From Theory to Practice:
Limits and Possibilities of Critical Pedagogy
In a High Poverty Urban High School

by

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ABSTRACT

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Public schooling in the United States has long been framed as a vehicle of social change. This dissertation explores the imagined, real, and potential role of public schools as a vehicle of social change, and in particular, as a means of improving the life chances and quality of life for high-poverty urban youth as a group. The high poverty urban high school is a site in which the limitations and contradictions of education for social change are strikingly revealed and magnified; it therefore provides a fitting site from which to examine popular assumptions about schooling and social change, and to gain a more accurate understanding of the limits of public schooling as a vehicle of social change. Drawing on two years of ethnographic research about a youth-led participatory research project in a high-poverty urban high school, this dissertation explores one attempt to implement critical pedagogy in this context. Critical pedagogy is defined as a theory and practice of education to promote social critique and political engagement, especially among students who have been historically oppressed and excluded from political and economic power. The study identifies three features of the high-poverty urban high

school that limited the effectiveness of critical pedagogy: 1) the school-based imperative to enforce classroom discipline, assignments, and assessments; 2) the schooling histories and poor academic skills of most students; and 3) the school-based imperative to prepare students for success at future levels of schooling. The goal of critical pedagogy in a high-poverty urban high school is to empower students to effect change in ways that improve their life chances and quality of life. Toward this end, critical pedagogy must do more than promote academic achievement; it must provide the opportunity, inspiration, and guidance for political engagement *beyond* schools. Such political engagement must address issues of economic justice such as livable wages, secure employment opportunities, affordable housing, and health care. Social policies in these areas are necessary to improve the life chances and quality of life for high-poverty urban students, and must be seen as parallel efforts with any educational reform.

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                                                            Date

To Zillion and Ronnie

intellectual community and support network that has encouraged and supported my work in immeasurable ways. Through so many conversations, dialogues, projects, and social events, I have been challenged to think about my work in new ways, and to imagine new possibilities for engaged research and meaningful education. I am indebted all of them for reminding me why I entered graduate school in the first place, for holding me accountable to my political commitments, and for modeling ethical, politically-engaged, and theoretically rigorous scholarship.

I owe many thanks to my writing partners Soo Ah Kwon, Andrea Dyrness, and Kristin Hull Cortes. Soo Ah Kwon read every draft of every chapter of this dissertation, and always provided helpful feedback as well as necessary encouraging words. Andrea Dyrness has pushed my thinking and analysis both on subjects related to this dissertation and many others; she has also shown me how to better balance work with relaxation (even though I don't always balance it very well). Kristin Hull Cortes provided excellent feedback on many drafts, as well as emotional support.

Marian Neutra made possible a month-long writing retreat in rural Wyoming, providing much-needed peace and quiet, fresh air, and inspiration in the beginning stages of data analysis and writing. I am indebted to her, as well as to Brendan and Justin Neutra, for making that retreat possible. The first draft of this dissertation was completed on another writing retreat, thanks to Bert and Ellen Spencer for providing an excellent deal on a rural home in the California wine country. I completed final revisions in a peaceful retreat house on the Central California coast, for which I am indebted to Kristin Hull Cortes and the Hull family.

"It's not about changing the *kids,* it's about changing the *system*!" Suli sat up straight on the edge of his seat as he made this claim. He spoke loudly and firmly, as though he were addressing a large political rally; his voice conveyed a strong sense of urgency. His friend "D" responded with no less enthusiasm: "Nah, it's about changing the *teachers,* cuz the *teachers* help change the *system!"* The two young men were in the midst of passionate debate about social change—specifically, about strategies for bringing about *system-wide* social change. Their ultimate goal was a society in which young people like themselves would have meaningful opportunities for a quality education and livable employment. Their disagreement concerned the role of public schooling in realizing this social goal.

D and Suli were young working adults and recent high school graduates, about twenty years old, at the time of their conversation. While in high school, both young men had been sent to a special school for students labeled "at-risk" or "low-achieving." Like D and Suli, most of their classmates were poor and African American; they tended to receive poor grades, had low academic skills, and saw few opportunities for themselves after high school—either for higher education or for livable wage employment. D and Suli talked frequently about their desire to help other young people like themselves: to give back to their community, to help other youth avoid the mistakes they made, to empower low-income urban youth to "succeed in life" and "think about tomorrow not just today." But as the two young men learned more about the root causes of poor grades, low academic skills, and the lack of opportunities for poor, urban youth in higher education and the workplace, they came to recognize that giving back to their community

required much more than helping individual students make different choices. To make a difference in the lives and education of other low-income urban youth, they would have to change the *system*—to bring about racial and economic justice. "But how you gonna change the *system,* man?" Suli repeated his question again, emphasizing the word *system* to underscore the need for social, not individual change. D's response again emphasized the role of teachers and public schools: "How you change the system? […] You gotta go with the *teachers* first!"

At the heart of D's and Suli's debate is a question about the role of public schooling in progressive social change. By progressive social change, I refer to systemic social changes geared toward expanding racial equality and economic opportunity, while reducing (or eliminating) poverty and poverty-related social problems. It is a question that educators frequently ask ourselves but rarely interrogate sufficiently. Too often, we ask the question rhetorically and assume the answer to be self-evident. We know that education should help all students succeed in life, and that good education should also empower students to make a difference in society. Many of us were drawn to education in order to create a better society—more just, more democratic, more equitable. We believe public schools should help not just individual students, but all of our students *as a group,* thereby contributing to the greater good of society as a whole. We educators are not alone in drawing these associations between public education and social change. In the United States, public schooling has long been framed as a vehicle of change, and schools are consistently charged with the task of improving society (Perkinson, 1995; Spring, 1991). Indeed, some version of educational quality or educational justice—as

manifested by better, more rigorous, or more equal public schools—is an integral part of almost any widely-accepted vision of social justice in the United States today.

In this dissertation, I explore the imagined, idealized, real, and potential role of public schooling in bringing about progressive social change. Specifically, I examine the promise of schooling as a means of alleviating poverty and poverty-related social problems, and as a vehicle for improving the life chances and quality of life for high-poverty urban youth *as a group.* These changes are often referred to as "social justice"— a concept that is frequently invoked by educators as the basis and inspiration for our work in education. I begin this dissertation with a firm commitment to social justice and to the role of public education in bringing about social justice. At the same time, I question the taken-for-granted tendency to equate school improvement or school equality with social justice, and I seek to provide a more accurate understanding of the real and potential role of public schooling in bringing about progressive social change, particularly as this applies to improving the life chances and quality of life for high-poverty urban youth.

The high poverty urban high school is a site in which the limitations and contradictions of education for social change are strikingly revealed and magnified. In schools like this, low skills, low expectations, persistent academic failure, and a startling lack of opportunities for high school graduates persist alongside the incessant promise of education for social justice and social change. In the field of education, the terms "urban school" and "social justice" are so often used together that choosing to work in an urban school is widely viewed as a progressive political act. Teachers in these schools are often drawn to work there as an expression of social justice and to promote social change. At the same time, the impacts of poverty and poverty-related social problems are especially

visible at these schools, and the lack of opportunities for high school graduates—either in higher education or in livable wage jobs—are painfully magnified here. The high-poverty, low-achieving urban high school therefore provides a fitting site from which to examine the limitations of popular assumptions about schooling and social change, and from which to theorize more accurately about the real and potential role of public schooling as a vehicle for improving the opportunities and quality of life for high-poverty urban youth as a group.

The Participatory Action Research Team for Youth

The conversation between D and Suli at the opening of this chapter occurred in the context of a youth-led participatory research project called PARTY: the Participatory Action Research Team for Youth. The members of PARTY were current and former students (ages 16-21) from Jackson High School, a high poverty, low achieving urban high school in Northern California.[1] The central goal of the PARTY project was to *understand* and *address* the social inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students. In its first year, the PARTY group conducted research about social issues and policies affecting their lives. In the second year, they developed and taught a class at Jackson High based on principles of critical pedagogy—a philosophy of teaching for progressive social change. The decision to teach a class at Jackson High School was the *action,* chosen collectively by the PARTY members, that emerged from the process of participatory research. In teaching the PARTY class at Jackson High School, the youth were driven by the theory of progressive social change,

and a belief in the power of education to bring about that change. Through group

reflection, dialogue, and participatory research, PARTY members developed a teaching

philosophy that reflected the principles of *critical pedagogy*: a theory and practice of

education that aims to promote meaningful social critique and political engagement

among all people, especially those who have been historically oppressed and excluded

from political and economic power, in order to bring about progressive social change.

This dissertation is based on two years of ethnographic research and participation

with PARTY. My research took place in PARTY meetings, with PARTY members, and

inside the youth-led PARTY classroom at Jackson High School. My methods included

participant observation at meetings, in the classroom, and the school site, as well as

interviews with PARTY members and Jackson High School students. Prior to initiating

the research, I worked as a classroom teacher at Jackson High School, as well as a

substitute, consultant, mentor, volunteer, and researcher, for a total of six years. This

dissertation study draws on this range of experience and familiarity with Jackson High

School and its students, staff, and teachers. The focus of my research, however, is the

group of five youth PARTY members as they studied, planned, taught, and reflected on

their youth-led class. I examine how the youth PARTY members related their research

and teaching to their life experiences, and how they articulated and re-evaluated their

own theories about the role of public schooling in progressive social change.

Participatory research

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[1] The name of the school and all places and people in this dissertation are pseudonyms. The only exceptions are the youth participatory researchers, who requested their first names be used in order to get credit for their participation as co-researchers and teachers: Lolo, Louis, D, Leila, Suli, and Hannah.

As I use this term, participatory research is not merely as a research method that involves participation by "subjects." Rather, it is an alternative paradigm of knowledge production in which groups who are adversely affected by a social problem undertake collective study to understand and address it (Hall 1992; Maguire, 1987). Participatory research is based on the assumption that people are capable of understanding the social forces that shape the conditions of their lives. In its purest form, participatory research blurs the traditional distinction between researchers and subjects, because the group retains control over each phase of the research process: identifying an issue to study, developing research questions and methods, interpreting and using the results as the basis for collective action. Research questions speak to the needs of the group because they emerge from their shared lived experiences. In the end, the knowledge is not "owned" by a professional researcher, but by people who use it to solve an immediate social problem or to organize for social change. The purpose of participatory research is not just to gain knowledge, but to *use* the knowledge to take action toward addressing a social issue. It is sometimes referred to as participatory *action* research because the research is inseparable from the action. This process is intended to be emancipatory "in that it makes those studied aware of the conditions which oppress them, and it helps them to design ways to resist oppression" (Lecompte, 1995, p. 98).

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is best conceptualized as a model of education for democracy. Like all visions of civic, citizenship, or democratic education, critical pedagogy aims to build an active democratic citizenry with the capacity to think critically, check abuses of

power, and reshape society. When Giroux (1983) defined the concept of critical

pedagogy, he described it as a form of education for "a genuine democratic society" (p.

201). Critical pedagogy, he argued, should promote "civic courage" and create a

"counter-public sphere" for historically-oppressed groups to become engaged in

questioning injustice and creating alternative social systems. In this education, Giroux

argued, "students should learn not only how to weigh the existing society against *its* own

claims, they should also be taught to think and act in ways that speak to different societal

possibilities and ways of living" (p. 202). These principles of critical pedagogy suggest a

commitment to broad-based *democratic participation* as the means, and the goal, of

social change. As a whole, the literature on critical pedagogy is highly theoretical, and is

rarely grounded in the day-to-day demands of a high-poverty urban high school

classroom. In this dissertation, I strive to inform a more practical theory of critical

pedagogy—one that is based in actual classroom practice, and which takes into account

the specific context of a high-poverty and low-achieving urban high school.

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation tells the story of the PARTY project over two years of

participatory research and action aimed at understanding and addressing social

inequalities affecting the lives of high-poverty urban students. In Chapter 1, I provide the

context of the study, an overview of the PARTY project, and a description of my research

methods. I describe how the PARTY project emerged from and reflects the context of

Jackson High School and each of the youth members who participated in creating and

shaping the project. I describe how the impacts of racialized poverty and marginalization

shaped the school context and the political consciousness of students, such that students developed an oppositional political consciousness that was rooted in their everyday lived experiences. This oppositional consciousness informed their participation in PARTY and shaped the direction of the project.

In Chapter 2, I explore the literature on critical pedagogy and illustrate how the principles of critical pedagogy informed the PARTY group's teaching philosophy. When they began teaching at Jackson High School, PARTY members explicitly connected the goals of the class to the larger goal of broad-based democratic action for progressive social change. They articulated theories of change that emphasized the important role of education, and *schooling,* in bringing about racial and economic justice. Between Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, a brief interlude takes us from theory to practice by describing a typical day inside the PARTY classroom. This typical day provides a picture of a complete, 80-minute class taught by PARTY members, and exemplifies several of themes to be developed in subsequent chapters—in particular, how the imperatives of compulsory schooling limited the transformative potential of critical pedagogy in the PARTY project.

The first and most obvious constraint that PARTY members encountered in the classroom was the school-based imperative to enforce classroom discipline and assign written assignments, despite routine and widespread noncompliance from students. PARTY members disagreed about whether students should be "forced" to do things they did not want to do, especially to obey classroom rules (such as speaking one at a time and coming to class on time) or to complete schoolwork assignments. The perceived need for coercion to hold students accountable to these expectations appeared to undermine the

democratic relationships between student and teacher, which are a central feature of critical pedagogy, and the ideals of student agency and democracy in the classroom. Moreover, when faced with noncompliance to rules and assignments, PARTY members struggled to articulate the connection between these routine practices of schooling and their larger vision of social change. Chapter 3 examines this tension between democracy and authority in the context of the PARTY class. Despite the intentions of the PARTY project to blur the distinction between students and teachers, (and between youth and adults, researcher and subject), the classroom context brought these categories to the surface and constructed them as mutually-exclusive and fundamentally antagonistic. Chapter 3 argues that Jackson High School students and PARTY members lacked the skills necessary to access a rigorous high school curriculum; additionally, they had few opportunities to see education as a liberatory practice and little reason to expect that a rigorous curriculum could be empowering.

The second challenge faced by PARTY members in the classroom was the school-based imperative to prepare students for future levels of schooling—in this case, for college. College preparation and academic rigor are widely viewed as essential components of education for social change. However, PARTY members found it increasingly difficult to articulate how college preparation for Jackson high School students connected to their larger goal of progressive social change, especially as they learned more about the root causes of social inequality shaping their lives, and reflected on their own life experiences as young adults, workers, and community college students. I explore the role of college preparation in progressive social change in Chapter 4. In particular, examine the underlying assumptions and political implications of the college

for everyone discourse—the view that universal college preparation, especially among high-poverty urban students, is a path to greater social justice. In light of PARTY's central goal to understand and address the social inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students, I explore the limitations of focusing solely on academic achievement, school success, and college preparation. Despite the positive impacts of the college for everyone discourse—such as extending educational access and foregrounding issues of equity—I argue that college preparation must be seen as a parallel effort with, not a substitute for, demands for more sweeping economic justice, including livable wages, employment opportunities, affordable housing, and health care.

In Chapter 5, I reflect on the dilemmas discussed previously: of rule-enforcement, schoolwork assignments, and college preparation in the critical classroom. In all three cases, PARTY members faced tension and difficulty because students resisted participation in these traditional "school-like" activities. When faced with routine student noncompliance, PARTY members revisited the *purpose* behind these school-like activities and found it difficult to articulate how they were connected to the larger goal of progressive social change. Taking the path of least resistance, PARTY members adopted a pedagogy based solely on "voicing your opinion," what I call the voice as therapy model. Chapter 5 argues that this shift to voice as therapy occurred at a significant cost: the PARTY class gave up a commitment to strengthening academic literacy skills. I argue these skills are important not for their instrumental value (e.g. college preparation), but also for their intrinsic value: deepening critical consciousness and strengthening effective political engagement. In order to empower students to be active and effective agents of social change, critical pedagogy must incorporate a non-negotiable expectation

of academic literacy, even though establishing a "non-negotiable" runs counter to the aim of critical pedagogy to foster a democratic relationship between students and teachers, where all share equal power in the common pursuit of liberatory knowledge. I refer to this contradiction as the *central paradox of critical pedagogy*: the desire within critical pedagogy to promote student agency while at the same time *directing* the outcome of that agency. Confronting the central paradox of critical pedagogy requires confronting the essentially paternalistic nature of education generally. However, drawing lessons from the PARTY class, I argue that facing this tension is necessary in order for students to move from "feeling" empowered to *being* empowered.

Although much of this dissertation focuses on the structural limitations of the compulsory school classroom as a context for critical pedagogy, my intention is not to dismiss the importance of school-based critical pedagogy. Formal schools, especially those serving high-poverty students, remain an important site of education for social change. But our efforts to realize this goal can be strengthened through a close and honest examination of the constraints and limitations of this context. This dissertation attempts to provide one such examination, in order to inform a theory of critical pedagogy that is grounded in practice and sensitive to the conditions of the high-poverty urban high school. In Chapter 6, I illustrate that school-based critical pedagogy offers promising possibilities and potential to advance action for social change from the level of the classroom. Although the high-poverty urban high school presents many challenges and constraints, it also provides unique opportunities to make a difference where it is most needed, by working with students who have the most to gain from progressive social change, and the greatest understanding about the need for such change. Chapter 6

highlights the possibilities of critical pedagogy within a high-poverty urban high school by examining the impacts of PARTY on Jackson High School students and the PARTY members themselves. Drawing on the lessons learned from the PARTY project overall, I conclude by revisiting the organizing question of this dissertation: the role of public schooling in progressive social change. I articulate my own new understanding of the limits and possibilities of public schools and school-based critical pedagogy within the larger goal of improving the lives, opportunities, and education for high-poverty urban students.

SITUATING PARTY: JACKSON HIGH SCHOOL AND THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH TEAM FOR YOUTH

"Even though public schools do reproduce existing social inequities, this book is written because public schools also offer us, potentially, a site, accessible to all, for the critique and transformation of these very inequities" (Fine, 1991, p. 26).

The Participatory Action Research Team for Youth (PARTY) was a two-year participatory research project that sought to achieve the following goal: to understand and address, through collaborative inquiry and action, the social inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students. The outcome of our work together was a class, developed and taught by Jackson High School graduates, that aimed to raise consciousness and political engagement among Jackson students. The choice to develop and teach a class like this reflected our group's assumption that schools, despite their historical role in reproducing inequality, also offer the possibility to transform those inequalities (Fine, 1991; see also Giroux, 1983). We began from a shared belief in students' capacity to understand—and take action against—the structural conditions shaping their lives. We further believed that education had an important role to play in encouraging, facilitating, and guiding such action. And finally, we believed in schools as an appropriate site of education for social action, drawing on familiar narratives about the democratic purposes public education as our primary justification (Labaree, 1997; Spring, 1991).

The PARTY project officially lasted from 2001 to 2003, but the foundation for the project was laid much earlier. The idea for a participatory research project with

Jackson High School youth emerged through my work as a teacher and researcher at the school, and through the relationships I maintained with five former Jackson High School students: Lolo, Louis, D, Leila, and Suli. The stories of these five young people provide a window into the everyday lived experiences of Jackson High School students. Second, they show how students' lived experiences provided the foundation for an *oppositional consciousness*: understanding how social structures shaped the conditions of their lives and the lives of others like them. In other words, these young people came to understand their personal struggles and challenges not merely as individual problems, but as *social* problems rooted in larger structural inequalities and relations of power. They developed a sense of injustice that was shared, and they were able to connect many of their experiences to larger social issues such as class exploitation, the lack of living wage jobs, institutionalized racism, or economic globalization. It was easy for these young people to see the contradictions between their own lived experiences and our society's prevailing myths of equal opportunity and equal protection under the law.

In relationship with these five young adults, I developed a greater understanding of how their oppositional consciousness was rooted in everyday lived experiences. My own understanding of this fact provided the inspiration to initiate a participatory research project at Jackson High School. This chapter discusses my relationship with the five core PARTY members and provides an overview of the project's two-year trajectory, including a brief description of research methods. I will demonstrate how the emergence and direction of the PARTY project was shaped by the context of Jackson High School, each of the five core PARTY members, and the unique relationships we shared.

Lolo

A few moments after the bell rang, signaling the end of first period, students began to trickle into Room A-3, my classroom, for second period English class. It was the first day of school, in August of 1998, and Lolo arrived to class with a knapsack, spiral notebook, and a pen. She chose a desk in the center of the room, opened her notebook across the desk, and sat with pen in hand, ready to write. From the moment I started class, I felt Lolo's attention focused on me with gripping interest. She participated in our first class discussion with a sense of urgency and intention, raising her hand to comment at every opportunity. As the first few weeks of school wore on, Lolo's enthusiasm for class only seemed to increase. Every day, she arrived to class early with her notebook and pen, ready to take notes. She poured her heart into every assignment, often coming back after school or at lunch time to get extra help.

Early in the school year, Lolo wrote an essay about her father who died when she was ten. Even though her family was always poor, Lolo remembered life before her father's death as a happy and stable time. After he died, Lolo's life changed dramatically. Her family lost their home, and began a cycle of moving every few months to new locations, staying just as long as they could before getting evicted. With her seven older siblings and widowed mother, Lolo moved from studio apartments to motel rooms to a car, and finally, to the streets. Prior to her father's death, Lolo and her seven siblings were home-schooled. After his death, she started public school for the first time, but the family was so mobile that Lolo changed schools several times a year, and went long periods of time without attending school at all. Lolo could not remember how many schools she attended, for how long, or in what order. But until the eighth grade, she

never attended the same school for a whole school year. The gaps in her elementary

schooling were immediately apparent to me in her writing assignments; Lolo worked

extremely hard to translate her ideas into writing, and struggled especially with sentence

construction and basic spelling.

Lolo was not especially unique among Jackson High School students. According

to district records,[2] Jackson High School had 127 students, who were: 72.4% African

American, 13.4% Latino, 5.5% White, 1% Asian, 1% Native American, and 7.1%

"multiple/no response." The proportion of students of color at Jackson High stood in

stark contrast to the population of the San Miguel school district as a whole: 31.4%

African American, 15.9% Latino, 29.3% White, 7.7% Asian, 0.3% Native American, and

15% "multiple/no response."   Jackson High students also tended to be poor: 82.7%

qualify for free/reduced price meals (compared to 49.9% district wide), and 29.1%

received CalWORKS[3] (compared to 6.5% district wide). As these figures show, Jackson

High School served predominantly African American and low-income students. Jackson

High School students consistently scored low on standard measures of academic

achievement, earning the school a reputation as "low-achieving" within the community.

In the 1999-2000 school year,[4] Jackson students had an average high school GPA of 1.7

and a median GPA of 1.57 (about a D+), and *no* Jackson students scored at or above the

50th percentile on *any* section of the state-wide SAT9 test given March 1999.[5]

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[2] 2002-2003 school year
[3] California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (formerly AFDC)
[4] The most recent detailed achievement data available, this data is from one year after Lolo graduated.
[5] California Board of Education Statistics: In 2000, the SAT9 scores of Jackson High students in 10th and 11th grades averaged in the 16th and 17th percentile, respectively, across all subject areas, compared with 61st and 67th percentile among high school students in the City of San Miguel.

Within a few weeks of school, Lolo began eating lunch in my classroom and staying after school to help me with copying, stapling, filing, erasing the board, and straightening the desks. Through our casual conversations, I learned that the water and electricity were often shut off at Lolo's house, and that she snuck into the YMCA with her sisters to take a shower. If they got caught on the way in, she came to school anyway with the embarrassing fear that she would smell from the lack of a shower. I learned that Lolo wanted to be the third member of her family to graduate from high school (after two older siblings). She told me that her faith in God and participation at church had helped her survive the extreme and continuous challenges in her household and extended family, which included police brutality, premature death, incarceration, domestic violence, drug abuse, and alcohol addiction. Just when it seemed that Lolo had witnessed and lived through an extraordinary number of tragedies, she became the victim of sexual abuse by her church minister that lasted five years, from age twelve to seventeen.

In the spring of her senior year, Lolo won an award from a local television network for high school students overcoming great obstacles. She was interviewed on the evening news and received a college scholarship of several thousand dollars. Almost overnight, Lolo became the poster child for Jackson High School; she earned straight A's, spoke at her high school graduation ceremony, and was the main topic of teachers' conversations. In her inspiring graduation speech, Lolo proclaimed proudly that she would be the first in her family to attend college, and that she wouldn't stop there: she was going to get her Ph.D. as well. The Jackson High School teachers were elated. Lolo gave us a renewed sense of hope and a belief that our work at Jackson High School, despite all its challenges and frustrations, was in fact deeply worthwhile.

Within a few weeks of her high school graduation in 1999, Lolo turned eighteen and her mother lost the family's home. Lolo managed to rent a house with six of her siblings in a neighboring suburb, and worked full-time in a grocery store while taking a full load of courses at the community college. Her work schedule was determined each week by the manager, and because Lolo could not work Sundays (due to church) or during class time, she was regularly assigned to less than forty hours per week despite assurances from the manager to increase her hours. She had no health coverage, paid time-off, or even a predictable schedule, and her income from the grocery store was simply not enough to cover the costs of rent, bills, food and transportation.[6] In less than a year, Lolo's brothers and sisters were evicted from the house they shared. With no credit history, no savings, and no ability to pay a security deposit, Lolo was an unattractive potential tenant to any landlord, even if she were not African American. She once again became homeless, and I lost contact with her for over a year.

I received a telephone call from Lolo in Spring of 2001, about two years after her high school graduation. She told me she had been living in motel rooms, at friends' houses, her sister's car, or wherever she could find a roof over her head. She had stopped going to church and started drinking and smoking, but she was determined to get "back on track" and graduate from college. She slept on my couch and I hired her to work as my research assistant—a temporary solution for her immediate financial need—while I helped her find a room to rent. Within days of moving into her new apartment, Lolo got a job at Starbucks and enrolled in a full load of classes for summer session at the local

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[6] Lolo's situation of working full-time without being able to pay bills is widespread among the working poor. See Ehrenriech (2001) for analysis of the mismatch between wages and living expenses in the US. See also Stack (2002) for a thorough analysis of the challenges faced by young workers balancing community college and low-wage employment. These issues are further explored in Chapter 4.

community college. She started going to church again and reunited with her old friend, Louis, who was also working as my research assistant.

Louis

On the first day of school in August of 1998, Louis arrived to the second period English class and chose a seat in the back of the classroom. Although I had not met Louis before, I recognized him from the previous school year. The only Filipino boy at Jackson High School, Louis wore a pony tail that hung to the middle of his back. He often hid his face with the hood of a navy blue down jacket that he wore every day, even when it was hot outside, as was the style. I remembered seeing Louis hanging out with a small group of boys—one Vietnamese, one Iranian, one white—whose bond appeared to be based on their status as racial outsiders at Jackson, as well as a visible love for marijuana. On that first day of school in August of 1998, Louis sat silently through the 90 minute class period, doing nothing to warrant my attention. Within the first few weeks of class, I could see that writing came easily to Louis, and he seemed to be bored with the slow pace of our English class.

The classrooms at Jackson High School opened out to a central courtyard— mostly cement but with two large patches of green grass, about six metal picnic tables bolted to the ground, a couple of benches, and a basketball hoop. On most days at lunch time, students sat at the picnic tables eating lunch while a few boys played basketball. However, in the winter months, the cold and rainy weather drove most students inside to the multi-purpose room where the free and reduced-price lunches were distributed. On one rainy day in the late fall of 1998, Louis wandered into my classroom at lunch time.

He brought a bag of chips and a soda from the Market across the street, and sat by himself at a desk to eat. I made light conversation with him and with Lolo between trips to the copy room and main office. The next day, Louis returned to my classroom at lunch time, and thereafter he ate his lunch there almost every day. For several weeks he and Lolo shared the space of my classroom at lunch time in relative silence. Eventually, my light conversations with Louis evolved into more meaningful dialogues, and he also began speaking with Lolo.

Although he was quiet in new company, when Louis got to know us he became an extraordinarily expressive young man. I learned that Louis was a skilled visual artist with a passion for video games, comic books, and Japanese animation. He dedicated all of his free time to these interests, especially video games and drawing comics. Even as a teenager, Louis possessed a great deal of self-awareness, a strong ability to articulate his feelings, and to empathize with others. He seemed to gain satisfaction from listening and supporting others, and over time, he developed a close platonic friendship with Lolo. Through our conversations at lunch time, I learned that Louis was born in the Philippines and moved to the U.S. with his parents as a young child. His parents had since divorced, and Louis lived with his mother and her boyfriend, both of whom worked as nighttime security guards. He had one sister, a few years older than he, who had recently given birth to a daughter with mild autism. When his sister got evicted from her apartment, she and her daughter moved back into Louis's house, causing a great deal of tension and a crowded household.

Despite his strong academic abilities, Louis showed up in the school records as a barely-passing, nearly-flunking student. His grades suffered primarily because Louis,

like many Jackson students, missed school regularly and often for extended periods of time. In a 1999 survey of Jackson High School students, for example, 42% reported missing school for a month or longer during their high school career.[7] In that same year, Jackson High School students averaged nine "unverified absences" per week (otherwise known as "cutting class" nine times). These findings confirmed a fact that Jackson High School teachers already knew: Frequent, unpredictable absences, as well as long term absences of several weeks or more, were the rule rather than the exception at Jackson High School. From anecdotal evidence, Jackson teachers knew many of the absences were due to incarceration, family obligations, work schedules, pregnancy, childbirth, or caring for a child. Often—even if a student was in juvenile hall—teachers were not formally notified of the reason for the absence. In Louis's case, many extended absences were due to severe illness that may have been caused or exacerbated by depression. But because Louis never brought in a "doctor's note" and his immigrant mother did not understand how to "excuse" his absences, Louis's absences were counted as "cutting class." He was not given (nor did he ask for) make-up work, and his grades suffered the consequences.

It may be inexcusable that neither teachers nor administrators followed up with Louis or his mother when he missed several weeks of school at a time. Yet the truancy and turnover rate at Jackson High School were so monumental that keeping up with every student was overwhelmingly difficult for the adult staff. New students transferred into and out of Jackson High School continually throughout the school year. During the 1999-2000 school year, for example, Jackson High School added 67 new students and

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[7] The survey and "unverified absence" statistics were collected by a graduate student for the purpose of a Master's thesis in social work. The results were shared with teachers at a staff meeting which I attended.

lost 51 (not including a small group who graduated in December).[8] Considering a total

enrollment of about 130 students, this rate of turnover is drastic. With these rates of

truancy and turnover, teachers often commented that all of their time and energy was

consumed simply keeping their roll books up to date. The administrative staff was so

occupied keeping up with the constant student turnover and disciplinary referrals, that

systematic tracking of student progress or long-term visioning became impossible or at

least extremely difficult; basic information like graduation, drop-out, and college

attendance rates were not systematically maintained. Teachers found it difficult to

implement a progressive curriculum that built on previous lessons, or plan for and

implement long-term class projects, because the attendance in each class changed so

much from one day to the next. Despite frequent fresh starts and well-intentioned

attempts to systematize follow-up with absent students, these long term reforms were a

daunting challenge and were never sustained in my eight years at the school site.

One day as Louis, Lolo and I were chatting over lunch time, Louis brought up his

concerns about sweatshops in Southeast Asia, which had recently gained media attention.

Based on his trips to the Philippines and relationships with relatives there, Louis felt

certain that these factories there were akin to slave labor conditions. He found it deeply

troubling and ironic that products made in sweatshops were often aggressively marketed

within communities of color in the United States. Yet he also recognized the ways that

he was complicit in these processes through his own purchases, and he found himself

longing for name brand clothing even when he knew it was produced in a sweatshop. As

Louis described his ambivalence about consumerism and exploitation, I remember being

impressed by his ability to articulate a political critique even while recognizing his own

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[8] Data collected by examining school records.

contradictory position within structures of oppression. From that time forward, Louis and I engaged in many conversations about global political and economic issues, in which I consistently appreciated Louis's thoughtful insights and coherent political arguments.

When he graduated from Jackson High School in 2000, Louis spoke confidently about his plans to attend the University of California at Berkeley's Haas School of Business, and to start his own business making video games. He enrolled in a full course load at community college with the goal of transferring to a university. In his first semester of community college, Louis again fell ill for over a month, causing him to withdraw from all of his classes. Despite this initial set-back, Louis remained ambitious and optimistic about his future as an entrepreneur. When he resumed community college courses, I became an informal tutor and mentor, working with him to select courses, complete homework, understand a syllabus, make a resume, and look for work. To formalize our relationship, I hired him as a research assistant for one or two hours a week. He would help me with copying, filing, and typing, and add the position title of "Research Assistant" to his resume. The work also provided a structure for us to meet consistently every week, giving us an opportunity to talk about his progress in school.

During our weekly meetings, I also talked about my academic work, what I was learning in graduate school, and what kinds of questions I was developing. Louis engaged in these conversations with some interest, sharing his own ideas about urban education, social inequalities, and academic achievement disparities. I started to look forward to our weekly meetings because I appreciated bouncing my ideas off Louis. He was a natural social theorist who enjoyed exploring and articulating new ideas about society and politics. As we have seen, much of Louis's interest in these topics was rooted

in his life experience as 1.5 -generation Filipino American, a low-income teenager in an American city, and a student in a high-poverty, low-achieving urban high school.

D (Daryl)

"I ain't never gonna stop talking, especially about something that I have an opinion about." While Daryl—who goes simply by D—viewed himself as someone who was "never gonna stop talking," my first impression of him was quite the opposite. In high school, D stood a good six inches shorter than most of his male classmates, and he seemed to disappear beneath thick layers of baggy clothing. D was never a student in my class, but when I saw him on campus he often appeared to be lost in deep, serious thought; he projected a tough-but-quiet, and deeply contemplative, image. I would later learn that D lived alone with his grandmother, who worked as a records-keeper for the city government, in a two-bedroom house just outside of San Miguel.

I developed a closer relationship with D in my first year of graduate school when writing a small research paper for a course in urban education. I wrote about school discipline policies and decided to interview Jackson High School students who were perceived by teachers as "discipline problems." D was one such student. He had accumulated a large number of disciplinary referrals for an offense called "disruption and defiance." Some teachers had commented that D talked back to adults in a threatening, underhanded manner; the word "attitude problem" was used more than once in the staff lounge to describe D. When I interviewed him for my research paper, he told me he was kicked out of the large, comprehensive City High School and involuntarily transferred to Jackson. Before that, he said he was sent to on-campus detention "almost every day,"

and received failing grades in several classes. D's story was a common one among Jackson High School students.

For many poor performing African American students like D, Jackson High School was the final destination in a sequence of segregation and removal from spaces of learning into spaces of punishment (Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 1995). For years, the school served as an unofficial disciplinary wing of the larger, comprehensive City High School. Students at City High who were labeled as poor performing, disruptive, or truant, were "involuntarily transferred" to Jackson High School. In theory, this was done in order to provide needy students with more individualized instruction and attention, as well as targeted interventions. In reality, the involuntary transfer policy meant Jackson High School was a punishment school. Although many Jackson students did benefit from the smaller classes and individualized attention, Jackson High School provided only minimal basic instruction and lacked a college preparatory curriculum. Jackson students were also barred from participating in inter-scholastic athletic teams (although there were some exceptions for unique star athletes) and extra-curricular programs that served students at City High School. As a result, transferring to Jackson High School essentially prevented students from college eligibility.

A year after my first research interview with D, I contacted him again for a follow-up because I was revising the paper for publication. Our follow-up interview quickly developed into a two-way discussion about educational inequality, criminal justice, poverty, unemployment, and social justice. D had thought a lot about these issues, and he was articulate in expressing what I considered to be a sophisticated and thoughtful social critique. I learned that he read the newspaper every day, including the

national and international sections. He was extremely knowledgeable about world affairs

and current events, but he also analyzed the news from a critical perspective. In talking

with him, I could see that he had an ability to "read between the lines" of a news article,

to identify bias, spin, and unspoken assumptions. He incorporated these insights into our

conversations about world events, political issues, and even discipline at Jackson High

School. Like Louis, D's oppositional consciousness was rooted in his life experiences.

He frequently drew examples from his own life—of police harassment and brutality,

unfair school discipline policies, racialized poverty, and a close friend's death from gun

violence—when making broader arguments or statements about politics and society.

Leila

I first met Leila in the fall of 2000 while substitute teaching at Jackson High

School. It was Leila's freshman year, and hers was the first *voluntary* cohort of freshmen

to enter Jackson High School. In the late 1990s, Jackson High School came under attack

as a segregated, involuntary, and predominantly African American school that essentially

barred students from college admission. In response, the school district ended the policy

of involuntary transfer. Riding on the political popularity of small schools, the district

promoted Jackson High School as an innovative and nurturing alternative to the large,

comprehensive City High School. Jackson High School became responsible for

recruiting a voluntary ninth grade class, and special attention was paid to "diversifying"

the student population—a euphemism for recruiting as many white students as possible.

The students in Leila's ninth grade cohort were specially recruited at the end of

their eighth grade year. They were told Jackson would offer a small, intimate school with

an alternative, experiential and school-to-career curriculum. The guidance counselors at San Miguel's public middle schools were asked to recommend students who might thrive in an alternative and small school environment. Approximately twenty-five freshmen voluntarily entered Jackson High School in the fall of 2000, and Leila was one of a small handful of white students among them. It is easy to see why an eighth grade counselor might have pegged Leila as an appropriate candidate for a small alterative school. Even as a young high school freshman, Leila wore her dirty-blond hair in long, sturdy dreadlocks, with a beaded, marijuana-leaf necklace always around her neck. She wore home-made clothing that she made herself by sewing bright patches of corduroy fabric or large fabric flowers onto old clothes from the Goodwill store. Outside of school, Leila never hung out with students her age. Her friends were an eclectic mix of high school juniors and seniors, high school dropouts, college students and college dropouts, whom she met through her older sister. They shared a political commitment to anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist, and pro-environmentalist politics. In school, Leila projected an air of independence and detachment from other students, whom she clearly saw as less mature than herself.

By the time Leila was a junior in high school, the euphemisms used publicly to describe Jackson High School—a "small school" with an "alternative curriculum"—served to mask the reality of a racially and economically segregated school that continued to function predominantly as a punishment school. Despite early efforts to recruit a "diverse" student body, the voluntary student population remained virtually identical to the involuntary one; Jackson High students continued to be about 75% African American and 80% poor. Most were still low-achieving by all standard measures of achievement,

and many arrived with hefty discipline records. The only difference was that these poor-performing students were *encouraged*, not required, to transfer to Jackson High School only after they were clearly failing academically.

Leila's counter-cultural style and ardent anti-consumerism often put her at odds with other Jackson students. In fact, Leila hated school at Jackson High, and she often complained that classes were boring and too easy. The issues closest to Leila's heart were the environment and sustainable agriculture. She was an adamant vegetarian and committed to organic, sustainable, and local food production systems. One of the first things she noticed about a person was whether they were a vegetarian, and she often described people as vegetarians or non-vegetarians. She was an outspoken critic of corporate agri-business and the fast food industry, and she was extremely well educated on these issues. She understood how food-production was fundamentally a political issue, and how to situate her critique of agri-business within a broader critique of capitalism.

Sometimes Leila's emotional commitment to social justice was so intense that it caused her to suffer: "I feel like I have so much compassion that sometimes I feel like I want to explode!" With a voice of despair, as if at the end of her wits, Leila continued, "and I just, it frustrates me even more because people don't feel the same way! If you're talking about that [political] stuff, why aren't you flipping out? Why aren't you feeling anger, and distraught, like I am?" Leila's oppositional consciousness was rooted in her participation in a white youth counter-culture as well as her personal experience as a working-class white woman. Leila's parents were divorced, and she lived with her mother and older sister in a small three-bedroom house in a low-income, predominantly

African American and Latino section of San Miguel. Her mother worked as a massage

therapist, and spent most of her free time taking care of fourteen rescued dogs that lived

with the family. Leila very rarely saw her father, who lived in a nearby suburb and was,

in her words, "right wing." Leila frequently drew examples from her life experience—of

growing up with a poor single mother, of living in the "ghetto" part of town, of attending

a failing public school—to make larger statements and arguments about gender

inequalities, class exploitation, and racialized inequalities.

Suli (Sulaiman)

I first met Sulaiman—who goes by the nickname Suli—as a student in my

Spanish class at Jackson High School in the 1998-1999 school year. Suli was the kind of

student who let *everyone* know he was in the room, and he made sure teachers knew *he*

was in charge of the class, not them. He was highly charismatic, outgoing, and verbal. It

seemed that he never stopped talking during our 90-minute classes, or to stay in one seat

for more than a couple of minutes. He consistently walked around, or in and out of, the

classroom during class time. As a very new young teacher, I had a difficult time with

Suli in class. He was one of those students that kept me awake at night, and appeared in

recurring nightmares about "out-of-control" classes and unruly students. For years after I

left Jackson, I remembered Suli as the only student who ever made me cry. His talent at

manipulating classroom dynamics was extremely impressive. But try as I might, I could

not get Suli onto "my team," and I came to suspect that undermining my attempts to work

with him was his sole purpose for coming school. I found myself looking forward to the

days he missed class, which happened more and more frequently as the year progressed. By the end of the year, Suli almost never showed up to school.

