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# Hope, Rage and Inequality: A Critical Humanist Inclusive Education

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## **Hope, Rage and Inequality: A Critical Humanist Inclusive Education**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we examine challenges faced by students of color in an intervention program [Opportunity] in a socially stratified community on California's Central Coast. The purpose of this paper is to name and discuss the problems students face: lack of support from the teaching community, the school staff and the administration of the parent district. We further identify challenges experienced by students and their teachers while highlighting strengths and weaknesses of educational programs and their reciprocal effects on participants. Finally, we seek to share a narrative overview of a teacher's experience in creating the conditions for an inclusive education.

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy, inclusive education, social justice, neoliberalism, critical ethnography

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## Introduction

The educational turn towards Neoliberal ends attacks the foundations of what otherwise might be a companionate, caring and democratic society. Post-modern campaign contributions shape federal politics, in the United States a majority of elections are won by candidates who possess the greatest campaign funding; those with the deepest pockets in education then shape its message and purpose. The fight for funding, in program development, assessment and teacher education, creates a market driven educational context. Educational institutions still claim to fight for social justice. Social justice becomes the legitimizing notion for capitalism. As a neoliberal interpretation of social justice is adopted its very roots are ignored. Actions and exploitation of workers and students are discounted, overlooking “exploitative nature of capitalism” (McLaren, 2006, p. 15). A caring, democratic and critical education is replaced by a mandated curriculum, the neoliberal execution of which supports a value focused society (Hill, 2012).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and other mechanistic educational policies become part of the normalized discourse working to narrow conceptions of democracy and emancipated student action. Policy makers laud high stakes testing as the great equalizer with the potential to increase student opportunity ensuring objectivity and equality in evaluation (NCLB, 2002; Eryaman, 2006, 2007; Paige & Jackson as cited in Hursh, 2007). The “self evident” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 29) nature of social domination reinforced by neoliberal accountability practices becomes second nature to education stakeholders, so much so that the policies are seen as “necessary, inevitable, and unquestionable” (Hursh, 2007, p. 495). NCLB, however, is only a tool for enacting social policy, disguising inequitable practices within a shroud of democracy, practical skills and economic development. Much like voters in presidential elections, the teacher, voter or middle manager is removed from vital policy discussions and trained to oscillate between pre-approved conceptions of teaching, curriculum and pedagogy (or democracy, service and citizenship).

While many teachers enter the profession compassionate professionals dedicated to the betterment of students, they contend with a “hidden curriculum”, (Giroux & Purpel, 1983; Cornbleth, 1984), masquerading as school culture designed to reinforce existing social inequalities (Apple, 2000; Apple & King, 1977); this creates a narrow minded workforce and further cements the Neoliberal status quo. The reproduction (Foucault, 1980; Žižek, 1989) of these values perpetuates the, “traditional role of education” of producing passive worker/citizens with just enough skills to render themselves useful to the demands of the capitalist elite (Hill, 2012; Gee, 2013; Hardt & Negri, 2000). These values are in direct conflict with lived student experience and, do not align with a student’s social and educational world order. Classroom manifestations of social reproduction are justified to mid-level decision makers as embodying the motivation needed in the workplace: good for business, equitable, valuable to a society perceived as meritocratic. As San Juan, (2003) explains, the capitalist elite restricts realizations of justice, fairness, and recognition including divergent identity and social worth. Once realized social justice inhibits the exploitability of human beings by uncovering inequality, the end goal of the dominant paradigm.

Ultimately, schisms between social justice and the reality of an educational experience framed in neoliberalism encapsulates teachers in a “regulated consciousness” (Au, 2009), limiting the educational discourse to who can teach, what they can say and how they can say it (Bernstein, 2000). Power structures isolate critiques to neoliberal constructions as radical and problematic as they disrupt carefully crafted aspects of the accepted world order. Bernstein (2000) explains the social consciousness is united in negotiated collective purpose as it creates identity via legitimization of particular knowledge, maintenance of social order and daily reinforcement and training. Classroom pedagogy has been specifically framed to promote technical and post-positivist curriculum rife with inequity. It becomes a mechanism by which the maintenance of an un-rigidly defined, neoliberal, semi-democratic western caste system is perpetuated. Rather than improving curriculum the most exposed students are positioned to fail through structurally problematic practices, misallocation of funding and racist, sexist, classist practices. Since the mass implementation of neoliberal policies and high stakes testing, the most vulnerable students have experienced higher dropout rates, less

demanding curriculum and less culturally relevant pedagogy (Kozol, 2005; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). When examined closely, the one thing the data from these policies have definitively demonstrated is that there are untroubled, unequal benefits to certain students on the basis of race, culture and class.

Moreover as schools implement hierarchical and monetarist based structures students likewise experience a lack of educational freedom, lack of acceptance by the school community and censorship by administrators as they reject the existing world order. As McLaren (2006) contends; the forthcoming struggle for emancipatory education must include ways of life where racist, sexist and homophobic ideals have no place, a culture where individuals can live independent of capitalist progress. Students who do not experience care or understanding in their educational or personal lives cannot hope to resist the challenges they experience in traditional school settings. The enforcement of high stakes testing, (Au, 2009; McNeil, 2000) overcrowded classrooms and impersonalized curricular standards effectively discourages teachers from creating relationships, those necessary for ensuring the well-being of their students.

The US is among the societies that socialize fire and police departments, unemployment, and education while also exploiting the citizens that receive those services (Harrington, 1997). Many of the stories in this paper typify this experience. Teachers, students and staff experience educational life as mentioned above to support the needs of the market. Some are exploited while others are schooled to become members of the capitalist class. This paper is a reflection of the personal pedagogy of a teacher attempting to better understand his students and help them across a vast spectrum of experiences which shape their lives, Kevin and his students shared the challenges they faced in their homes, at school, in the streets, with families, with gangs, with teachers, with staff, in multiple settings as more than a participant observer through the transformation of their educational experience. In this paper we identify and name the inequities caused by the current societal lens teachers, administration, staff and others subscribing to dominant ideologies (Gramsci, Hoare, & Smith, 1972; Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1980) often work within and perpetuate. We hope to share challenges and possibilities gleaned from critical ethnographic data used to challenge preconceptions and inequities causing irreparable damage to students.

### **Philosophy**

The student experience, principally in urban and multicultural schools in the United States, is a diverse and complex convergence of culture, social relations and history (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010; González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Smith and Rodriguez, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). Sometimes educators fail to recognize the dynamic union, or relatedness (Fromm, 1990), which creates the educational experience for students. Like all humans, students require a union with somebody, or something, outside oneself, while maintaining a self-identity in what Fromm (1990) calls humanistic communitarian socialism.

