Sites of Liberation or Sites of Despair?: The Challenges and Possibilities of Democratic Education in an Urban Public School in New York City

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This article considers the possibilities of critical democratic education through the lived experiences of students at an urban U.S. public school. I show how students shape their own educational trajectories amid larger meta-narratives about schooling to illuminate the complexities and paradoxes of democratic schools. I argue that democratic schools are neither sites of transformation nor sites of despair, but rather sites where agency is negotiated, contested, and remade, often in unexpected, unassuming, and contradictory ways. [democratic schools, youth agency, critical pedagogy, empowerment, social justice]

The dominant narratives surrounding the institution of schooling in the United States tell vastly different stories, suggesting that schools are either gateways for personal advancement and social mobility, sites to maintain the societal status quo, or potential conduits for inclusion, transformation, and social justice, particularly for those most historically marginalized. Despite the persistence in popular media and discourse that schools foster meritocracy, social reproduction theories have debunked this conventional idea to show the ways in which schools operate to deliver a hidden curriculum that perpetuates a rigid economic, political, and social order (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976). Further, studies have shown how economic resources remain inequitably distributed in schools along racial, class, and geographic lines, and that the types of pedagogies and curricula offered in schools also vary among these same social locations (Anyon 1980, 1997; Kozol 2005; Oakes 1986).

Though critical theorists generally accept these viewpoints, some scholars view the hegemonic relationship between one's schooling and one's economic/political socialization as a framework from which counternarratives can emerge. Grounded in concepts such as liberation, anti-racism, and democracy, these theorists see schools as potential sites of productive resistance, counter-hegemony, participation, and collective societal transformation (see Freire 2003; Giroux 2003; McLaren 2003; Shor 1996). Nonetheless, despite the emancipatory rhetoric of these approaches to schooling, some scholarship has pointed to their potentially oppressive and silencing features (see Bartlett 2005; Boler 2004; Ellsworth 1989; Gore 1992; Luke 1992; Popkewitz 1999; Shugurensky 1998). Calling into question core assumptions about liberation and transformation, these arguments suggest that these pedagogies simply reproduce the very power relations in schools and society that they are ostensibly meant to overturn.

While schools certainly may serve some or all of these purposes and interests, these assumptions often obscure the roles that school actors play as transformative change agents in the context of their own schooling and social environments. This article takes up these competing narratives about schooling to consider both the possibilities and limitations of critical democratic education through the lived experiences of students at a small public high school in New York City that was designed for students who previously felt schooling unresponsive to their needs. I draw from two years of ethnographic data to

explore the following question: How do former and current students make meaning of their educational experience at a school that emphasizes a commitment to peace, justice, and democracy? In particular, I discern how students enact and negotiate these ideals in their daily lives, paying particular attention to how students' actions, conceptualizations, and discourses surrounding their experiences both intersect with and diverge from the stated visions of the faculty.

My analysis reveals many possibilities, contradictions, and struggles that exist when enacting this type of education. While students are exceedingly positive about the democratic nature of the school, I also show that these perceptions are both subtly and overtly challenged in quotidian and mundane interactions at school and beyond. Yet, I complicate some of the ways these dominant and divergent narratives circulate, suggesting that the ways in which local actors and participants negotiate their agency in these settings illuminate the complexities, paradoxes, and nuances of democratic schools. In this vein, I argue that while there are inherent limitations to enacting critical pedagogies, there is still more possibility in its promise of social change when democratic schools are viewed as dynamic sites of collective struggle that are continually self-reflective and evolving.

Democratized Critical Pedagogies: The Struggle to Redefine Power in the Classroom

The school at which I conducted research was one part of the early wave of "critical" small schools that opened in New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see also Hantzopoulos 2009 and Hantzopoulos and Tyner-Mullings 2012). Situated within broader debates about the economic, political, and social purposes of schooling in the United States, these critical small schools were grounded in democratic principles, critical pedagogies, and a commitment to social justice (Ancess 2008; Fine 2005; Hantzopoulos and Tyner-Mullings 2012). Assuming that schools have historically served as sites for hegemony, inequity, and social and class reproduction (Anyon 1980; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Fine 1991; Kozol 2005; Oakes 1986), the communities and educators involved in this movement were committed to finding ways for schools to be sites of inclusion, liberation, and transformation, particularly for those that had been traditionally underserved by NYC public schools (Ancess 2008; Fine 2005; Hantzopoulos and Tyner-Mullings 2012; Cook and Tashlik 2005; Meier 1995; 2002). Thus, this collective of critical small schools could be understood as a "vibrant, gutsy social movement for creating democratic, warm and intellectually provocative schools, particularly for poor and working class youth of color" (Fine 2005:1). Steeped in the historic and contemporary theories about democratic schooling (see Apple and Beane 2007; Davies 2000; Dewey 1916, 1990; Greene 1986; Meier 2002), these schools' missions were not only attentive to participatory processes but also situated in egalitarian ideals about equity and the public good. In particular, they were seen as sites that could reinvigorate public schools with anti-racist practices and agendas and were rooted in the belief that education should be inclusive, participatory, and provide opportunities for all (Fine 2005; Fine and Powell 2001; Meier 2002; Powell 2002).