Despite these rocky beginnings, I developed a closer relationship with Suli a few years later when I returned to Jackson High as a substitute teacher. The 2000-2001 school year was Suli's senior year, and I often substituted for the social studies teacher, Ms. Barry. Ms. Barry was the only Jackson teacher with a good working relationship with Suli; as a result, Suli was assigned to her class for four out of six class periods, giving me ample opportunities to develop a new relationship with him. Although he still stood out as a highly energetic student, Suli was extremely committed to graduating and he was careful not to get into too much trouble. Noticing Suli's strong ability for social and political critique, I started clipping news articles and editorials to give him when I substituted. Reading them usually kept him occupied during class time (as teacher's assignments never did), and we often discussed the articles after he read them. A few years later, when interviewing Suli for my dissertation research, he mentioned these articles as one of the significant turning points in his developing political consciousness.

Suli lived with his mother and one brother in a predominantly Latino and low-income area of San Miguel. His mother was Puerto Rican and Mexican, and worked in retail. His father, who lived in another state, was African American and Muslim. Suli was raised as a Muslim and spoke Spanish as a young child, but he had lost most of his Spanish fluency as he grew up. Suli's mixed-race heritage was a significant feature of his identity, and it often came up in conversations and meetings. "My life has revolved around [race] because I'm mixed so everybody wants to know what I am, and they want to put me in this category and they want to put me in that category." He said people

always asked him "what are you?" and he explained: "I've always been in a group by myself, as far as racially. All my friends are Black, African American. […] I'm always the other guy."

When he graduated from high school in 2001, Suli planned to go to community college for two years, transfer to the University of California, major in political science, and become a state or national-level politician. His interest in politics and his oppositional consciousness were rooted in his life experience as well as an internship he held for a county-level politician in the summer between his junior and senior year in high school. Suli claimed the internship got him interested in politics, in part because he had time to read web sites and political pamphlets during his down time there. Like other Jackson students I knew, Suli frequently drew examples from his own life when talking about larger social and political issues. He often brought up his uncle in prison, his friend who was injured by a police officer, and all the times he was harassed or pulled over for "fitting the description." Suli was also an outspoken critic of the educational system; he drew on his own experiences of punishment, segregation, and marginalization in school to make broader claims about the problems with education and the embedded racism in schools.

Jackson High School: High-Poverty Urban High School

The life stories of Lolo, Louis, D, Leila, and Suli, provide a tiny glimpse into the conditions that shape the daily lives of Jackson High School students. These young people's stories illustrate how poverty, homelessness, incarceration, and the premature death of family and friends through gun violence or police violence, impacted their

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everyday lives and shaped their experiences at school. Their stories also suggest that other issues like sexual abuse, depression, drug or alcohol abuse, and domestic violence—which are universal issues affecting every social group (though they may be exacerbated by poverty and thus disproportionately affect poor students)—also impacted Jackson High School students. However, unlike more privileged students, Jackson High School students were much less likely to receive counseling and support in dealing with issues like depression or sexual abuse. For example, Louis's persistent struggle with illness and depression led him down a path that ultimately ended in academic failure, even though Louis was relatively fortunate to have had basic health insurance through his mother's unionized job. Despite healthcare coverage, neither Louis nor his mother understood how to navigate the complex systems required to get him proper medical support, permission to miss school, and make-up work during extended absences. Like Louis, it is likely that many Jackson students had reached the bottom rung of the academic hierarchy in part because of issues like these which understandably took their attention away from schooling.

Numerous ethnographies, memoirs, journalistic accounts, and popular nonfiction books have documented conditions that constrain academic achievement in low-performing urban schools (Anyon, 1997; Fine, 1991; Maeroff, 1988; Kozol, 1991; Kretovics & Nussel, 1994; Payne 1984). What is striking about all of these works is the degree to which conditions in urban schools appear to have remained the same over the decades. Ethnographies conducted in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s read as though they were written today (e.g. Anyon, 1997; Fine, 1991; Payne, 1984). Read any of these rich, vivid descriptions of the day-to-day realities in an urban school, and it becomes clear that

things have hardly changed since the mid-1970s, and arguably, since well before that (for example, see Anyon, 1997). In fact, only the slang used in student quotes appears to have changed significantly. All of these works describe a setting in which students congregate in hallways during class time, habitually arrive to class late, arrive unprepared, sleep in class, and openly engage in noncompliance of school rules. They also describe frequent interruptions of class time for assemblies, fire alarms, real fires, or student disruptions. And they frequently describe learning environments characterized by low expectations, low skills, and alienation of both students and teachers.

Fine (1991) has argued that the structural conditions in a low-performing urban high school can create a context in which "teachers can no longer easily conceive of schools as sites of transformative, democratic, intellectual life" (p. 140). Likewise, the structural conditions at Jackson High School sometimes created an atmosphere in which pessimism and hopelessness could easily arise. The consequences of poverty and racism affected every aspect of students' daily lives, inevitably spilling over into the classroom and schoolyard, creating conditions that appeared to undermine teaching and learning. In all of these ways, Jackson High School resembled a typical high-poverty urban high school in the United States. At the same time, the stories of Lolo, Louis, D, Leila, and Suli show how students' everyday lived experiences formed the foundation for an oppositional consciousness. This oppositional consciousness was the basis for their participation in PARTY.

PARTY: Participatory Action Research Team for Youth

The PARTY project emerged from and reflected the specific context of Jackson High School, and the relationships I maintained with Lolo, Louis, D, Leila, and Suli. These former Jackson students and I shared first-hand knowledge and understanding of the Jackson High School context, despite having experienced it from different positions, (I as a teacher, and they as students). From our new vantage points outside the school context, we could reflect back on that experience from a distance, no longer consumed by the day-to-day responsibilities and challenges of life at Jackson High. We aimed to build on our collective oppositional consciousness, learn from each other, and—hopefully— make some kind of difference in the lives and education of Jackson High School youth.

The idea for a participatory research project at Jackson High School was born in May of 2001, when Lolo and Louis—then 19-years old—met in my living room for a meeting of research assistants. During this meeting, I proposed a participatory research project. I explained such a project would shift our relationship: They would no longer be my research assistants, but co-researchers in a *collaborative* project. They enthusiastically agreed and we articulated the following project goal: to understand and address the social inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students. Just a few weeks later, I was re-united with D through our follow-up interview, and immediately asked Lolo and Louis if I could invite him into the group. They agreed, and the four of us decided to start meeting the following September.

In the fall of her sophomore year, Leila responded to a flier advertising a job as "education researcher" with the PARTY group. She signed up for an interview with Lolo, Louis, D, and me. In the interview, all four of us were instantly impressed with Leila's obvious and exceptional commitment to political issues and social change. After

some discussion about Leila's race and whether she "represented" Jackson students, we agreed that Leila was indeed a unique Jackson student, but she was also a *real* Jackson student; she had attended Jackson High School for over a year. D advocated strongly for Leila's inclusion in the group, emphasizing her sophisticated political analysis and demonstrated commitment to political issues. Thus, Leila joined the PARTY project in the fall of 2001 as a Jackson High School sophomore.

Suli joined PARTY a year later, but he had attended many earlier meetings with D. Suli and D were close friends, and Suli sometimes came to PARTY meetings with D just for fun. The first time he visited a meeting, Suli participated actively as if he were one of the members. At the end he commented, "I learned more in the last two hours than I learned in twelve years of school." Suli did not officially join PARTY until its second year, when the group needed new members. Altogether, eight youth participated in PARTY at some point in the two years but only two of them, D and Leila, were consistent participants over both years.[9]

Every PARTY meeting began with a discussion of "news stories," during which we all shared the things we heard or read in the news during the previous week. Often, PARTY members brought the newspaper, news magazine or Internet printout to our meetings so they could share a particular story with the rest of the group. The kinds of stories we talked about ranged from the sports news and celebrity gossip to the World Trade Center attacks and subsequent bombing of Afghanistan. After summarizing the news story, we discussed how it affected our lives and the lives of Jackson High School

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[9] In this dissertation I talk about the PARTY group as a unified and consistent entity, even though there was significant turnover in the group members. While I recognize it could be misleading to discuss PARTY in this way, I have chosen to do so because the project followed a progressive course in which each step built from previous ones, and there was a clear sense of beginning, middle, and end.

students. These weekly discussions about "news stories" tended to be the most dynamic and fruitful discussions of our meetings, often taking over the majority of our two-hour meeting time.

We dedicated the remainder of our meeting time to research on the issues affecting the lives and education of Jackson students. We developed research questions, learned about different research methods, conducted a survey of Jackson students, and interviews with students, teachers and staff.[10] In addition to our formal research activities—a survey and interviews—the PARTY group engaged in other supportive activities, including: reading texts about education, inviting guest speakers (whom PARTY members always called "motivational speakers"), taking two visits to other youth-led participatory research projects, and attending academic lectures on the college campus or in the community.

At the end of our first year, it was not clear whether PARTY would follow through on our plan to implement an action on the basis of our research. Although we had engaged in many research activities—a survey, interviews, guest speakers, lectures, field trips, readings—none of these seemed to generate momentum toward a project or action. To some degree the survey and interviews felt more like empty exercises than meaningful research, and tallying survey results felt like a never-ending chore that PARTY members always described as "boring." The group seemed to grow irritated with my repeated insistence that we "analyze" our findings. What was there to analyze? Everything that came back to us looked like common-sense knowledge to the youth; there were no surprises or revelations. When we parted for a summer break, it appeared

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[10] See Appendix A for a more detailed account of our participatory research methods, including a more detailed description of our first year research activities.

the PARTY group would simply dissolve without implementing any action.

Complicating matters further, due to illnesses and scheduling conflicts, we never held a

final meeting to discuss the project's accomplishments and future plans.

I attempted to reconvene the group when school started up again in September.

Although I did not anticipate the project would continue into a second year, I invited the

PARTY members to attend "one last meeting" to reflect on our accomplishments and

lessons learned. Even though I had introduced the meeting as "our last," after three hours

and a couple of pizzas we decided to stay together and continue into a second year. In

that three-hour meeting, PARTY members all agreed the weekly "news stories"

discussions had changed their habits of thinking, generating greater consciousness and

curiosity about the impact of far-away political events on their everyday lives. They

expressed disappointment only at the fact that they didn't *do* anything with the

knowledge and information they gained. They wanted to share this knowledge and

consciousness with other young people, and the idea to work directly with Jackson High

School students immediately seemed to make sense. We talked about what it might look

like to discuss news stories with Jackson students as we did in our weekly meetings,

perhaps in the context of a class at the school. D exclaimed: "I'm down to teach a class!"

and the group suddenly cohered around the idea of a "PARTY class" at Jackson High

School. The enthusiasm in the room was palpable as we decided to stay together and

dedicate ourselves to this goal.

The project's second year focused on preparing and teaching a class at Jackson

High School. From January to June of 2003, we taught every Tuesday in Ms. Barry's 3rd

period U.S. government class. We continued to hold weekly PARTY meetings on Friday

afternoons, where we reflected on our previous class and planned the next one. We continued to start every meeting—and every Jackson class—with a discussion of news stories and their impact on our lives. Three PARTY members took primary responsibility for preparing and teaching the class: D, Leila, and Suli.

Integrating Participatory Research and Ethnography

At the same time as I participated as a member of PARTY, I also conducted an ethnographic study of the project. [11] My research methods included participant-observation at PARTY meetings, the PARTY class, and Jackson High School, as well as in-depth, semi-structured interviews with PARTY members and Jackson High School students. Additionally, all weekly PARTY meetings in the second year were audio-taped and transcribed.

My relationship to the research site and participants include dimensions of both insider and outsider status (Foster, 1995). My prior experience at Jackson and my familiarity with school staff and many students also afforded me a certain degree of insider perspective. Because I was a familiar face on campus, I was able to interact directly with students and teachers in a variety of contexts from the formal spaces of the classroom to the informal spaces of the courtyard, lunch room, staff lounge and copy room. Informal conversations with students and teachers frequently provided additional insights that informed and guided my research. For these reasons, I considered myself an "insider" with the teachers—and students may have perceived me this way too—but in reality I was a graduate student pursuing a Ph.D., and teachers most likely saw me as an outsider. More importantly, in the students' world I was simply a teacher: They knew me

as a substitute; they saw me interact on familiar terms with teachers; and many of them knew I had previously been a real teacher at Jackson. Contributing to this perception is the fact that I, like most of the teachers, am white while the students at Jackson High are predominantly African American (~75%). Even though I believed myself to have a good rapport with most students, their perceptions of me as an ally of the teachers undoubtedly created distance and possibly mistrust.

In addition to dimensions of insider and outsider status, my role within the PARTY group shifted between that of partner and researcher. PARTY members were both *participants* in a collaborative project and *subjects* of my dissertation research; these multiple roles required ongoing clarification and negotiation. To integrate the dual aims of participatory research and ethnography, I included PARTY members in many aspects of the ethnographic data analysis, and tried to ensure their voices emerged in the story of PARTY told in these pages.[12] My purpose was, as LeCompte writes, to make "research subjects and investigators *co-equals* in the 'telling of the story,' or the analysis and interpretation of results." (Lecompte, 1995, p. 98). In weekly meetings, I regularly shared drafts of documents relating to the research and sought their input. These included my dissertation proposal, my ethnographic research questions, my interview protocol for Jackson students, a grant proposal, conference presentations, and two journal articles. I incorporated the PARTY members' ideas and suggestions, and ensured that nobody objected to the final draft of anything written about our work together. At all

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[11] For a more detailed description of data collection procedures, see Appendix A.

[12] Although PARTY members were included, Jackson High students were not.

points, collaboration and feedback were invited but not required.[13] In weekly meetings,

we read aloud from my written field notes and discussed them, providing both a check on

the accuracy of my observations and a chance to learn more about the PARTY members'

interpretations of the class. Our conversations provided an avenue for collaboration and

group reflection on our work together.

Although the involvement of PARTY members in data analysis enriched the

findings of this study, it also entailed challenges and conflicts.[14] Ongoing negotiations

about our roles and relationships in the group produced tension in the group, and my field

notes often described the project as "tumultuous." Additionally, integrating participatory

research and ethnography raised questions about objectivity in the research process. As a

participant and organizer of the PARTY project, I deliberately influenced the other

PARTY members by exposing them to particular pedagogical literature, organizing our

discussions, and sharing my ideas about education and social change. This intentional

influence on the research subjects runs counter to some models of objective ethnographic

research, yet I believe my close involvement with the group was an asset rather than a

"contamination" of the data. In writing up my findings, I have tried to account for my

influence where appropriate and necessary to my analysis. It should be assumed,

however, that I was never an isolated observer in the scenes I depict; I was always both

physically present and actively contributing to those scenes.[15]

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[13] I recognize that subjects/participants are sometimes not interested and not empowered by the opportunity to share in data analysis and/or to read drafts of the research write-ups (Kurzman 1991). For this reason, I made every attempt to share my results, analyses and papers, without forcing participation from the group.

[14] See Appendix A for a detailed description and analysis of these challenges and conflicts.

[15] This point is true for all ethnographic research, to some degree. See Appendix A for a more detailed analysis of objectivity in the research process.

Conclusion

The goal of PARTY was to understand and address the social inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students, Jackson High School is a typical high-poverty, low-achieving urban high school, just like hundreds of similar high schools in cities across the United States. PARTY emerged from and reflected this context. The trajectory of the project reflects the contributions the five core PARTY members: Lolo, Louis, D, Leila, and Suli. These PARTY members, like other Jackson High School students I have worked with, exhibited an oppositional consciousness that was rooted in everyday lived experiences of marginalization and oppression. This existing critical consciousness served as the basis for their participation in PARTY. In addition to being a participant in PARTY, I conducted an ethnographic study of the project which serves as the basis of this dissertation. Combining participatory research and ethnography in the PARTY group forced me to continually negotiate my role along axes of insider/outsider and researcher/participant, often producing conflict and tension in the group. The second year of PARTY was dedicated to planning and teaching a class at Jackson High School. The class aimed to promote critical consciousness and action for social change among Jackson High School students. In the next chapter, I explore how PARTY members developed their pedagogy through dialogue, participatory research, and reflection, and illustrate the parallels between the PARTY class and critical pedagogy—a theory and practice of education for social change.

Figure 1:

**Participatory Action Research Team for Youth (PARTY)
2001-2003 Timeline**

2001 SEPTEMBER	**First PARTY meeting**
	Recruited new members
OCTOBER – DECEMBER	Learned about research methods
	Developed research questions
	Decided to do a survey
2002	Designed a survey
	Distributed survey to all Jackson classes
JANUARY- JUNE	Began analyzing survey results
	Interviewed teachers, students and community members
SEPTEMBER	**Reunion meeting: Decided to teach PARTY class**
OCTOBER- DECEMBER	Got permission to teach PARTY class at Jackson High
	Planned the PARTY class
2003 JANUARY	First PARTY class
FEBRUARY- JUNE	Taught PARTY class every week
JUNE 6	**Last day of PARTY class**

Figure 2:

FOUNDATIONS OF PARTY TIMELINE
(2-year project period is shaded)

Year		Event
1998		I met Lolo, Louis, D, and Suli as students at Jackson High School
1999		Lolo graduated
2000		I interviewed D for a research paper Louis and D graduated
		I met Leila substitute teaching
2001		I hired Lolo and Louis as research assistants I conducted a follow-up interview with D
		I proposed participatory research idea to Louis, Lolo, and D Suli graduated
SEPTEMBER		First PARTY meeting:
2002		PARTY research phase: survey & interviews
SEPTEMBER		PARTY started Year Two
		Planned the PARTY class
2003		Taught PARTY class at Jackson High School: D, Leila, Suli
		Ethnographic research data collection
		End of class & project
		Ethnographic data analysis
2004		Dissertation writing Leila graduated
		Follow-up meeting with PARTY members to share early drafts and discuss dissertation
2005		Individual follow-up with each PARTY member: Shared complete draft, explained key arguments, received feedback.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY:
EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

> The pedagogy of the oppressed [is] a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. (Freire 1970/1999, p. 30)

Public schools in the United States have been framed as institutions of both social reproduction and social change. Even as they are implicated in the perpetuation and legitimization of social inequality, public schools are simultaneously called on to foster democratic citizens with the power and the will to critique and change oppressive social structures (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1983). The Participatory Action Research Team for Youth (PARTY) reflected a belief that public schools, despite their historical role in reproducing inequality, also offer the possibility to transform those inequalities. The context of the project was Jackson High School, a high-poverty urban high school similar to hundreds of such schools in cities across the United States. Schools like Jackson High are a product of immense social and educational inequality in U.S. society, and they are often cited as evidence that such inequality exists (e.g. Kozol, 1991). Like other high-poverty urban high schools, life at Jackson High was shaped decisively by the racialized poverty, segregation, and marginalization experienced by the majority of its students and their communities.

Three graduates of Jackson High School—Lolo, Louis, and D—helped create the PARTY project's central goal: to understand and address the social inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students. They were later joined by two

other Jackson youth, Leila and Suli. After one year of participatory research aimed at

understanding the causes and impacts of inequality in their own lives, PARTY members

chose to *address* these inequalities by developing and teaching a class at Jackson High

School. Their goal was to involve Jackson students in a process of collective inquiry into

the conditions of their lives. In choosing this goal, PARTY members demonstrated a

belief in the power of education for building critical consciousness and action for social

change. As they prepared to teach their class, PARTY members explicitly connected

their *educational* goals to the larger goals of social change and racial and economic

justice. In other words, PARTY members developed a *critical pedagogy*—a model of

education for social change (Giroux, 1983).

The group developed course goals, lesson plans, and a teaching philosophy in

weekly PARTY meetings using participatory research, group discussion, and critical

reflection. In this sense, it was a pedagogy forged *with,* not *for,* Jackson High School

youth for the purpose of social change (Freire 1999/1970). Planning the class was itself a

pedagogical process for PARTY members. In the weeks leading up to the first day of

class, the group shared key moments in which they collectively imagined possibilities of

broad-based popular activism, and they strived to articulate the relationship between

liberatory education and progressive social change. These moments were critical in

generating group solidarity and enthusiasm for the first day of class. When they started

teaching, PARTY members brought a well-defined vision of education for social change,

a vision that reflected five core principles of critical pedagogy. In this chapter, I argue

critical pedagogy is not simply a teaching method but a theory of democratic social

change. I explore the literature on critical pedagogy—including its gaps, contradictions,

and problems—as an introduction to the organizing questions of this dissertation. All of these questions ultimately address the role of education, and in particular public schooling, in social change.

Theorizing Education for Social Change

As they prepared to teach their class at Jackson High School, PARTY members sought to articulate the (real and potential) role of schooling in bringing about social change. In several animated group discussions, they explored how and why social structures are perpetuated, and how to change them to bring about racial and economic justice. They sought to connect these theories of change to their immediate goal of teaching the PARTY class at Jackson High School. We invited a guest speaker named Marcus, a former social studies teacher, to discuss these questions in a weekly meeting. With Marcus in the room, PARTY members discussed how schools serve to perpetuate existing relations of power by socializing students to accept and conform to dominant cultural practices and social structures.

"If people feel like it's about the schools," Marcus asked, "and we believe that education isn't something for freedom but something that indoctrinates, who is to blame? What are the causes?" His question led D and Suli to debate the role of teachers in perpetuating an unjust system: D placed the blame on teachers, while Suli distinguished between teachers and something larger which he called "the system."

> *D*: The *teachers,* man. The only way you gonna change it man is with the teachers.
> *Marcus*: Teachers.
> *D*: Yeah, man! It's easier to change five million teachers than twenty five million kids *in* the school system.
> *Suli*: It's *not* about changing the *kids*, it's about changing the *system*.

D: Nah, it's about changing the *teachers* cuz the teachers help change the *system!*
Suli: Who gives the teachers the information to teach? The system.
D: Nah
Suli: The *system* does!
D: They don't teach all the same thing! You feel? All teachers don't be teaching the same thing.
Suli: How you gonna change the *system*, man?
D: How you change the system? The teachers gotta agree with the system so you can change it. So you gotta go with the *teachers* first.
Suli: See, that's what you call different levels of different steps, towards... the, the…
D: So you want to change the system and *then* go…
Suli: … Start with the *system* and the information that's being handed out. *Then* the people that *don't* wanna teach, would be let go.
Hannah: But teachers have no say in what they teach. So it's like, starting with the teachers would be counter-productive in a way. […] You need awareness to create social change.
D: Man, if you say that, you wouldn't have to start with the system then. It would start with the *kids*.

When D pointed out that "[teachers] don't all teach the same thing," he raised the issue of agency; teachers have agency, and they can use it to reinforce domination or to teach for liberation. In contrast, Suli saw teachers as relatively powerless in a larger power structure that he called "the system." He rhetorically asked: "Who gives the teachers the information to teach?" and answered for himself: "The system!" In this comment, Suli portrayed teacher agency as insignificant because school rules and practices are dictated by structure.

The men's different explanations of teacher agency supported different theories about the role of teachers and pedagogy in promoting social change. D argued that change needed start with the teachers, because teachers influence students. In contrast, Suli's comment, "it's not about changing the *students,* it's about changing the *system,"* distinguished individual change from structural change; he did not believe that changing *individuals* could effectively bring about *systemic* or structural change. After making this

distinction between individual-based and system-wide change, the four PARTY members jumped into a whole-group discussion about strategies for system-wide social change. Despite his earlier confidence in the role of teachers in social change, D now expressed skepticism about the possibility for true systemic change.

> *Marcus*: How do you change it [*the system*]?
> *Hannah*: I know I think about that all the time and it's like—
> *D*: The question can't really be answered—
> *Leila*: It's so-o-o…. complicated!
> *D*: You can't answer it.
> *Hannah*: There's such a, it's like an endless space of information that you need to need to fill—
> *D*: You can't change it.
> […]
> *Marcus*: You said you can't change it?
> *D*: Yeah… It would take a long time.
> *Marcus*: It would take a long time, but is it *possible* to do it?
> *D*: Is it possible? I *think* that it's possible, you feel, but—
> *Hannah*: Civil disobedience!
> *Leila:*: Yes!
> *D*: —It's, it's… who would actually come up with that, with that curriculum, you feel?
> *Marcus*: Does it have to be a curriculum?
> *D*: The change is [inaudible]… there will always be arguments and, and… I don't know… [leaves off]

While D struggled over the question of systemic change, Hannah confidently proposed civil disobedience as the path to change while Leila urged her on with enthusiastic nods and the comment "yes!" The whole group grew more animated as the discussion of systemic change developed: The pace of dialogue sped up and the volume in the room grew steadily louder. Suli jumped in to propose a top-down strategy of change:

> *Suli*: I just think it's gonna take a lot of people in a lot of high places for everything to change. And that's not gonna happen any time soon, because, I think, the larger part of society is convinced that this is the system that's gonna work. Even though, it's been proven for a long time that the system isn't really working… but, it's working for *them*. So why would they change it?
> *D*: Maybe it *ain't* working for them.
> *Hannah*: [*to Suli*] That's what I was saying! They're already satisfied, you know?

> *Kysa*: But is it working for the *majority* of people?
> *Suli*: No, it's *not* working for the majority…
> *Leila*: No, that's what I was saying, the majority is like…
> *D*: Doesn't *matter* about the majority! *I* got the *money*!
> *Suli*: That's true like I said, it's gonna take a lot of people in a lot of high places.

Suli claimed people in power had an interest in maintaining the present system.

The PARTY members concluded that the majority of people in society were not

"satisfied" with the present system, but they were powerless to make a difference.

Having hypothesized that the majority were not satisfied with, or well-

served by, the existing social system, Leila proposed a counter-theory to Suli's

top-down view of change. As she explained her theory, D interjected the

comment "Do it!" several times, but Leila continued speaking with no pauses.

The back-and-forth between Leila and D moved at a rapid pace.

> *Leila*: But the thing is, what if the working class, what if the working class just stopped working! And we all just stop. Everything would just be shut down!
> *D*: Do it!
> *Leila*: They would not have their money—
> *D*: Do it!
> *Leila*: [her energy level rising, as if imaging the possibility] We actually do have the power!
> *D*: Do it!
> *Leila*: I can't do it alone man!
> *D*: Do it!
> *Leila*: [yelling] I can't do it alone! I can't do it alone! The thing is, if I do it by myself, then I'm just gonna sit here and starve by myself. But if *everyone* does it—
>
> [All four youth begin speaking simultaneously with raised voices. What follows is a rough sketch of what can be discerned on tape.]
>
> *Hannah*: That's what I'm saying! We need community—
> *Leila*: So let's do it!
> *Suli*: You want to do it?
> *D*: [yelling] Let's do it! Let's do it! Let's do it! Y'all down now? Let's *do* it then!
>
> [discussion becomes inaudible as everyone speaks at once. When the voices subside enough to make out the words, Leila is speaking]

> *Leila*: …'cuz I seriously think that the system subliminally enforces, like, us to be separated, you know? In one way or another, like age, or race, and I think there's a lot of race issues, I mean it's like, and it's not just that but it's more just like, we're *all* working class and we're all struggling. We have to like, more, unite.

In two years of participation in PARTY, D rarely showed open emotion or enthusiasm in group meetings. But at the peak of this conversation, D sat on the edge of his seat and yelled at the top of his lungs: "Let's do it! Let's do it! Let's do it!" At this moment, the excitement in the room was palpable. In contrast to their usual posture – slouched or curled up comfortably on the sofas – PARTY members sat up straight on the edge of their seats, leaning forward as though in great suspense, raising their arms in the air, yelling out in loud voices, and interrupting each other through laughter and smiles. As we called the meeting to a close, the youth were elated and pumped up, as if we had watched a game together and our team had won by a single score in overtime.

I wondered later whether D's repeated comment, "Let's do it!" was meant as a joke to mock Leila's idealism—as if it were that easy to start a general strike and take down the system. While this may have been the case, it does not take away from the excitement our conversation generated among the youth. It was a rare moment in the PARTY project in that all four group members passionately participated, and together they generated a solid feeling of group cohesion. And although D may have intended to mock Leila's idealism during that meeting, the idea of broad-based popular resistance seemed to stick with him, and he began to articulate a new theory of change. Just a few weeks later, after our first PARTY class, I asked D to explain what he wanted students to learn in the class.

> *D*: Basically I want to teach that it's power in numbers. If you come, you feel, millions and millions and millions, they not gonna be able to stop us, you feel,

even the National Guard, you feel me? If *everybody* in this country believed in *one* thing, you feel me, and actually stepped up the plate, you feel, we're unstoppable. Even if minorities just come together, you feel? And, we just on different sides, minorities and then high class rich people whatever, they're on the other side. We're unstoppable! Nothing can stop us!   That's what Martin Luther King was preaching, you feel, that it's power in numbers. That's why he actually started all them walks and protests and all that, you feel?

In his explanation about the "power in numbers," D articulated a theory of change not unlike Leila's vision of a popular strike. He imagined "millions and millions and millions" of people coming together to challenge the power structure. If the common people—even just the minorities—worked together in unity, they would be "unstoppable" in the face of the repressive state apparatus, "even the National Guard."

During this phase of the PARTY project, D started to express a broad vision of social change led by the popular classes, and he often repeated the phrase: the people have the power. He connected this vision to the goal of the PARTY class, explaining he wanted *students* to know they could make a difference, because there is power in numbers. In articulating this goal for the course, D suggested that when students understood their power, they would be more likely to *act* in ways that contribute to social change. Leila also explained her ultimate goals for the course in this way:

> *Leila*: I want [students] to know that we really do like, the lower class people really do have the power. If we, I mean, I just feel like everyone's so worried, you know like they're worried about getting dinner on their table, which is very real, really really important. But at the same time it's like, this sacrifice or something. Or like, I don't know how to explain it, like I wouldn't, I would do *so much* if like, everyone would work with me on that, you know? Like, 'cuz I really feel like we should just, seriously, shut down the system. We could.

Like D, Leila articulated clear social goal for the PARTY class: She wanted Jackson High School students to develop a critical consciousness that people have the power to effect social change. D and Leila described a broad-based, democratically-led movement for progressive social change as the ultimate outcome of this critical consciousness.

While D imagined a popular movement for a social change in racialized class terms—as "the minorities" coming together against "high class rich people," Leila explained popular resistance in strictly class terms, as the "lower class people" coming together for change.

The goals expressed by D and Leila in the days before teaching the PARTY class reflected the group's emphasis on teaching for social change. When they talked about their work at Jackson High School, the PARTY members explicitly connected the goals of the course to much broader goals of social change. Their vision of education for social change emerged through dialogue and reflection on their personal experiences and insights, but it closely embodied five key principles of what educators call critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1983).

What Is Critical Pedagogy?

Critical pedagogy is a theory and practice of education aimed at stimulating social critique and political engagement among historically-oppressed groups for the purpose of progressive social change. First coined by Henry Giroux in the book *Theory and Resistance in Education* (1983), critical pedagogy has evolved as a field of study that employs critical social theory to deconstruct the oppressive nature of schooling, and to promote an alternative vision of education for social change.[16] Critical pedagogy draws

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[16] The Frankfurt School of critical social theory builds on Marxist social theory and Gramsci's theory of ideological hegemony (1971), to illuminate how power and hegemony function in advanced capitalist societies. Critical theorists often focus on the realm of culture and cultural institutions, which includes schools. Giroux integrated critical social theory, social reproduction theory (Bowles & Gintis, 1974), and Paolo Freire's pedagogy (1970/1999), which informed his conception of critical pedagogy. Many have acknowledged this work as the first to connect the Frankfurt School of critical theory to the study of education and pedagogy in the United States (Kincheloe, 2004; Morrow & Torres, 1995). For a review of the Frankfurt School or critical theory and its implications for critical pedagogy, see Giroux (1983) and Kincheloe (2004).

on a long and varied legacy of radical social theories and progressive democratic

pedagogies which I refer collectively as *critical pedagogies,* to distinguish these from the

recognized "canon" of writing about critical pedagogy.[17] Critical pedagogies go by a

variety of names: popular education (Adams, 1975; Hall, 1978; Horton & Freire, 1990),

decolonizing pedagogy (Tejeda, Espinoza & Gutierrez, 2003), radical or feminist

pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Lather, 1991), critical literacy (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996),

empowerment education (Shor, 1992), and democratic education (Engle & Ochoa, 1986;

Knight & Pearl, 2000). The different labels reflect slightly different focuses, for

example, as pedagogies primarily intended for children versus adults, or for school

classrooms versus non-formal contexts. They also reflect different theoretical traditions

from which the pedagogy emerged, with some (like critical pedagogy) drawing primarily

on Marxist critical theory and others (like democratic education) drawing on radical

democratic theory. In addition to these formalized pedagogical models, there are

countless political activists, organizers, and educators who consistently employ critical

pedagogies in their everyday work without giving it a name or writing about it.

 Despite inevitable differences among this wide group of scholars and

practitioners, all critical pedagogies share five key principles: 1) the assertion that all

education is political; 2) the goal of eliminating oppressions such as race, class, gender,

nation, and sexuality; 3) the value of popular, community-based, and subjugated

knowledge; 4) the pedagogical practices of problem-posing and dialogue; 5) the concepts

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[17] I use the word "canon" to refer to a body of literature widely associated with the field of "critical pedagogy." These texts constitute a canon because they are widely cited and associated with the field of critical pedagogy, and no published works on critical pedagogy fail to cite them. The authors in this canon frequently cite each other, and they self-identify as critical pedagogists or critical pedagogues. Key works in this group include: Apple (1979), Aronowitz & Giroux (1985), Freire (1970/1999), Giroux (1983), McLaren (1989), Shor (1992).

of critical consciousness and action for social change, or *praxis*. [18] These principles are

widely associated with the writings of Paolo Freire, who articulated them in the classic

work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1999). However, these ideas predate Freire and

are not unique to his work.[19] PARTY members drew on each of these principles as they

constructed a vision of education for social change.

1) All education is political

> *D:* This country is ran off of followers, you feel me? They never go in deep, you
> feel, and have their own opinion. They follow somebody else. You know, but
> schools, schools, it's all about schools though. What schools teach today is they
> teach you how to be followers, instead of teaching you how to have your own
> opinion.

D argued that schools create a passive populace that follows orders rather than

voicing their opinions. In this way, schooling helps to perpetuate existing structures of

power because students are not encouraged to voice opposition and critique. Suli claimed

in a meeting that "education molds you into the oppressive society," to which the other

youth nodded in agreement. And when Marcus visited the PARTY meeting as a guest

speaker, he summed up the group's discussion with the statement (quoted earlier): "We

believe that education isn't something for freedom but something that indoctrinates."

Their comments echoed Freire's (1970/1999) statement that: "the more completely

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[18] This is not an exhaustive account of the features of critical pedagogies. However, these are the key aspects of critical pedagogies that informed this study and the work of PARTY.

[19] Most recent theories of radical pedagogy draw on Freire's work explicitly; however, radical pedagogies predate Freire, as seen most notably in the Danish Folk Schools and the Highlander Center in Tennessee (Adams, 1975). The use of education as a tool for consciousness-raising and political change is timeless; therefore, many of Freire's central ideas are consistent with key concepts of social movement theory (Morris & Mueller, 1992), critical race theory (Ladson Billings, 2000), anti-colonialist theory (Tejeda, et al, 2003), Marxist theory, critical social theory, political organizing (Alinksy, 1946), Dubois's double consciousness theory (1903/1953), and the popular education of the Highlander Center (Adams, 1975). All of these explore the "subjective" aspect of social change and the subversive potential of subjugated knowledge and critical consciousness .

[students] accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them" (p. 54).

Critical pedagogies begin with the assumption that all education is political. Educators who claim to be "neutral" by avoiding controversial topics or simply transmitting "objective" information serve in fact to support of the status quo and legitimize the tacit assumptions of dominant society (Shor, 1992; Horton & Freire, 1990; Freire, 1970/1999). The practice of teaching students to succeed within the present social and educational systems, without challenging or questioning them, offers a tacit endorsement of those systems. Since all knowledge is socially-constructed and tied to relations of power, the practice of transmitting "official" knowledge without challenging or questioning it also serves to legitimize the system. Thus, all education either *upholds* or *challenges* existing social structures and their prevailing assumptions (Freire, 1970/1999; hooks, 1994).

Critical pedagogies also emphasize the inherently political nature of schooling as an institution. Schools are political in terms of funding, regulation, certification, goals and objectives, the manner in which these goals and objectives are evaluated, the nature of the textbooks, what is taught and what is left out, what knowledge is valued, and who has the power to make these and other decisions (Apple, 1979; Kincheloe, 2004; Spring, 1991; Shor, 1992). The cumulative result of these processes is a school system that serves to perpetuate oppressive social structures and relations of power. In other words, schools reproduce existing social inequalities, and then legitimize these outcomes by propagating the myth of a meritocratic system (Apple, 1979; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983). While critical pedagogies begin with the assertion that schools are

oppressive and reproductive institutions, the classroom is also seen as a potential site of consciousness-raising and social change. Critical pedagogies call on students and teachers to critically analyze and deconstruct patterns of social inequality as a path toward taking action to change them. This view of the school as a site of "domination and contestation" (Giroux, 1983, p. 62-3) is central within critical pedagogies.

2) Eliminating structures of oppression

Should schools help students succeed within the system, or help them learn to change it? When I posed this question to the PARTY group, they generally agreed that education do both: help students master the system in order to change it. Yet there were differences in opinion about which aim should take priority; at opposite ends of the spectrum were Lolo and Leila. Lolo doubted if education could change society: "Education is something that has to be learned. You can teach people, but *people* have to change the world, not education. It all depends on the person who learns, what they decide to do with their education." In contrast, Leila was very clear that education can and should empower students to *change* society, and emphasized liberatory education of the poor: "Poor people need to be educated to change [society] because poor people make the change, because they do the work." For Leila, success within "the system" should only be promoted as a means of social change, not as an end in itself.

Leila's responses illustrate an already-existing class consciousness. She had learned to use class as an analytic category by participating in a politicized and anti-capitalist youth counter-culture; additionally, as a low-income white women, Leila

experienced class oppression personally and identified strongly with it.[20] For Leila,

education was seen as a consciousness-raising tool to empower "the poor" to transform

structures of oppression. At the other end of the spectrum, Lolo's life experience was

shaped by extreme racialized poverty and marginalization, and a life-world where drug

abuse or gang violence seemed always just around the corner. For Lolo, education was a

path to *escape* (rather than transform) structures of oppression. It was empowering to the

degree that it promoted assimilation and mobility*,* rather than consciousness-raising and

social action. Lolo's personal experiences of class, race, and gender oppression were in

many ways more severe than other members of the group, and they necessitated both

escape and assimilation as a means of mere survival. She articulated individualistic goals

for the PARTY class, which focused on personal transformation and individual

mobility.[21]

        This tension between the objectives of social mobility and social change emerged

consistently in the PARTY project. The group often revisited the goals of the PARTY

class and the challenges of promoting, simultaneously, *individual* social mobility and

collective social change. U.S. society is characterized by a strong belief in education as a

means of *individual* social mobility (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Labaree, 1997), and as a

result, many educational reforms and movements for educational justice focus on

realizing this goal more effectively—in other words, to improve the ability of schools to

help individual students succeed within present socio-economic structures. When this

focus is geared toward students from historically-oppressed groups, it is often framed a

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[20] Leila also identified the ways that gender oppression affected her life; however, at the time of this
project, Leila believed that her own life was most decisively shaped by class exploitation.

path toward a larger goal of equality and social justice because it reflects equality of opportunity and increases racial diversity in positions of power and privilege (Tejeda, Espinoza, & Gutierrez, 2003).

In contrast, critical pedagogies explicitly reject the goal of assimilation and mobility within existing structures of power (ibid), and seek instead to *transform* power structures. Rather than *individual social mobility*, critical pedagogies frame education as a path to *collective social change*, toward the goal of a more equitable and democratic society (Giroux, 1983, p. 201). Critical pedagogies promote social critique and political engagement among students as a means of advancing social justice and democratic equality. Unlike many models of civic or citizenship education, which promote civic engagement as a politically-neutral exercise, critical pedagogies explicitly seek to "contribute to the transformation of the social relations and formations that produce social inequalities and injustices" (Tejeda et al., p. 32). The PARTY group also struggled over the relative roles of social mobility and social change, but they consistently moved toward a vision of social change and economic justice as the ultimate goal of the PARTY course.

3) Popular, community-based, and subjugated knowledge

> *Leila*: [Students] know that the government's not looking out for them. I mean it's pretty obvious.
> *Suli*: You don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand that.
> *Leila*: It seems like the facts on the pages kind of prove what [students] already kind of knew about the government and how their lives work.

