Systemic Constraints on Students' Appropriation of Reform Oriented Curriculum

Nancy Ares, University of Rochester
Dawn M. Evans, Grand Valley State University
Alice M. Harnischfeger, Keuka College

Abstract

We investigate 10th-grade Latinx and African American high school students' engagement in a reform-oriented curriculum designed to foster their critical social analysis of urban schooling. Students' designs of "ideal schools" based on their studies of their neighborhoods largely reproduced existing inequitable structures and practices of schooling. Our study was spurred by the failure of this curriculum and pedagogy to move students to challenge traditional structures of schooling. The grammar of urban schooling, endemic racism, and interest convergence guided our study of students' roles in appropriation of progressive reform and our understanding of the larger constraints within which this effort operated and that limited their critical responses.

Keywords: *urban school reform; youth appropriation of reform; endemic racism; interest convergence; grammar of schooling*

Introduction

We examine the contradictions and tensions seen in students' responses to a reform-oriented curriculum designed to foster their critical thinking about schooling for youth of color in western New York State. Our study site was a high school sophomore class in a progressive program intended to prepare future teachers, filled mostly with Black and Latinx students. Their teacher worked to help them envision democratic views of schooling and the ways that "urban" schools often reproduce inequity.[1] Students conducted mini-ethnographies of their neighborhoods to design an "Ideal School" responsive to their communities' strengths and challenges. We found, however, that the students' Ideal School designs reproduced traditional instruction and structures of schooling they were used to and that they were trying to succeed in, rather than challenging urban schooling. This led us to ask: What influences shaped students' designs of Ideal Schools?

We describe their preparation for critical social analysis of urban schooling and the numerous influences that shaped their designs. That they did little to take up opportunities to challenge existing structures of schooling is not a shock given schools' roles in maintaining inequities (Wildman, 1996; Giroux, 2011). However, the failure of this class' reform-oriented curriculum to move students to critical social analysis struck us as important to understand, as the literature

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1. The term "urban" is in quotes to trouble the many deficit-based assumptions that accompany it.

includes a lot of examples of successful efforts to move to more democratic curricula and liberatory pedagogies (e.g., the Dalton plan, Parkhurst, Bassett, & Eades, 1922; democratic citizenship education, Banks, 2007). Indeed, we found many "best practices" that have been identified in the literature in this particular classroom (discussion-focused pedagogy, students as citizens and community members, explicit critiques of schooling). The teacher had liberatory goals: critical social analyses of schooling in general and in their school and community more specifically; building students' awareness of endemic, systemic racism and oppression in US schools; using critical ethnographic-style methods of gathering and analyzing data about their neighborhoods; and designing "Ideal Schools" based on those analyses. We were drawn to his class for these very reasons—students were engaging in social justice research aimed at fostering their becoming agents of change as future teachers. Still, these students' responses were largely non-critical and reproductive. Thus, we sought to develop a deep understanding of an important phenomenon: why students largely recreated existing structures of schooling when involved in an innovative class and curriculum allegedly aimed at directly challenging those structures. We argue that this is important information for researchers and practitioners interested in transforming schools and engaging students in liberatory classroom practices.

Similar to research around teachers as appropriators of reform (Behrstock-Sherratt, Rizzolo, Laine, & Friedman, 2013; Cohen & Scheer, 2003; Rogers, 2007) we explore *youth* serving in that role. An important contribution of this study is showing the ways they negotiated an alternative approach to curriculum and learning that asked them to challenge conventional notions of schooling. Varied data sources (e.g., observations, interviews, class assignments, district policies, historical literature on District reforms) were analyzed to understand the opportunities and contradictions involved. Thus, an important contribution of the study reported here is our focus on youths' appropriating reform-oriented curriculum centered on teacher-identified problems.[2]

Grammar of Schooling

We drew on the concept of the grammar of schooling (Jenkins & Keefe, 2002; Tyack & Tobin, 1994) to understand students' appropriation of a curriculum aimed at disrupting such conventions:

> By the "grammar of schooling" we mean the regular structures and rules that organize the work of instruction. Here we have in mind, for example, standardized organizational practices in dividing time and space, classifying students and allocating them to classrooms, and splintering knowledge into subjects. (Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 453)

Ruthven (2007) describes the way that standardized notions of classrooms and curriculum, along with a functionalist purpose of schooling-as-certification, have led to ossified practices fiercely resistant to change. When reformers work at changing instruction in pursuit of less technocratic and more learning- and student development-focused goals for schooling, their initiatives often fall short.

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2. There is a rich, related body of research in youth participatory action research that focuses on youth and teachers/adults conducting *youth-directed* studies of problems *they identify together* (Akom, 2003; Morrell, 2003; Torre, Fine, Alexander & Genao, 2005; Tuck, 2009).

The Grammar of "Urban" Schooling: Endemic Racism and Interest Convergence

That racism is endemic to US society and schooling is well established, particularly in work on Critical Legal Studies (Delgado, 1987) and Critical Race Theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Generations of structural and institutional racism have resulted in uneven distributions of resources, educational opportunities, and outcomes across the US, so that students of color and those living in poverty are relegated to struggling communities and schools (Frankenburg & Orfield, 2003). Persistent under-achievement, overly prescribed curricula, and increasing re-segregation along racial and class lines illuminate how entrenched and intransigent these forces are, as reform upon reform is tried and largely fails to truly transform urban schooling. Concepts of endemic racism and interest convergence (explained in more depth below) also guided our work to understand students' responses by placing their work in larger social, historical, and political contexts.

