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The School–Education Dialectic in Social Justice

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“I shall create! If not a note, a hole./If not an overture, a desecration.”

Gwendolyn Brooks’s (1968/1992) poem, “Boy Breaking Glass,” captures a fundamental dialectic in human agency: that between constructive and destructive action. Nowhere is this more relevant than in considering the agency of oppressed peoples when facing institutions that ostensibly benefit them, such as youth of color vis-à-vis schools in the divested urban ghettos of the United States. The school–education dialectic refers to how social justice efforts must simultaneously deconstruct oppressive school systems while constructing emancipatory projects of education. Given that schooling in the United States more often reproduces than disrupts class-based inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, pp. 125–126), inculcates racist and misogynist ideologies rather than critiques them (hooks, 1994), and promotes a colonial agenda over one of self-determination (Woodson, 2000), human agency, that is, the ability to transform these very structures of social reproduction (Giddens, 1979), becomes an obligatory focal point in any discussion of social justice.

Therefore, any struggle by, with, for youth in education raises the question of whether human agency, in the context of an inequitable education system, serves to create overtures or desecrations of mainstream schooling institutions.

Schooling is a peculiar form of education. That is, if the term education describes all forms of learning in general, then schooling is a peculiar institution that formally conditions young people to legitimated systems of knowledge reproduction. In this respect, schools may not educate but instead inure students to a pedantic culture (Freire, 1970/2000); likewise, a person may be highly schooled, yet remain miseducated (Woodson, 2000). The core contradiction lies in the juncture where formal education diverges from the fundamental project of humanization (Freire, 1970/2000). Put simply, it is the vocation of all humans to struggle for education even if it means to work against schooling (Woodson, 2000).

School is a dialectical space wherein both education and miseducation are possibilities. This school–education dialectic summons some very practical questions. In my own experience, I have engaged in schooling institutions from various stances: as a teacher within a mainstream, comprehensive, urban high school; as a reform officer in the superintendent’s cabinet; and as the founder of a social justice school. In each of these settings, practitioners must grapple with how to work for the school system, and yet work against its repressive features. A number of theoretical propositions also emerge from this dialectic, and help frame the educational literature in social justice. At the macrolevel of institutions, should social movements build schools or work to unschool? At the microlevel of classroom curriculum, is critical curriculum a deconstruction of society or an inculcation of skills necessary for society? This final question not only challenges the role of youth agency in relationship to education, but also that of pedagogy to social justice, movement making, and human rights. This chapter refuses to stay in a polemic
position of writing “for” social justice, and rather engages a critical questioning of “how” social justice might be engaged through schooling, particularly within the context of U.S. urban education.

Two Freires: Pieces of a Social Justice Literature

In the United States, the development of social justice literature is yet immature, and the next few decades will reveal a deeper understanding of this as a serious area of inquiry. As a result, current research on social justice is syncretic; that is, it draws selectively, it erases selectively, and remembers selectively from a hybrid genealogy of educational efforts within and without the United States. As we glue together these pieces, we begin to notice gaps and shadows in the way social justice in education is discussed.

This progressive agenda in U.S. education syncretically misremembers Paulo Freire as a promoter of institutional critique and student-centered classrooms, and forgets the realities of his educational practices from Brazilian camponês adult literacy. In effect, there are two Freires in social justice literature. One is a philosopher delving into the abstract principles of humanization through “conscientization” and dehumanization through “banking education.” One is a literacy strategist, who appropriated the capital of the Brazilian university for the struggle of the camponês, and navigated the unresolved complexities of his own class, race, and privilege to do so. Together, they form a binary that must be studied holistically and dialectically in any consideration of social justice work. However, in typical Western fashion, Friere has been dichotomized, and his two halves have been hierarchized in U.S. education. In semiotics, we call this presence and absence (Derrida, 1978), whereby Freire the philosopher is given an idealized, benign, and Whiter presence that overshadows his darker twin. By implication through exclusion, the second Freire is imperfect, violent, and Black. Nonetheless, this second Freire, the strategist, is obfuscated but still nearby, waiting for his insurgence in the U.S. world of education.