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[21] I do not mean to suggest it is necessary to share Lolo's positionality to view education as primarily a vehicle for individual mobility. In fact, this view is strongly engrained in US society as a dominant discourse (Labaree, 1997; MacLeod, 1995; Tejeda, et. al., 2003).

In this conversation, Leila and Suli reflected on students' existing oppositional consciousness. This consciousness was rooted in everyday lived experience (as discussed in Chapter 1), and from their own understanding of "how their lives work." Likewise, critical pedagogies assume that historically oppressed communities possess valuable local knowledge that contains not only the wisdom of generations but also a critique of dominant power structures. This critique is developed as a result of persistent exclusion and marginalization, experiences which facilitate the creation of a "double consciousness" (Dubois, 1903/1953; Ladson Billings, 2000) or subversive forms of knowledge (see also hooks, 1990, pp. 145-154).

Critical pedagogies are not unique in the attention paid to popular, indigenous, and community-based knowledge within historically oppressed groups; the subversive potential of this knowledge is a key feature of anti-colonialist, feminist, critical race and critical social theories, and writers from oppressed positionalities have often emphasized this point in their work.[22] These writers argue the construction of "official" or "expert" knowledge systematically excludes or de-values the experiences of women, the poor, and people of color. Recognizing the subversive potential of subjugated knowledge, critical pedagogies aim to access and build upon it to promote critique and political engagement for social change. They call on teachers and students to scrutinize "the formal corpus of school knowledge" (Apple, 1979, p. 9) and examine its role in sustaining oppression. By engaging in critical analysis and deconstruction of official knowledge, students and teachers come to understand the multiple ways that structures of oppression are

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[22] For example, outside of education this is a key idea in the writings of Dubois (1903/1953), Fanon (1968); Gaventa (1993); Morales (2001); Pulido (1998), Shiva (1997).

legitimized and sustained through the production of knowledge (Apple, 1979; Tejeda et al., 2003).

4) Dialogue and problem-posing

"Ask [students] what they want to learn, and then teach it to them." This was how D explained the teaching methods of the PARTY class, aptly summarizing the PARTY members' key values regarding pedagogical practice. As they developed curriculum for the PARTY class, they consistently emphasized the importance of building from students' interests and remaining flexible enough to let students determine the direction of the class. When examined formal lesson plans as part of the participatory research process, PARTY members consistently responded that they were "too contrived" or "too structured," and "students wouldn't do it." Instead of structured classroom activities, PARTY members preferred open-ended discussions. Their pedagogy consisted of sharing news stories or facts, and developing discussion questions designed to push students to critically reflect on those facts. As I discuss further in Chapter 5, PARTY members cited "voicing your opinion" as the primary goal, teaching method, and measure of success for their class.

The PARTY group's emphasis on dialogue as a teaching tool reflects a key principle of critical pedagogies. These pedagogies reject the traditional model in which a teacher-as-expert transmits knowledge to students in a one-way fashion. This traditional model re-creates and reinforces the authoritarian structure of society inside the classroom (Freire, 1970/1999), and it presents official knowledge as a body of objective facts that exist independently, rather than a socially-constructed product of collaboration and

negotiation among people (Apple, 1979; Shor, 1992). Thus, critical pedagogies assume the classroom is a place for knowledge *production,* (rather than knowledge *transmission).* To achieve this, critical pedagogies employ dialogue-based teaching practices to problematize, challenge, and deconstruct the prevailing assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs of society. It is through this process that students and teachers gain a critical awareness of oppression in their own lives, and learn to decode the myths that sustain oppressive relations of power.

Critical pedagogies confront controversial issues of power and inequality head-on, following Freire's (1970/1999) call for pedagogy that "makes oppression and its causes the object of reflection by the oppressed" (p. 30). These things are not presented as inevitable facts of life, but as challenging situations that can be changed through human action (ibid). Critical pedagogies often refer to this teaching practice as problem-posing. Shor (1992) explains, "problem-posing offers all subject matter as historical products to be questioned rather than as universal wisdom to be accepted" (p. 32). Problem-posing continually emphasizes the constructed nature of knowledge and expertise; it engages students and teachers in a "critical dialogue" (ibid., p. 31) that facilitates learning. While subject matter content, facts, and academic expertise are still considered important, they are not presented as immutable truths to be absorbed without question. The primary method through which learning is assumed to occur is through dialogue facilitated by a critical educator (Adams, 1975; Freire, 1970/1999; Hall 1978; Shor, 1992).

5) Critical consciousness and praxis

PARTY members established four learning goals for their class,[23] and developed

the following statement:

> Students will learn:
> - Why things are the way they are.
> - How all of this affects their life.
> - To question why it is the way it is.
> - What they can do about it: People have the power.

The first goal suggests PARTY members wanted Jackson High School students to

understand the root causes of social problems, or "why things are the way they are."

Secondly, they wanted students to see connections between structural and individual

problems: "how all of this affects their life." The third goal emphasizes the practice of

questioning dominant assumptions, or as Freire (1999/1970) has written, to "permit the

oppressed to begin to question: why?" (p. 67). The fourth goal speaks to the power of

collection action to effect social change: that "people have the power." These four

learning goals for the PARTY class reflect the core aspects of critical consciousness, or

conscientization, as Freire (1970/1999) described it:

> In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their
> liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed
> world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation with they can
> transform. This perception is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for
> liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action (49).

Freire (1970/1999) describes critical consciousness, (or *conscientization*), as the

realization that structures of oppression are social constructions that are built—and

potentially changed—through human action. This consciousness brings a sense of

empowerment and agency, because the possibility of change becomes visible and real

(ibid). With critical consciousness, people "perceive oppression not as a closed world

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[23] See Appendix B for a detailed description of this process.

from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (ibid, p. 31). Yet consciousness, by itself, does not lead to social change. Critical pedagogies strive to effect social change through *praxis:* "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (ibid, p. 33). The concept of praxis implies the *unity* of consciousness and action: the relationship between them is dialectical rather than linear. Said another way, praxis can be defined as "guided action aimed at transforming individuals and their world that is reflected upon and leads to further action" (Tejeda et al., 2003, p. 16). In order to facilitate praxis, critical pedagogies consider the classroom as a space for reflecting on social action (through critical dialogue), in order to inspire and guide further action. The goal of critical pedagogies is critical consciousness, understood to include both critical awareness as well as *being in action* to effect social change.

Critical Pedagogies as a Theory of Change

Considering the five principles of critical pedagogies outlined above, it is clear these pedagogies are not simply a method for teaching, but a *theory of change*. Like all theories of change, critical pedagogies begin with a theory of society. First, critical pedagogies begin from the assertion that present social structures are unjust and unequal: some groups are systematically privileged while others are systematically oppressed. Second, they assert this situation is not inevitable or immutable because social structures are created and changed through human action. Third, critical pedagogies claim a certain *type* of human action can change social structures to be more equitable and democratic. They call for critical consciousness and political engagement (or *praxis)* on the part of

historically-oppressed groups as a means of bringing about a more just, equitable, and democratic society. Finally, critical pedagogies frame broad-based *praxis* as both the means *and* the goal of social change. They embrace a vision for a more perfect society understood as "one that is responsive to the needs of all and not just a privileged few" (Giroux, 1983, p. 201). These principles constitute a social theory because they articulate a coherent explanation and interpretation of how present social structures came to be, how they are perpetuated, how they *should* be changed, and how to bring about that change.

This theory of change relies on a strong belief in human beings and the powerful role of education. It might reasonably be considered a leap of faith to assume that broad-based social critique and political engagement by historically-oppressed groups can bring about a more just, equitable, and democratic society. After all, what is to prevent these groups from reproducing the same structures of oppression that exist now? Critical pedagogies respond to this question by highlighting the transformative power of education. A key aspect of critical consciousness is recognizing that social justice requires the elimination of oppression, *not* the substitution of one powerful group for another (Freire, 1970/1999, p. 26). Critical pedagogies claim that with critical consciousness, students will pursue social change to eliminate oppressive social structures, not reproduce them.

Critiques of Critical Pedagogy

The canon of literature on critical pedagogy has been the target of many critiques and sometimes vicious attacks. These often accuse critical pedagogy of being too

political, too theoretical, too detached from practice, and irrelevant to practitioners. In

perhaps the most widely-cited critique of critical pedagogy, Ellsworth (1989) exposes its

theoretical contradictions and reproductive tendencies. Her critique emerges from

concrete (university level) classroom experiences, in a course that attempted to approach

power and oppression through critical pedagogy. Knight and Pearl (2000) also advance a

compelling critique of critical pedagogy based on their experiences working as and with

practicing educators in K-12 schools. Like both of these articles, this dissertation focuses

on the limitations and contradictions of critical pedagogy in practice, particularly as these

arise in a formal classroom shaped by institutional power imbalances and a reward

system with material consequences. Yet, while I acknowledge limitations of the

literature on critical pedagogy, I also recognize the powerful and positive influence this

literature has had, and continues to have, among educational scholars and practitioners.

In this dissertation I attempt to *engage* with the prevailing literature on critical pedagogy.

Rather than discredit critical pedagogy as a theory of change, I wish to deepen our

understanding of its contradictions, dilemmas, limitations, and implications for classroom

practice—as well as its possibilities.

I am guided in this effort by Burowoy's (1991) description of the "extended case

method," a method of ethnographic research aimed at "reconstructing social theories" (p.

9). Burowoy contrasts the extended case method with the more common ethnographic

method of grounded theory. In grounded theory the ethnographer starts from scratch;

lacking prior theoretical commitments, she seeks to *construct* theory from the ground up,

informed only by her data. In contrast, the extended case method strives to build on

existing theory in order to refine, deepen, and improve it. In this model the researcher

begins with a body of theory that is of interest to her. She looks for an anomaly, a gap, or a problem with the theory, and undertakes participant-observation with the goal of gaining new insights and ultimately to develop or strengthen the theory. This dissertation study and its focus, the PARTY project, were informed and inspired by critical pedagogies generally, and in particular, the canon of writing about critical pedagogy. The following sections examine four major criticisms of this canon that shed light on important gaps, dilemmas and contradictions in the literature. Not surprisingly, these gaps in the theory also serve to introduce key concepts that I further explore throughout this dissertation.

Theory not informed by practice

The literature on critical pedagogy relies on abstract theoretical constructs that are rarely located in practice. Knight and Pearl (2000) point out that the central theorists on which critical pedagogy is based—Gramsci, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Althusser— were never teachers and are not relevant to North American classrooms today. Despite the merits of critical social theory, Knight and Pearl question critical pedagogy's *reliance* on theorists from a different social context and historical era, without also incorporating insights gained through practice or through working with students and teachers in the contemporary North American context. An example of this reliance on theory is Giroux's book *Theory and Resistance in Education* (1983). While Giroux outlines the need for critical pedagogy and its key theoretical principles, the reader is left with little clue about what this pedagogy might actually look like in practice. There are no examples from practice and no hint about how one might try to teach this way.

Ironically, Giroux claims critical pedagogy "must provide the conditions that give students the opportunity to speak with their own voices, to authenticate their own experiences" (p. 203), and yet his book offers no voice of students or teachers.

Much of the literature on critical pedagogy uses arcane language and theoretical jargon that renders these texts inaccessible, especially to audiences that critical pedagogy should wish to reach (e.g., teachers and historically oppressed groups). Such language can serve to exclude rather than include, thereby contradicting the inclusive aims of critical pedagogy. Here again, Giroux's book *Theory and Resistance in Education* (1983) as a telling example. Despite its important theoretical insights, Giroux's book turns many people away from critical pedagogy and contributes to the field's reputation as an elitist, detached, irrelevant form of "antiseptic politics" (Knight & Pearl, 2000, p. 222). In response to frequent criticisms that critical pedagogy is purely theoretical and detached from practice, scholars of critical pedagogy reject attempts to "reduce" critical pedagogy to a teaching "method" (Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2000; Tejeda et al., 2003). They defend the necessity for theoretical rigor and tacitly suggest that inaccessible language and detached theoretical constructs constitute such "rigor."[24] While I agree with the

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[24] hooks (1989) writes about a similar tendency within feminist theory (p. 35-41). In equating convoluted language and inaccessible texts with theoretical rigor, feminist scholars reproduce racist and colonialist assumptions about scholarship; and they contribute to academic elitism within feminist studies departments and anti-intellectualism within the feminist movement. I believe this same bifurcation (between academic elitism and anti-intellectualism) can be said of critical pedagogy, distancing those who "theorize" from those who work primarily as educators, teachers, and activists. hooks writes: "Feminist theory is rapidly becoming another sphere of academic elitism, wherein work that is linguistically convoluted, which draws on other such works, is deemed more intellectually sophisticated, in fact is deemed more theoretical (since the stereotype of theory is that it is synonymous with that which is difficult to comprehend, linguistically convoluted) than work which is more accessible. Each time this happens, the radical, subversive potential of feminist scholarship and feminist theory in particular is undermined" (p. 36). Reflecting on the value of theory that is inaccessible, hooks concludes, "There is a place for theory that uses convoluted language, metalanguage, yet such theory cannot become the groundwork for feminist movement unless it is more accessible" (p. 39).

necessity for theoretical rigor, I share the view that critical pedagogy is not sufficiently

informed by practice.

The PARTY project represents one small attempt to integrate the theory and

practice of critical pedagogy in a high school classroom. By examining this attempt, this

dissertation strives to inform the theory of critical pedagogy through a rigorous reflection

on *practice*.

The Ambiguous Aims of Critical Pedagogy

The long-term goal of critical pedagogy is praxis and democratic action for social

change. Yet the shorter-term objectives and intended outcomes of this pedagogy remain

ambiguous in the literature. This ambiguity exists at the micro level of student-outcomes,

as well as the macro-level of steps toward social change. On the micro level, critical

pedagogy does not specify the precise skills that students need to become active agents of

social change (Knight & Pearl, 2000). On the macro level, the literature contains ample

references to abstract concepts like "praxis" and "action for social change" without

specifying the precise activities that these concepts imply. For example, do these

concepts suggest voting and writing congressional representatives? Do they include

community organizing, protesting, boycotts, civil disobedience, or armed revolution? Do

they include other forms of social responsibility like recycling, bicycling instead of

driving, or buying organic food? I would argue that action for social change includes all

of these activities and more. But without exploring what political engagement would

look like in practice—especially for school-aged students—the literature on critical

pedagogy mystifies the process of social change and leaves critical educators with few concrete ideas about what skills to teach or how to measure their success.

The tendency to mystify the outcomes of critical pedagogy occurs on the macro-level as well. Larger questions about the purpose of critical pedagogy are obscured by theoretical abstractions or by palatable language like "democracy" and "equitable society." These euphemisms mask a much more specific political agenda, which becomes apparent when one digs into the more dense theoretical texts. As Ellsworth (1989) points out, the word "critical" is a code word for "antiracism, antisexism, antielitism, antiheterosexism, antiableism, anticlassism, and anti-neoconservatism" (p. 302). She points out that advocates of critical pedagogy seeks to "appropriate public resources (classrooms, school supplies, teacher/professor salaries, academic requirements and degrees) to further various 'progressive' political agendas that they believe to be for the public good—and therefore deserving of public resources" (p. 303). The literature on critical pedagogy often glosses over this point, using theoretical jargon to mystify its true political aims.

In this dissertation I seek to provide a more accurate understanding of the knowledge and skills that contribute to the deepening of critical consciousness and effective political engagement. In Chapter 5, I identify these skills as academic literacy and explain why they are a necessary, classroom-level goal of critical pedagogy. In Chapter 6, I explore the question of what political engagement would look like, and what avenues for participation are realistically available to high school aged youth, by investigating PARTY members' divergent views on this question.

The Central Paradox of Critical Pedagogy[25]

The *central paradox of critical pedagogy* refers to its simultaneous attempt to value local, popular knowledge and to promote a particular political agenda. The practice of critical pedagogy seems inevitably to prompt such questions as: Can a critical educator "empower" students to construct their own knowledge and vision for social change, while at the same time seeking to *direct* social change in a particular direction? What if, in the course of dialogue and problem-posing, students express views, opinions and political agendas that are inconsistent with the anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-capitalist aims of critical pedagogy? This issue is glossed over in much of the literature on critical pedagogy. There is an implicit assumption that students from historically oppressed groups will almost naturally perceive society, justice and injustice in ways that are consistent with an anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-capitalist political agenda. Critical pedagogies assume that students who develop critical consciousness will adopt an anti-oppressive and pro-democratic position on all social and political issues. But in practice, critical educators have found that dissent is inevitable, even within groups of historically oppressed students.

This inevitable diversity of opinion leads Ellsworth (1989) to argue the assumed "unity of values" among historically oppressed groups of students is incorrect at best, and "potentially repressive" at worst (p. 308). Although critical pedagogy values local and popular knowledge, it also holds there is a "correct" social and political analysis to which

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[25] I borrow this term from Gee, Hull, & Lankshear (1996), who write about "the central paradox of the new capitalism." The authors ask how businesses can "empower" workers when they already have a set of core values to which workers are expected to adhere? The authors criticize corporate projects of "worker empowerment" as a thinly-veiled form of "soft-touch hegemony." I argue that this same central paradox exists at the heart of critical pedagogy. This leads me to question: is critical pedagogy also a form of soft-touch hegemony?

all students will eventually arrive. This theory presents critical consciousness as something similar to universal Enlightenment (ibid) or objective truths, a concept critical pedagogy claims to reject. This commitment to a correct political analysis seems inconsistent with the value placed on local and popular knowledge, egalitarian classroom relationships, and the shared production of knowledge. Ellsworth suggests that critical pedagogy's embrace of democratic teaching practices (such as dialogue, problem-posing, and "teacher-as-learner") is less an expression of valuing popular knowledge, and more a strategy for effectively bringing students to the "correct" political analysis. To enforce this correct analysis, critical educators may be tempted to silence or discredit dissenting voices. This dilemma leads Ellsworth to ask: "What diversity do we silence in the name of 'liberatory' pedagogy?" (ibid, p. 308).

The literature about critical pedagogy has not sufficiently addressed its central paradox. If critical educators truly value popular knowledge and democratic practices, we must begin to theorize from a position that accepts and embraces the unpredictability of democratic outcomes.[26] In Chapter 5, I discuss the central paradox of critical pedagogy in the context of the PARTY classroom.

Academic achievement and skills in critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogies strive for a "two-tiered" curriculum (Kincheloe, 2004) that pushes students to master traditional academic content while challenging, questioning, and deconstructing it. Tejeda et al. (2003) argue that students from historically oppressed groups must be prepared to enter and succeed in prestigious colleges and universities

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[26] Although it does not address critical pedagogy, a good example of this kind of theorizing can be found in Amy Gutmann's book *Democratic Education* (1987).

even as they learn to criticize the role of these institutions in maintaining structures of oppression. This dual curriculum is necessary to ensure that critical pedagogies do not set poor students and students of color up for academic failure and thereby reproduce existing inequalities. The "two-tiered" approach to teaching echoes Lisa Delpit's (1988) widely-cited argument that educators have a responsibility to teach students of color the rules and codes of the "culture of power," and to simultaneously teach them to critique the role of this culture in sustaining oppression.

The literature on critical pedagogy provides few insights about how to translate this two-tiered curriculum into practice. Much of the literature tacitly assumes that students naturally come to see the importance of traditional academic achievement and skills as they develop a critical consciousness. For example, Kincehloe's *Primer on Critical Pedagogy* (2004) describes this two-tiered curriculum with an example from Paolo Freire's teaching:

> [Freire's] students were motivated to gain literacy in order to take part in changing both their own lives and the society. The process of learning was inseparable from individual empowerment and social change. They could not achieve the goals they sought without knowing how to read and write. Because the dominant classes did not want students from the peasant class to succeed with their academic studies, Freire's students knew that they had to excel in their studies in order to overcome the oppressors. (p. 71).

Simplistic accounts like these of students growing "motivated to gain literacy" through critical pedagogy are plentiful in the literature. These accounts gloss over the difficult work of how this motivation was achieved. Moreover, they often draw on educational projects like Paolo Freire's as an example, even though Freire worked primarily with

voluntary adult students in South America—a very different social and historical context than a North American high school classroom.

Anyone who has worked in a high school setting knows that critique of the power structure does not automatically translate into aspirations for traditional academic achievement or academic skills. Students often voice extremely sophisticated criticisms of schooling and society that demonstrate deep insights about the nature of oppression and injustice. Yet this capacity for critical understanding does not appear to correlate with academic achievement or a commitment to acquisition of traditional academic skills. In fact, the experiences of countless high school educators and school-based ethnographies[27] suggest the *opposite* is true: for high schoolers, critical consciousness sometimes appears to *discourage* traditional academic achievement.

The PARTY project offers one more example of this finding. This dissertation illustrates that even when youth understood how their lives had been shaped and their opportunities limited by oppressive structures of power, and even when they were able to articulate these connections clearly and intelligently, this consciousness did not translate into an aspiration to improve traditional academic skills or traditional measures of academic achievement. This finding and its implications are examined further in Chapters 3-5.

Conclusion

The PARTY project aimed to understand and address the social inequalities shaping the lives and education of Jackson High School students. To *address* these

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[27]Such as: Bettie, 2003; Eckert, 1989; Fine, 1991; MacLeod, 1995; Ogbu, 1987; Sefa Dei, Massuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1998; Willis, 1977.

inequalities, the PARTY members, (all former Jackson High School students), decided to teach a class at Jackson. In making this decision, PARTY members demonstrated a belief in the role of education in social change. Even though PARTY members believed schooling contributed to the perpetuation of oppressive social inequalities, they also believed it provided a space to engage students in critiquing and changing those inequalities. The PARTY class was an expression of this belief, and its central goal was to promote critical consciousness and action for social change. In the context of weekly PARTY meetings, the youth developed goals, lesson plans, and a teaching philosophy for their course. These course goals, plans, and philosophy reflected the five key principles of *critical pedagogies*—a diverse group so educational theories and practices for social change. In particular, the PARTY class represented an attempt to implement what educators call critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy is more than a teaching method; it is best understood as a theory of social change. Despite numerous theoretical contradictions, dilemmas, gaps and problems in the literature on critical pedagogy, this dissertation study and the PARTY project in general were strongly informed and guided by this literature. Rather than discrediting critical pedagogy as a theory of change, this dissertation aims to inform this theory through a rigorous reflection on the practice of critical pedagogy in a high-poverty urban high school. Ultimately, I seek to inform a more practical theory of critical pedagogy—one that is informed by practice and which takes into account the specific context of a high-poverty urban high school. Such a theory serves two purposes. First, it might inform future attempts to implement critical pedagogy in similar contexts. Second,

it provides a more accurate understanding of real, imagined, and potential role of public

schooling in advancing the goals of social change and social justice.

INSIDE THE PARTY CLASSROOM:
A TYPICAL DAY

PARTY members D, Suli, and Leila taught at Jackson High School every Tuesday in Ms. Barry's 3rd period U.S. Government class. The class met right after lunch from 12:20 to 1:40. Their third day of class, described below, represents a typical day in the PARTY class.

A typical day in the PARTY class

When the second bell rang at 12:20, signaling the beginning of 3rd period, there were zero students in Ms. Barry's classroom. As she frequently did, Ms. Barry said "I'm going to round up the kids," walking toward the doorway and out into the courtyard. Students began to trickle into class, one or two at a time, over the next several minutes. They took seats from among the twenty or so desks that were arranged in a semi-circle facing the white board. Some talked in pairs or small groups, ate fast food, candy, and drank soda. D, Suli and Leila sat at desks as though they were students, waiting for things to get started. When Ms. Barry returned she was immediately approached by three students who had been absent and wanted to make up work. She talked to them and went to her desk to get some papers, which she then brought to the students and began to discuss. At 12:30—now ten minutes after the official start of class—I signaled to Suli to get started. There were twelve students in the room: 6 boys and 6 girls. They included 8 African American, 2 Latino/a, 1 Asian, and 1 mixed race (Filipino/Black).

Suli walked to the front of the classroom and faced the students. He inhaled deeply as if to begin speaking, but he stopped short, hesitating perhaps because most students were still talking with each other. Even Ms. Barry was talking to a student, Pablo, who had been absent. Suli stood in the same place, swaying slightly from side to side, as a few more moments passed. After a brief pause, he inhaled again and this time he spoke in a loud and commanding voice that caught most students' attention. "Alright everybody, we're gonna get started." Ms. Barry was still talking to Pablo. In the rest of the class, a continuous soft buzz of side conversations never completely disappeared, although most students looked up at Suli. He continued: "OK I'm gonna read you this fact of the day. The fact is day is," he turned to look up at the white board, and read aloud: "One in three African American men will serve time in prison during their lifetime." Suli turned back to the students and paused a moment to let that fact sink in. He continued: "Do you think this is true?" A couple of students immediately called out answers at once. One said the number was higher than that. Another responded "I think it's *two* out of three!" And another: "It's two-and-a-half out of three!" Then Frank, an African American boy, called out, "No, it's *three* out of three!" Suli asked Frank to elaborate on his answer, and Frank responded, "If they're not in jail now, they've *been* there."

Suli walked around the classroom room as he led a discussion, moving closer to students' desks as they spoke, calling on students, asking them to elaborate on their answers, and asking them "how does this affect you?" Students also called out questions to Suli: "Do you smoke?" "Do you drink?" Suli responded: "If I'm not old enough to buy it I can't drink it." Another called out: "Have you been in jail?" Suli said no, to

which Frank responded: "Maybe it's because you're light skinned." Then Shanell called out from the other side of the room, "No, Suli is *mixed*." Throughout the discussion, the class was lively and talkative. Suli managed the activity, juggling questions and interruptions, with skill and charisma as though he had done this for years. Students called out, laughed, asked questions, and sometimes "messed with" Suli, but they mostly stayed on the topic of race and incarceration.

After about seven minutes of discussion the room dissolved into several small conversations, with Suli engaged in one over the in the far corner of the classroom. Leila was assigned to lead the "news story" discussion, so she took it on herself to start. She stood up from her desk, faced the students, and said, "I'm gonna pass out an article about a new loitering law they just passed in Elmwood [a neighboring city]." Her voice was too soft to be heard above the engaged conversation of the room, but she proceeded to pass out copies of the article, handing one to each student. Leila had used a purple highlighter to highlight key sentences on every single copy. When she finished passing out copies, she stood in the front facing the students and quickly summarized the article in her own words. As she spoke, most students continued their previous conversations, and only a few looked directly at Leila. Leila said the Elmwood City Council had passed a loitering law, despite criticisms that it would increase racial profiling. She said students should make formal complaints about racial profiling because the law will be reviewed in one year.

Despite continuous side conversations that competed with Leila's summary, a few students began calling out comments, including: "This is a stupid law," and "This ain't gonna stop drug dealing." Frank asked, "Why don't we know about this?" D answered

him, still sitting at a desk with students: "Do you read the paper? Do you look at the news?" Frank replied "I look at the news but I don't read the paper." From the opposite side of the room, a student named Tommy jumped in to comment: "They don't know what's going on." Since I was seated right next to Tommy, I asked him who "they" means. He answered me, loud enough for the class to hear: "the people who pass the law. White people."

The conversation continued like this for some time, as students called out answers, comments and questions in a free-flowing form. After a few minutes, the calling-out began to branch off into several simultaneous side conversations. Despite Leila's attempts to get people to talk "one at a time," students were soon engaged in so many side conversations that it became impossible to follow any single thread of discussion. Three more students had arrived late during the opening discussions, bringing the total attendance to fifteen students. I stood up and wrote students' names on the board in groups, and Shanell called out: "We have to go in groups *again*?" It took at least five minutes for students to move their desks into four groups, each one working with a PARTY teacher. Suli, D and I had four students each; Leila had three students.

We led our groups through a classroom activity from the nonprofit advocacy group, the Prison Activist Resource Center, designed to teach students about the human impacts of prison policy. Each group had a different set of "prison facts" printed on note cards and four true stories about people who were unjustly imprisoned. We were to discuss each fact and figure out which "personal story" was supported by the fact cards. Each group then picked someone to present back to the class about the personal story we chose, and to share one fact the class should know. While working in groups, everyone

in the classroom appeared engaged. The four students in my group took the activity seriously; rather than simply complete the assigned tasks, they discussed each fact, its meaning, possible causes, and impact on their lives. They read the brief personal stories with interest, adding commentary after each one such as "Damn! That's messed up," "That's scan'lous," and "That happened to my uncle." When it was time to present our answers to the class, the room quickly fell quiet and everyone turned their desks facing in toward the center. A member from each group presented their group's personal story and one prison fact that they found most compelling. During the presentations, students appeared to listen by making eye contact with presenters and occasionally commenting on the facts.

When the last group had finished, I announced the journal assignment was to write your opinion about the topic of today's class. This was the third PARTY class, so students were familiar with the weekly journal assignment. Immediately somebody called out that class was over, and there was not enough time to do the journal. I responded, "It's 1:25, there are fifteen minutes of class." Now Frank chimed in to say that class ended at 1:35. Ms. Barry, who had been seated at her desk for the whole class, looked up and asked "Really?" Frank answered her, "yes, class is over at 1:35!" I responded again, reading from the official Class Schedule which was stapled to the bulletin board: "It says here that 3rd period ends at 1:40." Frank protested, "that's the old schedule! Now it ends at 1:35!" Ms. Barry could tell that Frank was lying, and from her teacher's desk she told to the class they had fifteen minutes to write their journal assignment.

Immediately the room filled with sound and motion, as though Ms. Barry's directive were the bell signaling the end of class. Students rose to their feet, joined their friends in conversation, packed up their bags, or threw away the remains of their fast food and candy lunches. No one took out their journals. Suddenly I heard a student call out, "If the teachers are leaving early I think *we* should leave early too!" I looked up and noticed that Suli and D were missing. I opened the classroom door and saw them walking across the courtyard toward the other side of the school. They must have heard me open the door, because they immediately turned around and said, "We're coming right back." I closed the door and returned to the classroom. Still no one was writing in their journal. Ms. Barry called out from her desk, "This is not chill time! You should be working on your assignments!" Frank's voice rose noticeably above the other noise in the room; he was engaged in lively conversation with a group of five boys. When I reached his desk, I reminded him that class was still in session and he was assigned to write a journal response. "I'm done for the day!" he responded. "In that case," I said, "could you at least lower your voice so that others can write in peace?" Frank responded, "No one is working! Even the teacher's pet isn't working!" I looked across the room and saw Ms. Barry's assistant, Shanell, on foot talking to two other girls. Frank burst out laughing and exclaimed: "Look! She even knows who the teachers's pet is!" Ms. Barry, still seated behind her desk, called Shanell's name and told her to work on her journal. Shanell asked, "Or else what?" Ms. Barry responded in a half-joking manner, as if at a loss for words, "Or else your teacher's pet status is jeopardized."

Suddenly I heard music. Suli had returned and was sitting on top of a desk with headphones over his head but one speaker facing outward so that music could be heard

throughout the room. Without missing a beat I told Suli to turn the music off and he did.

Just a few moments later I heard Ms. Barry call out from her desk: "Suli you have to be

in or out." Suli had left the room again and was now popping his head through the open

window from the outside courtyard, ruffling the plastic blinds. Frank started cracking up,

punctuating his laughter with exaggerated, over-dramatic body movements. His fit of

laughter propelled him from his seat, and he started walking in circles and leaning

forward holding his stomach, ostensibly to control his laughter. I instinctively told Frank

to sit down and he responded: "Kick me out so I can leave early! I'm ready to go!"

　　　At this point, a few students had taken out their journals and were writing. The

rest of the class was engaged in lively conversation, walking around the room, sitting on

tables, or drawing on the white board. D and Suli joined Frank's group in conversation.

Leila was seated at a desk on the other side of the room by herself, reading a book, and

appearing to ignore the action in the classroom. Finally Ms. Barry called out from her

desk, "It's OK if you want this to be chill time, but please keep your voices down

because a few people are still working." There was no acknowledgement of the teacher's

directive and the volume in the room did not change. It was 1:35, and ten minutes had

passed since the journal was assigned. Students began trickling out of the classroom.

When the bell finally rang at 1:40, only eight of the fifteen students were still present, and

they exited quickly in a final, decisive wave. The quiet of the now-empty classroom was

shocking, a drastic change from the busy noise of the class. Somehow in the bustle of the

last five minutes of class, four of the fifteen students handed in their journals. The third

PARTY class was over.

Reflections on the typical day

This typical day in the PARTY class exemplifies many of the themes I develop in the following four chapters. First, in the typical PARTY class, we saw that the starting and ending times of class were negotiable. In addition to students arriving to class late and leaving early, we also saw how each activity, and the class overall, essentially ended when students decided it was over, not when the teachers or the school "bell" did. Second, we saw the impacts of truancy as Ms. Barry talked to students who had been absent, and only fifteen students out of twenty-five officially enrolled showed up for class. Third, the day illustrates several occasions where I instinctively acted "teacher-like" (a descriptor that PARTY members used disparagingly), for example, when telling Frank to sit down and telling Suli to turn off the music. This "teacher-like" behavior became a focal point of debate within the PARTY group, as PARTY members criticized teachers' excessive preoccupation with petty rule-enforcement and control. Finally, the typical day shows how students creatively avoided an assignment they did not want to do: the journal assignment. Even though students had been engaged at other points in the class, they collectively refused to attempt the writing assignment. Moreover, it was not only students who avoiding doing the journal; they were aided by PARTY members who did not hold them accountable to it. This creative avoidance of the journal assignment became a consistent feature of the PARTY class. In the following chapters, I develop these themes from the typical day and explore their significance for critical pedagogy in a high-poverty urban high school.

STUDENTS VERSUS TEACHERS:
IDENTIFICATION AND CONFLICT IN THE CLASSROOM

> *Suli:* We understand where the students are coming from because we've been there before, so we both know what they're going through. […] Being able to understand that helps to communicate.

> *D*: I ain't tried to teach this whole time. I just tried to be myself and keep it real. […] You can't use your authority over them type of kids.

Critical pedagogies are based on the premise that learning environments should reflect and model the values and practices of a truly democratic society (Shor, 1992). This entails promoting and nurturing relationships of equality among students, and between students and teachers. In contrast to traditional, "authoritarian," or "banking" teaching methods—in which students learn obedience and compliance suitable for an authoritarian society—critical pedagogies encourage students to critique power, challenge authority, and exercise voice in shaping society (Freire 1970/1999; Giroux, 1983; Shor, 1992). As discussed in the Chapter 2, much of the literature on critical pedagogy is based on, or implies, a voluntary student population; it does not sufficiently analyze how the compulsory nature of schooling *challenges* the relationship of equality between teachers and students, thereby limiting the transformative potential of school-based critical pedagogy.

The PARTY class provides a window into understanding how and why this occurs. One goal of the PARTY project was to blur the distinction between researcher and subject, as well as between student and teacher, youth and adult. This goal was based on the intention of critical pedagogies to transcend the limitations of a student-

teacher duality and construct in its place a community of collaborative learners, in which every member is both a learner and a teacher (Freire 1970/1999). Our experience in the PARTY class shows that these categories—of youth and adult, student and teacher—are not easily surpassed; they are strongly entrenched and habituated within society and especially within the school. In the PARTY class these categories emerged strongly. PARTY teachers consistently identified themselves as, and were identified by others, as belonging to one or another of these categories. These categories were not only entrenched; they were also framed as oppositional and antagonistic. PARTY members aligned themselves with one group *in opposition* to the other, creating a dichotomy of students *versus* teachers. These dynamics suggest a framework in which teachers and students held oppositional interests.

This chapter examines the construction of student and teacher categories by focusing on two debates within the PARTY group: the rules debate and the journal debate. In both cases, PARTY members disagreed about whether they should "force" students to do things—either obey classroom rules or complete weekly journal assignments—if students did not want to do them. The two debates mirrored each other in significant ways. Both broke down along lines of race and gender, and both spoke to the core question of which set of interests—students or teachers—should control the classroom context. As they wrestled with this question, PARTY members worked hard to avoid being seen as "teacher-like," but Leila was consistently identified by others as a teacher due to her positionality as a white woman, her more formal teaching style, and her

support of classroom rules and the journal assignment. Eventually, Leila

embraced this role and actively identified with teachers as opposed to students.

At the same time, D and Suli identified with students and actively

distanced themselves from teachers. The men formed an alliance with students in

opposition to classroom rules, journal assignments, and teachers. While their

opposition to these formal elements of schooling might be seen as a result of

immaturity, stubbornness, or a reproductive critique, these explanations offer only

part of the picture. This chapter argues that students' schooling histories and poor

academic skills are the most significant factor forming and strengthening their

opposition to classroom rules and writing assignments. As a result of schooling

histories marked by low-tracked classes and frequent or extended absences,

Jackson students and PARTY members had skills too low to access a rigorous

curriculum involving independent research, reading, and writing.

The Rules Debate

As the typical PARTY class illustrated[28], students' voluntary participation in

organized class activities or discussions could not be taken for granted; it constantly had

to be negotiated through ongoing requests and persuasion. When participation in an

organized class activity or discussion was achieved, it was temporary and fragile, ready

to disintegrate at any moment. When it disintegrated, widespread noncompliance and a

feeling of disorder prevailed. The room erupted into exhilarating noise, movement, and

play. Similarly, In an ethnographic study of a low-performing Chicago high school,

Payne (1984) describes the school context as "wondrously, joyously disorganized" (p.

50). Disorder, he argues, pervaded every aspect of the school context and structure; administrators, teachers, staff, and students all contributed to it through systematic noncompliance of school policies and procedures. Payne describes this collective process as "the production of disorder" (p. 50), a description that aptly applies to Jackson High as well. Even though individual classrooms exhibited different levels of "disorder," the school-wide production of disorder spilled over into every class, including the PARTY class.

The typical day also illustrated how Jackson students routinely arrived late to class and left early, rendering the first and last fifteen minutes of every class essentially worthless, or "chill time." As a result, an 80 minute class period was regularly reduced to 45 or 50 minutes of instructional time. Moreover, those remaining minutes of class were frequently interrupted. In addition to school assemblies, occasional fights in the courtyard, standardized testing, fire alarms, and other school-wide interruptions, students participated in a range of classroom interruptions through "active not-learning" (Kohl, 1991), or "the conscious effort of obviously intelligent students to expend their time and energy in the classroom actively distancing themselves from schoolwork, thereby short-circuiting the trajectory of school failure altogether" (Ferguson, 2000, p, 99). Countless examples of active not-learning occurred in the PARTY class, regardless of which PARTY teacher was leading the class. These examples will not surprise teachers who have worked in a school like Jackson; they are a common part of the repertoire of schooling. But it is important to note that, although active not-learning varied somewhat according to which PARTY teacher was leading, it was a fairly constant aspect of classroom dynamics. This was also the case when Ms. Barry taught the class. According

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[28] See Interlude between Chapters 2 and 3: Inside the PARTY Classroom: A Typical Day

to the Jackson teachers, staff, students, and the PARTY members, this was consistently

true for all Jackson classes, even those with the best teachers.[29]

Questions about the enforcement of classroom rules came up immediately in the

PARTY group and continued throughout the semester. Our first discussion of this issue

focused on whether to ask students to speak one at a time during whole-class discussions.

Leila suggested a one-at-a-time rule immediately after the first day of teaching:

> *Leila*: I think, maybe we should… Like maybe we should be like "yeah we're not gonna do the like, raise your hand thing, cuz that's not, that's kinda, but just like you know, if someone's talking just wait, it's not that hard." Maybe just try to like, give it some kind of order? Cuz then I have trouble hearing what some people are saying. Or something, or if they're asking a question and someone else speaks I can't hear what they're saying.
> *Kysa*: D, do you agree with that? I saw you shaking your head.
> *D*: I don't agree. I hear them pay attention to everything. At least they're talking.
> *Kysa*: M hm. M hm. So you guys thought the energy was a good thing.
> *D*: If they didn't have energy they'd be dead, man.
> *Suli*: Just sit there and not say nothing.
> *D*: I don't care about your raising your hand! I don't care!
> *Leila*: Yeah I don't want them to raise their hand either.
> *D*: I don't care about *none* of that, you feel, as long as you enter the discussion.
> *Leila*: No, yeah I'm totally down with it.
> *D*: You feel, if y'all have your side conversations about the class, go ahead, do your thing. *You* did the same thing! Think back to when I was in high school, you did the same thing.

In the above conversation, Leila explicitly did *not* suggest a hand-raising policy, only that

they ask students to speak one at a time so everyone could hear the whole discussion.

Her suggestion was immediately shot down by D, who insisted "I don't care about your

raising your hand! I don't care!" D may have mis-interpreted Leila's suggestion as a

hand-raising requirement. Either way, he claimed the most important thing was for

students to participate and enter the discussion in any way they wanted to. Thus, from

the outset of teaching, D opposed ground rules for student participation. Almost

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[29] For a more detailed description of active not-learning in the PARTY class, see Appendix C: "Scenes from the PARTY classroom."

immediately, Leila withdrew her suggestion and changed her mind, stating "yeah I'm totally down with it." Perhaps she was convinced by D's argument, or she was afraid of standing up to D in the meetings. Nobody else challenged D's position on that first day, and it was decided—by consensus or by default—not to request that students speak one at a time.

