

Social Justice Must Be Action

Obligatory Duty and the Institutionalizing of Activism in Schools

DEBBIE SONU
Hunter College

All these moralities that address themselves to the individual, for the sake of his ‘happiness,’ as one says—what are they but counsels for behavior in relation to the degree of dangerousness in which the individual lives with himself; recipes against his passions, his good and bad inclinations insofar as they have the will to power and want to play the master.

(Nietzsche, 1886/2000, p. 299)

OVER A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, Friedrich Nietzsche (1886/2000) elegantly warned that an unquestioned control of meaning and interpretation would lock our sense of will and freedom into suffocating parameters, devastating the natural human inclination to think, act, and love both self and others. He called, instead, for an understanding of self-in-society as one caught within a struggle over dominating ideals, masked by the seductive rhetoric of liberty and democracy, yet ultimately violent and detrimental to the ability to perceive injustices and act upon them in subjective ways.

A hundred years before Nietzsche, Immanuel Kant (as reprinted in Pakaluk, 1991) marked rules and regulations as the shackles of permanent immaturity, arguing that individuals cannot feel respect and love out of obligatory duty; it is rather the predisposition to the emotion of love that facilitates the fulfillment of civic action. For Kant (1784/1983) individuals are so intensely restricted in their freedom that they are unable, perhaps even unwilling, to cultivate their own minds. In this light, obligations are not meritorious since they involve conforming to the rights of others. It is rather the cultivation of emotional love that emerges into acts of kindness; this cannot be perceived in reverse (Kant, as summarized in Paton, 1993). Kant may agree, then, that acting on behalf of others must arise from an exercise of free will, not from an institutional mandate which inevitably works to yoke a person’s calling to think for his or herself.

Heeding these concerns on ethics, social responsibility, interpretation, and control, I present here segments from a larger two-year ethnographic study at one New York public high school in an attempt to question prescriptive activism and obligatory duty as popular teaching tools of a

social justice education. In this paper, I emphasize how tenth grade Justice High (pseudonym) youth regard, respect, and reject civic responsibility as a mandated advisory course requirement and present ‘social action projects’ as a resigned and refused operation of the institution. Drawing from the standpoint of students, I question the institutional control of social responsibility and the evaluative school processes that urge behavioral compliance and a consensus of concern. I find that the framing of ‘social action’ works contingently on the struggle over its interpretation emergent within a pedagogical paradox where ideals of emancipation and dissent are met with the authoritative dictates of schooling. How does activism get produced when dealt the full force of disciplinary schooling practices? Is it responsible, or just, to proffer social action as an obligatory duty?

This story of social action at Justice High in B-Town, Brooklyn unfolds mainly from participant observations in one specific Justice High advisory and three semi-structured interviews conducted with each of five tenth grade students during the spring 2008 school semester. In this paper, I place social action work within a nexus of conflict, where the promulgation of ‘truth’ and interpretation on what constitutes responsibility is responded to by the multiple voices of its youth participants. Although I understand the critical position of the teacher in facilitating the interests of this advisory, I intentionally center the ways in which B-Town youth contest, affirm, ignore, and embrace the uptake of social action within the institution of schooling.

Theoretically, I draw upon the revolutionary spirit of critical pedagogy, which foregrounds the debilitating consequences of normativity and capitalism and urges political action as a form of ‘praxis’ (Dardar, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2000). At the same time, I honor the work of poststructural scholars (Butler, 2005; Lather, 2007) who attempt to disrupt categorization and its determinations on lived experience, acknowledging authority and power as circulatory, never fixed, stable, or resolute. Throughout, plural notions of social responsibility among teachers and students, and among students themselves, explode into a rich nuance of complexity and resistance, where individuals are not only framed by constructs of identity, ideology, and institution but also uniquely authoritative in their own interpretations of classroom experience.

Critical Theory and Praxis

At the core of critical theory is the imminent critique of the debilitating messages promulgated by institutions and ideologies in society. Through raising dissent and enacting a pedagogy of resistance, critical theorists work to expose the rationality deployed to protect the positionality of those in economic authority and power and to unravel the one-dimensional society that harnesses ideological ‘truths’ as a way to outcast marginalized individuals, both psychologically and materially (Marcuse, 1964; McLaren, 2003). Attentive to the inequitable distribution of capital and the ideological common senses that foster ambivalence and complacency, critical theorists, although widely variable, share in common a political interpretation on theory, a socio-cultural analysis of society, and a call for revolutionary agency, change, and social justice (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005). For those critical theorists in the field of education, classroom pedagogy then becomes the vehicle through which social transformation can be achieved, and the practice of this, generally considered ‘praxis,’ entails developing the action-oriented commitments tangibly embedded within the theoretical study of inequity and capital and the understanding of all individuals as participants in the making of a more socially just history.

Critical pedagogy, as a teaching practice, then seeks to engage students with their lived experiences, to understand knowledge as historically constructed and produced, and to acknowledge themselves as self-determining individuals in the fight against injustice and oppression. While current schooling seems obsessed with efficiency and assessment, critical pedagogues teach toward a critical awareness of the world, a “process in which people achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 93), encouraging students to reflect on their location *in* the world and *with* the world.