The two Freires play out in schooling with dramatic consequences. Idealized democracy can generate naive attempts at deregulating schooling spaces, whereby “equal voice” privileges acritical reproductions of racist, sexist, and violent thought, as Ellsworth (1989) illustrated through pitfalls she faced in her own teaching of U.S. college students in a classroom environment rooted in student voice and dialogue.

By contrast, the Cuban literacy campaign translated both Freire’s philosophies and strategies to the Cuban context of a newly found revolutionary state under the shadow of U.S. imperialism, and to national scale (Kozol, 1978). Although similar in addressing adult literacy, Cuba’s campaign was in many ways dissimilar to Freire’s work in San Recife. Where Freire abhorred reading primers, Cuba implemented one, based on the understanding that the literacy brigadistas, many of whom were young children, needed tools. The Cuban methods involved unmistakably nationalistic and counterimperialistic generative themes, such as the impact of U.S. policy on Cuban farmers. Such discourses were not benign, and silenced counterrevolutionary dissent as well as socialized a revolutionary identity.

The recovery that must be made is to return the historical specificity of Freire’s work, the practical aspects that ground his philosophies, and thereby the real, rather than ideal, aspects that could be translated to U.S. urban schools and youth of color. Most importantly, we have to start considering the exercises of power in Freire and Freirian-inspired work. Once such exercise of power lies in the workings of pedagogy, especially in the socialization of youth through schooling. The second Freire suggests to us that schooling, or the formal conditioning of youth to legitimated knowledge systems, could yet be a
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valid method of emancipatory education. Often, this possibility is obscured by the fear of “banking education”—the inculcating of learners to a depository of information and to a colonial relation between student and teacher—a process that Freire (1970/2000) so eloquently critiqued. However, its opposite, “problem-posing education,” is not the absence of pedagogical power, nor the absence of authority, nor a benign activity. Rather, it is a form of socialization that requires difficult examination of worldly conditions, by teacher and student, through rigorous, even painful literate endeavor (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 77). The question facing social justice educators is not whether to socialize youth, but how, and to what?

Social justice literature in education is also syncretic in its selective forgetting of traditions in educational thought. One of the grand erasures that hopefully scholarship in the upcoming decades will recover are the writings of postslavery, pre-Civil Rights Black educators, such as Ana Julia Cooper and Carter G. Woodson who are situated in a broader “diaspora” of Black thought from Black Americanists to Black nationalists to pan-African internationalists. These educator-intellectuals are regularly omitted in the curricula in schools of education, yet their work offers invaluable insights to effective struggle within mainstream institutions that were literally founded upon a hypothesis of Black subordination. The tradition of Black educational thought, when viewed through the window of post-Reconstruction writers, offers a complex perspective for and against schooling. On one hand, Woodson (2000) decried schools as colonizing institutions that sap intellectual resources from the community, and teach a Eurocentric curriculum. The expansion of public schooling then is an expansion of the colonial project. On the other hand, these same Black educators viewed schools as a possible institutional structure for community “uplift” (Cooper, 2000), and for the development of an educated class of community servants (Woodson, 2000).

These gaps in theory manifest as uncertainties in practice for a coherent social justice vision. This chapter proceeds with several illustrations of these practical dilemmas. These short vignettes are not meant to be in-depth analyses of complex phenomena; I use them to raise fallacies and insights into how youth and their education communities negotiate the school–education dialectic. Most significantly, they point to critical directions for much needed research in social justice literature. The first vignette asks the question, what is the role of pedagogy in moving youth walkouts and protests from “crisis behavior” (Melucci, 1980) to sustainable and strategic social movements? The second asks, what is appropriate discipline in a school for social justice? The third poses the question, how can grassroots movements in schooling effectively implement a socially just education within the state project of mass education? In this respect, this chapter proceeds with a problem-posing orientation.

A Pedagogical Strategy for Youth Organizing?

