Education as a Site for Ethical Transformation and Activism

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EDUCATION AS A SITE FOR ETHICAL TRANSFORMATION AND ACTIVISM

by

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A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts, The City University of New York

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Abstract

EDUCATION AS A SITE FOR ETHICAL TRANSFORMATION AND ACTIVISM

by

Lindsay Sudeikis

Advisor: Professor David T. Humphries

In adolescence, purpose, integrity, and wonder come to life. It is of paramount importance that ethics-in-action be taught in our high schools. There is a need for a broader vision of the purpose of education beyond instrumental uses, specifically beyond preparing young people only for the work force. In the twenty-first century, we are educating laborers, *homo economicus*, and not whole persons, *homo sapiens*. Does this mentality negate the heart, psyche, dignity, feelings, awe, and creativity of one’s humanity? Likewise, does it negate one’s ethical responsibility to their fellow human and to the natural world? Who has the right to define what is meant by a “whole person,” and what role does ethics and ethical curriculum play in formulating such a definition and in educating “whole persons?” Certainly, the issue of what is meant by “whole persons” can be controversial and even divisive. Can ethics-in-action be taught
in the public sector? If so, what role can an ethics-in-action curriculum play in countering such mentalities?

I am proposing that educators and administrators teach compassion, creativity, and solidarity within the classroom, ask existential questions, create answers through the arts, coordinate service immersion trips, mentor students on what it means to be human, all the while advocating for emerging issues that young people themselves find vital. I am often reminded how identity shapes one’s pursuit of knowledge and engagement with the world-at-large. Thus, I will focus on the breadth of identity, including culture, and how students can bring their values, attitude, and beliefs into their lived experience, in a word, action. This curriculum has the potential to awaken young people and teachers alike to embody joie de vivre and justice in a world in dire need of both.

This thesis will provide relevant background information about these issues; provide examples of ethics-in-action curricula to show how these issues can be engaged; offer an outline for possible paths forward to make education a site of fulfillment and transformation rather than the status quo.
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In childhood and adolescence, purpose, integrity, and wonder come to life. It is of paramount importance that ethics-in-action be taught in our elementary and high schools. There is a need for a broader vision of the purpose of education beyond instrumental uses, specifically beyond preparing young people only for the work force. In the twenty-first century, we are educating laborers, *homo economicus*, and not whole persons, *homo sapiens*. Does this mentality negate the heart, psyche, dignity, feelings, awe, and creativity of one’s humanity? Likewise, does it negate one’s ethical responsibility to their fellow human and to the natural world? I am proposing that educators, administrators, and policymakers implement compassion, creativity, and solidarity within the classroom. Education needs to be a place where learners ask existential questions, create answers through the arts, where service immersion trips are part of the curriculum, and students are mentored on what it means to be human, all the while advocating for emerging issues that young people themselves find vital. I am often reminded how identity shapes one’s pursuit of knowledge and engagement with the world-at-large. Thus, I will focus on the breadth of identity, including culture, and how students can bring their values, attitude, and beliefs into their lived experience, in a word, action. Curriculum that encourages action and recognizes identity has the potential to awaken young people and teachers alike to embody joie de vivre and justice in a world in dire need of both. It can offer possible paths forward to make education a site of ethical transformation and activism rather than the status quo.
Education must be reclaimed by strong democratic thinkers and practitioners. An ethics-in-action curriculum has the potential to make this happen. It develops learners who question power and current practices. It is an education which cultivates learners who question ideas, policies, and the foundations of knowledge, asking who benefits culturally and politically from this? This curriculum orients itself to the local community and develops full human beings, *homo sapiens*, as imaginative, ethical, unique, social, and spiritual beings who solve complex problems in real world situations. Something revolutionary needs to be done within education to overturn the hegemonic principles currently driving schools. According to Paul Shaker and Elizabeth Heilman in their work *Reclaiming Education for Democracy*, qualities dominating schools are undermining education. Education is currently a site “which develops obedient learners schooled in technical skills but unlikely to challenge authority … they are unschooled in the theory and practice of free thought in a democracy. It is an education which focuses on individual achievement and skills … it develops employable students who reproduce a testable canon of knowledge and information” (185). In order to shatter these undermining qualities, it is important to offer a substantive, alternative way, namely, an ethics-activist education.

A primary and leading lesson in any ethics-in-action curriculum would be around community organizing, a profoundly democratic experience that is bound up in actions which speak much louder than words. In the twenty-first century, we teach young people how to be entrepreneurs, we educate them about finance, the global economy, yet why don’t we teach young people how to organize? “Organize” in the sense of being an “upstander” for some cause, injustice, or social movement, not merely a
bystander. According to Peter Nelson, Director of Facing History’s New York office, “an upstander speaks up in the face of injustice, asks questions, empathizes, combats bigotry, and nurtures democracy” (Facing History and Ourselves). Effective community organizing is more than charisma, charm, and smarts; it’s about walking with folks, working with people across racial, gender, and class differences, and not backing away from difficult, sustained work in the service of creating a more just and equitable world.

Organizers need to be educated. There is a need for a broader vision of education beyond instrumental uses, specifically beyond preparing young people for the financial and technocratic marketplace. Education could address the steep income inequality gap, question and deliberate what constitutes a just wage for any given job, and attempt to tackle affordable housing in urban areas, to name only a few national problems which could be explored inside the American classroom. Education could also be a site where global ethical dilemmas are explored, dilemmas such as war and the environment.

What if third graders did an entire study driven by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? The class could read We Are All Born Free, which is a children’s book of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures. Society is in dire need of connecting students to community organizing based upon ethical habits which manifest in democratic participation and engaged citizenry.

A concrete example of curricula driven by democratic principles in lieu of curricula driven by high-stakes testing is exploring the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In a third grade classroom in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, where the school is deemed “failing” due to New York State Exams by the Department of Education, I can tell you firsthand that a sense of activism is well and alive. Over the course of four
weeks in ethics class, where I was the teacher, twenty two third graders came to know their human rights! First we did an Interactive Read Aloud with the book *We Are All Born Free*, which is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures. Third graders mapped out the human rights, with clipboard and pencil in hand, as I read aloud the powerfully and beautifully illustrated Articles of the UDHR. We discussed how everyone on this planet is protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Wherever we live, whoever we are, these are our rights and no one should take them away from us. Freedom, peace, and justice around the world are built on these rights. A few of the rights that really resonated with our Brooklynite learners were, “we all have the right to make up our own minds, to think what we like, to say what we think, and to share our ideas with other people;” “we all have the right to meet our friends and to work together in peace to defend our rights;” “music, art, craft, and sport are for everyone to enjoy;” and “we all have the right to a home, enough money to live on and medical help if we are ill.” After we finished the writing exercise of mapping, it was time for our young friends to put their imagination to work and make the UDHR their own. They were given a forty-five minute class period to create a poem, rap, speech, or song using the human rights map they worked on arduously. The final class of our human rights unit culminated in democratic creativity, namely, spoken word! Federico, one third grade boy, expresses himself as follows, “We have the right to freedom and have a kingdom. And we have to rise to become those rights. We are a part of the world so get up, and stand up for yourselves to become those rights!!!! And we all have the right to be loved and not to be shoved and we have the right to have a school and look like a fool. We
have the right to eat and have a seat. We have the right to make money and to be funny."

