition of ideologically-driven neoliberal policies in education and social programs undermined institutional supports that had been contributing to improving outcomes for students of color.

Key Neoliberal Concepts

It is important to articulate at this point the central ideological issues behind neoliberal educational reforms, as these have informed the form and substance of educational reform efforts. Critical pedagogical practices have been used to lay bare the power structures that have been at the heart of these issues, cloaked as they have been in the language of freedom and American values.

Choice

Freedom of choice has been a primary driver in neoliberal educational reforms. The rationale for both the voucher movement and the charter school movement has been empowering parents to choose the best school for their child. If the local school was deemed a failing school by measures established by school-policy makers, parents were free to choose another school. Privately-run charter school organizations have emerged to offer alternatives to parents seeking to take their children out of public schools that were already under-resourced, while vouchers where available could be used at any school—public, charter, or religiously affiliated. Such reforms have functioned to effectively privatize public education, placing it more directly in the grip of the capitalist marketplace. In the neoliberal framework, the private sector has been deemed inherently superior by virtue of the fact that in theory it was considered to be more responsive to the needs of those it sought to serve, its customers.

Accountability

Accountability has been the second linchpin of neoliberal educational reforms. The concept of education as a private good means it is rendered a product that must be evaluated and measured. Hence, there must be quality control. An elaborate system of quantifiable

assessments and formulations has been developed in order to facilitate such a valuation. Unlike iPhones or blue jeans however, educational attainment does not readily conform to a template of excellence. High-stakes assessments have been flawed, results have been skewed, and opinions about what constitutes achievement have differed across a wide range of individual and societal variables.

Standards

Subsequently, there has been a third rail of neoliberal education reform: standards. It sounded reasonable that there should be objective measures in education against which to evaluate achievement. Instead, standards have represented the most insidious invasion of the neoliberal ideology into education. One must question which standards were privileged and what groups were tasked with developing them? As a response to progressive educational efforts that sought to diversify bodies of knowledge, standards were, by definition, reactionary (Apple, 2012). They were an overt attempt to enshrine an official version of what students in the US ought to know, discounting as irrelevant or wrong anything that did not appear on the official curriculum.

Choice, accountability, and standards, as the three pillars of neoliberal educational reform, have represented the functional overthrow of humanist principles in public education by the forces of the marketplace (Giroux, 1997; Molnar, 1996). It has been telling that the most vocal proponents for these reforms have not been students and parents but rather business leaders and wealthy philanthropists. Many have subsidized charter schools, or issued competitive grants in order to entice chronically cash-strapped schools to conform to the philanthropists' pet theories of how schools should work. It has been a reprehensible perversion worked by the

wealthiest of elites, of a good that should be *by and for the public* [emphasis added] (Apple, 2012).

New Directions in School Reform

Reforms have evolved to take a broader view of the goals of secondary preparation for postsecondary options (Mourshed et al., 2012; Obama, 2009; Pathways to Prosperity, 2011). However, the discourse has been framed in the language of conservative political economy and global market competitiveness (Apple, 2012). The student has been reduced to object status as the recipient of the benefits of reform (cf. Freire and the banking model, 1993) rather than an active participant fully engaged in becoming an adult member of society, with all the hopes and dreams that entails. As Darder (2012a) pointed out, even earlier liberal visions of education such as Dewey's (1916) notions of education and democracy, situated the individual as the site of all possibility, disregarding the influence of the oppressive society at large and the hegemonic institutions with which it was populated. Lampert (2013) extended the critique to question the foundational assumptions of educational practice and meaning of achievement. Our construction of education pre-supposed rank order with its dependence on scientific, positivist quantitative measurement. In the process, it has made educational professionals who execute the policies of the elite not only complicit, but also has dehumanized them as servants to the method (Lampert, 2013). In the critical tradition that informed the conceptual lens of this study, Lampert's (2013) notion here can be linked to Gramsci's (1971) view that educators, whether aware of it or not, functioned as moral agents of the state.

In examining reform initiatives and the rhetoric tied to such debates, one has been left wondering where was the student in all of this? When we ask young children what they want to

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be when they grow up, they do not say "college and career ready." And when we talk to elementary age children, we do not say, "You can be whatever you want to be in this country as long as it is in the areas of science, technology, engineering, or mathematics, because those have the greatest return on investment." Instead of harnessing the natural curiosity of children and the adolescent's quest for identity, something has happened to youth in the K-12 process that has caused them to emerge at the end without a clear idea of who they are, with little sense of their innate strengths and interests, and lacking a vision of their place in the world.

Statement of the Problem

There has existed a huge disconnect between the aims of recent reform initiatives and the actual lives and aspirations of children across U.S. society. The perceived deficits of public education, conflated with the stated needs of industry, have acted as surrogates for the actual needs and desires of students, which have been generally associated with their innermost sense of passion and calling. Struggling to fulfill the demands and metrics of reform has left school personnel little time to integrate the personal and social needs of students into the process, with the result that youth have been objectified in ways that have limited their innate potential. In such a context, education is something that is *done to* youth, rather than a humanizing process of learning and knowledge construction to maximize their inner potential, as was once envisioned by progressive theorists such as Dewey (1916), when universal K-12 education first came to be widely accepted as the norm for the nation's children.

The absence of this humanizing ethos in the schooling of U.S. students must be examined as an issue of social justice. This can best be understood since one of the stated aims of educational reform has been to close the achievement gap by dictating standards and acceptable

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levels of achievement through a reinforced educational hierarchy. Yet, the policies and practices enacted within schools often have bypassed the emancipatory development of the human individual, considered by Freire (1993) and his followers to have been critical to enacting and maintaining a democratic society. Moreover, within a social justice perspective, this humanizing vision of education has been considered one of the most important roles of education in the Western humanist tradition, for all youth in general, but especially for working class youth of color, given the lack of opportunities afforded them in comparison to their white and more affluent counterparts.

The choice of what to be and how to become what one aspires for these students tends to have been dictated through the formulaic application of evidence-based pedagogies, rather than a substantive understanding of what these students aspire to and require within a radically unequal society (Mourshed et al., 2012; Pathways to Prosperity Project, 2011). The students with whom I have worked have been unfamiliar with the word *aspiration*. Most have been unable to articulate what they wanted from their lives; thinking about what *they* wanted to do has not been part of their experience of education. Generally, they have experienced education as something outside of themselves. School has been a rite of passage marked by the playing of *Pomp and Circumstance* at a graduation ceremony and the receipt of a rectangle of parchment-like paper, not as something related to their lives as lived, and certainly not at all related to their life goals or deepest desires. It has haunted me as a heartbreaking waste that these youth have spent 13 years in public education and have come out at the end with so little.

More broadly, one must also consider the changes to the framework of adolescence that have emerged in the last 30 years. The growth and ubiquity of advanced technologies that make

smart phones possible, combined with the accelerating pace of social change that this growth

fosters, has meant that children have lived in a radically different world than their parents, and

thus their experiences moving through the adolescent years must also have differed. Thanks to

this technology, the Millennial Generation has been studied and characterized, but the generation

following has yet to emerge fully as an archetype. Nevertheless, the U.S. generation being

termed Generation Z has been subjected to more rapid change than their Millennial counterparts.

Too young to have had recall of the events of September 11, 2001, their digital native worldview

has been ineluctably shaped by technology, by the economic disaster of 2008 occasioned by the

mortgage crisis, and by the ongoing military conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere

(Anatole, 2013; Giroux, 2012). Their school experience has been exclusively framed by NCLB

(2001) as 2015's graduates have been educated entirely under its rubrics and strictures. Thus,

they have lived in a world that is paradoxically both highly structured in school and frighteningly

unpredictable elsewhere. We might have caught a glimpse of their world through the eyes of our

children, but collectively and institutionally we seldom even have made the attempt. Our

expectations for them also have been driven by our own fear: fear that our children have been

using drugs, being sexually active, joining gangs, or falling at risk of abduction or cyberbullying.

(Boyd, 2014; Finkelhor, 2010). The result has been a highly structured environment that has left

little room for dreaming or deviance from the pre-determined or prescribed pathway.

     In the world in which we live, it is necessary to have a job or livelihood. The

commonsensical belief has been that the more education one has, the better the jobs available.

To the extent that this has been true, the emphasis on college and career has been considered to

support equity. Models of secondary education have emerged that incorporated internships and

work experience programs in specified career pathways to facilitate a prescribed transition to the work force. However, no such prescriptions have been placed on the children of privilege. Prescribed career pathways have existed for those students who would not follow a college preparatory course of study, who took advanced placement classes, or who studied languages other than English. It has been predominantly youth of color living in poverty who have been problematized by educational reforms, rather than having been understood to be the victims of an unjust and entrenched meritocratic system of inequalities and social exclusions which has served to replicate existing social structures (Bourdieu, 1986; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Willis, 1977).

When I graduated from high school 30 in the 1980s, conventional wisdom said that almost 40% of jobs that would exist in 25 years had not yet been imagined; and predictions were that by 2015, the figure was closer to 65% (U.S. Department of Labor, 1999). Even if we accept the foundational assumption held by proponents of educational reform—that education is instrumental in enabling economic success—in an era of rapid change, channeling our youth into pre-determined avenues of pursuit has been a questionable strategy that has left untapped an enormous pool of potential and has narrowed possible outcomes for a vast segment of the population. It would seem preferable that we should harness the creative energies of our youth and nurture all areas of aspiration.

Research Questions

The discriminatory nature of public education and educational reforms has been subtle and not easily teased out. The rhetoric surrounding NCLB (2001) included claims that its aims were to increase opportunity and to close the achievement gap, both of which were worthy goals. In my practice as a school counselor, however, and in my own children's progress through the

public education system, I have witnessed rampant discrimination and a shocking level of stratification as educators scrambled to adhere to the letter of the latest directive, while ignoring the actual student experience. It has been as if the educational establishment existed for the benefit of professional educators and as a political football rather than as a necessary foundation for a democracy (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1993; Jewett, 1997) or culturally democratic life (Darder, 2012a).

The central research questions for this study guided my work in eliciting, recording, analyzing, and representing students' critical narratives in an effort to capture students' understandings of the relationships between the formal education process and their hopes for themselves and their futures. Three inquiries comprised the first set of research questions:

- How do recent high school graduates describe their past and current aspirations?

- In what ways are these similar?

- In what ways do they differ?

Including the progression over time was intended to capture the ways in which their aspirations evolved during their time in K-12 education. The second set of research questions sought to make explicit the link between students' formal educational experiences and the evolution of their aspirations:

- Did recent high school graduates view their education as contributing to the attainment of their aspirations?

- If yes, in what ways?

- If not, why not?

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study of critical narratives was to inquire into the role public K-12 education played in supporting the aspirations of current high school seniors, as perceived by students. In this way, the actual voices of students regarding their experiences of schooling and their preparation for this important transition in their lives could be brought to light, through their insights and concerns. The overall aim of the study was to generate critical narratives that detailed the lived educational experiences of traditionally underserved youth in the context of the stated aims of public education. Generating critical narratives of youth perspectives would provide practitioners in the field a place from which to examine and perhaps rethink the educational needs of their students and the educational approaches currently utilized; as well as to consider ways in which the voices of students might assist school counselors and other school personnel in better supporting educational practices that youth considered to be useful in preparation for their transition after high school graduation.

Significance

The underlying thrust of my research questions also spoke to the significance of bringing the voices of students to the table. The needs and aspirations of students have been generally disregarded throughout the educational process. The U.S. educational system has been predicated on a standardized model of pedagogy, curricula, and assessment propounded by positivist science that has tended to homogenize students, neglecting the diverse variations in our humanity (Apple, 2012; Lampert, 2013). It seemed obvious and research has indicated (Cumings Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2004) that especially as they grow into young adults, children should be, and would like to be, consulted in planning for

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their futures and for their roles as future leaders of our institutions and future citizens of our democracy. That was the practical significance and underlying assumption that underscored the impetus for this study.

The need for such a study was evidenced by a dearth of literature that included student voice in K-12 education, particularly, as it related to the question of student aspiration. Aspiration has been generally understood in terms of desire or preparation for postsecondary education, not in any existential sense. Student aspiration has been undeniably a part of student achievement in formal education. Yet in the last thirty years aspiration rarely has been mentioned in the literature on educational reform and student success and when it has been, it has been most often couched in educational, occupational, and economic terms (Johnson et al., 2009; Lake Research Partners, 2011). The omission of aspiration in discussions of educational reform and student success pointed to a kind of subtle discrimination and stratification. At one time in the educational history of the US, schools were thought of as a training ground for the factory floor. Common features were rigid schedules, loud bells, and an emphasis on conformity. More recently, educators and politicians have spoken of closing the achievement gap, and college and career readiness. However, the reality has not changed. Schools have continued to prepare middle and working class youth to occupy positions in a deeply stratified class structure that has perpetuated economic inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 2001) and social exclusions for those students from racialized communities (Darder, 2012a). In both instances, youth have been treated as objects of what one might call the "educational-industrial complex", rather than as the subject of their own destinies and future members of a genuinely democratic society.

Theoretical Framework

This study approached the question of student aspirations through a critical pedagogical lens with a further grounding in the work of sociologist Bourdieu (1986). I first addressed critical pedagogy. In sync with a critical approach, I openly acknowledged the influence of my personal bias in this work; in that I believed public education and public educational reforms have served the interests of the hegemonic elite and have acted as a dehumanizing factor in the lives of poor youth, especially poor youth of color. Education in the public sector has been spoken of as preparing students for college and career, not for conscientization or for the development of humanizing characteristics, which have been considered the primary emancipatory aims of education within a critical pedagogical framework (Darder, 2012a; Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009; Freire, 1993).

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy, a theoretical orientation to education practice, offered a way to understand the aims, both overt and covert, of the system of public education in the US, particularly those that have underlain the last 30 years of educational reform. It has comprised the ideas of scholars who represented many different strands of philosophical thought, working over the course of nearly a century. Building off this tradition, this dissertation focused on a few statements described as central tenets of the field: education's potential as an emancipatory agent, education's service to elites, and how to harness education's emancipatory potential (Darder, 2012a; Friere, 1993).

Education is emancipatory. *Education*, in the global sense with a capital "E", rather than in the sense of the formal education process, has been defined as supporting individuals in

becoming more fully human. Education has had the function of helping individuals become aware of themselves, of the circumstances under which they live, and their relationship with others in the world. Under this definition, individuals became aware of both their limitations and their potential. They developed social agency as they grew in critical awareness and seek to realize their humanity by joining with others (Darder, 2012a; Freire, 1993).

Education systems serve the interests of societal elites. In contrast to Education, *education* in state-run systems usually has represented the interests of the elites. Power relations that existed in the society at large have been reproduced and perpetuated at school sites and in classrooms. Bowles and Gintis (2011) reported that class status was reinforced through the meritocratic sorting mechanisms inherent to the process of formal education. Similarly, Darder (2012a) found that a racialized class formation supported the ethnocentric properties of the dominant culture and class (Darder, 2012a).

Education's emancipatory potential requires a dialogic process. Recognizing that there is no definitive body of knowledge and that knowledge is constructed and constrained by culture and society, critical pedagogy has espoused a dialogic process. In this process as described by Freire (1993), the teacher presents a lesson or information and engages with students horizontally in investigating the validity of the lesson with respect to the students' personal histories. In response to student participation, the teacher co-constructs the process of learning in ways that both reflect and integrate students' lived experience.

Education for conscientization is necessary for a democratic society. Although Dewey (1916) propounded the view that universal education was necessary for the informed electorate described by Jefferson (Jewett, 1997), Freire (1993) further developed the idea of the

centrality of education to the propagation of democracy, through exposing the contradictory structures of social oppression that inform supposedly democratic institutions. He demonstrated how ignorance has allowed oligarchies to flourish, acting as their foundation. Therefore, to be a democracy should mean that each member of the populace has been emancipated from the prison of prescribed circumstance through dialogic education. In this way, people could become fully human and capable of engaging in the project of democracy.

It was not my intention to encompass the totality of scholarship relating to the evolution of critical pedagogy and its practice. Included here were the core concepts of critical pedagogy, those which most drove the scholarship that has continued in response to hegemonic forces that have oppressed and limited the humanity of people everywhere, and that have been most salient to my theoretical framework.

Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu was an influential French sociologist most recognized for his work in the area of class formation. His concept of social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) sought to illuminate why, in nominally democratic and meritocratic societies, social mobility has been limited. His theories on class formation, emanating from his empirical research both in France and in North Africa, centered on the varieties of capital—economic, social, and cultural—and the constructs that emerged from the interplay between them, which he termed *habitus* and *field*. Bourdieu's (1986) work was seminal to the field of sociology, and like critical pedagogy, has provoked both critics and adherents who attempted to qualify or expand the work. It was, of course, beyond the scope of this dissertation to explicate Bourdieu's (1986) enormously complex and comprehensive body of work. His concepts of capital, class, symbolic violence¸ social

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reproduction, habitus, and field were simply the defining elements that informed my theoretical orientation and allowed me to understand, explain, and analyze the dynamics at work in the lived experiences of my research participants.

Capital. In the Marxian sense, *capital* constituted the means of production, and possession of capital defined one's class position. Bourdieu (1986) produced a more nuanced definition of capital, more expressive of the social realities of post-industrial societies. First, he defined economic capital as money and assets that are able to provide access to concrete goods and services. Second, he defined cultural capital. This was a more abstract concept that Bourdieu distilled into ownership of the tools that impart the ability to successfully navigate society: access to, familiarity with, and employment of, things like books, art, and complex language. Possession of cultural capital was institutionalized through earning educational credentials. Finally, there was social capital, perhaps the most ambiguous of the three primarily because it was least amenable to quantification. Bourdieu used dynastic aristocracy as its most recognizable form; in the US we might call it *connections*. It consisted of knowing and being known by others of one's class so that one's membership was acknowledged and one could therefore access all the rights and benefits that might accrue to that membership.

Class. The concept of *class* was one of the key features of his theories that informed my own understanding of the role of the school as an institution of hegemonic culture in the lives of my research participants. For Bourdieu (1986), the term *class* was something of a misnomer. The term conjured up a static group made up of individuals who existed in relation to their access to the means of production. Instead, for Bourdieu individuals in society occupied a *social space*, positioned there by the combined weight of their cultural, economic, and social capital.

There were no clearly defined boundaries, and identification was complicated by the fact that simply occupying a certain position affected one's ability to perceive that position. Further, social space and the expression of belonging to that space were in a reciprocal relationship so that the structure was both informed by and formed its members. In this dissertation, the terms *class* and *social space* were used interchangeably.

Symbolic violence. Bourdieu's (1989) theory included the concept of *symbolic violence*. When divisions between groups were institutionalized, and those who controlled the institutions were able to impact or otherwise impose structures onto the lives of those in subordinate groups, then Bourdies regarded those in control as having committed symbolic violence.

Social reproduction. Bourdieu (1989) also defined *social reproduction* as the hidden ways that location in a particular social space were conferred across time and mediated through transmission of economic, cultural, and social capital. The concept of social reproduction challenged the ideologies of social mobility and meritocracy found in democratic post-industrial societies.

Habitus. The concept of habitus encompassed the "schemes of perception, thought, and action" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 14) expressed by inhabitants of a particular social space. They were unconscious and inculcated through the activities of daily life rather than explicitly taught. The habitus of the dominant culture was analogous to the commonsensical notions of the hegemony propounded earlier by Gramsci (1971).

Field. Weininger (2002) likened Bourdieu's (1989) concept of *field* to "a battlefield or a playing field . . . individuals [who] confront one another, from a more or less advantageous position" (p. 137). Based on the concept of field, one could visualize the imaginary spaces

occupied by various groups as engaging in social struggle through daily interaction in the physical world.