The Journal Debate

The typical day illustrated that many students in the PARTY class avoided doing the journal assignment even though they had been engaged in earlier parts of the class. As soon as the journal was assigned, the whole class collectively joined in a group effort of active not-learning. This episode of active not-learning around the journal reflected a routine refusal to attempt assignments requiring reading or writing. This, in turn, shaped the PARTY group's lesson plans. Anticipating student resistance, the PARTY group gradually stopped incorporating reading or writing into their lesson plans. When Leila suggested bringing in copies of a newspaper article to pass out to students, D and Suli quickly convinced her that to do so would be a "waste of paper" because students would not read it. Suli argued that news articles were too long for students to read in class:

> *Suli*: Usually the articles are hella long. They'll be like two pages. Cuz I be readin' em, it be like two pages.
> *Leila*: At *least*.
> *Suli*: It don't seem that long on the computer cuz, you know, you be scrolling down and it doesn't seem like it, but when you print it out it's like two pages, two and a half, and you be like "*ah! Man!*"
> *Leila*: If I can find a short, simple one I'll bring in copies for everyone.
> *Suli*: I think you should just bring in the front cover and, with the headline on it. They can see the headline and discuss it from that. Cuz I don't see them reading a whole article. Better just bring in the headline.

As this conversation shows, PARTY members made allowances to avoid asking students (high school juniors and seniors) to read a two-page article from a newspaper. PARTY members came to accept this resistance to reading as normal and natural, and worked around it.

In addition to their assumptions about students' willingness to read, PARTY members took it for granted that Jackson students would not do homework or otherwise work independently outside of class time because they were "dealing" with other stresses and responsibilities.

> *Leila*: Honestly I don't even know if they're gonna be dedicated enough to take out of their own free time to do the project.
> *Suli*: Yeah that's why I was like, man, are we gonna try to make class time for y'all because man, I just don't think as far as groups go, the people that are working together aren't gonna make the effort to work together on their own time.
> *D*: I think they will forget. It's a lot of things on their mind, man, when they out of school, they out of school!
> *Suli*: Yeah, they're dealing with all of this.

In several PARTY meetings, the youth members suggested it would be pointless to expect students to do school work outside of class time. As a result, we adopted the policy of most Jackson teachers, which was not to assign it.

In my six years of involvement at Jackson High School, teachers who assigned homework often became frustrated because, consistently, no students completed it. Over the years there were a few attempts to institute a school-wide homework policy. Each time, the policy was quietly dropped. One teacher responded by offering a voluntary "homework class" for which several students signed up. This teacher was consistently identified by students as the most engaging, challenging, and creative teacher at Jackson High School. Her classes incorporated student-driven projects and activities like guitar-playing, a student garden, and cooking. Her classes consistently had very high

attendance and students generally produced higher quality written work for her than they did in other classes. However, her engaging pedagogy was not sufficient to inspire students to work outside of class on homework. Within a few weeks, even the willing volunteer students in the homework class stopped doing their homework. After one year, this teacher left for another high school, claiming that Jackson High was causing her to "burn out." That was the end of the homework experiment.

These facts suggest the persistent difficulty in assigning written work at Jackson High School, whether in class or as homework. The PARTY group confronted this difficulty through the weekly journal assignment, and over the course of the semester a debate grew within the PARTY group about whether to continue assigning it. The idea for a weekly journal did not represent the collective planning of the PARTY group; from the beginning, the journal was a teacher-imposed addition to the PARTY class.[30] It was only because Ms. Barry required the PARTY group to give a weekly written assignment, and I personally supported her requirement, that journals became part of the PARTY class curriculum. However, PARTY members did agree to institute journals at every class, and they exhibited varying degrees of acceptance and even appreciation for the journal at different moments in the semester.

There were moments during the semester when all PARTY members expressed appreciation and enthusiasm about the journal assignment. In weekly meetings, we read aloud from typed copies of students' journal entries and discussed them as a group. This activity prompted D and Suli to engage in playful competition over whose group turned in more journals. Their comments

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[30] For a detailed description of the process through which the journal was introduced, see Appendix B: Planning the PARTY Class.

suggest they were beginning to take ownership of the journal as their own

assignment. For example, in one meeting D noticed that Suli's whole group had

turned in journals:

> *D*: [to Suli:] I bet your whole group did the journal.
> *Suli*: [laughs]
> *D*: [pointing to the typed copies of journal responses] See? [laughing]
> *Kysa:* What?
> *Suli*: He was like, "I bet your whole group did the journal." They *did!*
> *Kysa:* Your whole group?
> *Suli*: Yeah. They all did it. Thaddeus, Shanell, Enrique, and Ezekiel.
> *Kysa:* [scanning the page] U-oh. No one in my group did the journal. [D laughing loudly] Wait, who did I have again? I had Taniza, Carmen, oh Carmen did it. I had Taniza, Carmen, Joe… Joe did it.
> *Suli*: I'm on a role!
> *D*: [to Suli:] You actin' like you the man, blood!

In this excerpt Suli's response suggests that he felt a sense of pride about having his

whole group complete the journal. Later in that same meeting, Suli took another

opportunity to point out that his whole group completed it:

> *Suli:* [to Kysa] I think it's kind of messed up that no one in your group did the journal.
> *Kysa:* Joe did the journal! And Carmen did the journal.
> *Leila*: I don't think anyone in my group did the—Oh, Maria did. Everyone else didn't. Oh, Carlton.
> […]
> *D:* [to Suli] Blood, your whole group did it!
> *Kysa:* Whether or not they did it in our group has nothing… although if you want to set up like a group competition, you know—
> *D:* Nah, Suli will win!
> *Suli:* Cuz I got the best track record so far. Yeah!
> *Kysa:* Are there things from, having thought about our class—
> *Suli:* I think we should try to get more people to do the journal. A lot of people ain't doin' it. [looking at D]
> *D:* What do you mean man? Three people in my group did it!

Conversations like this one, in which we compared whose group did the most journals, or

whose group did the best *quality* journals, occurred during three different meetings over

the semester.

Even though the journals may have been used simply as a proxy for D and Suli to engage in playful competition together, the men had fun with the contest and exuded authentic pride when their students wrote high quality journals. D was especially proud when students' journals reflected the points he had made in class. It gave him a sense of accomplishment to see his own teaching reflected in students' writing. "They actually listened to us," he said one day after reading students' journals aloud, "They actually listened!" The smile on his face and pride in his voice suggested he was genuinely pleased, perhaps even surprised, to see his own statements reflected back in students' journals. Upon reading the response of one student, Tommy, D exclaimed: "Ain't that what I said! *Exactly* what I said!" Comments like these suggest that even D and Suli felt some degree of ownership toward the journal assignment at some points in the semester.

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> *Suli*: See, in my opinion, for me personally, I don't feel like we should necessarily even be forcing them to *do* the journal. That's just my opinion. You feel. I wasn't, I mean, I understand where *you're* coming from where it's like, you want to see if they're getting something out of the class on a day to day basis so, it's cool for you to give the journal but not, you know, to see what they really think, and how they respond to what we do. [pause] I don't like the journal. I never did.
> *Kysa:* So, why… explain more why you don't like it.
> *Suli*: I just don't think, personally I just don't think anybody wants to do it. And that's before we actually went in there and assigned it though. I mean I didn't feel like they would want to do it anyway. It's like, it basically just makes kinda like, after they enjoy like, I guess, say enjoy the class, last fifteen twenty minutes then it's just like "aawh, they givin' us work." 'Cause I know if I went there I wouldn't do the journal.

Instead of talking about holding students accountable for assignments, Suli chose the words "forcing them" to do the journal, thus portraying a required class

assignment as an act of coercion. He identified with students' reaction, "aawh, they givin' us work," thus framing the journal assignment as "work" devoid of intrinsic value. Suli acknowledged the journal might serve as an evaluative device for teachers, but he did not seem to believe it served the students in any way.

As the semester progressed, fewer and fewer students in the PARTY class completed the journals, and those who did wrote shorter and shorter responses; by the end of the year less than half the students in class turned in journals, and a typical response was one or two sentences quickly scribbled with little evidence of reflection or care. As students increasingly rejected the journals, so too did D and Suli. (It is not clear whether D's and Sul's devaluation of the journals prompted students' refusal to complete it, or vice versa.) In one meeting toward the end of the semester, D said to me, "Man, why you keep giving us these journals? My group doesn't *want* to do the journals!" Even though D had agreed to assign journals as part of the weekly lesson plan, his comment here was directed at me: "Why [do] *you* [Kysa] keep giving us these journals?" (emphasis added.) This question implied the journal was being imposed on him; he did not ask "why do *we* keep assigning the journals?" In this comment, D took the side of his students and claimed they did not want to write a journal. Suli also sided with students in opposition to the journals. He argued: "It doesn't matter because if [students] don't want to do it, they won't do it. So we shouldn't make them." Thus, the journal debate essentially revolved around the question of whether students should be "forced" to do a writing assignment against their will.

Students versus Teachers

The journal debate, like the rules debate, was framed as a contest between students and teachers. In this contest, D and Suli represented the "students," and Leila and I represented the "teachers." D and Suli consistently called on their ability to relate and identify with students, to understand students' perspectives, and speak for their interests. At the same time, they consciously and explicitly distanced themselves from the teacher role. In contrast, Leila actively distanced herself from students while emphasizing her ability to relate to teachers. Our discussions served to frame the categories of student and teacher as oppositional and antagonistic. In this dualistic framework, each PARTY participant essentially had to choose an allegiance to one group or the other. D and Suli came out unequivocally on the side of students, while Leila and I came out on the side of teachers. These allegiances underscore the racialized and gendered nature of teaching at Jackson High which, like many urban high schools, is staffed by mostly white female teachers and attended by mostly African American students. In the Jackson context, the racialized and gendered categories of student and teacher were the only available categories with which to identify.

Relating to students

It was widely recognized among Jackson teachers, students, and PARTY members, that a major strength of the PARTY class was the fact that Suli, D, and Leila were peers who had attended Jackson and could relate to the students. Students in the class often pointed out that PARTY teachers were "young" and "fun" and identified with students. In my interviews with students, each one mentioned the *age* of the PARTY

teachers as a major strength of the course. Their responses included: "that you're young and not too far of high school," "Suli and them, they're more like our age, they can relate to us," "since they're younger, they know how to handle us and stuff, cooperate with us," and "they know how to talk to us, cuz they're like, not much older." Every student mentioned age as the primary axis of identification, rather than race, class, gender, or experience. This suggests that, in the context of the school classroom, age is a particularly salient axis of differentiation and identification. Only one student, Tommy, expanded on his answer by drawing on race, gender, and life experiences to describe the connection he felt with Suli and D.

The PARTY members would have agreed with Tommy's observations. D and Suli often talked about students "who remind me of myself," drawing on shared schooling experiences, neighborhoods, race, and gender as axes of identification. In separate interviews, each explained his connection to students:

> *Suli:*We understand where the students are coming from because we've been there before, so we both know what they're going through. So a lot of things, we experienced the same frustration in going to school so we know exactly what they're feeling. Especially for the guys that don't want to be there, some of them are there because they actually want to graduate, some of them are there to pass the time. Being able to understand that helps to communicate.

> *D*: I can relate to the students, because we goin' through the same things, like more or less, trying to graduate, you feel me? And, just basically trying to graduate, you feel me, and going to the same school, being from the same spot, you feel me? And stuff like that, the same neighborhood, you feel me, same environment, same family life, same *messed up* life, you feel me? And same type of issues. […] So, I'm connected with them. It's true.

As they emphasized their ability to relate to students, D and Suli actively distanced themselves from the teachers, and they described teachers as authoritarian, overly

preoccupied with rule enforcement, and unable to relate to students. When reflecting on

his teaching experience, D claimed:

> *D*: I ain't tried to teach this whole time. I just tried to be myself and keep it real.
> And spread the information that I know. And I know how to move on. It's all
> about moving on, and still connecting on the same level. It's much easier though
> for me and Suli though. Just cuz, you know, we went to school with them. And
> we had seen 'em before. I don't know though, you just got to bring yourself
> down to their level. You know you can't use your authority over them type of
> kids.

In this comment, D distanced himself from the teacher role by claiming "I ain't tried to

teach this whole time," and distinguished the formal practice of "teaching" from the

unofficial practice of "spread[ing] the information that I know." At the same time, he

emphasized his ability to relate to students, pointing out that he went to school with them

and saw them in his neighborhood. D offered an implicit criticism of teachers who focus

too much on rule enforcement, arguing that "you can't use your authority over them type

of kids." Later in the same interview, D expanded on this point about authority:

"[Teachers] try to dictate. They feel that they're the only person right, and they don't

know how to get the hint that it ain't working." Thus, D painted a picture of teachers as

authoritarian and overly concerned with rule-enforcement. He squarely positioned

himself with students and distanced himself from teachers, contributing to the perception

of these two categories as mutually exclusive and oppositional.

Not-a-teacher

In the context of the PARTY group, being "teacher-like" came to mean an

authoritarian preoccupation with enforcing rules, disciplining and punishing students, and

assigning schoolwork. It was a descriptor that PARTY members worked hard to avoid.

For Leila this was the most difficult. Despite her dread locks and marijuana-leaf necklace, her positionality as a white woman was highly visible, and significant because most Jackson teachers are white women too. The image of Leila as a "teacher" was compounded by her teaching style; she always had a detailed lesson plan for her small groups, employing handouts and discussion questions, while D and Suli just talked with their groups and rarely used handouts. During class, Leila often asked students to quiet down or speak one at a time. When her requests were not backed up by Suli and D, she became seen like "the teacher" while D and Suli were seen like "the students."

The perception of Leila as "teacher-like" often led students to assume she was more economically privileged than she in fact was. One day after class, Leila came to me in tears because a student had made an underhanded comment that she was from "Sea View"—a rich and predominantly white part of town. Because San Miguel is characterized by a racialized class system here race and class are strongly correlated and residential segregation persists, it is easy to see why students would make this assumption about Leila. Yet Leila had lived her whole life in a low-income and predominantly African American and Latino neighborhood of the city, where in fact many Jackson High School students also lived.

Despite her age, neighborhood, and experience as a former Jackson student, Leila claimed to have trouble relating to students:

> *Leila:* I'm just not the same mindset as the students who go to that school. I'm not saying that it's better, but they have a different mindset. They don't think the same way as me. There's different cultures, and I can relate to you [*to Kysa*] a lot because we're aiming for the same kind of stuff and we act in the same kind of way. And Ms. Barry too, the kids don't like her but don't they see she is trying to help? Making a conscious effort to empower you?

In this comment, Leila expressed difficulty relating to students, and in the very next sentence, claimed to identify with me and Ms. Barry. Leila's reference to "culture" may be understood to include race and gender—as Ms. Barry and I were the only other white women in the research context—in addition to personality traits like "aiming for the same kind of stuff" and "act[ing] in the same kind of way."[31] One student, Tommy, distinguished Leila from the male PARTY members for these same reasons:

> *Tommy:* They [D and Suli] see what's going on, and they probably lived, I know Suli done lived half of this stuff. I know D done been through half this stuff too. They're like, you know, "I'm not gonna go out like every other Black man," you know? Or like, Leila, she just wants to help, you know? I guess that's what she thinks her mission is, to help.

Although Tommy and Leila were the same age, Tommy drew on race, gender and life experience to explain his connection to D and Suli, but not to Leila. He assumed that Leila did not share his experiences, and that her participation was motivated not by identification with students but a desire to "help" them. In fact, Leila did relate to the teachers' desire to "help" students, when she asked rhetorically, "don't they see [Ms. Barry] is only trying to help?" In identifying with teachers, Leila drew on similar race, gender and culture. In aligning herself with teachers *as opposed to* students, she participated in the group's framing of these categories as mutually-exclusive and oppositional.

While Leila struggled to earn the respect of students, D and Suli enjoyed great acceptance, but they did so at a cost. Their rapport with students, while initially established on the basis of shared identities and life experiences, was strengthened over the semester by their solidarity with students in opposition to classroom rules and writing

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[31] Later, there was one other white woman in the research context. A white female student, Rebecca, transferred to Jackson High and joined the PARTY class in late April. Leila often said she could relate to

assignments. Leila and I tended to support stricter ground rules to ensure all students had

a chance to participate and be heard, and to maximize instructional time in the classroom.

D and Suli rejected the implementation of ground rules, seeing them as "teacher-like" or

overly authoritarian. Leila and I tended to support rigorous and challenging assignments

that involved reading and writing, and holding students accountable to them. D and Suli

rejected the emphasis on schoolwork as a meaningless and empty exercise that was

unmistakably "teacher-like."

Opposing schoolwork

The men's opposition to schoolwork was interesting to me given their

commitment to the goal of education for social change. As seen in Chapter 2, PARTY

members identified critical consciousness and action for social change as the primary

goal of the PARTY class. Yet their critical consciousness, even their belief in education,

did not translate into a commitment to building traditional academic skills like reading

and writing. In supporting the journal, Leila (and I) drew on both the intrinsic and

instrumental value of writing. Yet D and Suli were not convinced that writing

assignments helped advance the goals of PARTY: to understand and address the social

inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students. Their

opposition raised important questions about the role of reading and writing—indeed, of

"schoolwork" generally—in education and action for progressive social change.

My support for writing was informed in part by research on school inequality and

tracking. It has become common knowledge among educational scholars that academic

tracking contributes to a two-tiered educational system (Oaks, 1985). The literature on

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Rebecca, because it seemed that Rebecca did not fit in at Jackson and did not have any friends there.

tracking is replete with examples illustrating the stark contrast between a typical low-track class (usually serving lower-income students) and a typical high-track class (usually serving higher-income students). For example, in the low track, students learn to get the right answer; in the high track, they learn to ask the right questions. In the low track, students are told what to do; in the high track, they engage in self-directed projects and activities. In the low track, students sit in rows facing the teacher; in the high track, they sit in circles for discussion or collaborative projects. In the low track, students learn the skills and behaviors appropriate for an obedient workforce; in the high track, they learn the skills and behaviors appropriate for an elite business or political leader. All of these examples underscore the tedious nature of low-track classes, which emphasize rote learning in a "skill-and-drill" format.

When reading this literature, I often envisioned high track classes as a kind of educational oasis where self-motivated students engaged in free-flowing discussions about literature or philosophy, worked in small groups to solve calculus problems, or collaborated on self-directed research about pressing social issues. Classes like this are a privilege that is systematically denied to low income children and children of color in the United States. Yet sometimes this fact can give the subtle impression that low-tracked students are eagerly waiting for a rigorous and stimulating curriculum to be set before them. It also can give the impression that high-tracked students are driven by intrinsic motivation and authentic interest in learning for the sake of learning. Both of these assumptions are, of course, false.[32] Nevertheless, at different moments over the course

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[32] For example, Pope's (2003) ethnography of high-achieving students demonstrates that these students are no less likely to cheat, regurgitate facts, and figure out how to do the least amount of work for the highest possible grade—in short, behaviors that are usually associated with low-tracked students. These behaviors

my teaching and research career, I have sometimes believed that, if given the opportunity for academic challenge, self-directed learning, and group discussion, traditionally low-tracked students would jump at the chance to participate. It would be as if these youth were literally thirsty for a schooling experience like the ones described as "high-track."

At different moments over the course of the PARTY project, I was again tempted into believing that Jackson students would enthusiastically participate when given the opportunity to sit in circles, engage in free-flowing discussion, and collaborate on self-directed research about pressing social concerns. Like many idealistic young teachers, I was confused and disappointed when these expectations consistently fell short. While I had experienced this sense of let-down in my prior teaching experience, I had not anticipated the same outcomes when working with the PARTY youth, all former Jackson students who shared the same goals of education for social change. Our partnership gave me reason to be optimistic. Thus, their persistent opposition to classroom rules and writing assignments exemplifies the depth of the challenges of doing critical pedagogy in a compulsory, high-poverty classroom.

It would be easy to brush off D's and Suli's opposition to classroom rules and journals as the result of false consciousness, stubborn anti-intellectualism, or youthful immaturity. Perhaps, like the "lads" in Willis's (1977) *Learning to Labour,* the young men were acting on a reproductive critique of society: although they saw through the myths of dominant society, including the myth of meritocracy, their critical consciousness led them to reject schooling and thereby reproduce their existing subordinate class positions. Alternatively, perhaps the young men simply wanted

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often go unnoticed among high-achieving students because they are skillful at achieving academic "success."

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students to like them. They achieved popularity by siding with students in the ongoing

contest with teachers over classroom rules and schoolwork. Indeed, the young men tried

hard to gain acceptance and popularity, even breaking school rules on one occasion by

taking their small groups off campus to play basketball during class time. While all of

these factors surely played a role in encouraging their opposition to rules and schoolwork,

a much more significant factor was also at play: the schooling histories and skill levels of

Jackson High School students and PARTY members. PARTY members' opposition to

classroom rules and schoolwork were principally shaped by their schooling histories and

academic skills.

Schooling Histories and Skills

It is safe to assume that many, if not most, Jackson students were tracked into low

level classes for most of their time in school.[33] In addition to low-track classes, many

Jackson students had significant gaps in their formal schooling due to frequent or

extended absences (as discussed in Chapter 1). The impact of these gaps in formal

schooling was revealed to me one day in a conversation with Lolo, one of the original

PARTY members, in which I learned she had never heard about primary colors. I was

certain she knew the concept of primary colors even if she didn't use that terminology, so

I probed her: "You know how yellow and blue make green? Red and yellow, if you mix

them together, make orange?" Lolo's face was blank, as though she really had no

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[33] This assumption can be made based on the high school records of Jackson students before transferring, racial segregation and bi-modal distribution of academic achievement at San Miguel high schools, and conversations with students about their academic history. It is also supported through anecdotal evidence from teachers who taught junior high summer school. The common wisdom among Jackson teachers when I worked there was that teaching junior high summer school was a way to meet future Jackson students. In fact, three to four years after I taught junior high summer school in San Miguel, many of my summer school students transferred into Jackson as sophomores and juniors.

recognition of this concept of mixing colors. I continued, trying to jog her memory,

"Don't you remember if you mix blue and red paint, it makes purple?" Lolo still showed

no sign of recognition. She said she had just never thought about that before. It was then

that I learned Lolo did not begin elementary school until the fifth grade. She had not

learned the concept of primary colors in school, nor did she have the opportunity to

experiment with mixing paints, an experience that most US children get in elementary

school if nowhere else. While it may seem relatively insignificant to know about primary

colors, Lolo's response as I tried to jog her memory was a bleak reminder of the gaps she

possessed in what we might consider foundational knowledge. Despite multiple ways of

knowing and experiencing the world, and despite the highly contextualized and culturally

situated nature of knowledge, there is a degree of foundational knowledge that constitutes

the building blocks for future school success and access to more advanced school

curriculum. Many of these building blocks were not available to Jackson students who

had extended absences in their schooling histories.

An impact of these schooling histories—marked by low-tracked classes, truancy,

and extended absences—was that many Jackson students had skills too low to access a

curriculum involving independent research, reading, and writing. Moreover, they did not

have any basis on which to expect that the effort involved in reading or writing might be

worth the pay-off. D explained his view on teaching skills in the PARTY class:

> *D*: [Teaching skills is] not really our job, you feel. Their fourth grade teacher
> should have taught them that, fifth grade teacher, taught them how to fake read
> little things, you feel, fifth grade, math, sixth grade, all around English, writing,
> and in 7th grade they should *know* how to write, eighth grade they should have
> perfected it. So in 9th grade and 10th grade supposed to have it right and all that.
> Eleventh grade, you should just be knocking that shit out. Twelfth grade, it
> should just be, it's four paragraphs and that's the answer. Straight up. You feel?
> Only thing they gotta do is on the language, you feel, a little bit. They should
> already a *learned* that. Cuz like I told you, I ain't in there to be a teacher cuz I

don't know all that shit. I'm not a teacher, trying to write all that, vocabulary words and all that.

In this quote, D argued that teaching skills was not the job of the PARTY teachers, or of any high school teacher; students should have learned all the necessary skills in the lower grades. He devalued literacy by describing it as "fake read little things," and claimed writing skills should be perfected by eighth grade. This suggests he did not see writing beyond the eighth grade level as important, or perhaps he was not sure what writing beyond the eighth grade level would look like or entail. His comments also suggest that he understood high school writing skills as the ability to write a four-paragraph essay: "Twelfth grade, it should just be, it's four paragraphs and that's the answer." In fact when D attended Jackson High School, the only English class offered there was called "proficiency writing," a whole year that focused on the four-paragraph essay to prepare students for the high school proficiency exam required for graduation in California. At Jackson, the four-paragraph essay was feared and revered. It was the daunting skill that students had to master to reach their ultimate goal of graduation, producing much anxiety and many failed attempts at the test. It is not surprising, then, that D would associate the four-paragraph essay as the logical culmination of high school writing skills. His own formal education in writing never went beyond it.

D's comments about skills underscore the possibility that many Jackson students had little understanding of what a more rigorous curriculum might look like and what it might offer in terms of liberatory possibilities for self and social change. Their limited prior experience with such curriculum gave them little reason to expect that schoolwork might have intrinsic or even instrumental value beyond preparation for future schooling (itself a dubious aim, as discussed in Chapter 4). In addition, students saw that

schoolwork had little connection to their real lives. They frequently claimed the only

important thing to learn in school was math, because as D said, math "teaches you how to

count your money." This statement about math skills was a common refrain among

Jackson students, as one student named Thaddeus explained:

> *Kysa*: Anything you don't like about the Tuesday class?
> *Thaddeus*: Writing. I don't like writing.
> Kysa: The journal?
> *Thaddeus*: The journal… everything. I don't like writing. […] It's like, I don't
> like putting my brain to use… unless I want to and it's gonna put money in my
> pocket. That's the only time, like when I do my math, I be calculating so hard.
> My head is like a calculator when I be adding dollars, I be getting it right too on
> the dot. That's why I ain't never used to miss my math class though.

D and Suli frequently commented that math was their favorite class and the only really

important class in high school. If math skills were the only important skills to learn in

school, then journal writing was mere busywork. Besides keeping students busy or

facilitating grading, it was not clear to D and Suli what pedagogical purpose journal-

writing was intended to serve.

While D and Suli claimed in meetings that reading, writing, and thinking skills

were important, they did not see how schoolwork could promote or support the

acquisition of these skills. Schoolwork was seen as a decontextualized exercise, part of

the necessary repertoire of schooling practices that bore little connection to important

learning. Alluding to the disconnect between classroom assignments and learning, D

argued: "Just cuz they don't do the journal don't mean they ain't learning nothin'." If

schoolwork was not a good measure of student learning, it would not be unreasonable to

ask what purpose schoolwork actually served. Besides facilitating assessment and

grading, how did assignments connect to the overall goals of the class? The connection

between schoolwork and social change was obscure at best.

In contrast, Leila supported the journal by calling on both the intrinsic and instrumental value of writing as well as academic rigor. Leila believed rigorous assignments would develop students' reading, writing, and thinking skills. Recalling her own experience at Jackson, where she found classes tediously unchallenging, she claimed the group had a responsibility to prepare students for success beyond school:

> *Leila*: That was one of my main problems with going there [Jackson High] is that they give, we were doing like third grade work. And I really do think that the kids need to be aware that, you know, as soon as you get out in the real world and you don't have like, the right schooling, you know, they're gonna be blasted, because it's not, this, I don't know it's like, way easy in that school. That's why I think they complain is cuz they get really like, small like assignments, that's pretty easy and they're like, I was just like, it was so easy that my brain was like *melting*. But really, I just, I didn't feel challenged at all.

Leila argued the "real world" would expect more of Jackson students than they were prepared for. Without "the right schooling," students would be unprepared to succeed in life. Further, she pointed to the intrinsic value of academic rigor by claiming her "brain was melting" from the lack of challenge at the school. This suggests she saw intellectual stimulation and critical thinking as important for their own sake.

Similar to Leila, I argued that educators had a responsibility to challenge students through rigorous assignments, and to push them to develop habits associated with academic achievement. In a series of PARTY meetings, I asked the youth to think about what kinds of assignments or projects would really give students the skills to make a difference in society. They immediately responded that students "wouldn't do it" because any such project would be too big to accomplish during a class period. Even though PARTY members recognized that skills contributed to critical consciousness and political engagement, they could not always articulate a role for themselves, as educators, in promoting or encouraging the development of those skills, at least not in the context of

a traditional school classroom. This occurred, in part, because PARTY members lacked school experiences from which to imagine what alternative pedagogy and curriculum might look like. Without a model of anything different, the group members immediately dismissed suggestions for more participatory and project-based activities as too labor-intensive and too ambitious. They also lacked the academic skills needed to access such a curriculum, let alone design one.

Conclusion

Despite the PARTY project's intended goal of blurring distinctions between teacher and student, adult and youth, these categories emerged strongly. In the school context particularly, these categories are entrenched as a way of doing business and relating to people. Each PARTY member chose to identify with one of the two categories, which were framed as oppositional. In other words, students' interests were pitted *against* teachers' interests, and vice versa. From D's and Suli's perspective, teachers were overly-concerned with rule enforcement, limiting of students' free expression, and blindly tied to a rigid lesson plan that didn't serve students. D and Suli aligned themselves with students and sought to protect student interests in the face of teachers' restrictions and rules. From Leila's perspective, the students were overly-resistant, oppositional, and unappreciative of teachers' good-faith efforts to help them. She aligned herself with teachers and sought to encourage students to take their work and education more seriously.

Missing from this framework of students-versus-teachers was the possibility of both groups sharing the *same* interests. In every situation, it seemed

as though teachers were primarily concerned with *coercing* students into doing work against their will, while students were primarily concerned with resisting domination and humiliation by teachers. At the heart of the struggle between students versus teachers was a disagreement over the proper exercise of power in the classroom. On the student side of the debate, D and Suli believed students should not be "forced" to raise hands, speak one-at-a-time, or do work against their will. On the teacher side of the debate, Leila and I believed that clear ground rules and the expectation to complete written assignments were essential for effective teaching. These allegiances underscore the racialized and gendered nature of student and teacher categories at Jackson High School.

In theory, all PARTY members supported the goal of reading, writing, and critical thinking. However, when faced with the sheer scale of student noncompliance to classroom rules and schoolwork, PARTY members faced a dilemma: prioritize their relationship and identification with students, or "force them" to do schoolwork and risk being labeled as "teacher-like." In the context of the PARTY classroom, giving written assignments seemed to entail a form of coercion, or at least a willingness to be temporarily disliked. This fact appeared to run counter to the democratic principles of critical pedagogy, where students and teachers hold equal power in the common pursuit of liberatory knowledge and action. Yet to understand the depth of their opposition to classroom rules and schoolwork, it is necessary to understand the schooling histories and skill levels of Jackson High School students and PARTY members. Students' and PARTY members' fierce opposition to classroom rules, schoolwork, and teachers, is

primarily caused by their prior experiences with schooling and their lack of academic skills, especially reading and writing.

In arguing for the journal assignment, Leila and I often referred to the intrinsic and instrumental value of writing. More often than not, however, my own comments focused on the instrumental value of writing, and in particular, the role of writing *assignments* in preparing students for college. Even if students did not use the journal as a tool for critical reflection or to push their thinking on the issues, I explained, at the very least they would get into the habit of completing written assignments—a habit they would need to succeed in college. In the next chapter I examine how PARTY members responded to the goal of college preparation in the PARTY classroom. I examine the school imperative to prepare students for future levels of schooling, and the corresponding limits on school-based critical pedagogies as theory of democratic social change.

COLLEGE FOR EVERYONE?
FACING MYTHS ABOUT COLLEGE
PREPARATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

February:

Kysa: Is one of your goals for the class to help students prepare for college?

Suli: Yeah, it's important because in college when you get there, if you don't ask, nobody's gonna ask the question for you. And the professor isn't gonna, you know, just go ahead and touch on it cuz nobody asked the question. So you can sit there with a question and if you're scared to speak up, your question is not gonna get answered. So you know, just trying to instill that in them now while they're young, if they do plan to go to college, they'll be ready.

June*:*

Kysa: Looking back, was one of your goals for the class to help students to be more prepared for college?

Suli: No, no not really. 'Cause personally I don't think they're gonna be into it like that. Most of them don't want to go to college anyway.

The goal of the PARTY project was to *understand* and *address* the social inequalities shaping the lives and education of Jackson High School students. Throughout the two-year project, PARTY members developed a greater understanding of these inequalities through critical group dialogue, participatory research, and reflection on their own new life experiences as high school graduates, young adults, workers, and (for some of them), community college students. To *address* these inequalities, PARTY members chose to develop and teach a class, based on the principles of critical pedagogy, to build critical consciousness and action for social change among Jackson High School students. In teaching the PARTY class, they quickly confronted the school-based imperative to prepare students for future levels of schooling—specifically, to prepare

them for college. This imperative prompted critical questioning within the group: Just as

they struggled to define how classroom rules and schoolwork advanced their broader

goals of social change (discussed in Chapter 3), PARTY members also wrestled with the

role of college preparation within their larger mission to understand and address social

inequalities shaping the lives and education of Jackson High School students.

When they started teaching, PARTY members claimed they wanted to encourage

students to attend college, and prepare them with the skills needed to succeed in college

classes. For all of us, it was second-nature to support these goals when discussing them

in the abstract. Who wouldn't want to encourage high school students to pursue higher

education and improve their academic achievement? These aims are widely voiced and

accepted as natural in public discourses on education. I also contributed to this aim: As a

former teacher and graduate student of education, college preparation for every student

was a goal I was taught to desire and trained to implement. Over time, however, two

PARTY members, D and Suli, began to challenge the role of college-preparation in the

PARTY class. The young men argued that students should "make their own decisions"

about college, and it was "not our job" to try to influence their choices. They found it

increasingly difficult to articulate a connection between school success and college

attendance, on the one hand, and their aims of collective political empowerment on the

other. The chasm between the conformist expectations of schooling and the radical aims

of the project appeared at times impossible to reconcile.

My initial response to this shift was to label it a tragic turn of events. Like the

lads in Willis's *Learning to Labor* (1974), I interpreted D's and Suli's position as a

reproductive critique, one that led them to embrace their subordinate class positions

rather than struggling to change them. Their critique of formal schooling was insightful: "School molds you to the oppressive structure of society," Suli once said. However, I thought, it was ultimately a reproductive critique because it did not promote or inform action to *change* that oppressive structure. In this chapter, I investigate how and why the young men abandoned the goal of college preparation in the PARTY class. Rather than disregard their position as an example of false consciousness, reproductive critique, or youthful immaturity, I examine their words, actions, and experiences in the PARTY project in order to shed light on the contradictory role of college preparation in a theory of education for social change.

In the dominant discourse of education reform, a popular rallying call is the goal of "college for everyone"—making college education accessible to all and preparing all high school students for academic success in college. The "college for everyone discourse," as I call it in this chapter, is fundamentally an equalizing discourse; it aims to equalize access to good and rigorous schooling, higher education, and ultimately, good jobs. However, by examining the underlying assumptions and political implications of this discourse, I argue it also serves to mask deep-seated structural inequalities, divert political attention from more critical issues of economic justice, and intensify credentialism (the reliance on educational credentials as a weeding device rather than a symbol of skills and knowledge). These three implications of college for everyone run counter to the aims of critical pedagogy, presenting a dilemma for PARTY members. While I acknowledge the important contributions made by advocates of "college for everyone," if our goal is to address the social inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students (and other high-poverty students), I argue that

these educational movements must be coupled with demands for economic justice—in particular, for livable wages, employment opportunities, affordable housing, and healthcare.

The College for Everyone Discourse

Historically, students like those at Jackson High School—high poverty and low-achieving students—were not considered "college-bound." In an earlier era they might have been tracked into the "vocational" track, or expected to obtain work in blue-collar professions. For the most part, these options are no longer available to Jackson graduates. The postindustrial economy—characterized by declining wages in all economic sectors, a decline in well-paid manufacturing jobs, weakened labor unions, and a proliferation of low-level, part-time, and temporary service work—has created an increasingly polarized labor force, and one in which a college degree is increasingly necessary for (though not a guarantee of) stable, well-paid employment (Sum, 1996; Tannock, 2003). In the absence of secure, livable wage jobs for workers without some college, teachers, politicians, and employers routinely promote college education as the solution to the limited employment opportunities facing low-income youth.

In the discourse of college for everyone, college preparation is framed as one of the most important purposes of high school education, and in turn, is one of the most scrutinized measures of high school success. The power of this discourse is deeply rooted in popular beliefs about public education as a panacea for poverty as well as a range of poverty-related social problems from drugs, to gangs, to teen pregnancy (Perkinson, 1995; see also Spring, 1991). Today, preparing high-poverty, urban youth for admission to college is arguably one of the most talked-about goals in education

reform. For evidence of its popularity, witness the proliferation of university-based laboratory schools, charter schools, public-private partnerships, after-school programs, non-profit organizations, test-preparation classes, tutoring programs, and philanthropic initiatives, all targeting high-poverty urban youth and emphasizing college preparation or "college readiness." Witness too the popularity of modern-day rags-to-riches stories, which increasingly feature poor, "inner city" youth escaping their fate through *college,* not simply through luck and hard work on the job, as Horatio Alger's protagonists did (see, for example, Suskind, 1999; Summer, 2003).

The college for everyone discourse was no less powerful at Jackson High School. Most Jackson teachers understood college preparation to mean motivational pep-talks drawing on age-old narratives about education for social mobility. These narratives encourage students to study hard and go to college in order to get a good, middle class, professional job, stay out of prison, and "succeed in life." They promote the instrumental value of education as a vehicle for individual mobility and status attainment—far from the goals of collective social change espoused by critical pedagogies.[34] Yet increasingly, narratives of education for social mobility are framed as a way to achieve of equitable social change. College preparation for all students, especially high-poverty students, is seen as an equalizing discourse aimed at diversifying access to positions of power and privilege, thereby advancing the goals of racial justice and a true meritocracy. In progressive movements for educational equity and access, college eligibility and attendance rates are a common measure of educational inequality and a benchmark for

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[34] The distinction between educational goals of individual social mobility and collective social change is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. Critical pedagogies always privilege the latter goal.

measuring progress toward equity. Thus, the college for everyone discourse seeks to

promote, *simultaneously*, individual social mobility and broader social change.

Jackson High School and the Promise of Community College

The prevailing belief at Jackson High School was that anyone could "make it" if

they attended a two-year community college, and then transferred to a four-year

institution to receive a bachelor's degree. The community college discourse at Jackson

High mirrored and reinforced the ideal of college for everyone and the ideology of

meritocracy. In the view articulated frequently by students, staff, teachers, and

administrators, the two-year community college was seen as a great equalizer available to

everyone. It equalized access to a bachelor's degree because it offered the possibility of

transferring to a four-year college or university. Moreover, since community college

offered open admission to all high school graduates, it was the *diploma* that counted, not

high school grades or test scores. As long as students passed enough courses to graduate,

they believed, the "second chance" of community college was available to them, and

there was little incentive to improve one's skills and grades while still in high school.

Suli explained:

> *Suli:* A lot of [Jackson students] do want to go to college, but they don't think
> that school is a way for them to get to college. So they think, "I'm just gonna go
> here and graduate and then go to a two-year."

The promotion of community college was so prevalent at Jackson High School

that it almost seemed like official school policy. The school had one part-time college

counselor, who worked once a week during the spring semester only, holding drop-in

office hours to help graduating seniors with college and financial aid applications. By the

time Jackson seniors got to sit face-to-face with a college counselor, community college

was usually their only option.[35] One PARTY member, Lolo, recalls telling the counselor

that she wanted to apply directly to four-year colleges. Although she lacked the

necessary courses, Lolo wanted to ask for special circumstances and to draw on the fact

that she won a televised award for low-income youth overcoming obstacles to succeed.

Lolo said the college counselor discouraged her from attempting this and argued that

community college was a better economic investment. In community college, Lolo could

get the same bachelor's degree while spending much less money in her first two years.

Looking back years later, Lolo wished she had been encouraged to apply directly to a

four-year college, and she believes the social support and peer networks available at a

four-year college would have helped her succeed there.[36] The important point in Lolo's

story is that it demonstrates how Jackson High School students were funneled, both

officially and unofficially, into community colleges.

The push toward community college at Jackson High School was influenced by

three factors: the broader popularity of the college for everyone discourse, the economic

realities of the postindustrial economy, and the low academic achievement at the high

school. Taken together, these facts meant that community college was the only available

route to a legal, livable wage job for most Jackson High School students. For these

reasons, it was both reasonable and honorable for teachers to encourage and try to

prepare students to enter and succeed in community college. Likewise, PARTY members

realized the importance of at least some college and, initially, they encouraged students to

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[35] This is because Jackson High School did not offer the range of required courses to be eligible for admission to California State Universities or other colleges.

[36] It is not clear to me whether Lolo could have been successful at a four-year institution directly after high school, given her skill level at high school graduation. Lolo in fact took remedial courses at community colleges before she was able to take transferable courses in English and math. She eventually caught up and transferred to a California State University after six years in community college.