In recent years however, the emphasis on individual social mobility and the increased privatization of public education in the United States, particularly in urban centers like New York City, have shifted popular belief about education as a public good. Discourses that locate accountability, choice, innovation, and competition at the heart of educational policy have led to the divestment in public schools, namely through the proliferation of charters, public school closures, and corporate backed evaluation systems that justify this divergence (Fabricant and Fine 2012; Labaree 1997; Lipman 2012). For this reason, many educators, communities, scholars, and activists have urged a re-commitment to participatory and inclusive policies that reverse the current mainstream trends in education. In this

sense, critical small schools are worthy sites to consider as they were designed to be equitable, inclusive, and committed to the public sphere, as well as part of a broader social justice movement.

Nonetheless, with the rise of neoliberal, hierarchical, and market-based trends in education that have reframed democracy discursively (see Schniedewind and Sapon-Shevin 2012; Watkins 2011), *democracy* as a concept is often met with skepticism (McGinn 1996). In order to reclaim its possibilities, Apple and Beane suggest that democratic education must be experienced and lived, moving beyond the "engineering of consent toward predetermined decisions [to a] . . . genuine attempt to honor the right of people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives" (1995:9). Schools have the potential to be transformative spaces if actors are encouraged to be contributors to knowledge construction and decision making, and practice the fundamentals of authentic participatory democracy. Democracy in schools, therefore, is not seen as a stagnant teleological noun but, rather, is more akin to West's active continual vision that views it as a "dynamic, striving and collective movement than a static order of stationary status quo" (2004:68). Fine, Weis, and Powell (1997) refer to these types of schools as integrated spaces in which multi-racial youth relations flourish under the conditions of sense of community, analysis of difference, and investment in democracy. This type of vision is in direct conflict with the current educational trends and policies tied to neoliberal reforms (Meier 2002).

Enacting such a vision of reflexive and vigorous democracy in theory and in practice requires that democratic schools engage inclusive, participatory, and critical pedagogies. First coined as such by Henry Giroux (2003), critical pedagogy emerged "from a long historical legacy of radical social thought and progressive education that aspired to link the practice of schooling to democratic principles of society and to transformative social action in the interest of oppressed communities" (Darder et al. 2003:3). Drawing from several different theoretical traditions, including the Frankfurt School negative critique, North American pragmatism, Gramscian (counter) hegemony, and Freirean critical consciousness, critical pedagogy contributes to the emancipatory ideals of democratic schools that may transform individuals and societies and work toward the betterment of the public good.

Essentially grounded in the concept of liberation and transformation, critical pedagogy is a framework from which teachers engage students in the process of recognizing their own experiences and identities, and they use these as a catalyst to transform their lives and social worlds (Freire 2003; Giroux 2003; hooks 1992; Kanpol 1994; McLaren 2003; Shor 1996). Rejecting the mainstream notion of "banking education" (see Freire 2003), critical pedagogues advocate liberation from both oppressive structures in schools and in society through critical dialogues that not only equalize relationships among students and teachers but also engender student agency. This dialogue occurs through problem posing and inquiry that involve a constant "unveiling of reality," one that ultimately leads to a conscientiousness that challenges and obligates all parties to respond to that reality. Because this process ostensibly does not alienate any of the people involved, it is intended to be both humanizing and liberating for them, and in particular, it serves to free "subjugated masses" from the economic and cultural structures that ostensibly oppress them (Luke 1992).

Despite its emancipatory and democratizing rhetoric and the fact that it is still in the margins, critical pedagogy has come under condemnation by scholars who also reject market-based educational approaches. Early feminist criticism for instance, initially aimed at the writings of Freire, pointed toward his usage of sexist language and the masculine pronoun, and openly challenged his emphasis on class at the expense of racialized, gendered, and other forms of oppression (Darder et al. 2003; hooks 1992; Shugurensky

1998). Others questioned the Freirean-based view of equalizing relationships between student and teacher as false, idealistic, and unattainable, indicating the irreconcilable nature of such a task. For instance, Shugerensky asserts that "it is no secret that the educator, even a democratic one, has more power and cultural capital than that of the learner, and that dialogue does not take place on an even playing field" (1998:23). Bartlett draws similar conclusions in her ethnography of a Brazilian popular education program and finds that the "temporary reversal of social hierarchies between teachers and students did not transfer outside of the classroom" (2005:12). While Bartlett's work recognizes that Freirean pedagogy created a humanizing and friendly rapport in the school, she questions its ability to actually challenge larger structural inequalities.

The most denigrating critiques of critical pedagogy, however, are skeptical of the feasibility of modern critical pedagogy's promise of transformation and in particular its core assumptions that privilege reason as the ultimate sphere upon which knowledge is constructed. Post-structural theorists have shown how these assumptions are inherently problematic, as they are embedded in liberal conceptions (equality, emancipation, and democracy) located within masculine notions of citizenship and rationality (see Gore 1992; Luke 1992). For instance, Ellsworth, after teaching a course that employed *critical reflection, student voice, empowerment*, and *dialogue* to respond to the increased visibility of racism on her campus, concludes that the "key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to literature on critical pedagogy . . . are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination" (1989:91). She critiques the critical pedagogy project as de-contextualized, abstract, and ultimately useless, and problematizes its contingency upon rational dialogical engagement as a premise that "has operated in ways that set up as opposite the irrational Other . . . In schools, rational deliberation, reflection, and consideration of all viewpoints has become a vehicle for regulating conflict and the power to speak" (1989:308). She argues that this emphasis on rational dialogue denies that thought is bound to discourse instead of reason, thereby disallowing the construction of partial narratives that are less totalizing and singular.