The two third grade teachers noted how alive and engaged learners are during ethics, and Giselle said, “it’s so great they can learn about this subject matter in ethics class, we just don’t have time to get to this kind of thing with all of the test prep that we have to do. It’s a shame because it’s obvious the kids love learning about social justice, they’re so excited for your class!” This anecdote supports the need for education to be a site for ethical transformation and activism, not merely a site for the neoliberal agenda. Ethics is taught weekly throughout the entire school, kindergarten through fifth grade. The ethics teacher is the lead teacher while the classroom teachers also participate in the lesson. A fourth grade assignment in the spring consisted in a writing exercise on activism. Learners were asked to explain activism in their own words. They could use examples from their own life or from activists they’ve learned about in ethics class to support their answer. One fourth grader wrote,

In my own words I would explain activism as a superpower. A power that can change the world. But there is only way we can have activism and that is having activists. And the only way we can have activists is by standing up for what you believe in. The only way you can believe in something is planting seeds in your ideas. This is what my great ethics teacher taught me. Now I want you to think about what you want to be when you grow up and how that one job will change the world. Now think about all the activists, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Effa Manly, and you! Thing about all the things you can do.
When children are exposed to people who changed the course of history, they become empowered to also change the course of history, not simply to perpetuate the status quo.

While educators and policymakers are increasingly pursuing programs which hope to strengthen democracy through civic education, service learning, and other pedagogies, these pursuits are often in niche areas like special programs, charter schools, and private schools. It is also noteworthy to mention the nature of educators’ and policymakers’ underlying beliefs around democracy greatly differ. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne treat this subject at length, raising the question “What kind of citizen” is the aim of any particular educational program? The spectrum varies based on one’s concept of what constitutes good citizenship and what good citizens do. Westheimer and Kahne illustrate three conceptions of the “good” citizen: 1) personally responsible, 2) participatory, and 3) justice oriented. Each conception espouses a distinct ideological understanding of democracy, and furthermore, each conception has political consequences. “The personally responsible citizen acts responsibly in his/her community by, for example, picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, obeying laws, and staying out of debt” (Westheimer and Kahne 3). Programs that seek to develop personally responsible citizens hope to build character by emphasizing hard work, integrity, and self-discipline. The participatory citizen is one “who actively participates in civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national levels. Proponents of this vision emphasize preparing students to engage in collective, community-based efforts” (Westheimer and Kahne 4). The third image of a good citizen is, perhaps, the perspective that is least commonly pursued by educators and
policymakers alike. “Justice oriented educators argue that effective democratic citizens need opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social, economic, and political forces. They call explicit attention to matters of injustice and to the importance of pursuing social justice” (Westheimer and Kahne 4). One way Westheimer and Kahne distinguish what kind of citizen is being educated is while the participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food, justice oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover.

Certainly the idea of democracy occupies a privileged place in our society, and most concur that democracy is desirable. However, politicians, community activists, educators, and policymakers espouse different politics when it comes to educating for democracy. How to further realize democracy continues to be a source of heated debate. I am proposing an education which is less likely to emphasize the need for charity and volunteerism as ends in themselves and one which is more likely to teach about social movements and how to effect systemic change. Certainly, it is a both/and, as we need both charity and justice. We must continue to serve at the soup kitchen and simultaneously question why are there still so many soup kitchens in New York City?

The aim of democracy put forth in this thesis is a citizen who emerges with a radicalized understanding of community, based upon justice, participation, and integrity. The child recognizes herself within the context of community, making the South African Ubuntu philosophy her own. This Ubuntu philosophy can be expressed as “I am what I am because of who we all are.” It is described as the essence of being human and points to the truth that one cannot exist as a human being in isolation; it is a philosophy which honors interconnectedness. A scholar of Ubuntu writes “we think of ourselves far
too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas we are connected and what we do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.” The hegemonic understanding of democracy in education as of late is the antithesis of Ubuntu. It is an iteration of democracy which breeds individualism and personally responsible citizens, but often omits social critique and structural change. Policymakers implement “Character Counts!” programs and service learning programs under the guise of social change, but once a closer look is taken at their politics it is clear that class reproduction is what is at stake. Later in this paper I employ Success Academy as a clear example of personally responsible citizenship void of addressing systemic injustice and employ Jean Anyon as a clear example of justice-oriented citizenship founded on integrity and the collective.

Keeping Ubuntu, “I am because you are” in mind and heart, what if public elementary schools begin with a small shift in how students are addressed? What if they are referred to as learners and/or friends throughout the long eight hour school day rather than as students or test-takers? Certainly, identity shapes one's pursuit of knowledge and engagement with the world-at-large. We honor that the human person, by nature, desires to know (Aristotle), yet how a child comes to know, through what identified self, is essential in the learning process. If throughout the school day teachers interacted with “friends” and recognized interconnectedness, that could shift the dynamic of education as a whole. When a nine-year old goes to school and is plainly identified as a student all day long, that shifts her pursuit of learning and happiness as a whole. A student is defined as “a person who is studying at a school or college,” “denoting someone who is studying in order to enter a particular profession.” On the
other hand, if a nine-year old goes to school and is identified as a friend all day long, she could see herself as a friend to others in the classroom, in her school wide community, neighborhood, city, and hopefully she will see herself as a friend to others throughout the country and world as a whole. What are the values and political implications on children by referring to them as students or as friends? The former lends itself to individualism, the latter to Ubuntu. A friend is defined as “a person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection” or as Aristotle notes “friendship … is a kind of virtue or implies virtue, and it is almost most necessary for living. Nobody would choose to live without friends even if he had all of the other good things” (Aristotle). When a friend is hungry or disheartened, you share your food with her or comfort her understanding that you belong to each other, understanding that “I am because we are.”

What is the current climate in education, is it sympathetic to Ubuntu, friendship, community organizing, is it questioning power structures that are in place, and justice-oriented? Among competing concepts of democratic values and citizenship, personal responsibility receives the most attention according to Kahne and Westheimer. Critics, however, note “that the emphasis placed on individual character and behavior obscures the need for collective and often public sector initiatives; that this emphasis distracts attention from analysis of the causes of social problems and from system solutions; that volunteerism and kindness are put forward as ways of avoiding politics and policy” (Westheimer and Kahne 5). Having been a part of and seen numerous community service and character education programs over the past fifteen years, I am able to note the difference between a program that perpetuates class reproduction in its efforts and
one that challenges unjust power structures. The reality of educating young people to be community organizers and to espouse a broader understanding of justice inside the classroom is not happening in most places due to a current, toxic binary with regard to student learning. One side of the spectrum is based on free market ideology while the other is founded upon participatory and justice-oriented democratic citizenship as John Dewey, Felix Adler, and others have envisioned. First, we will explore the market model of education, one void of community organizing and civic literacy that challenges the status quo, and is occupied with hard and soft “skills” of another sort and for a much different purpose. Professor Joel Spring lays out in his recent work *Globalization of Education*, a poignant explanation of the market model. "Multinational corporations, including global education corporations, are currently dominating global school policies with the goal of educating and shaping human behaviors for the corporate workplace" (Spring 2).

New York City public schools have certainly fallen prey to this influence. The Common Core State Standards are a primary example. The following is taken from the Common Core website, “informed by other top-performing countries to prepare all students for success in our global economy and society. . . according to the best available evidence, the mastery of each standard is essential for success in college, career, and life in today’s global economy.” The prepositional phrase “in today’s global economy” is at the crux of the neoliberal agenda. Private funding and private decision making have co-opted a public right, namely, the right to a free education that helps one flourish in life and have turned education into a corporation that helps prepare young people for a corporate capitalist society. Multinational corporations network through
international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Economic Forum, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), among other regional trade groups. An important question to raise is, who are the innovators behind The Common Core Standards, educators or economists?