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strive toward college. An expression of this commitment was the group's decision to invite a guest speaker, Daniel, to the PARTY class. A childhood friend of D's from the same neighborhood, Daniel was an exceptional graduate of Jackson High School: He had attended community college and transferred to the prestigious University of California at Berkeley, where he planned to graduate that May with a degree in psychology. Daniel's speech offered insights about the possibilities, and limits, of the community college discourse at Jackson High School.

Daniel's Story: Limits and Possibilities of Community College

As he stood at the front of the room facing the twelve students who were in class that day, along with the PARTY members and Ms. Barry, Daniel talked about his personal journey from high school to college. A tall, thin, African American man in his mid-twenties, Daniel told the students about how he got kicked out of regular high school and involuntarily transferred to Jackson. After graduating from high school, Daniel got a job in a warehouse stocking shelves and continued living with his mother. He wanted to get his own apartment, but that was out of the question given his wages. Daniel told the class that he worked side by side with other high school graduates, many of whom were parents working two more jobs to support their families. He looked at his co-workers supporting families and wondered how they made ends meet, and why they bothered working in the legal economy at all. He quickly recognized the legal economy could not provide opportunities for him to live a stable, independent adult life. So he enrolled in community college where he spent five years studying. With hard work and dedication,

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Daniel succeeded in transferring to the University of California's flagship campus in Berkeley.

Daniel's speech focused on his five-year journey through community college. He claimed he was never a good student in high school, and he was unprepared for the difficulty of the courses at community college. He told students he failed all his classes in the first semester, and that he took the same English class six times before passing it. Daniel told students not to get discouraged if they failed a few classes in community college. He shared the importance of seeking out tutors, mentors, and other forms of support, and offered to speak personally with students who aspired to college themselves. Daniel's message reinforced the prevailing narrative at Jackson High School: that anyone can transfer to a university if they have enough persistence and motivation, no matter what kind of student they were in high school. But he also offered a reality check: This path was not nearly as easy as students might think.

Indeed, Jackson students regularly expressed plans to attend community college, transfer to a university, and then become a lawyer, nurse, parole officer, social worker, etc.[37] However, they rarely had a realistic idea of what the transfer process entailed. Transferring to a four-year institution required that students complete a broad range of transfer-credit courses in subject areas such as foreign language, laboratory science, literature, and geometry—all courses that Jackson High School did not offer. As a result, many Jackson students who entered community college had to complete remedial courses before they even qualified for the transfer-credit courses. Finally, many Jackson High

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[37] Like the high-poverty urban students in Fine's (1991) ethnography, Jackson High School students often voiced aspirations to pursue professional middle class careers. They often named positions that are "familiar" jobs or professionals with whom they come into contact, such as lawyers, doctors, nurses, parole officers, judges, police officers, social workers, etc.

School students graduated with poor academic skills that made it virtually impossible for them to keep up with college courses. Suli recognized this fact: "[Jackson students] don't realize where they're really at academically, cuz they haven't been given that much stuff that's harder. They don't realize what level of skill they're at. The quality of their work, they don't really realize where it's at."

Michelle Fine (1991) has written about the "student folklore" associated with the GED among students at a low-achieving New York City high school. She argues that "student folklore conspired with official advice" (p. 87), leading low-achieving students to believe that the GED was much easier to obtain than it truly was. Fine documents how the GED, as well as post-secondary vocational training and community college programs, were widely promoted by the adults at the high school she studied. Fine claims that these adults never told students "the truth" about the GED and the post-secondary vocational training programs. The truth was that very few students who entered these programs emerged successfully. Fine argues the promotion of these programs really served as a means of pushing low-achieving students out of high school and avoiding the responsibility of educating them. A very similar dynamic occurred at Jackson High School. Unlike the students in Fine's study, Jackson students realized a GED was more difficult to obtain than a high school diploma, so they generally chose to stay in high school for the traditional diploma. Yet similar to the students in Fine's study, Jackson students held a great deal of faith in postsecondary training programs, and especially the community college. Jackson students were led to believe, through formal and informal channels, that community college was their ticket to success.

Occasionally, students like Daniel and Lolo emerged from Jackson High School, "proving" the truth of this narrative. Like Daniel, Lolo entered community college academically under-prepared, and she has continued her studies for six years despite severe financial hardships, including three times becoming homeless, sharing a one-room studio apartment with six siblings, and balancing unpredictable schedules, unreliable managers, job insecurity, and poverty wages. After six difficult years at community college, Lolo was accepted to a California State University. "Success stories" like Daniel and Lolo gave Jackson teachers a sense of pride and purpose, especially because of them have credited individual Jackson teachers for the initial inspiration and support to pursue college. But stories like Daniel's and Lolo's have been few and far between. Many more Jackson students who entered community college ended up changing their aspirations or dropping out. Their stories are not surprising given the statistics on transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions. Although the overall transfer rate is hotly disputed in the literature (Laanan & Sanchez, 1996; Wellman, 2002); the rate of transfer from California Community Colleges to four-year institutions is estimated at somewhere between 4% to 21% (Cohen 1996; Lanaan & Sanchez 1996; Wellman 2002).[38] Yet despite this wide disparity and the lack of consensus about how to measure transfer rates, one finding is consistent in all the literature: Poor, minority and urban students lag far behind their white and (and some Asian) counterparts in transferring (Falcone, 2000; Wellman, 2002).

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[38] The wide disparity in rates is explained by the choice of measurement methods, how "transfer" is defined, and what constitutes the "base" for such measures. (For example, the "base" can include all students who stated an intention to transfer upon entering community colleges, or those who completed at least one or two semesters of coursework.) For a more detailed explanation of research disputes on the transfer rate, see Laanan & Sanchez (1996) and Wellman (2002).

An obvious explanation for the disparity in transfer success rates is the poor academic skills and the lack of college preparatory curriculum available to high-poverty urban students. After Daniel's speech to the PARTY class, Ms. Barry asked him if he felt cheated of a college preparatory education at Jackson High School, and whether he thought Jackson teachers should provide a more rigorous curriculum to better prepare students for college. Daniel hesitated momentarily before responding. "I don't think it would've made a difference for me," he said. He explained that as a high school student, he was not emotionally prepared for a rigorous school curriculum, and that such a curriculum would have simply left him to drop out of high school. Until a student is ready to choose it on their own, he claimed, a college preparatory curriculum is futile. Daniel's response to Ms. Barry's question seemed to legitimize the position that D and Suli would later adopt: that we should not try too hard to teach skills or to encourage college attendance, because the students had to "want it for themselves."

Daniel's position—that Jackson students were not "ready" for academic rigor or a college preparatory curriculum—risks reinforcing popular images of "at-risk" youth that portray high-poverty students as "too troubled" to be academically challenged (see Ferguson, 2000, pp. 91-95). These images of "troubled youth" justify the current educational status quo, while setting Jackson students up for failure if and when they do choose to pursue higher education. In many casual conversations with Ms. Barry, she often talked about this dilemma and concern. Ms. Barry recognized that some degree of personal development and social or emotional support had to be built into the schooling experience at Jackson,[39] but she worried about potential dangers of this focus if pursued

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[39] We both knew students who (like Lolo or Louis) experienced a range of challenges in their lives such as sexual abuse, domestic violence in the household, drug abuse and addiction in the household, and clinical

exclusively. Too much emphasis on "emotional support" frames the problems of Jackson

High School students as *medical* ones, rooted in psychological troubles, and requiring

counseling or therapy, rather than *political* ones, rooted in social inequality, and requiring

social change. Nevertheless, the therapeutic paradigm was deeply entrenched at Jackson

High School. Despite the PARTY project's attempt to re-frame these issues along

political lines, PARTY members ultimately gravitated toward a therapy-based model of

education.[40]

Daniel's speech in the PARTY class highlighted the possibilities and limits of the

community college discourse at Jackson High School. On the positive side, Daniel's

story was evidence of the opportunities available through community college, and his

journey from high school failure to a prestigious university was inspirational for everyone

in attendance. Daniel did not sugar-coat his story by painting the journey as easy.

Instead, he emphasized the need for self-sacrifice, persistent dedication, and the personal

strength to never give up. Daniel's speech was so moving that Ms. Barry promptly

brought him to the Main Office where the Jackson High School principal invited him to

be the keynote speaker at graduation.

But Daniel's story also exposed some of the limits of the community college

discourse at Jackson High School. In his speech, Daniel emphasized his poor preparation

for college-level coursework, and the need to repeat courses multiple times before

passing them. Daniel managed to persist through these challenges, but how many of us

would be likely to do the same? Daniel said he slept just three or four hours a night to

depression. We knew these students were not receiving counseling and support for these challenges the
way that many privileged students might. We also recognized these issues inevitably interfered with
students' ability to focus on school, as they do for more privileged students.

[40] The PARTY group's therapeutic model of education is discussed further in Chapter 5.

balance studying and work, even though he had the relative luxury of living in his

mother's home, which was quiet enough for him to study and read in. How many

Jackson students have the luxury of stable housing? How many of them have ready

access to a quiet place to study at the hours they need to? With libraries closing at 8:00

in the evening or earlier (including the community college libraries), and work schedules

that go until 10:00 or 11:00 at night, a severe challenge for many Jackson graduates is

finding a physical place to study.[41] As a result of these challenges, most Jackson

graduates who attempt community college as pathway to a four-year institution

eventually change their aspirations or drop out. Daniel's story hints at these challenges,

suggesting the limitations of the community college discourse at Jackson High School.

The experiences of two PARTY members, Suli and Louis, further illustrate these limits

as well as the political implications of the community college discourse. In the next

section I focus on Suli's experience in particular.

Suli's Story: Critical Consciousness and Cooling Out

Suli started community college for the first time in the spring semester of 2003,

the same semester he taught the PARTY class. When he started college in January, Suli

was optimistic about his future and regularly expressed his plans to transfer to the

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[41] The experiences of Lolo, Louis, and Suli correspond to the findings in Carol Stack's (2002) ethnography of youth fast food workers. Although her study focused on youth in the workplace, Stack notes the majority of workers in her study were community college students. Her research provides important insights into the challenges that low-income youth face as they balance work, community college, and social life. For example, Stack found that time scarcity and sleep deprivation were central to the lives of these young workers who struggled to manage full-time workloads with unpredictable schedules, family obligations, and college coursework. To cope with heavy demands on their time, many youth workers sacrificed sleep, leading Stack to argue the majority of workers in her study experienced persistent sleep deprivation. See also Ehrenriech (2001) for analysis of the mismatch between wages and living expenses.

University of California, to major in political science, and become an important politician. He enrolled in three courses at the local community college: political science, English and math. In January and February PARTY meetings, Suli often spoke with enthusiasm about his political science class, sharing insights he gained and facts he learned, as well as ideas for lesson plans taken directly from the political science class. His enthusiasm about college translated into his teaching philosophy in the PARTY class. In February, Suli explained why he encouraged students to raise their hands and ask questions:

> [Asking questions is] important because in college when you get there, if you don't ask, nobody's gonna ask the question for you. And the professor isn't gonna, you know, just go ahead and touch on it cuz nobody asked the question. So you can sit there with a question and if you're scared to speak up, your question is not gonna get answered. So you know, just trying to instill that in them now while they're young, if they do plan to go to college, you know, they'll already be, "OK I don't have to be afraid to ask a question," because I guarantee someone's thinking the same thing you're thinking.

In this comment, Suli articulated a connection between his teaching style and his goal of preparing students with the habits they would need to succeed in college. He spoke with a sense of authority as someone who knew what a college class was really like.

Two months later, in April, Suli dropped his English class. He claimed the class was too easy, and that he was failing because the work was too boring. He had been placed in a remedial writing course on the basis of an assessment test, but he believed he was mis-placed because the course was too easy. Around the same time, Suli failed his second math test. He reported that the tests were unfair because they did not test the material covered in class. Suli believed he had studied well, but he had studied the wrong material. By May, Suli had dropped his Math class too. In June, I asked Suli about his position on college preparation within the PARTY class:

> *Kysa*: Don't you think it's important for [Jackson students] to take school seriously, or get their academic skills up, go to college?
>
> *Suli:* That's not something I can force on them. That's something that they might not want to do. They have to want that for themselves, and I understand that. I'm a realist. No matter what someone gives to you, it's whether or not you choose it.

As his response illustrates, Suli no longer voiced the goal of preparing students for college. Instead, he explained that students had to choose this for themselves.

I believe Suli's changing perspective about college preparation in the PARTY class reflected his changing experience as a community college student. When he started the semester, Suli wanted to study political science and become a politician. In voicing these goals, Suli imagined the possibility of higher education as a vehicle of upward mobility as well as social change. Through higher education, Suli could pursue his dream to become a politician and thus become a more effective agent of social change. While this goal provided upward mobility and economic stability, it also provided the means of making a greater difference in society. Suli's vision for himself thus embodied the twin goals of social mobility and social change simultaneously. With optimism for his future, Suli sought to encourage other youth to strive toward college too.

As Suli began to drop his first college courses, the experience undoubtedly supported a changing orientation toward the value of higher education. Rather than connecting with the liberatory possibilities of higher education, Suli now saw the ways in which higher education replicated the dehumanizing sorting practices of the K-12 education system. To promote college attendance would legitimize the very system that was continuing to identify him as a failure. Suli's experience in community college seemed to strengthen his already-existing critique of the K-12 education system. This critique, in turn, under girded his opposition to "forcing" students to take school seriously

or to care about school success. As long as the education system was completely

illegitimate, then "success" and "failure" within that system had no meaning, and

students had no reason to take them seriously or internalize them.

In fact, community colleges do mirror the public schools in important ways. Like

public schools, community colleges are faced with the contradictory task of providing

equal opportunity while ensuring unequal outcomes (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Carnoy &

Levin, 1985; Katznelson & Weir, 1985). Brint and Karabel (1989) argue: "American

society generates far more ambition than its structure of opportunity can satisfy" (p. 7).

Consequently, the society faces "a problem in what might be called the *management of

ambition"* (ibid, p. 7, emphasis in original). Community colleges are ideally positioned

to serve the function of managing ambition by serving as gatekeepers to "real college"—

the four-year institution. While extending the *opportunity* of higher education to all,

community colleges (like K-12 schools) must systematically deny upward mobility to

many. Given Jackson students' positioning within broader political-economic structures

and relations of power, most eventually find that social mobility is elusive, even when

they attempt to achieve it through community college.

In a widely-cited essay on community colleges, Clark (1960) describes them as

playing a "cooling out function" by helping to "deflect resentment" of those denied social

mobility. By extending the appearance of equal opportunity, Clark argued, community

colleges promote the ideology of meritocracy and lead students to believe they have an

opportunity for mobility. At the same time, community colleges limit the number of

students who go on to four-year institutions; therefore, for most who attempt to use this

route to mobility, "failure is inevitable and *structured" (*Clark, 1960, p. 571, emphasis in

original). For young people who would traditionally occupy low-status positions on the occupational hierarchy, community college provides a gradual, rather than sudden, realization of their failure to achieve upward mobility. Clark argued that cooling out serves to reduce potential tensions inherent in a system of vast economic inequality by increasing the chances that youth will blame themselves—rather than the system—for their lack of mobility. This gradual cooling out process serves to divert potentially threatening political anger.

The experiences of two PARTY members, Suli and Louis, illustrate this change in ambition and softening of political anger. Both young men once spoke passionately about transferring to the University of California, and both wanted to pursue professional careers—Suli as a politician and Louis as a business man. While Suli saw politics as a way to effect social change, Louis voiced a desire to implement socially responsible business practices, including a living wage, as a way to advance social justice by changing the way business is done.[42] Both young men have since altered their aspirations, modified their faith in college as a path to social mobility, and muted their ambitions about engaging for social change. Suli is taking an indefinite "break" from college, and may or may not return. Although he continues to voice a strong social critique, he no longer talks about becoming a politician. While Louis still aspires to start his own business, he is currently taking a long break from school in order to save money. He insists he has not given up on college, but he now recognizes that it "takes longer" than he anticipated. He no longer talks about leading the way in changing how business is done.

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[42] Louis's dream of socially-responsible business is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 1.

Like other Jackson High School graduates I know to have started and stopped community college, these young men offered many reasons for their choice, often pointing to the fact that school was too expensive or they needed to work full time. They did not generally talk about the difficulty of the coursework, but when I asked these Jackson graduates about their grades in community college, they admitted to failing or barely passing most of their classes. Given the economic and emotional costs of being a student, we might expect that youth who earn poor grades in community college, despite effort and determination, would feel discouraged and would be likely to drop out. The college for everyone discourse operates in much the same way as the "cooling out" function of community colleges. The next section examines the underlying assumptions and political implications of this discourse in order to show how this occurs.

College for Everyone: Underlying Assumptions and Political Implications

The college for everyone discourse has opened the door to important gains in educational access, educational equity, and educational justice. The popularity of this discourse has provided the inspiration and leverage to expand educational opportunities to previously excluded groups including the poor, immigrants, and people of color (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Lazerson & Grubb, 2004). It has also improved the quality of education generally by emphasizing the importance of rigorous curriculum and good teaching, and spurring public interest and funds into research that improves teaching and learning (Lazerson & Grubb, 2004). However, these gains have also come at a cost. By examining its underlying assumptions and political implications, I argue the college for everyone discourse masks structural inequalities, diverts political attention from more

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promising social movements, and intensifies "credentialism"—the use of educational credentials as a weeding device rather than a representation of meaningful skills and competencies (Labaree, 1997).

Masking structural inequalities

The belief in education as panacea for poverty and related social problems goes back as far as compulsory public schooling in the United States (Perkinson, 1995). Public schools have long been promoted as a way for children of the poor to lift themselves up out of poverty. Implicit in this narrative of rags-to-riches through schooling is the related belief that better education for *all* poor children is an antidote to poverty in general, and to many poverty-related social problems like street crime, gang violence, welfare dependency, and teen pregnancy (Perkinson, 1995; Spring, 1991). Such beliefs about the role of education in reducing poverty and alleviating its symptoms helped justify numerous education programs of the War on Poverty (Spring, 1991), and they continue to shape popular perceptions today, which routinely link educational equity with economic uplift. In proposing better schools to alleviate poverty and its related social problems, these popular beliefs frame poverty as a problem of *education* rather than *distribution*. By defining poverty in this way, the solution can be achieved without actually redistributing wealth.

The college for everyone discourse reflects and promotes the view of education as a panacea: It implies that equal access to higher education—and equal college attendance and graduation rates across all social groupings—can reduce poverty rates in general and alleviate poverty-related social problems. The underlying assumption of this view is that

poverty is principally caused by poor education, not by poverty wages, lack of jobs, or other aspects of the social and economic structure. President George H.W. Bush voiced this assumption in a televised speech:

> We're used to thinking of unemployment as a case of too many people and too few jobs… In the 1990s, into the next century, our problem, our nation's problem, will be just the opposite: more than enough jobs and too few people qualified to fill them… Think about it: For every child growing up today—black or white and, yes, urban or rural—there will be a job waiting. The question, our challenge, is whether they'll have the education and the skills that they need to seize that opportunity. (Quoted in Lafer, 2002, p. 19).

In this speech, Bush's comments suggest the primary cause of falling wages, poverty, and unemployment is a "mismatch" between the needs of employers and the skills of the labor force. If this is correct, then ample opportunities for well-paid professional work exist for anyone who gets the right education and training.[43] However, the political popularity of this discourse seems to be growing at just the same time as opportunities for well-paid professional employment are *shrinking* (Lafer, 2002; Sum, 1996; Tannock, 2003). Notably absent from the college for everyone discourse is any mention of wages, job availability, or job creation. By failing to mention these or other aspects of the social and economic structure, the focus on higher education as a solution to poverty masks the reality of deep-seated structural inequality in the occupational hierarchy. As Lazerson and Grubb (2004) argue, this discourse "provides little incentive to examine the organization of work, the nature of labor markets, or the economic consequences of

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[43] More recently, President George *W.* Bush often makes similar claims. In a presidential debate between President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry in the fall of 2004, President Bush was asked a question about jobs, and specifically, how he would keep jobs from moving overseas. His response did not mention jobs at all, but focused entirely on his education policy *No Child Left Behind.* The implication was that lack of jobs and the movement of jobs overseas were caused by *poor education* in the United States, rather than political-economic policies and globalization.

globalism, since—apparently—more and better education can solve whatever problem exists" (p. 22).

Diverting political attention

To address the social inequalities shaping the lives of education of high-poverty students (like those at Jackson High School), the college for everyone discourse calls for better, more rigorous, and more equal public schools, thereby helping more high-poverty students become "college ready." This response implies (by what it leaves out) that poverty and poverty-related social problems can be mitigated through education, not redistribution of wealth. It obscures the important role of wages, unemployment, housing, and health care—arguably the most pressing issues facing high-poverty students like those at Jackson High School—and "presents education and training as *substitutes* for other forms of social and economic policy, rather *complements* or parallel efforts" (Lazerson & Grubb, p. 23). Rather than mobilizing for living wages, job creation, or economic justice, the poor are encouraged to channel their energy into more and more education (Lafer, 2002; Tannock, 2003). Progressive activists, who want to put their energy where the most gains can be made, are encouraged to focus on less threatening reforms like educational equity and access—less threatening because they don't actually redistribute wealth. At the same time, high-poverty youth like those at Jackson High School are led to believe that they alone are responsible for the economic difficulties they face.

While diverting political attention, however, the college for everyone discourse appears as liberal, progressive, and equalizing. It thus allows politicians and corporations

to do very little about poverty while appearing to care deeply about the poor and disadvantaged. Politicians can call for school reform and new educational policies "and thereby give the appearance of doing good without antagonizing any community interests" (Spring, 1991, p. 14). Corporations can make large donations to new rigorous schools and scholarship programs, appearing to help the disadvantaged and aligning with the progressive cause of college for everyone. In addition to providing much-needed funds for woefully under-funded public schools, such donations also increase corporate control of education, contribute to privatization of public education, generate positive publicity for the company, and provide an attractive tax write-off (Spring, 1991). Had the same amount of money been paid in taxes instead of a large donation, it would be in the hands of the *public* to decide how to spend it, not private interests (ibid., 1991). Corporate interests are well served as, increasingly, school funding is channeled through private corporations and foundations—a practice that is legitimized through the equalizing discourse of college for everyone. In short, college for everyone serves existing political and corporate interests in multiple ways. Despite the honorable ideals of equality and social justice at its heart, the college for everyone discourse serves deeply conservative purposes.

Intensifying credentialism

Another way corporate interests are served by college for everyone is through the intensification of credentialism: the reliance on educational credentials as a sorting device rather than evidence of skills and knowledge gained through education (Labaree, 1997). The college for everyone discourse has helped to produce an ever-expanding number of

postsecondary education opportunities and degree programs. More and more young

people are seeking postsecondary education; additionally, they are spending more and

more time (and money) in postsecondary degree programs, (Brint & Karabel, 1989;

Tannock, 2003), often accumulating substantial debt in the process. Colleges and

universities are increasing enrollments while new institutions, postsecondary degree

programs, and vocational training programs are proliferating to meet the demand. In fact,

the United States sends more young people to colleges and universities than any other

country on the planet (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 5). Despite all of this time, energy, and

money that young people are investing in postsecondary education, real wages continue

to fall steadily has they have since 1973 (Statistical Abstract 2001; See also Henslin,

2003, p. 214; Sum, 1996)—a fact that challenges the view of higher education as an

antidote to poverty. Nevertheless, the push to send still more young people to college

continues unabated, even though only about 30 percent of job openings require more than

a high school diploma (Lafer, 2002; Lazerson & Grubb, 2004), a number that existing

postsecondary institutions can easy accommodate with current enrollments (Lazerson &

Grubb, 2004, p. 18). These figures lead Lazerson and Grubb (2004) to claim: "the notion

of an overwhelming surge in education requirements for jobs is absurd, and the

promotion of college for all is in some ways dishonest" (p. 19).

Due to the success of college for everyone, access to *educational* opportunity has

grown significantly faster than access to good jobs (Labaree, 1997), creating what some

have called an "educational arms race" (Livingstone, 1998). As more and more young

people channel their energy into higher education, the competition for well-paid

professional work has intensified to new levels, creating greater educational prerequisites

for jobs where skill requirements have remained virtually the same (Labaree, 1997). With an increasingly polarized labor force and declining real wages across all sectors of the economy, the competition for a dwindling number of "good" (i.e. secure, full-time, livable wage) jobs has intensified. Labaree (1997) argues that young people have entered into "credential race," or "a futile scramble for higher level credentials," creating a hyper-competition for living wage employment. While college for everyone helps more and more young people enter the race, it offers no consolation prize to the increasing numbers of "losers" in this competition.

Contradictions of College For Everyone at Jackson High School

In drawing attention to the shortcomings of the college for everyone discourse, I do not wish to suggest that students should be tracked into non-college bound courses, or that popular struggles for educational equity and equal access to college-preparatory curriculum have been undertaken in vain. On the contrary, these movements have done much to challenge the ways that schools structure and reproduce racialized class and gender inequalities. Additionally, they have been critical in opening up new avenues of opportunity for whole groups of people who have been systematically denied it. These have all been positive gains, as a result of which many individual lives have been transformed. Daniel and Lolo are excellent examples of students who would have had no chance at a bachelor's degree were it not for the community college, which itself is a product of the college for everyone discourse (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Popular movements for educational equity and access have embodied and promoted the ideal of college for everyone as a question of basic social justice. I do not suggest we go

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backwards or give up on these important reforms, but instead, to examine how the ideal of college for everyone is co-opted to serve elite interests when it is framed as the *dominant* policy solution to poverty and poverty-related social problems.

In their own ways, PARTY members wrestled with the college for everyone discourse as they sought to define and articulate goals and priorities for the PARTY class. During the semester they taught, PARTY members developed a deeper critical consciousness about the limitations of college for everyone as a path to social change. Many episodes in the PARTY project contributed to this growing critical consciousness, including Daniel's speech, Suli's and Louis's experiences in community college, and countless group discussions about the educational goals of social mobility and social change. In addition, PARTY members learned about the college for everyone discourse at an academic conference we attended together. At this conference, the community college transfer rate for low-income minority youth was presented and discussed. The following week, PARTY members chose the topic of community college—and in particular, the low transfer rates—for a class discussion. In class, many students claimed to be surprised at the facts; one student, Dannisha, appeared bewildered as she commented, "They make it seem like it's really easy to transfer." The mood in the classroom during this discussion was decidedly somber and quiet. In my field notes, I noted that there were long periods of silence between comments, very few interruptions, and no side conversations or playing.[44]

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[44] It is possible these observations were not caused by the topic. Many factors contribute to the energy level in the classroom—the mood that day, level of tiredness, weather, etc. However, this was the only class I observed (including Ms. Barry's regular classes and every PARTY class) in which the classroom energy was this low.

After that day, PARTY members expressed no continued desire to re-introduce the issue of community college in their lesson plans. I believe their lack of enthusiasm for this topic stemmed in part from the apparent contradiction between the PARTY group's attempt to "tell the truth" about community college, and their simultaneous attempt to promote school success and college preparation. On the one hand, they encouraged students to improve their skills so they could attend and succeed in college; on the other hand, they were upfront about the odds of success, to a degree that seemed to undermine their message and make college appear futile. This contradiction helps explain why PARTY members were ambivalent about discussing these facts with students, and why they grew increasingly skeptical of higher education as pathway to social mobility and social change.

The contradictions that PARTY members wrestled with are in fact at the heart of the college for everyone discourse. PARTY aimed to address the social inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students. But as PARTY members reflected on their own experience as high school graduates and working adults, they increasingly articulated the centrality of wages—*poverty* wages—in shaping their own lives and those of Jackson students. D spoke powerfully to this point:

> D: [The students] see, man, there's nothing in it from this nine-to-five. Nothing. You gotta wait two weeks for a check, no matter what you want to do until then. Work, nine to five, for eight hours, you feel, come home tired, and then, you feel, get your check in them two weeks, you feel like four hundred dollars, five hundred dollars, six hundred dollars, seven hundred dollars. [...] We see our friends struggling on a nine to five, barely makin' it. [...]Everything is going up, you feel me? The cost of living is going up, because society is starting to cost more. And you gotta survive, you feel me? You gotta survive. And, people know you can't, you can't survive off five dollars an hour no more. You ain't gonna be able to get no decent meal that can fill you up. So, you got to start surviving off children too, and how are you supposed to get it when their parents is goin' day to day, or week to week, paycheck to paycheck. Ain't got enough money, you feel, to get the necessities that they need.

As a response to social inequality and poverty, college for everyone comes up against a very difficult paradox: While each and every young person should be encouraged and prepared to pursue higher education, this pathway out of poverty cannot succeed for young people *as a group*. Educators at high-poverty schools like Jackson High School *do* have an obligation to prepare students for college; to neglect this responsibility would further contribute to the reproduction of race and class inequalities. As Tejeda, Espinosa, and Gutierrez (2003) argue: "While we see the need to problematize and expose the official curriculum's complicity with neocolonial domination and exploitation, we know that failing to prepare students in the mastery of this curriculum only sets them up for academic failure and its related social consequences" (p. 34). Yet while college education can help individual students escape poverty—as it did for Daniel and Lolo—universal college preparation does not reduce overall rates of poverty. In short, college for everyone offers an *individualistic* response to a problem that is fundamentally *structural*.

As PARTY members grew more knowledgeable about the college for everyone discourse and the political-economic realities of their lives, it became increasingly difficult for them to articulate how college preparation in the PARTY class connected to their larger goal of collective political empowerment and social change. If anything, the college for everyone refrain began to sound like one more example of mainstream dominant discourse that ultimately would position students as the cause of their own failure. The group's shift in focus away from college preparation might be understood as a response to an emerging consciousness of these larger social and political-economic realities, and the limits of college preparation in addressing them.

Conclusion

The goals of the PARTY project were to *understand* and *address* the social inequalities shaping the lives and education of Jackson High School students. Throughout the project, PARTY members struggled to understand the source of those inequalities, and how to address them most effectively. While teaching a class at Jackson High School, they confronted the school-based imperative to prepare students for future levels of schooling—in other words, for college. The expectation of college preparation in the PARTY class prompted the group to question the role of college for everyone in transformative social change. This chapter has argued that college for everyone intensifies competition for a dwindling number of "good" jobs in the postindustrial economy, without threatening the structure of that economy or providing economic justice. As such, college for everyone is an inappropriate aim given the overarching goals of PARTY: to address the social inequalities shaping the lives and education of Jackson High School students.

The college for everyone discourse reflects and promotes the ideology of meritocracy—not the view that meritocracy exists, but a belief in the ideal meritocracy as a pathway toward, or a substitute for, more sweeping economic justice. When the ideal meritocracy becomes a proxy for other social and economic reforms, it suggests that vast inequalities of wealth are justifiable as long as the distribution is achieved through meritocratic processes (Goldthorpe, 1996). This belief in meritocracy is so widely accepted and unquestioned in U.S. society that it may be considered hegemonic (Tannock, 2005). But if our goal is to improve the lives and education of Jackson High School students, or high-poverty students generally, then this view needs to be challenged

on two counts: first, because it assumes an objective measure of "merit" is attainable (Goldthorpe, 1996), and second, because it does nothing to reduce poverty overall or to alleviate poverty-related social problems. As Varenne & McDermott (1999) argue: "One can imagine an American world in which whites and blacks, men and women, succeed and fail in exactly the same ratio. This world would be 'fairer,' but it would remain structurally the *same* cultural world" (p. 209).

Though cloaked in progressive and equalizing language, college for everyone is at best misguided and at worst dishonest; it ultimately serves conservative purposes. The college for everyone discourse channels radical political energy into demands for better, more equal, and more rigorous schools—all worthwhile goals in and of themselves. However, improving the life chances of Jackson High School students, *as a group*, requires alleviating (or eliminating) poverty and poverty-related social problems—aims that are not achieved through better, more equal, or more rigorous schooling. To improve the life chances of high-poverty students, demands for educational access and equity must be coupled with demands for meaningful economic justice, understood as livable wages, employment opportunities, affordable housing and health care. Social policy in these areas would do much more to improve the life chances of Jackson students, and all high-poverty students, than universal college preparation ever could.

Despite the shortcomings of college for everyone, the next chapter argues that college preparatory *skills* still have an important place within school-based critical pedagogy. I argue that academic literacy skills (e.g. reading, writing, critical thinking) contribute to deepening critical consciousness and fostering effective political

engagement. Therefore, these traditional "academic" skills must be considered a non-negotiable component of school-based critical pedagogies.

CHAPTER 5

THE CENTRAL PARADOX OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES:
FROM "VOICING YOUR OPINION" TO POLITICIZED VOICE

> *Kysa*: What did you want students to learn from the class, besides voicing their opinion?
> *D*: That's all, that's all I wanted. You feel me? I don't care about anything else, I just wanted them to voice their opinion… on some of the subjects and issues we was talking about. Other than that I don't care.

As they pursued their goal to *understand* and *address* the social inequalities affecting the lives and education of Jackson High School students, PARTY members developed and taught a class at Jackson High School based on the principles of critical pedagogy. Their class aimed to promote critical consciousness and action for social change among Jackson High School students. Translating this lofty goal into the mundane activities of teaching a weekly 80-minute class was the object of heated discussion and debate at many PARTY meetings. In this dissertation, I have analyzed these debates as an opportunity to gain ethnographic understanding and to illuminate theoretical contradictions of school-based critical pedagogy. Chapter 3 examined the rules debate and the journal debate—two conflicts about whether to "force" students to do things, even if they did not want to do them, such as speaking one at a time or completing written assignments. Chapter 4 continued to explore the issue of "forcing" things on students, in particular, whether to "force" them to prepare for college, or let them "choose it for themselves." In this chapter, I argue that all of these questions about

"forcing" students reflect a core theoretical dilemma of critical pedagogies, which I call the *central paradox of critical pedagogies.*[45]

The central paradox of critical pedagogies, (as discussed in Chapter 2), refers to the contradictory aims of empowering students to be their *own* agents and authors of social change, while simultaneously influencing—perhaps even determining—the *direction* of social change action. This central paradox applies to all critical pedagogies, whether implemented in formal or non-formal educational settings.[46] But in the formal school classroom, the critical educator's role is marked by an additional layer of contradiction. Public schooling is compulsory by nature, and the institutional power imbalance between students and teachers cannot be erased. School-based critical pedagogy promotes student agency, but student agency is always confined by a set of non-negotiable parameters, including the imperative to promote "school success."

In Chapter 4, I discussed the evolution of the PARTY class away from an emphasis on college preparation. In this chapter, I argue that this shift occurred at a significant cost. In abandoning the goal of college preparation, the PARTY class adopted a new focus on "voicing your opinion," what I call the dialogue-as-therapy model. PARTY never gave up the larger goal of transformative social change; however, they gave up the commitment to building skills that could deepen critical consciousness and strengthen political engagement. I refer to these skills as *academic literacy,* which I

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[45] As I discuss in Chapter 2, I borrow this term from Gee, Hull, & Lankshear (1996), who write about "the central paradox of the new capitalism." Their definition of the "central paradox" of the new capitalism mirrors what I am calling the central paradox of critical pedagogies. In both cases, the paradox speaks to the contradictions of "empowering" workers/students while simultaneously directing them toward a pre-determined goal or value set.

[46] As discussed in Chapter 2, critical pedagogies often apply more aptly to non-formal educational settings such as community-based organizations, advocacy groups, unions, adult literacy programs, etc. This dissertation, however, focuses on school-based critical pedagogies: implementing these educational principles in a formal (compulsory) classroom setting.

define as the capacity to read and understand written texts; translate ideas into writing; research new information; critically examine the arguments and claims of others; discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate evidence in others' arguments; and communicate powerfully in speech and writing. This chapter argues that academic literacy is an integral component of critical pedagogy, and must be framed as a non-negotiable expectation in the critical classroom. Academic literacy empowers students to move from "voicing your opinion" to a politicized notion of voice.

Academic Literacy and Critical Pedagogies

I define academic literacy as the capacity to: read and understand written texts; translate ideas into writing; research new information; critically examine the arguments and claims of others; discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate evidence in others' arguments; and communicate powerfully in speech and writing. Strengthening these skills is an essential component of school-based critical pedagogies, not only because it prepares students for college, but more importantly, because academic literacy facilitates and provides a pathway to critical consciousness and action for social change. In words, academic literacy has both instrumental as well as intrinsic value. These skills are not peripheral to the PARTY project's overall goal of critical consciousness and action for social change; they are central to it.

Jackson High School students developed a critical consciousness through their everyday lived experiences, but this consciousness pertained primarily to the issues that directly or visibly affected their lives. That we are most conscious of the issues which touch our lives personally is true for people generally, not just high-poverty students. For

all people, *deepening* critical consciousness requires significant intellectual work.[47] By

deepening critical consciousness, I mean drawing connections between and across many

social issues and structures of oppression, including those that directly or visibly affect

one's life and those that do not. Drawing such connections means learning to recognize

how structures of oppression are *interlocking* (hooks, 1989), such as race, class, gender,

sexuality, and nation.

For example, students in the PARTY class revealed a strong critical

consciousness of racialized class inequalities in the United States. It was easy for them to

articulate how the government perpetuated a racialized class structure through institutions

like the criminal justice system, because they came into contact with these institutions on

a daily basis. However, as predominantly U.S.-born citizens, most Jackson students were

not directly or *visibly* affected by issues such as deportation, xenophobia, or globalized

systems of inequality.[48] Most did not come into contact with the Immigration and

Naturalization Service or border control officers, and did they did not know relatives in

the global South working in sweatshops or suffering from environmental destruction.

Since these issues and institutions were outside of their daily lived experience, gaining a

critical consciousness of them would require the intellectual work of *deepening* critical

consciousness, or recognizing interlocking structures of oppression.

Deepening critical consciousness is a key objective of critical pedagogies. It also

informs and strengthens action for social change. As the processes sustaining social

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[47] For a more through analysis of this point, see Ladson Billings (2000).

[48] Since Jackson High lacked an English Language program, there were no recent immigrant students at the school. Most Jackson students were native-U.S. African Americans. Of the Latino students, most were U.S.-born Chicanos.   There were also very few students from immigrant families; however, exceptions included a few Latino students born in Mexico or El Salvador, and a few Asian Pacific Islander students, such as Louis (a PARTY member) who was born in the Philippines.

inequality grow increasingly complex, responsibility is spread across a growing number of smaller, differentiated parts (Payne, 1984). The root causes of inequality are obscured through the fragmentation of the system; this, in turn, makes mobilizing for social change more difficult, as there is no clear "villain" or culprit to fight against (ibid). In this context, the ability to understand and articulate the connections among interlocking structures of oppression is an important component of both critical consciousness and action for social change. Academic literacy skills enable students to expand beyond their own experience by accessing virtually unlimited and diverse perspectives, ideas, theories, opinions and narratives. They facilitate the process of discerning and articulating connections within complex social systems and structures of oppression. Academic literacy thus promotes both the deepening of critical consciousness and effective political engagement.

It is perhaps for this reason that critical pedagogies have historically been carried out in adult literacy programs. Critical pedagogies have long recognized the important role of literacy in social change. But, as discussed in Chapter 2, the literature often subtly assumes that students will become motivated to strengthen their academic literacy skills simply upon developing a critical consciousness. As Chapter 3 suggests, these outcomes are not automatic, and most likely do not occur in the space of a single school year. When faced with teaching a real high school class, PARTY members encountered students who refused (or were not able) to attempt assignments requiring reading or writing, even when these were non-graded free-write journals, or a one-page newspaper article read aloud in a small group. One or two page articles from the mainstream news media were defined as "too long" to read in class, and those students who did write in

their journals most often stopped at one or two sentences.[49] When faced with Jackson

students' consistent opposition to reading and writing assignments, PARTY members

abandoned any attempt to strengthen academic literacy or promote school success, and

adopted instead the goal of "voicing your opinion," what I refer to as the dialogue-as-

therapy model. The shift to a dialogue-as-therapy model was, in many ways, a path of

least resistance for the PARTY group. I explore this shift, and its implications, in the

next section.

From College Prep to Dialogue as Therapy

The month of April was a turning point for the PARTY class. Before April, all

PARTY members voiced at least some support for the idea that the PARTY class should

promote academic achievement and college preparation. After April, D and Suli began to

express a new perspective, maintaining that students had to choose school success on

their own, and it was not the teacher's job to tell them what to do. Their goals for the

class took on a more therapeutic rather than academic tone. Instead of focusing on school

success, they emphasized the goal of creating a safe classroom space where students

could freely express themselves and voice their opinions. Over time, "voicing your

opinion" was consistently described as the goal, the means, and the measure of success of

the PARTY class. D's and Suli's comments suggest that dialogue and voicing opinions

were therapeutic, because many other teachers did not provide freedom to voice opinions

in the classroom. They articulated a belief in dialogue-for-the-sake-of-dialogue or

dialogue-as-therapy, and this became their overarching goal for the course.