Endemic Racism

CRT scholars argue that racism is pervasive in US society and schooling. It is found in standardization of curriculum and pedagogy and is often magnified in schools serving students of color (Gordon, 2012; James, 2011; Lee, 2009; Tate, 2001). Gordon's (2012) study of urban school reform highlights the persistent influence of deficit-based notions of African American (and other non-dominant) youth on the kinds of reforms schools pursue. Lee (2009) writes about African American youth "facing a widespread culture of low expectations, significant differences in per pupil spending, curricula that are basic-skills oriented, less access to technological resources, and more teachers who are not certified in their fields" (p. 377). Tate (2001) agrees:

> …the role assessment has played in creating low-level curriculum opportunities for students in urban school settings who are African American, Hispanic or acquiring English [is often ignored].[3] For example,…[their teachers] reported significantly more often that test scores were "very" or "extremely" important for evaluating student progress, placing students in special services, planning curriculum and instruction, and recommending textbooks (Madaus, West, Harmon, Lomax, & Viator, 1992; Strickland & Ascher, 1992). They also indicated they had greater incorporation of test-oriented pedagogical strategies and were pressured more often by their administrators to increase test scores. (p. 1020)

These assumptions and practices lead to students of color being taught to pass tests rather than to learn and grow. Rather than rich curricula that may spark interest and engaged learning, they are often taught to approach content as something to master instead of something to explore.

Further, students of color are also often identified as "at risk" based on White middle-class norms of "appropriate" behavior, language use, and "regular" family structures. Research shows the power of such discourse, including that, "The language of risk can serve as a euphemism for racism, sexism, and biases based on factors such as class, immigrant status, family makeup, neighborhood of residence, cultural assumptions, and other 'risk-inducing' constructs" (James, 2012, p. 465). Urban schooling is thus rife with elements of institutional racism: "systemic White domination of people of color, embedded and operating in corporations, legal systems, political bodies, cultural life, and other social collectives" (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009, p. 345). Biddy Mason

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3. We use the term Latinx rather than Hispanic. The use of Hispanic is in a direct quote from Tate (2001).

Academy (BMA), the school at which this study was conducted, was in many ways an institution grounded in these oppressive power dynamics. In this institutional context, our work suggests that BMA's innovative Preparation for Teaching Institute (PTI) program (described below) is an important research site given its challenges to the grammar of urban schools.

Interest Convergence

In situating this study in a larger critical literature, we found important insights in critical race theory's concept of interest convergence (Bell, 1980; Delgado, 1987; Tushnet, 1991). According to Milner (2008), "Interest convergence stresses that racial equality and equity for people of color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of Whites" (p. 333). Bell's (1980) landmark article in the *Harvard Law Review* proposed that interest convergence was at the heart of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision that outlawed racial segregation in schools. He wrote:

> …the legal issue in state-imposed segregation cases was not one of discrimination at all, but rather of associational rights: "the denial by the state of freedom to associate, a denial that impinges in the same way on any groups or races that may be involved." Wechsler reasoned that "if the freedom of association is denied by segregation, integration forces an association upon those for whom it is unpleasant or repugnant." (p. 521)

He further argued that, "The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites. However, the fourteenth amendment [equal protection under the law], standing alone, will not authorize a judicial remedy providing effective racial equality for blacks where the remedy sought threatens the superior societal status of middle and upper class whites" (p. 523). Understanding racial policies in and since *Brown* is not possible without taking into consideration the impact on Whites and the ways that legislation and policy maintain Whites' superior social status while also recognizing that for some, the moral basis for racial equality is indeed important.

Thus, in order for change to occur, dominant groups have to see that what they do give up will not cut deeply into their privilege and power to the point of discomfort or substantial loss. Change can happen but at a rate that is comfortable and with outcomes that are acceptably benign. The PTI program, when seen in this light, is an important example of the ways that endemic racism and interest convergence served to thwart the program's liberatory goals.

Setting

BMA is in a mid-sized school district in Lakeview, a city in western New York. In 2016-2017, the 1714 BMA students were 29.9% Latinx, 8.9% White, 54.9% African American, 6% Asian, 0.2% Native American, and 0.05% two or more races. 66.9% of the students received free/reduced lunch, 10% were designated English Language Learners, and 25% were labeled as needing special education services. These demographics are virtually the same as the 2007-08 academic year in which our study was conducted.[4]

At the time of our study, there were three specialized learning institutes—the Culinary Arts Institute, the Future Firemen Institute, and the Preparing for Teaching Institute (PTI), the

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4. The sources of these data are not included to maintain the anonymity of participants.

program that was the site of this study. Conventional compartmentalized curriculum and content-specific departments (e.g., mathematics, English, science, social studies) characterized the rest of the school. BMA shifted in 2011 from a large, comprehensive high school to one focused on smaller learning communities. Six Advanced Placement/Honors classes were being offered, along with an Advanced Placement preparation class, and an English-as-an-additional-language program. Through those shifts, the PTI has retained its identity as a cooperative, democratic learning environment focused on academics and civic engagement, specifically engagement in social justice in Lakeview City schools.

BMA's official performance data show that only White students were reported as making "acceptable" progress (NYSED, 2013). Thus, despite efforts at innovation, the school continued to struggle to support the academic and other successes of non-dominant students. We discuss the implications of this larger school context in relation to our findings in the conclusion of this paper.

The Preparing for Teaching Institute (PTI)

Local high school teachers and university education professors started the PTI in 1995 to help make the school district's teaching force more demographically diverse and to create local teacher-leaders. Graduates of the program who become certified teachers are guaranteed a position in the local school district. To enter, they undergo a rigorous application process requiring an essay, letters of reference, and a 2.5/4.0 grade point average; they must maintain high academic and good citizenship records throughout the four-year program. Each year of the Institute involves a one-credit seminar. During the tenth grade PTI seminar (the focus of this study), students learn about the social foundations of education in the US, critical ethnographic research, and conduct a mini- ethnographic study of their neighborhoods.

