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Debbie Sonu
CUNY Hunter College

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Forgotten memories of a social justice education: Difficult knowledge and the impossibilities of school and research

Debbie Sonu

Hunter College, CUNY, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper is about memory, the elusive process of remembering and of an encounter between a researcher and a participant who after five years reunited to remember. The object under study is a high school social justice curriculum with a central focus on the development of social action projects. Grounded in Pitt and Britzman's work on difficult knowledge, this paper asks: What do 10th grade students who spent four years attending a school committed to the Freirian principles of political engagement remember about their high school experience? Past and recent interviews are woven together to surface three emergent lines of thinking: the failure to secure knowledge as unitary and in agreement; education as deferred in time; and research as relational dilemmas and unconscious desire. The aim is to complicate teaching and learning by illuminating its difficulties and unseating our reliance on evidentiary accountability, production and outcome. Throughout, the positionality of the researcher is discussed, particularly as unconscious desire for social justice, as lovely knowledge, becomes transferred through one participant, Sadie.

KEYWORDS

Social justice; memory;
difficult knowledge;
teaching; forgetting

Where does one situate the event that is experience? In the past that is narrated or in the presence of its interpretation? (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 759)

Although Sadie¹ was 15 years younger than me, she had always been taller, and in the last five years, it seemed little had changed. Her hair was cut just as it was in high school, straightened right below the ear and she was wearing a smear of blue eye-shadow and pink lip-gloss. I was relieved and slightly surprised at the ease in which we encountered each other, the immediate familiarity of her laughter, the way we embraced. It was like old friends, now of the same generation. Fourteenth Street was abuzz, and the New York City traffic muffled my attempts to fill the spaces with pleasantries. In a brisk turn, we rounded the corner and she took the lead. I followed in step until we both realized I was the one who knew the directions. Sadie had always been a natural born leader. When the waitress took our order, she decided almost immediately on the fusilli pasta with chicken. I wavered back and forth and settled on something completely random and unlike me. She always knew what she wanted; in my mind, Sadie had always been resolute.

This paper is about memory, the elusive process of remembering and of the remembered thing itself, of an encounter between a researcher and a participant who, after some time, were reunited again to remember. The remembered object in this case is a 10th grade social action project that emerged out of many months during which Sadie and her classmates bravely tackled the misconduct of the security guards at their Brooklyn, New York high school. From this example emerges an investigation into the remembering subjects themselves, the dilemmas that issue from encounters of teaching, learning and in this case, also of research. Against certainty and consensus, this work attempts to unhinge a representation of social justice that is unitary and in agreement. It seeks to understand the impossibilities of education through the curious marvels of time and the seductive demands of desire. The pragmatic questions remain: what do 10th grade students who spent four years attending a school committed to the Freirian principles of political and civic engagement remember about their social justice high school experience? How are such memories returned, repeated and worked through in their young adult lives? Even more, the inquiry continues: How can acknowledging the difficulty of narrating educational experience, with its gaps and absences, anxieties and desires, make us more attuned to our understanding of teaching, learning and research?

Certainly, much of empirical research in education frames the pedagogical moment as an organized and predictable event that occurs between the teacher and a group of students. Within the temporal architecture of the classroom, teachers enact lessons that are anticipated and ordered. Contemporary models for curriculum development often begin with essential questions and assessments that are smartly aligned with defined aims and objectives. As borrowed from the learning sciences (Taubman, 2012), the proof of teaching is based on the degree and rate of dispositional change in students, measured against developmental benchmarks and evidenced by standardized exams. Periodic assessments ensure fidelity and progress.

The difficulties here, and there are many, lie in the idea that however refined our instructional methods are, we cannot guarantee that our intentions, desires and hopes reliably transfer as part of the experiences of our students (Biesta, 2013). When concerning education, we are not only faced with the impossibility of representing our pedagogical subject with accuracy and clarity, but we are simultaneously forced to reckon with existential questions about the meanings and traces that are left to linger after that moment. Acknowledging this acknowledges education as an abundant site between the past and the present, between presence and absence, a place in which to play out resistance, to work through phantasies and to forget for the sake of remembering.

In using the notion of difficult knowledge (Britzman, 2003, 2013; Britzman & Pitt, 2004; Pitt & Britzman, 2003), I attempt to represent a portrait of teaching, learning and research that challenges the primacy of immediate outcomes and contests the idea of learning as evidence-based production. The intent here is to invite the impossibilities of learning as part of the educational endeavor and to explore unexpected breakdowns, encounters of the self and remembering/forgetting, as events that conjure up education when perhaps education was never meant to be. As Deborah Britzman (2003) claims, "The concept of impossibility signals a certain excess and distress, which results when the qualities of trying to learn and to teach, namely, the desire to persuade, believe, and transform the self and the other, encounter uncertainty, resistance, and the unknown" (p. 15). Therefore, this paper draws upon the memory of one young adult as she is asked to remember her high

school experience and in doing so, calls into question our illusory confidence about what makes teaching effective. Similarly bound to illusions of confidence, the experience of researching with Sadie provokes parallel concerns about the fragility of knowingness and the relational dilemmas that are produced when one's desire meets incongruous realities. My own demand for justice, as a site upon which to share, presents a problematic dimension to the work of research. In what follows, I present this story of Justice High School, as it is my story, as my remembrances of the past and the more present reconstructions of what Britzman calls, difficult knowledge.