Methodology

Framework, lens, and methodology are inextricably linked. With this in mind, in order to have the greatest chance of accurately capturing the experiences of youth, in this study, I employed a qualitative methodology. Specifically, I used a critical narrative approach. In the critical narrative approach, the research subject told his or her story around the given prompt. I prompted the subject with additional questions, but in a manner that elicited further stories, rather than direct answers. I then analyzed the stories for themes, which may or may not have answered my question, or confirmed my bias. The answer may have led to alternate conclusions, or to another line of inquiry. I utilized a critical lens to find themes in an individual's experiences and across the experiences of participants in the study.

I recruited recent high school graduates as participants through the nonprofit agency with which I worked. I met individually for one hour with six participants, ages 18-19, on two separate occasions, to voice record them telling stories of their educational experiences. I supplemented these narratives with optional blog posts and journal writing by participants. Ensuring participants' full collaboration has presented challenges to qualitative researchers. As incentive, I offered Amazon.com gift cards in the amount of $50.00 to those who completed the cycle of interviews, with a bonus $20.00 Amazon.com gift card for at least four journal or blog entries.

Limitations and Delimitations

No study can claim to be authoritative and comprehensive. This study was no exception. One limitation was the sample. I used a convenience sample recruited from one nonprofit agency in Southern California, so there was a regional impact on the generalizability of the study. This agency's mission was to fight bigotry, bias, and racism, and their in-school program used peer counselors to facilitate difficult conversations around these topics. These peer counselors received training in recognizing the various manifestations of bias, as well as in facilitation skills. After their training, these students were entitled *Youth Leaders* in the agency, and could be understood to have reached a degree of self-awareness, and a more sophisticated understanding of the foundations and nature of racism, bias, and prejudice. This made my sample population somewhat self-selecting.

In addition, I only selected participants who graduated from high school in 2014. I chose to limit the sample in this way because at the time of the data collection, this group had recently completed compulsory education and had begun their transitions to the adult world. This particular group of graduates was the first group of students to have been educated entirely under the influence of NCLB (2001) and I thought that this factor was of interest, as this Act has had a significant impact on the way in which public education has been understood and delivered. In fact, NCLB (2001) has been symbolic of the multiplicity of changes that has affected this generation of students.

Organization of the Dissertation

In this study, I examined the educational experiences and aspirations of recent high school graduates. The organization of this dissertation followed the classic template. In Chapter

One, I offered an introduction to the development of the study. Chapter Two includes a literature review on the current state of adolescence, critical pedagogy, critical youth studies, and student aspiration. Chapter Three includes discussions of the details of the research design and methodology, including the theoretical justification for its use. In Chapter Four, I present, in a systematic manner, the findings based on the decoding of the data. Chapter Five includes a careful discussion of the findings with respect to critical interpretation of the critical narratives of students in relationship to literature. In Chapter Six, I present conclusions based on a summary of the entire study, along with implications of the findings and specific recommendations for school counselors and future educational leaders.

Definitions

The following terms are used throughout this dissertation.

Accountability: Accountability is the act of demonstrating to stakeholders that the institution is performing the activity for which it is being funded. In terms of public school funding, accountability takes the form of a yearly administration of standardized assessments to 2nd through 11th grade students, from which relevant data are extracted to prove that teachers and administrators are doing their jobs (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; National Research Council, 2007.)

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB): NCLB is the 2001 re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) that ushered in comprehensive accountability measures, teacher certification standards, and included incentives for improvement as well as punishments for failure.

Meritocracy: Meritocracy has been defined as a system in which the individual progresses through the exclusive merit of their own individual effort and ability; success is earned, rather than conferred by membership in a certain class or caste (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Aspiration: In this study, aspiration denoted the concrete expression of individual hopes, dreams, and desires. It is a goal, but it goes much deeper to tap into our innermost sense of our self and our belief in our own capacities. The word has been more commonly used in the literature to denote a desire for higher education.

Critical pedagogy: Critical pedagogy has been defined as a theoretical orientation that delves into the subtext of educational practice to unveil the institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism, that drives the form and content of pedagogical practice (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Darder, 2012a; Friere, 1993: Weis, 2004).

Critical narrative: an individual's story that is subjected to rigorous analytical processes to lay bare the ways in which the story teller has been affected by both the impact and internalization of larger societal practices of racism, sexism, and classism.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

My research questions were broad, concerned with describing the lived experiences of high school graduates as they formulated dreams for themselves—their aspirations—and how those dreams were impacted by, or even at odds with, their experiences as they progressed through the formal educational process. In order to contextualize the study, in the literature review I concentrated on four areas of research: adolescence, critical youth studies, student voice, and student aspiration. I also analyzed Bourdieu's work as it applied to working class youth of color. A better understanding of each of these elements has provided a strong foundation for situating the youth within the critical narratives they offered for this study.

Adolescence

Almost all aspects of public schooling in the US have been operated under the same set of restrictions and assumptions; however, these restrictions have intensified in the secondary setting, perhaps because it has been considered at this point that departure for the "real world" is imminent. Secondary schools in the US have been primarily organized as grades nine through 12, serving students ranging in age from 14 to 18. This age range has been commonly referred to as *adolescence.* In this dissertation, it was worthwhile examining further the assumptions and beliefs around this term and this stage, as it was an important part of understanding both why the dreams and voices of adolescents have been neglected, and why it was critical to hear their voice and to support their aspirations.

The transitional period in human development between childhood and adulthood in Western societies always has occupied a contested space (Epstein, 2007; Feixa, 2011; Rice,

1996). It is usually characterized as disrespectful, impetuous, and emotionally turbulent; remember, Romeo and Juliet were teenagers. Writers even earlier than Shakespeare were quoted as characterizing the young as disrespectful (Feixa, 2007). This understanding of adolescence as a time of storm and stress was reified in the writings of early psychologist G. Stanley Hall at the turn of the 20th century (Ferguson, 2013). For the last century, library and book store shelves have been filled with texts targeted to the concerns of and with that age group or attempting to explain it to adults. Some of our most enduring films—*Rebel Without a Cause* (Weisbart & Ray, 1955)—and literature—*The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1991)—addressed the theme of the confused adolescent. Without a doubt, the turbulence of adolescence has been among the strongest tropes in North American Western culture.

Erikson (1968) conceived adolescence as the time of life in which one experienced identity confusion. He confirmed Hall's (Ferguson, 2013) conceptualization of adolescence as an age of dramatic change, but refined it by focusing on it as being specifically concerned with the development of a healthy concept of the self or identity. This developmental task demanded that youth find their place in the world through a process of resistance. That is, in order to construct a strong identity, the adolescent needed to try out different beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, before settling on those that fit and distinguished the adolescent from parents and adult society in general. Thus, adolescents necessarily questioned the society around them and the adults in their life as they assert their burgeoning independence through rebellious behaviors and speech.

If the developmental task was not successfully negotiated, a pathological rebelliousness, or deviancy could result. Perhaps as a result of the time at which he was writing, Erikson (1968)

refrained from stating definitively that those who existed in a state of prolonged rebelliousness were neurotic. Rather, he stressed the need to understand such behavior in a historical context. Ericson used Martin Luther, the religious reformer, to illustrate this principle. A modern-day Martin Luther, rather than having been hailed as a visionary, might instead have been sent to a psychiatric facility for treatment of his neurosis.

It has been noted by some writers (Epstein, 2007; Feixa, 2011; Gatto, 2000) that compulsory education evolved in concert with increasing industrialization. As the West moved from a primarily agrarian society in which all family members engaged in work to an industrial model where wages were earned, compulsory education acted as a means to eliminate children from the pool of available labor. Compulsory education requirements marked the beginning of coordinated efforts to control the activities and behaviors of adolescents.

Epstein (2007) connected the advent of the social work movement with further efforts to contain the behavior of youth, including the invention of the term *juvenile delinquent* defined as young men not engaged in labor nor attending school. Their activities were, therefore, suspect and in need of direction and control. This was an attitude still present in the matrices termed by researchers *disconnected youth*, those ages 16-24 neither working or in school (Tung, Nolan Guyer, Subramani, & Bennett, 2012). These youth represented a challenge to society by their very disconnection. They appear to have rejected or been rejected by formal schooling, yet were unable or unwilling to engage in paid labor. Our ideology that adolescence needed to be channeled appropriately in order to avoid pathology meant that 14% of our youth were considered a danger not only to themselves but also to society itself.

Since the 1970s, there has been a strong, though much less well known, counternarrative to this understanding of adolescence. Perhaps as an acknowledgement of the evident capacities of youth seen with the growth of student activism throughout the Civil Rights movement and the Anti-War movement and into the emergence of the feminist and Black Power movements, academics in the US and abroad (Epstein, 2007; Feixa, 2011; Holt, 1996; Illich, 2000) have written of the way in which Western society infantilizes adolescents. In *The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen,* Epstein (2007) provided an historical overview of the way in which adolescents have been gradually edged out of full participation in industrialized societies for overtly altruistic reasons that had as the subtext a need for greater control. The fact that there was no recognized stage of adolescence in societies considered primitive seemed to support the assertion that the stage considered adolescence was culturally constructed (Liedloff, 1985; Mead, 1928, as cited in Epstein, 2007; Schlegel & Barry, 1991).

In earlier eras, sexual maturity was the turning point between childhood and adulthood. Vestiges of this have remained in religious ceremonies such as the Bar or Bat Mitzvah in Judaism or the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church. These ceremonial rites have been timed to take place at about the time of sexual maturity and mark the acceptance of the child into the adult community of the religion. As adults, they are believed to have full moral agency. As our understanding of the stages of physical and cognitive development has become more sophisticated, the physical development that occurs during adolescence has been seen as evidence of the unfinished nature of the adolescent's development into personhood and justified a more gradual assumption of the status of adult.

More recently, advances in medical technology that have made it possible to see inside a brain at work have made research into the neuroscience of the hypothetical stages of life possible. Rather than confirmation of what has been commonly believed about adolescence, contradictory evidence has been found. The adolescent brain has been recognized in its essentials to be the same as an adult brain (Feixa, 2011). Researchers have seen that the ongoing activity termed *myelinization* of the neurons which only serves to keep the brain plastic and receptive to new ideas and concepts is the sole difference between adolescent and adult brains, which. Males in *The Scapegoat Generation* (1996) cited abundant empirical evidence to demonstrate that adolescents transgress at the same rate as adults, concluding that risk-taking behaviors attributed to the undeveloped teen brain were learned behaviors—"like father, like son."

Although widely accepted as incontrovertibly true and thoroughly ingrained in our collective consciousness, the existence of the psychosocial stage of adolescence has been in question. Pre-industrial societies did not recognize this period, and Dolgin (1996), Epstein (2007), Feixa (2011), and Ferguson (2013) have offered compelling evidence that it was a construct of Western industrialized societies. This socially constructed concept has engendered paternalistic contempt as well as fear, inspiring a need for control. Adolescence has been constructed as a reflection of society's values about the behaviors that constitute adulthood. As the perceived need for greater amounts of education increased, increasing stratification occurred, while youth were pushed into a position of artificial dependency—whether through incarceration, or the assumption of college debt, rendering youth as criminals or indentured

servants. Those who were identified as disconnected were seen as the threat of anarchy and chaos.

Critical Youth Studies

One must ask who or what has been served by the existence of a separate defined life stage known as adolescence? Exposing the forces at work in constructing the mythology of adolescence in capitalist societies has been central to the area of critical youth studies. Researchers have done this by examining the links between policy, schooling, media, and power that have worked together to create the contemporary ideology of youth in order to accomplish its subjugation and control. Working class youth of color have been particularly subject to these forces as members of a class that have had limited access to social power.

A major component to critical youth studies has been the analysis of the ways in which youth have been objectified as consumers. Building on their predecessors' research, Epstein (2007), Clark (2011), Giroux (2012), and finally Ferguson (2013) have written of the ways this has occurred. Epstein took an historical perspective, going back to the age of burgeoning industrialization and the formation of a toy industry. Children and youth whose roles were now limited to school and home were a natural target for products which offered quasi-productive occupation hitherto unnecessary. As the 20th century progressed, and the advertising industry was born, the development and marketing of toys and games progressed as well. In the current age, young men in particular are named as the target demographic, those who most reliably spend money on extraneous products. Clark (2011) traced the roots of this generation's materialism to the way parents have substituted the provision of things for time spent with their children.

Keeping adolescents pacified with material objects has been one way to keep them from realizing their agency and enacting rebellion upon society, and fear has been another. Finkelhor (2010) termed this *juvenoia* or paranoia about the young. Since the 1970s, legislation has been written and policies developed that have focused on limiting the rights and privileges of minors under the age of 18, in the US (Epstein, 2007; Giroux, 2012; Males, 1996). As in the late 19th century, the stated objective has been the protection of youth, but when researchers have compared the reality of the threat against the rhetoric, they have found that those things hyped as dangers such as kidnapping, school violence, and drug use barely have registered as credible threats (Finkelhor, 2010; Glassner, 1999; Males, 1996). Internationally, in 1989 the United Nations presented the Convention on the Rights of the Child to its member states for signature and ratification (Watson, 2009). This extensive document carefully detailed the manner in which evolved societies have treated their youth, combining the human rights for youth with societal privileges. It was interesting to note that all the member nations signed the convention, while only three declined to ratify it: the US, Somalia, and South Sudan. As such, the US seems to stand on the same side with two nation-states employing children as soldiers, echoing the extent to which we withhold rights from our minor citizens.

Neoliberal backlash to youth culture began in the 1980s concurrently but not coincidentally with the demand for educational reform. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) the report that mobilized popular opinion in support of a back-to-basics public school curriculum (Symcox, 2009) did so in order to bolster the academic achievement of K-12 students in the US, decrying progressive pedagogical practices. Such practices included honoring the multicultural

antecedents and make-up of the culture of the US; development of curricular materials that were inclusive of the experiences of groups previously marginalized in the US; and recognition of divergent learning needs and styles influenced by different cultural practices. This disturbing vision of a U.S. economy unable to compete with nations whose children perform better on international measures of achievement along with the ideological cudgels of choice and accountability were used by those in the social and political elite despite evidence of increasing academic achievement among the working class and populations of color, including record-breaking numbers matriculating to four-year colleges (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The subtext to the education reform movement was that the challenges brought to the status quo by youth in recent years could not be tolerated. Youth were viewed as a source of anxiety, to be feared and controlled through "no tolerance" policies, which became the norm in public schools (Giroux, 2012; Glassner, 1999; Grossberg, 2005; Epstein, 2007). Schools returned to their earlier function as the sites of control. School counselors whose job had been to tend to the academic, vocational, *and* social/emotional needs of the students in their care (American School Counselor Standards, 2004) felt the pressure to conform to the new zeitgeist by convening to adapt their standards to collaborate with administration in raising schools' academic performance index numbers (American School Counselor Standards, 2004, reported in Schellenberg, 2008).

Educational reforms that emphasized the importance of measurement and accountability along with an emphasis on the need for a college degree ingrained competition, ranking, and stratification in the educational process equated educational attainment with economic and class security (Abeles & Congdon, 2010; Clark, 2011; Pope, 2001). As a result, young people were

expected to compete with each other to gain access to opportunity, a sort of divide and conquer approach that both defused resistance amongst them and engendered conformity through promoting individual competition (Lampert, 2013; Pope, 2001).

A majority of young people in 2015 believed that a generic college degree was necessary for a good job and economic security (Lake Research Partners, 2011). Yet college persistence rates and data on first-year student academic preparation (Kuh, 2007) as well as the persistence of the "prison pipeline" for Black and Latino males indicated that this aspiration was not well supported in the schools that had evolved in response to the educational reforms of the previous 30 years.

The dominance of a competitive ethos that emerged with neoliberals' control of the public K-12 educational process concurrent with the withdrawal of social and institutional support reinforced youths' internalization of success or failure as situated within the individual, putting the institution above criticism (Darder, 2012a; Delpit, 2009; Hooks, 2003; Lampert, 2013). In addition, adult cultivation of adversarial and authoritarian relationships with youth left these young people alienated with internalized feelings of worthlessness (Clark, 2011; Giroux, 2012; Lampert, 2013; Strickland, 2002).

The commodification and *instrumentalization* of education also have been considered key. Instrumentalizing education as the means by which individuals could access and sustain class status emphasized the role of the student as consumer. Researchers have identified ample evidence that social and political forces have been making this link explicit to the extent that some public university systems are publicizing the return on investment of specific degrees at specific schools (Carnevale, Cheah, & Strohl, 2012; Poppen, 2013). Yet one criticism frequently

heard of the Millennial generation has been that they have become too materialistic (Clark, 2011). Instead, it seemed that they have absorbed the lesson of the greater society—that their value was in their ability to consume goods and services and to be a market-driven rather than socially in tune. There has been the intrusion into the school setting of commercially sponsored television, commercially sponsored athletics, and now commercially sponsored branded charter schools. In a very real way, the voices and demands of youth have been channeled into a demand for consumer goods including education.

It has been difficult to say from whence came our juvenoia. Epstein (2007) cited anthropological and sociological theorists who explained our fear of youth as a kind of collective, primal, fear of social change and the unknown future. It has been described as similar to the concept of negative space in art: we may not see the object itself, but we can know it by its boundaries. Of this, Glassner (1999) wrote:

> Our fear grows, I suggest, proportionate to our unacknowledged guilt. By
> slashing spending on educational, medical, and antipoverty programs for youths
> we adults have committed great violence against them. Yet rather than face up to
> our collective responsibility we project our violence onto young people
> themselves, and onto strangers we imagine will attack them. (p. 72)

The Social Milieu of Working Class Youth of Color

Youth may have been defined as forming a distinct group that has transcended boundaries of race, class, and ethnicity, but the ways in which working class youth of color have been particularly impacted by the efforts of school reform to close the achievement gap have not been adequately explored. Bourdieu (1989) researched and

wrote extensively on the way that class identity—which he termed *social space*, or

milieu—was formed. In his research he found that social space was static over time; and

that the structures of society worked to reproduce individuals' social milieu, a

phenomenon he termed *social reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In his

conceptualization, one's social space was determined by the combined weight of one's

economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1989) specifically

cited the role of the school and of schooling, in contributing to the formation of one's

social milieu and to social reproduction, as the school as an institution expressed the

values of the dominant culture. He termed the institutional imposition of the values of

the dominant culture onto subordinate milieus *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 1989),

Paradoxically, the school was also the bearer of cultural capital in the form of

education credentials such as degrees and certificates, and so education might also have

been thought of as a means by which the dominant culture might be challenged, unless

"the holders of the dominant type of capital (economic capital) were not able to set the

holders of cultural capital in competition with one another" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 246). It

became an open question as to what the actual impact of pursuing higher education would

have on working class youth of color. Was it truly opening the door to economic

opportunity for these youth? Or was it grafting an alien set of values onto their native

habitus in order to create cheaper labor for the dominant culture? Research that detailed

the sheepskin effect (Carnevale et al., 2012) and economic analyses that explored how

increases in the numbers of workers with advanced degrees had a cascading effect on

employment opportunities and wages (Beaudry, Green, & Sand, 2013) would seem to indicate the latter.

A weakness of Bourdieu's oeuvre was his admitted failure to adequately delineate the fields and habitus of the working classes (Weininger, 2002). His explanation for this was that because this group had limited economic, cultural, and social capital he was unable to distinguish patterns of consumerism that would make finer distinctions possible (Weininger, 2002). Bourdieu also failed to adequately address the role of race in the development of social milieu, initially having seen it as a secondary influence, although he later acknowledged that race could have a significant effect on the development of social milieu (Weininger, 2002).