To do this, prominent Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire (1970, 1973) compelled teachers and students to engage together in developing their powers to critically examine lived experience. By seeing reality as continually shifting and evolving, teachers and students can then see themselves as in a process of becoming and are then able to locate opened spaces for transformation. Therefore, education is constantly remade through ‘praxis,’ a humanist and liberating praxis, where the subjects of domination fight for emancipation, engaged in a deepened consciousness and in pursuit of their own humanity. One means of approaching such pedagogy involves discussing, debating, and analyzing with students the production of forces that plague individual and global livelihood (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005) and how these forces uphold the priorities of its benefactors. Providing such a forum for dialogue is the “moral and ethical obligation” (p. 258) of critical pedagogues and as a relevant subsidiary, that of social justice educators.

Praxis is vehemently argued by critical theorists as defying any formulaic rule, taking on a multitude of diverse expressions. However, the claim that there are as many instantiations of critical pedagogy as there are believers and scholars must contend with the fact that schools are becoming places of increased mechanization. The pursuit of humanity, whatever that may entail, requires an imaginative character largely threatened in the era of accountability and assessment. As teaching is increasingly constrained, operationalized, and evidenced by mandated measure, critical pedagogues may find a myriad of challenges when enacting their envisioned ideals of consciousness and freedom.

The Poststructural Influence

Dismantling rigid perspectives on social construction is one essential tenet of poststructural theory. As critical theorists adamantly deploy a language of class-based materialism and ideology, poststructural thinkers, instead, locate interpretations of this experience as the locus for explanatory power. In doing so, they seek to disrupt identification markers that construct a dichotomous competition between White versus non-White, man versus woman and, instead, gesture toward a recognition of experience as indeterminate, evolving, and incomplete. As social categories of namely race, gender, sexuality, and class neglect “sliding meanings and contested boundaries” (Lather, 2007, p. 5), Patti Lather argues that they are problematic in accounting for deeper levels of interpretation, meaning, or subjectivity, which then turns against the presuppositions of emancipation in its confinement of experience as one of, for example, domination and subjugation. Poststructural scholars critique that the foretelling of experience as categorically-defined and a rigid sense of what needs to be done (e.g. the poor need to rise up) serves to reproduce the very positions of authority that necessitate subjugation in the liberatory project. This will be further explored in the discussion on activism at Justice High.

However, honoring this plurality does not lead to a disappearance into the countless numbers of vying interpretations. It means that relations must respect the subjective uniqueness of the other in any given encounter. There may be moments when individuals experience a sense of true understanding with one another, when their thoughts and ideas may seem familiar in imagination and empathy; however, those individuals will always remain in the exterior of the other. Yet, “the judges of normativity are everywhere” (Foucault, as cited in Hoy, 2004, p. 65), and the project then becomes of examining the deliberate enforcement of universal norms and the constriction of possibilities achieved when norms are asserted as necessary and natural.

As expected, critical theorists have made their rebuttals upon these arguments, holding great concern about the poststructural preference for local narratives over grand narratives, individual voice over transformation, and the relations of exchange over relations of production. Spearheaded by McLaren (2003), several critical theorists contend that these notions of singularity serve to permit hegemonic relations that favor dominant class structures, especially as they reject historicity and class as an enabler to political subjectivities. They charge that without a universally acceptable notion of justice and equity, the poststructural project, in its obscurity, allows for moral passivity and an arrested political stance. However, Judith Butler (2003) sees the limitlessness of knowledge as a reason to turn toward a critique of the social condition. In a sense, Butler’s call for reflection on the subjectivity of experience is a reflection of the social conditions from which they emerge, a political movement rather than arrested development.

As critical theorists nurture a pedagogy built upon liberation, critique, and action, it would be counterintuitive not to acknowledge its contribution to a social justice-based curriculum in a public high school set within a working class community such as B-Town. Yet, the poststructural contribution, particularly its skepticism of narrow essentialist language, commands attention to the powers of individual interpretation that may or may not authorize class as a true indicator of experience. It denounces certainties of knowledge that mirror positivist presuppositions and opens up qualitative work to the conflict, dissent, contradiction, and messiness of subjective articulation and expression. In this vein, poststructuralists critique the critical theorist perspective on ‘praxis’ for its positional fixity, the formation of a dominant versus subordinate binary in which the former must be somehow overturned. And partly due to this, poststructural critics have made problematic the pretense of finality hinted by critical theorists, including the ethical and teleological determinations of social change and behavioral compliance expected from its constituents. May these two divergent theories, in a relation of solidarity, not contest, provid groundwork for an examination of social action at Justice High School?