Methodology

Given that our research question—what influenced students' designs of their Ideal Schools?—was broad and focused on students' appropriation of a reform-oriented curriculum, our qualitative methodology included multiple data sources and analyses grounded in those data.

Participants were 30 tenth grade PTI students—21 girls and 9 boys. Twenty-five of the students were non-Latinx Black or Latinx, while 5 were non-Latinx White students. Mr. L., a White teacher, had been teaching in the PTI for 15 years. A 45-minute interview with him was conducted on June 9, 2008. Three researchers conducted focus group interviews with 28 of the 30 PTI students in October 2007. (See Appendix A for the focus group protocol.) Those interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. We gathered Mr. L's Ethnography Project assignment handouts and six Ideal School brochures. We videotaped eight Ideal School classroom presentations. *Table 1* presents a timeline of data collection:

Table 1. Timeline and Data Corpus

Date	Oct. 2007	Feb. 2008	May 2008	June 2008
Data source	3 45-minute videotaped sessions on conducting critical	3 45-minute videotaped sessions on data analysis	6 Ideal School brochures (May 2008)	1 45-minute individual interview with Mr. L (June 9, 2008)

	ethnographies (Oct. 12, 18, 31)	(Feb. 6, 8, 11, 2008)		
	6 30-minute focus groups with students (Oct. 19)			
	Ethnography Project booklet as artifact			

The PTI program serves as a telling case (Mitchell, 1984) to:

> …show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances…From this point of view, the search for a "typical" case for analytical exposition is likely to be less fruitful than a "telling" case in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent. (p. 239)

Again, we sought to develop a deep understanding of students' recreating existing structures of schooling even though the PTI program aimed at disrupting them.

Researcher Positionality

We are all White, middle class women, which required us to consider explicitly the influence of race, social class, and power relations among us and the participants. This was especially true for Ares and Evans, as they were involved in all aspects of the study (Harnsichfeger contributed to data analysis only). Evans was conducting her dissertation study in this classroom, spending 80 days over the academic year immersed in the program. Ares had conducted prior studies in mathematics classrooms at BMA and was brought in to engage PTI students in ethnographic-style data gathering and analysis. Our familiarity with the school and our extended engagement with this group of students and their teacher helped us understand the racial, economic, and social context. Our discussions of what we could and could not understand as White, middle class women also helped. Finally, our abiding interest in anti-racist education and asset-based approaches to research guided our work throughout the study.

Data Analysis

We used a constructivist grounded approach in the initial phase of our analysis, following Charmaz (2006), with the goal of understanding and describing rather than explaining or predicting, and giving priority to illustrating patterns and processes. We conducted process coding (Saldaña, 2012, p. 76) to capture the "ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations, or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handing a problem" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 169, as cited in Saldaña, 2012, p. 77). Two of us used this approach in our first cycle coding of the Ethnography Project packet, focus group interview data, student work products, and the Ideal Schools pamphlets. We came to consensus on categories through discussion.

For example, students' discussions of where learning happens provided insights into the kinds of activities and structures they valued:

- "Broaden the curriculum and add more arts, careers, technologies, and hands-on courses so that students will be more prepared for life outside school;

- Tear down classroom structures, i.e., instead of giving teachers well-defined curriculum, trust the teachers to construct curriculum that connects to the 'real world.'"

And examples of direct connections to school via the PTI program:

- "High expectations are important for all children, especially for children coming from difficult circumstances—they should be supported to aim high;"

- Include the PTI principles (caring, respect, dependability, creativity, cooperation, responsibility) and create a welcoming and safe environment that is respectful, safe and loving so that parents will be interested and confident in sending their children to schools." (Analytic memo, Learning versus Schooling, 07/18/2012)

The distinctions students made between where learning happens (everywhere) and what kinds of things are taught where (academics in schools, non-academics outside of school) were clear, helping us explore their values around learning in relation to the Ideal Schools they created.

To tie our research question to existing literature, we returned to research on school reform and structures of schooling. The grammar of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1994) provided us important explanatory power as a theoretical framework for subsequent analyses. The theory's focus on tensions between structures of schooling and activities of students and educators in school reform efforts guided our attention to ways that historically developed practices acted as constraints on students' uptake of reform.

The third researcher joined in the analyses, providing a source of researcher triangulation to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of our findings. She created content logs for the video data (Jordan & Henderson, 1995) that identified naturally occurring events (e.g., beginnings and endings of tasks, discussions). She then analyzed specific segments that were important for our analysis of ideal schools (Charmaz, 2006; Erickson 2006; Jordan & Henderson, 1995), e.g., segments involving challenges to and maintenance of structures and routines; situating schooling in social and local contexts; and opportunities to imagine alternatives to the status quo.

Our analytic processes ended with collaborative model building involving all three researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1983; Saldana, 2013; see Figure 1, below). We returned to the data to look for confirming and disconfirming evidence to refine our categories and model. We explored our model and claims in relation to elements of the grammar of urban schooling and interest convergence, using shared analytic memoing (Jenkins & Keefe, 2002). Built into our study were four forms of triangulation: Data triangulation (collection over time and by two researchers), investigator triangulation, theory triangulation (grammar of urban schooling, interest convergence), and methodological triangulation (multiple data sources) (Denzin, 2006).

Limitations include gathering data in one class that was unique in the school and district, restricting the claims we can make. Also, our interviews centered on broad questions about participants' views of teaching and learning rather than critiques of schooling. However,

generalizability was not our goal; we sought to understand the potential and limitations to increasing students' critical thinking about learning and schooling. We hoped to glean principles that can inform youth and educators who aim to think more critically about schools in society and move successfully toward substantive reform.

Findings

Again, our focus was on providing in depth descriptions of students' negotiation of this reform-oriented curriculum. Our findings are reported in two sections: 1) Analyses of the PTI program, and 2) analyses of students' work products. We start the first section with the ways that students were prepared to conduct critical social analyses of schools and schooling. Mixed messages in the curriculum are then explored, followed by evidence of both disruption and maintenance of the grammar of schooling. The section ends with contradictions found in the Ethnography Project directions and tasks.