Youth as a distinct group have been primarily affected by the aims of public school reform. In the US, public school student bodies have been dominated by working class youth of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). This has led to some ambiguity in determining the role of the school in the lives of working class youth of color.

Aspiration

Technical high school. That's where dreams are narrowed down. We tell our children, "You can be anything you want." Their whole lives. "You can do anything!" But this place, we take kids—they're 15, they're young—and we tell them, "You can do eight things. We got it down to eight for you." (C.K., 2011)

Quaglia (1989) defined *aspiration* as "derived from a combination of educational goals, vocational endeavors, and perhaps, most importantly, their own sense of self as it relates to what

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they feel are important elements to success in lifestyles of their choosing" (p. 7). This was a more nuanced and individualized way of thinking about aspiration than current usages, which use aspiration as a way of indicating a desire for higher education. It emphasized the multiple dimensions to the idea of aspirations rather than a narrow focus. It was also less amenable to quantification, necessitating a qualitative approach to arrive at richer descriptors of the elements to aspiration. However, even researchers in youth studies would argue that this definition fell short. Friere (1993) noted that we must not fear of speaking of the emotional, the inchoate, the unquantifiable. We must acknowledge that each of us holds within our heart a dream of what and who we will become that goes beyond an occupation or an income level. We must acknowledge that we are creatures of emotion as well as cognition. Hence, Quaglia's (1989) definition can be expanded to incorporate this deeper meaning to aspiration. To do so is to accept the unbound potential of our youth; to refuse to "narrow it down to eight."

Student aspiration has been addressed in the literature. However, in this body of literature, educational aspiration has been broadly and repeatedly defined as going to college (Lake Research Partners, 2011). The political-economic drivers at work in educational reform have been intent on pushing more students into college. There has been a move recently to include community college and vocational training, referencing postsecondary education rather than the more generic four-year college. Nevertheless, the subtext of the literature reviewed for this study and the reforms analyzed in it seemed to suggest that all high school students should plan on attending a four-year college.

Some of the literature I reviewed for this dissertation indicated that more education equated to greater lifetime earnings (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Lake Research

Partners, 2011). Therefore, reform efforts of neoliberal leaders in power focused on pushing

more youth into higher education to reduce poverty as well as to reduce the need for social

welfare programs and to provide for the continued funding of Social Security. Both Georgetown

University (Carnevale et al, 2012) and Harvard University (Pathways to Prosperity Project,

2011) have sponsored research to design a complete education overhaul that emphasized

economic achievement and access to the middle class. The conditions of inequality, however,

that have prevailed in society at large and that have allowed both the education achievement gap

and the income gap to flourish were not addressed in this research. Indeed, it was a continuation

of the neoliberal focus on the ability of the individual to achieve which made poverty and lack of

achievement into a character deficit rather than the result of systemic oppression (Darder,

2012a).

Harris (2011) wrote on the issue of achievement and educational aspiration among

African American children. Popular theory holds that urban youth or poor youth of color fail to

achieve as part of an oppositional culture of resistance (Ogbu, 2003). Yet, in his research and in

the research of others, youth have not spoken of deliberate failure (Friend & Caruthers, 2012;

Kao & Thompson, 2003; Sirin, Diemer, Jackson, Gonsalves, & Howell, 2004; Strand &

Winston, 2008). They have spoken of a desire for teachers who cared and work that challenged

and engaged them. Instead, poor working class children of color often have received

substandard classrooms, poorly prepared or indifferent teachers, and low expectations.

To be sure, there has been some mention of the concept of self-actualization in a small

subset of the literature on aspiration (Johnson et al., 2009; Lake Research Partners, 2011).

However, this was also framed within the aspiration for higher education. Youth who aspired to

higher education were also considered to have had an expectation of some degree of self-actualization.

Related to the area of the study of aspiration in higher education also has been the notion of student engagement. In contrast to investigations of student needs at the K-12 level, the body of literature related to student engagement in higher education has been broad, deep, and wide There were 3,538 entries on the Education Resource Information Center database for the term *student engagement* compared to 817 entries for the term *student voice*. I did not review this area of the literature for this paper as it related to a self-selecting population who were already to become a part of the privileged class. Moreover, research indicated that student retention was highly correlated with student engagement (Kuh, 2007). In the field of higher education, student retention has been an important metric in judging institutional quality, which in turn has related to the quality of undergraduates that an institution could attract. It has been a prime illustration of the ratings mania that dominated education at all levels and types, and which has been at its root an economic imperative.

Student engagement has been used as a blanket term for understanding how and to what degree youth were involved with and stimulated by the institutional environment (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2005). It included socially, querying the extent to which youth participated in clubs or other campus-based groups and activities; academically, looking at the degree to which students were satisfied with individual courses, professors, and curriculum; and emotionally, measuring how happy youth at the institution felt. This body of literature and subgenres showed that educational researchers have done both qualitative and quantitative studies that focused on populations such as first-generation Americans, African Americans,

African American males, and more recently males of all ethnic backgrounds (Butterfield & Pemberton, 2012; Ewert, 2010; Lee & Ransom, 2011).

It was revealing that there was such a plethora of research done on youth as they became paying consumers of education. The script was flipped at the K-12 level in which student engagement was virtually nonexistent as a metric, even though it was youth who took the tests that determined a school's rating. Youth in K-12 education were simply objects upon which teachers, administrators, and counselors enacted educational policy in such a way as to obtain good ratings. Research on student engagement at the secondary level focused on engagement as a way to foster motivation, with the object of improving student achievement and thus schools' Academic Performance Index scores (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2004; Kennedy & Datnow, 2010). In the process, it functioned as a transactional and behaviorist way to exploit students' motivation.

There has been a limited amount of research on the topic of student aspiration completed within the last decade. Results related to students' educational aspirations pointed to youths' desire to broaden horizons and to participate in the perceived college experience of interacting with others of different backgrounds, which was equally as important to students as the notion of education as a vehicle for class mobility and economic stability. However, there was little substantive literature that examined the question of student aspiration with a focus on their dreams or passion. Instead, self-actualization was generally viewed as occurring through accessing higher education. In our instrumentalized age, it seemed if it could not be measured or operationalized, it was not important. The student engagement literature I found in research on postsecondary environments could be understood as tangential to student aspiration and was an

important metric in that area, but was scarce in the research on the secondary school environment. Again, it was as if youth became a valuable source of inquiry only when they also became a source of income.

Student Voice

In the literature and research on school aspirations and accountability the voices of students have seldom been included, nor have their voices been part of the conversation on school reform despite the fact that it has impacted their world the most. It was as if the dominant culture feared that allowing students agency would mean that youth would refuse to fill the roles in society and the workplace designated for them—roles necessary to fulfill the aims of that elite class. Yet, the absence of student voice could negatively impact the effectiveness of educational reforms. Hence, Sizer (1992) noted their voices were essential to enacting educational reforms that genuinely would humanize the educational process. And although the notion of student voice seemed like a straightforward concept—the words of students, specifically as applied to the educational arena—within this idea there were layers of meaning, for student voice could not be monolithic. From a critical perspective, voice has been entwined with three of the major themes of critical pedagogy specified earlier: dialogue, discourse, and emancipation.

To realize the emancipatory potential of education would require dialogue (Darder, 2012b; Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 2007). In order to participate in dialogue, students must have a voice. This concept has been complicated by the reality that the discourse of public education has been one that privileged the white, middle-class narrative. In this usage, discourse has referred to the narrative that society has promoted about the form and function of education, which has infused the K-12 educational project from the classroom layout to the material

included or eliminated in textbooks. Darder (2012a) explored the concept of hegemonic discourse in depth in *Culture and Power in the Classroom: Educational Foundations for the Schooling of Bicultural Students.*

To have student voice it would be first necessary to explore the foundational assumptions students had about themselves and where they come from, who they were, and how this related to the discourse of education. Of course, this should be a continuous process. As youth evolve a more complex understanding of the interplay between themselves and the school, they develop the ability to take part in the dialogic process of integrating knowledge in a critical, emancipatory, way. Students most marginalized by the discourse of education such as those of color, working class, impoverished, or with special needs have been considered to benefit most from developing critical consciousness. However, in this study, I examined the hypothesis that all youth have been negatively affected by this oppressive discourse, irrespective of their social location.

It has not only been that individuals have undergone a process of emancipation from the oppressive restrictions of society as a result of education, but also that education could potentially provide conditions that would enable and support them to engage more fully in the project of democracy. In so doing, a more truly democratic space could be established and developed. If this happened in the school, it could impact not only the school but society at large, as youth could leave school prepared to become full participants in forging a more democratic sphere.

There has been evidence of a growing concern with student voice in the literature (Akom, Ginwright, & Cammarota, 2008; Beaudoin, 2008; Cumings Mansfield et al., 2007; Daniels &

Arapostathis, 2004; Friend & Caruthers, 2012; Kennedy & Datnow, 2010; Kordalewski, 1999; Mitra, 2006a, 2006b; Robinson & Taylor, 2007; Scanlon, 2012; Sizer, 1992; Smyth, 2006; Zion, 2009). One class of student voice research has been concerned with school reform or improvement (Beaudoin, 2008; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2004; Kennedy & Datnow, 2010; Scanlon, 2012; Zion, 2009). In these studies, researchers inquired into the role students might play in changing school environments or cultures. Each concluded that accessing student voice would be valuable in achieving desired outcomes and improving school climate. Daniels and Arapostathis (2004) argued:

> Thus, understanding the phenomenon of disengagement is imperative for educators if they are to help their students realize increased academic achievement to avoid remedial or punitive measures and so that districts will be ensured of continued state and federal funding. (p. 36)

As the quote ably illustrated, the goal of student voice in this context was seen as coercive, not for any dialogic purpose. In none of these articles was the need for school improvement questioned. Student voice was simply another means by which to optimize outcomes.

A second group of student voice research has been organized around the use of student voice as means to enhance social justice outcomes (Friend & Caruthers, 2012; Mitra, 2006a, 2006b). However, the focus of this research was still adult-determined and adult-driven. It was allowing the students to have input into the goals and organization of the group. Mitra (2006a, 2006b) has termed it a partnership, but in reality the initiatives derived from the adult leadership at the school.

Finally, there was a small category concerned with students as the originators of change and as change agents. Akom, Ginwright, and Cammarota (2008) and Smyth (2006) advocated for youth to be empowered as capable actors in the move to create schools and a society that would be more socially just and more humanizing. Akom et al. specifically were developing spaces for youth in Northern California and elsewhere to expand the idea of the possible by imagining "youthtopias." They were engaging with youth in a process to make possible what could be imagined.

It was encouraging to learn that this area of inquiry has continued to grow in the US. In the United Kingdom, it was codified in education reform legislation (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). In the US, students have developed a more consultative role in postsecondary education through the mode of student engagement. Yet, it was reasonable to suppose that students did not develop ideas about what they wanted from their education, or critiques about how they had been educated only after they left compulsory education. At the time of this literature review, there was only a small body of research around the issue of student voice in creating a more emancipatory and humanistic kind of secondary education, so the questions in this study that addressed the issue of student voice in the larger population should contribute to the literature on student voice, in addition to that on student aspirations.

Conclusion

The confluence of impending independence for adolescents and concern for adult lives and livelihoods, a fractured society, and the contested nature of the form and substance of educational reforms made the exploration of literature on student voice and student aspiration rich and multilayered. Our education reforms purported to improve outcomes for all students

have had a covert mission: to socialize youth into occupying the space that the hegemonic

culture has prepared for them. Adolescence has been socially constructed and the myths and

anxieties that have abounded about that age group reflect adult societies' concerns about

command and control, which writers and researchers in the field of critical youth studies have

ably demonstrated (Epstein, 2007; Giroux, 2012; Males, 1996).

Moreover, most writing about student voice and student aspiration has centered on the

need to bind students to the goals that hegemonic culture has designated or prescribed for them.

Distributed leadership has been deemed to generate buy-in from students to the demands of

reforms. The term *aspirations* commonly has designated a desire for postsecondary education,

ignoring the deeper consideration of constructing identity and meaning in a society that has

recognized a limited palette of acceptable outcomes for its youngest citizens. In direct contrast

to this body of literature, in this study I sought to examine how the mainstream understanding of

students' aspirations can be expanded or interrupted in ways that would make the voices of youth

central.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study was inextricably entwined with the research questions. I focused the research questions on student aspiration throughout the process of formal education. The ways in which these aspirations were affected by the educational process, were distinctly personal in nature. The phenomena under study were complex and individualized. The critical pedagogical framework aimed to facilitate voice. Therefore critical narrative was the optimal methodology to use in this dissertation. Critical narrative has been defined as a method in the qualitative family of methodologies which comprises a wide range of approaches, all of which have in common several factors:

- The logical framework is inductive reasoning.

- The researcher has a position in the study.

- Inquiry evolves in reaction to participant responses.

- Inquiry is holistic in nature.

- Meaning develops in concert with participants (Hatch, 2002).

Qualitative Methods

Researchers initially employed qualitative methods in the fields of anthropology and sociology. The practice of observing, documenting, and then applying rigorous analytical techniques has been expanded to other fields in the social sciences. The term *qualitative* has been defined to encompass a wide variety of methodologies from ethnography, in which a group is observed over a long period of time to construct a cultural model, to the more esoteric post-structuralist discourse analyses in which conversational exchanges are deconstructed and

meanings emerge which reveal truths about the speakers and their meta-meanings (Hatch, 2002). Although quantitative methodologies are those generally have been considered research based, qualitative methods have been considered equally as rigorous in execution. Indeed, for certain kinds of research projects that are inductive in nature, qualitative research methods have been preferred for arriving at deeper, richer, kinds of data that illuminate the question at hand rather than provide incontrovertible evidence.

Critical Narrative

One form of qualitative research often used has been the narrative, in which stories of participants' experiences have been gathered and aggregated to produce a composite that has become representative of the experience being studied. Given the research questions that informed this study, critical narrative was the best, most appropriate method to use, because it was also most in sync with a critical theoretical perspective.

Critical narrative has been recognized as distinct from other types of narrative because it is dialogic in nature. That is, after participants have recorded their stories, the researcher returned to the participants to review the results of the data analysis and to reach a kind of praxis with them. From a theoretical standpoint, societal forces have influenced each individual in the system which is a cycle particularly in education. A person's educational experiences produced an effect, that has then led to a reaction which resulted in another, possibly different effect, and so on. In critical narrative, the researcher and the participant work together to expose this process, to explore the ways in which the participant was acted upon by the experiences within the institution that subsequently affected new actions and behaviors.

Contending that early twenty-first century educational practices have worked to standardize outcomes, eliciting the narratives of participants was a natural extension of my theoretical stance. As a result of individual differences wearing down or being suppressed, it was inevitable that there would be some dialectical process that came to light during the course of the narrative inquiry, as was illustrated by the narratives in this study.

Research Design

Gaining Access

As the 2013-2014 school year ended, I sought out alternate means to connect with recent high school graduates because my plan was to work with youth 18 years old and older. I utilized the contacts I had developed with nonprofit groups that work with high-school-age students to recruit participants—specifically, the California Conference for Equality and Justice (CCEJ) which has contracted with my school to provide services. Working through this agency I gained access throughout the summer of 2014 to recent high school graduates. I received permission from the regional director to contact their Youth Leaders once I received Internal Review Board permission. The mission of CCEJ has been to combat racism, bias, and bigotry in all its forms. Its Youth Leaders have been trained to recognize their own position with respect to these constructs and to facilitate sensitive discussions on these topics with their peers. Thus, they could be expected to have a more informed outlook on their own educational experiences.

Participant Recruitment

With permission from the agencies and Internal Review Board approval, I recruited student participants. CCEJ has conducted events for their members on an ongoing basis, so I asked to be included at one such event at which I presented my proposal to the young people. I

also distributed a criterion index to the agency's employees in case they knew of a specific young person who would be a good fit for the study (See Appendix A.). The criteria for participant selection included at least 18 years of age, low socioeconomic status, prospective first-generation college student from a traditionally underserved group such as the African American population, and sufficiently articulate to speak about their past and current experiences since the study was centered on participant stories. This was closest to a convenience sample, although there was an element of purposive sampling as well. I provided information to participants regarding the study and required them to sign consent forms to participate. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point.

Recruitment was more challenging than I had anticipated. Few youth leaders responded to the appeal for participation, and not all who expressed interest responded to my outreach. Ultimately, I ended up with six participants who met my stated criteria, and who were willing to take the time to be part of the study. All were working class youth of color, 18 years of age or older, former youth leaders or currently active in CCEJ who had undergone human relations training and could thus speak to the dynamics of race and class (See Table 1.). Those who completed the cycle of interviews received a $50 gift card to Amazon.com. Participants who also blogged or wrote entries in their journals at least four times received an additional $20 Amazon.com gift card. I made myself available outside of school hours to answer questions or address concerns the young people may have had, such as the procedures followed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, and the protocol for voice recording and transcribing. The names I used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Table 1
Profile of Participants

Name	Gender	Age (At time of participation)	Ethnicity	Postsecondary Participation
Liz	Female	18	African American	Public 4-year university
Jay	Male	18	African American	Private 4-year university
Tatum	Female	18	African American	Elite public 4-year university
Wolf	Male	18	Biracial	Community college
Tony	Male	18	Biracial	Community college
Tyrone	Male	19	African American	Workforce

Note. Data derived from student interviews.

Data Collection

To generate the narratives, I met with each participant individually at their convenience either at their home or at a place of their choosing that provided adequate privacy for a minimum of one hour on two separate occasions. I asked guiding questions to initiate and prompt participants and voice recorded their responses (See Appendix B.). I also took research notes so that I was able to supplement the verbal responses with written notes on expressions, body language, or other observations that helped to enhance the recorded data. I informed participants before the interviews of the process I planned to use so that they would be prepared for minimal disruptions to our conversations. I also provided each participant with a notebook for weekly written entries or requested that they write weekly blog entries on an Internet blog site such as Tumblr or BlogSpot if they preferred and agreed to provide me with access. I intended for such journal-type writing to enrich the dataset because it was to consist of participant's thoughts on topics that I may have neglected during our meetings. It also gave the participant a space to react

to what was taking place at the time of the study in the education arena so that the data were as current and as comprehensive as possible.

Data Analysis Procedures

Once all the narratives were completed, I progressed to analysis. Each narrative underwent *ex post facto* analysis, which included reviewing emerging themes and meanings with participants.

Qualitative Critical Narrative

The critical narrative as qualitative methodology is a process of rigorously analyzed storytelling. As noted above, I met individually with six high school graduates and prompted them with guiding questions to tell their stories, which I recorded and subsequently transcribed. I also asked each student to keep a journal or blog to record any further thoughts, beliefs, or experiences, following the collection of the narratives.

I analyzed the data through a critical lens in order to code themes and topics according to their significance in the story. My hypothesis was that emphasis in the public school arena on aggregate data has clouded the experience of the individuals, creating a dehumanizing rather than emancipatory educational experience. This experience could lead to students' disengagement from education and a subsequent shift in their aspirations. This is true for all students to some degree, but especially true for poor students of color who are stigmatized and problematized by institutional concern over the achievement gap and the language of school reform.

After reading students' transcribed narratives, journals, and my notes from the interviews, I re-read them for evidence of my concerns and wrote generalizations that demonstrated connections between my concerns and the all narratives in the data set. I then re-read the data set

and coded for these generalizations and wrote summaries accordingly. Engaging in praxis with

my participants was the next step. I took my findings back to them to negotiate these meanings

with them. Participants had an opportunity to read the transcripts from their sessions, in order to

verify that statements were reflected as they meant them. Once I completed this step, wrote a

final summary, using examples from the data set to support my position.