Background

Justice High is a small learning community that encourages their predominantly Black and Latin@ students to consider the meanings and manifestations of social justice as a form of resistance against political oppression and disenfranchisement. With *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in hand and backdropped by sprawling murals of Che Guevara, the teachers here work tirelessly with students to examine their lived experience through the critique of systemic discrimination, problematizing the historic condition that continues to sustain hardship for the subjugated, the poor, immigrants, women and people of color. While other high schools use their advisory course for homework assistance and college readiness, Justice High teachers design this 9th and 10th grade one-hour period of the day to focus on the centerpiece of their social justice mission. "This is where we do social justice," one teacher remarked. Amid a flurry of heated emotion, it is common to walk through the heavy steel doors of Ms. Vee's advisory class and enter into debates over issues such as police brutality, gang violence, homophobia and racism.

The first phase of this project began in 2006 when I was assigned to do an in-depth case study at Justice High for a national organization on high school reform. At the time, Justice High School was no more than three years old and I was charged with interviewing teachers, students, parents and administrators about its recent conversion from a large-scale comprehensive campus into five independent small learning communities. Many times throughout this work, fond memories of my elementary teaching years in East Los Angeles would appear on my mind, my activist colleagues protesting in red, our refusal to accept the standardized bilingual program, Cesar Chavez, Cinco de Mayo, the 1968 Chicano Blowouts. The justice imperative was why I pursued teaching. Yet such commitments also come with a demand to legitimize teaching as a vehicle for social change, a demand that would surface in hundreds of pages of dissertation work, a desire that would appear in the research as I attempted to bring Sadie in closer agreement with my own memories of Justice High. Within the next month, I frequented Ms. Vee's ninth grade advisory classroom once every two weeks. In the following 10th grade year, the students remained with Ms. Vee and I volunteered in their room at least once a week. In the last few months of the 2007–2008 academic year, my presence grew as the students turned to the completion of a social action project that addressed allegations of mistreatment by on-campus security officers.

The three young adults, who I became reacquainted with five years after their graduation, all participated in the making of a Town Hall meeting that attempted to address the inappropriate conduct of several campus security guards. According to the students, the New York City police officers who were assigned to ensure safety at Justice High were

allegedly stealing from their backpacks, making lewd sexual comments to the teenage females, and inviting students to off-campus parties. To expose their misconduct, students in Ms. Vee's advisory designed a series of actions that included collecting data on incidence rates through a school survey, videotaping re-enactments of misconduct, and planning a Town Hall meeting in which to present their findings to the entire 9th and 10th grade classes (Sonu, 2009). This project evolved over the course of many months and resulted in the production of a tri-fold brochure and a Town Hall meeting that required hours of rehearsal and the courage to speak truth to power against the New York City police officers who were assigned at their school.

In 2015, I received a small grant from the City University of New York to conduct a study on remembering and worked to bring the three students back together again to reflect on what a social justice high school experience meant in their young adult lives. Sadie and I kept in sporadic contact through Facebook, and she put me in touch with the two others. My attempts to contact other classmates failed; one participant expressed initial enthusiasm but then discontinued all communication. Returning to the place of high school can be haunting for some, it certainly is for me, and after some effort I relinquished trying. I interviewed each of three participants for over an hour on my university campus, and then scheduled one focus group at which they reunited for the first time since graduation. I asked them to describe how they have grown, returned interview transcripts drafted when they were 14 and 15 years old, and asked them to think back upon their adolescent days. Now in their early 20's, living in South Carolina, Syracuse, and Brownsville, Brooklyn, they spoke of life, the temporality of existence, the memories of a social justice education both lost and re-found. While all their narratives were illuminating, it was Sadie, who by virtue of her remarkable personality and blunt honesty, worked with me most often throughout the two years that I conducted research in her advisory class. It was Sadie who was most attentive to the idea of meeting with me again to share her memories of Justice High.

Difficult Knowledge

While a number of scholars (see Zembylas, 2014) explore what renders knowledge difficult in the context of museum studies (Simon, 2011); language and literacy (Tarc, 2011, 2015); and history education (Farley, 2009; Hoffman, 2000; Simon, DiPaolantonio & Clamen, 2002), Britzman's questions over difficult knowledge also hold direct relation to the workings of a social justice education. By many accounts, social justice teaching is premised on the notion that education has the social responsibility to address systems of oppression by cultivating praxis-oriented dispositions in students (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Macrine, McLaren, & Hill, 2010; Oakes & Lipton, 2003). By critically analyzing how injustice works on micro and macro levels of society, students are asked to take action within their own communities by exposing inequitable conditions and fighting for local change. What form these actions take is largely an issue of representation that is made difficult by the authoritative position of the teacher and the product-oriented traditions of schooling (Sonu, 2012). Relational dilemmas such as these are further complicated as social justice imperatives are brought in by adult teachers who may live outside the material realities of their students, some of whom may carry inaccurate perceptions of how the other lives within this condition. In addition, these pedagogies are often directed toward communities within which the risk, loss and trauma of social, economic and political injustice is

most viscerally and directly felt. They require students to take responsibility by forcing an attachment to a condition that may ignite in young people contradictory emotions of comfort and refusal.