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[49] These responses to reading and writing assignments are consistent in all classes at Jackson, even when a
real teacher is in charge.

At the end of the school year, D told me that "voicing your opinion" was the single most important aim for the PARTY class.

> *Kysa*: Why is it so important for [students] to voice their opinion?
> *D*: Why is it so important?
> *Kysa*: M hm.
> *D*: Because, I feel, you step up to the plate, if you don't agree with something, you don't like something, you don't bite your tongue. That's just how I was raised, you feel me? I always voice my opinion, you feel? You ain't gonna get nowhere by just going around with the flow, you feel me? You gotta know, when to go with the flow and when not to go with the flow. Basically that's what I think.
> *Kysa*: Do you think that most of the students *don't* voice their opinion?
> *D*: I wouldn't say that.
> *Kysa*: I mean now they might, because now they've had our class. But what about before?
> *D*: It's just that a *teacher* has never let them voice their opinion.

D suggested that students voiced their opinions in other social contexts; however, *school* was not a place where they were empowered to have a voice. For D, an important contribution of the PARTY class was providing a space within school where students could voice their opinions and ideas.

Toward the end of the project, all PARTY members described "voicing your opinion" as both the goal *and the means* of the PARTY class. The principal classroom activity was group discussion, including whole-class and small-group discussions. PARTY members explained the rationale behind this emphasis by drawing a contrast between the banking model of ordinary classrooms, and the dialogue model of the PARTY classroom. For example, Suli explained:

> *Suli: We* give them an opportunity to speak their mind. It's not about being right, just say what you want to say. We're giving you a chance to speak your mind. You can say "fuck Bush" if you want to and you can say the school system is a bunch of bullshit. In a lot of classes you're looked down on for voicing your opinion. In our class we want to hear what your opinion is, we don't care if it's against mine, we want to get it out there so we can talk about it. A class you can come in and say "I saw this on the news" and get everyone talking.
>
> *In a separate meeting:*

> *Suli:* Our [teaching] style is kinda like man, we want to get you to talk, and be active, and have an opinion. Rather than just sit there and not say nothing. Even though we're giving you information, we want you to talk about it and discuss it.

In these comments Suli emphasized that dialogue in the PARTY class was not about getting the right answer, but about voicing opinions and concerns freely. In the PARTY class, students' opinions were valued unconditionally, even if they criticized the school system or used profanity – two things that were not usually welcome in the classroom. Finally, Suli emphasized that the goal was to get students talking, to get them into dialogue. Dialogue was seen as valuable for its own sake, not necessarily connected to any other purpose or agenda. D called on the concept of voice to distinguish the PARTY class from other classrooms:

> *D:* We let them voice their opinion. We never cut 'em off, or *I* never cut 'em off, for saying this shit fucked up, you feel me? That's your opinion. You know when a normal teacher is like "don't use that language." […] *We* just let them voice their opinions, the way they feel, and the way it comes out.

D suggested that most teachers cut students off and scolded them for using bad words. He emphasized that in the PARTY classroom, students were free to criticize society and to use profanity; he valued this as a form of free expression that existed in stark contrast to traditional classrooms.

The importance of "voicing your opinion" played an equally important role in assessing the class. Both students and PARTY members talked about "voicing your opinions" in their evaluations of the course. For example, Suli commented:

> *Suli*: I think we were [successful] as far as like, giving them the type of knowledge that we wanted them to have, I think they were already aware of a lot of the stuff we taught. It's just, getting them to open and, at least voice their opinion. Cuz you know they have an opinion, but, it's often not shared. So, I feel like, in that sense we were very successful in getting a lot of opinions out there and at least getting some ideas out there. And if they didn't have an opinion

before they at least have an opinion now. And they're willing to voice it. So I feel that we were successful.

All of the students I interviewed also identified "voicing opinions" as the most notable strength of the PARTY class. For example:

> *Kysa:* What do you like best about the PARTY class?
>
> [Student responses from three separate interviews.]
>
> *Taniza*: When you guys come in everybody will talk and share their opinion and stuff. Because everybody has their own opinions. And you guys ask us our opinion and stuff, and how we feel about it, so the people get that off of their chest and stuff, how they feel about it.
>
> *Kamari*: That we get to talk. We have discussions. We don't have to be quiet and just do work.
>
> *Thaddeus:* I like when we be having them little big discussions. When we start the little arguments. They be serious.
> *Kysa:* Can you think of an example of a discussion you liked?
> *Thaddeus*: […] The one I was liking the best though was the one when I said, when Tommy was like, "You ain't got no money, ain't nobody gonna listen to you." We just, steady talked. See, it kept it going. Everybody was productive in it. But nobody was just sitting there going to sleep. When you get Tommy to say something in the classroom, *everybody* gonna say something. Cuz Tommy don't say nothing in class cuz he barely come to school.

In these three separate interviews with students, all of them identified the opportunity to talk and voice their opinions as the major strength of the PARTY class. Thaddeus believed the PARTY class was particularly successful because even one of the worst students, Tommy, participated in class discussions. This was important because Tommy did not usually come to school, and if he did attend he never participated. Getting Tommy to participate in class discussion was viewed as a major sign of success.[50] In

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[50] See also Chapter 4, where D and Suli explain Tommy's role as the "gangster" or "cool guy." Many of the young men in the class, along with D and Suli, noted Tommy's participation in class discussions as a sign that our class was successful. Tommy's participation legitimized the class and opened the way for other students to participate because of his status as the "cool guy."

sum, students and PARTY members agreed that voicing opinions was one of the most important determinants of the PARTY class's success; dialogue was thus the goal, the method, and the measure of success.

The Impacts of Dialogue as Therapy

Providing a space to "voice your opinion" was an important and positive aspect of the PARTY class, especially because Jackson students tended to experience schooling as a silencing and marginalizing institution. Yet the dialogue-as-therapy pedagogy came at a significant cost: It did not allow PARTY teachers to emphasize academic literacy skills. The "final project" assignment in the PARTY class illustrates how the dialogue-as-therapy model worked in practice, and also reveals its strengths and limitations. The goal of the final project was for students to develop deeper knowledge and understanding about a topic of their choice. Many students had commented that they wanted to "go deeper" into the issues than was possible in one class period, so PARTY members decided to let them study a single issue for longer. The PARTY team created four student groups based on students' votes for the issues they wanted to study.

For five consecutive class periods, each PARTY teacher worked with the same small group of students, which were named: 1) "Economic inequality and the ghetto," with D; 2) "Prisons and police brutality," with Suli; 3) "Corporate power and environmental racism," with Leila; and 4) "Women's health and economic issues," with me. In practice, D and Suli joined their groups together and spent five weeks talking about prisons and police. They argued that they had the "same topic" since, as Suli explained, "police are mostly in the ghetto and the people in prison are mostly from the

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ghetto." The students in both groups were predominantly African American and male, with the exception of three Latina girls and two African American girls. Leila's group was racially diverse with Asian, Latino, African American, and mixed-race students, all of whom (we later discovered) lived in integrated or majority-white middle class neighborhoods. My group was all female with one white and four African American students.

Initially, PARTY members planned for groups of students to do research on their topics, for example, by interviewing people in the community, clipping and sharing news articles, or searching the Internet. They began by developing research questions and discussing ways to research their topics. However, the research component of the final projects was never carried out because students were not interested in this aspect, and PARTY members did not enforce the requirement. Instead, final project groups discussed how their issue affected their lives, occasionally using handouts or articles to supplement or guide their discussions. On the penultimate day of class, each group gave a presentation to share what they had learned. We followed up in the last class with a discussion of the interconnections among all four topics. The five-week trajectory of the final project assignment—initially conceived as a research project and developing into discussion groups—reveals the strengths and the limitations of the dialogue-as-therapy model. These impacts are most poignantly illustrated in the students' final presentations to the class.

Final project presentations

Three students from D's group, who called themselves "the ghetto group," stood in front of the class with a large poster. In the center of the poster was a neatly-drawn pie chart, and across the top were the words: "Economic Inequality and the Ghetto," written neatly in thick, black marker. Around the edges, students had used magic markers to draw houses—those on the left were large and neat with colorful gardens and green trees, while those on the right were drawn to look "messy" in gray, black, and brown. A tall, slim, African American student named Dudley stood in the middle holding the poster directly in front of his face, completely hiding his face from the class. Two African American girls, Cara and Kamari, stood on either side of him, pointing to the poster as they spoke to the class. "Our poster is basically showing how rich and poor areas look different," explained Kamari. Cara said that poor people could not afford to live in rich areas because of high rents and because landlords in rich areas did not accept Section 8, "which is what most people live on." Cara then explained the pie chart. Reading from the chart, she began: "Sixty percent of white people are rich, and only fifteen percent of black people are rich."

When they finished their five-minute presentation, they took questions from the class. Ms. Barry raised her hand first, and asked: "How are you defining 'rich' in this chart?" Cara appeared flustered. "Um…" she began, looking at her group members for help. Ms. Barry continued, "Do you mean they own a house? Have a certain income?" Cara drew a blank expression, as though the question were absurd because the meaning of "rich" is so obvious. She began tentatively, "We-we just meant in general." Kamari helped her out, saying that their group did not have a specific definition of rich. I raised my hand next and asked, "Where did you get those figures?" This time Cara responded

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confidently: "Those aren't exact numbers. It's just, you know, what we can see." Now

Dudley set the poster on the chair so we could see his face for the first time. He made his

first and only comment: "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It's a cycle!" He

stated the last words like a concluding remark, with an air of finality, as though he might

say "*period!*" at the end. Ms. Barry raised her hand to ask another question, but suddenly

the room was filled with sound and movement. Students seemed to have interpreted

Dudley's comment as the official end of the presentation, or perhaps they wished to save

their classmates from the awkwardness of the teachers' critical questions by erupting into

conversation among themselves. Through their body language and conversations, the

students had declared it time to move on to the next presentation. Three more final

presentations followed a similar pattern.

Reflections on the final project presentations

The final project presentations illustrate both the strengths and limitations of the

dialogue-as-therapy model. On the one hand, the "ghetto group's" poster was a powerful

visual representation of wealth and poverty in the United States. The students used

contrasting colors to communicate a political statement about economic inequality: bright

greens, purples and reds for the rich areas; dull browns, grays and black for the poor

areas. The projects illustrate how students took advantage of the opportunity to discuss

issues relevant to their lives, and to express their opinions and experiences in creative

ways. My interviews with students suggest the free-flowing format and ability to "voice

opinions" brought many students to the PARTY class who were otherwise disengaged

from schooling.[51] This accomplishment is important to highlight. Despite the fluctuating

and inconsistent attendance in the PARTY class, Ms. Barry observed that 3rd period

Tuesdays (the PARTY class) consistently had the highest attendance of all her classes.

The school guidance counselor noticed it too, and she congratulated the PARTY group on

their excellent work. The logic was that if students were showing up, and staying in

class, PARTY must be doing something well.

Undoubtedly, students thought the PARTY class was "fun." In this class, they

could talk about the issues they cared about; speak their minds in unedited form; work

with young peer-teachers with whom they could identify; and they did not have to do any

reading or writing assignments. But the limitations of this "fun" class are also illustrated

in the final project presentations. Students in the "ghetto group" presented a fictional pie

chart about poverty and wealth, using made-up numbers based on casual observations.

They missed an opportunity to research and use official figures to make a persuasive

argument, raise consciousness, or effect change. Had they been forced to research real

figures and document them in a "correct" pie chart, they might have been able to

problematize official definitions of poverty, see documented rises in poverty, and

understand the dimensions of the growing gap between wealth and poverty. They may

have had an opportunity to connect with more liberatory aspects of schooling and even

schoolwork, and to see how these skills could contribute to effective action for social

change. In short, they would have been "forced," or led, to develop academic literacy

skills.

Yet from the students' perspective, most likely, these seemed like elaborate

requirements that only proved a fact they already knew: "The rich get richer and the poor

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[51] In Chapter 6, I discuss Tommy as an example of one such student.

get poorer." Why go through the arduous process of schoolwork to arrive at such an obvious and taken-for-granted conclusion? The students in the ghetto group appeared to be irritated with the teachers' questions that challenged them to "back up" their statements with "official" evidence and definitions. Just like the PARTY group claimed after our first year of participatory research, (discussed in Chapter 1), using academic skills and scholarly research to "prove the obvious" could feel like an empty exercise. Leila observed that students appeared to feel this way about the PARTY class:

> *Leila*: [Students] know that the government's not looking out for them. I mean it's pretty obvious.
> *Suli*: You don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand that.
> *Leila*: It seems like the facts on the pages kind of prove what [students] already kind of knew about the government and how their lives work.

Suli's comment, *you don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand that,* underscores the taken-for-granted nature of students' existing critical consciousness. This consciousness is rooted in day-to-day life, where students experience first-hand the effects of unjust government policies and social inequalities. In the PARTY class, students had many opportunities to reflect on, amplify, and articulate their views about government, society, and inequality. Their comments indicate the degree to which their daily experiences ran counter to the dominant ideology of equal opportunity, meritocracy, and color-blindness. Students easily discerned a pattern as one which, either by design or unwittingly, perpetuated a racialized class structure.

The existing critical consciousness of students sometimes made the PARTY class feel redundant. PARTY members struggled over how to *build* on this consciousness to create something new. In the context of the PARTY class, the requirements of schooling—to back up information with "official" facts, to document them on a "correct" pie chart, to specify the definition of familiar terms like "rich" and "poor"—seemed

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geared toward pleasing teachers or measuring the deficiency of students, not enlightening them. Yet I believe the final projects could have been even more powerful if these academic literacy skills were presented as a non-negotiable expectation.[52] Creating a teacher-imposed "non-negotiable" is by nature an undemocratic practice, and this seems to run counter to the principles of democracy, student agency, and empowerment that are central to critical pedagogies. This contradiction is at the heart of what I have called the central paradox of critical pedagogies.

The Central Paradox of Critical Pedagogies

The central paradox of critical pedagogies refers to the problem of how to "empower" students to create their own knowledge and their own vision of social change, while at the same time *directing* the knowledge and vision in a particular direction.[53] PARTY members, especially D and Suli, identified with and wanted to be liked by students. They could avoid the discomfort of being disliked by siding unconditionally with students, and supporting student agency in all circumstances. Their position was in fact consistent with many of the principles of self-empowerment and democratic social change we discussed in PARTY meetings. However, their position came into conflict with the imperative to strengthen academic literacy skills. In many heated PARTY meetings, I argued that academic literacy must be presented as a non-negotiable aspect of school-based critical pedagogies. The conflict within the PARTY group concerned the

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[52] As I write this chapter nearly two years after our last class, PARTY members Suli and D disagree with the argument about academic literacy. In reviewing this draft together, Suli pointed out that my conclusions about academic literacy and school success reflect my bias as someone who possesses traditional academic credentials.

[53] This central paradox is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

proper role of the teacher and the appropriateness of setting non-negotiable expectations in an undemocratic fashion.

Much of the literature on critical pedagogies describes schools as overly rigid and authoritarian (Knight & Pearl, 2000). While it is true that many adult-performed school activities are geared toward the establishment of order (Ferguson, 2000), I showed in Chapters 1 and 3 that Jackson High School was similar to most high-poverty urban high schools in that it was best characterized by *dis*order (Payne, 1984). The disorder of the school-wide context spilled over into the classroom, making it difficult to sustain a class activity or discussion for more than five or six minutes. In this context, dialogue-as-therapy pedagogy easily evolved into a cover for granting "free time," effectively extending the lunch period an additional eighty minutes. These eighty minutes of "free time" were loosely structured with discussion topics and a few questions, but lacked the expectation that students would follow discussion ground-rules or produce meaningful work.

Critical pedagogies do not erase the institutional power imbalance between students and teachers. Teachers continue to have the power, and the responsibility, to set expectations and hold students accountable to them. Teachers have an important role to play in establishing and enforcing ground rules for group discussion as well as for the completion of rigorous and challenging assignments. Assignments should push students to strengthen their academic literacy skills and to understand the relevance of these skills in the social world. These aims cannot be accomplished with coercion; they rely on the ability of teachers to make a *persuasive case* that the ground-rules for discussion are worth following, and the curriculum they have to share is worth learning (Knight & Pearl,

2000). Specifically, I believe critical educators must work extremely hard to persuade students that academic literacy has something to offer them.

School-based critical pedagogies must incorporate academic literacy skills as a non-negotiable expectation, while at the same time pushing students to critique the narrow definition of those skills and the ways they are used to exclude and marginalize alternative ways of knowing or communicating (Delpit, 1988; Tejeda, Espinosa, Gutierrez, 2003). This is the "two-tiered" curriculum that Kincheloe (2004) has written about.[54] Achieving these multiple aims in the classroom is a complex art that requires far more on the part of teachers than simply understanding these goals in theory. Confronting the central paradox of critical pedagogies means confronting the essentially paternalistic nature of all education (Ellsworth, 1989); all education unavoidably reflects the view that "I know what's good for you," and the claim that "academic literacy is good for you" is no exception. It is difficult to reconcile this inevitable paternalism with the liberatory goals of critical pedagogies. But the PARTY class suggests it is important to do so, in order to move from "voicing your opinion" to a politicized voice.

From Voicing Your Opinion to Politicized Voice

Jackson students and PARTY members expressed an earnest longing for voice. When they talked about this desire for voice, their tone and body language revealed the injuries of having been silenced.[55] In many ways, the classroom served to symbolize this

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[54] This concept is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

[55] In referring to the "injuries" of being silenced, I am informed by the concept of "hidden injuries" including injuries of class, gender, and race. The concept of injury implies both the material and psychological impacts of oppression. For example, Bettie (2003) describes the hidden injuries of class as "the social-psychological burdens of class status anxiety" (p. 43); Likewise, Sennet and Cobb (1972) define class injury as: "the feeling of vulnerability in contrasting oneself to others at a higher social level, the buried sense of inadequacy."

persistent silencing in their lives. The final presentation by the "ghetto group" illustrates how Ms. Barry's and my questions—though intended to challenge students to think critically—also served to devalue, marginalize, silence, and dismiss their ways of knowing the world. Their inability to "correctly" answer the teachers' questions seemed to confirm their deficiency, and their fate was certified through official evaluations and assessments identifying them as academic failures. This occurred even though I and Ms. Barry agreed with the students' conclusion that "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." From the teachers' perspective, the problem with the ghetto group's poster was not that their experiential knowledge was incorrect, but that they failed to use academic methods to arrive at their conclusions. In the world of schooling, their fictional pie-chart was not legitimate, even if it led to a conclusion we could all agree on. Ms. Barry's and my critical questions had the impact of dismissing these students' experiential knowledge, rendering unimportant their ways of knowing the world, and *silencing* their arguments.

The tension produced by the teachers' questions reflects the competing knowledge claims at work in the interaction, and raised the question: Whose knowledge about the ghetto counts as valid? These competing knowledge claims do not exist in a vacuum; they exist in a social world of vastly unequal power relations that clearly position one way of knowing as dominant. The teachers' critical questions—and the knowledge claims they represent—served to marginalize and devalue the popular knowledge of students in the ghetto group. This fact would not matter nearly so much were it not for the role of schooling in reproducing social, economic, and racial inequalities (for examples, see Bettie, 2003; Bowles & Gintis, 1974; Ferguson, 2000;

Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1995; Oaks, 1985). But these everyday practices of silencing at school in fact have concrete material consequences for students at Jackson High; they are one of the many means through which schooling acts as a vehicle of social reproduction.

Beyond the classroom walls the silencing is even more complete. Most of society dismisses these youth without a second thought. Their voices and perspectives are consistently left out of public debate, policy decisions, and scholarly discourses about them (Checkoway, 2003; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Ginwright & Camarrota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002). Students experience the injuries of silencing on a consistent basis whenever they interact with dominant social institutions. It is not surprising, then, that "voicing your opinion" was such an important possibility for Jackson students and PARTY members. Providing a space for voice in the classroom was a significant accomplishment of the class that PARTY members deserve to feel proud of. But the concept of voice must go beyond the freedom to use profanity in the classroom, or to voice one's opinion in a group setting. The next step must be to empower students to move from "voicing your opinion" to a politicized voice.

By a *politicized voice,* I mean the capacity to speak in politically meaningful ways and to be heard. Politicized voice suggests the power or the capacity to *effect change* in community, society, or political-economic structures and relations of power. Coming to a politicized voice is a process of empowerment, but not of simply "feeling empowered." As Brown (1995) has pointed out, the "discourse of empowerment" that is so popular in education describes empowerment as something that exists in the realm of individual feelings. She argues there is "a wide chasm between the (experience of) empowerment and an actual capacity to shape the terms of political, social, or economic life" (p. 23). In

other words, people can "feel empowered" without *being* so; *being* empowered refers to the capacity to effect change in social structures and relations of power. I believe the dialogue-as-therapy model allowed students to *feel* empowered in the classroom. In contrast, politicized voice *confers* power; it refers to speaking and communicating in ways that effect social change.

The concept of a politicized voice is essential in the literature on critical pedagogies. Giroux (1992) distinguishes between levels of voice; he argues for "a politics of voice" that goes beyond the sharing of stories to include theorizing and action for social change:

> To focus on voice is not meant to simply affirm the stories that students tell, nor to simply glorify the possibility for narration. Such a position often degenerates into a form of narcissism, a cathartic experience that is reduced to naming anger without the benefit of theorizing in order to both understand its underlying causes and what it means to work collectively to transform the structures of domination responsible for oppressive social relations. (ibid, p. 80)

I would argue that the PARTY class, by and large, exemplified what Giroux describes as "naming anger without the benefit of theorizing." Students in the PARTY class were free to voice their opinions, to use profanity, and to interrupt others without raising their hands. But this form of "voicing your opinion" often fostered crisscrossing monologues without emphasizing critical analysis or *listening*.

Giroux suggests an important difference between the voice-as-therapy model and politically meaningful voice. He argues for a politics of voice that goes beyond the "telling of tales of victimization," and instead, makes those tales "the object of theoretical and critical analyses so that they can be connected rather than severed from a broader notions of solidarity, struggle, and politics" (ibid, p. 80). By implementing a dialogue-as-

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therapy model, the PARTY class reduced the concept of voice to the "telling of tales of victimization," or just talking freely about anything. Experiences were shared but they were not routinely made the object of theoretical analysis. Without an emphasis on academic literacy, students missed an opportunity to learn from diverse narratives within *texts,* and to integrate these diverse narratives into their own theorizing. As a result, I believe the PARTY class helped students to "feel empowered" by voicing their opinions, without actually empowering them through politicized voice. .

Jackson students and PARTY members deeply longed for a politicized voice. They longed to not only to voice their opinions but also to be heard and to have their voices make a difference. When Leila and D envisioned their future as social change agents, they both emphasized the act of speaking and being heard as a practice of social change.

> *Leila*: I really feel like I would like to be like a really humongous speaker. You know? Like, that would be my political activism. […] I would be like, debating with like these big politicians. […] That would be totally cool to like, give speeches and stuff like that.

For D, a politicized voice involved speaking out through hip-hop music. When he talked about his dream to speak out through hip-hop, he spoke with deep emotion and passion:

> *D*: I want to get up there and *say* something. I just don't want to be in the group, you feel, saying lines. I want to *speak.* You know? That's my whole thing, I want to *speak!* But I want to speak on a *national* level. You feel, I just don't want to speak to, even though two hundred thousand people is a lot of people, I want to speak to the whole country. That's my whole thing, man. I want to speak to *e-e-e-e-e-ver-ybody.* You know? And even though two hundred thousand people's a start, or even, even a thousand people's a start but, it's not a big enough start for me though, you feel? If I'm actually gonna step foot into that, you feel, I want to go *big*. That's why when I actually do really start pursuing this [hip-hop] music, you feel, I am going to make songs, you feel, and put it out there and I'll say "Fuck the world!" Fuck! You feel? And I ain't got nothing to lose. I ain't got *nothing* to lose!

Conclusion

Providing a space for students to voice opinions in the classroom was a significant accomplishment of the PARTY class, and students responded by coming to class in near record numbers. However, the PARTY class's shift to a dialogue-as-therapy model occurred at a significant cost. Students did not strengthen academic literacy skills that facilitate the deepening of critical consciousness and effective action for social change; consequently, they did not move from voicing opinions to a politicized voice. The central paradox of critical pedagogy refers to the contradictory aims of empowering students as agents while simultaneously directing them toward a particular set of skills that "*we* know *they* need." This inherently paternalistic aspect of education runs counter to the principles of agency and self-empowerment that inform critical pedagogies. However, given what we know about the importance of academic literacy for critical consciousness and social change, school-based critical pedagogies must face this contradiction and present academic literacy as a non-negotiable classroom expectation. A greater focus on academic literacy in the PARTY class would have contributed to the goals of the project: to understand and address the social inequalities shaping the lives and education of Jackson High School students.

This dissertation has challenged the view of education as a panacea; however, the PARTY project was also influenced by a belief in education as a powerful force for social change. In the next chapter I dive deeper into this contradiction, examining the seemingly contradictory view of education as not-a-panacea, but indeed a powerful force for social change. I highlight the *possibilities* of critical pedagogy in a high-poverty urban high school, as evidenced in the PARTY classroom, and examine the impacts of

the PARTY project on Jackson High School students and PARTY members. While

emphasizing the importance of academic literacy skills, I caution against relying solely

on traditional measures of academic achievement as evidence of the "success" of critical

pedagogy. Drawing on the lessons learned from this and previous chapters, I strive to

offer a more accurate understanding of the limits, contradictions, and possibilities of

public schooling within a larger movement for progressive social change.

CHAPTER 6

**PUBLIC SCHOOLING AND SOCIAL CHANGE:
LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY
IN A HIGH POVERTY URBAN HIGH SCHOOL**

Almost every theory of change contains some consideration of "education."

While the role of education in social change is not self-evident—it is constantly

challenged and contested—theories of social change almost universally specify *some*

important role for education. This dissertation has focused on the real, imagined, and

potential roles of public schooling in progressive social change. I have explored these

multiples roles by investigating how PARTY members attempted to address the social

inequalities affecting their lives. Toward this end, the youth developed and taught a class

at Jackson High School which aimed to promote critical consciousness and action for

social change. The class, and the PARTY project, were informed by critical pedagogy—

a theory and practice of education for social change. Although this dissertation has

focused on the limitations of compulsory schooling as a context of education for social

change, I argue that schools remain an important site for critical pedagogies.

In this chapter, I illustrate the presence of transformative moments in the PARTY

class: moments in which students deepened critical consciousness through dialogue and

collectively imagined possibilities for social change. In these transformative moments,

even students who were otherwise disengaged from schooling participated actively.

These accomplishments offer insights into the *possibilities* of school-based critical

pedagogies in a high-poverty urban high school. Second, I explore the possible impacts

of the PARTY project on Jackson High School students and PARTY members. While I

recognize the importance of college preparation and academic literacy, I caution against

relying on these traditional measures of academic achievement as evidence of "successful" critical pedagogies. The impact of critical pedagogies should be sought not only in academic achievements but also in the less tangible ways that students engage with social and community concerns.

One of these impacts can be seen in the ways that PARTY members refined their theories of change as they reflected on the practice of teaching, and how they embraced the role of *educator* even as they distanced themselves from the role of teacher. PARTY members explicitly connected their work at Jackson High School to a larger vision of social change. They also articulated a role for themselves as educators and emphasized the importance of popular, community-based education in social change. The findings of this dissertation suggest the importance of school-based *and* community-based critical pedagogies as parallel efforts to promote critical consciousness and action for social change. I conclude that school-based critical pedagogies remain important, but can be more effective if linked more closely to community-based efforts such as youth activist organizations. Such connections would strengthen both school-based and community-based critical pedagogies, and provide students with a clearer way to translate critical consciousness into action.

Possibilities of Critical Pedagogy

Previous chapters of this dissertation have focused largely on the challenges and limits of the PARTY class. But the story of PARTY would be incomplete without recognizing the moments of possibility created in the course. In these transformative moments, students deepened their critical consciousness and collectively imagined an

alternative social world. By creating transformative moments in the classroom, the

PARTY class successfully engaged students, like Tommy, who were otherwise

disengaged from schooling.

Transformative moments

In one PARTY class, I worked with a group of six students: Tommy, Thaddeus,

Jade, Carmen, Maria, and Eugenia. Our job was to pick a fact or a point from the comic

book we read last week—one that we found striking, surprising, or interesting. Maria

spoke first: "Let's do the one about how companies own the news." She pointed to an

illustration depicting corporate consolidation of television networks.[56] The comic

explained that GE purchased NBC in 1986. Maria read the caption aloud from the

photocopied page:

> *Maria:* "The television news media are owned by some of the largest
> corporations in the country. NBC, as we have seen, is owned by GE, CBS
> is owned by Viacom, ABC is owned by Disney, and CNN is owned by
> AOL Time Warner. The members of the boards of directors of these
> powerful corporations also sit in the boards of weapons manufacturers."
> (Andreas, 2002, p. 54)

Our group assignment was to make three lists about our fact: its causes, its effects, and

things we could do to change it. As the teacher, I was supposed to ask probing questions

to push the group to think about *root causes* rather than immediate ones. I also reminded

the group that it was a brainstorm, so all ideas were valid no matter how far-fetched they

seemed. I told the students to "use your imagination" and not to worry about whether

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[56] The comic book, (Andreas, 2002) was chosen by D as a lesson plan idea. A few months earlier, I
discovered the comic book and shared it with PARTY members. D brought the book home and read it
cover to cover. In our next meeting he shared what he learned, and suggested we develop a lesson plan
using the book.

their ideas seemed "realistic." Carmen volunteered to be note-taker as the whole group brainstormed together. I placed a large piece of white butcher paper across Thaddeus's and Maria's desks. We would use it later to make a poster to present to the class.

As we began discussing the causes of our fact, it immediately became clear we needed to clarify a few concepts. I posed questions such as, "What does this mean? What's the board of directors?" Students called out answers—"the people that own stocks"—and they corrected each other—"No! Those are investors." Throughout the conversation, I shared what I knew and corrected students' guesses when I knew them to be inaccurate. Although I did not know much about corporate boards or how they worked, I was able to fill in enough gaps to ensure we all shared a basic understanding of the statement we selected. Together we clarified what a board of directors is, and distinguished between a publicly-traded corporation and an individually-owned business. In the midst of our discussion, we passed over the list of causes and immediately began talking about the *effects* of concentrated corporate ownership of the television news networks. Students quickly identified that corporate ownership was likely to create biased news coverage, privileging the perspectives of companies, investors and advertisers over those of the public. They called out answers like: "We don't get the most important facts," and, "They [news media] don't give back to the community," while Carmen, our note-taker, wrote them down.

When we moved to a discussion of change strategies, our conversation grew louder and faster. I posed the question: "What could we do to *change* this fact, if we wanted to?" A pattern quickly developed in which Carmen hesitated to write down ideas she thought were too far-fetched. For example, Maria suggested, "Stop watching TV!"

Carmen refused to write it down, responding: "How could you do that?" I countered her: "It's a brainstorm, everything goes! Write it down!" Maria then said: "Stop buying from Disney." Again Carmen replied: "That's impossible! How could you do that?" Again I told her to write it down anyway. Each time, I pointed to the white board where Leila had written one instruction: *"It doesn't have to be realistic – use your imagination!"*

Tommy had been silent during the entire conversation, but he appeared to listen closely as Carmen and Maria debated the feasibility of various change strategies. Suddenly he interrupted them with a firm, but calm, statement: "Don't just stop buying Disney products though. You gotta get a *lot* of people to stop buying them." He looked straight ahead as he spoke, maintaining a serious and flat facial expression. He said we have to educate people, and "spread the word far and wide," in order to make a difference. Tommy continued talking without a pause, while Carmen sat straight up and exclaimed: "Get everyone in a town to stop watching TV for a week! Then see what would happen!" I responded, "You mean a boycott?" Jade said something about the Montgomery bus boycott, but Tommy's voice overpowered her as he continued his speech, which grew more and more impassioned as if he were addressing a packed auditorium. He talked about making fliers and walking through the neighborhood to educate friends, families, and neighbors. He talked about "spreading the knowledge" and getting other people excited to do something about injustice. He continued speaking until Suli announced it was time to make presentations to the class.

Normally, PARTY members had to struggle to persuade a student to be the presenter, but this day Carmen immediately called out, "I'll present!" She smiled as she looked around the group and concluded, "I like the boycott idea!" Carmen, Maria and

Eugenia neatly copied Carmen's notes onto a large piece of white butcher paper. Carmen

and Thaddeus hung the poster on the back wall of the room, where it stayed for the rest of

the year. The poster read:

> *True Important Facts:*
>
> - *CBS owned by Viacom*
> - *ABC owned by Disney*
> - *CNN owned by AOL-Time Warner*
> - *NBC owned by General Electric*
>   *All these corporations sit on the board of weapons manufacturers.*
>
>   *Effects: TV stations make $ off of viewers like us and they produce*
>   *dangerous weapons.*
> - *We don't get the most important facts*
> - *TV stations don't give back 2 the community*
>
> *Things you can do:*
> - *Stop watching TV*
> - *Stop buying Disney*
> - *Educate the community about all the shit they show on television*
> - *Boycott*
> - *Start your own TV station*
> - *Make flyer and spread the word*
>
> *By: Carmen V.*
> *Jade*
> *Tommy*
> *Maria*
> *Eugenia*
> *Thaddeus*

Throughout the group activity described above, there were no distractions, side

conversations, or insulting comments. None of the six group members walked out of the

room, threw wads of paper, or teased each other. When Tommy introduced the idea of a

boycott, he shifted the conversation from one about individual changes (stop watching

TV) to one about organizing for *collective* change (get everyone to stop watching TV).

He grew increasingly passionate as he described his vision for organizing a boycott, and

moved other students to get excited too. The students participated with a sense of

commitment. They grew visibly excited as they imagined the possibility of organizing a boycott of Disney or the TV networks. Students raised their voices and cut each other off, but they did so with a spirit of engaged enthusiasm.

Moments like this one were scattered throughout the PARTY class. They occurred in pockets, usually in one of the small groups, and never in all four groups on the same day. They were tenuous and temporary, usually lasting twenty or thirty minutes within an eighty minute class period. They were also inconsistent, and no formula seemed to explain them or reproduce them. One week Tommy would speak passionately about organizing a boycott and the next he would crack jokes about "smoking blunts on the picket line." But every PARTY teacher recalled a few moments like this one, when a whole group of students engaged in critical dialogue about a social issue. In these moments, students imagined an alternative future and tried on new theories of change. They began to see powerful social structures as constructed and harmful. They saw, even if perhaps temporarily, the theoretical possibility of transforming society around a different set of values and interests. In this case, students envisioned a world where television networks served the community rather than the corporate owners and advertisers. They imagined the power of the people to bring about this change, starting with consciousness-raising in the context of their communities—by educating their families, friends, and neighbors.

Tommy

According to the school guidance counselor, Tommy was considered a truant student. He managed to stay on the roll books because he attended Ms. Barry's U.S.

government class on a regular basis. Like many Jackson students, Tommy often traveled all the way to school to attend only one class period, and then left again.[57] From the other teachers I learned that when Tommy did attend class, they perceived him as disruptive, threatening, and disengaged. One visiting student-teacher requested to have Tommy removed from her class; she told the principal she could not teach with him in the room because he was "intimidating" and "threatening" to her. Even veteran Jackson teachers dreaded the days Tommy came to their classes, because he was so successful at derailing lesson plans when he chose to do so. Therefore, eliciting Tommy's positive participation in the PARTY class was viewed by the group members and Ms. Barry as one of PARTY's unique accomplishments. Tommy had nearly perfect attendance at 3rd period on Tuesdays, when he knew the PARTY group would be there. Even though he occasionally "messed around" with other boys, he never took it far enough to derail the lesson plan. More often, he contributed in ways that pushed the class to a broader level of theorizing, such as when he introduced the idea for a boycott in the small group activity.

In fact, students and PARTY members believed that Tommy's positive participation in the PARTY class opened the door for other students to participate and take the class more seriously. D and Suli credited Tommy's engagement with giving the class a kind of legitimacy. They believed Tommy's reputation as a "cool guy" or a "gangster" gave him the power to influence other students in the class; when he participated, it became acceptable for others to participate too.

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[57] When I taught at Jackson it was a common practice for students to regularly skip classes they didn't like, and attend only those they liked. This often meant attending only one or two classes regularly, while regularly cutting all the others. Fine (1991) documents a similar practice at a New York City high school.

> *Suli*: It's like *Dangerous Minds* [the movie]. I'm telling you, it's like they gotta get the approval of the cool guy. They gotta get the approval of the gangster to speak up in class. If he doesn't learn, nobody learns. There's a couple of 'em [gangsters]. But really, it was Tommy though, cuz he was *on* one.

Suli's comment suggests that other students deferred to Tommy to decide whether or not to participate. The PARTY group's ability to elicit Tommy's participation meant that other students would participate as well. Suli then imitated Tommy's comments in class, and D joined him in hysterical laughter as they re-lived highlights from the class:

> *Suli:* [imitating Tommy's comments in class] "Whatever happens happen, man. Man, I ain't thinkin' about this stuff. But in a couple years I might be thinkin' about it." [no longer imitating Tommy] Man you too *hard* blood!
> *D*: That *is* hard!
> *Suli*: Man, he be like [imitating Tommy] "Man I be out there on the picket line, just give me like thirty blunts!" [D and S laugh] Man he was *on* one!
> *D*: [still laughing] Yeah he was on one!
> *Suli*: [barely audible through laughter] Yeah he *was*! But see—
> *D*: He had me *rolling*! [imitating Tommy] "We goin' to a protest? What's up?" [laughing]
> *Suli*: But see, but see, he was one'a the only people that had an opinion.

In the class they were referring to, Tommy's comments could have been interpreted as disruptive. He was in fact ridiculing the idea of political protest by saying he would only go in exchange for thirty (marijuana) blunts. Yet D and Suli saw Tommy's participation in an entirely different light. They gave Tommy credit for the overall success of the class by comparing it to the movie *Dangerous Minds,* in which the "cool guy" gives legitimacy to the teacher by participating. They did not consider Tommy's comments to be disruptive but instead to foster participation among other students.[58]

I met Tommy after school on a sunny afternoon in May, and we walked to a nearby diner to conduct a formal interview. As we took our seats in a booth, Tommy

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[58] Another student, Thaddeus, made the same argument about Tommy's class participation, as discussed in Chapter 5.

folded his hands neatly on the table in front of him. He wore a black wool jacket and

blue jeans, his hair in short dread locks about one or two inches long. He was tall and

above average in size, but Tommy had a gentle and vulnerable presence. His eyes

revealed a hint of sadness, and his facial expression was contemplative and serious. We

ordered our meals, and Tommy requested a salad instead of french fries on the side.

When the server walked away, Tommy explained with a slight look of embarrassment:

"I'm going to the waterslides next month, and I do want to drop a couple pounds. [*pause*]

And I thought about it and that salad did sound good."

We conducted an audio-taped interview while we ate our lunches. We talked

about Tommy's teachers and his classes at Jackson, and he said Ms. Barry's government

class was his favorite because it was the only class where he learned anything. "I learned

a lot with you and Suli," he added, "That's probably where I learned the most about our

government." Tommy continued:

> *Tommy*: I learned that it's all basically a set up, and we're all set up to fail,
> basically. And, whether people realize it or not, the government isn't for your
> best interests but for the best interests of Americans with money. It's not in the
> best interests of making America a better place. It's in the best interest of getting
> the most money as possible for the world.

Tommy claimed this knowledge about the government was important because it allowed

students to see how larger social structures influenced their lives. With this knowledge,

he thought students would be able to make different choices—choices that would

challenge those structures rather than reproduce them.

> *Kysa:* Do you think it's important for students to have that knowledge about the
> government?
>
> *Tommy*: Yeah, because otherwise you're walking around blind. Or you might,
> you might just be believing the government is doing right, and you're just gonna

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follow their plan basically. Like you know, like people selling dope. The government *brings* dope in here. That's what they *want* you to do so they can lock you up.

Kysa: So do you think a lot of people out there are walking around blind?

Tommy: Yeah. They think, "Oh I'm selling dope, I'm making money for myself, I'm beating the system." But you're not beating the system, the system is beating *you*. You're doing exactly what they want you to do. Go out there and sell dope so we can lock you up and build a whole bunch of jails, and contain all you minorities, so we can have uh, uh, American, you know like a new breed or something like that, [*laughing*] I don't know what they trying to do… *something*.

Tommy's response suggests a system that works with an internal logic. Students who try to "beat the system" often become pawns in a larger structure that they don't understand—they are *walking around blind*—performing roles, perpetuating their own oppression.