Synthesis

Qualitative research has been shown to be a valuable tool to explore social science

phenomena in a rich and meaningful way. When done well, it has shown the potential to

communicate meaning in a way that has been sympathetic to participants and easily understood

by readers, which is not to say it is a simplification. On the contrary, qualitative research must

be done with strict adherence to protocols to make research findings valid. This was precisely

the underlying intent that drove the synthesis of my data for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

NARRATIVES

The methodology I employed for this dissertation was critical narrative. My research questions focused on developing a better understanding of the student experience throughout the years of mandatory public education, commonly accepted as from roughly the age of five, when children begin kindergarten, through the age of about 18, when young people complete a thirteenth year of formal education as twelfth graders or seniors in high school. (I used *commonly accepted* to refer to the legal truth that kindergarten has been optional, and attendance has been mandatory only through the age of 16.) My focus centered on discovering the relationship between students' aspirations or hopes for their futures, the emergence of their voice, and their lived experiences in their particular educational environment.

From September through November of 2014, I met individually with six recent high school graduates to listen to their stories about attending school. Our meeting places varied, depending on the young people's schedules and locations. I met with three students in a library study room, one at the offices of CCEJ, one in a dormitory's common area, and one at a coffee shop. Overall, the participants were very frank and open about their experiences, their feelings, and their reflections. All spoke with seriousness and appeared very engaged in the topics under discussion, although their affects varied from animated to reserved.

I this chapter, I presented the narratives of the six study participants, followed by a brief composite summary of the participants' narratives. I developed this chapter in this manner because I wanted to allow for greater depth in the retelling of the individual stories of the six participants and to honor in a more coherent manner each of their contributions to this study.

Tony

Tony was an 18 year-old mixed-race young man of Latino and Euro-American (specifically Italian) descent. He described his background as poor, or more accurately, "not having a lot of extra money" (Interview 1). His dad was in his life at the time of the interview, but he did not grow up with him. His father had re-joined the family about five years prior to our interview, when Tony was in middle school. Tony talked about him with respect and a measure of fear, though infrequently:

> My mom and dad didn't go to college at all. My dad, he's a really strong man as
>
> in he does everything he needs to, no complaining. It's just that typical dad icon.
>
> There's no option, he just does it. (Interview 1)

Tony spoke of his mother with affection and respect. They had a close relationship, demonstrated by his describing her views on different occasions, so her impact on him was clear. Tony had two brothers. He was the middle sibling. Tony described his older brother as "hard-headed [and] not kind-hearted" (Interview 1), and described himself as "cool, sweet hearted, [and] more mature" (Interview 1). Both he and his older brother looked down on his younger brother as being "babied" (Interview 1). He said he and his brothers fought a lot. They were quite close in age so that at one point they all attended the same high school.

The family lived in a small city in southern California. It was a very diverse city, with a population ranging from the extremes of poverty to the extremes of wealth. The public high schools in the city were similar in that all of them qualified for Title II funding, requiring at least 60% of the student population qualify for free or reduced lunch. However, despite efforts to voluntarily integrate the schools through magnet programs or other high-interest curricula in so-

called schools of choice, parents most often sent their children to their neighborhood schools, particularly since busing was eliminated. Therefore, the schools reflected the demographic of the neighborhood. White students were clustered in the predominantly White, middle-class neighborhoods, while students of color dominated the enrollment of schools in the poorer neighborhoods.

Tony's educational career started at his neighborhood elementary school located in one of the poorer areas. He got in trouble a lot in elementary school. He reported,

I couldn't really handle my stuff. (Interview 1)

This led to his mother's involvement with the school. Her frequent interventions with school personnel on his behalf led to her becoming president of the Parent-Teacher-Student Organization. From the beginning, Tony described himself as different from other students, encouraged to be so by his mother:

She told me probably about second grade like she thought I was different. You know that whole story in the movies like "Oh you know you're different. You're smarter than other kids. You know what's better." (Interview 1)

This was a thread running through his narrative. He frequently described himself as different, smarter, or more mature—a belief that appeared to have been reinforced by adults throughout his life.

He was recommended for testing for the gifted program in third grade, and when he was included in the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, his mother transferred him to an elementary school out of his neighborhood:

We were never well off on money so we couldn't afford to go to a different [private]

school. (Interview 1)

The new school, as well as the middle school and high school that Tony subsequently attended,

were located in one of the more affluent areas of the city. Tony described his feelings about the

new school:

It was horrible! After that there were kids I didn't know, lives I didn't have any

similarities with. It was in a more money-dominated school so I had no idea how to

handle that. (Interview 1)

Tony believed that being in a new school was partly responsible for his problem behavior:

I was always talking back to teachers . . . . Their brothers and sisters have had that

teacher and everyone knew how to do everything. They were familiar with the

area, just everything. I was different. I was new completely to the school, to the

area. (Interview 1)

Indeed, middle school seems to have been a series of conflicts with teachers, as evidenced by

Tony's comments:

My personality of being a rebel kind of stood out and I got into a lot of trouble in school.

(Interview 2)

Middle school was probably the worst I would say because it was probably at my peak of

me going against teachers and just not doing anything so it sucked. (Interview 1)

I remember being in middle school, was so vividly being harassed by the teachers, but

honestly I couldn't pick why it was. (Interview 2)

There were different times where I felt like I was just being picked on. I don't know if it was because of my behavior or me just always trying to argue or if it was because I wasn't white or wealthy. (Interview 1)

It was clearly not a good fit. Attending the better schools in the nicer area made Tony excruciatingly aware of the existence of economic disparities:

. . . going to a different school just thinking, "Oh yeah they have it better." They have better stuff, more privileges or whatever. Part of me was like, "Wow this sucks. My friends can do more." Going over to friends' houses it was like, "Wow they have so much better stuff" and I had to go home and it was like, "Oh wow, I'm back home and it was just the normal day now." (Interview 1)

It also made Tony aware of more subtle cultural differences:

At my old school it was K-eight and everyone knows everybody. At that school it was completely different; everyone does their own thing. (Interview 1)

The primacy of the individual was also indicated in the way that competition was used to encourage students, while simultaneously enforcing a standardized outcome:

Now go over here with all these different kids and be one basically; be this type A. Going into there, the teacher taught the same way, forgetting the fact that these kids are all GATE. Maybe they're all different and maybe just because they're all GATE doesn't mean that they're all the same. In fourth and fifth grade, which was the GATE program, it was all the same; all the kids were the same. I felt like it was just—they're all computers. It was a race just to—who

does the best, and I would sit there and think this stuff is easy. We can all

obviously do it so who cares? (Interview 1)

Despite his subsequent education on the presence of racism, classism, and other

inequities that have become institutionalized, Tony focused his frustrations with the

educational system on teachers:

Well, up until high school, teachers were all the same to me. It was just that

figure of authority. There were a bunch of high school teachers as well who was

just—it was like they wanted to get you in trouble and it's just having that

authority makes them a better person. Basically, I viewed teachers as someone

not of authority just because—I know that with all the programs that I'm in that,

oh you know, they're just teachers. They're there to do their job or that doesn't

mean that they're better than you. All these things that I've learned that teachers

aren't better than you, they can't do this and all that. They're people too. Now

that I realize that, I'm just like why do they think that they're better than me? So

I just see them as human now. They're just like me. (Interview 1)

Most middle school students look forward to high school as a place of greater freedom.

For Tony,

In high school it was like I was already mad just being in class because all these

guidelines and all this and all that. (Interview 2)

Behaviorally, things remained the same as usual, too:

In high school it was detentions all the time . . . . It never went as far as to getting

referrals unless I really got into trouble which I did a couple times just because

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like some dumb things like getting into the school's computer and blah, blah, blah

but nothing that had to do with my attitude. (Interview 2)

However, he had learned one thing:

I knew disagreeing would get me nowhere. I knew that basically now it was time

to learn. In middle school it taught me a lot of how to deal with teachers in

general. . . . In high school I found it, I was very distant from my teachers.

(Interview 2)

That statement was not completely accurate. Tony had found at least two teachers who

reinforced his sense of self-worth: He noted,

[He] would tell me that, 'I know you're going to make something out of you' and blah,

blah, blah. (Interview 1)

Nevertheless, Tony said,

[In] junior year, I kind of just did my own thing. That was like my lowest point of high

school. (Interview 2)

Tony's progress through the public K-12 education system left him wrestling with

conflicting ideas about education, the role of race in society, and his own aspirations. Despite

indicating that he felt singled out by both teachers and students for his racial identity, and saying,

[It] sucks sometimes because you know that this group is going to be better off in the long run

just for no reason. This group has a harder road to travel just for the color of their skin.

Tony also stated,

I saw a lot of minorities just acting as if they're picked on all the time. Just to use

that against teachers, just to use that against—just disrupting the class for no

reason and like they don't want to cooperate for no reason at all. A lot of people can use that to their advantage or they can play the victim or anything, but in school I saw it in a weird way because a lot of people were either being the victim like I said or they were educating themselves on it. I remember specifically one of my friends in school, she's black, and she completely went against all the stereotypes, "Oh yeah, this is why we're like this and this is why our kind is looked down upon." She did everything she ever had to. She got into a good college. Her family situation she told me was, you know, the typical stereotypical black family. She didn't have a dad. She had a lot of brothers and sisters and she would be really straight out with me every day. Then she would tell me on the other hand there were other people just like her who just give up just because they feel like the world is against them, but in reality it's just that they're just doing it to themselves. That applies to every other group. (Interview 2)

And, regarding his high school experience he said,

In school, yeah, going into high school you see the cliques completely. Everything is divided in racial groups. Everyone calls it different sections like Mexico or Africa [and, in] the Advanced Placement and the honor courses there were way less minorities. (Interview 2)

Yet, he also stated,

We were all graded the same for the most part, treated the same as well, but you could feel the difference just being not white at that school. . . . I remember specifically in tenth grade we had a discussion in history. It was about how was

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our school divided. We had to make a pyramid of who was on top, who was on bottom. I remember one of my friends, he's really a bold guy and he just straight out said it. He said the white people are on top. I remember everyone in the class got quiet and the teacher thanked him for being so bold and you know just saying it. That was the first time that it occurred to me like it's okay to say it. It's okay to discuss this. Before it was like no one speaks of it: nothing. Up until that moment then I realized that the teachers know what's going on. It's not like something hidden from them. So we started talking about it … We also broke it down into the water polo kids, because they were like the top of the school and who's on the bottom, just the minorities and the teachers were even underneath the students, the white students. I just remember it. It was really weird talking about it to an actual teacher. (Interview 2)

Public education also inspired contradictory beliefs. On the one hand, Tony stated,

I always felt like school was just school. When things came I did them. I never really thought about what was to come next because school was just school. (Interview 2)

On the other hand, he also reflected:

Education is everything in life. . . . I wouldn't change the way it is because I feel like, as you get into college you know looking back on the years that I've spent in school, everything contributes to itself, especially in my experience, in public schools. (Interviews 1)

Now that Tony is attending community college, however, he explained,

> You have to pay for everything and it's completely different. It's literally like you are paying for your education and just it's different. The vibe is different. Everybody knows it's different. You're sitting in class and you're like, "Wow, I have to pay for everything. I have to pay for my book. This is my own book. This is my own everything." In a sense, this is the first time I actually had to learn. I made myself to learn [sic] because it was required of myself. Before in high school it was like yeah, I don't really have to. I'm here by law, or I'm here just because my mom wants me to get an education, but now it's like for my own sake so saying that I had to pay for it makes it real. It's basically the truth. (Interview 1)

Tony credited changing schools with giving him a different outlook, as well:

> Well, I know going to a different school, my goals changed completely because the atmosphere is completely different. Trying to keep up with everybody else who maybe had a computer when I didn't, or had tools when I didn't. So, yeah, my goals are changed completely by wanting to do more, wanting to be smarter than everybody else. I remember my first school the one that was in, the one that wasn't the rich school or whatever, I felt at home, I felt like nothing mattered. It was just school; all my friends and everyone was the same, and by going to the different school, I just felt like I had to do more. I had to push myself. I had to actually do stuff to feel like one of them or even better. (Interview 2)

And what were those goals? Again, Tony was conflicted. He vacillated, initially saying,

Growing up it's all been, oh the rich and famous, and just money, money, money. . . . We didn't grow up with a lot, and so I know just wanting to have more was always a drive, and I always wanted to just do more and earn more money in that sense. (Interview 2)

Later, he said,

I want to be happy with life, but then at the same time I know the bigger concern probably is going to be money. (Interview 2)

Tony's vision of his future did not encompass happiness and economic security simultaneously; it represented a choice for him.

Jay

Jay was an 18-year-old male, a Youth Leader with CCEJ, and a recent graduate of a continuation high school in the same southern Californian city as other participants. He appeared to be African American, but mentioned that "half my family is Hispanic" (Interview 1) and

I don't care at all about race. I don't really see—honestly like that's something that means nothing to me . . . I think every person is their own person and not defined by a race. I don't think we should be defined by a race. (Interview 1)

Jay was unique among the participants in this respect.

Jay's demeanor was worth noting. Other participants were serious, even earnest, while telling their stories, but Jay seemed always to be laughing, even when telling the most distressing parts of his history. When I asked him about it, he replied:

I learned to just enjoy and just make the best out of everything, honestly. There's no

point going around angry about stuff when nobody else gives—who cares about you

being angry? (Interview 1)

In contradiction to these words, however, many of Jay's problems with the school environment

such as fights ad confrontations with teachers stemmed from his anger.

For various reasons, we met in a coffee shop rather than a study room or other semi-

private place. Throughout the hours we met, Jay consistently interrupted his story to comment

on or participate in activity going on around us, to answer phone calls, or to view updates to his

social media accounts. He never lost the thread of the conversation, however, and the breadth of

his experiences combined with his observations and insights made his inclusion in the participant

pool valuable.

Unlike the other participants, Jay attended a variety of school types. He began his formal

schooling at a small, private, Christian K-8 school located in the same city, but in a suburban

neighborhood. His mother and grandparents thought it was worth the cost, because the

neighborhood where he and his mom lived at that time was, as Jay described it, "the barrio"

(Interview 1). He said,

They didn't want me growing up like the rest of the kids that I hung out with outside of

my house basically. (Interview 1)

The experiment began well, but in second grade, Jay was in his first fight. This was followed by

another fight in third grade, and a third and final fight in fourth grade. The way Jay told the

story, each incident was fairly innocuous in execution. He was responding to provocative acts

by other students. However, since in the first fight he threw the first punch; in the second, he

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used a pencil box that broke the skin as a weapon; and in the third, he again hit first, he was expelled from the school.

His mother, the parent with whom he lived—Jay never mentioned his father—moved him to a K-8 school in a neighboring city that was located across the street from his grandparents' house. Because of that Jay said,

Nothing that bad could happen. . . . Those kids were like, I want to say, were more cut from the same cloth in a way. (Interview 1)

When asked if this was a way of saying that these kids were also poor, he agreed. This city's population was more heavily Latino and African American, and therefore, people of color dominated the student population, which may also have accounted for his statement.

His family's hopes were not borne out, as Jay "did a lot of bad stuff there" (Interview 1). He began smoking marijuana in seventh grade, became sexually active, and fought in the park after school, but, he said,

I didn't get into any fights in school. I was lucky for that. (Interview 1)

His grades were also poor. Jay admitted that he always had some D and F grades, but in middle school they became the norm. He blamed the structure of the school—double periods for core classes—for causing him to lose any interest in coursework that he may have had, frequently sleeping his way through the period. He believed that he did well when his interest was caught by something, but that was for a limited selection of subjects such as history, biology, and anthropology.

The high school Jay was slated to attend was far from his grandparents' house, so since Jay's mother would have to transport him anyway, she decided to have him attend the same

school at which she worked as a para-educator. This school was in yet another city, and would require an inter-district permit for Jay. There was a delay in obtaining permission, so Jay was supposed to do home studies for a semester through an online high school program. At first, he enjoyed the freedom from the classroom, and the ability to work independently at his own pace. His mother made him stay at his grandparents' so he was forced to do schoolwork, and he said,

Then it started to suck because you miss all the high school stuff. (Interview 1)

He gradually gave in to laziness, and when the semester ended, he was not on track and was not able to begin classes at the new school. He continued with the virtual academy for the entire year.

Jay transferred to a comprehensive high school at the beginning of his sophomore year. He remarked,

That [high school] was amazing. . . . That was some of the best years of my life. (Interview 1)

He became part of a group of boys who dealt drugs, primarily marijuana.

Anyway, we were just popular from the things that we would sell of course. . . . We felt like we were the s-h-i-t. It was nothing. I didn't care about nothing at [high school]. I was doing very . . . parties were amazing. Everything was going perfect for me, but of course, compared to how you should be in school, it was terrible. (Interview 1)

Drug dealing was accompanied by more fights, again off campus. He also dealt with a pregnancy scare. It seems to have been a point of pride to avoid the undercover police and the drug-sniffing dogs, since

. . . that's the only thing about going to a high school like this. They really go to the

extreme to find out what you're doing that's bad, and they're ready to kick you out.

Despite his behavior, teachers tried to get him to change paths: (Interview 1)

I was the one person that they tried with. They wouldn't really try with other people even

though I seem like I was worse than other people but they really still tried with me for

some reason. (Interview 2)

Jay believed it is because they recognized his intelligence, that teachers could tell who had "it"

and who did not.

Eventually it happened. He and his friends were found out and Jay lost his inter-district

permit. He had to transfer to a continuation school in his hometown, the exact environment out

of which his family had struggled to keep him. He initially maintained the same attitude as

before, not caring about classwork and getting high every day. Gradually, though, as he got to

know other students, he became aware of how far off track he was and he and another student

agreed to help each other change their bad habits so that they could earn their high school

diplomas.

In the course of his senior year, Jay turned his life around. He got involved with CCEJ,

became a Youth Leader, and graduated on time. He was the only male participant to matriculate

directly to a four-year university, although that came about serendipitously, not as part of a plan.

After graduation, his mother made him go on a weeklong retreat held by a Christian college in

southern California. In the course of that retreat, Jay had an epiphany; not a religious one, but

one related to his own desire and capacity to learn. He thrived on the intellectual stimulation of

discussion and took pride in his participation. Leaders at the school were equally impressed and

one of the facilitators of the retreat visited Jay at his home to encourage him to apply for admission.

> They came to visit me and I was surprised. . . . He was saying a bunch of nice stuff that I
> don't really think is true about myself. (Interview 2)

Jay did apply, however, and was admitted. He planned to begin in the spring semester of 2015:

> It is going to be hard as hell. . . . I'm looking forward to doing my best and trying and
> doing my all. (Interview 2)

Tatum

Tatum was an 18 year-old freshman at the University of California, Los Angeles, the most popular and most competitive university based on 2014 admissions data to be admitted to in the University of California system. She was the youngest child in an intact family, with one brother and one sister. Her family lived in a working class part of the same small southern Californian city, an area dominated by families of color. Tatum and her family are African American. She and her siblings attended the neighborhood elementary school, but when her siblings were ready to transition to middle school, her mother moved them all to a K-8 school in a different part of the city closer to her workplace.

> The school that was closer to my house, it just didn't work out. [My mom] didn't want
> me walking home by myself because I was still young. In her mind it made more sense
> for me to go [to the K-8] and just wait for her. (Interview 1)

The new school was also in a more affluent and whiter area of the city. Tatum's experience at this school was uneventful, if not engaging. To her, it is very straightforward:

I was always a really good student. I was always nice to my teachers so they always

liked me. Yeah, I never really had any problems. (Interview 1)

When I asked about her motivations for being a good student, she responded,

I think at that time I was doing it because I had to, and I wanted a good grade. I

didn't really see the importance of the work that I was doing mostly, probably,

because it wasn't interesting to me. . . . I liked having good grades. I've always

been an honor roll student and to not get the recognition and not to get the honor

roll, it's like I've always had this. If I don't do this then I'm not going to get on

honor roll. I'm not going to get a good report card. My parents wouldn't yell at

me, but they would be like, "You know you could do better than this."