Casing-the-Joint

Located within the geographical center of the Brooklyn borough,¹ where the intersections of Black, Caribbean, and Latino culture mingle under the roar of the elevated New York City L-train, Justice High School, restructured into a small learning community in 2002, promised a fresh beginning to a collapsed old campus notorious for rampant violence, failure, and drug abuse. Founded upon ideals of social justice and community change, Justice High developed with full force in hopes of forwarding academic rigor, as well as the disposition to fight against social injustice and despair. While the typical high school advisory is more often reserved for extracurricular activities or college and career advisement (Champeau, 2006; Lampert, 2005), Justice High deliberately creates an advisory platform where students raise dissent against an

issue of social urgency or injustice and provides an experience that aims to foster a heightened sense of responsibility and awareness. The radical ethos of Justice High is highly contagious.

Towards the middle of the spring semester, ninth and tenth grade advisory students are required to begin focusing specifically on action-oriented pedagogies and the central purpose of advisory becomes what teachers and students term, ‘social action projects.’ With their loyalties to activism, students, alongside their teachers, develop strategies for participation in school and community governance, capitalizing on their sense of agency and locating their role in transforming the world. In class, students and teachers list and categorize various injustices in their lives: the strewn litter in the neighborhood, the deplorable school bathroom conditions, the gang affiliations and occurrences of violence. They explore these issues through a grassroots curriculum supplemented by film documentaries, newspaper articles, guest speakers, and reading materials. During these months, students and teachers gather data through a range of methods including interviews, observations, survey techniques, and internet searches. Shortly thereafter, they plan for deliberate action that educate school and community members and advocate for institutional change. In the past years, these projects have resulted in school wide presentations, letter writing campaigns, dissemination of reading materials, demands on school administration, public service announcements, and organized protest. Project completion is scheduled for late May. The following excerpt draws from reconstructed field notes of one social action project as engaged by tenth grade youth in the spring 2008 semester at Justice High.

A Story of Social Action

Like every other research day, I walked the familiar B-Town streets that led from the train station to the sturdy entrance of Justice High School. As I approached, I prepared myself for school security, hoping to see Dee behind the desk as she often allowed my entry without the usual stripping and searching to which most others, including students, had to submit. It often angered me to see the procession of high school students shuffling into the controlled area, awaiting permission to enter their place of learning. During my first few months of research work here, I often waited my turn with them, arguing against my adult status which by no merit somehow allotted me a certain amount of respect, a fast-track. In time, my privileges became shamefully second nature and on days when Dee was not stationed behind the monitoring screen, I tinged with irritation. That morning, I was required to go through the proceedings: identification, sign-in, guest badge, purse scanning, metal detecting, arms extended, walkie-talkie request, waiting, waiting, waiting, police escort, hallway walk, until finally, arrival.

I was immediately struck by an undeniable fervor in the air of advisory that day. I hung my jacket on the back of a rolling chair and scanned the room, grinning with interest. Ms. Vee, the principle teacher in this advisory, sauntered over casually and we exchanged brief words about the beginnings of their social action work. *These projects are supposed to encourage students to choose an issue that affects them and act on injustices they see. We’re doing security, so that group over there,*² she points to the opposite wall where three girls giggled over a video camera, *is creating a video to bring awareness to how security treats students during scanning and how they wish to be treated.*

Cool, I responded and stood indecisively, lavishing in the bustling activity and heightened excitement of advisory that morning. In the video camera corner of the brightly lit room, a group of girls were designing protocols for peer interviewing, exploring the features of their new

equipment. In another corner, several boys leaned deep into their chairs and laughed over certain experiences with security guards they planned to reenact. Wavering in and out of interest, their conversation struggled to maintain focus and oftentimes got lost in mixed words with the nearby girls. Ms. Vee phrased her questions to rope them back in. Over by the computers, another group of students typed a school survey to be folded into a handout for presentation day. Adding to the wonderful chaos was Chris Brown and Usher intermittently blasting from the computer speakers, fingers snapped and heads bobbed in tight rhythm. However, lost in the backdrop sat silently another group of students, unmoved by their surroundings and seemingly disengaged with the project; they would pass these 50-minutes of the day as patient observers. Nicholas and Malcolm laid their heads down; I glanced over to see them sound asleep.

I visited often during these months. As I floated from group to group, I inquired into their progress and reconstructed notes on what I observed them say and do. *Sadie is an incredible interviewer*, I told my doctoral friend over Panini sandwiches at a local cafe. When I told this story, I thought back to a video tape I viewed of two students, Sadie and Jacinda, interviewing peers about the Justice High security guards. I have branded into my mind one portrait of a 15-year-old female who came to school with a cut on her lip and the words of the male security guard as he made a crass remark about her sucking dick.

With a disbelieving tilt of my head, I asked, *Is that really what he said?*

The group of girls, Sadie, Jacinda, and the interviewee, raised their voices in unison, *No, for real....he said, 'What have you been doing, sucking dick?'* The interviewee looked down quietly toward the cold beige floor of the room.

The boys in this advisory are hilarious actors, I told my dissertation sponsor across a roundtable in her office. When I told this story, I was thinking about a video the boys were making, a series of re-enacted personal encounters with security guards. Using the hallway door frame and a long table to simulate the scanning area, Antonio approached the door, reluctantly took off his belt, emptied the change from his pocket, and pushed his backpack across the table. Beep! Another student played the security guard. He shuffled through the backpack, surveying its contents, then proceeded to take a pack of Dentyne Ice chewing gum and casually hide it away in his pocket. Antonio called attention to the theft; the security guard pushed him through the doorway, yelling in denial; and the scene was over.