The PTI Curriculum and Activities

Preparation for Critical Analysis

Table 2, next page, summarizes goals and activities supporting students' preparation for critical analysis. The sophomore seminar took a social foundations approach to understanding the history, politics, economics, and sociology of education. Mr. L. is certified in history, and, based on observations and an interview, grounded his teaching in "the belief that future citizens should be endowed with the capacity to solve contemporary social problems based on the wisdom of the ages, the realities of present-day circumstances, and the tools of critical analysis" (Jacobs, 2015, p. 249). For example, in describing the purpose for the major assignment for the first term, the Ethnography Project, Mr. L. said,

> So, we use those skills of the ethnographer to make the familiar sound strange, to get them to be more observant and detailed and learn about their own neighborhood and give them some perception on economics, on sociology in the network of families, churches, the different races, ethnicities, and we give them some perception of the political situation, too…All of this, of course, leading to [the Ideal School] project the second half of the year. (Interview, 06/09/08)

Thus, inequities based on race and class were a central focus of the seminar, and the local Lakeview context served as material for the class' curriculum.

Table 2. Preparation for Critical Social Analysis

Mr. L's sophomore curriculum
- Develop critical social awareness of urban schooling
  - History of education – disparities across groups
  - Comparisons of local urban/suburban contexts
  - Teacher assistant practicum in urban elementary schools
- Critical ethnography
  - Local study of school/community reform as context for learning
  - Developing an ethnographer's persona
  - Gathering neighborhood interview and observation data
  - Analyzing data for challenges/strengths of neighborhoods for children

Mr. L. brought Ares in as an expert in critical ethnographic inquiry. She taught four lessons in the Fall term to support students' critical analysis of conditions in their neighborhoods. For example, she described a community-based participatory ethnography she was conducting of an initiative operating in an area of Lakeview that several students lived in, describing the asset-based stance that challenged deficit depictions of that part of town. She worked with the students and their teacher to learn about ethnographic methods (observation, interviews); and engaged students in constructing interview questions/protocols and practicing through role play. She and students conducted qualitative data analysis over four sessions in February 2008. The teacher's invitation to Ares to add a critical ethnographic lens to the assignment positioned the students as critical analysts who could question the status quo.

Mixed Messages in the PTI Curriculum

Of course, reforms are rarely consistent in their challenges to conventional practice, and Mr. L's sophomore class' curriculum was no exception. Situating his curriculum in the larger context of BMA, Mr. L. attributed a loss of accountability for students and teachers' behavior and performance to BMA's large size:

> it's just too much to have so many students in the school and expect that sense of identity, accountability, cohesiveness…It's a factory model, it's not a model that promotes community well, though everyone would say that's what it's supposed to do… (Interview, June 9, 2008)

He and the other PTI teacher worked hard to establish a sense of community among the students as a counter to the invisibility they experienced as students in the larger school. Our analyses

illuminate the messiness of their efforts to carve out a space for their program. See *Table 3*, below, for examples.

Table 3. Disruption and Maintenance of Grammar of Urban Schooling

Disruptions	Maintenance
• Promoting a sense of community, inter-generational connections, family • Preparation for critical social analysis • Varied seating arrangements • Democratic classroom practices • Serving as teacher aides, debriefing experiences • Conducting Ethnography Project, developing an Ideal School	• Standard schedule of classes • Rigidity in assignment requirements • Limitations to critical social analysis (Ethnography Project, see analysis below) • Constraints on debate, possible problem solutions • Unexamined assumptions • Us versus them

Disrupting the Grammar of Urban Schooling

Analyses of field notes show that there was an ongoing, deliberate effort to establish a healthy community of learners across generations of program participants. The year started with an intensive effort to establish such a community: for the first two-three weeks of school, the sophomore PTI students were engaged in team-building activities and were expected to research and write up team building activities for future use. Significant time was spent in activities with past and present PTI members, and sharing time together and with the teachers' family on various holidays and observances. The teachers are married and have three children; they hosted holiday and other meals at their home and involved the PTI students and their children in each other's lives as well. The culminating luncheon featured former PTI students' sharing their college experiences and current PTI students and teachers reflecting on the past year. A slide show of all the activities conducted by each grade cohort was prepared for viewing. These types of activities served to perpetuate the sense of family and community that the teachers strove to build at the start of that year, and were long-standing traditions in the PTI program.

Actual class meetings and curriculum differed from the typical grammar of urban schooling in that teacher and student roles as well as seating arrangements varied depending on the activity for the day. For instance, one role-play had homeowners facing tenants across the classroom in a potentially confrontational setup around the topic of drug houses in a fictitious neighborhood. Other days, students would be grouped in varying ways to work on activities such as mapping neighborhoods, bus routes to school, and creating youth friendly multiple choice tests—the object of which was to make the teacher fail. In many of their seminar activities, the PTI students were invited to act as discussion leaders or moderators. These roles, interactions, and the seminar's content were very unusual in the broader BMA context.

Academically, Mr. L's purpose for the sophomore seminar was to help students develop a critical social awareness of the contexts of urban schooling and to engage students in democratic classroom practices. The sophomore class learned about the history of education in America, particularly the disparities in education for African Americans and European Americans. At all times, students were encouraged to question and reflect upon what they were doing, saying, reading, and writing.

Six weeks into the school year, the sophomore PTI students were assigned to teachers in two nearby elementary schools. One day every second or third week, the students served as teacher assistants for the morning. On the day following each visit, class time was spent debriefing and discussing their experiences in the context of urban schooling.