(Interview 2)

Learning was equally straightforward. When she described her first teacher at the

new school, Tatum said,

Her ways of teaching were kind of like the normal way of teaching. She would

give you something to do and explain what it is and how she wants you to do it

and you just follow along in the elementary sense. (Interview 1)

Wanting to do well inhibited her from taking risks in the classroom, however. She reflected:

 I wouldn't really raise my hand unless I was certain and absolutely sure that if I opened

my mouth, the right answer was going to come out. (Interview 1)

Mathematics was a particular challenge, although she said,

They just kept passing me on. I did good. I never did really super well on the

STAR testing, but I did good in the class. I always got an A or a B in the math

classes so I kept advancing on and on. I got the help that I really needed so I wouldn't fail the class. . . . The homework really—like if you needed a bump up— just do your homework and that would get you there. . . . I just got help so much. I would study or get help the day before the test so I knew it before the test, but if you ask me anything now I would just say I don't know. (Interview 1)

School attendance and homework became so much a part of her identity that without it she said,

I'm just like, ugh, I have nothing to do. It just becomes like your daily thing. It just became embedded in me. That's why I don't like the summer. I literally have nothing to do. I don't have homework and I have all this extra time on my hands. What am I supposed to do? (Interview 1)

From an early age, Tatum planned to attend college. As a child she wanted to be a dentist and was aware that it would require college to become one. It was also an ideal that the school reinforced:

Yeah, they said that college is what happens after high school. You should go to college. This is the reason why you should go to college: to get better jobs, bigger incomes. To obviously learn more, and to keep your mind open, and to become more intellectual. (Interview 1)

Later, thinking about the role of college in her own life, Tatum reflected:

I think also what kind of drove me to like, I have to go to college, I have to do something for myself, is that I didn't want to stay at home. I didn't want to end up like [my brother and sister], living at home. (Interview 1)

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After completing eighth grade at the out-of-area school, she returned to her neighborhood high school. In this district each high school has at least one magnet program with competitive admissions criteria, in addition to serving neighborhood students. Tatum was disappointed that she had to attend this high school, as her new friends would be going to a different one. She was also worried about the school's reputation:

> Just what people say like, "Oh, it's ghetto. You don't want to go there." It just got in my head. (Interview 1)

Tatum's mother was optimistic about Tatum's participation in one of the magnet programs, however, so she tried to get past her reservations.

At this high school, the freshmen attended a self-contained school. Even so, it was a much larger campus than the K-8 school Tatum had attended. She noted,

> The good side was that I was already in the [magnet] program . . . so my classrooms, they had all the students who were academically driven and actually wanted to do work, so I wasn't stuck in classes with students who would sit in the back and talk all the time, and the teachers had to yell at them and stuff like that. Being in the classroom environment, the environment was way better than the outside at nutrition and lunch. That was like chaotic. (Interview 1)

Her solution to the chaos was to keep busy, saying,

> [I] just kind of went to class, work, class, work, and then home. (Interview 1)

The magnet program was demanding, and she also got a job on campus working in the cafeteria. Tatum then joined a sorority on campus that was a club named with Greek letters that had a modified rush, but was not affiliated with any national Greek organization. It had

community service as a focus, and was affiliated with CCEJ because members were expected to attend the CCEJ human relations camp known as Building Bridges.

Tatum attended the camp in her sophomore year, and she said,

The experience was so amazing. I didn't know what I was going into. I didn't know what it really was about, but just like the atmosphere and the people that worked there, it was so great. (Interview 2)

Her description of how it affected her was more philosophical, reflecting her lack of any direct experience of racism:

How do we unify everybody in a way that hasn't been done before to really have people understand that the things that are going on are actually hurting people? (Interview 2)

Tatum did do the training to become a Youth Leader, however, and attended one other camp as a Youth Leader in her junior year.

Membership in the sorority was also important to her, however,

I couldn't imagine if I didn't get in. I would have so much free time on my hands and I don't know – I wouldn't have gotten into anything bad because I'm just not that type of person. To be able to have been in that program is so much more fulfilling because good grades and doing my work and getting into UCLA. I don't know if I would be able to do that if I wasn't there because I think such a big part of like the college acceptance is being a well-rounded student and being involved in so many other things. (Interview 2)

Her friends in the sorority were also responsible for Tatum's election to senior class president. Tatum seemed to be a very modest young woman and would not think of

putting herself in that position. Nevertheless, she was nominated and won. The

remainder of high school passed in a blur of activity, work, and school.

As a newly-minted college freshman, Tatum was struggling to both determine her

path from that point on as dentistry had been abandoned long ago and was yet to be

replaced. She questioned how to learn in this new environment:

[Advanced Placement class] was like something that transitioned me well because

you have to learn. You have to do everything that the teachers tell you and how

they tell you because other than that you're not going to pass. . . . I think I was so

used to learning that way so now I'm just like well what am I supposed to do? I

have all this information but how am I supposed to remember it all? How am I

supposed to learn it all if you don't give me anything to show that I'm learning it?

. . . I have quizzes for one of my classes, but I think I'm used to doing worksheets

and working in books. (Interview 1)

Wolf

Wolf was the first to volunteer to participate in this study. It seemed he was anxious to

tell his experiences, especially as a Youth Leader with CCEJ. He initially presented as cautious

and reserved, but quickly warmed up and enthusiastically shared his story. Wolf was the only

participant to have attended his neighborhood schools in progression: elementary, middle, and

high. He was well aware of the reputation of his neighborhood and the schools he attended.

Wolf began the conversation by telling me that his generation and that of his older cousins are

actively participating in turning things around in that part of town. Now that they are more

mature, with children of their own, they are turning away from involvement with gangs and

working to make their area a better place to live.

> Our community was going downhill and we didn't want to see our home
>
> get run into the gutter. So they decided let's start changing how we act. . . . Let me
>
> stop being so naïve or irresponsible and let me gain more responsibility so I can
>
> pass it on to my family members and these kids that look up to me as a role model
>
> and just change the way I act. (Interview 1)

> Like the other participants, Wolf reported that he was excited but nervous to begin

school. He said he was

> A little wild. . . . [His daycare provider] just like put me in line so that when I actually got
>
> into kindergarten I was just like okay let me just do what they say. (Interview 1)

Wolf remembered kindergarten and first grade as a transitional time and did not recall specifics,

but his second grade teacher was especially welcoming:

> [She said,] "My classroom is your guys' classroom. We have rules so respect the rules.
>
> Respect each other." She treated all of us like her kids. There wasn't a day during
>
> second grade I was like, "Oh, I have to go to school," just because it was like "Oh Mrs.
>
> Robinson's class is so cool. We do the dopiest activities." (Interview 1)

> Third grade was when he started getting into trouble. At that point, Wolf's narrative

veered from the earlier elementary school ideal of

> It was a golden time, [and] we were there always having fun, from the nurses to the
>
> principal. (Interview 1)

Wolf described middle school as

> Learning was work. . . .Some students made it into a competition. (Interview 1)

Clearly, Wolf wanted to believe in the story of elementary school as an idealized environment where innocent children were nurtured and cared about, but there was also the reality that he struggled with the content, that teachers emphasized academic achievement measured by test results, and that he was seen as a troublemaker because of the five fights he got into from the third to the fifth grades.

Wolf's report of himself as a learner was also full of contradictions. He told me about learning to study in fourth grade, and taking school seriously, and "wanting to be smart" (Interveiw 1), but also that he did not study for spelling tests, or read very well, or finish his math facts timed tests quickly, all of which frequently caused his family to limit Wolf's participation in sports. I asked him about the impact of race, given his exposure to the realities of prejudice through his involvement with CCEJ, and although he identified the elementary school personnel at his school as being predominantly White European, he dismissed the idea that it had a bearing on the way he or other students were treated.

Middle school was "when the shit hit the fan" (Interview 1) for Wolf. He believed that he brought a reputation with him and so was in the position of having to prove himself. He described the middle school environment as highly segregated, where

> there were certain benches you could sit at and certain benches you couldn't, otherwise
>
> you would get jumped or beat up. (Interview 1)

Although he is of mixed racial heritage, he joined with the African American youth due to an incident in fifth grade when he was called "the N-word" (Interview 1) by a Latino boy.

We had a little clique in middle school. I joined up and that's when I experienced my

first riot/race war but we caused it. (Interview 1)

After that incident, the principal had an assembly, and Wolf and his clique

stood up in the back and we were just like all arms crossed and looked at them, smiled,

laughing [to let the staff know who was behind the incident.] (Interview 1)

He figured that because there were so many involved, the principal would be powerless to do

anything about it, and he was right, except for one boy who gave the principal the finger. He

was suspended, because "you just can't do that" (Interview 1).

Education and learning were peripheral considerations for Wolf in middle school:

I wanted to be out with my friends doing stupid stuff and getting money for it. I didn't

care about [school] work. What I did with my friends was my work in a way because I

was getting paid throughout middle school. (Interview 1)

The school had a point system in place to attempt to enforce compliance from the student body,

but because it primarily affected participation in eighth grade activities like promotion, it did not

exert influence on Wolf until the end of the eighth grade. His parents tried to tempt him toward

better behavior and grades by promising family activities, or father-and-son activities, but even

that had little impact. The lure of money and friends was too much.

Despite his bravado and middle school ascendancy, Wolf told me he did experience

anxiety when it came time to apply to high school. As I noted above, in this school district all

eighth graders have to apply to both a high school and to a specific program within that high

school. If they are not eligible for any of the programs to which they apply, or are not accepted,

then the district places them into a program at their home high school. This was what happened

to Wolf, and he admitted that at that point he wished that he had tried harder:

> I felt like if I went to [my home school] I was going to be a reject in some way just
>
> because they [my friends] got accepted to other schools and I didn't. (Interview 1)

The reputation of his home high school was daunting, even to him:

> It was more of a fear like I hope I make it to see graduation. Just because of the path I
>
> was going on and the school's reputation. (Interview 1)

> Despite his initial anxieties, for Wolf high school began on a similar trajectory to that of

middle school. Wolf joined the football team and continued to hang out with the same friends as

in middle school. About midway through freshman year, something happened that changed his

life:

> [It was a] real, hands down, this is going on, cops are here riot. In middle school
>
> it was like principal stopping us. It wasn't that big of a deal because we're little
>
> kids running around. That was my first riot. This was my first serious, holy shit,
>
> I can get hurt riot. What happened was some racism issues of like black versus
>
> brown over a Caucasian girl who started it all. . . . It wasn't safe. You couldn't
>
> even really walk home without being pressed, which is when they tell you like
>
> what's up? (Interview 1)

One of his teachers pulled him to safety. It was the first time in a long time that Wolf had

walked away from trouble.

> The following year Wolf took a class tailored to young men on the campus:

A lot of the times a lot of us are in there because we're known to society as fuck-ups. . . . We were known to society as fuck-ups, but we wanted to be something in our life so we were all in that class to help each other out and get to where we wanted to go which we all did. (Interview 2)

It was in this class that Wolf had the opportunity to attend a Building Bridges camp. He went with low expectations, but instead had the experience of a lifetime.

I didn't have anyone to tell it to, but now this group sat there out of respect and listened to what I had to say. . . . I felt loved like never before. My mom loves me. My dad loves me. Everyone in my family loves me, but I felt some of the love that I still can't explain to this day. Maybe it was so much understanding and support and we love you for you no matter what. We respect Wolf for who Wolf is. We respect George for who George is. Tina for Tina, basically. So each of these people I met and I respected them just because they were being themselves. They were being open-minded and understanding to not only what I'm going through but what they're going through. . . . If I didn't go to camp, I wouldn't be where I am today. I would never join [the fraternity]. I would have still been in the streets still doing what I wasn't supposed to be doing, and I probably would've been in jail, to be honest, if I didn't go to camp. That's just my personal opinion. (Interview 2)

Returning from camp, a group of campers and Youth Leaders formed a human relations club based on the precepts they had learned. They wanted to bring it back to school, to bring about change in their school community.

If I can say what [Building Bridges] does for the community in one word it would

be *awakens*. There are so many blinders on people—kids, teenagers, and adults—

in this community from like past, present, things that have happened, that it puts

blinders on you, and it just doesn't let you see the broader side of things. . . [The

members of the human relations club] let people know about camp, but also let

them know that, hey, the community is really messed up. What do you think

about that? Students at [this high school] never . . . you never really hear hey

what do you think about our community? How can we make our community

better? You're going to be . . . What? What? Excuse me? Community? I worry

about myself. But then even if you don't answer like "oh it's whatever", you're

going to think about it later. Damn, someone really asked me how I felt about my

community. You're going to see an event and you're going to say, 'Damn, that

person was probably talking about something like this.' All through one question:

what do you think about your community? You could be the most ignorant—oh

man, fuck you, I don't care about my community—but you're going to see later

and you're always going to be thinking about that one question. (Interview 2)

From the young men's class, to CCEJ, to involvement with the fraternity which was the

male counterpart to the sorority joined by Tatum and Liz, the other female participant whose

narrative follows, Wolf's life took on a different tone:

When I became a member it was just like, fuck, I belong somewhere. I could say I'm

proud to be in this program. . . . I started taking school way more serious. I wasn't

involved in doing stupid activity anymore. (Interview 2)

The impact of his involvement was reflected in a newfound maturity, which he explained in the following way:

> In high school, there's so much activities to do. You're so involved in school that you don't notice how much homework you have sometimes. Sometimes you have so much homework you're just like, "Fuck!" You're so involved that you don't even notice how much work you have. If you're failing, it's because you're not trying. It's on you. Junior and senior year, that's on you. If you don't do your homework, or pay attention in class, that's your own fault. You can't blame anyone. I failed a test and I didn't study. That's because you know what? I didn't study. I can't do that. Now that's my own fault. (Interview 1)

As he entered his junior year, Wolf also had the opportunity to take more classes in his area of interest, Theater Arts, and he also believed that teachers began to be more respectful to students, which made a difference in his attendance and attitude.

> The teachers started to care a lot more in high school just because they had respect for you in choosing what you want to do already. (Interview 2)

Wolf was not completely reconciled to academics, however. He described his senior year:

> I only had four classes. It was just like I did my bare minimum so now I can chill senior year and just get ready for prom and senior activities and stuff like that. (Interview 1)

Liz

Liz was one of only two female participants. Like Tatum, she was African American, participated in a rigorous college preparatory curriculum in high school, attended a K-8 school beginning in second grade in a predominantly white, middle-class part of the city, and she

matriculated directly to a four-year university. Like Tony, Liz was identified as gifted in

elementary school, and her parents chose to move her to another school to take advantage of the

GATE program. Of transferring, she said,

> I don't think that it really truly affected my learning process. I don't remember having a
>
> harder time adjusting to the people that I was around. I remember having a harder time
>
> adjusting to the workload though. (Interview 1)

Liz came from an intact family with two older brothers and an older sister. One brother

was two years older than she, while the other two siblings are much older. Her youngest brother

was also moved to the K-8 school. Liz's father passed away in her eighth grade year after a

period of illness, which had a significant impact on her experience of school, particularly at the

transition to high school.

Of all the participants, Liz was the most reserved initially. Her responses in the first

interview were brief and I assumed factual, but conveyed a sense of remoteness, as if talking

about the experiences of someone else. Only after recounting what happened to her brother in

the sixth grade, did Liz became animated and seemed to let her guard down somewhat. In the

sixth grade, her brother, who as well as being a mediocre student suffered from health issues,

doodled a caricature of his teacher with an Italian surname whipping stick figures with a whip

made from pasta (a play on the teacher's name). The teacher claimed she felt "threatened and

unsafe" (Interview 1) and had Liz's brother prosecuted. Liz vividly remembered going to court

with her family in support of her brother, who was nonetheless expelled from the school, though

not from the district.

Liz subsequently attended the same K-8 school where this incident took place. She liked the small size and the fact that everyone was a familiar face. She did say that she noticed that she was among the few students of color at the school:

> I remember the students being a little different because I think they were in a slightly
>
> different area, demographics-wise. I felt more secluded in comparison to like a ratio of
>
> African Americans to Hispanics to Asians to Caucasians. (Interview 1)

However, she did not think that it meant that the school, the other students, or school personnel, were inherently racist. Given what happened to her brother, this seemed quite a leap of faith, or perhaps self-deluding, although she did expand on what she learned through this event:

> My parents told me don't do things like this [challenge teachers' authority]
>
> because people might react strongly to it. I think it really affected the way I grew
>
> up just because I learned to be a little more subdued after that. I pulled back a
>
> little in most situations so that nobody would take me as a threat. I learned to
>
> kind of pull back and be more watchful. (Interview 2)

Elementary grades were fun and challenging for Liz, perhaps because she was in the accelerated classes. Middle school represented a slowing down of the curriculum and Liz began to retreat into herself. Unlike in the elementary grades, she did not recall that any teacher or staff member took a particular interest in her or singled her out for encouragement, even after her father became ill when she was in the seventh grade.

> Yeah, I think the fact that they recognized that I was unique, that really is what
>
> got me going to school every day. When teachers started to not notice [when I

was struggling] that, I think, is when I kind of streamlined into a more disdain for

school. (Interview 2)

In addition, Liz did not like the change to multiple teachers and subjects throughout the

course of the day that came with middle school:

Where's the fun in being forced to sit down for hours a day and switch classes and

have your mind bombarded by knowledge, but it's just going to get all jumbled up

in there? (Interview 1)

Although Liz presented herself as poised and reserved, it did appear that the failure of

these important people (teachers) in her life to reach out to her at this difficult time combined

with her brother's treatment, affected her ability to connect to school despite her evident

academic ability.

I was still in this bubble of my life is different than their life. I have to deal with

things that are different than them, than the things they have to deal with. I didn't

really think about it so I felt like I was in my own bubble of not thinking about it

as well; [a] let's-drift-along bubble. (Interview 1)

After all, one benefit to a small school was supposed to be the capacity to treat each

student as an individual and to respond to their needs on an individual basis. It did not appear

that this happened in Liz's case. She cited this as a reason for her further withdrawal into

herself, retreating into her "bubble [where I] drifted along on the surface" (Interview 1) Her

relationships with her peers also had an effect:

When I was one-on-one with my peers and they would not listen to me or they

wouldn't invite me to things, I would feel very targeted and very uncomfortable

so I think I kind of built a bubble to lessen the impact of being alone. . . . I'd say

sixth grade [was] when I became conscious of it. I think that's when I really

started solidifying my little bubble that only encompassed me. (Interview 1)

Liz was, if not focused on her academic career, at least conscious of needing to do her

best in high school in order to prepare herself for college. With that in mind, she applied to one

of the most rigorous college preparatory programs available in the public high schools in the city.

It was also housed on the campus of her home high school, the same college preparatory

program attended by Tatum Lewis. Unlike Tatum, however, Liz chose the program deliberately,

not as a default and did not express any reservations about attending the school with the bad

reputation. When asked what she had thought high school would be like or be about, she replied,

Work, definitely. (Interview 1)

In high school, Liz continued to exist in her bubble, while simultaneously struggling with

adapting to the expectations of the college prep curriculum. She believed that her father's illness

came at a pivotal time in her education and made it difficult for her to learn time management

and the value of routine. At that point in her life, her mother was in school and her siblings were

away, so she was left on her own to find a solution to these new demands.