Subaltern groups, including youth of color in divested urban areas of the United States, have always found ways to subvert spaces toward countercultural practices, often contrary to the intention of their architects. For example, in the enormous protests for immigrant rights in Paris and the United States in 2006, youth exploited the corporate technologies of text messaging in cellular phones and Internet social networking sites (Yang, 2007). In universities, designed often to promote a docile technocratic class and to produce elites who will reproduce social inequality (Bourdieu & Clough, 1996), students are often the main fomenters of dissent. In urban public schools, despite curriculum and authoritarian systems to the contrary (Apple, 2004), youth have consistently mobilized around a diverse set of issues (Noguera, Ginwright, & Cammarota, 2006). In many
ways, walkouts, protests, and other direct confrontations with institutional authorities have become the imagined modus operandi of the American political dissenter.

During the short life of the school that I founded, East Oakland Community High School (EOC), I witnessed youth mobilize their entire student body in an unusual display of Black–Brown solidarity for immigrant rights. Not quite a year later, these youth, their families, and teachers walked eight miles from the school to the state-run district offices. Their action was part of a yearlong battle with the state over the future of their school, ultimately resulting in the closure of EOC. They also organized school lunch boycotts, and participated in rallies against the high school exit exam. Furthermore, our youth were frequently solicited to attend rallies for affirmative action on college campuses, walkouts for teacher contracts, marches against the war in Iraq; flyers for political actions were so ubiquitous that they often littered school hallways. Interested news reporters would even inquire when the next walkout might take place. These strategies of dissent are so conventional that youth have difficulty imagining social justice outside of the spectacle of protest. What then, should be the relationship of social justice educators to youth organizing? The choice should not be framed as a simple, “Should I walkout with the youth or not?” A serious examination of solidarity must pose the question: by what pedagogy could youth move from performances of dissent to strategic, enduring social change?

EOC moved from a standard of exposing youth to political actions to analyses of political power. At first, youth learned about the atrocities in Darfur, discussed the cultural bias in textbooks, and studied the lives of revolutionary heroes. They read the biography of Stan “Tookie” Williams (the founder of the Los Angeles Crips), and protested outside the prison walls on the night of his execution. Youth community action research projects were exposé-oriented, and concluded with predictable political stances. Outside of fairly polemic position-statements, youth could articulate very little about the workings of power. Arguably, this kind of political education, although relevant, were not “generative themes” (Freire, 1970/2000) from their own daily existence. Rather, they were imposed political imperatives. By the second year, youth were analyzing how various social actors struggle for political dominance through culture-producing institutions of church, family, media, and school. As generative themes, they traced the economic genealogies of consumer products in their neighborhoods, and studied the semiotics in popular media forms from video games to magazines to music. They then applied their understanding in an original analysis of a social phenomena, culminating in a public lecture to a community audience. Similarly, EOC moved from a curriculum of featuring political dissent to one of producing rigorous skills in academic, new media, and critical literacies (Morrell, 2004).

Our goal was to train youth to become producers of strategic public texts, rather than consumers of political education. Youth were trained to: produce their own films; apply social theory to everyday media; debate through legal discourse; deconstruct and reconstruct academic texts; write research papers, literary analyses, and statistical reports; design websites; operate statistical software for the social sciences; and present to diverse audiences from academic researchers, to congressional policy-makers, to peers. In other words, youth developed skill sets to speak authoritatively in both mainstream and subaltern spheres. In the case of the immigrant rights march, I argue that Black–Brown youth solidarity was rooted neither in ideological consensus nor in common political interests, but rather in a shared cultural space carried out in popular media: Internet and cellular phone social networks (Yang, 2007). This directs educators to think about what rigorous training in new media and popular culture would look like, starting from existing research including Morrell (2001), Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002), and Ginwright and NetLibrary (2004). This emerging body of work on popular culture demands that
we see youth as human beings, and not economically conceived Marxist actors. The latter case essentially imagines students as rational decision makers who trade in a currency of critical theory—that the only relevant currency is ideological partisanship.

Social justice, so ill-conceived, will continue to be politically relevant, but culturally irrelevant and theoretically stunted. Youth actors condense to form larger movements not only in response to the structural inequalities, but also to trade in pleasure, in post-colonial differences. Youth participate in postmodern, yet highly ancient, sign-systems that signaled human concerns long before the advent of capitalism. Any clear social justice agenda must address the fundamental humane concerns of popular culture in youth movement. In the case of the eight-mile march, youth managed for a time to redirect the question from schooling to education.