Tommy's analysis conjures the image of the "lads" in Willis's (1974) in *Learning to Labour*. Like the lads, Tommy could see through the myths of dominant society. He saw that he was positioned in ways that made school failure, incarceration, and social immobility a near certainty. He also described how students were set up to play certain roles, which ultimately served to strengthen and legitimize the system. He suggested that critical consciousness could empower students to make different choices in order to challenge rather than reproduce this system. Tommy's critical consciousness and active engagement in the PARTY class suggest the power of critical pedagogies to reach students who are otherwise disengaged from schooling. In the PARTY class, Tommy articulated an insightful social critique, encouraged other students to participate, and contributed to the deepening of critical consciousness.

In the fall after the PARTY class ended, I returned to Jackson High School as a substitute teacher for a week in Ms. Barry's class. When I arrived to school on Monday

morning, I was delighted to see Tommy's name on the class list. That day, Tommy was

absent from class. He was absent again on Tuesday, as well as Wednesday. In fact,

Tommy was absent that entire week. When I asked other students in the class if they

knew his whereabouts, they said they didn't know who Tommy was. Then, one girl who

knew him told me that Tommy never came to school anymore. Hearing this brought

disappointment and confusion. Again, like Willis's (1974) lads, Tommy's critical

consciousness did not translate into academic achievement or the attempt to achieve

school success as a means of fighting back. As educators, it is tempting to interpret this

story as evidence of one more limitation of critical pedagogies. Indeed, I would have

considered the PARTY project to be "successful" if Tommy's active engagement had

translated into academic achievement in all of his other classes. It would be even more

successful still if Tommy had continued on to college, using his academic literacy skills

and politicized voice to organize boycotts and other political actions for social change.

The happy ending picture of Tommy organizing boycotts with a bachelor's degree

in hand conforms to predominant expectations of school success and social mobility as

the ultimate purpose of education. This happy ending narrative relies on familiar

measures of academic achievement as a primary measure of critical pedagogies' impact.

I have argued that college preparation and academic literacy contribute to political

empowerment and therefore constitute one measure of the impact of critical pedagogies.

But the impacts of critical pedagogies are inevitably broader than these measures. In

addition to academic literacy and school success, the impacts of critical pedagogies must

be sought in the everyday practices and unspoken ways that students relate to the social

and political world. In the next section, I explore the possible impacts of PARTY for the

Jackson students and PARTY members.

The Impacts of PARTY

The impact of the PARTY class for Jackson High School students is difficult to

guess. D thought the PARTY class made a difference in students' lives, and that all of

them would remember it. He said the PARTY class imparted important knowledge to

students that they could now pass on to others.

> *D*: We made a difference. […] We opened their eyes a little bit farther. And gave
> them a couple numbers, a couple facts, you feel me. That's what I think we did.
> And now they can pass it on to whoever they want to. I say they're gonna
> remember us because, you know, we were different, you feel me? We came up in
> there, and we just kept it real. And if they ever, even if one of them wants to
> become a teacher later on in their life, you feel me, they'll probably use some of
> the things that we did.

Beyond the prevailing measures of success like school attendance, grades, test scores,

and college attendance, it is difficult to uncover what the impacts of critical pedagogies

might be in students' lives. One measure of impact is participation in recognized

"political" activities such as voting, writing to representatives, participating in protests, or

joining activist organizations. Other impacts of critical pedagogies are more diffuse and

may not be immediate. For example, one student, Kamari, said she had a conversation

with her father about the war in Iraq as a direct result of discussions in the PARTY class.

Another student, Taniza, said she thinks following the news is more important and more

interesting as a result of the PARTY class. These comments suggest critical pedagogies

might impact students' everyday practices, even if these effects are not recognizable in

discrete acts such as voting or showing up at a protest.

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I believe the most profound impact of PARTY was felt by the core members themselves. For PARTY members, our meetings were a space of critical pedagogies where we shared in dialogue and reflection about social and political issues. In these meetings we learned new facts and information, shared personal experiences, and built relationships across age, gender, race and class. In choosing to teach a class at Jackson High, PARTY members engaged in a concrete action for social change, working through many group conflicts and challenges to fulfill their commitment to complete the course. Together, we reflected on our practice to refine our theories and inform future action. In short, the PARTY group engaged in collective *praxis* for social change. PARTY members have described this process as meaningful and valuable in their lives. Suli described being an educator as exciting and rewarding. He talked about the difference he made in students' lives, especially for the young men, because he could relate to them.

> *Suli*: To go from being a student to being a teacher, I think, seeing people in the same, that have the same mind-frame as you, like when I was in high school. Like Tommy, the way he's kinda got a little attitude going, but he actually understands everything and he's on top of it. But he kinda tries to stay out of the discussion because I guess he's got the image like "I'm too cool for that." So it's kind of fun seeing young people who feel the same way that you felt when you were in high school, and being able to help them, you know, because you kind of relate with them. I think that's the most exciting thing…

The PARTY project was an opportunity for Suli to exercise his political leadership and speaking abilities, and he proved to be a true charismatic leader when teaching the PARTY class. Suli's ability to manipulate classroom dynamics was a true strength when he was teaching, and he never failed to capture the students' attention. I was frequently struck by Suli's ability to engage articulately in substantive political discussions, as well as his genuine self-confidence and leadership. Teaching the PARTY class gave Suli an opportunity to develop and exhibit these skills.

Leila talked about gaining self-confidence in the PARTY project, growing more articulate, and learning how to speak more effectively—perhaps coming to a politicized voice. She emphasized the importance of *being in action* toward making a difference, rather than the immediate outcomes of those actions.

> *Leila*: I gained a lot of strength being in this group 'cuz there's a lot of challenges and like a lot of things that I didn't really want to do but I did. […] I've always never thought I was gonna teach 'cuz I'm just not confident. But I realize that I can really be confident. But I just don't let myself open up to that sometimes. So that's kind of like a barrier that I crossed. And um, yeah just in general I've just, I've gained a lot more power in myself. And I can articulate a lot better. My speech has gotten a lot better, and what I'm talking about, I have more of an idea of what's, you know, these random terms and vocabulary…
>
> … Even though it might be a little stressful at times, I know it's worth it because I'm spending my extra time, like, *trying.* You know? Trying to do *something.* Create change. I think it's really important.

> For Leila, teaching the PARTY class took a tremendous amount of courage and endurance, and the students sometimes ridiculed her or talked over her when she spoke. Still, she took the PARTY project extremely seriously, in part because she was so motivated to be involved in an activist-oriented activity. Leila was strongly committed to the issues at the heart of the PARTY project and the class. In weekly meetings, she often bubbled over with enthusiasm as she shared new facts and ideas, or tried out new theories in the group. She seemed to get genuine pleasure from engaging the topics of our meetings, learning about new issues, practicing new arguments, and discussing local, national and international news.

Contrary to popular perceptions of urban youth as "apathetic" and "disengaged," (Checkoway, 2003; Finn & Checkoway, 1998), PARTY members were deeply concerned and relatively well informed about social and political issues. All PARTY members

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expressed a strong belief in the power of knowledge, and a faith in the people to make their own decisions on the basis of this knowledge. They described a future in which they would make a significant impact on society by "spreading knowledge" to others, and expressed optimism about the immanence of social change and the need to struggle for a more just and equitable society.

As PARTY members reflected on the practice of teaching, they refined and developed their theories of education for social change. Increasingly, they emphasized non-formal and community-based education in their theories of change, rather than schooling. For example, D consistently identified himself as not-a-teacher through comments such as: "My goal was never to be the *teacher*. It was to just be a regular person just spreading knowledge," and "I ain't tryin to be no teach-*er* [emphasis on *er* syllable]. But I can teach, you know? I ain't trying to be the teach-*er*, but I'll teach though." In both of these comments, D distanced himself from the teacher role but embraced the role of educator: "a regular person just spreading knowledge." In rejecting the role of teacher while embracing the role of educator, D drew an implicit distinction between schooling and education. *Schooling,* as we saw in Chapter 3, was symbolized by formal rules and regulations, petty rule-enforcement, rigid lesson plans, required state standards, evaluations and assessments, compulsory attendance, and empty schoolwork. And yet *education* was symbolized by spreading knowledge, raising consciousness, and voicing your opinion. For D, these two very different concepts did not easily co-exist.

At the end of the semester, D looked back on the PARTY class and explained his goals:

> *D*: My only goal was to get the issues in their head. Whatever they do with them is totally on them. But, you feel, just to get them issues in their head, you feel me. 'Cuz I got the issues in my head, and I chose to do whatever I did with them.

And I'll teach them, you feel. And that's the only way the cycle will keep going.
That's the only reason is why, you feel, we actually know, you feel, Martin
Luther King and Malcolm X and every other Black activist and White activist,
because somebody taught them, you feel me? They decided to *talk*, and tell other
people, you feel me? And if people keep on doing that for another hundred years,
we *will* see some change.

In articulating these goals, D voiced a theory of social change that highlights informal

teaching about activism in a community context. He saw his role as an educator as part

of a historic cycle, connected to activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

The cycle involved talking*, a *politicized voice* that spreads knowledge and raises

consciousness. Through this cycle, people would gain a critical consciousness of

injustice, which ultimately—perhaps inevitably—would lead to social change.

Kysa: Do you think that [our teaching] could actually change society in some
way?
D: The more and more people, you feel, if it was more people teaching what we
teaching, yeah, it would. It would make society look at it like, "Huh, it *is* kinda
messed up."

His comments suggest that D saw educating as a form of political engagement, intricately

connected to changing society. PARTY members often talked about the transformative

power of knowledge, what D referred to as "just spreading the information that I know."

They envisioned the path to social change as one of community-based education and

informal practices of "spreading knowledge." They were united in viewing themselves

as agents of social change.

However, PARTY members did not agree on what kinds of actions would

constitute meaningful political engagement. Leila advocated political protest and

organized activism; she believed education should encourage students to join activist

organizations, participate in public protests, register to vote, and attend college. D and

Suli believed education should spread knowledge and raise consciousness, but it should

not prescribe a particular formula of social change or encourage a particular set of

actions. They were skeptical about the potential of voting, protests, and schooling to

make a difference, and they saw no evidence of these actions making a difference in their

own communities. In one meeting D posed the question:

> *D*: Alright tell me this, right? We been talking about this, about the government
> and all this. What's positive with the government?
> *Leila*: Nothing, but change is positive.

The whole PARTY group agreed with Leila's statement that "change is positive,"

but they differed over how to *bring about* this change, and specifically, whether formal

schooling—with its imperative to strengthen academic skills and prepare students for

more schooling—had any role to play in this process. D's comments about his role as an

educator suggest that he was not skeptical about the possibility of change, but he *was*

skeptical about the use of institutionalized channels of change like voting, protesting (in

legal, organized marches), and schooling. D and Suli recognized the usefulness of

schools for bringing students together in one place (thus facilitating "spreading

knowledge"); however, they expressed skepticism that the content of schooling had

anything to offer in terms of social change possibilities. In contrast, Leila argued that

school success and college attendance for Jackson students could ultimately facilitate

social change. At the heart of their disagreement is the distinction between social

mobility and social change.

Social Mobility and Social Change

A key question that PARTY members struggled over, as seen throughout this

dissertation, concerned the relative role of social *mobility* in a theory of education for

social *change*. As discussed in Chapter 2, prevailing societal beliefs about the role of

education foreground the goal of individual social mobility; in contrast, critical pedagogies promote the goal of collective social change. However, it is easier to differentiate between these two goals in theory than in practice. In practice, most educators are informed by both at the same time, and recognize that social mobility among high-poverty students can contribute to overall social change. The recurring question in the PARTY group concerned how much social mobility was necessary to *promote* social change, and how much mobility would *undermine* social change. On the one hand, writing assignments, college preparation, and academic literacy skills reflected a framework of individual mobility in that they aimed to prepare students to succeed within present educational and social systems. On the other hand, some social mobility among high-poverty students could be seen as a *component* of social change, by enabling access to positions of power and the skills needed to advocate for change.

In the left-liberal discourse of school equity, the social justice goal is defined as equal distribution of educational outcomes across race, ethnicity, gender, and class. In this discourse, educational outcomes are measured with familiar yardsticks: standardized test scores, grade point averages, high school graduation and college acceptance rates. The goals of social mobility and social change are neatly meshed, because both simultaneously reflect and promote the larger goal of equal opportunity and meritocracy. As discussed in Chapter 4, PARTY members were generally critical of this discourse, and rightly so: Equal distribution of educational outcomes across all possible social groupings would not eliminate or reduce the unequal distribution of resources that produces and perpetuates poverty. In many ways, (as illustrated in Chapter 4), the discourse of school equity may *strengthen* existing social and educational systems, not

challenge them. First, it implicitly suggests that vastly unequal distribution of resources is acceptable as long as the distribution is achieved through meritocratic methods. Second, it assumes that traditional measures of academic success could reflect meritocratic methods—if only students were given an "equal playing field" at the beginning. Third, it diverts political attention from efforts that might actually redistribute wealth—like job creation or higher wages—and encourages high-poverty communities to channel their energies into education instead. These observations may create despair; if not to provide equal opportunity and access, what *is* the role of public schooling progressive social change? Must educators abandon our work and join other movements?

The Role of Public Schooling in Social Change

The shortcomings of the school equity discourse are at the heart of this dissertation. In examining the role of schooling in progressive social change, I have focused primarily on the limitations of schools as a context for critical pedagogies. Schools require teachers to do things with very official consequences, such as take attendance, give or withhold credits, and distribute grades. These activities go beyond the purpose of *educating;* they in fact facilitate the production of ranked difference (Ferguson, 2000), and are ultimately tied—however imperfectly—to the unequal distribution of resources in society. Unlike those who purely educate, schoolteachers are constrained by the imperative to prepare students for success in future levels of schooling. In a high-poverty urban high school, this responsibility is even greater because the social consequences of school failure are greatest for high-poverty students.

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Despite many structural limitations of the school context, schooling and education need not be mutually exclusive. Schools remain an important context for educating, and an especially important context for critical pedagogies. Schools are one of the few public institutions legally required to serve all children regardless of ability to pay, citizenship status, race, or gender. They are the only public institution with the explicit *mission* to educate all children, and part of this mission (in theory if not in practice) has always included cultivating an active democratic citizenry. Critical pedagogies embody and revitalize the democratic aims of public schooling in that they promote broad-based political engagement among all students, especially those from historically oppressed groups. Schools are not the only context for critical pedagogies, but they are an important one,[59] and there is no inherent reason that schooling must undermine the aims of critical pedagogies.

The goal of critical pedagogies in high-poverty urban high schools is to empower students to effect change in ways that improve their life chances and quality of life. Therefore, critical pedagogies must encourage, guide, and empower students—meaning to actually confer power rather than the "feeling" of being empowered—to identify root causes of social inequalities, to advocate for meaningful change, to make political demands, and to lead or participate in social movements for economic justice. Toward this end, school-based critical pedagogies must incorporate academic literacy as a non-negotiable classroom expectation. Academic literacy facilitates the deepening of critical consciousness and effective political engagement; it also helps high-poverty students enter and succeed in college. College for everyone is not an appropriate policy response

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[59] Other contexts of critical pedagogies include anywhere where community education could occur, e.g. community-based organizations, advocacy groups, labor unions, adult education programs, summer camps,

to poverty and poverty-related social problems, and upward social mobility for individual students is *not* a substitute for structural change. However, educators in high-poverty schools should continue to work their hardest to prepare all students for college, and this should be considered an ethical obligation given the increasing requirement of postsecondary education for legal, livable wage employment. Additionally, upward mobility for high-poverty students can contribute to social change because it provides access to positions of power and greater opportunities to exercise politicized voice.

Ultimately, if our goal as educators in high-poverty schools is to improve the life chances and quality of life for students, our efforts to prepare them for college must be coupled with *political* demands for economic justice such as livable wages, secure employment opportunities, affordable housing, and health care. Social policies in these areas would do much more to improve the life chances of our students than more education, more degrees, or a fairer meritocracy would. Consequently, empowering students to effect change in ways that improve their life chances and quality of life requires that we provide the opportunity, inspiration, and guidance for political engagement *beyond* their schools. It is important that there are organizations for students to connect with outside of schools, such as community-based youth activist organizations. This connection to organizations was a missing link in the PARTY project, which I believe limited its overall impact. School-based critical pedagogies, community-based education, and activist organizations can support and complement one another, and all are strengthened when there are links and communication across these diverse contexts. These links allow students to translate their consciousness into action and deepen their consciousness *through* action. An obvious challenge, of course, is

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after-school programs, etc.

eliciting voluntary participation in these extra-curricular activities, yet there are examples of effective community-based organizing with high-poverty, low-achieving urban youth (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Kwon, 2005). The experiences of PARTY suggest the importance of building on and expanding efforts like these, and *linking* these efforts to school-based critical pedagogies in meaningful ways.

It goes without saying that practicing critical pedagogies is significantly more difficult than conceptualizing them theoretically. One of the challenges of this work is the mismatch between the scope of its theoretical vision and the manifestation of that vision on the ground. Despite the broad theoretical objectives of PARTY, in reality the group had relatively modest goals. When putting theories into practice, it can sometimes feel as though we trivialize them by subsuming them into "programs" or "projects" that are decisively reformist. While this can feel discouraging, it should also be remembered that the larger goal of PARTY was not to institutionalize or reproduce itself as a program at Jackson High or other schools, nor to advocate for specific policy changes. Rather, the goal was to engage Jackson youth and graduates as *partners* in a process of collective inquiry and action to address the social inequalities affecting their lives. Ultimately, we hoped and expected this process to have ripple effects as PARTY members and Jackson students took what they learned into other aspects of their lives. "I know how to talk," commented D, as he looked back on the accomplishments on the PARTY project and its impact on his own life. "I know how to talk, and I know how to write. So I can hit all aspects. And I ain't never gonna stop talking!"

EPILOGUE

In the year immediately after the PARTY project ended, the guidance counselor at Jackson High School invited D and Suli to work as paid tutors at the school. In this role, the young men saw themselves as positive mentors for urban youth. They talked about this work as an expression of their commitment to education, and often said they wanted to help students avoid making the mistakes they had made. Meanwhile, Leila completed her senior year of high school while working as a waitress part time.

Suli still works as a paid tutor at Jackson High School. He specializes in reading, working one-on-one with students in the Special Education class. For a couple of years, Suli worked as a custodian for the school district and volunteered at an after-school program for teens. He now works as a part-time Physical Education teacher at an independent middle school. He was recently married.

After working for one year as a paid tutor at Jackson High School, D left to get a license to referee basketball. He now works as a referee for a youth basketball league. In the summer time he works at a public swimming pool where his job is to supervise children. D still spends his free time writing rhymes and listening to underground hip-hop.

Leila holds a full-time job at a preschool where she works with two-to-four year old children. She enrolled in a few classes at the local community college but withdrew before the semester ended. She applied and was accepted to Mills College, where she hopes to major in education and child development. She will start as a freshman in the fall of 2005.

Louis works full time at a drug store and hopes to return to college when he has saved enough money. He contributed to the making of an independent film, and has since begun a hobby of writing screenplays with the dream of producing a family-friendly Hollywood film. He remains very active in his church. Lolo was accepted as a transfer student to San Francisco State University and declared a major in Sociology. She will start as a junior in the fall of 2005.

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ETHNOGRAPHIC AND PARTICIPATORY
RESEARCH METHODS

Much of the literature on participatory research focuses on the theory and

rationale for these projects, as well as their accomplishments and outcomes. Yet the

specific day-to-day processes through which the projects were carried out are frequently

glossed over or de-emphasized, leaving the reader with few ideas about what the project

actually looked like in practice, or how the group arrived at its accomplishments.[60]

Maguire (1993) points out that much of the literature about participatory research

romanticizes the projects, portraying seemingly effortless campaigns ending in successful

community-based change. In contrast, Maguire argues for honest, realistic descriptions

of the *process* of participatory research: "Reflection on the flaws and inadequacies, and

even the modest successes of *attempting* this alternative research approach may help

others find the courage to learn by doing rather than being immobilized and intimidated

by ideal standards" (p. 158).

This account of my research methods—as both an ethnographer and partner in

participatory research—provides important context for the dissertation overall, and

attempts to de-mystify participatory research as a methodology for research, education,

and action. I begin with a description of my ethnographic research methods, including

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[60] For example, the articles in Park, et. al., (1993), with one exception (Maguire, 1993), all focus on the theory and/or the outcomes of participatory research projects, without describing how the work was actually carried out. One article in the collection, by Comstock and Fox, was written twenty years after the project was completed, and close ethnographic descriptions of the project are missing. For example, the authors claim that participants "realized" and "discovered" certain things (p. 116), but it is unclear how they realized, or how the authors know they realized these things. A special issue of *Practicing Anthropology* (Berg & Schensul, 2004) about participatory research with youth also highlights the rationale for these projects or their outcomes, while providing only a superficial account of the processes involved in

some ethical and epistemological issues of ethnographic research. I close with a detailed

account of the PARTY group's collaborative research activities, and documents of our

work together.

Ethnographic Research Methods

I collected most of my data during the Spring 2003 semester (January through

June), but I have also drawn on field notes from as early as May 2001, when I first

discussed the idea for PARTY with Lolo, Louis, and D. Ethnographic data was collected

through the following activities:

Field notes, transcripts, and video of weekly PARTY meetings: Our weekly

PARTY meetings were approximately two hours long. In the first year (2001-2002), I

took detailed field notes after every meeting. In the second year (2002-2003) I also

recorded every meeting on audio tape, and video taped about one quarter of our meetings.

I later listened to all of the audio tapes, transcribing large sections of every meeting. In

addition to weekly PARTY meetings, we held three longer visioning meetings,

approximately three hours each, in October 2002, January 2003, and June 2003. In these

meetings we engaged in long term visioning and reflection, in contrast to regular weekly

meetings that tended to focus on immediate goals for the next PARTY class. In our

visioning meetings, we defined our goals for the PARTY course, including what we

wanted students to learn and how we would measure our success. I took detailed field

notes as well as audio and video tape of these meetings. Large sections of the meetings

were transcribed.

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carrying them out. Important exceptions are Maguire 1987 and Maguire 1993; both describe the process
and challenges of doing participatory research.

Semi-structured interviews with PARTY members: I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each of the three PARTY teachers (D, Leila, and Suli). These interviews were conducted in February and June of 2003, at the beginning and end of the PARTY class. Although I had a list of questions, the interviews were open-ended and conversational in style. They addressed topics such as their life and school experiences, their feelings about the PARTY group, their thoughts on teaching the PARTY class, what they wanted students to learn in the class, and what they thought its impact would be. Interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, and took place at one of our homes or, in one case, at a taco shop while we ate. Interviews were audio-taped, fully transcribed, and coded thematically.

Field notes from informal conversations and "one-on-one" meetings with PARTY members. I took each of the three PARTY teachers out to dinner separately, to get to know them on a more personal level and in an informal setting. I also spoke by phone with PARTY members frequently, often about our work together but also about life in general. After each dinner or phone conversation, I immediately typed detailed field notes. These informal spaces—on the phone, in the car, a chance meeting downtown, waiting for a meal to arrive—often provoked the most fruitful and insightful conversations. When the tape wasn't running, and our conversation was not labeled as an "interview," the PARTY youth opened up more and our conversations flowed freely.

Participant Observation. I observed Ms. Barry's U.S. government class a minimum of two days per week between January and June, 2003. One of these days was always Tuesday, the day that PARTY members taught the class. I carried a small notebook with me during class time, but I often found it difficult to write and observe at

the same time, given the pace of activity in the classroom. Immediately after every class, I typed detailed field notes, attempting to capture as much detail as possible about the sequence of activities and the students. I had informal conversations with students before and after class, and I sometimes helped Ms. Barry by working with one or a small group of students when the demand became overwhelming for just one teacher.[61] In addition to classroom observations, I hung out in the public spaces of Jackson High, roaming the courtyard between classes, attending assemblies, and mingling with students during lunch time. I also hung out in the staff room, main office and copy room, where I had friendly and informal conversations with other teachers and school personnel.[62]

Semi-structured interviews with students. I conducted semi-structured, taped interviews with eight students in the U.S. government class. Although I prepared an interview protocol, the interviews were open-ended and conversational in style. Topics included students' experiences at Jackson High and other schools, and their views on the PARTY class. I tried to assess what students were learning in the PARTY class, and the degree to which the course influenced their political engagement, their feelings about school, and/or commitment to academic achievement. Interviews lasted about forty five minutes to an hour, and took place wherever the student preferred: at school, in their home, in my home, or at a restaurant while eating. Interviews were audio-taped, fully transcribed, and coded thematically.

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[61] Occasionally I took over the class if Ms. Barry needed to conference with a student outside. At times I worked individually with an individual student on a difficult assignment, or with a small group of students as needed. Sometimes Ms. Barry broke the class in half and assigned one group to work with me. In these moments I recognized the need for another adult to help out when demands exceeded what one teacher could handle.

[62] My past experience as a teacher and substitute teacher at Jackson facilitated my entry into these teacher-focused spaces of the campus.

Weekly student assignments from the PARTY class. Each weekly PARTY class

ended with a written journal assignment in which students reflected on the day's class. I

typed all journal responses and distributed copies to the PARTY teachers in our weekly

meetings. Together, we used the journals to analyze what students were learning and

how they were relating to our course material. I also analyzed whether the quality and

effort put into student work changed over the semester.

Ethical and Epistemological Issues:
 "You analyze too much!"

As three PARTY members, (D, Suli, and Leila) convened in my living room after

their second day of teaching the PARTY class, I passed out copies of typed field notes I

had taken while observing the class. I read aloud all the way through the document,

which described in detail the entire sequence of events from our 80-minute PARTY class.

The field notes recorded, to the best of my ability, every comment made by students

during class time, including some side comments made to friends or mumbled aloud. For

example, the field notes stated that a student named Tommy said quietly to himself,

"Damn, this class is going so slow!" After reading the notes aloud, I looked up and

asked: "What do you guys think?" D spoke first:

> D: [to Kysa] You analyze stuff too much, man!
> Kysa: That's my job, I'm a researcher! I'm supposed to analyze—
> D: But you analyze it *too much!*

At this point, I and the PARTY members ignored D's comment and allowed the meeting

to flow naturally into other topics. The PARTY members marveled at the level of detail

in the field notes, and they laughed about the number of references and direct quotes of

student comments. As we were wrapping up discussion of the field notes, the topic of

"over-analyzing" came up again:

> *Kysa*: I'm glad I showed this [field notes document] to you then, because I'm
> only one set of eyes and I'm like –
> *Suli*: Yeah. But you over-analyzin' it though.
> *Kysa*: Well that's my job. Ok so here's the thing—
> *Suli*: It's *not* your job!
> *Leila*: Did he [Tommy] really say "damn this class is going so slow"?
> *Kysa*: Yeah.
> *Leila*: When?
> *Kysa*: During the big discussion. He was sitting near me.

When Suli stated that I overanalyzed things, I brushed off his claim as insignificant by

saying, "well that's my job." When he protested, "It's *not* your job," I ignored (or simply

didn't hear) him, and engaged with Leila on her question. But the topic was still on D's

and Suli's minds, so they continued to bring it up:

> *D*: You really are overanalyzing everything, cuz you named everybody that
> didn't say nothing. [laughing] That's—
> *Suli*: --that's taking it to the extreme! [laughing] Is it really that serious, blood?
> *D*: Yeah, is it really that serious?
> *Suli*: This person, that person and you 'bout to--
> *D*: And you be quotin' people too like, "Tommy said um, this class is goin' kinda
> slow today…" [laughing]
> *Kysa*: M hm.
> *Suli*: Why? Is that part of your, your research?
> *Kysa*: Yeah.
> *Suli*: Hey, that's… [shakes his head at a loss for words]

The topic of "overanalyzing" became the buzzword for the meeting, and each time I

responded by staying that analyzing was just part of being a researcher.

But the young men's comments about overanalyzing persisted throughout the

PARTY project. In meeting after meeting, I was told that field notes and analytical

members were "overanalyzing." In one of our longer visioning and reflection meetings,

the group members listed off things they liked and disliked about PARTY. Immediately,

D offered this item:

> *D*: I say you over-analyze stuff. You can put that on the negative side.
> *Kysa*: So, Kysa should analyze less?
> *D*: Yeah. You *over* analyze stuff.
> […]
> *Suli*: You should take things for what they are, not for what you want them to be.
> *Kysa*: What do you mean by that?
> [both D and Suli are laughing]
> *Suli*: [through almost uncontrollable laughter] That's part of the over analyzing! [regaining his composure] See, 'cuz sometimes you're seeing something that's not really there. And you're trying to make it into more than what it is.

This conversation exposes some important epistemological and methodological issues that apply to all ethnographic research. When Suli claims that, "Sometimes you're seeing something that's not really there," he suggests the possibility that I *read into things*, searching for meaning in every detail where it might not exist.

This problem of reading into things or adding meaning to them is an aspect of any ethnographic research, one that deserves further explanation. In fact, I believe ethnographic writing does, by nature, "make it more than what it is." Instead of simply recording observations, ethnographic writing adds *analysis*; it adds meaning. This fact raises the important question of what to do when the ethnographer's analysis runs counter to the meanings and explanations that are indigenous to the community. As already mentioned, LeCompte (1995) claims that collaborative (or participatory) research strives to make "research subjects and investigators *co-equals* in the 'telling of the story,' or the analysis and interpretation of results." (p. 98). Yet in *ethnographic* research, investigators frequently find themselves speaking *for* and *about*, rather than *with*, the communities they study. While this fact is often seen as oppressive, reflecting the colonialist legacy of ethnographic research (Wolf, 1996; Lather, 1994; Fine, 1994; Smith, 1999), my experience with PARTY led me to question whether speaking *with* is always, in every instance, preferable. As Kurzman (1991) points out, "feminist social science has

frequently applied a gender analysis over the objections of its subjects, with the intention

of thereby creating a gender consciousness where it is lacking" (p. 254). In other words,

even if community-members do not identify gender as an important axis of oppression in

their lives, feminist researchers may still apply a gender analysis. Such an analysis may

silence or marginalize indigenous understandings or explanations of what is happening.

In my analysis of the PARTY class, I applied analysis—constructed meanings to explain

and interpret what happened—that often ran counter to D's and Suli's analyses of the

same events. These differences created tensions and often led to accusations my analysis

consisted "overanalyzing."

　　　While my detailed notes about students in the Jackson High class were merely

amusing to the PARTY members, they were not as amused to see my equally-detailed

notes about *them.* For example, in one meeting toward the end of the year, this

conversation ensued:

> *K*ysa: OK, one thing to say about over-analyzing, I'm a researcher so I'm
> supposed to be analyzing this.
> D: You're not supposed to research *us* though, and analyze *us* though.
> *Kysa*: But, [laughing]
> D: Right?

This conversation illustrates the tension over the changing nature of the PARTY

members' role from co-researchers (in year 1) to research *subjects* (in year 2). This

evolution happened gradually, and even though I believed I communicated the changes

clearly at every step (for example, by sharing my dissertation proposal and explaining the

nature of my ethnographic research), D's comment illustrates a lack of clarity about my

role as a traditional *researcher* within the PARTY group.

Ethical and Epistemological Issues:
The Knower and the Known, The Observer and the Observed

In the PARTY project, as in all ethnographic research, the "subjects" of the study had agency: they chose what information to disclose and what to withhold, what to emphasize and what to play down, when to speak frankly or when to deliberately mislead (Foster, 1995). These choices may have been shaped by the presence of a researcher, the relationship of the researcher to the subjects, the context of the study, or the researcher's positionality (e.g. her race, class, gender, generation, occupation). Thus in the PARTY project, as in all ethnographic research, both the observer/researcher and the observed/subjects always worked together to actively create the reality that was captured through ethnography.

The inseparability of the observer and the observed became even clearer to me while analyzing interviews with Jackson students and PARTY members. As I sought to make sense of their words, I sometimes found myself wondering how to determine whether a response represented their "true" beliefs/opinions/feelings/thoughts. I wondered, perhaps they were merely trying to give me the "right" answer? Perhaps they were deliberately misleading me? Or perhaps they were themselves mistaken, speaking from a kind of "false consciousness" or inability to see their own true feelings? As I struggled over these questions, I remembered that an individual's comments, in any conversation, are shaped by their perceptions and assumptions about the listener (Bakhtin, 1986; Foster, 1995). Thus, students' answers to my questions were influenced by their perceptions and beliefs about me; I was always exerting an influence on their words.

In addition, if my interview respondents were anything like me, chances are that their opinions and interpretations change from day or day, or week to week, or year to year. What they say on one particular day—often to a question they may have never thought about previously—represents at best a temporary point of view, a moment in time rather than a pure representation of their "true," unchanging perspective. If this is so, I wondered whether there was any meaning to be gathered from interviews at all? In this dissertation, I analyze interview comments and meeting transcripts as temporary moments in time, rather than true representations of a fixed belief/opinion/ thought. I look for patterns in the PARTY members' comments that recur over time, and use them as suggestive guides to be situated within observations of what participants actually *do*.

The process of researching PARTY continually brought new surprises and insights about the limitations of my existing paradigms and analytic categories as tools for understanding the lived realities of Jackson students and PARTY members. Ferguson (2000) has written about our "unexamined research common-sense" (12), which includes a belief that we can "gain access to [students'] meaning systems" using the tools of our existing knowledge and experience. During my research process, I was frequently reminded of the gap between my own set of taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, knowledge claims, and experiences, and those of many Jackson students. For example, Jackson students knew I was a student at UC Berkeley, but I often found myself explaining the difference between undergraduate and graduate school, or that graduate school came *after* the bachelor's degree. In these moments I was reminded that many of the categories I use and take for granted in my day-to-day life are quite meaningless to many Jackson students. I also began to think about the countless possible categories,

assumptions, and bits of knowledge that Jackson students employ and take for granted in their day-to-day lives that were just as meaningless to me. There was no reason to assume the familiar constellation of meanings and categories that I use to interpret my own life experience would enable me to access the life-worlds of Jackson students or PARTY members.

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this dissertation, I analyze interview comments and meeting transcripts as temporary moments in time, rather than true representations of a fixed belief/opinion/ thought. I recognize that all PARTY members (including myself) articulated multiple, shifting, and sometimes contradictory theories over the course of the two-year project. Often, PARTY members appeared to "try out" or "try on" one another's theories, and they sometimes adopted very different positions within the space of a single meeting. Consequently, I analyze their stated theories as "moments" or "experiments" with new ideas, not as evidence of a "true" set of beliefs. I look for patterns in the PARTY members' comments that recur over time, and use them as suggestive guides to be situated within observations of what participants actually *do*.

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Ethical and Epistemological Issues:
The Politics of Representation

Although I involved PARTY members at every step of the data analysis and writing process, it is ultimately my own story that appears in these pages: I selected the focus, the analytic categories, the literature to incorporate, the quotes and observations to emphasize and those to leave out. I ultimately chose how to interpret every quote and observation, how to frame the topic, and what to conclude about the findings. In writing up the results, I often faced dilemmas of how to represent the people, stories, and scenes of this work. One issue I was especially concerned about was how to write about students' behavior in the classroom. I wanted to portray the challenges of giving the journal assignment and leading class discussions; however, I recognized that such portrayals might have the inadvertent effect of portraying Jackson High School as the cause of their own failure; rather than emphasizing social structural inequalities, these descriptions could lend themselves to analyses locating the cause of student failure in their own non-compliance and oppositional behavior.

There is a widespread belief within the general public that a lack of discipline is the biggest obstacle to school success (Fine 1991). The popularity of this belief can be seen in the frequent calls for military training or military-like programs for "at-risk"

youth. This belief, which Fine (1991) calls the "discipline view," is consistent with dominant discourses of at-risk youth. The dominant discourse of "at-risk-ness" (Ferguson 2000) explains student failure as a consequence of their attitudes, behaviors and/or families. This discourse assumes that what at-risk students need is to learn impulse-control, respect for authority, self-discipline, and appropriateness (Ferguson 2000: 91). The discipline view and discourse of at-risk-ness are central to the dominant discourse on the crisis of low-achieving urban schools (Ferguson 2000). They are problematic because they place the blame for school failure inside students, thus "blaming the victim" and lending themselves to policy interventions that focus on fixing students. These interventions fail to address the root causes of school failure such as poverty, structural inequality, and an educational system designed to produce of ranked difference (Ferguson 2000), and deny the role that *privileged* groups might play in the production and reproduction of inequality—including the inequality of academic performance.

Recognizing the dangers of victim-blaming theories, many conscientious researchers work hard to avoid painting an "unflattering view" of poor, marginalized or powerless groups (Bougois, 1995). By focusing on the behavior of students, research can reinforce the mistaken belief that these students "fail" inside a system that is fair and neutral. My hope is that this work overall will challenge this view by presenting a structural analysis of schooling that emphasizes the social construction of school failure within a highly stratified and unequal political economy. However, I also wish to avoid presenting a naïve and romanticized view of these students, which Bourgois (1995) calls "sanitizing" the lives of the poor.

The production of disorder is not caused solely by students, and it is not the

"cause" of poor academic performance at Jackson. Disorder and active not-learning are

symptoms of poor performance and skills too low to access the curriculum, which in turn

become factors that exacerbate poor performance in an endless cycle. All of these factors

are intricately bound up with each other in a complex web that cannot be reduced to a

simplistic model of causality. Therefore, the idea that poor discipline "causes" poor

performance is flawed. At the same time, I believe systematic noncompliance and

disorder at Jackson created a set of classroom dynamics that challenged the effectiveness

of our PARTY class, and I believe this has implications for others attempting to

implement critical pedagogies in low-performing urban schools.

Participatory Research Methods

In May of 2001, I suggested the idea for a participatory research project to Lolo

and Louis, in a meeting at my home. I proposed that we recruit current Jackson students

to join the team, and that all the youth researchers be paid a stipend of $10 per hour.[63] In

our first year, September of 2001 to June of 2002, we met every Tuesday from 4-6 in a

conference room at a local college. After opening each meeting with a discussion of "the

news," we dedicated the rest of our time to the collaborative research project. For the

first few months, we discussed the goals of our project and developed four research

questions:

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[63] I suggested stipends for the youth researchers because I recognized Lolo's and Louis's financial need, and as a signal that all our time is equally important and valued. It is often the case that students are invited to participate in research projects while only the traditional (credentialed) researcher is compensated financially for her time and effort. This scenario sets up an immediate power differential between the traditional researcher and the research "subjects," a distinction that participatory action research seeks to overcome. A small grant made stipends for the youth researchers possible.

- What are Jackson students interested in?
- What are the goals of Jackson students?
- What are the social, political and economic issues that affect the lives of Jackson students?
- What teaching strategies are most effective for Jackson students?

We learned about different research methods and explored which methods would help us better understand our research questions.[64] Through discussion and consensus, we chose to do a survey of Jackson students. We spent one month developing a survey and distributed it to all Jackson High School classes. After tallying the results of our survey, we conducted audio-taped interviews of Jackson students, graduates, dropouts, and teachers—the friends, family members, and teachers of PARTY members. We discussed the interviews in our meetings and took notes on large butcher paper of the important themes and things we learned. In addition to our formal research activities—a survey and interviews—the PARTY group engaged in other supportive activities, including: reading texts about education, inviting guest speakers (whom PARTY members always called "motivational speakers"), taking two visits to other youth-led participatory research projects, and attending academic lectures on the college campus or in the community.

About half-way through the first year, we came up with the name PARTY by brainstorming possible names in a series of consecutive meetings. We also stopped meeting at the college and moved our meetings to my home. The college campus was a long way from Jackson High, and the fluorescent overhead lighting, chairs around a conference table, and a chalk board in front of the room gave our meetings an unmistakably "school-like" feeling. When we moved the meetings to my home (just a few blocks from Jackson High), the atmosphere changed dramatically and meetings

became much more informal. In the home we lounged on the sofa, ate snacks, and

occasionally turned on the TV or radio. Another significant change in our first year of

research was losing one member of the group, Lolo, when she moved to a rural northern

county to attend community college. We replaced her with a Jackson High School junior

whom we had interviewed in October. Her name was Cassipia, and she participated in

PARTY for the rest of the first year.

Before we started teaching, there was a major turnover in the PARTY group

membership. Lolo and Louis left the group in order to participate more fully in church,

leaving only D and Leila. They each decided to invite one friend to join PARTY, adding

D's friend Suli and Leila's friend Hannah.[65] In the end, however, Hannah decided not to

participate in teaching the PARTY class, saying she did not feel comfortable in the

teacher role.[66] She stayed on as a non-teaching PARTY member for a few months, and

eventually dropped out of the group when our meetings became exclusively focused on

planning and reflecting on the class. Suli, the third PARTY teacher, was a close friend of

D and had attended several early PARTY meetings as D's guest. Suli also had long-

standing previous relationships with both me and Ms. Barry, increasing his connection

and exposure to the PARTY project. Through these previous relationships, and the

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[64] See Appendix B for notes from our brainstorm of research methods and questions, and a table of research questions with corresponding methods. PARTY members presented this table at a conference in February of 2002.

[65] Both Suli and Hannah had attended earlier PARTY meetings as guests of D and Leila, so they were natural additions to our group.