In her freshman year, Liz and a friend from the tennis team applied to join the school

sorority described earlier as a way to meet the school's service learning graduation requirement.

Liz made it into the program, while her friend did not, surprising her.

I had a lot of fun. Due to the [extracurricular] program actually, the high school

part of it, like if there was no [extracurricular] program, I know that I wouldn't

really have had fun because I would be at home all the time. (Interview 2)

Participation also exposed her to other opportunities in student leadership as well as CCEJ.

Perhaps Liz's exposure to overt racism through her brother's experience made the camping experience more meaningful for her than it was for Tatum. Her natural reserve made it difficult for her to share her own experiences, but she did learn by hearing from others; and it was definitely empowering for her to affirm her own racial identity and to have it validated by others.

Involvement with CCEJ and becoming a Youth Leader in order to spread awareness and to teach tolerance was part of what motivated Liz to continue her education. She identified with those who were oppressed and disadvantaged by the system of privilege under which they lived, and she included students in that group.

> Even though not everybody will learn loving—I mean love learning—it still there are enough students that have the capability like everyone has the capability of it, but if you don't engage them or give them the opportunity, they're never going to . . . I feel like I've never been emotionally available for school to touch me because I've always seen school like an obligation. Not always, but I've seen school as an obligation for quite some time and I just don't want other students to feel like that. (Interview 2)

For herself, Liz intended to use education as a "stepping stone" (Interview 1) from a state university to a more prestigious university for graduate school, to her ultimate goal of home ownership.

Just somewhere with a space that's my own, a house with space that is my own.

(Intrview 1)

She notes that,

School has been probably the most transformative experience in my life, and I don't

know whether to feel glad or sad about it. I feel mostly sad right now because it was so

hard. (Interview 1)

Tyrone

I met Tyrone at the offices of CCEJ. A soft-spoken young man, with the build of a

football player, Tyrone approached our meeting with an open and cheerful expression, and a

willing manner. He was African American, and lived with his grandmother, uncle, and older

brother. His mother and stepsiblings moved to a city several hours north after his stepfather died

when Tyrone was in the twelfth grade.

Tyrone lived in the same small southern California city as the other participants, but on

the border with a neighboring city. Consequently, family moves made during his years of

schooling meant changing school districts as well as schools. He started school in the

neighboring city where

Kindergarten was one of my, I want to say my top, like hands-down best school

year because I didn't have much to worry about because at that point in life. No

one really had a judgment or stereotype about others. It was just two young

human beings playing with each other, which made life a little bit easier. I

enjoyed the teachers because they weren't mean. They kind of didn't get grumpy.

There were always kind of energetic and had a positive vibe to them. That was

really kindergarten for me. (Interview 1)

Tyrone changed school districts and schools in third grade, which, from piecing together

different parts of his narrative, had quite an impact. At his new school, he had a hard time

making friends, and he had a harder time in the classroom.

The teaching habits, I mean not habits, but the way teachers taught they were kind

of generalized. They weren't specific enough because sometimes—I'm more of a

hands-on learner—and sometimes it was more of a general teaching way so it was

hard for me to keep up because that's the way I learned. (Interview 1)

In the end, he was retained in third grade, and in his second third-grade year, he was referred for

anger management.

Third grade they wanted to put me in anger management, which didn't really

work out because anger management only made me more angry [sic]. . . . I was

always frustrated and I always expressed how angry I am with people because

people frustrated me. (Interview 1)

He felt that his teachers did not try to meet his learning needs, he was ashamed that he

had to repeat third grade, and he struggled to make friends, but mostly Tyrone connected

his struggle with the lack of a father.

I don't know my dad. I met my dad once, but I don't really know him like that

and we haven't talked or anything. That there, and not having a father figure,

which that was like my main thing as a child. I wanted my dad. Going to school

I always saw people with a dad and a mom. (Interview 1)

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In fifth grade, Tyrone joined a club for students interested in mathematics and science, which helped his confidence. He also had the first nurturing teacher since enrolling at the school.

> She had us all go around and say what we wanted to be, and when I said it everyone told me that I couldn't be the president. They laughed at me and booed me. . . . She told me that I could be the president. At the moment it made me feel really good because it's someone telling me like you can be whatever you want. . . She just inspired me to try to do my all. It was kind of . . . I think it was more of an inspiration because I was younger and it was the first time that I really had someone to say like you can do this. You can do what you want. For so long, I felt like there were people saying you can't do this and you can't do that.
>
> (Interview 1)

He began to work harder throughout fifth and sixth grade, and then in the seventh grade, he attempted accelerated work.

Unfortunately, his gains were wiped out when, due to another move, he was withdrawn from the school abruptly toward the end of seventh grade without finishing the year. Consequently, he received Fs in all his classes. (When a student withdraws, the grades are frozen. Then, when the student enrolls at the next school, the grades are taken as grades in progress. Because Tyrone's parent did not officially withdraw him, and he did not re-enroll in another school within that school year, his grades continued to drop.) He did not re-enroll in school until the following year, and it was yet another school

within the district. Tyrone was put into remedial classes which frustrated and angered

him, and he also got into a fight his first week. It was definitely a step backward.

> That year I did well enough to walk for promotion, but I didn't do what I think I
>
> should have did [sic] now. I really slacked off. (Interview 1)

Leaving seventh grade early and a poor performance in eighth grade affected

Tyrone's high school options. He applied for a variety of programs, but ended up

attending his neighborhood high school in the auto mechanics program.

High school represented a fresh start for Tyrone, and he took full advantage. He

was inexplicably placed in Associated Student Body (student council) as a class, where

he took on the role of Activities Director. Combined with joining the wrestling team, that

compensated for the low level classes he was expected to take, and allowed Tyrone to

feel some enthusiasm for school.

He continued to express a lingering resentment toward teachers:

> They expect me to act and think and be like a regular middle school/high school
>
> student. They thought I was immature and I couldn't think for myself sometimes.
>
> They kind of talked down upon me, which I thought was rude. I'm not like those
>
> guys over there because certain people act like goof balls and stuff. (Interview 1)

According to Tyrone,

> Certain teachers said oh well you guys don't change. All students are the same
>
> when they come in here. (Interview 1)

Counselors would not allow him to change classes if he felt a personality conflict with a

teacher, so he would not attend the class. He explained,

It was my solution of not blowing up at someone or having the biggest problem.

(Interview 1)

Two notable exceptions to Tyrone's generalizations about teachers were his stage crew teacher and his video production teacher. By junior year, Tyrone had moved out of the auto technology academy and into the academy related to media arts. These teachers made their academy much more united and comfortable. Students came to their classrooms at lunch to hang out, their teaching methods were stern but fair, and they related to students on a more genuine level. Joining this academy led Tyrone to other opportunities—one that changed the direction of his life.

The high school had phased out their photography program but stored the equipment in the stage area. One day, the stage crew teacher put a camera in Tyrone's hands and had him start photographing football games for the closed circuit news show on campus. Tyrone said,

When they put a camera in my hand, I was a natural. I loved it. I was getting paid on a Saturday $200 to take 150 pictures. (Interview 2)

Being a photographer gave him "a charm" (Interview 2) that helped him relate to his peers. By the end of his junior year school was going really well for Tyrone. He was still on the wrestling team. He had discovered his passion, photography. He had joined the fraternity, and he was a Youth Leader for CCEJ.

Senior year was a critical time for Tyrone. His stepfather died in the middle of the year. When the family went to Las Vegas to lay him to rest, their car broke down leaving them stranded for several weeks. Tyrone's grades plummeted. When the family did make it back to southern California, his mother and younger siblings moved out of

the area. Tyrone moved in with a friend from school and was effectively on his own. He had a "hustle" buying and selling electronics to earn money, but still had to sacrifice many of the senior activities and accouterments in order to have enough money on which to live.

After graduation, Tyrone planned to join the Army but due to an outstanding bench warrant stemming from a truancy citation in freshman year of which he was unaware, he was unable to enlist. A mentor at CCEJ convinced him to give community college a try. But even though he qualified for financial aid, it would have been months before it would have been awarded; and during that time he would not have access to the books and materials required by the classes he wanted to take. So Tyrone had to put that aspiration on hold.

> I feel very lost because it's kind of like now I feel like an adult. I feel like where
> do I go now? It's the difference between being in elementary, middle school,
> high school, you've always been given directions and go here and do this and be
> here at this time and that time. That was your main concern. Now, I have all this
> free time now. It's like where do I put this time and which way do I go?
> (Interview 1)

At the time of our meetings, Tyrone was interviewing for full time work as a mover.

Composite of Participant Narratives

The following is a composite of what I learned from the participants about their experiences. In reviewing the data, the most illuminating way to understand the stories

was to summarize them together, according to different stages in their school experience: elementary school, middle school, and high school.

Elementary School

Five out of six of the participants began school with high expectations. They were excited to begin school and the process of learning. Most of them had positive experiences with teachers throughout their elementary years. Several even remembered specific lessons that particularly resonated. All commented on the interactive nature of the learning process in elementary school.

In contrast to how they described the learning process in elementary school in general, the participants all used the language of educational reform. They spoke of their "skill levels"; some referenced "reading benchmarks"; for others "timed math facts tests" was their reference point. They remembered that there was a competitive component to the elementary school classroom—the boys more so than the girls. They understood, either through direct instruction or through intuition, that it was important for them to demonstrate continuous improvement in reading, writing, and mathematical competencies.

The socialization that took place in elementary school reflected a starkly different process between the girls and the boys. Three of the boys had multiple fights in elementary school; one was even expelled from his school in the third grade. As they moved through the elementary grades, the boys' positive perceptions of teachers and of school in general deteriorated in perceptible ways that were often linked to disciplinary actions.

While not as fraught as that of the boys, the girls' positive perceptions as they moved through elementary school also diminished. The girls attended a similar K-8 school outside their neighborhood and reported that their experiences with their peers were generally positive. The girls reported that their teachers were somewhat impersonal, but caring.

Middle School

Middle school was generally considered to be a challenging time for all of the participants. They were moving through puberty and into adolescence. It was also a time when instruction transitioned from a more engaging, interactive process to the more traditional lecture format. Children were considered to have developed the capacity to sit still for longer periods of time and to be capable of more abstract thought, which may be inaccurate as reflected in the stories of the participants.

As middle school students, the participants in this study may have had the capacity to sit still for long periods of time and the capacity for abstract thought, but they seemed to lack the inclination or motivation to do so. A common thread running through their narratives was the disconnection from school that they felt, particularly at the beginning of middle school. For the boys, there were increasing conflicts with teachers, and for three of them there was increased involvement in illegal activities. Liz floated along in her bubble, while Tatum kept her head down, continuing her achievement and maintaining her status as exemplary student.

High School

All of the participants found some kind of place for themselves in their high school years. Freshman year was a difficult transition except for Tony, who experienced it as more of the same. However, it was during this time that connections were made and doors seemed to open for most of them.

Tony was the outlier; he expressed feeling alienated from school throughout high school. Even his involvement with CCEJ put him in a different category than his school peers rather than forging a deeper connection. The other participants found their participation in clubs and classes to be reconciling to the school environment. It was a way to make it through the drudgery of the school day and to continue to make school their venue.

Conversely, the educational element for all of the participants in this study remained in the background. They may have been reconciled to the fact of school attendance, but none of the students was able to articulate to any great degree the meaning and purpose of the high school curriculum, nor were they able to link it to future aspirations. It was, at best, peripheral to their high school experience.

Conclusion

For all of these students, education represented a way to achieve something of their own. They all came from families of limited means—from outright poverty to difficult circumstances. Four of them had the experience of attending school with children from much better economic circumstances. It was these young people who indicated that education was important to them because they saw it as instrumental to

their economic success. They all expressed that educational attainment was a prerequisite to them someday having something more for themselves—a space, a room, a house. There was no question that their families' poor economic status affected their opportunities and desired outcomes.

With one exception, the participants attended more than one school during at least one grade span, K-5, K-8, 6-8, and 9-12. That lack of continuity may have also contributed to some of the participants' difficulty connecting with school as an institution in which they felt that they belonged.

Family situations also played a significant role in the way the participants experienced school. Liz and Tyrone each had a close family member die. Wolf, Tony, Jay, and Tyrone had transient or absent father figures. Both Liz and Tyrone's older brothers had legal trouble that impacted their lives and their educations. These are all conditions linked to poverty that are not uncommon in working class communities of color.

Nevertheless, these narratives were rich sources of data regarding the contemporary student experience for low-income students of color. As you will see in the following chapter, the commonalities in the participants' experiences were telling, equally as telling was what was not expressed in their stories.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS

The research questions that drove this study centered on the intersection of education and aspiration and the ways in which schools and school personnel supported or otherwise affected the development of each participant's unique vision of themselves as burgeoning adults. Yet in the course of my conversations with participants, when we spoke of their aspirations, these existed outside of their experience of education or, in Liz's case, in reaction to it. Instead, their education was "a lot of little things . . . basic skills" (Tony, Interview 1) that they understood they needed to master to obtain a high school diploma; which, they understood they needed to access any sort of economic opportunity. It amounted to a sort of quid pro quo, in which dreams gave way to economic necessity. No middle way was possible.

This speaks to the reality of the post-NCLB (2001) public school, with its emphasis on accountability and measurement and its impact on the lives and aspirations of working class youth of color. As will be discussed further in the sections to follow, this can be framed as an expression of the social milieu inhabited by working class youth of color that make them subject to the imposition of the institutional goals of the school in its function as an arm of the hegemony.

The following discussion of findings is organized around a set of overarching themes that includes: school as field; schooling as contradiction; schooling as agent of domestication; schooling as symbolic violence; the complexity of student resistance; and schooling as process of colonization. It is important to note that these themes, although categorized for discussion here,

must be understood as a matrix of overlapping elements, which impact the aspirations of children, as well as their perceptions of themselves and their future.

Major Findings

School as Field

The French sociologist Bourdieu (1986) used the term *milieu* to characterize the environment in which one lives. He argued that it is one's milieu that creates one's habitus, or one's understanding of how society functions—one's assumptions about the world and one's place in it. One's milieu and habitus in turn create one's field, or the arena within which one lives in relation to others in different fields. Having carefully listened to participants in this study, I argue that the public school environment creates a unique milieu for youth who attend public schools. It is different from their home environment, and it is also different from the external social environment outside of school, although it does mirror the social environment to an extent. That is, in many ways the expectations placed upon public school students reflect their race, ethnicity, and class in what critical theorists such as Giroux (1997) and Apple (2012) have called the hidden curriculum. However, there are characteristics specific to the school environment that inform students' understandings of what constitutes the function of the school, and so creates a deep disconnect between the school as the place for education, and the school as the field (in Bourdieu's sense) for working class youth of color.

Social Context. Most widespread is the school as a social context or the place for children and youth, full stop. Many of the participants in this study made statements such as "I don't know what I would do if I didn't go to school" (Tatum, Interview 1) and "school is where I see my friends" (Wolf, Interview 1). Societal fragmentation and the lack of public space for

young people—and for families collectively—has been noted by scholars (Boyd, 2014; Clark, 2011; Finkelhor, 2010; Giroux, 2012; Males, 1996) as effecting the transformation of the school from the place where children go to receive an education to, generically the place children go. Much has been made of the prevalence of social media in the lives of this generation in popular media, but the participants also expressed wanting to have opportunities to physically interact with their peers. Accordingly, given the constricted access to public spaces and pervasive anxiety around these same spaces, school served for the participants as the default place for them to socialize, given the very few public spaces available to them. This fear of public spaces supports the concept of school-as-institution in further limiting and directing the trajectory of the lives of working class youth of color. The benign way in which this has been accomplished—offering opportunities for engagement that are otherwise out of reach—has disguised the way in which the habitus of working class youth of color is ineluctably formed by their time in the school, creating both a unique social milieu and the field within which it is enacted.

Extracurricular. The fear that has driven many parents to severely limit children's access to public spaces also has dictated that youth be constructively engaged in activity to "keep them out of trouble" (Boyd, 2014; Finkelhor, 2010; Glassner, 1999). In middle class families, that desire has been joined with a drive to optimize available opportunities to create a competitive resume for college applications, making participation in organized sports, music or other artistic instruction, the new normal (Clark, 2011). For children from low-income families who may live in neighborhoods that their families perceive as unsafe, the idea of school as a social milieu has become especially salient. Parents in these families typically work longer hours and are limited in their ability to provide leisure time activities for their children due to the

constraints of time and money. The school, therefore, has operated as a proxy for extracurricular activities that are more readily available to children of privilege. Wolf, who discovered a love of acting through an afterschool program, could not afford to participate in the children's acting class nor could his mother transport him: He noted,

It was like $400 a month and I was just like oh man. It's all the way out in Huntington Beach so it was like, all right I'll just watch a lot of TV and YouTube and see what happens. (Wolf, Interview 1)

He almost was not able to attend Building Bridges camp for lack of money. Tyrone could not participate in sports until they became available through the school. He reflected,

If you wanted to play sports you had to like—it was outside of school—you had to pay for it. We weren't financially set to pay for a league. (Interview 1)

Schooling as Contradiction

The confusion between the social and educational function of the school sets up and reinforces an essential contradiction in modern public education. That is, school is meant by society to provide for the education of its youth. The hidden curriculum privileges the ideal of the college preparatory curriculum as the desired outcome and imposes this ideal through coerced compliance (Abeles & Congdon, 2010; Clark, 2011; Lampert, 2013; Pope, 2001). Thus, there is a two-tiered system that coexists within the school site, which generates a variety of contradictory dimensions.

School as student space versus school as workplace. A primary reason that children attend school is to socialize with their peers. The participants in this study did not see themselves as having any voice or say in what they learned. They had no voice in the way in

which learning was conducted or measured. Daniels and Arapostathis (2004) found that this enforced passivity encourages youth to disengage from the process, so that the adults whose job it is to ensure that students perform at a given level and who are subject to sanctions if that level is not reached must find a way to manipulate students into performance. This phenomenon, as Darder (2012a) posited in her work *Culture and Power in the Classroom* could actually place the labor of teachers and the social student space at cross purposes, fueling authoritarian responses from educators who are seeking compliance to maintain order in the classroom. In turn, this can provoke, wittingly or unwittingly, student passivity or resistance. As Jay stated,

> Sometimes you may think that teachers just care about the job and getting paid and everything, but a lot of times it's not the case but sometimes in the way they treat you, you kind of feel like that. (Interview 1)

Tony with the ongoing problems he faced with teachers said,

> I've had a lot of teachers who are just teachers because like I said, the authority. (Interview 2)

Education as conformity. Higher education may indeed serve as a gateway to the middle class, and as such it may represent opportunity for youth of poverty and working class backgrounds, particularly as the social safety net continues to disintegrate and high-wage, low-skill jobs continue to evaporate along with unions. However, the contradiction lies in the fact that obtaining access to this public good requires greater and greater conformity with the status quo. Education as emancipation and as a means to self-realization may have existed to some extent at the university level (cf. Baxter Magolda, 2001), but in many ways access to social emancipation and self-realization is systematically siphoned off from the individual in the

process of gaining access to higher education. The participants spoke of the repeated warnings

they received in elementary school about preparing for middle school, *or else*. In middle school,

the warnings were about being ready for high school, *or else*. In high school they were about

going to college, *or else*. The implied threat being that conformity would engender access, and

defiance would close the door to opportunity. Tatum summed it up,

> You have to do everything that the teachers tell you and how they tell you because other
>
> than that you're not going to pass. (Interview 2)

Student voice. As the school has come to dominate the lives of children and young

adults, it would be natural to assume that these same people would want to have a voice in the

way the educational process is structured, as well as the physical environment. However, this

was not borne out by participants' narratives. Study participants mentioned the notion of voice

explicitly twice. Tony considered his "strong voice" (Interview 2) as the source of his conflicts

with teachers. Tyrone said,

> If the students had a bit more kind of voice in the school, then more students would want
>
> to come to school and be active and be active learners and active listeners. (Interview 2)

As noted in Chapter Two, there has been a limited amount of research on student voice in

the K-12 grades. Studies available have shown that youth value participating in decision-making

when it is offered (Akom et al., 2008; Cumings Mansfield et al., 2012; Daniels & Arapostathis,

2004; Kennedy & Datnow, 2010; Kordalewski, 1999; Mitra, 2006a, 2006b; Robinson & Taylor,

2007; Scanlon, 2012; Smyth, 2006; Zion, 2009). However, it seems that young people for

themselves do not (or are not prepared to) consider the possibility of such participation. Instead,

the participants displayed a high degree of passivity. Each participant found a way to cope with

this enforced passivity within the school: Tony through teacher confrontation, Tyrone in angry outbursts, and Liz in her bubble. In Tatum, the adaptation was so successful she did not know what to do when school was not in session.