According to Ponce, (as cited in Gadotti, 1996), education can be understood only through analysis of the society, which maintains it. If an educator believes this to be true, he or she has the responsibility of critically examining, the society in which he or she lives, the curriculum he or she is required to teach, and how both affect the students in his or her classroom. This is as the constructivist (Dewey, 1997; Kincheloe, 2005) philosophers contend, education built upon experience. As the goal of education is to encourage students to be participant members of society, teachers must help students engage with education and society in a manner most beneficial and personal to the student. It is this personalization, which supports a critical consciousness (Frerie, 2000). If we cannot share with students our basic humanity, how can they be expected to learn?

Schooling serves to limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion (Chomsky, & Barsamian, 1998) both politically and socially. As a microcosm of this acceptability, the disconnect between students in matters of race, sexual orientation, religious background and their educational environment further, highlight the discrepancies between the prescribed curriculum and the “social trauma” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) many students carry as a result of being disengaged from their educational experience.

If teachers disregard traumatic student experiences in favor of a rigid curriculum, students often perceive this rejection of their experiences as a rejection of themselves, resulting in resistance and detachment from classroom instruction. As a result students often tune out in the classroom and turn to other avenues for acceptance, both at school and in other social contexts. Students become alienated (Fromm, 1990; Marx, 2011; Ollman, 1971) as they work at the command of others; as Arendt (1998) claims, it is easier to act under conditions of tyranny than think critically. Social relations and mindless activity then dominate student thought having framed their existence (Hudis, 2012).

It is not only teachers who must display compassion. Every member of the school community and anyone in contact with students must understand the formative influence they have. The student is living her or his own sociocultural and historical milieu within a paradigm with which they may not be able to relate. As a community any school stakeholders have the responsibility to understand the disparity and cultural diversity experienced and lived by the students within their setting, as well as what is expected by the school community. This community then, extends to teachers, janitors, lunch staff, school resource officers etc.

Comaroff and Comaroff, dispute the claims of capitalization and neoliberal policy as a system, appearing a, “gospel of salvation” which, if used correctly has the potential to transform the lives of the “marginalized and disempowered” (1999, p. 292). We believe this critique extends to education, which tends to mirror the sociopolitical call for further cultural domination over student thought by cultural elites, rather than becoming the salvation for students, which it claims to be.

When Kevin shared many of his experiences with Donaldo Macedo, Donaldo used New York City as an analogy for the school community, “Most people do not see the problem. We have shops selling \$300 bars of soap in billion dollar buildings while homeless men, women and children are sleeping in the adjacent alley” (D. Macedo, personal communication, May 17, 2012). Educators and many in our society often idealize their classroom and their community effectively blinding themselves to the plight of those outside their immediate circle. Furthermore, classrooms of forty or more students and the tasks the teacher is expected to perform, prescribed curricula and state mandated assessment, ensure teachers cannot be the mentors students require.

Many educators promote the idea of a “color blind” classroom, mistakenly believing that this will lead to equality. Milner (2010) and others have posited that when administrators, teachers, and students fail to recognize differences in the classroom, it forces students to conform to cultural norms and the understandings of the dominant class. This practice marginalizes and devalues the heritage culture of students, negating inclusion we might hope to create. These cultural differences (Delpit, 2006, Gay, 2010), subtle and overt, are hidden behind learning and communication styles, attitudes, interests, behavior, and more. Since culture is the result of systematic accumulation of human experiences, the classroom is the result of student interaction with the material presented, their peers, the teacher, and the subsequent community, created as a result of the fusion of those experience. (Gadotti, 1996; González, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

In his book *Life in Schools*, McLaren (1989) discusses the critically responsible pedagogy adopted by the classroom teacher,

We must face our own culpability in the reproduction of inequality in our teaching, and (that) we must strive to develop a pedagogy equipped to provide both intellectual and moral resistance to oppression, one that extends the concept of pedagogy beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and skills and the concept of morality beyond interpersonal relations. This is what critical pedagogy is all about. p. 21

To this end there is a need to support culturally responsive teachers, critical pedagogues, in an effort to balance the current, increasingly overwhelming neo-liberal educational system. Students are more than “the selves that have been given to us” (DeLissovoy, 2010, pg. 211) but stakeholders become part of the subjugation as we become complacent to oppressive pedagogies.

Our educational communities must facilitate the hope that optimism, as Cornel West (2004) argues, can help to “adopt the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better” (p. 296). Many students are not optimistic about their lives, not to mention their academic experience. In many cases the very educators who have sworn to be their advocates have ensured this perpetual loss of optimism. Teachers and members of the educational community can rally, “against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth inequality, group xenophobia, and personal despair” (West, 2004, pp. 296–297), which may be prevalent in education, especially for students from diverse and often marginalized backgrounds.

Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2009) points out several necessities, which connect teachers and students and facilitate student support,

Do we make the self-sacrifices in our own lives that we are asking them to make? Do we engage in the Socratic process of painful scrutiny about these sacrifices? Do we have the capacity and commitment to support students when they struggle to apply that framework in their lives? Teachers who meet these challenges are beloved by students. The sacrifices they make and the solidarity it produces earn them the right to demand levels of commitment that often defy even the students’ own notion of their capabilities. Teachers who fall short can be liked but not loved, and this means they are unable to push the limits of students’ abilities; they cannot take them down the painful path. p. 8

Many of the issues Kevin’s students experienced are direct results of the oppressive conditions (Smith - Maddox & Solórzano, 2002) inherent in school systems. The forthcoming examples show that a lack of understanding, caring and compassion by school personnel separates students from other members of their school community. “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress” (Freire, 2000, p.127). This is true of the educator and power brokers within the school community.

This manifestation can be the inadvertent marginalization of a student’s culture in the classroom, a lunch server who asserts his or her power over students by denying them food or in the form of a campus monitor who assumes students are causing problems when they are enjoying their break. This is as Freire mentions, “One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding” (Freire, 2000, p. 95).

Finally, many actors in a school’s culture recognize only their own educational experience as valid. They expect students to behave as they did, to react to the curriculum as they did, moreover, as they expect the students to. Assimilationist policies and practices then become weapons to divest students of their culture (Valenzuela, 1999), further homogenizing students for exploitation. When students resist, resistance is often met with disciplinary action- because educators misunderstand what is happening in front of them. Resultant deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010), subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) limited opportunities to “clarify the struggle against alienation” (Foucault, 1980, p. 24) pervades educator consciousness. Rather than asking why are these kids acting the way that they do or why can’t they just do, what is to them, the right thing, why not ask how can we facilitate a culture of activism, democracy and reciprocal acknowledgement of humanity?

## **Method**

This study, conducted over a three-year period, follows a program for students living on the California Central Coast. Data was collected using a critical ethnographic approach, transforming a local context while considering its implications for multiple contexts (Barib et al., 2004). We took this approach in the writing to highlight common misunderstandings and challenges experienced by the

community in working with marginalized students. This paper is organized to expose and critique the flawed framework which contemporary education paradigms have adopted in the education of nontraditional, diverse and often marginalized populations.