Other scholars, like Luke (1992), expand this critique to explicitly call attention to the male authorship of Marxist and Enlightenment-driven critical theory that historically situates men at the center of public discourse and wholly preserves a gendered public/private sphere dichotomy. By neglecting to realize the androcentric and universalistic subjectivity of totalizing narratives, and the attempts of feminists to destabilize them, Luke claims that critical theory and pedagogy can work for neither women nor men as a template for societal transformation. Gore (1992) builds on this analysis, using the Foucauldian lens of "regimes of truth" to reflect upon issues of power relations and knowledge integral to the normalizing discourses surrounding these pedagogies. She particularly calls attention to the construction of the term *empowerment* in this discourse, one that presupposes "(1) an agent of empowerment, (2) a notion of power as property and (3) some kind of vision of desirable end state" (Gore 1992:56). Gore asserts that critical and feminist pedagogues are often unreflexive about these presuppositions, perpetuating a simplistic dichotomy between oppression and empowerment that oversimplifies the operation of power in society, one that Foucault describes as "circulating," "exercised," and existing "only in action" (2001:59). Consequently, critical pedagogy discourse retains static dualisms so that empowerment remains in the hands of the dominant and privileged and depends upon teachers actualizing it.

Key theorists of critical pedagogy have responded to these criticisms in a variety of ways. Some have tried to re-imagine possibilities for critical pedagogy in light of these critiques, re-situating it in new historical terrain, particularly around discourses on globalization, neo-liberalism, dismantling of democracy, and the "war on terror" (Giroux 2004; Gur-Ze'ev 2003; Nelles 2003; Rizvi 2004). Kincheloe (2007), for instance, urges critical

pedagogues to engage these discourses and their relationships to complexities of daily life, moving critical pedagogy in a more contemporary and context-driven direction. Burbules and Berk (1999) re-theorize and move away from foundational assumptions of critical pedagogy toward a theory of *alternate criticality*. They acknowledge the ways in which the tradition is embedded in rationalism assumes universality and emphasizes teleological conclusions from their processes; however, rather than discarding it all together, they look toward an alternate criticality to think "anew" and "outside a framework of conventional understanding" (Burbules and Berk 1999:61).

Others have stressed the deconstructive and unfinished nature of the work or pointed to the overtly pessimistic and nihilistic features of the post-structural critiques (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993; Giroux 2004). Bizell (1991) and Darder (2002; 1991) in particular, suggest that some critics have inadequate and incomplete interpretations of power that falsely label critical pedagogy as simply coercive. Building off Giroux's notion of critical authority in the classroom, Darder posits that an emancipatory form of authority is distinct from more traditional approaches in that it may lay the groundwork for a "critical transformation of consciousness" that is dialectical, continual, and collaborative (1991:110). Teachers that assert this type of authority not only critically challenge oppressive ideas that reinforce racism, sexism, classism, and so forth in the classroom but also simultaneously understand that knowledge is culturally and historical bound and is "forever in a state of partiality" (1991:111). When teachers are authoritarian (not authoritative) or excessively permissive (giving equal voice and weight to all ideas regardless of personal histories, ideologies, and material circumstances) however, they create anti-dialogical conditions that interfere with critical development, collective struggle, and agency among students (Darder 2002). In particular, Bizell (1991) suggests that radical scholars often hesitate to claim their own authoritative power in the classroom and rely instead on a persuasive form of power that "puts them at 'a disadvantage in an educational system in which existing power relations are far from the egalitarian ideal required for true collaboration'" (1991:59). By assuming that power is symmetrical between students and teachers, these teachers inadvertently generate mistrust and insecurity because students realize this premise is false. Instead, Bizell asserts that pedagogues must recognize the power they possess and use it authoritatively (not coercively or persuasively) to challenge students to think critically about the historical and material conditions that define their worlds so that they can collectively transform them.

Furthermore, while post-structural criticisms most certainly illuminate and caution against the insidious power dynamics that may circulate in any form of critical dialogue, there is little scholarship that focuses on the micro-level ways in which school actors, particularly students, negotiate their own agency within the contexts of their own oppressive or liberating schooling and social environments. Both Bartlett (2005; 2010) and Sonu (2009) have shone a critical lens upon the ways in which power operates on interpersonal levels at democratic and social justice–oriented learning environments. Through ethnographic work, both scholars elucidate the complex and uneven ways egalitarian relationships between students and teachers actually play out alongside a post-structural theoretical framework. My study in many ways complements these works but, in particular, hones in on the larger school structures, as well as the relationships, that help shape students' experiences in school and beyond. More specifically, I examine the ways that students conceptualize and enact the schools' democratic ideals, noting how they make meaning of their experiences to understand more broadly the promises and challenges of participatory education. In this sense, I am attentive to ways these localized actors navigate their sense of empowerment amid larger structural forces that may seemingly inhibit their sense of agency to read for possibilities and limitations in these forms of critical education.

Methodology

Germinating from the desire to understand the processes of a curriculum/school that is committed to peace, democracy, and social justice, I relied on multiple ethnographic methods for data collection, including participant-observation, individual and group interviews, and document analysis. By conducting the study in a natural setting, I was able to build a textured and complex account, inductively analyzing the information drawn from data collection while focusing on participant perspectives (Creswell 2002; Marshall and Rossman 1998). Though students were most central to the research, I also included the perspectives of teachers and administrators in the school as they were instrumental in implementing the school's mission. In addition to the methods mentioned, I also collected 231 surveys to retrieve demographic data, select interview participants, and obtain cursory anecdotal data about students' experience in the school. As a former social studies teacher in the school, I was able to gain access more easily to possible subjects, and this facilitated my work in the field. In fact, many former students even contacted me about the prospect of being interviewed when they heard from others that I was doing this project. Current students did not know me as well, but I was able to interview them fairly easily on school grounds.