Private schools, on the other hand, though influenced by global school policies, maintain much more academic freedom in the classroom. Ethical Culture Fieldston School, a private K-12 school in New York City which costs $43,000 annually is exempt from the burden of taking the New York State Exams. The Ethical Community Charter School (TECCS), a public charter elementary school in Brooklyn inspired by Fieldston’s model of progressive, humanist, rigorous education, however, is tasked with all the pressures of the dominant free market ideology that’s infesting education. These two schools illustrate the class stratification of society currently in New York. Learners and families from Ethical Culture Fieldston have the luxury to discuss issues of privilege and race as the recent New York Times article mentioned, yet they are not affected negatively by such things in the quotidian of daily activity, whereas learners and families at TECCS recently learned that their school will be shuttered under Chancellor Farina’s tutelage due to failing test scores on the New York State Exams for two consecutive years. Conversations of power and race are a vital part of a TECCS education, yet it is nearly impossible to quantify that kind of knowledge and, well, that is what human capital theorists of education want to do. Ergo, TECCS will close, and Fieldston will live and flourish on.
II.

Scholar-activist Joel Spring closely examines the theory which is behind the global corporatization of education, a theory of education that the majority of New York City public schools are the victim of. Human capital economic theories, grounded in Milton Friedman’s and Gary Becker’s research from the 1960’s through the 2000’s, focus on shaping human behavior and knowledge to meet corporate needs. “Simply stated, human capital economists claim that investment in education to produce better workers will result in economic growth, reduction of inequality of incomes, and increased employment” (Spring Globalization 4). One could argue that given the current state of economic affairs in the United States, where the rich continue to get richer and the poor, poorer, that the human capital theory would fall flat on its face, yet such is evidently not the case. Khary Lazarre-White, Executive Director of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol in East Harlem, New York recently stated that in New York City the top 10% of wage earners’ income in 2015 is $90,000 annually whereas the bottom 20% of wage earners’ income in 2015 is $9,000 annually. It appears there is a lack of imagination about alternatives to the economization of education ideology. This way of thinking shifts concerns from schooling for such things as civic participation, protecting human rights, and environmentalism to economic growth and employment. Education which promotes meaningful employment and civic participation is the ideal. The two do not need to be mutually exclusive but rather have the potential to be mutually reinforcing. There are innumerable examples of employment where a person can protect human rights, the environment, honor the dignity of work and the rights of
workers and at the same time be an ethical agent in the global economy. Scott Harrison, founder and CEO of Charity: Water, whose mission is to bring clean and safe drinking water to every person in the world; Blake Mycoskie, founder and CEO of TOMS, with every product that is purchased TOMS will help a person in need through their “One for One” business model; and Nancy Lublin, CEO of DoSomething.org, one of the largest global orgs for young people and social change are a few examples of folks and corporations who are doing commerce with conscience.

Though there are exceptions when it comes to the politics of educating for democracy, the dominant mechanism in education is one where human capital theorists are educating human beings _qua homo economicus_, namely, as laborers and not human beings _qua homo sapiens_, namely, as whole persons, who have the potential to community organize “for liberty and justice for all.” Indeed, having a job is an integral part of the human experience, but is it the ultimate goal of education or only one dimension of education? Many economists are involved in education, which Spring refers to as the corporatization of global education, and for them being hirable/employable seems to be the ultimate goal of education. Economists are being enlisted to judge the work of school systems. Behavior is being shaped in school and by government to meet the needs of corporations and to sustain free market economics. A concrete example of this type of education-at-work in the United States, as I noted earlier, is the recent implementation of the Common Core. The literacy section of Common Core testing is to assess the student’s ability for “close reading,” that is to say, understanding a text without knowing the author or the social context of the text. Spring refers to this as “corporatizing literacy.” Teachers are not to ask students how they feel
about the text, nor are they to contextualize it for them because literacy is for the sake of the economy, to be an efficient worker. Literacy, as laid out in the Common Core, is not for social justice, nor is there any political context in a young person’s reading. And, there is certainly nothing about pleasure in reading.

In Spring’s work on the globalization of education, he highlights, “the human capital model can be criticized for educating citizens that passively accept existing political and economic structures even when they are operating against their interests. There is little attempt to educate active citizens who act to bring about political, economic, and social improvements” (Spring 42). Since we live in an era where human capital education is rampant, it is no surprise that community organizing and civic literacy through a social justice lens are not being taught in our school systems, save for some courageous exceptions which will be referenced later on in this paper. Quantifying knowledge with regard to community organizing, ethical inquiry, passion, and activism is not the same as quantifying math and literacy skills. This fact makes it difficult to implement aforementioned curricula due to the current obsession with standardized testing as a way to legitimize what a “student” is learning in the classroom. It is indispensable to keep these questions in mind: What kind of student are we teaching, a lifelong consumer capitalist or an engaged citizen willing to participate and deliberate in democracy and, thus, work for a more just and equitable world? What are the implications for society as a whole and others?

Perhaps these two different sides of learning are not so siloed, but in the current moment of education, the dogmatic demands of high stakes, standardized testing and scripted teaching do not leave much space for a Deweyan philosophy in the classroom.
“From the early origins of American schools, the concept of universal, free, and public education has always been tied to democracy and its fundamental principle of public participation and governance” (Dewey, *Democracy and Education* 42). But who in the community presently has the power to employ this principle in schools and mandate there be a shift in what is taught in school and how it is taught? If public school teachers and administrators have to report their students’ assessments and tests scores to local and federal governments in order to receive funding, remain open, and/or have a solid reputation, then when is there time for teachers to promote the protection of human rights and the environment, for example, within their nationally-mandated curriculum? Teachers are forced to teach to the test, corporatizing literacy and memorizing dates in social studies. Instead of having students face themselves through learning about history or critically question what they read and its relevance to the world around them, teacher’s hands are tied because they need to get through the “essentials” so the students will score well on the tests. John Dewey’s wisdom is ever so urgent in schools today, “...if I were asked to name the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education, I should say: 'Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make it the full meaning of the present life'' (Dewey, *Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal* 77). If young people are actively engaged in the subject matter they are learning in school, better outcomes are achieved, which is why culturally relevant and compelling pedagogy is imperative in today’s schools. Students who inquire about who they are and the world around them and students whose capacity for wonder has been cultivated are more likely to act in the face of injustice and unethical comportment, for these students know they are more than a test score.
Dewey honored the urgency to act, thus education and engaged citizenship/activism were inextricable for him. An activist actively answers a call to action, in the classroom where it is crucial children engage in the local community around them and in the world-at-large. In a second grade classroom *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Cole can be read, explored, and even challenged. It tells the true story of six-year-old Ruby Bridges. In 1960, Ruby, a young African-American girl, entered a whites-only school in New Orleans. Even though she had to pass through crowds of angry protesters, Ruby bravely walked into the school. Every day for months, Ruby persevered. White parents pulled their children out of the school, and Ruby and her teacher were alone in the classroom. Still, Ruby and her family would not give in. Second graders are appalled and riveted by this true story. An interdisciplinary lesson can be at work through this piece of literature, which is an effective way of engaging learners in a holistic way. Also, questions of race emerge and instead of not having time to discuss race, there would be time allotted to explore it. In a fourth grade classroom *Sit-In: How Four Students Stood Up By Sitting Down* by Andrea Davis Pinkney can be read, explored, and experienced. The book illustrates peaceful protest at its finest. Courageously defying the Whites Only edict of the era, four young black men took a stand against the injustice of segregation in Greensboro, North Carolina by sitting down at the lunch counter of a Woolworth’s department store. Countless others, of all races, soon joined the cause—following Martin Luther King Jr.’s powerful words of peaceful protest. By sitting down together they stood up for civil rights and created the perfect recipe for integration not only at the Woolworth’s counter, but on buses and in communities throughout the south. Each of these activists could potentially impel young
people to both question and act on contemporary systemic injustices. A language of critique coupled around issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, et al coupled with a language of possibility must be cultivated in the classroom. The force for a paradigmatic shift from human capital education to social justice education would realize Dewey’s admonition to make education the full meaning of the present life. Students, families, and other community members of each school have the right to practice their democratic citizenship and demand what’s happening in schools to change. Their voices as *homo sapiens* and not as *homo economicus* need to be heard.