The aim of this paper, then, is not to critique social justice teaching in order to move out of the impossible, nor is it to stultify the necessary work done by K-12 activist educators. But to instead explore three areas in which social justice teaching and the narration of learning is made difficult for the purpose of relieving the pressure of control and certainty in educational practice, of trusting in the inexplicable mysteries that are left to linger after the school doors are closed, and to candidly reflect on what it means to study a pedagogical subject that we as political teachers and researchers hold so dear within the core of our being – to teach for social justice.

Failing to Secure the Subject

In one well-known example, Britzman (1998, 2000) uses the concept of difficult knowledge to discuss the profound arguments made around the curricular representation and pedagogical use of Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. At its core, the diary represents the deep suffering and utter devastation experienced during the genocide of European Jews by the Nazis. It potentiates an examination into the structures that provoke hatred and aggression, the condition of vulnerability and fear and the power of narrating and bearing witness to profound loss and horror. Yet despite such depth, representations of Anne Frank are also susceptible to idealized models of courage, adolescent yearning and martyrdom that de-emphasize the magnitude of the devastation befallen the Jewish people by shifting focus on the more uplifting and universal qualities of the diary. By using this example, Britzman asks: What happens when historical accuracy is in doubt, when facts are unclear, and when the truth is called into question? What would it mean then to think of education through such terms?

To begin, we can think of the pedagogical moment as made difficult in two important ways: first, by the impossibility of containing meaning within the confines of communication, and second, by the ways in which inner conscious and unconscious attachments refuse to reconcile knowledge that is new and discomfiting. For social justice educators, the purpose of education is layered, urgent and aimed toward a futurity yet-to-come. This vision of the world is based on a social imagination intimately rooted in singular desires for hope, narratives of trauma, notions of solidarity and change. Given what David Tyack and William Tobin (1994) call the grammar of schooling, or the immutable structures of the educational institution, social justice educators must reconcile this struggle for justice, one that is profoundly enduring and deep-seated, with the outcome-oriented processes engrained in developmental theories of teaching and learning. In some cases, this entanglement is translated as the completion of a project that addresses some issue of social import and urgency. As in the teaching of Anne Frank, difficult knowledge becomes replaced by hallowed out content or diverted into technique and skill. Anne Frank becomes a persuasive paper. Social justice becomes a completed project. Some of this is conscious and deliberate, much of it occurs without question.

Below is an excerpt from an interview I conducted with Sadie shortly after the completion of the Town Hall project on security personnel in 2008. I share it here to illustrate the difficulty in representing social justice as unitary and the ways in which schooling over

determines evidence as proof of learning. In subsequent sections, I will present her memory of this very same project five years later.

I first asked her, "Tell me how the project started."

First, Ms. Vee announced it and everybody was like, I don't want to do it. Nobody wanted to do it because it seemed so boring. Why are we wastin' our advisory time, when we usually just socialize with our friends?

But me and Jordana started the pamphlet, we made like a rough base out of some construction paper, and we did the pie chart and all that stuff. Byron made letters to the principal and to the Board of Education, and they also, him and Thomas, started a petition. Jannine and Darnisha made posters and um, when it came really close to the presentation time, me and Jordana had to stop doing the pamphlet and Catherine, Fariolis, and Melissa did it, then me and Jordana went to help with the posters. But, I had to start with the presentation because I was gonna speak.

"That sounds like a lot of work," I remarked.

It was pretty intense, all that work that we put in, we really thought it was going to be this humungous change. But none of the security guards showed up, that's what happened. I think the presentation overall was great. Not great, but it was good because it did something that all the other presentations didn't do. None of the other presentation had pamphlets, all the other presentations had speakers but it was like not that deep.

What was the letter about?

The letter basically said that we didn't like what was happening in our school and wanted things to change. So they gave the letter to [the principal], they mailed one to the DOE, and they gave one to [the head of security]. The letter was basically trash talking, basically it said I don't like what is happening at this school; I want to change it. He didn't say, well, the school is kind of one sided and we would like it if it changed. It was like, change it! I felt like, I guess if it was a little more friendlier or kind, then we probably would've gotten a better outcome.

So what happened afterwards? Did anything change?

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

Difficult knowledge presents manifold entry points into this surprising excerpt on social action projects. Despite the kernel of pride she felt by its completion, Sadie is unabashed in her discontent that not only was she coerced into the project, but that it resulted in a sense of risk, hopelessness and even danger. There is a feeling of tension and hurriedness in her accounting here, the rattling off of all the responsibilities that needed tending, and then the subsequent disappointment when there was no one there to listen.