None of the participants connected their frustration to a larger system that had influenced or coerced them into adopting a passive role, remaining powerless with respect to political formation. Again, research shows that such disengagement and disempowerment has been a byproduct of the coercive, authoritarian structure of our public schools (Apple, 2012; Darder, 2012a; Giroux, 1997; Lampert, 2013; Zion, 2009). As would be predicted, the participants may have bemoaned the loss of interactive lessons, but they did not challenge that loss. They took what was offered and accepted it as their lot without any sense of individual or collective social agency to effect change. Only Liz hoped to become empowered to the point where she could advocate for improvements, and she put that action off until she has gained the credentials of a prestigious university.

Aspiration. From the six narratives, it is also evident that just as their voices have been silenced, so too have their aspirations been funneled into the school and into the societally-sanctioned goal of college attendance. The confluence of juvenoia (Boyd, 2014; Finkelhor, 2010; Glassner, 1999), the neoliberal drive to shape public education (Apple, 2012; Giroux, 1997; Ravitch, 2010), and middle class economic insecurity in the face of the expanding gap between rich and poor (Abeles & Congdon, 2010; Clark, 2011), has created a perfect storm of conditions to repress and undermine the very ability of the participants to conceptualize an aspiration beyond the generic goal of going to college. Liz and Wolf expressed a desired outcome from their college experience, Liz to become a statistician and Wolf an actor, while

Tatum, Jay, and Tony were attending for the sake of attendance. Tyrone recognized that while high school may prepare one for college, it did not prepare one for life. He stated,

> That's the one thing I can say, is that it just really prepared you to go to college. To get the knowledge enough to graduate and then you can go to college. (Interview 2)

Schooling as Agent of Domestication

More broadly speaking, the school has become an agent of domestication, most notably for poor youth of color, but also to some degree for all public school students. The narratives of the participants reflected the manner in which "the classroom exists as an arena of domestication, where knowledge and its construction are objectified and the student must acquiesce" (Darder, 2015, p. 69-70). The domestication of their aspirations was particularly apparent with respect to the college readiness mantra. Beginning with elementary age children, teachers as agents of the school and of society enact upon their students an agenda that de-emphasizes the needs and desires of the individual in pursuit of adherence to the standard. Students' beliefs and habits begin to be formed as they are trained early on to be college ready. The educational process is viewed as a hierarchy that becomes progressively more difficult as the student moves through its levels, like he or she moves through the levels of a demented video game.

Participants viewed kindergarten through second grade as an idyllic time when teachers were kind and nurturing, delivering their educational packages in palatable nuggets of interactivity. With third grade commenced the imposition of the need to do better, to work harder, and to become more disciplined, in preparation for the challenge of middle school. Wolf noted,

A lot of the times in elementary especially like fifth grade they told us you're getting

ready for middle school; middle school is no joke, which they weren't lying about

because it actually got serious around that time. (Interview 1)

Interactive lessons of elementary school gave way to middle school teacher talk and

student note-taking, as Liz explained,

It was when things got more structured so that it was less interactive and [there was] less

"let's make this fun" and more just "you sit there and do what I say." (Interview 1)

Middle school brought the imposition of arbitrarily determined chunks of time to devote

to an externally determined set of subjects. Accordingly, school bells and schedules ruled

participant's days. They learned to channel their creativity and curiosity into sanctioned

behaviors and activities. Rubrics gave way to letter grades. Ranking and competition became

more overt. High school—the last frontier for too many public school students—loomed large.

It became the cudgel to enforce student compliance according to the participants in this study.

Conventional wisdom says that one cannot find a job or support oneself without a high school

diploma at the very least, and one must be prepared for high school or one will put the realization

of that modest goal in jeopardy. The participants seem to have gotten that message loud and

clear. Jay summed it up: "

We are not star athletes that could just go and not go to high school or drop out of high

school to make it, or be marked as successful in this world. It takes education and

working toward a career. (Interview 2)

It must be such a relief for young people to finally reach high school. At last! An end to

the threats and unceasing preparation. Alas, teachers in the earlier grades were correct: whatever

one had accomplished to this point, even though the average age to begin high school is 14, seems to determine the path one follows. As Wolf said,

> My parents would tell me that it was always good to do well in education and what not because I could get a better job and go to a better high school. (Interview 1)

For Liz, middle school was conditioning for high school:

> They're slowly streamlining us into, "this is how you're supposed to learn. You need to learn by lectures and you have to do it this way." School, it became a tedious thing to me especially middle school to high school. (Interview 1)

In the schools the study participants attended, vocational programs were geared to children who had failed to demonstrate a strict-enough adherence to the standards. College preparatory programs were reserved for those who had demonstrated a satisfactory degree of compliance and had met the criteria as determined by the institution.

Neither Wolf or Tyrone were given real options in their high school choice, and even Tatum, the most compliant of all the participants, was denied access to her chosen school, perhaps because, as she noted, her performance on the California Standards Tests did not reflect her classroom performance. School achievement, the pathway leading to access to higher education, became a function of docile behavior rather than ability, and it was certainly not related to the individuals' dreams or goals. Or rather, the ability to fulfill one's goals and dreams has been made conditional on the ability to placate and appease the right teachers, counselors, and leaders.

Schooling as Symbolic Violence

The schooling process that participants experienced seemed to inevitably enact a symbolic violence on both a personal and institutional level. *Symbolic violence* is a term coined by Bourdieu (1986) to express his theory of the ways in which social institutions such as schools enact the hegemonic ideology on members of society who are subsequently victimized by this version of social relationships—brainwashing, in effect. This understanding of the school's role in conditioning children and young people to occupy particular social spaces has informed the work of many who have written on critical pedagogy in the past, from Weis in 2004, to Bowles and Gintis in 2011, to Darder in 2012 (a). The alienation of the educational process from the needs and dreams of the individual participants and the enforcement of ideologically-determined outcomes enacted upon them seem to function as a kind of spiritual rape—or worse. When over time the institutional ideology overcame the organic dreams and hopes of the participants, it created a kind of zombie, one that mouths the mantras learned over the course of thirteen years. Participants took as their guiding statement, "I'm going to college!" with little or no thought to what that actually entailed, or how, in fact, this might be related to their life goals.

Institutional. Re-creating all public schools into a single prototype negates the realities of each child's life. Youth of color and youth of poverty particularly have been affected by the propagation of neoliberal ideologies (Darder, 2012a; Delpit, 2012; Giroux, 2012; Kao & Thompson, 2003). They have been extracted from their environment and have had the dominant curriculum enacted upon them without their consent or cooperation, in order to achieve the externally determined goal of college preparation. Tony spoke of the shock of adjustment to the "money-dominated" (Interview 1) school; Liz reported feeling left out; Tyrone and Wolf were

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brought into compliance with the school environment through activities unrelated to learning; and Jay's experience reflected his personal defiance to the oppressive forces of his high school.

Personal identities. The banking model (Freire, 1993) that has guided the way education has been delivered in public schools effectively has induced in children a vision of the world that is meritocratic in nature. It has presented the world as a place where gender, queerness, race, ethnicity, and class do not exist as determinants of one's choices and opportunities in life. It has placed responsibility for achievement within the purview of the individual and has made achievement contingent upon adherence to the dominant curriculum (Apple, 2012; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2004; Gatto, 2000; Lampert, 2013). In the process, the components of the participant's personal identity seem to have become subsumed under the generic term *student*, while the reality of the institutionalized oppression seem to have been abstracted from the youth's experience, which speaks to both the issue of symbolic violence and participants' situation in the social milieu of public school student. As Tony clarified for me,

> Rarely do you see teachers in high school or K-12 where the student or somebody
> learning from them can change something or can do their own thing. There were always
> the guidelines. There was always something wrong that was done or "oh you should've
> done it my way." But just in the school sense. Not in the whole world. (Interview 2)

Race. All the participants, regardless of their personal experiences such as with Tony, or those of their family members such as with Tyrone and Liz, or even explicit discussions about racial divisions visible on their campus such as with Tony, viewed their school as place where all students were treated equally. Race was seen by the participants either not a factor or a crutch used by some students to justify their lack of achievement. Conversely, participants were quick

to note that once they left school for the workplace, or the "real" world, then they would be subject to the full spectrum of "isms:" racism, sexism, ageism, and classism, to name only the most common.

Class. Participants in this study all came from low-income families. All were aware of their class position and there was some similarity in their self-stated life goals. Three of the six participants had as a goal a place of their own, and they viewed education as a means to achieve that goal. One desired power over his destiny. Half of them had a goal that may be interpreted as a function of their class location. Yet, in a follow up focus group interview the participants unanimously stated that schools were class-neutral, just as they were race-neutral. The subtext of their narratives in which they spoke of the reputation of their school belied this stated belief. There was a commonsensical assumption (Gramsci, 1971) that schools in more middle-class areas were better, an assumption that may have been transmitted in two instances when parents moved their children from the neighborhood school to a school in a predominantly Caucasian area.

Gender. The different ways in which male and female participants responded to the pressures exerted upon them through the educational process is striking. There has been a large body of research on the gender gap in college (Butterfield & Pemberton, 2012; Ewert, 2010; Hudson, Aquilino, & Kienzl, 2005; Lee & Ransom, 2011; Liu & Educational Testing Service, 2011), and efforts have been underway to improve recruitment and retention of male students, particularly male students of color. It is clear even from this small sample that males and females respond differently to the structure of the public school environment beginning at an

early age, and that a new approach is called for if the goal is to guide more males of color into higher education.

Both female participants Liz and Tatum matriculated to four-year universities. Of the males, only Jay may go directly to a four-year university, and that came about as a fluke. Tatum, the most successful in that she attends the most prestigious school, understands explicitly what it takes to be successful in K-12 education:

> You have to do everything that the teachers tell you and how they tell you because other than that you're not going to pass.

The boys' narratives by contrast focused on the power dynamic with teachers and other school personnel. Tony expressed resentment over what he considers K-12 teachers' need to exert authority; Tyrone was resentful that teachers treated students however they pleased, while students received discipline when they attempted self-advocacy; and Jay and Wolf both experimented with covert defiance in the form of illegal activity.

Yet, all participants expressed fondness for elementary school and the ways that learning was experienced during those years. Ogbu's (2003) central thesis was that students of color fail as an act of defiance, while Harris (2011) refuted that conclusion. His research indicated, as I found with my participants, that failure was more a matter of being pushed out of education through failure to exhibit adequately compliant behavior. Why students fail is clearly a matter for further research. To date, little research has been concerned with the totality of the educational experience; instead research has focused on the outcomes rather than the processes. Given the gender differential in college enrollment and completion, however, gender represents a promising lens through which to explore the experience of K-12 education.

Complexity of Student Resistance

One might expect that young people would resist forms of symbolic violence in their schooling experiences. However, none of the participants interviewed did so. Inculcation of the hegemonic myth of personal responsibility, which was echoed in a variety of ways throughout the interviews, seemed to neutralize the possibility of their participation in organized resistance. These participants located success or failure squarely within themselves as individuals. When Liz failed to live up to the moniker of "gifted," she blamed her lack of performance on failure to master time-management and her mother's busy schedule rather than on institutional apathy or neglect of her academic needs. Further, as the school site has become the proxy parent for many poor youth of color such as those in this study, resistance has been co-opted within organizations that act to channel student action into pro-social activities that reflect the goals of the broader hegemonic forces; again creating the public school social milieu of the working class youth of color as well as their field. These students participated in a variety of school-related activities, sports and otherwise, but none assisted them to name the structural inequalities they faced daily. Instead, the focus remained on individual participation and future success. Tony, who named the racial divisions at his high school and characterized his other school as "money-dominated," nevertheless related of his African American friend,

> There were other people just like her who just give up just because they feel like the world is against them, but in reality it's just that they're just doing it to themselves.

The personal is . . . personal. Five of the six participants experienced conflict with the school site at different points in their K-12 schooling. Tony expressed his resistance through personal conflict with teachers within the classroom and by refusing to work to his "potential" as

a gifted student. Tyrone resisted the failure of teachers and the school site as a whole to recognize his inherent right to humane treatment through explosive outbursts that caused adults to refer him when he was only eight years old to "anger management." Wolf and Jay expressed their resistance by refusing to adhere to the expectations of the school and by engaging in illicit activity from an early age. Liz's resistance took the form of retreat into a "bubble" where she floated along on the surface, disengaged from a system that had failed her brother and disregarded her own unique traits.

  Counterhegemonic spaces or domesticated resistance? Each of the participants found a type of relief valve for their frustration and resistance through participation in a leadership program. All of them attended a Building Bridges Human Relations Camp, sponsored by CCEJ, and subsequently became Youth Leaders. The camp held more meaning for Wolf, Tony, Liz, and Tyrone. According to their interviews, the lessons from that experience continue to exert an influence on their life choices. For the young men, it seemed to have been particularly meaningful as a place in which they could safely articulate their anger and frustration with the way they had been treated both in and out of school. CCEJ gave them some degree of understanding that they were not the sole architects of their destiny; that race, class, gender, as well as other factors, all exerted an influence. Liz's expressed experience with the impact of racism was indirect, yet CCEJ still gave her a place to better grapple with the forces that pushed her and her brother to occupy stereotypical social spaces, namely, dangerous African American male and docile African American female. Liz stated that the program affirmed her sense of injustice and gave her the impetus to move forward to work for change.

Nevertheless, their participation in CCEJ did not noticeably affect participants' ability to generalize their personal conditions to the system as a whole. Their resistance came to be channeled into efforts directed at the individual through providing an opportunity to talk about issues of oppression in the club that came into being at their high school. The exception to this was Tyrone, who did share the belief that teachers needed to attend human relations training to better work with their students.

Those participants who were part of the school fraternity or sorority also came to be reconciled as a by-product of their involvement. Wolf called it "home." Their membership gave them the opportunity to be part of something larger. It is interesting that Tatum, who became senior class president, saw the sorority as part of meeting the profile of the successful college applicant when she said,

I was able to do much more community service as part of [the sorority] than I would have on my own.

For Tyrone, the wrestling team was the catalyst that initially reconciled him to the school site. This was followed by his interest in photography. He explicitly indicated that wrestling gave him a physical outlet for his feelings of rage and frustration, while photography tapped into his deepest sense of himself as a talented artist and aesthete.

In all cases, membership in an organization that recognized some part of the youth as inherently capable apart from their academic achievement assisted the participants to recover a sense of engagement with the school site, although it existed outside of the educational function of the school. For Tony, whose participation in CCEJ made him an anomaly on his school

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campus and reinforced his alienation from school, it was only finding adult mentors that reinforced his sense of uniqueness and value and enabled him to tolerate the high school years.

Yet, from the experience of speaking with them, I was left with the sense that while these activities made palatable a disagreeable experience and to some degree assisted in the conscientization of these emerging adults, they fell short in helping them to evolve as collectively conscious citizens of the world. Channeling student resistance into constructive activity seemed to also have the effect of making oppression bearable. These organizations, even CCEJ, seemed to act as representatives of the hegemonic order, reinforcing its goals and values. CCEJ existed in a paradox because to further its mission it had to remain neutral on the embedded injustices of the system within which it worked. The sorority and fraternity, by operating on a competitive basis, explicitly reinforced these hegemonic values by strengthening the culture of meritocracy. As Tyrone acknowledged,

My friends who dropped out, or did badly, didn't have anything to do.

His solution was to establish more clubs.

Schooling as Process of Colonization

In the hegemonic process of becoming educated, which extinguishes true aspiration, silences student voice, and co-opts resistance, the individual child, youth, and emerging adult, has become colonized with the traits and values of the dominant culture (Apple, 2012; Darder, 2012a; Freire, 1993; Gatto, 2000; Giroux, 2009; Lampert, 2013). The participants in this study remembered entering school full of anticipation, eager to learn and explore the world. Inidially, those high expectations were seemingly met with warmth and encouragement. Gradually, measurement began. Competition set in. In essence, the participants were no longer explorers,

but objects to be measured and analyzed, each in comparison with the other. Thus began the objectification process. In a variety of ways, participants become alienated from their own educational achievement. Learning was no longer done in a spirit of curiosity and joy; instead, it became a product to be evaluated and found to be satisfactory or inadequate. From the interviews, participants were no longer understood by name and personality, but by a set of metrics—so-and-so is a below-grade reader, but excels at addition.

As that transformation took place, the participants expressed its impact on their lives physically. In a bid for recognition of their beautiful and unique humanity, some exhibited challenging classroom behaviors, like "failure to follow instructions," or conflicts with peers, both of which frustrated the goal of the elementary school class to create tractable middle school students. The participants seem to have become abstracted into a set of behaviors and test scores as they were socialized to believe that the standardized tests administered every year represented their core identity—a belief fostered to create motivation to do well and engender those all-important high scores for the teacher who faces the specter of "value-added" and the school which faces designation as "low-performing"—or worse (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2004; Lampert, 2013).

Disillusioned, the participants entered puberty and middle school. The instructional format changed for each of them from the influence of one teacher in the elementary classroom—good or bad, at least a single teacher necessitated developing a personal relationship—to multiple teachers and subjects throughout the day in middle school. At that point, the participants felt they understood what was being asked of them and either proceeded to docilely produce the behavior and achievement that merited approval and accolades, or became

either a goofball or troublemaker to overtly or covertly resist the colonizing pressure of the classroom environment.

Judging from the testimonies of the participants, coercion seemed to become the tool of the school in the middle grades. Relational instruction was left in elementary school, and in order to exert control in the classroom and in the school at large, teachers and administrators made explicit the transactional nature of the public school environment. Whether it was through issuing demerits that put at risk the participants' involvement in school activities, or threats of detention, suspension, or expulsion, fear and control dominated the middle school campus. Yet, participants did feel that they had a measure of power in the process because they had learned what behaviors and what products were expected from them.

Understanding the systematic application of the carrots and sticks, participants felt that they could choose to play along for the reward or resist for the possibly greater satisfaction of having frustrated the authorities. Jay and Wolf both played a cat-and-mouse game with school authorities, while Tatum did what teachers and family expected. Either way, what was clear was that participants in this study had internalized the knowledge that it was not what mattered to them that was important, but rather how well they were able to provide the school with the desired product. In comparing it to the community college, Tony stated,

> In high school it was like I was already mad just being in class because all these guidelines and all this and all that. You know you're there to do their stuff and then in college it seems like the professors are there to do our stuff.