The second incident was filmed in the middle of the hallway. Another student in a T-shirt labeled security sat in a chair patrolling for students cruising without hall passes. Antonio walked by, a hall pass in hand, while the security guard looked both ways, then called him over. He approached the adult, and they engaged cautiously in a conversation about a party going down over the weekend.

The security guard said in a whisper, *Naw, you should come through...there'll be weed, you smoke, right?*

Antonio replied, somewhat inaudibly, *Really?* He continued to mutter as a sneaky smile spilled across his lips. When suddenly, from an open doorway, appeared a student actor dressed as the principal. Struggling to hold back the laughter, the principal waddled forward in a cream shirt and blue tie, made silly with a jacket-stuffed belly. In a deep serious voice he called out, *Get to class. Get to class. Get to class*, repeating this at least a dozen times more. Antonio tripped on the stairs running out of the scene. Unable to hold back, we all burst forth, rolling in laughter.

A few days later, I asked Antonio, again in disbelief, *The security guard didn't really ask you to come over and smoke weed with him, did he?*

Antonio replied, lifting the pitch of his voice, *Yeeeah....there's been parties where the security guards invite students [pause] and they drink and smoke and shit.*

A few months later, I told my dissertation sponsor the story of social action presentation day. I began with the yellow three-fold informational brochure students developed as a handout to their Town Hall presentation. On the back side were results from a student survey listing actual verbal exchanges Justice High students have had with security guards. During in-class rehearsal, Sadie and Aisha took center stage; they introduced the advisory, the issue, and segued into the video of interviews and skits. During rehearsal, the teacher encouraged students to read from the back, guiding them to elicit audience participation on how students could avoid negative encounters by better responding to security guards. (How the *students* could better respond? I thought, stunned and uneasy). To my surprise, the students concurred; they rehearsed as directed and proceeded to ask their pretend audience how students could rethink their actions to avoid further altercation. However, on the actual presentation day, the students would boldly assert their identities and experiences, co-opting the format, and performing its content in ways unexpected and unrehearsed.

The auditorium filled up with noise before it did with people. Student voices bounced madly through the large, open room, and one by one the advisory classes filed in. It was an obviously exciting time for them; smiles were contagious and salutations darted through the air like paper planes. Unable to focus on any one thing, the scene was utter confusion, its perpetual movement and the cacophony of sounds melting into a Jackson Pollack splatter. I observed one presentation on recycling before Sadie and Aisha climbed up the side stairwell and onto the elevated wooden stage. Aisha visibly froze, leaving Sadie to nervously deliver the presentation largely on her own. She did almost everything as practiced, the topic, the video, the brochure. She laughed a little, then glanced at Aisha before she directed the audience to the back page of the handout.

In a loud, clear voice, Sadie continued, *On the back, these are quotes from the student surveys you all filled out. Now I have a question [pause], how do you think the security guards could have responded in these situations?*

What! The security guards? I thought in shocking admiration. Elated and surging with energy, I recalled how the students rehearsed in class and immediately spun over towards the teacher; she seemed a blank canvas. Sadie continued reading the lines and calling on student volunteers. One female student shouted toward the front about a time when she saw a classmate berated by security guards for using the N-word, when the adults use it just as much as they did. Unfortunately, what began as a critical conversation was rudely interrupted by the deafening school bell; its ringing for passing period drowned out Sadie's last words and, in unison, the students stood up and shuffled out the side door. Yellow brochures fluttered through the air and fell to color the auditorium floor. A few days later, when I asked Sadie about the remarkable presentation, hinting at her self-assurances, she claimed she knew nothing about changing anything; as she spoke, I grinned inside with perplexed fascination.

Policing and Surveillance at Justice High

In 2006, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) turned to the Rand Foundation (Ridgeway, 2007) to gain a clearer understanding of racial bias and police behavior. To examine this, Rand researchers analyzed data from over 500,000 incidences where pedestrians were stopped by NYPD officers for suspected criminal activity. Of all these reported incidences, 89

percent involved non-Whites suspects, 53 percent involved Black suspects, and 29 percent Hispanic suspects.

According to statistics, officers recovered contraband, such as weapons, illegal drugs, or stolen property, in 6.4 percent of the stops of White suspects, 5.7 percent for similarly situated Black suspects and 5.4 percent for similarly situated Hispanic suspects. Additionally, a report issued in 1999 by then New York State Attorney General Elliot Spitzer found that the NYPD stopped Blacks six times more frequently and Latinos four times more frequently than Whites (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2000, as cited in Fine, Freudenberg, Payne, Perkins, Smith & Wanzer, 2003). Consequently, several recent public opinion polls have showed that many New Yorkers, especially African-Americans and Latinos, believed that the NYPD unfairly targeted certain groups. In schools, zero tolerance policies, security guards, and metal detectors have forced out large and disproportionate numbers of youth of color who are seemingly regarded as untrustworthy, suspicious, and potential criminals (Noguera, 2001).