As difficult knowledge is used to understand our engagement with historical trauma, so too, are implicated the teacher and learner's encounter with difficult knowledge in social

justice settings. As said by Aparna Mishra Tarc (2015), *pedagogic* is “the inner communion of inner meaningful exchange between two people...where two strangers without speaking to each other, intimately communicate, teach and learn and make meaning” (p. 39). Here, learning is made meaningful, yet difficult, by the ineffable aura created by the educational event. The tendency to secure the subject as unitary (social justice must be this) and in agreement (we must all believe in this cause) presents for Sadie a condition that is beyond mere representation; it is relational to both her and the subject, and similarly to her and others (Praglin, 2006). Deeply emotional and affective, the pedagogical moment passes through conflicting desires and resistances which ignite for Sadie a potential crisis in both representation and encounter. Here, learning is re-conceptualized as a meeting of the self through what Britzman (2004) calls, “the otherness of knowledge” (p. 354), or what Roger I. Simon (2011) regards as “disturbingly foreign or inconceivable to the self” (p. 433). The intent of education, then, is not to strive for a better, more accurate or refined idealization, but for an understanding of what this idealization does for both student and teacher.

Perhaps then, the idealization of Anne Frank is a defense against the anxiety and unpreparedness that educators feel when addressing such devastation and despair with students, a protective mechanism that forecloses on the possibility of being too authentically engaged, or a fear that students may not care at all. In some cases, difficult knowledge may induce anxiety by opening up vulnerabilities and wounds, returning us to a place we wish to abandon. It may lead teachers and students to unconsciously recoil from the very objects, ideas and materialities they imagined could set them free. At times, there is a limit to what we are able to tolerate; we find ourselves at the brink of our willingness to understand and learn (Hoffman, 2000). It could be that Sadie’s emphasis on the more didactic and practical elements of the project is a response to her fear that accepting the project as anything more would leave her vulnerable to the reality of its inefficacy at changing the behavior of the security guards, even perhaps the inefficacy of social action itself. She narrates the experience as full of activity, a list of things to-do, which at its end, is seen as coercive rather than reflective. What seems missing is her capacity to integrate something of herself into the experience.

Demands of this nature will always involve risking the potential distresses of vulnerability and the opening of wounds that are sometimes better left undisturbed. Peter Taubman (2000) reminds us that for teachers a desire to rescue, cure and even hope for a better tomorrow can sometimes become so consuming that we lose sight of the impossibly complex students before us. In his work, he distinguishes between a therapeutic and emancipatory model of teaching. In a therapeutic model, the student is placed at the center of the profession’s effort, which works toward finding a cure for its ignorance. Such models attempt to know the aims of education in advance. It finds voice in proven treatments and best practices. In contrast, the emancipatory model works to offer questions instead of answers and makes no promises for a happier, more fulfilled life, but rather cherishes understanding for understanding’s sake. This kind of education asks students to recognize their own complicity in what they know and refuse to know. In citing Donald Winnicott, Britzman (2003) notes, “One refuses the encounter with knowledge because one worries that the knowledge will devastate.” (p. 364). Does a political imperative act as a defense for the terrifying fear that we as teachers have little control over the future, the realization that humans have inflated their sense of agency in a largely unpredictable and

unfolding world (Taubman, 2000)? What might education mean if the teacher is neither in control of her or his pedagogical reach nor the students' responses to it?

Ambivalence, Openness and Deferred Action

Above, I discussed difficult knowledge as both a struggle within the limits of language, and second as a psychological condition that renders the act of engaging knowledge difficult and uncertain. Here I explore how teaching and learning is made difficult by the inability to know what is actually occurring in the pedagogical moment, particularly as knowledge becomes an educational object with a meaning that is worked then reworked subjectively and outside of complete control. Britzman and Pitt (2004) share a story about a time when Shoshana Felman screened a testimony by a Holocaust survivor in her class of student teachers. Intending on provocative discussion, her class instead fell completely speechless. Learning that their silence was induced by her students' insecurity at making comments appropriate to the gravity of the horror, Felman thought methodically about how to bring her students back into significance and so directed them to write down their thoughts. Yet, this activity brought forward unexpected feelings of trespass. Upon further scrutiny, Felman determined that she had prematurely demanded her students to move from experience to language and at its end, they wrote not of their own emotional unsettling, but rather about something more removed and outside of themselves: how to teach the Holocaust to the students in their classroom (for a different interpretation of this event, see Orner, Miller, & Ellsworth, 2005).

This scene demonstrates that no matter how well intended a teacher may be, the learning moment will always defy predictability. This, Britzman writes (2003), makes the field of education very nervous. As teachers are strong armed by evaluative protocols and performance-based measures, the difficulty of knowing just what may ensue when individuals are caught by difficult knowledge becomes more than a mere challenge, it becomes criteria for dismissal. Therefore, difficult knowledge complicates the entire profession of education by confessing to the uncanny limits of the human. It refuses the illusion that technique and evaluation will promise subject mastery and releases the teacher from having sole responsibility for creating the learning experience (Biesta, 2013). In the case of Felman, we can speculate that silence was not a function of teacher planning, but rather a response to the difficulty in reconciling knowledge that is emotional and tragic. Unable to work through their hesitations and anxieties, the students decidedly reach toward what they consider more easily spoken about – the pedagogy of others. There is a relief that they have dodged the situation. Their defenses emerge unpredictably in the wake of an anticipated devastation.