It is important moving forward that we engage students and families as community builders, placing emphasis on cooperation rather than competition. Schools can become sites of ethical transformation and engaged citizenship. Both John Dewey and Felix Adler were concerned with the social mission of education and that is what needs to be reclaimed in the current moment. As Dewey put it in *School and Society*, “make each one of our schools an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society, and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science. When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious” (*School and Society* 20). If we want schools to become model democracies of the larger world, then we need families and teachers alike to create a school culture where young people can find their life’s vocation to achieve personal fulfillment, transformation, and lead the kind of lives they value. Ergo, the importance to
unpack and dive deeply into what constitutes something “worthy, lovely and harmonious” in ethical conversation and in ethical action.

Schools have the potential to play a critical role in reforming society. Many would argue that in the United States, we as a people are in dire need of a reform, a social moral reform, some might even say. Yet, how does one define reform? There are people like Eva Moskowitz, who runs Success Academies Charter Schools, categorizing reform through a human capital lens and reinforcing what scholar-activist Jean Anyon refers to as the theory of reproduction. Moskowitz’s network is filled with Wall Street one-percenters, as revealed in a recent New York Times magazine article. She founded her first Success Academy, a kindergarten and first grade in Harlem, in 2006 and has swiftly created the largest charter group in the city. It stretches from the South Bronx to Bedford--Stuyvesant-, with nearly 9,500 students in 24 elementary schools, seven middle schools and one new high school. Most students are black and Latino and poor enough to qualify for federally subsidized lunch. In the same article we learn that from Success Academy’s earliest years, Moskowitz’s methods have brought quantifiable solutions, where the pedagogical practice throughout her schools is test-driven. Daniel Bergner, author of the Times article writes, “In talking to dozens of current and former Success Academy employees and parents, the critique with the most staying power involved the schools’ overly heated preparation for the state exams. A former fourth-grade teacher recounted that network employees made a mini-van run to Toys “R” Us and returned to unload a mound of assorted treasures in the back of her classroom. ‘It was a huge pile,’ she says. ‘We called it Prize Mountain.’ She would remind the pupils that a good score on a practice test meant a gift from the mountain.”
Incentivizing children with gifts for good test scores and humiliating children who test poorly through visible posting of their names and scores incurs reform, but not a reform that lends itself to question power structures of class stratification in the United States and reform where the larger political economy is taken into account. It is a reform that opens the door to monetary profits, propelling the privatization of education onward. Policymakers and politicians who espouse a personally responsible citizen with no obligations to others as the goal of democracy are wholly aligned with the high stakes testing environment and culture at Success Academy Schools.

However, there are contemporary critics of Eva Moskowitz’s approach to education reform. Diane Ravitch, a renowned New York University professor and education historian, has indicted the hedge-fund titans and business moguls who put their weight behind promising charter schools, leading their board and lending political clout, according to “The Battle For New York Schools: Eva Moskowitz vs. Mayor Bill de Blasio.” In this New York Times article, Ravitch states, “when they call themselves reformers, it’s something I gag on. What these philanthropists are all about is making themselves feel good while using charters as a halfway step in a covert effort to pull the country toward the privatization of economy” (Bergner 8). Critics deem this type of education reform as “corporate reform,” because none of the reform has to do with educating for democracy where citizens are participatory and community organizers, nor where citizens are justice-oriented. Rather, their reform is bound up in what Spring defines as the corporatization of education, preparing young people to be laborers in the global economy. Another noteworthy critique of Eva Moskowitz comes from Joanne Yatvin, former teacher, principal and superintendent and literacy expert in Oregon. In a
blog post addressed to Diane Ravitch about Success Academy and its regimented environment, focused on test scores Joanne writes,

In my career as a teacher and principal I came to know a great deal about what children learn at school. It’s not only academics and proper school behavior, but also how to operate in personal relationships and the outside world. Reading the New York Times article about the Success Academy Charter Schools earlier this week, I saw some pretty tough demands being made of all kids and humiliating consequences for those who didn’t meet them. I can’t help wondering if Success Academy students aren’t also learning some or all of the following life lessons:

- The only thing that matters is being a winner
- Competition works better than cooperation
- Do what you’re told even if it makes no sense to you
- Keep quiet when you see other people being abused
- Those who are not successful at their work are just lazy
- Punishment and humiliation are good training for children
- Prepare yourself for stressful situations by wearing a diaper (Blog Post From Diane Ravitch's Blog: A Site To Discuss Better Education For All).

On the other hand, reform could look more like the following key statement from Felix Adler, “The ideal of the School is not the adaptation of the individual to the existing social environment; it is to develop persons who will be competent to change their environment to greater conformity with moral ideals; that is, to put it boldly, to train reformers” (The Ethical Record, 107). Reform in this sense is not about social class reproduction, but rather fostering a mind and heart that advocates for racial and class
equity, longs to eradicate disenfranchising practices, and is self-examining in a holistic manner. Reform, as radical scholar Henry Giroux expresses can define “teachers' work as intellectual, as opposed to purely technical, labor, we can begin to rethink and reform the traditions and conditions that have prevented teachers from assuming their full potential as active, reflective scholars and practitioners, i.e. as ‘transformative intellectuals’ who can educate students to be active, critical citizens and speak out against economic, political, and social injustices both within and outside of schools” (124-128). So what we as independent thinkers can extrapolate is that one vision of reform is within a human capital paradigm, it accepts the current economic power structure, while the other vision of reform offers the means to change it through possessing a social justice paradigm.

III.

One main reason subjects like ethics, service learning as civic literacy, and social justice are not taught in public schools is because the Department of Education is currently obsessed with assessments of both teachers and students. How does one assess that which is unquantifiable? Ethical habits such as empathy, honesty, hard work, cooperation, kindness, and self-control can be practiced within in a school community, but can these habits be assessed? Teachers and students alike can be committed to a weekly curricular lesson and hands-on experience at a local community garden, but are they to be assessed on this, too, to make it count? Fourth graders can lead a protest on making their neighborhoods sites of peace and non-violence rather than sites of shootings and drug warfare, but are they to be assessed on how well the protest went in order to receive school credit for their efforts? There can be something
quantifiable for each example cited above, but that which is unquantifiable is the driving force behind ethics education, service learning, and social justice issues within the classroom and beyond. Now, perhaps more than ever, public education needs to prepare students to be active, pragmatic, lifelong learners rather than mere repositories of information. Paul Shaker and Elizabeth E. Heilman in their inspiring work write, “clearly, democratic education is a moral, spiritual, and critical endeavor rooted in a particular view of humanity as equal, rational, and cooperative, and a citizenry that asserts responsibility for all people, for all species, and for the environment. Democracy espouses faith in our ethical capacities and in democratic dialogue, decision-making, and lived practice” (183). Thus, there is a profound conflict of interest between said subjects and the human capital paradigm that is currently driving education in the United States. Cultivating communities of cooperation and equity versus indoctrinating scholars for corporate America have two very different ends. The former is one that envisions working in order to live and the latter is what Max Weber in his well-known study of capitalism expressed as “one does not work to live; one lives to work” (Cited in Pieper p. 20).