While the state focused on whether or not to close a school, the community asked the question of how a school might provide a just education. They marched not to keep their school open, nor to smash the state, but rather on the platform of quality education, achieved through self-improvement and self-critique. They employed print and multimedia research materials, alongside personal narratives, all nested within a broader discourse of educational quality (Arredondo, 2007). The marchers violated all depictions manufactured by the state propagandists to characterize the youth as violent, the school as acritical and self-defensive, and the teachers as subversive commandos in a terrorist organizing camp. After eight miles in the rain, five hours of peaceful waiting, dozens of presentations of articulate self-critique and plans to move forward, the state-appointed administrator nonetheless closed the school. After the Administrator’s decision that night, even the police (hired in extra numbers to protect the state from the marchers) held hands with the youth and wept in the hallways outside the school board chambers. This moment of empathy showed the winning of hearts and minds through moral compulsion, and the influence of revolutionary subjects (the youth, teachers, and families) over nonrevolutionary classes (police, media, public officials). The youth and those adults who worked alongside them were able to construct a public consensus for their cause, or at least, fracture the state consensus against it. Such tactics reveal how subaltern actors collude with supposed adversaries, operating for and against, and elude a priori assignments of political affiliations.

Although it is important to recognize youth as an important political category and agential social group distinct from adults, we must avoid the fallacy of idealizing youth as an isolated, independent social category. Any effective practice in youth organizing enacts a sophisticated understanding of how adults, particularly teachers and other adult authorities, work in solidarity with youth groups. This involves a rigorous conceptualization of the politics of solidarity, but especially the role of adult pedagogues, leaders, and mentors. This give and take between adult guidance and youth self-determination is reflected in sociological examinations of social movements, in effective youth participatory action research (Morrell, 2004), in learning theory on the role of apprenticeship and guided participation (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), in critical pedagogy in the U.S. urban schooling context, and in the voices of youth organizers themselves. To answer the question of how pedagogy could transform youth dissent to organized social movement, future research must critically analyze the forms of adult authority, solidarity, and curricular strategies.

Disciplined for Justice?

Because of its institutional nature, schooling is a regulatory process that conditions the minds and bodies of both students and teachers (Foucault, 1979). Highly regulated
schools provide apt conditioning environments and tend to discourage a liberatory education. The most profound consequence of this is how the ghetto conditions of urban schools acritically help to construct the prison-industrial complex and a docile workforce (Davis, 1998). However, one ideological fallacy is to presume that deregulation is the natural agenda for social justice in schools. Instead, an effective social justice strategy must consider how these systems of regulation can favor an emancipatory movement in schooling at large. The liberal mentality is discomfited by the regulatory function of schooling. Accordingly, the liberal response is to either deny or obfuscate the regulatory systems in a school (Yang, 2008). The inaugural year at East Oakland Community High School (EOC) was characterized by a deregulatory culture: there were no bells, no hallway passes, no security guards, and conventional punishment systems like suspensions were avoided. However, no alternatives to orthodox regulatory measures were constructed—the assumption was that explicit ideology, democratic culture, and caring adults would counteract years of conditioning. The result was an unleashing of a schooled habitus (Bourdieu & Clough, 1996; Willis, 1977), or habituation of youth to become docile under repression yet self-destructive once unbound. The “hidden curriculum” of schools (Apple, 2004) not only trains compliance by inuring youth to a factory setting of structured authoritarianism, but also conditions a dependency on those very systems of regulation.