There were several overlapping phases of participatory observation throughout the duration of my study, beginning in September 2005 through June 2007, periodically spilling over into 2008. These included school-based participant-observation of actors (and my interactions with them) within the school and off-site participant-observation of former and current students in spaces outside the sphere of the school. I recorded and logged daily field notes about what I observed in the classroom, hallways, and other spaces where students were engaged in school-related activity. Semistructured interviews were an essential part of the research process and served as a way to obtain information that was "simply not amenable to observation, so that asking people about them [the participants] represents the only viable means of finding out about them within a qualitative research strategy" (Bryman 2006:329). I conducted in-depth semistructured interviews with 20 former students, six current students, and 14 faculty members.

I also conducted five focus group discussions with current students who were not interviewed individually. Students participated based on their willingness to be interviewed, as indicated in the survey. These focus groups assisted in obtaining perspectives that I did not get through my interviews (Fontana and Frey 1998) and worked well with students because many were accustomed to group discussions, a central pedagogical practice in the school.

I engaged in a multilayered, dually inductive and deductive process of data interpretation, which involved taking daily field notes in the observation portion and the transcription process in the interview portion. Every two weeks, I reviewed these notes to capture the themes emerging from the data as I was in the process of collection. Every two months, I re-read my notes and memos to revise the emergent codes accordingly. At the end of the fieldwork, I reviewed these analyses once more so that when I wrote up my findings post-fieldwork, I had already interpreted and analyzed much of the data.

Humanities Preparatory Academy: Democratizing School

Originally conceived as a mini-school in 1993, Humanities Preparatory Academy (Prep) is also a college-preparatory school that is not only "a haven for students who have previously experienced school as unresponsive to their needs as individuals" but also a place that welcomes students with diverse educational backgrounds (Humanities Prep Mission Statement n.d.). By constructing an alternative educational environment rooted in values like peace, justice, and democracy, this school presents itself as one that provides a

transformative experience for its students within and beyond the sphere of schooling. According to the mission, it endeavors to uphold these core values and create a space for students to "find their voices" and "speak knowledgeably and thoughtfully on issues that concern their school, their world."

The school serves a population that spans the socio-economic, racial, and ethnic spectra of the city, which is atypical of New York City's de facto segregated schools. At the time of my research in 2005–2007, the racial background of the student body was as follows: 40 percent Latino, 38 percent black, 12 percent white, 6 percent Asian, and 4 percent other. Twelve percent were enrolled in special education (in line with the city average of 11 percent). Approximately 64 percent of the population qualified for free and reduced price lunch, though the rate is likely higher as many do not submit requisite forms. Prep is considered a successful school, mainly because its graduation and college acceptance rates are well above average. For example, the school has averaged 91 percent to 100 percent college acceptance rates since it opened in 1997 through the time of my fieldwork, while the citywide rate did not rise above 62 percent during that same period (Performance Assessment 2008). The dropout rate remained under 4 percent, as compared to the city rate of 19.9 percent (Performance Assessment 2008) despite the fact that Prep accepts many transfer students who have been pushed out of other schools. These figures demonstrate the schools' commitment to addressing larger structural racial and economic inequalities embedded within the education system in New York City.

By rethinking the form, content, and structure of traditional schooling, Prep endeavors to move toward a more libratory space for its students and teachers. From its inception in 1993, Prep has remained unwavering in its commitment to student-centered education, critical pedagogy, and the school's aforementioned core values. For instance, the school has a flattened hierarchy of school governance in which staff, parents, and students are invited to create and shape school policy and practices. Moreover, Prep is unique in that it has de-tracked, mixed-age, and heterogeneously grouped classes, such that there are no prerequisites based on grade levels, prior achievement, or ability for students to take most classes. Further, Prep has a waiver from the standardized high-stakes testing used in the New York public school system. Instead, they use a form of assessment known as performance-based assessment (PBA), which resembles the college or graduate level thesis system, in which students present and defend final projects to two teachers and an external evaluator for review. This type of assessment has allowed for the creation of thematic courses, often reflecting enduring themes in social justice education, including courses called America at War: 1898–Today; The American Dream: Fact or Fiction; Math and Social Justice; and Eugenics.

The school also builds into its schedule unique and intentional structures that may be perceived as non-academic, but they are relevant to its mission of school and democratic engagement. These include Prep Central, Advisory, Town Meeting, and the Fairness Committee, all of which are part of the school day and built in to the overall schedule. Prep Central is a communal workspace where teachers keep their desks. Advisory is a daily class period where students discuss issues relevant to their lives, receive academic support, develop leadership skills, discuss personal and social issues, and build community with other members of their group. These issues stem from students' own interests, and they are often asked to come up with topics for discussion and debate. Town Meetings are weekly whole-school gatherings where students and teachers discuss a myriad of issues ranging from personal to global. They often expand upon the themes explored in Advisory, encouraging further debate and questioning. Topics for discussion vary and include items such as school policies, police brutality, political prisoners, and military recruitment in schools, and guest speakers are often invited to speak and attend. Finally, the Fairness Committee, a form of "restorative justice," is a mechanism through which

students can discuss with one another, and with teachers, violations of the community's core values and brainstorm alternatives and solutions to these dilemmas in a more democratized fashion.