The question of what does it mean to live, namely, to be wholly human and alive emerges. In the twenty-first century, the original conception of leisure, as it arose in the civilized world of Greece has become unrecognizable with regard to defining what it means to be human and in a human world of planned diligence and “total labor.” Nowadays, the sphere of work is overvalued, and the sphere of leisure is unknown. Ought we work in order to have leisure, namely, to live? Ought we form, educate, and school children in both matters of life/leisure and work? An ethics education is bound
up in wonder, integrity, and purpose. An ethics education orients itself to issues of
social justice: It is about how to be a good community member within family, school,
one’s neighborhood, city, country, world, and planet. It resists mainstream modernist
curricula which often assume a position of ethical neutrality, where issues are presented
as neutral information, and key questions of compassion and non-violence, of inclusivity
and difference, of sustainability and environmentalism, and global stewardship, as well
as questions of power and privilege are left unexplored or are avoided. We want
children to learn a language of critique coupled with a language of possibility within the
classroom. Children and youth need to be able to question the status quo in the current
moment of education and life in general in the United States. In 2015, we are educating
laborers, *homo economicus*, and not whole persons, *homo sapiens*. This mentality
negates the heart, psyche, dignity, feelings, awe, and creativity of one’s humanity. It
negates one’s ethical responsibility to their fellow human and to the natural world. “But
democratic education aimed at influencing a moral sensibility has been thwarted by the
policy debates that confound and confuse the nature of private religious ethics and
public democratic ethics … yet there can be a different epistemological and ethical
expression of democratic public education--revitalization--when spiritual, critical,
Deweyan pragmatist perspectives are considered” (Shaker and Elizabeth 186).

Contrary to the democratic spirit, in the current climate of education, curriculum reflects
empiricism, certainty, disciplining, and sorting and is void of meaning, passion, ethics,
and imagination!

However, there are a myriad of public school educators who espouse a social
justice paradigm within education and who are trying to combat the economization of
education. Theirs is a philosophy which honors each student’s quest for ethics-in-action; these educators imbue a language of possibility within their communities. Henry A. Giroux is one scholar-practitioner who exhorts teachers as transformative intellectuals and is a real pioneer within the social justice paradigm. He states, “there is a need to defend schools as institutions essential to maintaining and developing a critical democracy and also to defending teachers as transformative intellectuals who combine scholarly reflection and practice in the service of educating students to be thoughtful, active citizens” (Giroux 122). The New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) is one example of a network of public school educators committed to both scholarly reflection and to organizing for justice-oriented citizenry in our school system and society at large. NYCoRE recognizes the urgency for a broader vision of education beyond instrumental uses, specifically beyond preparing young people only for the work force. These teachers work with people across racial, gender, and class differences, and do not back away from difficult, sustained work in the service of creating a more just and equitable world. In order to nurture this vision NYCoRE hosts an annual, action-packed conference with keynote speakers, community building, peace poets, and over eighty different workshop sessions. The theme of the 2014 conference was “Radical Possibilities,” inspired by Jean Anyon. Anyon (was) is a scholar-activist and inspiration to innumerable persons working in and for urban education who wrote a body of work entitled, Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement, for which the theme of the 2014 conference was based upon.

Jean Anyon, what Beautiful Trouble she was, is, and continues to be, for so many. Hers is the wisdom of an activist, the gravitas of a troublemaker, the brilliance of
a political economist and the intensity of a scholar. It was a serendipitous series of events that led me into the energy field of one, Jean Anyon, during my coursework in the MALS Program at the CUNY Graduate Center. Together as a class of 14 under the tenacious, compassionate guidance of Wendy Luttrell, we reveled week after week in Jean’s *Beautiful Trouble* which she created over decades of scholarship, research, activism, friendship, and a laborious love. Each week I was moved by Jean’s profound sense of hope amidst the ongoing crisis of urban education; her desire to theorize not simply about why things are the way they are, but rather to theorize and do research for social transformation and to foment revolution!

Whether it was *Ghetto Schooling*, *Marx and Education*, *Radical Possibilities*, or *Theory and Educational Research*, Anyon began with the material conditions of reality, namely, that life is hard. Yet her desire to both understand life in its whole and in its process all at once, revealed a sort of paradox about Jean’s practice: that life is hard, celebrate. She argues that education has the potential to be a place for bringing various small social movements together into a larger movement that can begin to have an impact on current economic and social policies that benefit privileged people and groups. Education “is an institution whose basic problems are caused by, and whose basic problems reveal, the other crises in cities: poverty, joblessness, and low-wages, and racial and class segregation” (Anyon 177). So, I knew I would need something tangible to remind me of the Troublemaker I had come to know and admire. Something to remind me to revolt against the economic injustice and environmental injustice that I bear witness to, daily. Jean knew that progressive internal school reforms and social movements leading to new social and economic policies are both necessary in today’s
neoliberal climate of corporate reform. Neither can be successful without the other. I needed something to remind me of community in a world where so many people find their own existence meaningless or futile. I needed something to remind me of possibility in a hetero-dominant culture, in a culture saturated in white privilege. Something to encourage me to help build social movements, to inspire me to community organize in an educational world inundated with agendas and accountability. But, most importantly, I needed a tangible reminder of something that gave me hope … as Jean’s work has, each day. I am amazed how connected I feel to this visionary, to this radical, to this Beautiful Troublemaker … I’ve always considered myself a shaker and a mover, a nonconformist, a lover of humanity … it is clear to me now, that Jean, too, is all of these realities, she, too, is a multiplicity of selves.

This multiplicity of selves lets us see the inherent both/and nature of what could be the antidote to our educational crises. Anyon claims, “urban neighborhoods will be necessary to create the conditions that allow for and support successful urban schools, but these nurturing conditions will have to be supplemented by reforms that prevent racial tracking, low-level curriculum, and poor teaching, for example” (Anyon 3). Charity is indispensable, as is justice; it’s a both/and. We need a democratic society where citizens are being educating from their earliest years to be personally responsible and justice-oriented. Qualitative research and quantitative research are essential in the adventure of education reform; it’s a both/and. For we need data in this debate and the stories behind the data. Reform is needed both within our school system and within our larger social and economic policies; again, it’s a both/and. One who is a shaker and a mover sees the need for justice, one who is a nonconformist sees the need for
qualitative research, one who is a lover of humanity sees the urgency for charity and for social and economic reforms. Jean’s vastness as a scholar-activist is terribly compelling. And I needed something that would continue to compel me long after our “Teaching Jean Anyon” course was over.

When I was at the NYCoRE conference in spring of 2014, with an entire day dedicated to Anyon’s *Radical Possibilities*, I wandered the hallways during the breaks between sessions just soaking up all of the good vibes and spirit of revolution. Teachers, parents, students, and communities were together as a collective, as one. The whole day was a lived experience in Ubuntu, “I am because we are.” Then, similar to how I stumbled into room 3212 in “Teaching Jean Anyon” last spring, I stumbled upon an utterance that spoke to the depths of my core and even vocation, if you will, … … an utterance that Jean herself embodied:

“So keep fightin’ for freedom and justice, beloveds,

but don’t forget to have fun doin’ it.

Be outrageous, ridicule the fraidy-cats,

rejoice in all the oddities

that pure freedom can produce.

And when you get through kickin’ ass

and celebrating the sheer joy of a good fight,

be sure to tell those who come after,

how much fun it was!” (Molly Ivins)

Jean has urged me as a fellow beloved, to behold my worth, my humanity, my very being. She has encouraged me to keep fightin’ … even amidst the dominance of
corporate capitalism and the neoliberal agenda on education reform, one void of “linking educational issues to community ones regarding jobs, housing, transportation, and investment” (Anyon 176).