In a community such as B-Town, issues of police brutality and racial profiling are daily concerns that remind students of rampant social injustices. It was in November 2007 that Raymond, an advisory student in Ms. Vee's class, came to school clearly disheveled and unfocused. A few days before, as the newspapers reported, 18-year-old Khiel Coppin was shot and killed by the NYPD in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, a neighborhood located in short distance from B-Town (Chan, 2007). Allegedly, Coppin, later found to be diagnosed as mentally ill, approached police officers exhibiting suspicious behavior, gesturing to officers in a supposed threatening manner. As Coppin reached into his jacket pocket, panic ensued, twenty bullets were fired, and in the aftermath, Coppin's life was all-too-quickly taken. An innocent black hairbrush was found clenched in his hands. Raymond, walking around with his friends that evening, laid witness to the crime. He described how one friend ran into an empty abandoned building and the other hopped a nearby fence; he frantically ran back to the safety of his home. As he told his story in advisory that day, his eyes looked distantly to the empty space across the advisory classroom.

On weekday mornings at Justice High, students, almost entirely Black and Latino, climb up the cement stairway and trickle in through the sturdy front doors of the school building. They wait patiently, sometimes in the heavy rain, until they reach the inside lobby area. They file in, roped off by fabric blockades and strip themselves of hats, durags, belts, jewelry, coins, mp3 players, and cell phones; the latter two unquestioningly confiscated by officers. They lay their backpacks and purses on the conveyer belt and pass through a metal detector not unlike those used to deter terrorists at airports. Oftentimes, students are tardy for class; many compare the system to a prison; others pass through without complaint. Suspiciously, in leaving the school building, there are very little questions asked. During passing period, NYPD officers comb the hallways; some stand regally in doorways or by elevator entrances. They remind students of the consequences for tardiness and oftentimes use elevated voices to hustle them through the crowded corridors. At times, they are sweet and cordial, forging amicable relationships with students and faculty.

In 2006, Justice High set up an intricate and thorough surveillance system, which included dozens of cameras and a monitoring system operated by full-time employed police officers. These video cameras live stream all activities and behaviors on all floors of the entire building. Surveillance, then, becomes the strategy of discipline. Even more disturbing, surveillance in the hallways of Justice High is largely invisible; students do not actually know when they are being observed, ergo creating a sense of fear and paranoia that ripens the subject for the full effect of control and discipline (Foucault, 1977). As shared by some of the students, this continual moni-

toring of behavior does not necessarily ensure their sense of safety but rather forces them to comply with the institutional dictates for proper behavior.

In Foucault's (1977) pivotal work, *Discipline and Punish*, he uses the physical body as an essential focus upon which the ideological and material forces of the institution manifest into and interfere with everyday practice. Reconceptualizing the body as an 'embodied subject,' or an object of control, he discusses the meticulous surveillance upon the operations of the body, as a constant imposition of a relation of docility-utility, which he terms 'discipline' (p. 137). Therefore, there are discursive systems that function both consciously and unconsciously to circulate 'truths' around what is deemed socially acceptable and what is deemed righteously punishable and wrong. The promulgation of these 'truths' are recursively imposed as legitimate knowledge and further reinforced through allegiances made within a disciplined and docile public domain. This discipline is not unidirectional, nor is it fixed in models of dominant and subordinate grouping. Rather, it is perpetually reproduced by the power, knowledge, and truth dispersed multifariously through every layer and strata of human experience.

The material forces of institutional power upon the bodies of Justice High youth are clearly visible in the examples of 'sucking dick' and the 'Dentyne theft.' However, physical subjugation is more than a function of direct mastery and surveillance; it is also a subtle, ideological subversion that seeps into a sense of what constitutes punishable behavior, if not the punishable being. As regarded by Foucault (1977), we must see such "punishment as a complex social function" with "techniques possessing their own specificity in the more general field of other ways of exercising power...as a political tactic" (p. 23). From this standpoint, argues Foucault, the relation between the state and its citizens, the police and youth, possibly even teachers and youth, reproduces itself on grander levels where the docility-utility of the body is a physical and ideological production that serves the interest of the institution in terms of control and function, therein possibly disrupting the responsibility of individuals to respond to each other.

Undoubtedly, oppressive structures of policing that work to devalue and offend the children of Justice High demand immediate redress. Yet, attention must also be given to the manner in which social action itself, as a mandated project of the school, works to inadvertently enforce institutional power and authority through processes and mechanisms of supervision, particularly as these projects must contend with the discourse of teaching and learning within an era of increased standardization and accountability.

Social Justice Must Be Social Action

We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become subjects.