The Paradoxes and Possibilities of Participatory Education

Most former and current students believe that this type of critical and democratic education found at Prep is instrumental in their academic success. While I have written extensively and explicitly about how this transpires elsewhere (Hantzopoulos 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013), I want to highlight the key arguments that illuminate the positive impact Prep has on students' lives. Particularly, I find that students value the strong intergenerational bonds between students and teachers that help cultivate a culture of respect that re-socializes them academically. For instance, Alejo discusses how Prep Central, the shared student and teacher room, facilitates this:

> Well, for one there was a student–teacher lounge. There is no other high school in the city that has that. Cause normally, you're either in class or you're eating lunch . . . or you're home, or outside of the school with peers; but there's no real interaction between students and teachers. [Interview, 26 April 26 2007]

According to students, this culture contributes to a sense of belonging, community, and individualized appreciation and recognition, which, in turn, leads many of them to feel more engaged in the environment and, thus, at school (Hantzopoulos 2012a, 2012b, 2013). As Sammy, an alumnus, remembers:

> I think the fact that the teachers didn't judge people because of stuff trickled down to the students; so, the students were less judgmental of each other . . . there's a lot of people who have similar interests and can get along well, but they won't ever know it unless it's in the right circumstances. I think Prep is the right circumstances for a lot of people who wouldn't normally realize that they have stuff in common, to find out that they have things in common. It was very accepting and . . . nonjudgmental, even stuff that was pretty out of the ordinary. [Interview, April 28, 2007]

While not explicitly connected to the goals of critical pedagogy, the emphasis on reciprocal student–teacher relationships and student worth is one of the fundamental premises to Freirean dialogical engagement. Students also speak more directly to the processes and goals of critical pedagogy when discussing the larger curriculum. For instance, Lisa, an alumna who transferred to the school, describes her classes:

> [Prep is] definitely different from what I had experienced before coming here because it was all based on lecture . . . and sitting in just rows and having the teachers stand there for an hour and just talking. There was no interaction. In Prep I feel like when we're learning we're also being engaged with the material. We sit in a group and we will discuss the topics. And they encourage us to see what we think about the topics . . . I think that's important because honestly I hadn't really learned before coming here . . . it was just a blur. [Interview, March 27, 2007]

This response, which shows how classes both incorporate multiple perspectives and engage students in their learning, was fairly typical when students and alumni were asked what they like best about their Prep classes. Moreover, this exemplifies how teachers generally assert more authoritative (rather than persuasive or coercive) approaches to power in the classroom.

Additionally, students repeatedly describe how the participatory nature of intentional school structures contributed not only to their academic achievement but also to their understandings of democracy, personal senses of agency, and perceived ability to initiate

change. Overall, they mentioned these structures as ones that help them feel part of a community, find their voice, and critically question the world. For instance, Sandra mentions the role of Town Meeting in engaging her as a participatory agent in school:

> [W]e have things like Town Meetings . . . we get to speak on the topic that we choose, any topic that we like to talk about, and . . . it makes you want to speak about it. And, I feel that before I was never around that kind of environment, that kind of school where . . . we can speak freely. So, I feel that this school has made my voice a bit stronger . . . it's not that textbook based kind of learning, it's all kinds of learning. [Focus group, May 18, 2007]

As many students describe feeling marginalized and silenced in previous school settings (and in society at large), the school structures are fundamental forums that engage them as participatory actors in their school. Many students view these experiences as initial catalysts that allow them to participate actively in decision making and democracy not only at school but also beyond (Hantzopoulos 2011). For example, Queena describes how she came to view herself as an agent for social change:

> Like I loved when we were protesting the Regents' exams and me and a couple other students actually wrote letters and we went and we read the letters at city hall . . . We actually went and we read those letters as part of our campaign . . . you hear about people doing these amazing things, these protests and these campaigns and just taking up these causes that they feel strongly for and you never realize that those people are the same people as you. *There's nothing about them that's extraordinary, except that they choose to be extraordinary people* [emphasis mine]. [Interview, May 6, 2007]

These excerpts are but a few that illustrate how students conceptualized their experience, of which I have written about elsewhere. Ultimately, they show that students view the school as a place that effectively promotes democratized education in which the principles of critical pedagogy—dialogical engagement, student knowledge valorization, and empowerment—are reflected in the school curriculum.

The remainder of this article, however, turns more closely to the tensions that students experienced in enacting democracy despite their general positive feeling towards its role in the school. Whether students describe their desire to change society, work toward dismantling unjust structures, and/or simply give back to their communities in some way, students also indicate that they often brush up against "realities" that challenge their assumptions about their abilities to affect change. In particular, they speak about encountering roadblocks to their sense of agency related to circumstances that are beyond their control. At times, these clashes happen right in the school, though more frequently, students describe teetering between two social words beyond the actual school site. It is here that the post-structural critiques of critical and democratic pedagogy may illuminate some of the theoretical issues with enacting such an education. At the same time, the students' experiences and the creative ways in which they circumvented these barriers reveal more closely what transpires when students steer through these transitions and sheds light on how to move the critical pedagogy project forward.