The Ethnography Project and the Ideal Schools assignment broadened the official curriculum by using the students' own neighborhoods and Lakeview as content and fodder for critical social analysis. This disrupted the more common practice in BMA of relying on textbook and other materials with little connection to students' everyday lives.

In sum, the PTI disrupted the grammar of urban schooling with: 1) its focus on creating a sense of healthy, family-like community among its students; 2) inclusion of democratic classroom practices; 3) a service learning element involving sophomore students acting as teacher assistants; and 4) the use of students' communities as curriculum and the focus of learning. Important to remember is that this program existed within a conventional comprehensive high school that operated more as a factory model of schooling, with less attention to relationships, more teacher-driven curriculum and teaching, and a focus on standardization rather than personalization.

Maintenance of the Grammar of Urban Schooling

Despite the moves to disrupt, the sophomore PTI class also remained "business as usual." The class met for a standard 45-minute block of time every morning. Even though students were expected to conduct an ethnographic study of their neighborhoods and to design their own Ideal School, there was little leeway offered them in terms of focus; the Ethnography Project handbook was largely a series of worksheets not open to change. Another example of conventional pedagogy was seen in the Drug House scenario assigned to them in the Fall term (described briefly above). Students were given roles as either landlords or residents in a neighborhood that had a known drug house operating. They were given 4 possible resolutions to the identified problem rather than being able to propose their own, and grades were assigned based on stringent teacher-determined criteria that restricted democratic participation. In these ways (little leeway offered the students in terms of focus of study, lack of exploring alternative solutions), the PTI enacted the conventional grammar of schooling (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Of course, the binary between maintenance and disruption is somewhat simplistic, so below our analysis of the Ethnography Project assignment shows the complex mix of messages also seen in the PTI sophomore seminar.

Contradictory Messages in the Ethnography Project

The main task of this assignment was for students to examine the historical development and current state of their neighborhoods and community in order to create ideal schools tailored to those spaces. This was communicated to students on the first page of the packet of handouts:

> The purpose of our ethnography project is to study our neighborhoods so that we understand what the dangers and benefits are to the children who live there. Then, we will be able to determine if our schools are teaching children what they need to survive and succeed. (Ethnography Project booklet)

However, there was a lack of recognition or exploration of assumptions about such things as what constitute dangerous and safe places, why worries about safety were so prominent, and what roles

larger forces, e.g., disinvestment and institutional racism, played in shaping their communities. While there was potential for students to address those larger issues, without explicit scaffolding they were left to conduct those examinations on their own. Given their youth and their schooling up to that point, this was not something they did readily or easily, if at all.

The Ethnography Project included "Lakeview History," through which students explored significant events in the past 85 years in the City, the effects on a formerly bustling business area following white flight in the late 1960s to surrounding suburbs, and statistics on transportation over several decades. Students also mapped their routes to and from school, identifying areas considered "dangerous" and those thought to be "good for children." This activity also had them compare the shapes, sizes and numbers of streets in the City with those in three surrounding suburbs. Interviews with neighbors, as well as comparisons of schools from the past with today's schools were also included. Each of these activities was complex enough to invite deep reflection on the characteristics of surrounding neighborhoods.

One of the first exercises in the Ethnography Project was to "make the familiar strange," or to adopt an anthropological point of view in considering how familiar rituals (driving to and from work, etc.) could be seen as objects of study. Similar positioning of familiar objects/scenes (home, neighborhood) was part of two other activities/tasks ("Home Description," "Lens Assignment"), where students were to choose a persona or role through which to describe their home. The students could choose from being an astronaut on an alien planet, an explorer in a "primitive" culture, an uneducated traveler in a technologically advanced society, a poor person in the rich world, a rich person in the poor world. Being an outsider meant being uneducated, rich or poor, from another planet, or from a privileged versus non-dominant culture. That they were invited to make the familiar strange is interesting as a way to foster a critical analytic position and encourage them to question assumptions about things such as housing, neighborhoods, and schools. Their required uses of descriptive language, visualization and imagination, and their attention to details of their neighborhoods and communities were all important to develop as informed citizens and as critical analysts of social phenomena. Connections from a) "Choosing a perspective other than your own" to describe to one's neighborhood 2) to "making the familiar strange" to analyze one's room to 3) taking on a "critical lens" to describe structural features of one's neighborhood all challenged taken-for-granted perspectives. However, the power dynamics involved and the judgments being made about the "Other" were presented in troubling ways. Most of the relations of power were not expressed explicitly; instead, unexamined assumptions were left to operate. The explorer was not simply exploring, but judging what primitive means (reifying notions of primitive versus developed or civilized). The focus on rich versus poor, no matter which persona the students took on, reified a binary of "us versus them,"

We found contradictions in the Ideal Schools designs the students presented as well. It was in these products that the strength of the grammar of urban schooling became most apparent, as seen next.

Students' Appropriations of the Reform-Oriented Curriculum

Our analyses of the ideal school projects yielded a model that represents the features of and relations among elements of students' designs (see Figure 1, below). The complex mix of conformity and resistance to normative grammars of urban schooling is illuminated.

The majority of students' designs closely followed what these students had known and experienced in their many years in school. This lack in innovative thinking was initially a surprise

to us and has larger significance for understanding students' appropriation of this reform-oriented assignment (addressed later in the paper).

Structures of schooling, regulation of bodies and behavior, and compartmentalized curriculum were primary features. The physical layouts of the schools represent, most obviously, examples of traditional planning. A majority of designs consisted of rectangular buildings that were divided into square classrooms, with a main office towards the front of the building and lockers organized by grade level. One drawing included a trophy case and a room that was labeled as the "teachers' lounge," mirroring physical features of BMA.