(Freire, as cited in hooks, 1994, p. 46)

The attempts made by Ms. Vee and Justice High administrators to encourage students to speak against unjust encounters with security personnel are honorable indeed. Not many public high schools favor the nurturing of student dissent against the structures of schooling. However, as remarked by Foucault (1977), the discourse of schooling is representative of the very condition under which the public is disciplined, and as he pushes forward in understanding the organization of school in terms of discipline and punishment, organization and supervision, he analyzes schools as "a learning machine, but also as a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding"

(p. 147). How does this notion of schooling interfere with a commitment to student dissent and resistance? Although the system of police surveillance at Justice High may be one transparent example of the discipline and punishment of which Foucault speaks, what becomes of a social action and social justice agenda when examined through the same conceptual framework?

By turning to the words of Jules Henry, Laing (1967) concurs that the practices of schooling can work to produce “a pathetic surrendering of babies” in that education, as an instrument of the state, has “never been an instrument to free the mind and the spirit of man, but to bind them. We think we want creative children, but what do we want them to create?” (p. 71). When activism becomes an advisory requisite, leveraged by academic grades, students are placed at the crux of a theoretical and material struggle, where the rhetoric of resistance and social justice are then forced to reckon with the operations of schooling. As one example, Sadie was found on Presentation Day to reclaim her interpretive authority against the persuasions of her teacher. Instead of remitting blame to her peers for their negative encounters with security guards, Sadie, perhaps without conscious deliberation, raised dissent and refashioned the curriculum to her own liking.

As seen, students respond in ways that resist the formation of knowledge and displace the ‘truth’ about their lives. In her work, *Practice Makes Practice*, Deborah Britzman (1991) refers to these moments as ‘preferred discourses’ as students challenge representations of the world, attentive that representations are not the world itself. Students do not simply absorb cultural authority but rather mediate it, refuse it, and refashion it, such that they are re-presented with their own significance. She describes a practicality that routinizes behavior over critical action and conformity over individual thought. As images of the ‘good’ teacher and the ‘good’ student “subvert a critical discourse about the lived contradictions of teaching and the actual struggles of teachers and students” (p. 5), classroom practices, including those unabashedly prefaced on resistance, may become inadvertent mechanisms for obedience and recitation.

Not long after presentation day, Sadie and I met again in our cozy library nook for the last of our interviews. With ‘Presentation Day’ still lingering on my mind, I inquired about her belief in social action projects as an instrument for change against something as deeply and historically rooted as security and surveillance in low-income neighborhoods. She admitted:

I don't want to do a social action project. Half the kids at the school don't want to do social action projects. After we did our social action projects on security guards, they started lookin' at us nasty, the whole advisory. What we did based on the security guards, it's like we put ourselves in the line of fire. That's how I felt, like we were basically out there for the security guards to pick on us and stuff. I don't know why you want to force kids to do things that they don't want to do. I understand that school, that's mandatory. But things that are not mandatory, why would you force kids? But then when we realized we had to do it, there was no question about it.

Abuse at the hands of authority is unfortunately a common occurrence for Sadie who sees little in the way of reform and advocacy. For her, taking up resistance is surely risky business, and she asks, whose risk is of concern here? What becomes fundamentally crucial here is that although the intentions of social action and student participation in school reform may have been initially benevolent, Sadie expresses a sense of betrayal, coercion, and hopelessness, resisting the form of activism made acceptable, then forced upon her, by her teachers.

Moreover, as social action becomes revered by the institution as a communal advisory obligation, irrespective of individual thought on the matter, students are culled into forming a

consensus on one social issue, wholly assessed and evaluated on their participation in its redress. No matter their stake or degree of investment, they are all supposed to get along and perform the components of a justice-based project. In a follow-up interview, Jacinda made clear that she is not like the other students in her advisory room; security guards were not her problem. She hinted at her resentment as she is forced to collaborate with her peers in an effort she did not regard as her own:

Security guards is something I really didn't want to do. [Students] said how people are getting mistreated by security guards but I never was. They showed all these kinds of cases where they be yellin at you. He's just actin' respectable, being polite, and saying good morning, he's not askin you out on a date or somethin.

Although Jacinda obliged herself to the given requirements of her advisory coursework, she did not embed herself within the larger discourse of surveillance and discipline present within her institution. Instead, she expressed discontent over the actions of her peers, with whom she had lost respect and trust. Mandated to raise dissent against a system she considered vital to maintaining order and safety, she resigned to the project as a means to earn an acceptable advisory grade for her college transcript. Her participation in social action work therein became a certain performance, removed from the ethical and moral responsibility that such projects were supposedly designed to induce.

It may be that Western pedagogy strains to make teaching possible, strains to achieve that moment of finally having been taught (Ellsworth, 1997); “reason as authority—history as overcoming of errors—the future as progress” (Nietzsche, 1887/1967, p. 42). Therefore, while pressured to accomplish ‘teaching’ within a given frame of timed acceptability and to remediate injustice through reasoned means and methods, curriculum may have inadvertently become an efficient operation; school, a machine with a definitive moment and final end product (Taubman, 2007). Striking, indeed, was that although Jacinda lost faith in the social action project itself, she did share a specific, more intimate and emotional moment when she fought against what she believed to be socially unjust.