Negotiating Opposing Perspectives at School

One primary example that illustrates the tensions between "reality" and "hope for change" in democratic schools happened during the first weeks of my fieldwork at school. The NYC Department of Education had just passed a policy that allowed police officers with portable metal detectors to conduct unannounced sweeps of students at middle schools and high schools throughout the city. When the police and the roving metal detectors showed up at Prep, several students from both Prep and another similarly themed school in the building began to organize and protest. Some refused to go through

the detectors and were detained. Others began to organize a protest, holding signs in the street that stated they were being criminalized. One student contacted her mother to get the media down to the school. Meanwhile the police, unaccustomed to this response at schools, phoned in to the head of Security at the Department of Education. Soon the two untenured principals at these schools were told to stop the protests or their jobs would be at risk. Consequently, students had to be persuaded by staff to stop and comply. Some acquiesced to the demands of the staff while others remained confused and angry. Many asked questions like, "Isn't this what we are supposed to be doing if we feel that injustice is happening? Isn't this what we learned here?" The school mediated this tension by holding an emergency Town Meeting in which students were able to voice their frustration and anger, though they were still asked not to protest on or around the school grounds. Students were encouraged to meet over the course of the week to develop other strategies. The Town Meeting and this space for organizing did in fact appease most students, and this shows that most, in fact, trusted that their teachers would work with them to figure out ways to cope. Some, however, remained frustrated, and one student even accused the school administration of being complicit in bringing the metal detectors to the school. While there are layers of complexity to this particular situation, this student's accusation sheds light on how these negotiations between students' desires and administrative mandates are fraught with tension in daily and quotidian interactions.

Nonetheless, when clashes like this did occur, students often were able to negotiate these tensions to their advantage, even when they felt like their desires were inconsistent with those of the teachers. For example, during one of the auditions for the talent shows, a few students wanted to stage a wrestling match, in the dramatic style of the World Wrestling Entertainment, as one of the acts. While some teachers felt that this would inherently contradict the school core values (in particular, a commitment to peace), the students presented a case of how they could integrate the core values into their presentation. They also assured the staff that there would be no actual fighting, just fake acrobatics and some movement. This posed a dilemma for the teachers; if the school were democratic and the students were attempting to (re)define the core values in their presentation, could they/should they prevent it from happening? Even students not involved in the project were weighing in on the debate, insisting that these students be allowed. In the end, the staff decided to let the performance happen, under supervision, though one staff member adamantly still disagreed.

Taking seriously the hesitation of the staff, the two student wrestlers actually wove in a skit about "Old Prep" vs. "New Prep." This theme reflected earlier (and polarizing) Town Meeting discussions among students that "newer" students were destroying "Prep culture" but not "understanding" the nature of the school. While there were a few jarring thumps and flips during the performance, the students actually created a piece that ultimately emphasized unity between new and old students. Thus, they endeavored to use this wrestling match as a way to speak about an underlying issue in the school in a constructive and new way, one that was often discussed in the sanctioned formats such as Town Meeting (where it often devolved). At the same time, they were able to put on a spectacular wrestling show.

Another example of discord at the school surfaced when a prominent guest author came to the school. After weeks of preparation and reading the author's book, students in four advisories prepared a forum to host him. This included a book talk at which they hoped to discuss his book and share their related projects with him, followed by a student catered reception. When the author arrived at the book talk, he told students that he did not have to talk about the book and that instead he could talk about boxing (assuming this was what they wanted to talk about). He peppered his speech with profanity and anecdotes about his youth and did not discuss his work or his craft. Some students thought this

was hilarious, while others were offended at what they perceived to be his disrespect for them. When one teacher openly challenged him on his lack of preparedness or willingness to engage the book or his work, the author seemed humored and pitted himself as someone who was in solidarity with the students. He continued to proceed without talking about his work, despite the fact that many students did, in fact, want to talk about his book.

After the book talk, students went back to their advisories and the author's visit dominated each discussion. Debates emerged such as the appropriateness of cursing (when, why, and where), or whether the author was "keeping it real" or was actually condescending to the students (not viewing them as intellectuals). Students went back and forth on these issues for the entire week, some changing positions, others adamantly defending the author's right to free speech. While tensions were not neatly resolved and there was no fixed outcome to the many conversations, the most revelatory aspect of this incident was that there were formalized school spaces for students to engage and process. In this sense, dialogical engagement was in full, continual play because of intentional structures in the school, and students were not silenced because of larger disagreements with the community.

When the stakes seemed higher, however, unresolved tension sometimes led to stronger feelings of discord. For instance, there were times when negotiation over the shared space of Prep Central, despite the previously mentioned positive views of it, created conflict among students and teachers. During school hours, students were required to have a free period or have a note from their teacher to be in there working. After school hours, students had 40 minutes for relaxation time, and then, as the sign looming on the wall indicated, the space was for "quiet and meaningful conversation or work." Competing interests however sometimes led to power struggles between students and teachers over the use of space. For instance, one day, students were upset that they had to leave the space in the afternoon so teachers could finish their work. As described in my field notes:

> Later on that afternoon, at 4:30, I engaged in a discussion with students about staying late in Prep Central. This transpired because they were about to play cards, were screaming loudly, and asked to leave . . . They brought up several issues and emotions, like "We feel unwanted" (Demetri), "We have no place to go" (Matt), "Why can't we go in the music room?" (Rawnda), "These are moments that we want to cherish" (Matt). In fact, one student even said, "If we were talking about politics or something else, the teachers would let us stay." [Field notes, March 22, 2007]

The tension that manifested in this type of interaction shows some of the difficulties in negotiating a communal space, even though it is a cornerstone of how democracy is perceived and enacted in the school. As the critiques of critical pedagogy illuminate, the perception of egalitarian student–teacher relationships erode when needs and desired outcomes conflict. Nonetheless, people often tried to find common solutions when there was an issue over Prep Central use so that navigating the space wasn't always as fraught as above. In this case, the situation was mediated through finding an empty room for the students to engage.