By the middle of the second year, EOC was in a cultural and academic crisis, where physical and symbolic violence among the youth became common and little academic discipline was in place for students to be successful at the school’s accelerated curriculum. At this point, a group of core teachers strategized to take over the culture of the school, with the explicit theory that the school’s mission was not to create a liberal environment, but rather a disciplined space for training youth leaders, similar to the Black Panther Party’s Oakland Community School. The resulting discipline intervention, called the “redemption plan,” was rooted in the moral authority of a “young elders circle” of the most respected adults on campus. The circle identified a long-list of 50 youth, or approximately one-third of the student body, who in their estimation had been miseducated by our school to consistently disrespect adults and each other. The young elders circle became the regulating body, imposing a set of contractual expectations on the youth as a parallel system to conventional district punishments of suspension and expulsion. The objectives, in a very Foucauldian sense, were for youth to internalize the moral order of the teachers, all couched within a reformist discourse. By the third year, fights became virtually nonexistent on campus. From the new cultural paradigm emerged a youth leadership group called the NSurGentes, who would intervene when racist/misogynist language and other forms of symbolic violence arose. An academic presentations curriculum became the norm for all 11th grade coursework, and every youth defended academic presentations across subjects twice per year. The school demonstrated the largest increase on the state Academic Performance Index of any high school in Oakland. Although still far from the purported vision of academic and moral rigor, the school undeniably had accomplished a major shift in culture.

However, this process of seizing the regulatory functions of the school and instituting a culture of discipline was nonbenign. As with any exercise of power, conflict preceded consensus and the new dominant group sought acquiescence from those who dissented. Of the second year faculty, three of 10 were either requested to leave or willingly departed. Of the 50 students identified for the redemption plan, at least three left the school. In selecting words such as regulation and authority, I have intended to make transparent the nonbenign mechanisms of the redemption plan. Furthermore, this example of regulation is a window into a cultural direction that EOC was taking across school arenas— includ-
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ing teacher development and youth training in academics, arts, and organizing. This kind of work raises questions about how power, although appropriated toward emancipatory interests, still contains repressive operations. A critical conceptualization of power, as exercised by groups engaged in social change, needs to be developed as the social justice literature in education progresses. To effectively answer the question of authority and discipline within a social justice schooling agenda, one body of literature yet to emerge are studies that cover the strategies, exercises of power, and forms of regulation in social justice schools.

Institutionalizing a Just State?

My direct work in district reform took place on top of two crashing waves. The first was a grassroots takeover of the district, a reform movement to generate small, community-based schools mobilized by thousands of families in the most economically and educationally divested parts of the city (Yang, 2004). The second was a highly repressive state takeover of the school district, resulting in relegation of the elected school board to advisory status, firing the superintendent, and the appointment of a state administrator as an absolute authority to govern the district. Both “takeovers” illustrate that competition exists among elite state agents, and how influencing these elites can provide or restrict space for more revolutionary activity.

This small schools movement was led and mobilized largely by a faith-based organization, which I call Oakland United Congregations (OUC) in my writings. OUC had an explicit theory of power, which was to consolidate their own power through a large grassroots constituency, and to influence those in power through winning consent rather than antagonistic confrontation (Yang, 2004). Furthermore, their efforts enabled them to construct their own elites with high positional authority, including the superintendent and his reform officers (Yang, 2004). In contrast to other movements for community control of schools (e.g., Podair & Ebrary, 2002), OUC did not establish community boards or oversight committees. Community power was predicated on constructing state authorities who were obligated to grassroots constituencies, rather than institutions that were micromanaged by community groups. OUC’s power thesis provided a large degree of effectiveness within circuits of power—and also earned them constant criticism from more militant activist groups. However, the small schools provided space for more radical endeavors, such as the School for Social Justice (now closed), as well as the school that I founded, East Oakland Community High School (now closed). When state takeover of Oakland Unified seemed likely, but not yet imminent, I met with various community organizers, elected officials, and unionists, to advise them of the dramatic shift in authoritarianism that would occur once the legislature voted to take over OUSD, and of the possible scenarios under which takeover could be avoided.

The response from nearly all these parties was that the current Oakland administration was just as bad, if not worse, than the state. Some union activists said they were too busy fighting for the pending contract. Other activist groups, although locally powerful in school district wranglings, were too busy in more global political engagements, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq and affirmative action on college campuses. The teacher’s union president publicly supported state takeover, claiming that contract negotiations would be easier because there would only be one person to meet with. Even when the union took a stance against state takeover, they made it clear that this did not imply support for the current administration. In short, city schools’ political bodies took all administrators to be natural enemies of teachers, and were unconcerned about different regime changes. As a result, little solidarity within these powerful groups was achieved against
(or even in preparation for) state takeover. Some exceptions were the community groups most engaged with direct reform in Oakland, who together managed to redirect some of the authoritarianism of the state takeover into continuation of community initiated reforms—at least for a few years. However, the overall apathy helped to herald an easy administrative takeover.