When asked to describe this moment, Jacinda, who is typically reticent in class, described how she brazenly acted on behalf of a close friend:

Last year, we were in class and we were learning about Gothic architecture and this girl started talking, oh, um, gothic architecture, you mean like gothic people, the ones that always wear black and cut themselves all the time. And I was just like, my friend, she's Gothic and she's sittin' there. I'm saying like, How can you just do that? Talk about a person and right to their face. Not cool.

When asked if this may be considered a form of social action, Jacinda refused to identify this event as one based on the tenets of activism defined by her school. It may be that the truth and authority around what constitutes acceptable advocacy disabled her from seeing herself as a just individual participating in the fight for justice. With the inscription of truth around the subject of social action, as it becomes named, fixed, utilized, and performed, “freedom and idiosyncratic moral choices may become unlikely” (Greene, 1980, p. 69) and difficult to locate. What is expected from students who do not understand security as a moral issue? Who has created this

reasoning for action? Will forced obligation undermine the emotive grounds from which emerges human action and responsibility?

The Ethical Turn: From Knowledge to Relation

“Obligations that were enforced would, by the virtue of the force behind them, not be freely undertaken and would not be in the realm of the ethical,” says David Couzens Hoy (2004, p.184) as he argues for a post-critique that acknowledges individual engagement in social or political resistance. A reconceptualization of social action, both conceptually and pedagogically, must then entail the natural state of plurality existent among students and teachers. Rather than submit to given delineations required and assessed by the institution of school, individuals may need to locate themselves as just individuals engaged in agentive action on their own terms and within their own definitions. As notions of justice are frequently grounded within responses to individual definitions of life, “functions of the domains of relevance” (Greene, 1973, p. 183), just action must involve an acceptance of others in their situational moment, unpredictable to how they may change these perspectives over the course of time.

Political action may instead come as students understand that they have already constituted their worlds through individual will and concern, that they already engage in legitimate forms of agency and resistance against events they consider unfair or unacceptable. As seen, students expressed variable opinion on the efficacy of social action as a means to reform institutions; yet even with great hesitation and growing frustration, they were forced to comply with its mandates, fully aware that passing advisory hindered on project completion. This did not, however, deter students from raising dissent and resistance against circumstances they deemed worthy of redress, even as they went largely unrecognized by the terms set forth by the institution. It is the unsettling distress felt by Sadie and Jacinda and their transgression of the schooling discourse that complicates the question of activism in schools, particularly as they worked against the universalizing of morality as a consensual ideal and the institutional school practices that forced their patronage.

I believe, then, there needs to be greater open-mindedness and wide-awakeness to what constitutes responsible action, embracing Sadie for her insubordination and Jacinda for her brave defenses, as actions of social justice, from the unique circumstances and particular standpoints of the students themselves, and in the name of something grounded within experience rather than obligatory duty. This may mean for teachers to examine how the discourses of schooling inscribe within them a narrow meaning of learning and evaluation, as well as their position to enforce particular forms of knowledge, all of which calls for resistance to fortified and fixed interpretations of ideas and actions. Teachers with keen ears and eyes may then see that justice is not promised when *giving* justice, *teaching* justice, or *designing* justice classrooms but rather, may arise as students move forward in their struggle to unravel for themselves what social responsibility may mean in the fleeting moments of circumstance.

Attentive to the crucial aims of critical pedagogues—their incessant outrage at bigotry and unfairness, their conspiratorial perspectives on hegemony and capitalism, their faith in the power of the individual and a hopeful tomorrow—I believe the calling for activism to be fundamentally necessary. Yet, when leveraged by academic record, institutionalized projects that require evidence of an agentive performance may blemish the emotional underpinnings that courageous-

ly inspire individuals to decisively raise voice against moments of injustice. One cannot demand proof of such loyalties.

Therefore, I concur with Patti Lather (1998) as she sees praxis renewed, where “questions are constantly moving and one cannot define, finish, or close. This is a praxis of not being so sure, of working the ruins of critical pedagogy toward an enabling violation of its disciplining effects” (p. 487). As subjectively lived and experienced, a responsibility to others may not necessarily require unifying contested meanings or coming to a consensual understanding, but rather, may lie within the unique encounter between one individual and another. This requires an unknowingness of the other that enables a richer, more expansive openness to the multiplicity of conflicting interpretations and alternative directions that we oftentimes obliterate for the sake of time or space.

I do not intend here to deny the critical need for teachers to work with young people in fighting indifference, self-doubt, self-destruction, violence, inequity, dehumanization, and acquiescence, and intend for this work to strengthen the project of agency, change, and social justice in schools, with hopes that it does not fall into the trappings of banality. I argue here against the hidden complicities of activism in schools, as mandating social action may work to inhibit students from acknowledging justice, and invariably injustice, as constitutive to the fabric of everyday life. I believe shifting the course of ‘teaching of, or teaching for, social justice’ to one of ‘teaching just individuals’ or ‘teaching with justice’ is vital to a reconceptualization of what justice may actually mean in schools, no matter how this may break from the safety of common senses and the reassurances of determinism and traditional thought. Teachers can model their activism and invite young people to engage in their projects. Yet, they cannot force students, even with scientifically-tested best practices, to authentically fight for justice without assuming the cost of student powerlessness to the institution of schooling. Just as teachers need to be freed from the rationality of accountability and assessment, students need to be freed in their ethical choosing, freed to garner a sense of self in relation to society, to reveal from within their subjective concerns and experiences. This presumes a relationship of endearing trust, where teachers need to allow students to decide, or realize, within their own contexts and through their own histories, their agentive role in the changing world, knowing that such endeavors are always unpredictable and impossible to deliberately teach.