The organizational plans were likewise traditional. Most plans included a ninth through twelfth grade structure. The one innovative organization did not begin until the eleventh grade. Daily schedules were also traditional: School days extended from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm, and the school week ran from Monday through Friday. Likewise, the school year was from September to May. One-hour classes and ten minutes for students to pass from one class to the next reflected a traditional time frame. One dramatic exception was a suggestion for a "college-like" and "open" campus, which students would attend only when they had scheduled classes.

There were some notable exceptions. The School of Elective Activities (SEA) and the Institute of Technology, Environment and Arts (ITEA) both situated themselves in the poorest part of the city, a region that was also the focus of the community transformation initiative addressed with Ares. SEA's student teacher ratio was 7:1 with a maximum school size of 300 students. For these designers, quality teacher contact time meant fewer students per teacher and a smaller, more intimate setting, allowing teachers to become more acquainted with student needs, lives, etc. Similarly, ITEA specified the number of students on their campus to be 900—a good deal smaller than most urban high schools.

Elitism and selectivity were prominent. One student noted, "It's not free." Although an attempt was made to extend school eligibility to some students from high poverty families, all prospective students had to undergo an interview process and admission was based on past academic progress. Any scholarships were also closely linked prior achievement. One brochure emphatically stated, "Only the motivated are welcome." Finally, one proposed entrance criterion included having a 3.0 (out of 4.0) grade point average on a mandatory state exam. In the same vein, once admitted to the school, grading criteria would be quantitative. These ideas are well within the traditional grammar of schooling, but also suggest recognition of the stakes involved as well as the criteria deemed important in this era of standardization and normalization.

Discipline = Behavior Management

Management of behaviors and bodies also followed normative schooling practices. There was significant surveillance of both physical and behavioral actions. First, our participants proposed to regulate students' dress. One design suggested brown/orange or yellow uniforms, but made some concessions in allowing students to design these uniforms themselves, but "only in these colors." Likewise, clothing choices were to be limited: "no sagging," "no spaghetti straps." Regulations for behavior were also strict, with firm (and familiar) repercussions for infractions. Students who repetitively broke minor behavioral rules would be "sent to their house administrator and they will be in charge of disciplinary action." Suggestions for repeated rule violations once again reflected common school practices: "First you get like a warning in class, then you get a detention." "If you don't go to your detention, you get an in-school suspension for a week." One student emphasized control: "Follow the rules and we'll all have fun."

Teachers were also to be closely monitored: "If teachers don't have most of their class passing, they will lose their pay." Close surveillance of these teachers' honesty as they adapted to these standards were also proposed: "Once a week an administrator, the principal, will come in to check on this."

Finally, participants made plans to keep their worlds inside and outside of school separate. One student noted, "No cell phones will be allowed" and another specified, "First, you are warned, then they [cell phones] will be confiscated." A third student added the stipulation, "electronic devices can only be used in study halls." Most ideal schools involved enclosed, protected buildings, with one participant mentioning an outside wall, a gate to each door, and a top over the building— "If a bomb hits, we can close the top." This reflected the BMA building itself, as there were yellow radiation signs on the outside of the building, marking it as a designated safe zone for the neighborhood. These features of Ideal Schools suggest the need for a sense of impenetrability.

Curriculum: Innovative Programs

Students seemed more innovative around curriculum, as most of the schools took a "magnet school" approach with specialized curricula. For instance, the ITEA ideal school offered curriculum based on: 1) "Click," a computer program where students learn how to use, protect, and make computers; 2) "Theme Park," where students have fun and are creative while learning math and physics; 3) "Go Wild," an environmental safety program which encompassed earth science; and finally, 4) "Think Out Loud," in which art (e.g., music, band, or painting) was studied. For another school, animals were very important; its program sought to broaden human connections through first developing young peoples' connections to animals. According to their brochure, "Students will also have opportunities to communicate and spend time with school animals because a lot of students have trouble communicating w/their friends and family and like sharing w/animals."

Three schools' curricula seemed closely tied to aspects of BMA and the PTI program: one was patterned on the BMA model with a Café and NASCAR program taught, in part, by professional chefs and NASCAR drivers. This is strongly reminiscent of BMA's Firefighters program and its Culinary Program's café. Promising connections to PTI's ties with local elementary schools and service were seen in the ITEA school, as their concern was with the community around them. They proposed a Giving Back to the Community Club (GBCC) as one of their extracurricular activities. Another school, the Leadership Academy, had an extracurricular activity called the Holiday Helping Club, which seemed to be of the same mold.

All but one group proposed specialized fields within their curricula, e.g., engineering, interior and fashion design, business management, medicine, foreign languages/foods, video game design, computer technology, environmental programs, culinary programs, NASCAR-type automotive studies, weapons, spying, and self-defense, to name just a few. These were to be studied in addition to the core subjects (Math, English).

Importantly, the larger school district and school context provided ideas for students to take up. Open enrollment was a major school reform approach in Lakeview starting in 1964; that policy still exists today (Brazwell, 2010). Students and families can choose to enroll in schools outside their neighborhoods and communities based on their desires to attend particular schools with specific programs, for example, drama and performance arts, democratic and social justice, or an International Baccalaureate school. The PTI and the other institutes at BMA were obvious models for students' proposed specialized programs. This history of providing specialized programs and

schools likely influenced the options the PTI students considered. Next, we present another layer of analysis that ties our themes and model to the larger literature in urban schooling.

Discussion: Connections to Grammar of Schooling and Critical Race Theories

The instances of innovation and conformity in the Ideal School designs can be seen as a mix of students' resisting the traditional treatment of high school students and, at the same time, conforming to measures of school success. Yosso (2000) labels this "Resilient resistance…the intersection between conformist and transformational resistance where the strategies students use 'leave the structures of domination intact, yet help the students survive and/or succeed'" (p. 181, as cited in Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 320). These students were challenging the deficit notions that shaped the education their school and District offered, succeeding in spite of the structures and practices that formed barriers to their successful trajectories out of school and into the world of higher education or work. In the context of Lakeview City School District, their success in finding and participating in the PTI was an act of resistance in and of itself.