In the days that led up to our reunion, I thought back to Sadie's first interview in the quaint corner of the upstairs high school library and wondered if she had the same disdain for George W. Bush, if she still believed that homelessness was due to a lack of motivation, and if she was still irritated that social justice tended to become an act of social work instead of justice (Sonu, 2012). After re-reading pages of old protocols and transcriptions, I thought about the kinds of questions that would provoke a narrative on the work of advisory at Justice High. Even after years of careful investigation into the complexity of justice teaching, I was left with no question that the memory I carried all this time would be significant for the individuals involved. Upon arrival, I unwittingly awaited for Sadie to

expand, not deconstruct, my referential imaginary. All I had were glimmers of an experience that occurred years prior, a memory that for me became repeatedly inscribed as truth through its many iterations, citations, analyses, and academic treatments. It was against this stirred up imagery that I would meet Sadie once again.

“Uh-hem, so, what do you think social justice was about at your high school?” I asked.

Yeah, they were really trying to push like the acceptance of homosexuality. And I think they really kind of helped because I grew up in a house where it was a sin, you’re going to hell. That really kind of helped because when I went to college, I had two gay suite mates. I was okay with them because the school helped me learn tolerance toward homosexuals. It also made me learn tolerance toward people with differences, because I can’t judge you. Who am I to judge you? I have no right. I’m not saying that what you’re doing is right, but I’m saying it’s up to you to make those decisions. That’s something that Justice High really did instill inside of me.

How did they teach you that?

Like with all the assemblies and the speakers, people who had HIV. You think that if, oh, she has HIV, you’ll know, she’ll look skinny, she looks like she has HIV. And then they brought this speaker who spoke for like 45 minutes and at the end, she like, oh that girl with HIV, that was me. But you look like me. How do you have HIV?

What else do you think Justice High was trying to teach you?

They were trying to make us more aware of things. To pay attention to the news and stuff like that. To not just accept everything at face value, to read between the lines. Like in global studies, we would learn what was going on in politics, the teachers would be like, but what was *really* going on? What is *really* happening? What are you actually seeing? Instead of the surface that you are getting, you have to dig past that. And I really appreciated that. I think that social justice was the whole concept of the school but Global History was the best class to pinpoint social justice.

What makes memory visible is that it has no proper place, that it is disassociated from the time of origin and not limited to the past (deCerteau, 1988). The inevitable and immediate separation of an idea from its moment of natality reworks meaning and alienates the educational object from its already lost beginnings. Accordingly, memory, or in this matter the deferred experience of education (Pitt & Britzman, 2003; Britzman, 2013), delays understanding for two reasons: first, the force of an event is always felt before it is understood and second, a present understanding may take its force from an earlier event. This latency of experience hints to the ways in which knowledge is constantly lost and found. The fact that memory can be welded into a form other than its birth is precisely what gives it its interventionary possibility. Therefore, what is learned in school, as both representational and emotional, is made from both past and present conditions that at once alter both past and present experience. This difficult knowledge requires a kind of ambivalence that is open to the risks of remembering and forgetting, a giving in to the circumstances and encounters that will reawaken traces of the past and make education significant again.

What Sadie remembers about social justice at Justice High is intimately tied to her sense of self and her relationship to and with others. Enfolded into and unfolding onto her perceptions of tolerance and acceptance, she is tested in her life circumstances, her unexpected living arrangements and the coincidence of having gay suitemates. All of this is interwoven with her memory of a high school curriculum that exposed her, if ever so slightly, to the disheartening experiences of those marginalized by social heteronormativity and the surprising discovery that HIV can happen to anyone. These are sites of great difficulty. At the time of high school, Sadie is forced to listen to her teachers, who with institutional authority and control over grades, forwarded a knowledge that came into direct confrontation with deeply entrenched beliefs rooted in home and church. Sadie felt this pedagogical event as an affective force that provoked in her resistance, a latent memory that becomes stirred up again by later encounters with the exterior social world of people, ideas, and new circumstances. Even with the church being more influential than ever, Sadie, now a young adult, is confronted with a condition that animates this difficult knowledge once more. These deferred experiences are not unfamiliar: the email from a student three years later or a sudden flashback to a book once read. They open up important questions about what actually counts as education, when it begins, where it goes, what happens in the aftermath of the learning moment.

Therefore, moral demands in schooling and research can produce a counterforce that forecloses consideration of the conflict that makes learning possible. In the search for consensus and agreement, it is often forgotten that education is premised upon complex layers of conflict that emerge in startling ways from relations of difference. For students like Sadie, the social justice education taught at Justice High was not easily reconcilable with old beliefs from childhood. Her narrative demonstrates that when new knowledge is made, it may break down; it may be unsettling, interminable, destabilized and difficult. How can questions that arise after the breakdown of meaning, self and society enliven or threaten the very concept of learning? Might we begin to think of this work as inflected by a kind of trauma that “swings between idealizations of and subsequent disappointments in education” (Britzman & Pitt, 2004, p. 356), as invigorated by confusion, contradiction, resistance and acting out? Rather than seeking out appropriate behaviors or engaging in the practice of persuasion, can the socially constructed nature of learning and research be open to the other as a distinct subject of difference?