Collectively, these examples show that the outcomes over these conflicts vary contextually and do not solely render one group or party silenced or dismayed. While they illuminate some of the inherent power dynamics that exist among students and teachers (despite attempts to equalize them), the examples also reveal the ways in which the school's space is also a dynamic site of contestation, continually grappling with, but not always resolving, the friction that occurs. While no students interviewed talked about these struggles, field notes indicated that they were common and regular quotidian experiences in the school. These engagements however, do not necessarily reflect a failed

attempt at participatory democracy but rather the collective struggles and negotiations that make the process dynamic, messy, and reflective.

Navigating Undemocratic Terrain beyond Prep

What many alumni did express in interviews was that they felt there were larger constraints on their activism and sense of agency once they left Prep. Many described feeling charged with optimism when they left the school but tainted with cynicism when they encountered obstacles to their commitment or ability to affect change. For instance, Antoinette, an alumna who transferred to Prep from a specialized high school, was studying abroad during my research. When asked to describe the school in her survey, she wrote:

> Prep reinvigorated a love of learning for me. The teachers encouraged me to look at the world around me, ask questions, and initiate positive change. One of the most important lessons that I learned was that activism did not have to be only big issues that you hear about on TV or marching with signs but could be as small as helping someone in the neighborhood or making the school look nicer. By making activism possible, Prep instilled in me the need to always be working towards positive change. Living now in Jerusalem, I struggle with this, as it is hard for me to walk to Arab neighborhoods and see poverty and discrimination but be unable to help without putting myself in danger. I am sure, though, if I look, I will find ways to work in small ways. [Survey, 2007]

Antoinette described the difficulty of being a change agent when larger societal forces prevented her from even engaging in the world in the way that she imagined she could. Because this excerpt was not from an interview but rather from a survey, I was unable to explore what she meant by danger. Nonetheless, what this does convey is that she felt there were real obstacles to her sense of agency.

Rebecca, another alumna, expressed something similar. In an interview, she mostly praised the school for helping to develop her "critical thinking capacities." For instance, she explained:

> My critique of capitalism definitely came from Prep . . . When I went to Jamaica last fall, I had fun but saw my country in a different way. I noticed disparities between the rich and the poor. I was there for 11 days and saw so much . . . People who live across the street from Margaritaville [a popular club for tourists] have never been to the beach because they have to pay. As a kid, I just did not have that view of Jamaica. [Interview, January 15, 2007]

While there are likely several intersecting factors that contribute to her analysis of global capitalism, she personally makes the connection between her education at Prep and this worldview. However, like Antoinette, she faced a similar dilemma of feeling powerless to initiate change in her post-Prep environment. For instance, she commented:

> [Prep] impacted me by allowing me to become aware of the social issues that mattered in this society. The school sheltered me, however, from other institutions where my voice may not have been heard and caused me to be aware of the issues in our society that need to be changed. [Survey, 2007]

Like Antoinette, Rebecca described feeling inhibited by external structures and institutions that limited her "voice"; yet, the comment about sheltering reveals an interesting paradox. When asked to explain further, she described her college as a "rich white school" that institutionally silenced her, a black woman from New York City. Other alumni of color had similar experiences, particularly at small predominantly white and wealthy liberal arts institutions. Yet Rebecca also said that this allowed her to understand what else "need[ed] to be changed," suggesting that she still felt hope and viewed herself as an agent of change.

Additionally, alumni also specifically spoke about how they were disappointed with the cultures at new institutions that often did not reflect the same values as Prep. For example, one alumna, Amelia, was particularly frustrated with the way that the administration at her college dealt with issues of race and gender and evoked the Fairness Committee as something that should exist to mediate campus tensions:

> things that I think should really be at [College X], you know how Prep has the whole Fairness thing? Well, X doesn't have anything like that . . . for example, there was a guy who had a crush on me in the beginning of last term, and I didn't say hi to him one day and he came and with a really powerful water gun and squirted me one day . . . and I was really angry . . . and there's nothing you can do for anything that's not like, where you have like a physical scar. . . . it just seems like there's no accountability for anything that goes on. And even last term a sophomore actually who got on the radio here . . . and he, a white person, said [racist epithet]. And there were no consequences, it just makes me angry, nobody did anything. I really feel like at Prep, if you would do something to disrespect the community there's going to consequences . . . But instead, here, you're just walking around, partying it up, having fun, it just makes me so mad. [Interview, March 11, 2007]

Others described the intergenerational and diverse community at Prep as something that was hard to replicate elsewhere. In this sense, they were unsure about how to integrate themselves into the environment and even felt silenced by it. For example, Dalia, another alumna, describes how she felt shocked at college when she could not connect with other students:

> I was kind of thrown into the real world . . . it was a commuter school so it was really hard to meet people. So my first, freshman year in college I absolutely detested the school [the college] . . . it was very bizarre for me cause I just went from a school that had so much warmth, and liveliness, to a school that didn't. It almost felt like being at [her previous mainstream public school] again, not at Humanities Prep, but a very rigid, segregated environment, and I was like "Isn't Prep prepping me for college? It's not!" [Interview, February 15, 2007]

Nonetheless, Dalia went on to explain that she negotiated this tension by becoming involved in Arab-American clubs and networks at her school and beyond. In fact, at the time of research, she was making a documentary about the fetishization of Arab-American culture in mainstream American society. She also concluded, "But you know, it did actually (prepare me for college), the way we interacted with one another, whether it was with students or teachers at Prep, being in college long enough and being a part of organizations, and functions, and classes you start to see how that really preps you for college." Thus, she linked her experience at Prep to the sense of activism she found in her community.