The Grammar of Urban Schooling

For the most part, we found that the grammar of urban schooling was so strong that students did not challenge it when given the opportunity and support to do so. Indeed, Mr. L. recognized limitations in the ways students responded to the Ideal Schools assignment:

> While he is pleased with the work that students do on their Ideal Schools because it teaches them the multitude of elements that comprise a school, there is an element of disappointment because "I don't think we're thinking outside the box enough. I think there are schools there that are replicating Biddy Mason Academy but they're just changing the mascot." (Analytic memo, June, 2008)

In practical terms, PTI involved only one-credit year-long seminars among the many other courses they took, which likely limited its impact. Beyond that, we theorize that "real" school had become naturalized to the extent that students' imaginations were bounded by their own experiences in 10 years or more of schooling. Immersion and internalization were very likely operating similarly in students' notions of schooling, as school structures and practices became taken for granted. This situation is somewhat like the story that fish do not know what water is because they are immersed in it (Sivers, 2012, http://sivers.org/fish). The strength of the imprinting, perhaps simply due to the large number of hours spent in school, may be such that the PTI teacher's intentions of encouraging critique were swamped or hardly influential.

However, PTI students were cognizant of the exclusive nature of their program and the power of conforming to the grammar of urban schooling as a way to gain access to opportunities and dominant forms of social capital. Given that PTI is a selective program with a college-going culture, expecting students to work against the grain may seem unreasonable. The program rewarded "appropriate" behavior, and although enacting a more progressive pedagogy and curriculum than the larger school, operated on a limited notion of social critique. Thus, the ideal schools they created bore an uncanny resemblance to the schools to which they have been socialized. Students tended to maintain and even intensify familiar physical and control-oriented structures (security systems, selective admittance criteria, disciplinary sanctions). Being successful in school

meant compliance, conformity, and obedience. Given the students' expectations of going to college and benefitting from the hierarchical power relations that result, perhaps challenging the grammar of schooling seemed unwise to them.

Similar findings were reported by Nygreen (2013), whose Participatory Action Research Team for Youth (PARTY) program involved him and his students from "an alternative high school to which students were involuntarily transferred if they fell significantly behind in credits toward graduating" (p. 2). The group designed and taught a full-term social justice class at their school, designed around "learning goals [that] emphasize orientations and habits of mind that are consistent with Freire's notion of critical consciousness" (p. 97). Even though the goals and curriculum were liberatory, the ways the PARTY students orchestrated classroom activities and relationships with their students undermined them through such things as assigning grades and letting behavior go that distracted the class from engaging in the content of their social justice course. They were there to teach a social justice curriculum, but had not and did not consider how to orchestrate classroom activity in productive ways. Nygreen (2013) concluded that the

> grammar of schooling…serve[d] to regulate teacher agency and prevent alternative educational approaches so that…Although PARTY enjoyed substantial freedom over how to organize and teach the social justice class,…members mimicked dominant practices of schooling, not because we had to, but because it seemed to "make sense." (p. 128)

The idea that there were limited "available identities" for PARTY students and their teacher is helpful in considering why the PTI students reproduced conventional schooling—it made sense in the context of what kinds of schools they could even consider being possible.

Two Tenets of Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory's focus on interest convergence and endemic racism helped us tie our findings from the PTI sophomore class to larger structures of schooling in Lakeview and the US. It also helped us tie those findings to the development of schools in the history of racialized and racist approaches to schooling.

Endemic Racism

The grammar of urban schooling is powerfully constraining with its strong potential for internalized racism and self-policing that militates against the kind of critical analysis that may have moved students beyond deficit notions to resource-rich stances toward their neighborhoods. Indeed, the District's 1964 open enrollment policy was such that "…Black students could attend predominantly White schools outside the attendance zone of their neighborhood schools. White students would be allowed (but not forced) to do the same in reverse" (Brazwell, 2010, p. 7). The message to urban Lakeview students (and their families) was that their neighborhoods and neighborhood schools were inferior, and that predominantly White neighborhoods and schools were desirable places to live and learn. This deficit-based view was reinforced in some ways in the PTI Ethnography and Ideal School projects.

However, while students' self-interested pursuit of goals make sense, the limitations on their upward mobility set by the larger social and political context are ignored if the focus stays on the individual. In his study of working class boys' resistance to schooling, Willis (1977/1981b)

wrote, "the difficult thing to explain about how working class kids get working class jobs is why they let themselves. It is much too facile simply to say that they have no choice" (p. 2, as cited in McGrew, 2001, p. 28). This seems applicable to this study if it is reworded: the difficult thing to explain about why students of color end up conforming to white middle class norms and narrow definitions of success is why they let themselves. It is much too simple to say that they have no choice. Critical examinations of social and cultural capital can help to make sense of PTI students' push to conform. The Ethnography Project did aim to some extent to enhance students' awareness of the social capital evident in their neighborhoods as a way to help them analyze how their school was responding to the community's social and economic contexts. Rios Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, and Moll (2011), in challenging some approaches to using students' funds of knowledge[5], note that:

> Existing research on social capital places the burdens of social change on the individual or on communities of color, continuing to perpetuate White privilege (Akom, 2006). In sum, Akom (2006) argues that traditional definitions of social capital fail to incorporate the ways in which under-represented students' identities influence the accumulation of social capital and potential for mobility. (p. 173)

As minoritized people in the US, the potential for PTI students being able to ascend the economic ladder to financial stability is almost inevitably constrained. This finding is supported in the literature that notes that, "having access to social capital (and we argue to cultural capital) does not automatically translate into activation or mobilization" (Rios Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravit, & Moll, 2011, p. 70). Rather than seeing the ways that conforming and complying with institutional norms could result in conflicting notions of how to be successful, our analyses indicate that students were not supported in examining their racialized and marginalized status as students of color. Thus, social reproductive functions of schooling worked through such mechanisms as limited recognition of non-dominant forms of social capital, as well as the grammar of 'urban' schooling that naturalizes students of color being positioned as sources of their own marginalization (Giroux, 2011).