We attempt to do this by sharing several experiences, which stand out as common misunderstandings of life in schools (McLaren, 1989). This is done by looking closely at several of those experiences from a critical humanist perspective (Magill & Rodriguez, forthcoming), beyond surface analyses to show what these experiences might mean for educators and students by adding examples which illustrate the need for a transformation of education designs. By submitting a critical humanist education, we reject the reproductive mechanisms of state power, thereby ending the commodification of students, the theft of capitalist production and the limitations imposed on democratic involvement. Instead we call for a space for understanding such influence through a human pedagogy and to disassemble historically problematic structures having asymmetrically defined human interaction. The critical humanist classroom allows for the confrontation of tensions cloaking shared concerns (Apple, 1993; Collier, 2003) hidden under a veil of greed, individualism and fearful ignorance. We call for an activist effort (Minchie, 2009) to build coalitions (Quijada Cerecer, 2010) across race, class, gender and socioeconomic status in establishment of unity (Allen et al. 2003; Sorrells 2003) working to transcend boundaries of social constraints. The narratives serve as a basis for discussion and a continual dialogue among those hoping to understand student life. That said, as a basis for analysis of these experiences we implement a critical humanist framework in the design of the following research questions:

- 1) What are the apparatuses of the educational paradigm which has led to current inequalities?
- 2) What, if any, experiences can help teachers better understand the challenges marginalized students face in school?
- 3) What, if anything, are students trying to communicate to the world with their actions in and outside the classroom?

### **The Students**

The stories of this Opportunity Program follow students during the 2011-2013 school years. Most of the data is taken from the 2011-2012 school year because Kevin was the case carrier, teacher, curriculum developer and community liaison for this program. The class included between 17 and 28 students at a time. Students entered and exited the class returning to the mainstream school community or, on occasion, included students who were in danger of being expelled from school for activities off campus. Students in this program were deemed unable to return to “mainstream classes” by administrators and staff because of, gang affiliation, time in correctional facility or other stigmas in addition to negligible academic effort in traditional settings. The program was designed to offer students a different type of pedagogy and curricular/instructional environments relative to personal need. It was made possible through a school improvement grant. The school principal was instrumental in clearing the space to make the program possible, facilitate necessary resources and creating the conditions for a semi-autonomous supportive environment and program. Special teachers, school/non-school community members and councilors were also instrumental to the success of this program. Despite the critical reflections herein illustrating common misconceptions of educators working within neoliberal policy, students were largely successful given the challenges described.

### **Kevin’s Foundation for Teaching**

Prior to the start of my placement every faculty member looked at me with a smile. “Oh hey, you must be the new teacher! Where are you from?” The smiles quickly faded when I told them what I would be teaching. Their faces could not hide the disgust and sympathy they felt for me. The conversation continued in this manor as they began sharing stories about students they sent to my class, how awful they were and what significant problems these students, I had yet to meet, were.

“This student tripped me! That student brought drugs to my class!” I listened, smiled, nodded and wondered, is this program offering students opportunities or are we offering teachers the opportunity to teach without the “headaches” the students present: “Participatory education is a collective effort in which the participants are committed to building a just society through individual and socioeconomic transformation and ending domination through changing power relations” (Campbell, 2001, pg. 1).

Truancy, referrals and far below basic CST score (California Standardized Test) data are the first things I am shown as I prepared for the first day of school. I was nervous but excited as the counselor, a San Francisco Giants fan, handed me a huge folder on each of my soon to be students. My first impression of the counselor assigned to work with my program seems to be a good man and he comments that he has a way with these kids and that his office is a safe zone. Students call him “Santa Clause” because of his beer belly, white hair and beard. I muse how the system failed the students so badly that they feel more comfortable with the behavior counselor and truancy officer than they do in class with peers and teachers of record.

My roster reads: Elorza, Galindo, Garcia, Gutierrez, Ramirez, Perez: “English Learner”, “Special Education”, what type of program will this be?

Since the unity of the oppressed involves solidarity among them, regardless of their exact status, this unity unquestionably requires class consciousness. However, the submersion in reality which characterizes the peasants of Latin America means that consciousness of being an oppressed class must be preceded (or at least accompanied) by achieving consciousness of being oppressed individuals. (Freire, 1992, pg. 174)

### **Class Structure**

There would clearly be difficulties teaching my students in any traditional manner. What we could do to best help these students, I wondered. As I looked up the Opportunity teaching standards, I realized traditional curriculum was not required. Ultimately, I was able to structure a classroom outside the traditional constraints of the mandated NCLB curriculum. “Opportunity Education”, according to the California Department of Education, are “...schools, classes, and programs established to provide additional support for students who are habitually truant from instruction, irregular in attendance, insubordinate, disorderly while in attendance, or unsuccessful academically.” As such, I was given the ability to do and teach the way I believed to be in the best interest of my students.

### **Lessons**

After discussions with Arturo about my initial impressions working with students I decided to create many classroom lessons focused on school community, and critical literacy. As I was developing many of the lessons I tried to implement modules typified by what Henry Giroux (2004) calls Public Pedagogy, who I was reading while developing this curriculum. Public pedagogy is the constant learning that takes place in situations removed from the traditional classroom, be they 193 family stories, cultural activities, multimedia barrages, or lived experiences of crossing and transgressing borders (Smith & Rodriguez, 2011). I also endeavored to use culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009) within the critical and constructivist tradition absent from most, if not all, the classrooms my students had ever experienced.

We began the school year with several community-building activities discussing the Diasporas of the world’s early human populations. This was done in an attempt to create common bonds among students and expose some of the institutionalized racism students could feel but not describe. Students listened intently to this lesson because they had largely internalized social constructions of race. We later began work on what they would call their student Bill of Rights. We examined our experiences with public figures like police officers. They shared experiences where they felt profiled because of clothing, the color of their skin or the company they kept. Students articulated and recreated several



societal and community problems and why, they argued, the problems happened. They were really learning and loving our discussions and began to talk about community activism. I was feeling optimistic about the class. Deep into one of our discussions about the creation of race a student called out “So, Mr. Magill, if we all came from Africa does that mean I’m black?”

As their consciousness about their living conditions deepened I continued to help establish a sense of community among the students. When two of my students tried to fight in class early one day it was clear community and the ties that bind needed further troubling. Since our school mascot was the Spartans I taught students about leadership and the love and support the Spartans had for each other using the Battle of Thermopylae as an example. The lesson focused on power and the success, which came from soldiers who unite for a common goal. I played a clip from *300*. In the scene King Leonidas said he would gladly die for any of his men while the Persian King Xerxes would gladly sacrifice any of his. We discussed the implications of these philosophies that typified the students’ experience with school leaders. The lesson resonated with students. We discussed why the Greeks were successful defenders by interlocking shields, what the students identified as having each other’s back. As the students filed out of the classroom I felt like we had won a small battle, but the war would continue.