Finally, the young adults in this study reached the last stop before emancipation: high school. The students recognized that they were sorted according to both their ability to perform

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and their exhibited promise. Conforming students moved into the elite strata of the college preparatory curriculum; those who challenged the system but showed some capacity inhabited the middle ground; and the goofballs or troublemakers got what was left. The rewards were tangible, while the coercion continued to press as many students as possible into the category of high school graduate. The shared belief among the participants that they needed to have at least a high school diploma before going into the workplace accomplished much of the work of engendering conformity for school personnel. The young adults had internalized the lesson. Some were even fortunate enough to find a place to call home in the school environment; however, some of their friends dropped out, unable to conform or produce as demanded.

Although, as Freire (2000) would contend, colonization is never complete. The responses of participants echoed much complacency and passivity. These young adults seemed to understand their place. They seemed to understand how they earned that place. They were able to recite the values of the institutionalized educational system: go to class, follow instructions, get the reward; act outside the boundaries, defy the rules, accept the punishment. On one end they saw opportunity and access, the validation of self-abnegation. On the other end, they saw failure and disgrace, the dreadful consequence of self-assertion.

Conclusion

The participants in this study were all smart, engaging, resourceful, and exuded a sense of belief in their own competence. Despite the oppressive practices of the K-12 public education system, they expressed a belief in themselves and faith that they would endure if not prevail, regardless of what the future brought—perhaps the outcome of repeating the mantras of the mainstream self-esteem curriculum, which effectively shrouds the deep inequalities of

meritocracy. Hence, it is not surprising that what they lack is a sense of the ways in which their situation at this juncture has been engineered through the application of misguided policies that have failed to take into account a sense of their innermost self, or to cherish their unique humanity. The outcome is that the participants seem to lack a dream for themselves—one that extends beyond their mere survival.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

In the course of the last twelve years, I have worked as a school counselor in a variety of environments. I began as a middle school counselor. My first student encounter was with an eighth-grader concerned with choosing the right college. I then moved to a comprehensive high school in a position that focused on developing career opportunities for students. I then worked as a traditional counselor in this same school with a college preparatory focus. Now I work at an alternative high school working to reinstate dropouts. My career has spanned the implementation of NCLB (2001), the explosive growth of charter schools, Race to the Top (2009), Common Core, and, in California, the Local Control Funding Formula. It has been a tumultuous time in public education. The school district that employs me is considered by many to be on the cutting edge, with a "rock star" superintendent. Yet, my experience has been that little has changed on the front lines over the last two decades.

What has not improved is the way in which students experience the process of becoming educated. What has not changed are the covert ways in which students are still tracked into positions in the classroom that reflect their family of origin. Poor, working class students rarely storm the gate of the college preparatory curriculum. Children of privilege even more rarely enter into vocational programs. Teachers change the language of their pedagogy to align with the latest trend in curriculum and instruction, but they do not change their classroom practices. Any book on educational leadership will tell you about the challenge of change. For change to be meaningful and sustainable, it must include the involvement of those who are most affected— namely the students.

Most often, however, change is driven from the top and instituted with an eye toward the appearance of improvement. When improvement is measured on standardized tests, then that becomes the emphasis of school leaders and, thus, of classroom teachers. The classroom teachers then pass that preoccupation and emphasis on to the student. Our public schools resemble the institutions of past fascist and communist dictatorships in which outcomes are jerry-rigged to support the current preoccupations of the elites. Our current emphasis is on preparing youth for college and career, under the national axiom "the countries that out educate us today will outperform us tomorrow" (Obama, 2009).

In the data-driven environment ushered in by NCLB (2001), public schools are defined by a variety of metrics: test scores, rate of increase on test scores, numbers of fights on campus, suspension rates, number of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch, number of English-language learners. These metrics influence not only how schools fare in school rankings but school budgets as well. School budgets contain categorical funds and may also consist of grant funds. Categorical funds are monies that are given to schools for a specific purpose or a specific population. For example, Title I funds are intended to assist the school in meeting the needs of poor children, so any expenditures from this fund must include language that indicates how it will allow the school to do so. Grants may come from state or federal bodies or from private foundations and are tied to specific actions or outcomes. For example, Race to the Top was a competitive federal grant, contingent on states adopting Common Core Standards and abolishing teacher tenure, among other criteria. (Giroux, 2012)

While the object behind establishing such guidelines is to improve student outcomes, or close the achievement gap, it results in causing activity at the school site to be directed at

fulfilling these criteria rather than treating the educational setting and the student holistically. In the district where I work, one new target is increasing enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, presumably to graduate more students who are four-year college eligible, or perhaps to cause our high schools to move up in the US News & World Report rankings. Students are to be placed in these courses regardless of inclination and must bring a parent to conference with the principal if they wish to withdraw from the class. This district has also required school administrators to drastically reduce the numbers of suspensions. This has been accomplished; however, the numbers of students diverted to on-campus suspension programs or classrooms has increased dramatically.

One must ask: whose interests are being served with these initiatives? While public schools remain strapped for cash, it is not surprising that they should seek to benefit from whatever revenue streams are available. However, in meeting the demands of the source of the funding the student is once again relegated to the background, and the teacher or other staff member is required to address their practice to achieving this other goal.

It is a cliché to say at this point that public education is broken. The dispute lies in finding meaningful solutions. A major flaw is that as a society we put our faith in positivist science, statistics, and scalability. There is no ONE solution. When we predicate our treatment on the standard, we fail to serve every individual. When we drive our reforms from the top, we neutralize our ability to meet the needs of our citizens. We must join with our young people to craft a meaningful education. We must tap into their dreams to fully capture the potential of their generation. We must stop treating them as extensions of the state and realize the promise of the democratic ideal.

When the movie *Dawn of the Dead* (Argento, Rubinstein, Cuomo & Romero, 1978) was released, it masqueraded as a grindhouse horror film. It gained a cult following and began to be interpreted by film critics as a metaphor for the emptiness of the growing consumerist culture engulfing the US at the time. Many social commentators have noted a parallel to the plethora of zombies currently found in popular media and the persistence of the consumerist culture today despite difficult economic times. I would go one step farther: between the objectification of youth by the consumer culture, the consumerization of education, youths' indoctrination into a neoliberal ideology that subjects them to oppression in the guise of opportunity, the assumption of society's goals as a substitute for dreams of their own, and the simultaneous overprotection and demonization to which they are subjected by society, our youth have become the zombies of the modern age. They have but one directive: GO TO COLLEGE!

Recommendations

Separate College From Success

One recommendation, which could ameliorate the college-or-bust mindset would be to begin to decouple the conflation of college from the concepts of success and financial security. Young adults who are expected to learn complex and abstract concepts and ideas from Federalism to Trigonometry are capable of understanding nuance; yet we in education are feeding them absolutes based on statistical data.

In a society where more and more citizens possess credentials, economists have determined that there is a cascading effect. It has become more difficult to find an entry-level job without a minimum credential, a Bachelor's degree, for example, regardless of the skill set required (Beaudry et al., 2013). The response from both government entities and institutions of

higher learning has been to adapt the return-on-investment model from classic economics to higher education. In the past, education has been viewed as an intangible good, resistant to quantification. Now, however, your education is only as good as the salary you can expect to earn upon completion of your degree. This model is in use in several states already, and Obama's White House is ready to launch a federally funded site to bring the concept to a national audience. It represents the triumph of the token economy, and a gross perversion of the nature and benefits of an education. It is certainly unrelated to maintaining an educated citizenry for the perpetuation of a democracy.

It is time, then, to push the pendulum in the other direction. It is time to introduce meaningful career guidance into the school curriculum, beginning in kindergarten and progressing throughout formal schooling. The wide array of options currently available as well as those impossible or whimsical possibilities dreamed up by children should be given equal time without prejudice or preference. It should be clear from the outset that college is but one possible outcome, and that the goal of each child's education should be to optimize the gifts and talents of that child, not to prepare each student for admission to a university. Such a process, of course, must be undertaken in a very serious, thoughtful, and conscientious manner, in order to avoid reproducing the de facto racializing and classed tracking system reminiscent of earlier eras in public education.

Go Beyond Entrepreneurship and Design Thinking

The latest craze to hit the education arena has been the idea of entrepreneurship and design thinking (Wagner, 2012). An entrepreneur has been defined as "one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risks of a business or enterprise," (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Thus,

entrepreneurship has been defined as the act of organizing, managing, and assuming the risks of a business or enterprise. Our youth have become noticeably passive, to the point where they need to be taught initiative. One would think risk-taking a difficult skill to teach; yet, in the pursuit of greater competitiveness, it is now the marker of success. Ironically, it is counterproductive to simultaneously mold youth into conforming to an ideal *über* student on the one hand and to an ideal of rugged individualism, unafraid to buck tradition, on the other. The new Common Core Standards that have critical thinking as the guiding principle will perhaps address the need to produce more entrepreneurs. However, it seems counterintuitive to use a standardized test to evaluate one's critical or creative thinking, since, on such tests, there is still only one right answer.

Design thinking revolves around the mantra, "fail early, fail often." It represents a deconstruction of the design process, which traditionally represented the work or ideas of one person, into a new functionalism. It purports to disassemble the way things are, in order to remake them better. Again, it is a paradox that a standardized, scalable, model of public education can implement the same kind of strategy across a multiplicity of learners, in a multiplicity of environments, in order to achieve—the same results? It is an open question at this point—can creativity be taught?

The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation the report produced by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2013) is a small effort in this direction. Struggling to make liberal arts relevant, the report examines the many ways that a liberal arts education contributes to both the economic welfare and the security of the US. In a similar vein, California recently adopted standards for arts instruction designed

to support the inclusion of an arts curriculum in public schools (Create CA, 2015), another indicator that the tide is turning. Indeed, there are many stories circulating in the popular media about the value of the arts in making children smarter, more creative and more flexible.

These initiatives all take as the foundational premise, however, that the case to be made must be an economic one. The foundational assumption is that in the current social environment, people will only respond to arguments that make economic sense. This is problematic on a number of levels. First, human beings are most decidedly not rational. There is an entire area of study known as economic psychology that seeks to understand individuals' motivations as they so infrequently coincide with what classic economics terms *rational choice*. Human beings are primarily creatures of emotion. They make choices and decisions based on how they feel about something, not on their self-interest, economic or otherwise.

Secondly, since humans are not rational but emotional, trying to tie such a momentous decision as what to do with the rest of one's life to economic data is quixotic at best. Data already indicate that the majority of working adults in the US (67.1%) are either underemployed or disengaged in the work that they do (Adkins, 2015). Trying to make careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics appealing by making an economic case may work for a small percentage of people, but ultimately people will go into—and be successful in—fields to which they are drawn by ability and inclination. Creating an arbitrary value because these are fields that the capitalist economy needs to remain competitive with international rivals is a strategy likely to fail.

I recommended that educators tap into the deepest dreams and desires of children, youth, and emerging adults: the student population of our K-12 system. It is those dreams which fuel

effort and inform motivation. Look at subject matter holistically: learning is inherently creative.

Creation is inherently design. Working to nurture the inherent drive to learn and create by

encouraging the innate aspirations of students will go much further to produce the kind of citizen

we are seeking than forcing students to strive to pass standardized tests. Children educated under

a system encouraging their innate aspirations will lead the way in innovation.

Use Student Data For Students

Data are the Holy Grail of the current era. We collect an unprecedented amount of data.

Most of it is used for commercial purposes—to find out more about human behavior so that we

may sell more things. This includes data on student learning. We have created a model to which

we expect all children to conform: "an eighth grade student should know this." Our assessments

are calibrated to measure each individual child's progress on this yardstick. When the student

falls short, we rely on technology companies to analyze the data and respond with interventions

to bring the student up to the benchmark. We pay huge amounts for the analysis and intervention

because the school's rating depends on so many students meeting this benchmark.

Of what benefit is this to the student? Decontextualizing the skill from the usage is

worthless to the student, I would argue. In addition, using standardized tests to measure an

individual's worth is dehumanizing. It begs the question: whose scale is this? Who decided I

need to be able to do this? How much more valuable to read a work of fiction and discuss

nuance, to argue interpretation and meaning, to present opinion and to learn from the opinions of

others than to essay an answer and be judged as right or wrong.

Assessment is indubitably part of the educational process. However, assessment should

always be done in the context of the individual and that individual's unique combination of

abilities and challenges. That is most effectively done by a well-trained preceptor, not by a machine. It is most effectively done when the student measures their progress against their own achievement, not against an imaginary model, which can only leave them feeling inadequate. It goes back to the idea that educating a child is something that is done *with* the child, not *to* the child. The child is the subject of the education, not its object.

Collaborate

Collaboration is necessary when the child is the subject of his or her own education. When the school must impose consequences for lack of compliance to school objectives, there is a lack of collaboration. Learning is natural for all human beings. Forcing children to master a particular curriculum on a specific timeline is a perversion of that natural inclination. It is the banking model, defined and decried by Freire in his masterwork, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993).

Returning education to a humanizing activity rather than one of objectification will require collaboration with the subject of the educational process, collaboration with the student. This represents not a technique or method but a paradigmatic shift. It already exists in the elementary classroom to a small degree. The study participants identified this as interactivity, and Liz recognized that she began to care less about education when she became an object to her teachers, when as she said,

> Teachers began to not notice [that I was struggling], that I think is when I kind of
> streamlined into more of a disdain for school. (Interview 2)

The answer to creating greater collaboration between student and teacher lies at least partly in responding to the crisis in teaching and teacher education. There is an ongoing battle

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between those who blame teachers unions and inadequate teacher preparation programs for the crisis in public education and professional educators themselves. As parents and citizens we must advocate for alleviating the pressures brought to bear on teachers by way of standardized test results and the value-added approach to teacher evaluation. Just as teachers must join with the students to co-construct a relevant education in the classroom, we must join with teachers to co-construct an educational environment that recognizes and nurtures the efforts teachers put forth for "other people's children" (Delpit, 2012).

Speak Out

Collaboration requires that students of all ages recover their voice. The colonization that instills passivity must be eradicated to create brighter futures for all students, ones in which students actively participate in creating their own destiny. Modern parenting recognizes that more punishment does not result in extinguishing unwanted behavior. Instead, parents learn to channel children's energy into productive avenues. That is what teachers must learn to do.

This is easier said than done, of course. It will undoubtedly require great amounts of organization and energy to create a classroom environment that engages and directs learners' energies to the creation of knowledge and the process of learning. That already does happen to a degree in early elementary grades, and there are movements afoot in secondary education that advocate for innovations to replicate that sort of environment at the secondary level. The flipped classroom is one approach, and *Linked Learning* an educational movement emerging in California presents the active, student-driven class as the optimal classroom environment. It is not a matter of selling one approach, or buying a curriculum. It is a way of re-conceptualizing our understanding of how learning happens and restructuring the classroom to reflect that reality.

Engage Students

We must proceed with caution, however. The subheading speaks to the need to engage students in the process. Educators and academics may have studied the problem and developed theories about best, most effective, and so on, but that does not obviate the need to engage the student in the process. Youth, children, students, do not represent an undifferentiated mass. They have strengths, challenges, preferences, and dislikes. It is not only prudent but also humanizing and democratic to engage those most affected, the students, in creating a classroom or even a school.

Society's practice has been to dictate to youth. Juvenoia has driven us to deny our young people a voice and space, especially poor or working class youth of color. It will not be an easy process to recapture their trust so that we may work together in this endeavor. It will not be quick. It will not be linear. Like the creation of democracy itself, it will be messy, flawed, and circuitous. We will be re-enacting the democratic process on a smaller scale, which will result in not only a better learning environment for all, but will serve as an object lesson in the practice of living democracy, as opposed to the democracy of the ballot. We will be nurturing our children's voices and renewing our democracy simultaneously.

Be Mindful

Mindfulness is a much-overused concept currently, in danger of becoming trite. The words are used as wall decoration in yoga studios and sold as art at Pier 1. Nevertheless, the term's use here is intentional and necessary. The participants' narratives illustrate how youth abstract teachers and education into a mildly annoying bland background to their real lives. Teachers, perhaps justifiably, begin to think of students as a single group divided into good,

unremarkable, goofball, or troublemaker. It is as much of a trap as racism or homophobia. To bring about regeneration in education, all of us must continue to be mindful of one another's humanity. Tyrone recommended human relations training for teachers. That is a great beginning, one in which students should share.

Another equally trite but true saying is, "I don't teach_____; I teach children." Moving from the banking model to the humanizing principle in education requires us to recognize the unique set of characteristics that make up each child.

Dream Big

To dream big is an approach that hearkens back to Humanist philosophers, and is echoed in Freire's pedagogy. Our best and highest purpose in life is not to accrue goods. Our best and highest purpose is found in realizing our potential as individual beings and as a part of a larger social structure. Supporting the realization of this ideal will necessitate a significant shift in the way that we understand education, which will in turn affect the manner in which we treat the children in our care.

It is unfashionable to speak about dreams, love, and hopes for a better world. We couch our reforms in terms of practical, pragmatic, and data-driven. Yet, it is the dreamer that brings the unimagined to light. It is the lover that works for the good of others. It is hope that allows us to persist in spite of global warming, terrorist threats, hunger, and homelessness. These attributes are the source of our very humanity.

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Limitations

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The sample in this study was small. All the participants lived in the same city and, although there was a small degree of variety in their schools of attendance, most participants

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spent the majority of their K-12 years in the same school district. I discussed the strengths of qualitative research and the value of the inductive process in an earlier chapter, so while this study represented a window into the student experience, it would still be valuable to continue to investigate, through both qualitative and quantitative methods, the student experience. There has been little research done in this area, and it would represent progress in engaging the child in the process of improving the experience of K-12 public education.

Conclusion

Public education in the US is a hydra-headed monster. There are layers upon layers of interested parties and academics, philanthropists, parents, and issues that beg to be part of the conversation, and all with the right to be included. It is daunting. Yet, in the midst of the fray, it is crucial that the well-being of the student, the individual child at the desk in front of you, now, today, remain at the center. That child is a human being, deserving of humane treatment. That child demands the right to become his or her best and highest self in collaboration with and through the agency of the adults in the educational system. And it is not up to the system to make the determination of what that best and highest self is, or to substitute its own goals for those of the child. That child has a voice, and a dream. That child is a creative genius, and deserves to be heard.

APPENDIX A

Dear Colleague:

I am a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University as well as a counselor at Reid. I am currently working on a research project for my dissertation. I'm not interested in high- or low-achieving specifically, but potential participants should have the following qualities:

- Be of *lower socioeconomic status*

- If planning on attending college (two or four year), be a first-generation college student

- Be from a *traditionally underserved population* (Native American, African-American, learning disabled, etc. An emerging category would be working-class White male.)

- Be *articulate*! I will be conducting interviews with these students, so they should be able to communicate well.

Students who are chosen to participate will receive a gift card in the amount of $50 to Amazon. They will need to meet with me for an hour or so to tell their story and also be willing to spend 15-20 minutes a week, writing in a journal or on a blog over a period of two to three months. Completing at least four entries will entitle them to an additional $20 Amazon gift card. Please forward names and contact information to me at mrosem13@gmail.com.

Thank you for your support!

Mary

APPENDIX B

1. What was school like for you as a young child? Were you excited to go to school? How about this past year, your last year in high school? If it's not the same, why do you think it changed?

2. How did your teachers treat you in elementary school? In middle school? In high school?

3. Is education important? Why or why not?

4. What did you want to do "when you grew up" when you were in elementary school? What do you want to do/be now? If it's changed, why do you think it's changed?

5. What are your plans for the coming year? What made you decide on that? How confident are you that that will be what you will do?

6. Do you believe that you got all the support you needed to do what you want in life from the adults at school – teachers, principals, counselors? If not, what could have been different?

7. Have you felt understood by teachers, counselors, and principals? If so, in what ways? If not, in what ways were you misunderstood?

8. What things do you believe that teachers, counselors, and principals need to understand about students' aspirations or hopes for the future?

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