Although some may frown upon her unwillingness to accept homosexuality as “right,” Sadie does exhibit attentiveness to those who inhabit a time and place other than her own. The particularities of the present day bring forward the educative moment five years later, not as a simple pedagogical gain or a cumulative result, but as a unique and unrepeatable sequence, recapitulated through unresolved issues with her family, her religion, her suitemates and inevitably, herself. What might it mean for Sadie to be both an advocate of tolerance yet unsure of homosexuality? Taubman (2012) describes this as a kind of defensive splitting in which threatening knowledge is both denied and recognized, a kind of rationalization that holds two contradictory emotions inassimilable but sustained. Not only are we complicit in what we know, but as seen here, we are also complicit in our refusal to know and sometimes these occur in tandem. These are not unusual predicaments because the self is never entirely in agreement with itself. Here we are witness to Sadie’s justice story, the way her high school experience comes to light on the occasion

when she is confronted with a relational predicament that questions her moral judgment once again.

Lovely Knowledge in Research

Over the years, themes, events and findings that I developed about Sadie's high school experience were inscribed into journal articles and book chapters that came from observational notes that I mulled over for months, transcripts that I read and reread, theories that brought me back to the "data" over and over again. With every return, the significance of Justice High became more and more consuming and my attachment to this knowledge led to perhaps one too many similar publications on the breakdown of social justice and the subjective experiences of youth. It led to this current work that brought the students back together again in an attempt to rekindle social justice one last time, to restage it all over again. The difficulty, however, is that because the act of telling is a play between memory and forgetting, witnessing and the unknown, any narration will always be perforated with gaps and ridges, dark spaces and blinding light. Despite my awareness that research is anything but simple, I reunited with Sadie with a hidden desire to remember together the social justice memories etched into my consciousness, to bring her into alignment with fond memories of our time together, to contribute to the field a romantic portrait on how Justice High lit an agentive spirit in these young graduates. This is the lovely knowledge I held dear as I approached this new phase of the study.

In *Monsters in Literature*, Britzman (2004) uses a story told in Freud's voice to illustrate how the narration of educational memory is filtered through and distorted by past passions and aggressions (p. 257). Similar to the unresolved conflicts that appear as pedagogical desire, the impressions shared during research can double back onto the memory leaving everything once more distorted by an altogether new force of hope and excitement. How does my idealization of social justice affectively and effectively invoke a relational dilemma that forecloses my understanding of Sadie's authority? How can the research event, given the researcher's subjectivity, be anything other than inflections of that researcher's character, preoccupations, unconscious concerns and desires? How then, can we as researchers whose very profession rests on the narration of the past, not think of memory as representations of what actually happened? Reading research through the lens of difficult knowledge is a reminder that research events are similarly made difficult by the inability of language to capture the aura of an educational subject and by the demands transferred onto the participant by the unconscious desires of the researcher herself. The analysis of this interview, then, begins not after the procurement of data or the transcription of its recording. It includes the manic defenses played out as idealizations of the event and the subject under study. Research, then, as in teaching, is a demand for love, a site upon which to be recognized. The need to believe, said one anonymous reviewer, is what constitutes the broken heart of this project.

About 30 minutes into the interview, I asked Sadie if we could talk about the social action project that she completed in her 10th grade advisory, the one that took up months of class time and hours of data collection. I passed back to her a stapled packet of transcripts, a substantive portion of which documented how she described the project in her own words. As a qualitative researcher I was quite excited. I had never been privileged

enough to examine transcripts with a participant like this before, to reminisce and connect over shared experiences both familiar and distant.

I listened as she immediately began to read the transcripts aloud and followed her eyes as they skimmed horizontally across the page. Suddenly her voice slowed and began to wither away. She fell completely silent. It was the first and last moment of silence in the interview.

No one spoke so I inquired, "Do you remember that project?"

"No, not at all," she said a little puzzled.

"Not at all?" my voice elevated in disbelief.

No, cause I didn't really care about it.

You worked really hard on it.

Did I?

"Remember you had to get up and speak to all the ninth and tenth grade class in a Town Hall. You got up on stage." I probed, refusing to believe that she could not recall a project I considered so central to her high school experience.

No. I do not remember that at all.

Do you remember how you had to re-enact those skits?

What were they about?

They were about the security guards and how they mistreated students. One of them was about how a police officer stole gum from Carlos's backpack. And we re-enacted them in the hallway and videotaped them.

Oh yeah.

And you and Jordana, I think, did surveys of the students and made brochures.

Oh, I think I remember that. I remember that, just a little bit.

"That was a big project. You really don't remember that?" I was slightly confused and pushed on, "But what I found most interesting" I said, "was that after you called the security guards out for mistreating the students, you felt like you were at risk. They didn't treat you any better, they treated you worse."

Yeah, hm, I always thought I was treated like crap by the security guards, but not all of them. There were some that were nice.

When Sadie is asked to remember, she is caught between an old and a new educational experience: a past clearly inflected by a panoply of emotions expressed in previous

interviews as frustration, vulnerability and risk, and a new moment in which she is asked to narrate it all over again. She knows that schooling requires her obedience, a coercion that she found repugnant, and when asked about it years later, she fails to bring this memory into her consciousness, claiming she really did not care about it anyways. Forgetting, according to psychoanalytical investigations, is never the result of accidents or mistakes, “we forget nothing except what we wish to forget for some good reason or other, though that reason is usually quite unknown to us” (Freud, cited in Britzman, 1998, p. 10). Surprisingly, this social action project had fallen into the recesses for the other participants as well. Individual interviews with the two others revealed that no one else seemed to remember this project as well as I did. When probed, only faint shadows were conjured as if the project in some surreal way occurred to no one but myself.