As the weeks ensued I continued to implement unique lessons. We included themes such as: empathy, peace/ethnic studies, social situation education, civil rights, imperialism, essential life skills and student directed alternatives. We employed a “Push in Model” with teachers of the following subjects: History, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, English, (Regional Occupational Program) ROP, Math, P.E., Art, Health, Technology, Science Concepts and Apex (a short term independent studies program). We had our good days and our bad days. I felt proud, however, to be sharing lessons in which traditionally quiet and/or unsuccessful students demonstrated layer upon layer of critical analysis and literacy during lessons in this program. A key moment of discovery was where we discussed the reasons Rome might have erected Hadrian’s Wall. I offered some scaffolding as part of a Socratic seminar to discuss implications. Students shared how the wall was similar to the wall built at the United States/Mexico border. They were able to compare Britons with Mexicans during our discussions and in their writing. Both peoples originally controlled land beyond the wall and now felt as if they were not welcome beyond its borders. My largely Latino class was so passionate about this lesson I wondered how I could make every lesson as meaningful as most of the students in my program expressed never having felt this type of lesson actualization. They never believed teachers could be the “cultural workers” that Freire asks teachers to be. In many cases students had been passed through grade levels because teachers did not care to deal with them anymore and felt it was the student’s responsibility to learn English, overcome academic barriers to entry, cope with the emotional and physical damage which came from the neglect and learned hopelessness resulting from years of challenging school and home life.

### **Challenges**

It soon became clear that the class consisted of rival gang members, students who were dealing drugs, students who had been in juvenile hall, students who had psychological trauma as a result of rape, friends or family being shot and or killed, and abuse.

### **The Alpha Male**

Three of my students were wrestling at break, not violently, but I needed to calm them down after watching them demonstrate their masculinity. When I began to pull the two students apart, the third snuck around behind me and in a confident manner put me in a headlock. It was a non-threatening headlock designed to assert dominance. This was a student who had, until today, resisted virtually everything we were trying to accomplish in class. He would spit on other students, intimidate and “jump” them after school. I felt the student only respected strength, and while he liked me, he did not see the teacher as a strong or valuable figure. As he put his hand around my neck I saw an opportunity to communicate in a manner he understood- I grabbed his arm, turned it, picked him up

and lowered him to the floor. While still standing, I immediately pinned him as if we were in a wrestling match. I looked down at him as if to say, what you intend is not going to happen. I then helped him to his feet and gave him a pat on the back. He immediately scampered off and said to his friends, "Damn, he is tougher than he looks," I heard him tell the others.

The rest of the class let out ooos and awwws. While I felt slightly guilty, I realized that he felt it was the first time someone like me, with cultural capital and power, had accepted him fully and used it like this. After the incident, I did not have any problems with him. He began doing work in math class for the first time all year and looked at me with more respect than ever before. This was one of my students who was heavily involved in gang life. He had been in Juvenile Hall and constantly felt the need to display power in everyday life. From an academic standpoint putting his hands on me may have been one of the best things that could have happened. All of the students in this class seem to respond to power. They continued to test me to see if I would support them or leave them. They seemed to wonder if I would I leave them if they made life difficult enough for me. I had to constantly prove to them that strength comes not just from your muscles but from the community we shared, that no matter what they did, I would not leave them. Clearly a delicate balance between strength and unconditional love was required.

### **Those Kids**

"Apartheid does not happen spontaneously, like bad weather conditions."  
Jonathan Kozol

My students and I took breaks and lunch in what was the former teachers lounge. A few of the students had been caught selling drugs the year prior and as a result our class was secluded from the general population. About six teachers kept food in the lounge refrigerator and would retrieve it on their break. A teacher entered the lounge, which was in my department. I said hello and he went to the refrigerator to retrieve his food. I turned my attention back to the class only to hear him screaming at the students. "Who took my salmon?!" he screamed. "You little thieves!" Shocked that he would speak with students in this way, I felt myself get hot- no one can speak to my students like that. I felt my skin boil but I took a deep breath, calmed myself and as quickly as I could, escorted him out of the room. "I am sure that my students didn't take your food, please don't speak like that to them again, and it doesn't matter if they did take your food, they are kids. Besides the room has been locked and only teachers have the key- I have been with them the entire time." I went on to explain how psychologically damaging his rant was to them. After, calming he left in a huff.

It was later discovered that, another teacher had his food taken as well. The two teachers discussed how terrible my students were and how they were going to take this to the administration. I felt as if in an instant my students had been placed on the most wanted list. Among the missing items were a 12 pack of yogurt and half of a salmon/rice medley. While it was perhaps very logical in their minds to blame the students, by doing so those teachers showed they valued their lunch, more than the experiences of their students, which was in conflict with what they claimed to stand for in our faculty meetings. Their cultural outlook allowed them to blame poor minority students, ones who needed the most understanding. It was later discovered that one of the classroom support staff for the teacher who blamed my students was responsible for taking the food. She thought the food was communal. The teacher who blamed my students never apologized.

### **Testing the Teacher**

"School is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned."  
John Taylor Gatto

One student constantly threatened to do harm to herself or her grade to make a point. She suggested, "I'm not going to do my homework because I'm mad at you". Later in the day, she continued to behave badly to wound the teachers for not allowing her to be on her phone during

instruction. She asked if she could take out her phone to turn it off. I thanked her for asking and said yes. She took it out, and proceeded to text message someone and left her phone on. She clearly received a text a second later and looked at her phone. This made me angry, I was trying to support her polite behavior and I felt like she had slapped me in the face. I confiscated the phone and she began stewing. Fifteen minutes had passed without incident. She said she had to go the bathroom. I told her she had to wait until the rest of the classes were finished with their break, which was in 10 minutes. In response, she immediately ran out of the room and urinated in her pants. I felt awful, but as I later learned this is what she wanted me to feel. A teacher who knew the girl told me that this was not the first time she had done this. The student later apologized and told me her display was to try and manipulate me. I didn't know how to think- I was speechless.

## Help Me

“Contrary to what we may have been taught to think, unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us but need not scar us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands.”

bell hooks

A new student entered our class and was what our counselor described as a “sugar bottom”. When someone wants to be in a gang or a part of the culture, the inductee must either be “jumped in” to the gang through a beating or, if they are female, through sleeping with senior members of the gang. It was clear after spending time with this student that she was troubled. The student tried to gain the attention those she thought could offer her safety. She used her sexuality and I feared she felt it was the one weapon at her disposal. In the “critically empowering spaces” (Pillow, 2004, p. 224) we co-created, alternative experiences and relationships. However at times she still felt threatened and displayed, “disorderly out of time acts” (Popkowitz 1997, p 19). She exhibited strange behavior showing up to school several days after using crystal methamphetamine or more “soft” drugs.