In both cases, Rebecca and Dalia sought out particular groups in which they felt active and felt they had a voice. Rebecca, for instance, describes joining an African-American community-service oriented sorority at another college (because it did not exist at her school), and Dalia became incredibly active in various Arab-American community projects in New York City. By turning to affinity groups or societies that were related to an aspect of their identity (race or gender), they perhaps perceived these as places to initiate change rather than subject themselves to otherwise institutionally racist or sexist environments. While they could not replicate the diversity of their high school in their new institutions, they could find spaces for activism elsewhere, carrying those values with them, albeit in a segregated (and more empowering) space. This involvement in groups suggests that students do not simply lose hope for change but find new and creative ways to mediate these tensions.

Participatory School: Liberating Spaces or Sites of Despair?

Students' experiences reveal that democratic schooling and critical pedagogy at Prep is mostly full of promise, despite the inconsistent ways in which this played out in students'

lives within and beyond the school. There is little question that the school created a profoundly nurturing and rigorous experience for students. As the data show, its particular approach to schooling re-socializes students academically through strong student–teacher relationships; a core values-infused culture of respect; a thematic, culturally relevant and project-based curriculum; and opportunities for participatory engagement (Hantzopoulos 2011; 2012). Not only did this curriculum help re-socialize students academically, but also they overwhelmingly felt that the school allowed them to cultivate their voice, provide room for their agency, develop a platform from which to think about the world differently and more critically than they had before, and imagine different alternatives for the future (Hantzopoulos 2011).

In spite of this, current students and alumni also discuss encountering obstacles to their sense of empowerment when dealing with power dynamics and larger structural inequities that inhibit their sense of agency within and beyond the school. This includes times when their perceptions of fairness and justice differ with the perceptions of their teachers, as well as when they are confronted with circumstances beyond their control. Thus, despite Prep's attempts to create a humanizing and democratizing environment, alumni and students sometimes describe the school as one that was overly utopic and removed from real world contexts and, consequently, suggest it may have hindered them for figuring out ways to negotiate their agency in these circumstances. Moreover, there are occasional times when they feel that their perspectives are marginalized both within the school and beyond, even by those who ostensibly uphold the schools' values. For the toughest post-structural skeptic of the critical pedagogy project, this potentially confirms the silencing nature of enacting an education that is rooted in emancipatory rhetoric.

While these issues necessarily raise questions about the extent to which education can be transformative when larger structural inequalities exist, scholars must also look to the ways that young people circumvent these barriers when confronted with obstacles to avoid an oversimplified and immediate dismissal of democratizing processes and critical pedagogies. In the case of Prep, students felt restricted by what they were able to do in these situations; yet, they mediated their mismatched expectations, displaying ways in which they negotiated these tensions to their advantage as active agents of change. Though democratic education might not be wholly liberating for participants at all times, the data show it is not wholly disciplining either. Instead, the enactment of such education in schools reveals that multiple contradictions arise, sometimes even simultaneously, as participants struggle to make meaning of their agency in prohibitive contexts. Thus, rather than being viewed monolithically as sites of despair, democratic schools are manifestations of sites in which (and by which) agency is negotiated, contested, and remade, often in unexpected, unassuming, and contradictory ways. In this sense, the dynamic and complex views of democracy articulated earlier are in fact left intact, as school agents collectively endeavor to transform their communities and social worlds into more just spaces.

Thus, by centering the localized experiences of participants, this paper addresses the importance of closely looking at how school actors shape their own educational trajectories amid larger meta-narratives (both dominant and counter). As Bartlett also maintains from her analysis of a Brazilian popular education program, Freirean thought and the prospect of democratized schooling "could benefit from a complementary, Foucauldian notion of power as ubiquitous, rather than located in certain groups, as productive rather than merely repressive, and relational, rather than reified" (2005:17). In this sense, rather than disposing of critical pedagogy, Bartlett suggests shifting the paradigm to employ a socio-cultural approach to school that also re-conceptualizes Freirean notions of power. Rather than viewing power as possession, which maintains false dualisms, power between student and teacher should be seen as circulating to dismantle these imagined binaries. By

engaging in ethnographic work, critical pedagogues can create appropriate programs that give attention to local ideologies, thereby assuming that there is no universal method or teleological outcome.

In conclusion, the efforts to engage young people in participatory education in public schools must undergo a similar re-reading and, in this vein, cannot be entirely dismissed nor be uncritically embraced. These approaches should be viewed as part of an ongoing and unfinished process, one that requires constant critical reflection and perpetual reflexive scrutiny, so that educators can be explicitly responsive to the ways students are bridging the complex realities of their schools and their social worlds. This is particularly important during an era when public schools (and their students and teachers) are wholly demonized and educational policies reflect an agenda embedded in accountability and privatized choice. Instead, attention to the ways that participants ascribe varied meanings to their experiences will enable scholars and practitioners to illuminate the educational needs of particular communities, re-imagine possibilities, and see through and beyond de-contextualized dichotomies and binaries. It is herein that these communities can inch towards more dynamic, integrated, and participatory spaces for youth, ones that are perpetually in flux, ever evolving, and constantly creating something new and more just.

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