NOTES

1. The B-Town community, home to more than half a million people, has unfortunately suffered from decades of substandard housing, schools, and infrastructure. Although the community’s poverty rate has fallen to 28 percent, it is still in the top 10 for the New York area, with the highest percentage of children born into poverty at 75.8 percent. Figures from the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) indicate a high school dropout rate close to 70 percent.
2. All italicized sections are verbatim quotations from transcribed interviews and observations reconstructed into field notes. As I am moved by Bakhtin’s (1981) work on the stylistics of the novel, especially his emphases on interaction and positionality, I present this qualitative work in a form that may seem familiar of a fictional text. I most assuredly do not embellish for effect, but use this descriptive style to embed the characters within thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of perceived spatial and temporal circumstance.

REFERENCES

- Britzman, D. (1991). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Butler, J. (2003). The question of social transformation. In E. Beck-Gernsheim, J. Butler, L. Puigvert, & J. Vaida (Eds.), *Women and social transformation* (pp. 1–28). New York: Peter Lang.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Champeau, R. (2006). Doing advisories. *Principal Leadership*, 6(7), 22–27.
- Chan, S. (2007). *Anger simmers in Bed-Stuy over police shooting*. Retrieved May 4, 2009, from The New York Times website: <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/16/anger-simmers-in-bed-stuy-over-police-shooting/>
- Dardar, A., Baltodano, M., & Torres, R. D. (2003). Critical pedagogy: An introduction. In A. Dardar, M. Baltodano, & R. D. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 1–23). New York: Routledge.
- Ellsworth, E. (1997). *Teaching positions: Difference, pedagogy, and the power of address*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fine, M., Freudenberg, N., Payne, Y., Perkins, T., Smith, K., & Wanzer, K. (2003). “Anything can happen with police around”: Urban youth evaluate strategies of surveillance in public places. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(1), 141–158.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Greene, M. (1973). The matter of justice. *Teachers College Record*, 75(2), 181–191.
- Greene, M. (1980). The passion of the possible: Choice, multiplicity, and commitment. *Journal of Moral Education*, 19(2), 67–76.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Hoy, D. (2004). *Critical resistance: From poststructuralism to post-critique*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kant, I. (1983). An answer to the question: What is enlightenment? In T. Humphreys (Ed.), *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* (pp. 41–48). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. (Original work published 1784)
- Laing, R. D. (1967). *The politics of experience*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Lampert, J. (2005). Easing the transition to high school. *Educational Leadership*, 62(7), 61–63.
- Lather, P. (1998). Critical pedagogy and its complicities. *Educational Theory*, 48(4), 487–497.
- Lather, P. (2007). *Getting lost: Feminist efforts toward a double(d) science*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One dimensional man*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- McLaren, P. (2000). *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the pedagogy of revolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- McLaren, P. (2003). Critical pedagogy: A look at the major concepts. In Dardar, A. Baltodano, M., & Torres, R. (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (pp. 69–96). New York: Routledge Falmer.
- McLaren, P., & Farahmandpur, R. (2005). *Teaching against global capitalism and the new imperialism: A critical pedagogy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

- Nietzsche, F. (1967). Book one: European nihilism. In W. Kaufmann (Ed.), *The will to power* (pp. 5–82). New York: Random House. (Original work published 1887)
- Nietzsche, F. (2000). Beyond good and evil: Prelude to a philosophy of the future. In P. Gay (Ed.), *Basic Writing of Nietzsche* (pp. 179–436). New York: The Modern Library. (Original work published 1886)
- Noguera, P. (2001). Finding safety where we least expected it: The role of social capital in preventing school violence. In W. Ayers, B. Dohrn, & J. Jackson (Eds.), *Zero tolerance: Resisting the drive for punishment* (pp. 189–201). New York: New Press.
- Pakaluk, M. (1991). *Other selves: Philosophers on friendship*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Paton, H. J. (1993). Kant on friendship. In N. K. Badhwar (Ed.), *Friendship: A philosophical reader* (pp. 133–154). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.
- Ridgeway, G. (2007). *Analysis of racial disparities in the New York Police Department's stop, question, and frisk practices* (Technical Report). New York: RAND Safety and Justice.
- Taubman, P. (2007). What is to be done in the age of accountability? In S. Leafgren, B. Schultz, M. O'Malley, L. Johnson, J. Brady, & A. Dentith (Eds.), *The articulation of curriculum and pedagogy for a just society: Advocacy, artistry, and activism* (pp. 1–13). Troy, NY: Educator's International Press.