Unfortunately, regime change had a profound impact. Under the superintendent, the teachers' union had enjoyed a 24% increase in salaries—the largest pay raise in decades. Community power was at an unprecedented level, with actual representatives at the highest level of decision making in the district. The new small schools enjoyed a modest set of autonomies, free from district micromanagement. Whether or not these gains were at the behest or despite the efforts of the current superintendent was immaterial—the facts remained that a "permissive context" (Meeks, 1993) facilitated unprecedented shifts toward community power. By contrast under state takeover, teacher salaries were immediately cut by 4%. The small schools lost their autonomy and became a mechanism for punishment—whereby low-performing schools were closed and then reopened. Double-speak state agents, such as the ironically named "Chief of Community Accountability" whose main job was to hold the community accountable to the state, replaced hard-won community allies in positions of power.

Future research on social movements in schooling must dispel the reductionist concept of a monolithic state, engaged in an innate adversarial relationship with grassroots communities. As U.S. schooling continues to tread down the path of state policing of school test performance, and diminishing state investment in education, this kind of reasoning may appear ideologically abhorrent. However, it is all the more relevant to distinguish between state institutional resources and state authoritarianism, in order to answer how communities may yet organize for a socially just education system.

**Synthesis: A Nonbenign Theory of Empowerment**

One possible synthesis to the school–education dialectic is to imagine a strategic radicalism rather than a polemic one, a strategic education rather than political education, and education that is socially just instead of schools of social justice. In the area of social justice curriculum, we have seen the developments of a cultural–linguistic radicalism (what counts is how one is taught), an epistemological radicalism (what counts as knowledge), and a functionalism radicalism (what is the purpose of education). However, an effective social justice agenda must begin to consider a strategic radicalism. As social justice literature advances, we should think beyond political education, and toward a strategic education.

Much as schooling has been a training ground for workers for a capitalist economy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977), social justice curriculum must be wary not to simply become a training ground for the rank and file in a political cause. One insight lies in understanding the difference between promoting a specific political critique, and promoting critical a framework (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) that leads to original application and new analyses. The second insight lies in developing the skill sets for youth to speak authoritatively in both public and subaltern spheres.

Strategic education requires an explicit teaching of codes of power (Delpit, 1988), not to submit to the dominant or hegemonic reading of codes (Hall, 1973) but rather to understand how to negotiate reading and indeed oppositional readings of these codes—what I term a “critical code fluency” (Yang, 2004). In this respect, “access” (Collatos, Morrell, Nuno, & Lara, 2004) to higher education takes on a more radical meaning, a radical “detracking” of courses (Oakes, 2005) subverts current systems of academic capital to construct transformative agents with full credentials in institutions of power.
The vignettes in this chapter illustrated urgent areas of research into the dilemmas of social justice education within the urban U.S. context. Across these three areas of youth organizing, social justice discipline, and state–community schooling projects, a common thread of analysis is how power may serve emancipatory interests. Whereas critical theory offers a critique of the repressive aspects of power (Foucault, 1979), by contrast, “empowerment” in educational literature is treated as a largely benign process (e.g., Mal- donado, Rhoads, & Bienavista, 2005; McQuillan, 2005). In actuality, the processes by which marginalized people come into social, economic, cultural, or discursive power are rarely benign, but rather decolonizing acts of symbolic and sometimes literal violence (Fanon, 1965).

For any realistic analysis of social justice efforts in education, we must develop a critical theory of empowerment, a term which refers to the construction of power, and moving from being a subjugated to a dominant group in social conflict. We must examine how empowerment itself is not a benign process, but a revolutionary one constituted by its own particular forms of violence and domination. Any social justice agenda with teeth will admit that conflict is unavoidable in radical change, and how we come to predict, and shape conflict is of great import.

Note
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References