Jean continues to inspire, from a liberal distance, to fight for what matters, namely, freedom and justice. “If those of us who are angry about injustice can recapture the revolutionary spirit of which King speaks, and if we can act on it together, then we may be able to create a force powerful enough to produce economic justice and the basis for real, long-term school reform in America’s cities” (Anyon 187). Alongside the recapturing of said revolutionary spirit, I have felt her hopeful sentiments time and time again to not forget to have fun while organizing … revolting. To be outrageous, and ridicule the fraidy-cats, and to rejoice in all the oddities that freedom can produce. “The continuity of protests over the long haul demonstrates that social movements do not necessarily die. They change and persist. Civil rights struggle, for example, continues--both quietly in courtrooms (regarding affirmative action, a living wage, urban education funding, immigrant and voting rights) and more noisily in transgressive public protest” (Anyon 132) like the peaceful protest I organized and participated in on March 11, 2015 at 52 Tweed Courthouse on the steps of Chancellor Farina’s office to keep The Ethical Community Charter School (TECCS) open.

Chancellor Farina made a unilateral decision to close TECCS due to two years of low test scores on the New York State Exams. Children at TECCS were angered by this unjust decision and wanted to respond with a peaceful protest. In ethics class at TECCS, kindergartners through fifth graders have found their voice to question power and current practices. They have had opportunities each week to explore issues of
injustice around race and class. They have learned and become inspired by many of the great activists who have gone before them and now they realized it was their turn to stand up for justice and truth. 260 learners went to protest at 52 Tweed Courthouse on March 11, 2015, all wearing t-shirts that said, “I am more than a test score” on the front and on the back the words “I am” with a blank space where each child filled in who she or he is with their own handwriting. Some t-shirts read, I am an author, I am a mathematician, I am an urban planner, I am a researcher, I am a poet, I am an activist, I am a scientist, I am an athlete, et cetera. Children from TECCS also all wrote advocacy letters to Chancellor Farina asking her to come visit TECCS, which she had never done before and, also, that she change her decision to close the school. The chanting at Tweed Courthouse on the morning of March 11 left a powerful democratic experience for all 500 people who participated in it. Surely seeds of ethical transformation and activism have been planted within the TECCS families!

My experience at TECCS has been inspired and informed by Jean’s vision, nurtured by NYCORE, and sustained by our learners enthusiasm around inquiry, inclusivity, and activism. “Whether one is born to radicalism or acquires it along the way, the premises on which it rests affirm the deeply rooted connections and disjunctures between democracy and capitalism … a radical analysis points towards concrete, long-lasting solutions (Anyon, 139). I trust that my labor of love and now grief will bear fruit in the near future. It saddens my heart that TECCS will close its doors once and for all in a few weeks. I can hear the children’s questions around power and injustice in my conscience, I can see their joy in ethics class when we do skits, and I can see their tears that our TECCS family will soon take on a different form. It is
imperative I strive to embody the spirit of great female radicals who’ve gone before me and that I continue to celebrate amidst the struggle.

Because when each of us gets through kickin’ ass and celebratin’ the sheer joy of a good fight, we must be sure to tell those who come after, how much fun it was. As we continue the joy of a good fight for comprehensive education reform, one that includes city-wide policies on housing and the living wage, on affordable healthcare and nutritional meals, we must be sure to tell our communities and students and neighbors how fun it has been. Remembering what parent-activist Zakiyah Ansari proclaimed, “organized people beat organized money every time!” This Molly Ivins declaration now hangs in a prominent place in my home. It is an utterance Jean embodied and thus rallied other people to the same revolutionary and extraordinary existence.

Radical Possibilities “is an attempt to intervene against injustice” (Anyon 2), suggesting that scholarship is a form of activism. Anyon talks about a new paradigm of educational policy. She thinks “the political potential of pedagogy and curriculum could be realized. Critical pedagogy would take to the streets, offices, and courtrooms where social justice struggles play out. Curriculum could be built toward and from these experiences. Vocational offerings in high school would link to living wage campaigns and employers who support them. And educational research would not be judged by its ostensible scientific objectivity, but at least in part by its ability to spark political consciousness and change” (Anderson 10). This social justice paradigm leads me to a concrete group of people who are actualizing Jean’s vision. I learned about them and their social movement at the 2014 NYCoRE Conference. The title of their workshop speaks volumes, “Teachers, Parents, Students, Communities: Unite and Fight!” The
workshop was led by Dao Tran and Jia Lee. Dao is co-PTA chair at the Castle Bridge School, where more than 95% of parents opted out of the early grade tests in spring 2014.

At a September 16 PTA meeting, Castle Bridge elementary school parents received some unwelcome news: the New York City Department of Education was imposing new standardized tests on their children in kindergarten through second grade. Kindergarteners would take a break from learning the alphabet to bubble A through D on multiple-choice exams. Images next to each problem—a tree, a mug, a hand—would serve as signposts for students still fuzzy on numbers (Davis).

Jia Lee is a 4th/5th grade teacher, a parent, and leading member of Change the Stakes, a grassroots anti-testing group. After years of drilling, assessing and scoring youth to exhaustion, Jia Lee and more than 25,000 kids in New York have defied the educational establishment in a test of wills according to Michelle Chen in her Nation article “Why Are Teachers and Students Opting Out of Standardized Testing?” The “opt-out” movement has exploded in schools across the state, as students, parents, teachers, and communities “resist the standardized testing regime that has fueled a free-market assault on public testing” (Chen). This movement reflects the inevitable response of citizens when dramatic changes are imposed unilaterally on democratic institutions, in this case, the Common Core State Standards testing on public schools. Dao Tran states, “as parents are unable to influence the content of curricular or nature of assessments through democratic means, direct resistance becomes perhaps their only option (Davis). Only by working as a people united can we imagine a different
educational system; one founded on ethics-in-action, that is to say, on justice, equity, democracy, love, and joy.

Dao Tran and Jia Lee lead mass boycotts on high-stakes testing so the classroom can be a place of liberation, not rote memorization and fact-learning in isolation. They both are very proud to lead and be part of a coalition of resistance, strengthening their effectiveness as activists. Tran stated that the parents knew that “acting as individuals wouldn’t keep testing culture from invading our school,” thus, they opted for collective action forging connections among parents and activists and educators. Jia Lee wrote to her administration at Earth School and public schools Chancellor Carmen Farina the following,

as an act of conscience, we are declining the role of test administrators for the 2014 New York State Common Core Tests. We are acting in solidarity with countless public school teachers who have paved their own paths of resistance and spoken truthfully about the decay of their profession under market-based reforms. These acts of conscience have been necessary because we are accountable to the children we teach and our pedagogy, both of which are dishonored daily by current policies (Chen).

Organized non-compliance, Lee says, enables community members to deny the data, starve the date beast. Because … these high stakes test are like the central nervous system to this entire operation. They are an operation that continues to perpetuate class and race stratification across the country, an operation under the neoliberal regime. This grassroots movement inspires and is organizing a national voice in the ongoing debate over education reform.
Parents and children alike are citizen-activists. Perhaps what happened in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1963 Children’s March will be replicated now more than fifty years later. What spurred thousands of children to action back in 1963? What gave them the power to rebel and resist? And what will spur thousands of children to action now in 2015, what will give them the power to rebel and resist the data-driven agenda in education? How did the power of love form their strategies and their actions in Birmingham? And how can educators today invite students to experience anew the legacy of the children of Birmingham and encourage them to rise up against neoliberalism? The mass “opt-out” movement around taking State tests that happened across the United States this spring is a contemporary iteration of the power of children’s actions in the face of injustice. As Mahatma Gandhi says, “if we are to reach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children” (Goodreads quotes). How can we make education a site of ethical transformation and engaged citizenship? We must implement lessons in community organizing, in activism, in questioning the status quo, in nonviolence, in ethical action, and in rebellion. And these lessons need to be part of the curriculum, they cannot be taught only by a few radical educators. Now is the time we need a Jean Anyon, John Dewey, Felix Adler, Paolo Freire and other transformative intellectuals to emerge in our pedagogical textbooks!