This absence and ambiguity comes into stark contrast with the vitality and significance the social action project continued to have in my mind’s eye, and to Sadie’s response, I am left in shock, confusion and disbelief. All of this is made even more curious as I witness Sadie reading through pages of her own transcribed words and puzzling over the strangeness of her own voice. The work of research then is humbled, even constituted, by frailties of the mind, and we understand from this moment that knowledge is not foreclosed by the loss of memory, but rather opened up in its absence. This is what makes knowing utterly impossible and difficult: it is always thrown into question; the work turns against itself; the event of remembering, as well as listening, is a play between both memory and forgetting. Such acts of forgetting may provide the salvation Sadie needs from fixating on a past that she has worked so hard to move away from, or it may resolve her ambivalence over the inefficacy of this experience or her confusion over what it may mean if the experience had some sort of influence or force over her adult life. In the moment when she forgets, there is a new knowledge being provoked, one that emerges in the wake of this loss. When asked to speak on social justice, Sadie refers not to the social action project, a loss I will similarly accept, but in its wake, brings social justice into significance through the work done in her Global History course and the encounters she experienced in her young adult life.

Suppose we entertain Britzman’s (2006) interest in the failures of representation, “suppose, then, we imagine learning not so much as victory over what is not learning, but as playing with and even requiring negativity” (p. 4). What might we learn from exploring the void that is left after a failed attempt to capture an educational object in memory? To do so would first require us to unhinge reality from pure representation, to give up the idea that our consciousness is able to hold the totality of our being, and to admit that empirical and historical materiality is not enough to bridge the divide between the depth of who we are and who we cognitively hope we will become. In citing Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, Britzman notes three characteristic reasons for breakdown: events cannot be simply and easily assimilated into meaning or lived experience; chronology is lost such that the first event is revised due to a second; and knowledge is unevenly developed, with history no longer straightforwardly referential, but instead a push and pull between reality and phantasy.

Such inconsistencies and reversals demonstrate that there is no promised fit between that which is desired in education and the lives that are lived, between the knowledge that is offered and the ways in which teachers and learners engage this knowledge. Had I not met Sadie again, I may never have known about the extraordinary ways in which the

social action project of her 10th grade advisory had fallen into the deep abyss of the forgotten. The doing of things, it seems, does not promise that something has been done and I am left with little trust for such simplified formulas. Yet I stumbled, once again, when hearing the discontinuity of Sadie against the lovely knowledge I created for myself. Even with my belief that education should be more about provocation than definition, I continued to seek verisimilitude and worked into the moment my preferences and desired outcomes. This may have been at the expense of the difficulty I tried to appreciate. In siding with my phantasies, I saw the narrating of memory as a kind of evidence for knowledge and knew little about how to understand it otherwise. Upon return, I can now see how I nudged Sadie toward this, pushing her to reconstruct the project with me. At one point, she feels my move and given her attempt to satisfy, to give in or move on, she succumbs, claiming to remember it “just a little bit.” Certainly, researchers delight when their participants narrate something that satisfies their predilections. Even as I desired for her to affirm my own, this interview became, as it was in the past, an unexpected site of education for me, a lesson that social justice will never be what I wish it to be, nor will it ever be what I remember.

Had I not met Sadie again, I may never have known about the extraordinary ways in which pieces of her social justice education were lost and rekindled during the years of her young adult life. When I left Sadie in the 10th grade, I carried with me the unsettling conclusion that social justice for her was a trick, a social worker’s concern, a disappointment. I felt clearly warned by her commentary that any pre-determined agenda for schooling would be forced to grapple with the impossibility of divergent thinking and that pedagogies of emancipation, liberation and empowerment would need to tread carefully if they were in fact interested in not subjugating their students. Sadie’s testimony pried open many questions for me about social justice as a curricular aim, in particular the ways in which method seemed to hold primacy over experience. Yet, we must continue to hold our certainties in suspension, to open up to the necessary losses, absences and gaps that comprise the learning experience. Any other position bears down on our capacity to hear and see the complicated work of teaching and learning with others.

Difficult knowledge, then, arises in part from the ruins of the lovely and desirable. Yet it must also endure long enough to allow a new space in which others can narrate their experience outside of the researcher’s projections. Sadie’s narration shows that learning is not easily applied or directly assimilated into lived experience. It demonstrates the unruliness of schooling and the difference between the educational object and the time at which the object is thought of as such. Had Sadie continued in the vein of activism, she may have recalled this project more readily. Perhaps in the future, if life compels her, she will look back and narrate it with greater confidence, perhaps not. Unless Sadie and I decide to share, her teachers will never really know what she learned from her high school experience. Ms. Vee, her advisory teacher, may have wanted Sadie to recall the project as memorable, as did I, but forgetting does not mean that no meaning has carried on. For me, slipping into the negative has brought incredible and unexpected insight into the extraordinary and paradoxical workings of education. If in five more years, I interview Sadie once more, we will most certainly tell the story differently, with renewed relevance, articulated through another interview setting, and in relation to me, a researcher with whom she has a unique relationship, not quite pedagogical, not yet friendship.