I invited her mother to school to try anything to help this student. Her mother asked if the student had gone to school the day before. I told her mother she had but did not attend earlier in the week. The day after her absence she was kicked out of class by our principal for wearing what she called, “Booty shorts”. She never came back that week but we saw her after school in the arms of a young man who we knew to be part of her gang.

A few weeks after this sighting she came back to school and told me she was pregnant. It was clear from her actions and the actions of others regarding her situation that she was dealing with, “the racialized discursive structures that construct teen pregnancy” (Pillow, 2004, p. 11). She began to vacillate between a strong, defiant public persona and a vulnerable, reserved young lady searching for answers. As Lesko (2012) observes, public school policies addressing the human concerns of minority or low socioeconomic status students are often limited and the way teenagers are portrayed is problematic. For many pregnant students of means, they are positioned as the “girl next door” (Pillow, 2004, p. 32) who made an error in judgment. Minority mothers are taken to task and are positioned as being, “responsible to society for their mistakes” (Pillow, 2004, p. 13). This was the case for my student. During a discussion about community she ran to the waste bin and began to vomit, I held her hair and she asked to go home as she cried saying she had no future. I was at a loss. Other than offering support, it was hard to know what to do.

I took her to Boy's and Girl's Club councilors afterschool because she had a relationship with one of them. I did not have any biological children but in that moment, I felt like a father. I was scared, frustrated and optimistic all at the same time. She was unsure who the father and what her options might be. We discussed Planned Parenthood and helped her consider what she might do. I called her mother about the pregnancy and she asked that I send her daughter home. One of the truancy officers was going to drive her home. As the officer was pulling the car around, she walked out of the office, I ran all around campus with the help of our campus monitors. I eventually found her with another of my students in a PE class of 60 kids. They had blended in because half of the class was

walking around the swimming pool (policy if students did not bring swim suits). The other girl snuck out of her English Class while we called home. I was relieved, shocked and numb all at the same time. I took her to the office again and we sent her home.

I came to school a week later to discover that she was not pregnant after all, I was relieved because she was relieved. She never told me if she lost the child, had a false positive or if something else happened. Shortly after she began doing better in school and was placed in the mainstream educational program and achieved a passing grade point average. She ultimately left the gang, stopped doing meth and seemed to be doing much better.

### **I Want Out**

A student who felt like he was too good for our program tried everything he could to leave the class. He convinced himself that he was going to be out of the program within a week but this was not the case. He was in the program because he physically intimidated a female teacher in the general population. He began telling students how much better he was than them and how he was too good for any of them. I was frightened that he could not see the hole he was digging for himself. Students began to tire of his comments and became verbally hostile in their own defense. He called his parents.

As his father came to the Boys and Girls club I had to block his entrance. He had brought a friend and his wife and he paced outside the club explaining how ghetto he was and how he would beat up the students who threatened his son. He was 6'2" and much larger than I, his friend was 5'8" and even bigger. The men had a look about them that made me feel sorry for them. I saw them more as middle or high school students than as the gangsters they wanted me to believe they were. Earlier in the year I might have been uneasy, but I calmly spoke to them and defused the situation. I discussed the situation showing him respect for protecting his son, but telling him to re-evaluate what he was doing-coming with his friend to beat up a sophomore in High School. He seemed happy with our conversation, but his wife was not satisfied. She called the police who showed up while we were speaking. She complained how the *Norteños* [a rival gang] were after her little boy and that he was not safe in my class. I later learned she was the victim of abuse and it became clear that this had normalized the student's behavior. The mother exhibited many of the characteristics of her victimization in the ways she engaged adult males. Her son displayed the behavior of an aggressor in undesirable situations yet he tried to do two things in his manipulation of those situations: be the victim to gain leverage and physically intimidate women.

Later that week his mother came into the office to speak with the principal once again to continue to try to help her son take his leave from the program. I had no idea what to expect. As she entered the meeting, the mother said she was filing a complaint against the school. Shocked, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Her son was never in danger; moreover he was insulting other students to provoke their responses. The student told stories about his "hardships" in the class, which were greatly exaggerated. The principal thanked the student for sharing his story and asked him to step outside. To my surprise my principal told the mother, "I know what your husband does to you- he beats you, and because you are hurt you are trying to hurt everyone in your world so they feel as badly as you do. So you go and file your complaint, because the District Office has my back and they know how manipulative you and your son have been in the past. If you need support for your issue we have councilors available for you." The room was absolutely silent. My jaw dropped in anticipation of what I might hear next. The mother quietly apologized, thanked us and walked out.

### **Drug Dealing**

What many teachers considered one of the nicest and most intelligent students in my class was using his phone- text-messaging after I had warned the class not to at the beginning of the day. We instituted a rule against texting because there were rumors of drug dealing by some of the students in my class. As he lay on the couch in the lounge at lunch I noticed he was texting under a pillow. Promptly I took his phone. I had never seen this normal, even tempered young man so upset. He hit

the wall and skulked around, pacing for the rest of the lunch period. This was out of character for him so I knew something was seriously wrong. We had a good relationship and this anger was not directed at me. Per school policy, I gave the phone to our councilor. Later he received a text that popped up on the screen which said, "What you want, pills, coke, weed, what?" Later, in Spanish, a similar message popped up. "Encontré tus cosas si me das una onza no voy a decir nada." It was his sister saying, "I found your stuff, give me an ounce and I won't say anything." Apparently, he had a pound of marijuana and various other drugs in a stash in his house. Earlier in the year his dad had asked if we could put him in a boot camp type of program. We had told him he needed an incident like this one. I was heartbroken. He was one of the most promising students in the program, always respectful and kind to most everyone. After his placement in boot camp he came to visit and told me how much he missed our class. I couldn't help feeling somewhat guilty.

### **New Student**

At the Boy's and Girl's Club, students were working out in the gym and I showed them some new exercises as they started their Physical Education class. I did some box jumps at height, some core work that looked difficult (they couldn't perform it) and bench pressed 300 pounds (with a spotter and proper form). All the students were impressed and expressed interest in working out with me next P.E. class. The new student looked shocked that I was so strong and athletic and I finally saw more than just a detachment in his eyes. I was excited at the prospect of connecting with him in this way.

Another teacher and I asked a student who is interested in lifting to try 245 pounds with both of us as spotters. He hesitated, said he had never done that much before. He did it however, with some help from the teachers. I was proud and could feel the positive energy fill our class. We then asked all the students to lift more than they had ever lifted before. All of who were quite surprised at what they could do. The last student was hesitant and refused 3 times before finally agreeing to lift 135 pounds. He was able to do 6 repetitions with minimal assistance. He also looked proud. The most difficult part of this class was proving to the students we cared about and would support them. With new students entering the class and leaving the class, this became a bigger challenge. It was difficult making a new student part of the existing culture. They often had no hope and believed they would be shipped off to the continuation school at any moment. Because of this, little moments between classes, at the Boy's and Girl's Club and in other interpersonal interactions, current students were important to the successful enculturation of new students into our class.