Interest Convergence

The PTI program is more than 20 years old. It has not been expanded, even though it shows evidence of success: 200 students have graduated since its inception in 1995. Thirteen PTI graduates were teachers in the Lakeview District the year of our study. The limitation on the size and reach of the program can be seen as the slow pace of change Milner (2008) writes about:

> Inherent in the interest-convergence principle are matters of loss and gain; typically, someone or some group, often the dominant group, has to negotiate and give something up in order for interests to converge or align…Lopez (2003) asserted, "Racism always remains firmly in place but that social progress advances at the pace that White people determine is reasonable and judicious" (p. 84). Change is often *purposefully* and *skillfully* slow and at the will and design of those in power. (p. 333, 334)

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5. Funds of knowledge are "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992, p. 133).

We conjecture that the school district allowed PTI to form and to continue because of the goal of producing teachers of color in a District that is predominantly Black/Brown with a predominantly White teaching force. Leaders can point to the program as evidence of their efforts to diversify the ranks of teachers. However, requiring that state-mandated standardized assessments of students remain unchanged, that the PTI program be squeezed into BMA's standardized curriculum, and that the program be exclusive in who can be admitted and stay limited the amount of change possible. Keeping a program meant to diversify teaching ranks can be a salve for White guilt. Slowing or preventing the growth of a program focused on preparing progressive educators aware of social inequities in systems of schooling and in the District itself serves the interests of the largely white, middle-class centered status quo.

Implications

We aimed to show how the pedagogy of reform at PTI was insufficient to challenge students' views of schooling. If we wish urban educational reform to utilize the promise and agency of students, approaches to engaging them must go beyond invitations to "think outside the box." Simplistic examination of educational and socioeconomic inequities only confirms what they already know – their neighborhoods and opportunities are poorer than those in the suburbs. While there was potential to move beyond deficit-based explanations and toward designing truly change-oriented schools, even this more innovative approach fell short of its goals.

Still, there are contradictions in our findings that provide glimpses of possible alternatives. Some of these are seen woven into students' designs and their emphasis on security, discipline, and exclusivity: They point to larger issues of concern in education. Taines (2011) conducted a related study of youth who were involved in a community-based reform focused on school activism. Students' concerns about school lunches, bathrooms, and teacher quality seemed trivial in relation to their schools' underachievement and low graduation rates. However, when they discussed their concerns, it was clear that for the students these seemingly small issues were connected to deeper ones, including feeling that they were not safe, were not valued, and that too many of their teachers didn't care about them. What may have *seemed* trivial were actually substantive concerns. In this view, students in our study were addressing similarly large issues with their attention to security, classroom management (if teachers do not manage their classrooms well, they are allowing students to fail by default), and high standards that invite/require students to work hard and teachers to teach well, all of which are of high interest to policy makers and educators as well. The implication is that moving *with* youth beyond innovation within existing school practices and structures requires that adults take on sustained, active roles as mentors in examining the structural, political, and policy implications of the innovations they envision. Noguera and Cannella (2007) stress the importance of "veteran activists who serve as formal and informal mentors, counselors, and supporters" (p. 335) of youth in their work to identify and address inequities. They were referring to youth engaging in civic action and policy reform. In PTI, the mentorship would need to go beyond examining the nature of urban neighborhoods as contexts for schooling to examining institutional racism, economic marginalization, and other oppressive forces that limit many urban schools' abilities to be truly responsive and effective places for non-dominant youth to develop as socio-politically aware, academically successful, and critically engaged community members.

Future research that follows up with these students to explore the lasting impacts (or not) of their work in the PTI Ethnography Project in their lives would be highly informative along those

lines. Some of them may have finished their teacher preparation and pursued teaching as a profession—their experiences and perspectives would add a longitudinal dimension that could inform further efforts in the PTI and other such programs about near- and long-term influences.

Finally, perhaps reformers would be well advised to consider Cook-Sather's (2009) advice that students' dialoguing with not only teachers, but also school administrators, policy makers, etc. might lead to truly innovative and imaginative ways to restructure schooling. It is possible that if the PTI sophomores had a wider audience for their Ideal Schools, their work may have had some influence. If we want reforms to transform rather than simply improve schooling and we want youth to be involved as stakeholders, the findings here shed light on just how deliberate and inquisitive we must be in partnering with youth in considering truly substantive change.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Protocol

You might remember that [Ares is] studying the ways that youth make their way in everyday life in the community to see what kinds of resources you/they draw on. A couple of things that you can help me with to get this part started are about teaching and learning. I'm interested in where and when teaching and learning happens. When you think about teaching and learning, where do you think about those things happening?

How do you think teaching and learning take place?

In all of these places (home, workplace, etc.), who does the teaching and the learning?

What's a way you have learned about something…

Nancy Ares is an associate professor in Teaching & Curriculum at the University of Rochester. Her research focuses on cultural practices, language, relations of power, and participation in classrooms and communities. Critical sociocultural and spatial theories guide her work that views non-dominant youth and communities as rich in resources that should be central to learning and development

Dawn M. Evans is an Associate Professor of English Education at Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI. Her professional interests lie in using funds of knowledge in the classroom and, more recently, developmental reading.

Alice M. Harnischfeger is an associate professor of Education at Keuka College, Keuka Park, New York. Her research explores constructions of identity in youth, critical analysis of the effects of school practices on non-dominant/non-conforming youth, and the connection of plac*e* to institutional practices.