Conclusion

In much of this work, I attempt to write beyond the narration of technique, design and action found in the literature on social justice teaching, moving to instead understand the emotional and pedagogical significance of trying to teach about the lived experiences of others in urban school environments. I find through this study that social justice work, however broadly defined, is anything but simple. In fact, it will always be quite difficult. As I wrote in the past, such educational imperatives ask students to use prior thoughts and experiences as the materiality from which to engage with new ideas about justice. While teachers attached themselves to ideas of equality and community-based protest, the strength of such commitments did not in the least promise instructional efficacy. Institutionalized methods can usurp incoming desires and even devastate phantasies about what a social justice education can do. In this case, they induced a kind of crisis. Students expressed feelings of betrayal and resistance and spread amongst their peers the idea that social justice was supposed to be about supporting their matriculation into law school. Some became committed, instead, to once-and-for-all leaving the very community that they were charged to transform. This “catastrophe of the pedagogical” (Britzman & Pitt, 2004, p. 358) signals the emotionality of the educational situation, one that is further complicated by the weight of GPAs and the performances necessary to earn a degree and go elsewhere.

Of course, Sadie’s description of Justice High should not be used as criteria to judge the merits of a social justice education. Her words do not represent some kind of a discovery or essential truth about what should happen in schools; but it is symbolic of the deep kinship between memory, the personal and social transformation. Sadie’s recountings are glimpses into how a person makes sense of a given dilemma or experience. They are provocative and complex constructions that work the border of the real and imagined and present us with new and surprising ways of seeing old experiences and problems. According to Ruth Behar (1997), memories, caught in a strange time, are literally the ones that are “taking place,” the ones exhibiting themselves in the present moment. They defy simple explanation or conceptual clarity; they are creative, elusive and remind us that every memory will always be part prevarication, invention, phantasy and desire. Memories may be crystallized in the first narration of the moment, as it was in the transcript, but are also located elusively in everything that issues from it, including Sadie’s inability or resistance to its remembrance. Intertwined by the particulars of her emerging self and wrestling with the memories of my own, the event of remembering and forgetting social action in this peculiar and unpredictable setting becomes a new story altogether.

In many cases, students of social justice education are framed as consequential figures to large complex systems of structural or institutional oppression. The community that surrounds Justice High is commonly known, even popularized, through heartbreaking statistics of children born into poverty, housing code violations and devastating graduation rates. In response, non-profit organizations, artists and public advocates have established a variety of programs aimed at increasing political participation and empowerment, voice, solidarity and protest. Sometimes narratives such as these are derived from a clear sense of a struggle that seems universal for all. It is the social structure within and against which every individual is positioned. And then there are individual, subjectively procured stories,

like that of Sadie, which carry a deeply intimate overtone, defiant to the generalizing tendency, utterly surprising and illuminating. Her narrative resists coherence, reminding us that there is much ambivalence in the examination of what such educational programs mean to the lives of their young subjects.

Like the well-drafted lesson plan that never unfolds with perfection or an idea that only makes sense long after its exposure, researching education is full of suspicion and inconsistency. In qualitative research, even empirical accounts verified with the strictest of method are not direct expressions of consciousness. They are easily vulnerable to the complications highlighted here. Every time I spoke with Sadie, whether in high school or as a young adult, what I wanted to hear and see was humbled by a new perspective unfathomable in my own mind. Perhaps our narratives are flexible enough, capacious enough, to accommodate many different kinds of perceptions, even those that come into the world through acts of forgetting. Perhaps memories of the past bring to light the difficult knowledge that is elided in our fascination with universality and our need for political and social security. As Britzman (2013) explains

Some of the difficulty in the study of education is instructed by what may be called 'inexplicable experience,' say those discarded or lost events that accrue an avalanche of feelings about the nature and reasons of knowledge, authority, and experience and that return in the subjunctive mood of memory that accompanies loss: feelings of being too late, repeating oneself, and missing the boat even as it waits in the dock. (p. 99)

The elusive qualities of education, the unruliness of ideas, the aesthetic undertakings and the creative delights of experience may seem counter to an age of accountability and evidence, but they are alive and well in that which constitutes the learning experience (Ellsworth, 1997). Therefore, beyond theories and practices that center student and teacher subjectivities as reflections of truth, difficult knowledge presents a necessary focus on the limits of teaching and learning, working towards a paradigm shift that relieves teachers from the stresses of immediate outcome.

Education, as we see, does not work on these terms. Classroom practices cannot be measured through the demands of certainty and the aim should not be the minimization of risk and instability. Instead, let us give old stories new dimensions, write about those times when assumptions are frustrated, challenged and refused. Our work can continue to elaborate the complex layers and aspects of being as we change and grow in relation to each other. To do this, we must include the social, the subjective, and the psychical into our past and present narratives, remembering that all can exist as they do in our lives, whether we forget them, or not.

Note

1. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Debbie Sonu is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hunter College and doctoral faculty in the Urban Education Program at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her research interests include curriculum theory and practice as it relates to urban schooling and social justice pedagogies in the United States. Her work has been published in *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Journal of Teacher Education* and the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, among others. Currently, she is studying the perspectives of youth and children as they engage difficult knowledge, violence and injustice.

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