### **Rival Gangs**

Mentioned above, students participated in Physical Education class for our program at the Boy's and Girl's Club. As the class was working in the gym and weight room area, five students left the gym and went to the entrance/foyer. A few minutes later, an employee of the Club came into the gym to tell me that some of our students were "messing with the new kid". I hurried over to see one student calling another a "fucking bitch" and to give him back his lighter. He proceeded to tell me that she stole the lighter while cursing her and pacing with his brow furrowed. She responded by saying that he ripped her headphones and stole her phone and as she yelled back at him. At this point I demanded the lighter and phone. He gave me the phone while the other students voluntarily emptied their pockets but the lighter was not recovered. Because we were now making a scene with young children coming into the club and he continued to curse, I asked everyone in the class to join me in the snack area. He continued his verbal assault while other students asked that he "not cry" about losing the lighter. I angrily told them that it was enough. I put an end to it and began trying some conflict resolution.

The student was still observably agitated and cursing while the Club employee opened another room. The whole class entered. He would have none of the conflict resolution and continued to verbally jab at students. Tired of hearing him some responded with curses of their own. I redirected these students and they complied. He then told them that he would, "fucking kill them!" and "he could get a gun, just watch!" The club employee then asked him to move to a chair from where he was

sitting on the table because they were preparing to feed young members after we left. Refusing, he called her a bitch and told her to fuck off. I wanted to give him a bit of extra time to get home safely while I spoke to the rest of the class. I asked him to go home- he stuck his middle finger up at me and spit in the direction of the class on the table. I made sure to hold the class for at least 10 minutes before allowing the rest to go home. I later learned he was a member of a rival gang to many of the students in the class.

A different day at the club, three students jumped into a large van after leaving class. When asked, each of them told me they had “to do something” after school. They gave nothing but vague answers. We later found out they were off to fight a rival gang member as retaliation for an earlier event. One of my students was placed on home supervision for the rest of the year. He was later arrested for assaulting his stepfather and sent to the county lockup.

### **The Park**

“I’ve never known anyone so loyal. If you are Larry Bird’s teammate, you are one of the most important people in the world to him.”

Kevin McHale

My students were constantly getting into fights outside of school. They began filming the fights and posting them on YouTube so they had proof of their toughness. Two students in my class who had called themselves best friends turned on each other when one thought the other was “talking shit”. I searched (our school name) fights on YouTube at the request of another student to find this altercation. Another of my students was arrested in violation of her probation for a similar reason so I was naturally concerned. She was having other girls “jump” a girl who apparently was talking about her after school. She masterminded the assault, recruited some of the girls from the continuation school and, as a group, injured the girl badly. The student was, first, sent to a juvenile center, and after the school year, was placed into a “boot camp” school for the summer.

I wanted to know in what other ways I could support my students so I began participating in the activities my students engaged in after school. In addition to seeing students at their homes every other week, I began cataloging their interactions after school. One week I went to the park many of them frequent. The park has a reputation for hosting drug deals, stabbings and vandalism. It has a large open field connected to a rundown combination baseball/softball field. Surrounding it is a liquor store on one side, lower income housing on the two longer sides and a community center opposite the liquor store. The community center was placed in this location as a response to the many students who were spending all afternoon and evening running around on the streets experiencing altercations with police and others.

My students were playing handball on a large wall with two, right triangular concrete slabs creating the court. Connected were the large concrete bathrooms seen in many parks designed in the 70’s with seat less metal toilets. I asked to join them. They agreed, visibly surprised and excited that I would be playing with them, although they did not say so. They were playing in teams of two, so one of my students wanted to add me to his team. We began playing against another young man who was clearly considered the best player. As he kept winning, he kept playing. The young man was ruthless in his intent to show everyone else that he could beat someone older than he. As we played, I let my student, the one on my team (and anyone interested) be my teacher. My teammate showed me some techniques and strategies. As we continued to play, I was surprised how much the ball hurt my hand on a hard shot. The ball was much harder and less bouncy than I anticipated. After the game my hand was numb and red. We lost and I apologized to my student with a smile. “You suck Magill!” he said smiling back at me. “We’ll get him next time”, I said and we did!

Several of the boys we played against were high school dropouts and in the local gang, others attended my high school. One young man they called Snoop [a gang name-as he looks like Snoopy] had just graduated high school. I went up to him and told him how proud I was of him. He said he

wished I had been his teacher and that he remembered handball in the park. Afterwards whenever I saw any of the other young men on or off campus they would say, "Hey Magill, what's good?" and give me hugs. A few weeks later the city knocked down the handball court. "They" claimed too many incidents were happening there and as a result the police were required to patrol it too frequently. It was replaced with landscaped wood chips, rocks and various plants. In a city with little for students to do, lacking transportation there was now one less option.

### **Humor**

"Everyone smiles in the same language. We also laugh and cry in the same language. We are all really one big family."

Spruce Krauss

One day a student got his lunch from the cafeteria and upset with what he was served he pointed down to his lap and said, "Man, my meat is hard!" From the back of the room a lone student howled with laughter and eventually the whole class realized what he had said and done, and everyone was rolling on the floor with laughter. A good natured ribbing is always helpful in drawing students out. It brings everyone together and is part of what they expect in interactions so it helps in connecting with them. As long as it stays PG-13 and non-cutting, meant to hurt one or the other it seems to help the class culture.

### **Where do I belong?**

One of my students was told by his mother that he was worthless, so she was sending him to Tijuana to work the fields and go to school in Mexico. He returned two weeks later- the teachers there told him he would not be enrolled because of the bad American influence he would have on the students after showing up to school in sagging jeans, with a knife and a bad attitude. He told me he felt like Mexican schools were stricter and held their students to a higher standard. It caused me to reflect on the inclusive nature of our school system and to question the intentions of school systems in general.

An interesting conversation between the behavior counselor and the Opportunity staff brought to light some of the stigmas that we all knew were present but didn't want to believe. According to the counselor, the administration and most of the staff of the high school simply wanted us to keep the students out of the mainstream classrooms. I had been working with these students under the assumption that we were trying to be academically rigorous, teaching students skills, helping them realize that they might need to do something if they wanted the commonly held notion of a successful life. We were working so hard to help them acquire the tools, voice, and the confidence to achieve their dreams. It seemed to me people could be more honest about the truth of the program's mission.

### **School Support Staff**

"No culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive."  
Mohandas Gandhi

When one of my students informed me another had a birthday I brought a cake, plates and napkins to school, but we were missing a full complement of utensils. The rest of the school had already gone to lunch as I was helping serve the cake [our principal did not allow my students at lunch with the rest of the school because of behavior issues the year prior to my being hired], we asked Angel, one of the more trustworthy and responsible students in this class, if he would run back to the cafeteria and grab enough spoons for everyone in the class. He ran off and came back with the spoons and said, "Those women are bitches!" "What," I asked. He responded, "Yeah, they were yelling at me so I just grabbed the spoons and left." I spoke with the cafeteria employees after we were finished eating. Before I could do this however, the police officer assigned to the school came to my classroom

with the campus monitor and spoke with Angel about stealing. He explained to the officer that he was just getting some plastic spoons, which I confirmed.