New York City public schools, as Tran and Lee convey, have certainly fallen prey to the free market ideology and human capital accountability. Schools are void of meaning and fulfillment for teachers and students alike, which is why it is imperative they find places to community organize around progressive education reform. One can
attend the NYCoRe conference to find solidarity and possibility to radicalize with other teacher-activists. Many of those present at the NYCoRE conference reunited at a rally and march on the steps of City Hall seeking to create and sustain a public school system that provides a fully funded, equitable, community-based education for every child in New York City. An ethics-in-action vision of education connects students, teachers, parents, and administrators to compassion, creativity, and solidarity within the classroom. It is an education that fosters young people to ask existential questions within their learning environment and create answers through the arts. Radical educators coordinate service immersion trips for their students and mentor them on what it means to be human. Inherent to this style of education is advocacy, namely, to advocate for emerging issues that children and young people themselves find vital throughout the learning process. Clearly children learn from the behavior that is modeled for them by the adults in their community as the old adage goes, “actions speak louder than words.” When students see their teachers and families audaciously participating in the “opt-out” movement, I am certain their children are learning they, too, can resist injustice when they see it. The children are learning about the power of the collective, they are bearing witness to Ubuntu, “I am because we are.” Lee and Tran are cultivating a language of critique coupled with a language of possibility within young people! Scholar-activist Henry Giroux writes,

making the pedagogical more political means inserting schooling directly into the political sphere by arguing that schooling represents both a struggle to define meaning and a struggle over power relations … critical reflection and action become part of a fundamental social project to help students develop a deep and
abiding faith in the struggle to overcome economic, political and social injustices, and to further humanize themselves as part of this struggle (Giroux 127).

It is indispensable that teachers become more politicized with their work and build coalitions across the United States while doing so. If more and more teachers can rise up and speak out against the current power structures in education, then we can realize Giroux’s exhortation.

IV.

Nietzsche, another force of human agency, once uttered, “he/she who has a why to live can bear almost any how.” It is my hope to bring young people to this why for themselves via the robust ethics curriculum I create, “Bread and Roses.” The human person does not only deserve bread, but roses, too! I believe that asking existential questions and emphasizing the sapiens dimension of our humanity in lieu of the economicus dimension will engage young people and teachers to bring more joie de vivre and justice to the world and at the same time will urge them to live in a more symbiotic relationship with the natural world. The participatory and social justice paradigm which Dewey and Anyon espouse will be my own as I forge ahead with implementation of this ethics curriculum. This is a curriculum which meets communities of any religious background and of any linguistic heritage where they are at in their quest for sapiens and “roses” not only economicus and bread.

How will I implement said vision? By bringing an ethics-in-action branch, one which employs civic literacy and interdisciplinarity, into already existing schools, whether of the human capital paradigm, the progressive education paradigm, the religious paradigm, or of the indigenous education paradigm. I am confident that the
celebratory and industrious nature of our branch will ignite conversation around paradigmatic differences. For "knowledge and power are inextricably linked to the presupposition that to choose life, to recognize the necessity of improving its democratic and qualitative character for all people, is to understand the preconditions necessary to struggle for it" (Giroux 127). Our program will strive to improve the democratic and qualitative experience for people across all class stratifications. In ethics, virtue, purpose, integrity, and meaning can come to life. Shira Epstein’s *Teaching Civic Literacy Projects* will prove essential for the curriculum. She is an activist-scholar who is cultivating a language of critique coupled with a language of possibility within her work. Epstein writes,

> I have had the privilege of learning from various educators and youth who address public issues through sustained projects. I have watched and at times guided such projects in urban schools … most of my learning has been with poor and working-class students of color. I have also had opportunities to work with White students of privilege. I have seen the English and social studies content areas be used as sites for civic engagement and have also seen these projects unfold in advisory periods and after-school programs … all the teachers and students I have met through my research on civic education have helped me understand how youth can be supported to name and analyze social problems around them and take action, working for a better world (2).

Youth, when given the platform, do generative work around issues of injustice they experience and witness others experiencing. The issues of homelessness, police brutality, and environmental injustice are a few emergent issues young people are
eager to explore, tackle, and champion. Ethics-in-action would involve three key phases; identifying civic problems, the study and exploration of these problems, and designing and taking action steps to address them. Epstein breaks down these phases as problem identification, problem exploration, and action. The aim is to cultivate a citizen who is personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented all at once!

Given the economization of education that dominates our classrooms, it is of paramount importance that ethics-in-action is taught in schools. It is vital to have thinkers such as Giroux, Westheimer, Kahne, Anyon, Epstein, and Dewey at the forefront of teaching pedagogy. How to be an ethical-activist in the current climate of being a skilled and prepared worker for the global economy is proving to be more and more difficult. We are educating laborers, *homo economicus*, to merely be personally responsible and not whole persons who are participatory and justice-oriented citizens in democracy. *Homo economicus* is the concept of humans as rational and narrowly self-interested actors who have the ability to make judgments toward their subjectively defined ends. Using these rational assessments, *homo economicus* attempts to maximize utility as a consumer and economic profit as a producer. This mentality negates the heart, psyche, spirit, feelings, awe, and creativity of our humanity, and likewise negates our moral responsibility to one another and to the natural world. A philosophy which views the human person through this lens is a philosophy which has led society to the fast-food and fast-fashion movements we currently experience. These are movements that forego basic, ethical principles of care, stewardship, dignity, and solidarity.
It is my hope to bring a sense of wonder, empathy, and “roses” into the classroom via an ethics-in-action curriculum. The action and “roses” of our global school system will be the practice of any art, comedy, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, writing, poetry, fiction, essays, and/or reportage. This will be practiced for the sake of itself, not to get money or fame, but for students to experience becoming, to find out what wakes them up in the morning, to make their soul grow. Formal assessment will also happen in our classrooms, but in the form of oral exams among other more individualized methods. I could imagine with writing, portfolios and reflection essays being used, for example. Urging and encouraging the students to find their own voice around real life issues of sustainability, consumerism, corporate behavior, and human rights, for example. The issues which are grappled with in the classroom will change according to the culture, country, and language in which we are participating. The goal is for young people to emerge more whole from this “Bread and Roses” curriculum, that is, to grapple with the tension that, indeed, life is hard, but come celebrate while being it, doing it. Students will respond to this curriculum with joy and a sense of relief. When they are engaged during school hours around what matters, they in turn respond with enthusiasm and a deeper sense of self and meaning in the quotidian of being a student. Later, I will give a concrete example of what this kind of activism and engagement looks like in action.

As these observations and experiences demonstrate, a resurgence of John Dewey’s philosophy is necessary in the current moment of education. He is a giant in public education of the twentieth century and wrote one of his most famous works in 1915, *Democracy and Education*. A century later his philosophy of education is ever so
urgent if education reform is to lead to ethical transformation and socially just and active citizenship. The relationship between education and communication is robust.

Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—like-mindedness as the sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another, like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces. The communication which insures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions—like ways of responding to expectations and requirements (Democracy and Education 4).

Thus, what type of democracy the educator or policymaker of education espouses matters greatly as to the aims, beliefs, aspirations, and knowledge learners are exposed to from their earliest days in the classroom.

Educators and policymakers are increasingly pursuing programs that aim to strengthen democracy; the nature of their underlying aims, beliefs, and aspirations around the “good” citizen, however, differ. The spectrum of ideas about what good citizenship is and what good citizens do vastly differ. Indeed, communication is integral to education, and “like-mindedness” as Dewey mentions secures certain ways of responding to expectations and requirements. A policymaker whose conception of the “good” citizen is one who acts personally responsible in her/his community by, for example, picking up litter, giving blood, obeying laws, and staying out of debt. On the
other hand, a policymaker whose conception of the “good” citizen is a justice oriented citizen, argues that effective democratic citizens need opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social, economic, and political forces. This view is referred to as the justice oriented citizen “because advocates of these priorities use rhetoric and analysis that calls explicit attention to matters of injustice and to the importance of pursuing social justice” (Westheimer and Kahne 4). The antidote to the current hegemonic understanding of citizenship where character counts and hard work pays off is in re-introducing John Dewey in a culturally relevant manner to today’s educators, policymakers, and children. It would be a vision which employs thinker-activists like Jean Anyon and Henry Giroux as contemporary champions of Deweyan practice. It is imperative the human capital paradigm be overthrown if, indeed, we want education to be a site of fulfillment and activist citizenship for all, not only for the privileged few.