[66] Hannah, a working-class white girl with dread-locks, said she did not feel comfortable teaching because she did not "relate" to Jackson students and felt ridiculed by other students there. Both juniors, both Leila and Hannah had recently transferred from Jackson to the Independent Studies Program, where they received a more rigorous college preparatory curriculum. They had been the only two remaining white girls at the school; all the other "diverse" students in Leila's freshmen cohort had already transferred out. Hannah and Leila felt they did not fit in at Jackson, where their "natural" style of appearance and their pro-vegetarian, animal-rights politics were often the object of ridicule.

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consistent presence of D and Leila, the PARTY project was able to maintain some sense of "institutional memory" over its two-year life-course.

The First PARTY Meeting

"What does it mean to transform something?" I asked. It was our first "official" PARTY meeting and Lolo, D, and I sat around a small table in a seminar classroom at a local college.[67] We established that transformation means making a drastic change—a change so compete that the new no longer resembles the old. Lolo offered the example of a "dope-fiend" who transforms her/himself to become sober and clean. I asked another question: "What do you think about when I say *transformative education*?" Lolo and D spoke immediately, their answers bouncing off each other in quick succession.

> *D*: It would be no more than about fifteen students, so the teacher could help all the students—
> *L*olo: The teacher would be young—
> *D*: The teacher would want to be there, not just there to get paid. They gotta make it fun, so we want to go to class—
> *Lolo*: At the beginning of each class the teacher would ask each student "OK, what's on your mind right now?" And the students would talk about it and the teacher would take notes—
> *D*: Class discussions, we should have discussions where you get to voice your opinion—
> *Lolo*: Each student should say something, and then you would say if you agree or disagree, and then you would have to explain why and then someone else would agree or disagree, or add to it or subtract, and—
> *D*: Yeah! The class discussion!

Their ideas continued in this fashion, emphasizing relationships, dialogue, participation, and fun in the classroom. They mentioned movies on Fridays and projects about topics of students' choice like music or sports. They emphasized the importance of personal relationships between teacher and students, and among students in class. It seemed easy

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[67] Louis was absent from the first meeting due to an illness, although he was an original member of PARTY

for Lolo and D to identify key components of an engaged and humanizing pedagogy. In later PARTY meetings with a larger group of youth, as well as during our interviews with prospective members, there were similar conversations where these same ideas were repeated. In every case, the youth did not need to think much about what "good teaching" would look like. Their ideas flowed effortlessly, and the same themes always appeared: personal relationships, discussion, building form students' interests, and fun.

As this first PARTY meeting suggests, Lolo and D began the project with a model of *individual* transformation—a "dope-fiend" becoming sober—as the goal of transformative education, and they articulated a humanizing pedagogy as the path to this individual transformation. Other than transforming individuals, I asked D and Lolo, "What other kinds of things can be transformed?" D quickly offered three examples: the school system, politics, government. Yet no sooner did he suggest these things than he ruled them out again, letting out a sarcastic laugh as he shook his head from side to side and cracked a cynical half-smile: "You can't really transform them things though, you feel, because politicians got the last word, regardless." Lolo agreed with D, adding that "the people are voting just to feel like we're involved, but they're [politicians] gonna do what they're gonna do, regardless."

In this first PARTY meeting, D and Lolo did not express optimism about the possibility of transforming institutions like the school system, politics, or government. When they talked about transformation, they portrayed it as an individual endeavor, primarily involved with changing *people*. As the project progressed, the group's collective vision for transformative education shifted from an individualistic focus to a

structural or *social* one. Although individual differences remained, the PARTY group as a whole moved toward a vision of broad-based *structural* (rather than individual) change.

Negotiating My Relationship in PARTY

My relationship with the youth PARTY members also included dimensions of insider/outsider status. Informal meetings in my home, occasional lunch or dinner dates with individual participants, and personal conversations about non-research topics, all produced a level of familiarity and collegiality in my relationship with the PARTY members that went beyond that of a traditional student-teacher or researcher-subject relationship. Nevertheless, PARTY was not purely a group of equal partners. PARTY members knew me initially as their teacher, and this power relationship persisted throughout the project. Even though we made most decisions by consensus,[68] I acted as the group leader by producing weekly agendas, typing meeting minutes, and coordinating communication among the group members, the Jackson High principal, and the teacher Ms. Barry. These responsibilities underscored my multiple positions of power within the group, marked most visibly by age, race, class, and education level.

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[68] For the most part, decisions in the PARTY group were made by consensus, but as this dissertation will show, there were some examples where rule-by-consensus was partial at best. As the group leader, I instated some "non-negotiables" that did not reflect consensus. I also made some unilateral decisions that I *later* brought back to the group and offered them the chance to accept or "veto." Decisions occurred this way because I was the primary contact person with the school staff, administration and teacher. Thus, when there was any question, school personnel contacted me first, and I mediated between the school and the PARTY youth.

Figure 3:

<div align="center">

PAR GROUP
Research Questions Brainstorm
From 11/15/01

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- What are kids interested in?

- Why don't they go to school?

- What is the focus of the research?

- When do they normally cut class? (time of day?)

- What keeps them coming back? (staying in class? Staying in school?)

- What classes are they taking?

- How can you keep them interested?

- How should you discipline students?

- Who are their parents and families? What is their background like?

- What is their community like? What community are they from?

- What has been a powerful teaching/learning experience in their past?

- What motivates them?

Figure 4:

<div align="center">

PAR Group
Research Methods Brainstorm:

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Name of Method	What kind of information can you get using this method?	Pros?	Cons?
Interviews	Personal information, direct vibes, feelings	You can get deeper into the questions	One-on-one, takes longer so you can ask fewer people
Survey	Wrong information, basic facts, Yes/no questions	Easily comparable, people are more willing to do it, you can reach a lot of people	Impersonal, you don't get any details, inaccurate information
Focus group	Different ideas on a common topic, opinions and feelings of the students	Everyone talks, hear the interactions among people, they like being in groups, learn from the things they disagree about	Uncoordinated, people might not open up, the setting and conversation are artificial.
Journal Writing	Personal thoughts, day-to-information, details and progress, personal feelings and opinions	Get to learn how people explain and interpret events without the influence of the interviewer and the tape recorder	Takes time, people won't want to do it, too much work
Participant Observation	How people behave and interact, what they actually do, what learning & teaching look like	Not just hear what they say, but actually see what they do; get to see how people respond to certain situations	Have to get permission to watch people, takes time to write field-notes after

Figure 5:

<div align="center">

PARTY: Research Questions
11/29/01

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Main Question	Related Questions	Research Method
1. What interests and motivates students?	What are their hobbies? What do they like to do in their spare time? What do they like/dislike about school?	• Interviews • Surveys
2. What are the hopes and dreams of students?	What are their goals? What do they want to do after high school? What careers do they want? Do they want to have a family? How could school be more closely connected to their goals?	• Interviews • Surveys
3. What are the social, political and economic issues that affect the lives of students?	What are the obstacles they face? What issues interfere with their coming to school? Do they have adult responsibilities? What happens in their daily lives? What are the root causes of these obstacles? What communities are they from, and what are these communities like?	• Interviews • Surveys • Library Research • Newspapers, news magazines and Internet
4. What teaching strategies are most effective for students?	What classroom activities do they enjoy most? In what classes do they learn the most? In what classes do they remember the most? In what classes and activities are Jackson students the most engaged in learning? What have been powerful teaching/learning experiences in their past?	• Surveys • Interviews • Participant Observation

PLANNING THE PARTY CLASS

This section describes the processes through which PARTY developed their course at Jackson High School. Most of the planning took place in Year Two. However, the first vignette is from Year One, when the PARTY members started to define education for social change. The following sections of this Appendix explore the processes through which PARTY members developed: 1) course goals; 2) teaching methods and lesson plans. The last sections describe the origins of the rules debate and the journal debate.

Defining Education for Social Change

It was November of the first year of the PARTY project. Five youth (Lolo, D, Louis, Leila, James) and I sat around a rectangular table in a small seminar classroom at the local college. A wall of large windows allowed us to watch the sun set and the sky turn dark during our late afternoon meeting. James laid his head on the table; the others looked straight ahead with blank facial expressions, making no comments. I distributed copies of a short magazine article about the use of hip-hop as counter-hegemonic pedagogy. We read the one-page article aloud, and defined new words as we came across them, including: pedagogy, hegemony, counter-hegemonic, and dominant discourse. After discussing the article's main argument—that hip-hop can serve as counter-hegemonic pedagogy—we listened to hip-hop CDs that D brought in and discussed whether the messages were "dominant" or "counter-hegemonic." Although the sky was now completely dark, the group's energy picked up when we began listening to

familiar hip-hop songs. It was not difficult for the youth to identify aspects of the dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses in the each song.

One week later, the same five youth and I sat around the same rectangular table. This time, we read aloud from an excerpt of *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks, 1994), in which hooks distinguishes between education as domination and "education as the practice of freedom" (4). We discussed that, just as hip-hop can represent dominant or counter-hegemonic discourse, so too can education serve the purpose of domination or liberation. We shared ideas about what education for liberation would look like in practice. I asked the group to consider whether liberatory education would help students succeed within society, or help them to *change* society*?* They unanimously agreed that liberatory education should do both: it should help students succeed in "the system," but it should also encourage and empower them to *change* that system.

Developing Goals for the PARTY Class:
Critical Consciousness and "School Success"

"What do we want students to learn in our class?" As I spoke, I stood up from my chair, grabbed a thick blue marker from the coffee table, and wrote on the blank butcher paper taped to the wall behind me: "Learning Goals." In front of me, D and Suli sat on opposite ends of a sofa. Hannah and Leila sat on another sofa, where they made themselves comfortable by taking off their shoes and sitting cross-legged or curled up with pillows. Behind them, three large sheets of white butcher paper with notes from previous meetings were taped to the wall. In the center of the room was a large wooden coffee table cluttered with snack food, piles of papers, and a (running) tape recorder. As the PARTY members called out answers I copied them on the butcher paper. Their

responses included: "How power is given by money" (Hannah) and "How much money is spent to support wars and it's been that way the whole time in this country" (D). After the meeting, I consolidated the ideas on butcher paper into a typed document. The following week we reviewed the document, adding changes and suggestions. I asked questions like, "*Why* do you want them to know that?" and "What is the *point* of that fact?" in order to push us to articulate broader and generalizable goals.

In three consecutive meetings we re-visited our list of goals, making revisions and suggestions in this fashion. In the third meeting, the whole group agreed on a document stating four basic goals for the course:

> Students will learn:
> - Why things are the way they are.
> - How all of this affects their life.
> - To question why it is the way it is.
> - What they can do about it: People have the power.

After agreeing on this document, we sent it to Ms. Barry for her approval. Upon reading these goals, Ms. Barry asked me privately whether the group planned to emphasize academics. PARTY had never discussed academics in weekly meetings, and I told Ms. Barry I could not guarantee the PARTY teachers were "academic role models" in the commonly-understood definition that term. Although Suli planned to attend community college, neither he nor D had pursued formal education after Jackson. Leila was still in high school, and though she seemed to be passing her classes, she was not a top student.

In our next meeting, I posed Ms. Barry's question about academics to the group (D, Suli, Leila, Hannah): "Do you guys think one of our goals is also to get students more interested in school? To take school more seriously and improve their academic skills?" Without hesitation, all four youth said school was important, and we should

encourage students to care more about education. D argued, "We gotta show them to think of tomorrow and not just today," adding after a slight pause, "even though tomorrow's never certain, you gotta live like it is." Suli agreed, noting "that piece of paper [high school diploma] is important." He mentioned his brother and two close fiends who all dropped out of high school. He said all of these young men were struggling financially, and Suli believed they had a low self-esteem from dropping out of high school.

Building on D's and Suli's comments, Leila argued it was not enough to focus on high school graduation; we should also encourage students to go beyond high school and attend college. She referred to her sister as an example: Even with a high school diploma, Leila's sister could not find a decent job. D nodded and mumbled "ain't that the truth." In addition to financial necessity, Leila explained that college degrees would give students more power to effect social change, and therefore, it was a necessary component of the social-change goals of PARTY. Hannah urged her on with nods and comments of agreement. Suli concurred: "You gotta learn how to work the system, make the system work *for* you, not *against* you." He continued after a pause: "That's why I'm going to [Community College], so I can be a politician!" Suli concluded that the PARTY class should include "that motivational aspect."

As these events illustrate, the topics of school success and college preparation did not originate with the youth members; they were prompted by Ms. Barry's question to me, and my own decision to bring this question to the group. As we moved forward with planning and teaching, group members held different assumptions about the relative importance of school success and college preparation within the PARTY class, and in

critical pedagogies generally. These different views reflect different theories about the role of individual educational attainment in social change. Specifically, they raise the question of whether preparation for "success" at subsequent levels of schooling is a vehicle of social transformation. As Suli noted in a later meeting: "Schools try to mold you into the oppressive society." Suli's comment is supported by the literature on critical pedagogies, which has long emphasized the essentially oppressive nature of schooling. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, this tension about school success was central to PARTY's experience teaching at Jackson High School.

Process for Developing Lesson Plans and Teaching Methods

After developing goals for the course, the PARTY group discussed how they would realize these goals in the classroom. The processes used to plan for classroom teaching consisted of two activities: 1) group brainstorms about topics, themes, discussion questions, 2) reviewing and practicing lesson plans. The first activity was to brainstorm lists of topics, themes, and discussion questions to incorporate in the class. The PARTY youth had no difficulty listing off topics they wanted to teach about in class, such as: education, health care, police brutality, racism, affordable housing, the environment, the war & foreign policy, global trade, poverty, and welfare. It was easy for them to come up with discussion questions about each of these topics. Some of their questions included: Who will really benefit from going to war? Why does the United States produce more waste per person and any other nation? Can the law be racist if it doesn't specifically mention race?

One day I asked the group to think about how our long list of topics could be synthesized into one or a few broader themes that could organize the class. Without any hesitation, D responded immediately: "Power. They all got to do with power." The room fell silent as the other group members appeared to think seriously about the topic of power. From their facial expressions, which included some smiles and nods, I sensed a feeling of approval, optimistic anticipation, and desire to hear more. D broke the silence: "That's a class that can go on and on for years and never run out of topics." Another pause. More smiles and nods. "I like that!" concluded D, with a sense of pride. "Yeah, that's really good," agreed Leila. The feeling in the room was like eager anticipation giving way to a sigh of relief. An enthusiastic buzz filled the space as everyone jumped in to comment about the theme of power. We discussed how power includes the coercive power of "the system" as well as the transformative power of knowledge and the people. The theme of power seemed to speak perfectly to the youth's four goals for the course, especially our last one that "the people have the power."

The second activity, reviewing and practicing lesson plans, was intended to help PARTY youth get ideas for structured classroom activities and learn new content matter. To facilitate this, I collected lesson plans designed to raise consciousness about social and political issues, including some written for classroom teachers and some for activist or community-based organizations. PARTY members chose lesson plans to take home based on their particular interests, and prepared their own "practice lessons" to share in the next PARTY meeting. After each practice lesson the group members discussed whether and how the lesson should be incorporated into the PARTY class. The youth also developed their own lesson plans based on topics they cared about, which they

practiced in group meetings. For two months, each weekly meeting consisted of one or two practice lessons led by a PARTY member. The typical response to practice lessons was that they were "too contrived" or "too structured," and "students wouldn't do it." Instead of organized activities, the PARTY youth preferred open-ended discussions. They used the lesson plans to get factual information and develop general discussion questions, but rejected the idea of structured class activities.

Whether reflecting on our practice lessons or brainstorming topics, themes, and questions, the same three values permeated our discussions: 1) building from students' interests, 2) flexibility, and 3) relationships. D claimed the only rule for good teaching was to: "Ask them what they want to learn, and then teach it to them." His response aptly summarizes the key values of the youth PARTY members regarding pedagogical practice. D and Suli thought most classroom teachers tried too hard to stick to a lesson plan rather than letting students influence the direction of the class. They advocated a class that would build from students' interests and remain flexible enough to let students determine its direction. For this to work, the value of relationships was critically important. D and Suli emphasized their ability to relate to students on the basis of poor academic performance in high school. Suli often recalled that, in high school, he was well known among teachers and students as a particularly "bad" student, who was frequently caught up in the discipline system. Suli celebrated this fact and frequently commented on it: "I can tell them, 'Look, I was sitting in your seat two years ago.'"

In summary, the youth PARTY members theorized that the goals of their course could be realized in the classroom through a teaching practice that began with what students *wanted* to learn, was flexible and responsive to student interests, and facilitated

relationships in the classroom. Additionally, they theorized that these aims were best met through open-ended class discussions with no formal agenda or structured lesson plan. They believed an open and flexible classroom practice would successfully engage students in the topics and themes of the course, and that too much structure would stifle student interest and participation.

Origins of the Rules Debate: On Being "Teacher-Like"

On our fourth teaching day the school guidance counselor came to observe the PARTY class, which had become the object of much positive discussion in the school. After opening class as always with the Fact of the Day and the News Story, students divided into four small groups with a PARTY teacher leading an activity in each group. About half way into the class period, with all four PARTY teachers, Ms. Barry, and the guidance counselor in the classroom, a piercing scream as if in a horror movie arose from Suli's group, and students erupted into laughter as Suli and a female student, Shanell, started running around the room. Suli was running away from Shanell, who chased after him, trying to grab a piece of paper from his hand. The two of them darted from one end of the room to the other, skillfully making it around groups of desks and hopping over backpacks on the floor. As she chased after Suli, Shanell yelled out loudly, "That is mine! Give it back! Give it back!" The chase lasted only a few seconds, but it propelled the rest of the class into laughter which never truly died down for the remainder of the period. "Damn!" exclaimed Frank as he jumped up from his seat and walked around the room laughing, "that girl is *scan'lous!"* When Suli and Shanell finally returned to their seats, we learned the cause of the chase. Shanell had been passing notes to her friend

during the group discussion, and when Suli asked her for the note, she refused to give it to him. Suli grabbed the note from Shanell's hand, and as she tried to grab it back, Suli got up and ran away, and thus began the chase.

In the next PARTY meeting, Leila brought up the chasing incident with the whole group:

> *Leila:* [to Suli] You shouldn't, um, perpetuate Shanell's flirtation.
> *Suli*: Oh, me, that was my fault.
> *Leila:* Yeah. No, no it's cool, it was cool. I know you were getting the letter from her.
> *Suli*: They was passing notes, you feel, and I snatched it. I was like, "Man, what are you all doing?" And she started invading my personal space.
> *Leila:* Yeah, exactly, I noticed she was hella, everyone in the class was—
> *Kysa*: She was flirting with Mario yesterday.
> *Leila:* Yeah.
> *Suli*: She was flirting.
> *Leila:* Anyone that she can like, mess around with, she will. I don't know, I noticed that.
> *Suli*: I mean, cuz technically I'm not a teacher you feel. I can't totally reprimand her. It's kinda like "who are you?"
> *Leila:* No no, it's totally cool, you should hella like, I just think that, specifically her like, having her chase you around the room was kinda like, you should just put it in your pocket and be like, "You know it's over, I'll give it to you after class." I don't know, that might be teacher-like.
> [*silence*]

This exchange shows how Suli distanced himself from the teacher role, and from the concomitant responsibility of discipline, by drawing on his lack of institutional authority, claiming: "technically I'm not a teacher… I can't totally reprimand her." Leila also distanced herself from the teacher role by noting that she doesn't want to seem too "teacher-like."

As the group continued discussing the chasing incident, the concept of being "teacher-like" came up again:

> *D*: I say we shouldn't be teacher-like.
> *Leila:* We shouldn't be teacher-like but then we shouldn't like, perpetuate their distracting other groups, you know, messing around.

> *Suli*: Yeah that was my bad, I didn't mean to distract you.
> *D*: You didn't distract *me* though! I found it kinda funny!
> *Leila:* No, I thought it was funny too. I thought it was funny. But then everyone like, it took like five minutes for my group to get back in order. They were all just hella staring at her. I was like, "C'mon you guys!"

Here, D asserts that "we shouldn't be teacher-like," and says he didn't think the chase was problematic, but "funny." Leila saw the chase as problematic because it distracted the other groups and took away from instructional time. As she explains her position, Leila seems to struggle between two conflicting aims: to avoid being "teacher-like," and to avoid "perpetuating their distracting other groups." Her struggle raises the question of how to exercise power in the classroom without reproducing authoritarian relations of power—and antagonistic relations—between students and teachers.

Origins of the Journal Debate

Just days before the first PARTY class, I received an unexpected email from Ms. Barry, which included this segment:

> *I need there to be an in class assignment that is going to be collected and possibly evaluated by the PARTY group. I would imagine that this would happen every Tuesday or at least every other.* […] *I think part of any good teaching process has to include assessing what the kids are really learning and whether or not your points are being understood.* […] [Writing assignments] *would add credibility to their curriculum and it would challenge the PARTY students to take on the peer evaluation and critique.*

I interpreted the email as a requirement that PARTY teachers assign written work. After reading the message, and without consulting any of the PARTY members, I made a hasty, executive decision to give a written assignment on the first day of class. I called it the "journal," an assignment in which students would respond in free-write form to a general question related to the day's lesson plan. When the PARTY teachers arrived at

Jackson for our first teaching day, I greeted them by announcing I was going to give a writing assignment in the last twenty minutes of class. It was a marked departure from my earlier agreement to sit "on the sidelines" during class. The first hour of class went as planned, with PARTY teachers leading on their own. At the end of one hour, and with twenty minutes remaining of class, I took over the teaching and explained the written journal assignment would be a regular part of class.

In our next group meeting I apologized for acting unilaterally, admitting that this went against our group policy of making decisions by consensus. I shared a printed copy of Ms. Barry's email and read aloud the segment about written assignments. Suli instantly got outraged, exclaiming: "She wants us to be her puppet! […] I think we should stick to our game plan. What is she fucking talking about?" I said I sympathized with Suli's feelings, but I also agreed with some of Ms. Barry's points about the usefulness of a regular writing assignment. I asked the PARTY members to read the typed copies of the students' journal responses, which were out on the coffee table. As we read the responses aloud, the mood in the room changed dramatically. After reading Tommy's response aloud, D responded, "Ain't that a trip. Ain't that what I said? *Exactly* what I said!" We read another journal, and D responded "I swear I went through all this. I swear!" When we finished reading them all, D exclaimed, "They actually listened to us!" D's tone reflected a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment, as though he were genuinely pleased that students had taken his ideas seriously enough to write them down in their journals. Later in the same meeting, as we worked on the lesson plan for the next class, Suli interjected to say: "We gotta

leave them time for their journals, don't we?" D answered: "That's our chill time

right there. I like that." When he pronounced these words, the group's perception

of the journal seemed to shift from passive acceptance to positive enthusiasm.

Previously seen as Ms. Barry's "teacher-like" requirement to be tolerated, D's

approval of the journal gave it a new legitimacy within the group.

SCENES FROM THE PARTY CLASSROOM

The First Day of Class

On the first day of class, D led a whole-class discussion about power.[69] He stood in front of the class and asked the students: "What is power?" They responded by calling out answers: money, oil, Bush, biggest army/military, competition. Next, D asked students: "Who has the power?" They answered: Bush, congress, rich people, white people, police, the military. Third, he asked: "How do you get power?" They answered: education, inherit it, steal it, killing, buy it.

This first introductory activity gives a sense of the kinds of images and understandings about government and the state that students brought to class with them. In this activity, students defined power as *resources* (money, oil) and *government* (Bush, biggest military). They identified those who *have* power as the *government* (Bush, congress), *privileged social groups* (rich people, white people), and the *coercive arm of the state* (police, military). Finally, when considering how you *get* power, students' answers here do not suggest the existence of fair play or meritocracy. With the exception of education, students' answers suggest a system of social reproduction (inherit it) or corruption (steal it, killing, buy it). Their answers suggest that students do not see the state as a system of fair play. Moreover, students' responses came in an almost knee-jerk fashion. They responded quickly as though they already knew the "right" answer. No time elapsed for reflection or consideration before responding, and no one in the room challenged or raised questions about the responses given. In sum, students' comments

from the first day of class suggest that they tended to identify coercive state power (military, police) as enforcing and protecting race and class privilege, and they did not perceive fair, equal or open access to social mobility.

Social Issues Brainstorm

The PARTY group chose to begin the semester by drawing on students' personal experiences, starting the class with issues that were close to home, affecting students most directly. Subsequently, they would slowly branch out into related social issues, helping students make connections between different issues such as poverty, unemployment, and education. To begin this progression, the PARTY team did a class activity called "Social Issues Brainstorm" on their second teaching day, designed to help identify the social issues that resonated most with students. Through this activity the PARTY team concluded that the criminal justice system was a pressing issue that generated lively student discussions and about which students obviously cared deeply.

The class:

Eighteen students sat in a semi-circle facing the white board with copies of the song lyrics to "Changes" by Tupak Shakir on their desks. Leila stood in front of the room facing students, and asked: "What is a social issue?" After a few seconds passed with no response, Leila answered the question aloud: "It's an issue that affects the whole society, or the whole community." She told students to read the lyrics silently and underline all the social issues they saw. "Can we underline everything?" asked

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[69] This lesson plan was adapted from the Freedom School curriculum designed by SNCC for the 1964 Freedom Summer in Mississippi.

Thaddeus. Suli answered him: "You can put a big box around the song if you want."

Three African American boys—Thaddeus, Carlton, and Frank—immediately drew big

squares around the song lyrics. About three minutes of relative silence ensued as

students obediently underlined phrases and words in the song. Suli then asked the class

to call out the issues they underlined. Several seconds passed without any volunteers.

Suli tried some probing, "C'mon, any social issue, whatever you found in the song." Still

no response. He tried again, "OK, read me any line that you underlined." Thaddeus

called out: "I circled the whole song." This time D replied, "Read a line you like best."

"I like them all the same," said Thaddeus. "Just read *any* line then," said D. Thaddeus

read aloud a line from the song, and this initiated a brief discussion in which students

called out social issues and I wrote them on the board. After compiling a short list of

issues, Suli announced students should now move into small groups. The list on the

board read as follows:

- police harassment
- police brutality
- drug addiction
- killing – war on the streets
- police racism
- racism
- government corruption

We split the class into four groups and each PARTY teacher (including myself)

took charge of a group. I worked with five students: three African American girls, one

Latina girl, and one African American boy. Our lesson plan was to ask students to

identify what social issues affected their lives and explain why. Without hesitating four

of the five students said "police harassment" affected them the most. I asked them to

define what police harassment means to them. They explained that harassment means

getting questioned by police when they are "doing nothing," "hanging out" or "walking somewhere" with friends. I asked them "what kinds of questions do the police ask you?" Students responded that police might ask them where they are going, where they live, what they are doing. They might ask to see identification or ask "can I search you?" A brief discussion ensued in which the four students spoke easily and openly about police harassment and what they perceived as police racism. This was clearly a topic they wanted to talk about and had plentiful examples to share. Our discussion was not so much about analysis but sharing stories. When one student spoke, others contributed by nodding their heads and adding comments such as "u-huh" and "yup." I asked them, How often does this happen – realistically?" They answered "all the time." I pushed for a more specific answer: Every day? Once a week? Once a month? Jade (African American girl) estimated "two or three times per week," and Carlton (African American boy) agreed that was about right. At the end of the period, one student from each group shared back to the whole class about the issues they chose and why. All four groups had identified police brutality, police racism, or police harassment as the issue that most affected them. Students then wrote a journal assignment in which they answered the same question individually. Eight students (of eighteen in class) completed the written assignment. Of these, five identified police issues (3 police racism, 1 police brutality and racism, 1 police harassment). The others identified killing/war on the streets, drugs, and "all of them."

Clearly the list students produced on the board during the "Social Issues Brainstorm" activity was incomplete. The PARTY teachers moved the class into small groups without probing students for additional social issues to add to the list. The narrow

list of issues on the board probably framed students' perceptions and comments during group discussions and when writing the journal response. If a broader sample of issues had been listed on the board, students might have focused on other things or we might have seen more variety in their responses. Nevertheless, when considered collectively, the class activity, group discussion and writing assignment indicated that students believed police harassment and racial profiling had an impact on their lives. Regardless of whether this was the "most" important issue to students, it was undoubtedly one that raised interest and generated lively discussions. In our next PARTY meeting we all agreed that police harassment was a hot-button issue that most of our students cared about deeply, and decided to focus our next few lessons on police and the criminal justice system.

Below are sample journal responses to the Social Issues Brainstorm.[70]

Joe

The social issues that affect me is police brutality and police racism. I'm affected by it every day I always get jacked by the police they be trying to body slam me. or they will just stop me because I'm black. I have to deal with it because it happens so much it's like a ritual now they only time they don't stop me, is if they don't see me so I hide on em.

Enrique

Police, Racism. police racism affects me because they always go around stopping me and my cousins or friends when we are walking in a group but when they see a bigger group of a different race walking by they dont even care. I can't really deal with it they always do whatever they want.

Tyreka

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[70] All student journal entries are copied exactly as written, without corrections for spelling, grammar or usage.

The social Issue that effects me the most would Be police Racism. Because they pick on the blacks and Mexicans the most over whites. They always assume that cause folks dress in baggy clothes or dress in a certain way mean they are thugs are some type of person associate with drugs or sell drugs are even smoke. I feel that they pick on us ethnic folks more then others. Where white folks do the same and they dont even pick on them

Everyday Practices of Active Not-Learning

The "cross conversation" was the most common practice of "active not-learning" (see Chapter 3) that PARTY members confronted again and again. The cross-conversation occurred when two or more students, seated on opposite sides of the room, carried on a long side conversation, seemingly unaware of the fact that the rest of the class was in the midst of a group discussion, lecture, or activity. Cross conversations seemed to deliberately focus on issues having nothing to do with the class discussion; often, they seemed deliberately geared toward testing the boundaries of appropriateness and offending the teacher. Similarly, during small group activities, students in one group sometimes carried on lengthy cross-conversations with students in a different group, essentially yelling across the room to each other and ignoring the other members of their groups or the fact that everyone in the room could hear their conversation. When the teacher asked students to stop the side conversation, students would look directly in the teacher's eye and say "OK." As soon as the teacher resumed the activity, the cross-conversation would continue unabated. If the teacher asked the student to leave class, the student most often complained loudly with comments such as "Why are you picking on me? She was talking too!" This pattern so often repeated so often in every Jackson classroom that it was almost a ritual. It occurred in the PARTY class, in Ms. Barry's

other classes, and the other Jackson classes I visited. (It was confirmed by my own experience teaching too.)

Other common practices of active not-learning included throwing small wads of paper across the room, passing notes, or fighting over a pen, (e.g. "He stole my pen! Give me my pen back!). During our PARTY class, these practices of active not-learning were a consistent aspect of the classroom dynamics. Students also test the boundaries through obscene language and offensive comments, (e.g. "Monique likes to suck cock," and "Ms. Nygreen, what does it feel like when he puts it in your booty?" As a result, it was challenging to keep any classroom discussion or activity going for more than a few minutes. In the PARTY class, there were at least four teachers in the classroom (sometimes five if Ms. Barry was there), and usually between ten and fifteen students – a pretty good ratio for a public school. Even so, PARTY teachers were not able to maintain a whole-group discussion for more than five or six minutes; their opening discussions on the "fact" and the "news" lasted for about five minutes each before dissolving into multiple side conversations. They were more successful in the small-group activities; however, toward the end of the year even the small group discussions were unsustainable beyond five or six minutes. Consider, then, the possibilities for a single teacher with twenty or thirty students, and without the shared race, generation, and gender identities that D and Suli had. Teaching in this context requires constant persuasion and negotiation; many teachers find themselves assigning simple worksheets that students can turn in at the end of class, rather than attempt to consistently negotiate participation in the face of unrelenting and overt noncompliance.

Cutting class may be considered another act of active not-learning. Although Jackson High School students have a variety of reasons for missing class—from illness, to incarceration, to the frequent premature deaths of family members and friends—many choose to cut class or stay home altogether, especially on Mondays and Fridays. At Jackson High School it was taken for granted that Mondays and Fridays could not be counted on as instructional days. Attendance was consistently and significantly lower on Mondays and Fridays, especially Fridays. Ms. Barry reported that sometimes as few as three or four students showed up on a Friday after lunch. The PARTY team had a chance to experience this when one week, our class had to switch to Friday due to a school assembly interrupting our regular Tuesday class. It was spring and the weather was warm and sunny. Although class started at 12:20, the first student did not arrive to class until 12:45. Three more students arrived between 12:45 and 1:15, for a total of four students. But since they all arrived separately and they all arrived late (between 25 and 60 minutes late), PARTY members scrapped their lesson plan and told the students to go home.

In addition, a few days before every holiday and the entire last month of school seemed to be hopeless in terms of expecting much from students. The PARTY members took it for granted that the last month of school would not be taken seriously by our students. As D noted:

> *D*: You can't rely on everybody to come every day. Because they see it's the end of the school year. You know? But I think if we were to start in September and go into January, you feel, it would have been different. They woulda been more focused cuz that's the middle of the school year. Once you start getting down to the summer, and nice weather, people got shit to do. Real talk!

Rather than try to interest or engage the entire class, the PARTY members took it for granted that students would cut class or goof off at the end of the school year. According

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to Suli, the only students who came to class at the end of the year were the seniors who needed to graduate. For the rest, there was no incentive to attend school at the end of the year. This pattern of increased absences and disruptions before a school holiday appears to be common in other low-achieving urban schools as well. Payne (1984) observed: "Near the end of the school year or just before a long school holiday, the more dramatic kinds of disorder […] occur more frequently. The attendance of both teachers and students falls off. Those students who do come to school spend more time than usual in the halls. The frequency of fire alarms and actual fires […] increases" (p. 57).

Taken together, one of the net results of frequent interruptions and absences was a severe shortage of instructional time. Teachers effectively lost the first and last fifteen minutes of every class, the last month of school, a few days before each school holiday, every Monday and Friday, and a week for standardized tests each spring. In the limited class time that remained, there were frequent interruptions from inside and outside the classroom, practices of active not-learning, and an unpredictable, ever-changing student population. Despite the loss of instructional time, teachers who tried to supplement it with homework were unsuccessful. In this context, we sometimes wondered, when could liberatory education happen?

The Ghetto Group

The last five weeks of the PARTY class were spent on final projects in four groups. Each group worked with the same teacher for five weeks; however, Suli suggested a "round robin" on the first day: PARTY teachers rotated from group to group,

working with each one for fifteen minutes on a different task. The scene below is from my fifteen minutes with a group assigned to study economic inequality and ghetto.

There were four students in the group, all African American, three boys and one girl. My task was to lead a small group discussion to help these students develop research questions about their topic. I began by telling the students to do a "brainstorm" of research questions about economic inequality and the ghetto. No sooner had I completed my sentence when Tommy and Dudley burst into what seemed an uncontrollable fit of laughter. I asked them what was so funny. "How we gon' do research on the ghetto?" asked Tommy, barely getting the words out through his laughter. Dudley responded simply, looking straight ahead: "People on drugs, smoking coke, crack, dope fiends, pimps." He recited the list quickly in an even voice, as if it were a memorized shopping list he was repeating back mechanically.

I ignored Dudley's comment and offered a definition of a research question: something you want to know about a topic that you don't already know. Their group project for the next four weeks was to find answers to their research questions about economic inequality and the ghetto. I suggested possible ways they could answer their research questions: looking in books, on the Internet, interviewing people in the community, and things like that. "We live in the ghetto man, we ain't gotta go do no asking people!" protested Dudley. I affirmed Dudley's comment by saying the group members already knew a lot about the ghetto. I then suggested there was even more they could learn about any topic. In an attempt to get the brainstorm started, I suggested some topics they might actually research. It was my hope that something might capture their interest and spark further questions and ideas. I suggested that students might look at

statistics about the ghetto, like how many people are living in ghettos, what kind of population lives there, and how these numbers have changed over time. Dudley's interjected in response: "crack-dealers, dope-fiends, gang-bangers." I wrote down Dudley's comment in my notebook but persisted in my teacher-role without verbally acknowledging him. I suggested more options for research, for example, that students could look at the history of how ghettos developed, or how ghettos are talked about in society, in the media, or by people who have lived in them for generations.

Fifteen minutes passed as I attempted to get a group brainstorm started. The only participation came from Dudley and Tommy, who offered a running critical commentary on all of my suggestions. "The ghetto's not a place, it's everywhere," said Dudley. Again, I wrote his comment in my notebook but otherwise ignored him, and proceeded to ask probing questions about students' interests about the topic. At one point Tommy interjected, "how can *you* tell *us* about the ghetto? *We* need to be telling *you* about the ghetto!" I acknowledged his comment by saying I agreed with him and I know he can teach me about the ghetto. Then I added: "But I want you to use the knowledge you have now and *build* off it for your research project." I then persisted in my attempt to interest him in the wonders of "book knowledge" about the ghetto. Rather than listen to the young men share their experiences and perceptions, I remained focused on convincing them there was something to be gained from *research*, emphasizing history and statistics about the ghetto as areas of research to consider. When our fifteen minutes was up, we had not yet written one possible research question about economic inequality and the ghetto. Aside from one comment about the historical use of ghettos as a place for

Jews, the other two students—one boy and one girl—remained silent through the entire conversation.

What had occurred during the fifteen minutes was a heated exchange between Tommy, Dudley, and me, which unraveled as a mutual attempt to silence and discredit each others' methods of knowing about the ghetto. The conflict was about knowledge and about whose knowledge counts as valid. It was a conflict between the book-knowledge valued by traditional schooling and the popular knowledge of experience and community. Foucault (1980) defines popular knowledge as "local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges that serve as a source for a critical stance toward institutional knowledge and power" (p. 82). Two aspects of this concept are important for understanding Tommy's and Dudley's reaction to me in this situation. First, popular knowledge values observation and experience over book-learning, and is rooted in the social/geographic context or neighborhood. Because it is contextually bound and embedded in the local, popular knowledge is inconsistent with book-knowledge which is framed as trans-local and universal. In other words, popular knowledge embodies a particular way of knowing the world, which can appear in direct opposition to school-based book-knowledge. As Ferguson (2000) writes, "Popular knowledge confronts institutional practices with a distinct, competing set of theories and methods for knowing the world" (104). In the group activity with Tommy and Dwayne, I posed "research" as the preferred way of knowing the social world—in this case, the ghetto. As a result, I marginalized their theories, epistemologies, and ways of knowing the world while positioning my own as superior.

A second aspect of popular knowledge is a critical and oppositional stance toward authority (Foucault 1980). In the group activity with Cory and Dwayne, I experienced their reaction to me as critical and oppositional. In our interaction I was positioned as an authority figure—a teacher invested with institutionalized power of the school, ultimately sanctioned by the state. In this position of power, I emphasized the importance of book-knowledge and "research" about a topic these students already knew about through experience. Their reaction to me can be understood as an aspect of popular knowledge, which supports a critical and oppositional stance toward authority. I interpret their behavior as a response to the silencing and devaluing of popular knowledge that is systematically practiced by institutions of schooling and higher education.

Despite having read Ferguson (2000), Foucault (1980), and numerous other works in the same theoretical framework prior to this particular day, my abstract understanding of popular knowledge did not help me navigate or negotiate the situation in the moment. Instead, I perceived their reaction to me as hostile and defiant, and experienced a feeling of victim-hood typical of teachers in urban schools: "I'm only trying to help!" I thought. "I'm bending over backwards to cater my lessons to topics based on their experience, and they don't even appreciate it." In my field notes from that day I wrote: "Dudley and Tommy did not listen to me. They were very confrontational." At the time, it did not occur to me to write down that *I* did not listen to *them*. It is only in hindsight that I can recognize the competing epistemologies at play in our interaction. During the interaction I claimed the role of expert about a topic that these young men knew intimately. I tried to convince them that *my* way of knowing was important and valuable, that they should be excited and interested in it. Through my actions—ignoring their comments, persisting in

my mission of interesting them in "research"—I silenced their attempts at sharing what they knew and how they knew it. While I paid lip-service to their knowledge-of-experience (telling Tommy he could teach me a lot about the ghetto), I continued to privilege book knowledge ("But I want you to *build* off it for your research project"). I continued to assert the primacy of my epistemology and to discredit theirs.

It is important to point out that these competing epistemologies do not exist in a vacuum; they exist within a framework of vastly unequal power relations, clearly positioning one mode as dominant. This unequal relation of power intensifies the oppositional and conflictual nature of the interaction between students and teacher. That institutions of schooling and higher education systematically devalue and marginalize popular knowledge would not matter nearly so much were it not for the role of schooling in reproducing social and economic inequalities. What matters is that these practices serve to systematically exclude Tommy and Dudley, and others like them, from access to upward mobility and positions of power. As such, these practices of exclusion have concrete material consequences; they are a means by which schooling acts as a vehicle of social reproduction.

Jackson High School students experience school as a place where their wisdom and life experience are not valued, and where they are not invited to make a contribution through sharing their opinions and experiences. The ghetto group experience illustrates how this silencing can occur even with a well-intentioned teacher. It also illuminates how these practices of silencing contribute to social reproduction.