The next day, the lunch administrator and hall monitor yelled at him again. "That little thief can NOT eat in here until he apologizes to me for stealing!" "Fuck this!" he replied, and stormed out, refusing to eat. After further investigation, I found from several other sources that the only thing Angel was guilty of was not using the social convention of please and thank you, being in the opportunity/intervention class, and being different.

### **The Red Car**

On the way down to the Club, two guys drove by in a red hatchback; they shouted some offensive language at the students who yelled back at them. One of my kids had a wood sculpture he made in class and was waving it in a threatening way. The car turned around and the man in the car yelled once again at the students. They then pulled up a bit past the Boy's and Girl's club and parked. The driver pulled out a crow bar as we were turning away from them towards the club. As he saw us walk the other direction and into the club, he got back in the car and drove off.

I told a member of the staff to call the police. An officer came out, questioned me, took my contact information and left. We didn't see the person for the rest of the day. I sat down and had a talk with a student who was trying to escape the incident. He confided in me that everyday he comes home, his mother yells and screams at him, whatever he does. He is living with her and his older sister who is 21 and has a young son. He said the reason he drinks and smokes weed is to escape from the screaming from his mother. It is not surprising she screams, not because her son is a difficult kid, but rather because she has had an extremely hard life. My student's father was in a gang and when he was young was shot to death. He grew up without a father and in a house with all women. He seemed extremely happy to confide in me as a man who he presumably respects. His story broke my heart.

### **The last day**

I will never forget, the last day teaching my class when one of my most challenging students all year told me, "Mr. Magill, you are the only white teacher who I ever felt cared about me. I love you."

### **Discussion**

Radical changes are needed if we hope to transform the limited considerations of what it means to educate students. Neoliberal policies have framed school as simply the location students are prepared for a career. For wealthy students receiving the benefits of a system designed to promote their privilege, it is difficult to see how their luxury comes at such a steep price. Examples from this paper demonstrate the problematic practice of commodifying humanity. Funding spent on education is channeled through corporate structures and what actually reach students are low quality textbooks, instructional practices and curriculum designed to limit critical thinking and funnel students towards predetermined careers. Just as standardized tests reflect the income of the student's family, where a student comes from will more than likely determine their profession. The government writes blank checks to promote the interests of the corporate industrial military complex. When it comes to dealing with poverty and injustice in our own country, students become the victims of policy makers with sudden fiscal responsibility. The real educational issues are left unexamined, as those understanding the system experience record profits. These forces create the rage and inequality preventing our schools from becoming what most hope they can be.

Neoliberal policies imposed on administrators only serve to draw teacher focus away from students towards quantitative measures creating vacuous classroom experiences. This model perpetuates the exploitation of marginalized students and ensures their distrust of school. The established order then guarantees success is measured according to the metric of an adequately funded



school. Consider the murder rate in the US while also considering the comments students make about their lives. “My mom makes me come straight home after school and I can’t go hang out with my friends because she thinks I will join a gang.” Or, “Those niggas will get it if they show up in (neighborhood) again. This is our hood.” Or, “You ain’t nothin in (this town) if you aren’t in a gang.”

The current battle cry of “inclusive education” is only a reality in unique environments. For example, contexts in which grant money and caring professionals are allocated for the assimilation of a struggling school by the parent district using ensured stratification across social class as a metric for success. What we mean is a given number of students meet expected outcomes; the proportions attending special education, gifted programs, and the mainstream school population are reflective of projections forecast by state and district administrators.

Furthermore, neoliberal policies ensure student commodification pervades all educational settings but is magnified among disfranchised students, denying them future roles among a liberated citizenry (Arendt, 2006; Marcuse, 1989). The human cost of these policies is most visible in settings like the one described above. The connection between poverty and education are clearly identifiable as students are trained to distrust, and violently react to inequitable treatment from teachers, police, perceived rivals and average citizens. Everyday was a struggle for survival and the psychosocial wellbeing of the students. Whether, a raced (Bell, 1992; West, 2004; Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010; Milner, 2010), classed (McLaren, 1989; Hill, 2012), gendered (Martin, 1999; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) or ideological oppression (Foucault, & Gordon, 1980; Apple, 2000, Žižek, 1989) it is clear the social and classroom conditions for an equitable education are not being met or discussed in complete or relevant ways. Even if we continue to live in a society dominated by surplus accumulation, it is imperative to develop an educational system that can exist independently of its harmful effects on students marginalized by class, race, sexuality, gender. Students have been positioned as quite literally less than human and struggle to find their way in a system that sees them as simply a number or interchangeable piece of an exploitative hierarchy. Many understand the oppression but criticisms are left unheard as we are taught the value and need for structures dominating our discourse.

We observe it in locations where “outcast” students congregate and live: consider the handball story from “The Park”: students were displaced from one of the only locations at which they felt a sense of belonging. Instead of trying to understand the students and their developmental needs, the city’s response to the “troublemakers” was to pave over the so called “cracks”, (Duncan Andrade, 2009) through which students might be allowed to grow. Framed as criminals rather than students, those in power are unable or do not care to understand these student’s pain and torment living in such a system which understands them primarily as laborers, drug dealers, sluts and thugs.

The student who was not allowed to eat by the cafeteria staff was marginalized because of a demand for him to conform. He did not share the values and cultural understanding the schools power hierarchy would force on him. In his situation, his food, like the paycheck of a disgruntled worker was withheld as punishment- for his overt “brownness” or for his lack of “proper behavior”. Consider further the cognitive dissonance students experience when told that what they know to be true in their lives, personal codes, values or beliefs, are ignored for the sake of conformity. Psychologically and culturally damaging to students they often combat what they see as lack of understanding and care by the school community in turning to those who will accept them or who will affirm their existence. In the case of Kevin’s students, this meant developing a reputation, and willingness to challenge anyone, anytime. It meant, behaving in ways that fed a need for attention and befriending those who hated the system as much as they did. The students did not need to be saved- they needed to be loved and supported.

Educators must therefore approach the spaces, cultural norms (Gay, 2010) and codes of conduct of the students lived experiences (Arendt, 1998; Frerier, 2000), to build community rather than forcing them to conform to school, societal or teacher values (Foucault, 1980; Ollman, 1971; Valenzuela, 1999). By failing to incorporate and honor the diversity of student culture, family values and backgrounds, we ostracize students and reinforce what is seen as appropriate behavior in a culture

of correctness. Much as content standards, which require students to learn X, Y, and Z, students are required to be X, Y and Z. As any classroom teacher knows, students like all human beings are dynamic and complex. Xenophobia (West, 2004) and homogeneity devalue students and their cultural understandings. Flooding the capitalist marketplace with dollars causes currency devaluation; classroom homogenization likewise devalues student culture and experience. The hidden curriculum, received capitalist culture, and cultural exploitation offers students a path of least resistance towards, prison, manual labor, and undesired military service- maintaining their status as commodities, sheep which can be sheered for the financial gain of the dominant class or for the further perpetuation of the cultural status quo (Dunayevskaya, 1981 & 1958; Hill, 2012; Gramsci, 1971; Hardt, & Negri, 2000; Harrington, 1997; McLaren, 2006). Even students who are able to navigate these landmines will face the detrimental effects of neoliberal policies. The rising cost of universities leave students with, in many cases, insurmountable debt and a degree equivalent to the former value of a high school diploma. Students, who have “played the game” the right way, have found that upon completion of a baccalaureate degree, the rules have changed, as was the case with several of Kevin’s students. Much of the hard work the students and he did was tempered by actions of those who had pre-ordained them as unworthy of another opportunity. As described in the data, minor instances were met with the harshest of responses and misunderstandings were blamed completely on deviant student behavior.

Critical humanism (Rodriguez & Magill, forthcoming) existent in a system priding itself on freedom, equity and democracy offers a lens on the claim the American ideology allows for upward mobility of any citizen based on their hard work. By extending capitalism to the global community, perhaps anyone around the world can achieve the American dream. Hard work, however, will never be enough in a system that operates as a *Möbius strip* with infinite barriers to entry. Students must therefore be supported in or reintroduced to their inborn criticality if they hope to overcome conditions such as race, class, culture, or underfunded/inequitably funded educational programs. Consider how these students felt, consistently silenced and scrutinized. Hope and reform can help, but only insofar as the teacher or community adopts a transformative culture of care, adaptability to student needs and love for their fellow human beings.

Yet even in transformative school cultures the neoliberal pathos for the “chosen ones,” that is, students who show an early willingness to conform to the one dimensional student (Marcuse, 1991), continue to negotiate hard won gains by educators; upon leaving school, assuming many of the transformative conditions mentioned above were possible, students enter a culture and world which treats them as the also above mentioned commodities, placing them in the iconic positions of power, Mayor; School Principal; Congressperson and so on, but only as reproductive measure for the perpetuation of the global neoliberal capitalist status quo. Others continue to live under threat of deportation, community stratification at their expense (handball court demolition), uncaring employment and police profiling/violence/blame or countless other equivalently harsh measures.

The entirety of student life then must be considered if we hope to reach students- particularly within the contexts described by Kevin. In a highly social profession that operates under capitalist rules, teachers can transform this paradox by engendering the suggestions by Freire, (2000) to become “cultural workers”. What we teach is in many ways less important than how we teach it. In the examples outlined in this paper, several of the lessons departed from the mandated curriculum and most of them were culturally relevant and inclusive, always in support of the largely Latina(o)/Chicana(o)/Mexicana(o) classroom population.

The context described above also shows students marginalized across race, class, and culture. The research on culturally responsive pedagogy, subtractive schooling and school culture and care is abundant, see Daniel Tatum, Valenzuela, Delpit, Noddings, Gay, and others, however, the significance of this study is the action oriented posture of the research we conducted, it demonstrates: students considered the most challenging can learn, teachers as professionals working to develop culturally relevant pedagogy can be transformative, as they enact a critical pedagogy in which they assume not only their students’ lives but their own lives will be transformed. Furthermore we have argued that teachers, as Daniel Tatum, Valenzuela, Delpit, Noddings, Gay, and others also argue, must be reflective in their practice, that is to enact a *praxis* as Freire and McLaren have argued to engage

systems of domination and oppression in solidarity with their students: as we see it systems of domination, schooling for reproduction, may only be overcome by individuals who build community.

### Conclusion

Many of Kevin's students had been labeled "bad kids". He understood, however that their behaviors were learned and would only be perpetuated by him and other teachers if they reacted negatively to their behaviors, as such he took a critical humanistic approach (Rodriguez & Magill, Forthcoming) to the development of the curriculum for the program and the pedagogy he enacted in the classroom. The program would provide a highly structured but nurturing classroom environment fostering a community of self-empowered (Dunayevskaya, 1981; Freire, 2000) learners in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. It was his goal to help increase student attendance, academic achievement and social stability through education: Kevin and his colleagues' curricular and pedagogical interventions in the classroom and community support and outreach in responding the particular needs of each student. Furthermore the program provided additional support for students, in ways which made them feel heard, understood, and successful, who were habitually truant from instruction, insubordinate, disorderly while in attendance, or unsuccessful academically.

He also developed community partners with an appreciation for the students' "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005): the Boys and Girls Club for curricular, after school, and psychological support. "Imagine College" at California State University Monterey Bay helped promote artistic expression, unique learning environments such as a filmmaking class, conversations with artists, academic support and older mentor students to help them with school work. Experiences here: helped facilitate motivation for college, fieldtrips, service learner support, and the development of community projects. The local Police Department also worked with students who had criminal records- the probation staff supported students to ensure they stayed in school.

Several students returned to the mainstream classroom and are doing well. The program helped students through the loss of family members, coping with family in jail, arrests and many other issues. Yet we continue to see the ways in which students were marginalized in every day classroom experiences. As students struggle to become emancipated critical thinkers, negative events permeate their experiences further complicating their lives. Influences like rival gang members, easy money from dealing drugs, threat of deportation and forced sexual encounters become marginalizing occurrences in the homogenized classroom.

Many students can navigate common educational pitfalls because of support in other areas of their lives; students placed in inclusion or special education programs do not have that luxury. Furthermore, students who are not born into a family who can pay for tutors, traveling sports teams or vacations must take jobs to help their family survive. They must join gangs to protect themselves from those in the community who would do them harm, they must seek companionship to satisfy emotional voids originally filled loved ones, they must follow the example set for them by family who face similar challenges. They fight because they have nothing to do, they act badly because it is expected of them and they are constantly told it is who they are.

While each student is unique they need a secure, caring, and stimulating atmosphere in which to grow and mature emotionally, intellectually and physically. The Opportunity program offered constant adaptation to student needs, a continuous nurturing of student spirit, voice and culture. We worked in a community of kindness fostering self-discovery and relatedness with the world. Teachers used real time philosophical reflection, practice and inquiry. We provided a supportive environment with specialized curriculum, instruction, guidance and counseling, psychological services, and tutorial assistance to help students overcome barriers to learning. This is not pedagogy unique to the needs of nontraditional students; it may ensure success for students whose only value to the school is their "whiteness", "wealth", "sexuality" or "masculinity". Finally, the success of this program was the teachers' willingness to go to students where they are and understand the lives they lead, live in their communities, play their games, share their food, laugh with and love them.

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