Educational programs that emphasize social change seek to prepare learners to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices. There is an explicit attempt in curriculum for students to name concerns they have about their society, to explore those concerns with print and nonprint texts that help them answer their questions or understand the problems they named, and ultimately there is space provided for students to take steps to address and potentially ameliorate the problem. An incredible organization that espouses this model and is effecting incredible structural change is The Brotherhood/Sister Sol (BHSS) in East Harlem. The Brotherhood/Sister Sol offers comprehensive, holistic and long-term support to youth who age from eight to twenty-two. They focus on leadership development, educational achievement, sexual responsibility, eliminating sexism, and misogyny, political
education and social justice, Pan African and Latino/a history, and global awareness. Their evidence-based programming includes a four to six years rites of passage process, a five-day-a-week after school care program, counseling, summer camps, job training and opportunities, college preparation, community organizing training, and international study in Africa and Latin America. BHSS is locally based with a national reach, training educators throughout the nation on their approach, and advising on educational policy across the country and New York City. BHSS is an evidence-based program that has documented outcomes that far surpass New York City numbers:

- Harlem’s teenaged pregnancy rate is 17% - BHSS members have a rate of less than 2%; BHSS’ educational achievement numbers far surpass those in NYC as well.

- In the City of New York the general high school graduation rate is 61%; whereas 90% of BHSS alumni have graduated from high school, 94% either graduated from high school or earned their GED.

- In Harlem 30% of youth, ages 18-25, are working full time or in college; whereas 95% of BHSS youth are working full time or enrolled in college.

- One out of three Black men in America, ages 20-29 are under supervision of the prison system - in prison, on probation or on parole. After 20 years no member of alumni of BHSS is incarcerated and less than 1% are on probation. (The Brotherhood/Sister Sol Model)

The Brotherhood/Sister Sol is one effective model espousing a social justice paradigm amidst the hegemony of human capital educational theorists and policymakers.
V.

People know what a test is and they can see numbers, but they have a harder time imagining - let alone planning - justice-oriented activities, curriculum, methods like BHSS. I have another specific example to describe what activism and engagement could look like in action. It is a service immersion experience I co-created and implemented called “The Big Onion,” peeling back the layers of New York City to discover truth. It is a week long opportunity for young people of means and privilege to immerse themselves in the communities and cultures of disenfranchised folks via service learning. During each day’s work young people seek “a compassion that can stand in awe at what people have to carry rather than in judgement at how they carry it,” as stated by radical activist Greg Boyle, S.J. (Tattoos of the Heart, 72). On the first night, students explore the Upper East Side, the second day students explore the Lower East Side by working at a food pantry, the third day students venture to Union Square and commune with folks at a homeless shelter, the fourth day they go to Upper Manhattan and spend quality time with our elderly in a nursing home, the fifth day, students explore the East Village through the lens of the Catholic Worker movement, and on the sixth day students venture to the South Bronx working in a community garden, and on the way home from the South Bronx they stop at Hot Bread Kitchen, of which I will speak more about later in this paper. Each evening students have the opportunity to unpack issues of power and privilege, oppression and systemic injustice that are happening currently in the United States. One night we watch the documentary A Place at The Table. It is an examination of the issue of hunger in America, which focuses on the plight of three individuals from different parts of the country who struggle
to find adequate nutrition. Another night we watch a TED Talk by Greg Boyle, S.J. on kinship and compassion, another night we create poetry founded on social justice, and another night we recreate with charades. However, each morning and each evening we ask the teenagers to keep in mind and heart and reflect on the following questions:

- How would you describe the neighborhood and its residents? What would be the bread and roses for the people you met?
- What did you enjoy? what was difficult or made you feel uncomfortable?
- Who did you form community with?
- Where did you experience Divine presence in your day? Where did you find it difficult to recognize Divine presence today?
- What are some of your attitudes, or preconceived notions that are changing?

My Personal Interest

I came across Hot Bread Kitchen when I was coordinating a service learning project for an all-girls Catholic college preparatory school where I was then working. The idea was for young people to put ethics into action, and that their actions would propel their ethical inquiry! When I was in my undergraduate studies, a dear friend of mine spoke of Rose Schneiderman’s coined phrase “Bread and Roses” referring to how the poor (our Poor) deserve bread, but roses, too! This truth struck such a chord with me, that it really became a sort of personal philosophy I espoused, one which I hoped to imbue unto others at that time of my life and even now. “We want bread and roses too!” It seems the both/and nature of human experience is manifest in these lines, as we long for bread (material sustenance) and for roses (spiritual sustenance and beauty), too.
Each human person, whether on the fringes of society as an immigrant woman from Bangladesh working at Hot Bread Kitchen, or an affluent CEO and founder of a thriving organization, needs food and purpose, water and meaning, shelter and beauty in their lives. So when I was organizing this service learning project in the spring of 2012 for high school girls I thought the Bread and Roses philosophy was a perfect fit. I am particularly drawn to the idea of Bread and Roses because it is not preachy or imposing, but powerfully inviting and resonates deeply with people when they first hear it and dwell on it thereafter. “What the woman who labors wants is the right to live, not simply exist - the right to life as the rich woman has the right to life, and the sun and music and art. You have nothing that the humblest worker has not a right to have also. The worker must have bread, but she must have roses too” (Rose Schneiderman). Upon further ethical reflection, one can come to realize that democracy must be a political system that provides Bread and Roses for all, not just for those who have access to these dimensions due to their privilege. Transformative intellectuals need to give learners an experience that unites the language of critique with the language of possibility. The hope is that young people who participate in this kind of service learning project emerge ready and willing to “speak out against economic, political and social injustices both within and outside of schools … we must work to create conditions that give students the opportunity to become citizens who have the knowledge and courage to struggle in order to make despair unconvincing and hope practical” (Giroux 128).

Hot Bread Kitchen (HBK), along with five other organizations, were a solid fit for this particular service learning project. Jessamyn Rodriguez and her team at HBK are
certainly cognizant of providing their workers with bread and roses. The work space in La Marqueta Harlem is kept tidy and organized. The workers are paid a just wage and have a welcoming working environment. The immigrant women are being apprenticed in agency. I realize that not every non-profit, nor every hybrid organization, nor every charitable for-profit can be entirely holistic, however I do think these organizations need one another. Instead of competing with one another in a cutthroat capitalist manner, I think it would behoove organizations to collaborate with each other. For example, the Hot Bread Kitchen site in La Marqueta donates its leftover breads from that day to a thriving and effective food pantry a couple of blocks away, New York Common Pantry. Clearly, HBK does all it can to meet the multifactorial needs of its employees, but one organization cannot provide all the bread and roses a given individual needs.

It is my hope to politicize young women when they immerse themselves in this service learning opportunity. Just as it is important for me to wake up to my own privilege on a daily basis, I also find it important to help other people to wake up to their privilege and do something about it. One way we can honor our privilege and do something about it is to buy food from places that are doing work grounded in dignity and social justice. We can patron a local farmer’s market, Hot Bread Kitchen, and Trader Joe’s, for example. It is essential to realize that as consumers we hold so much political power when it comes to where we purchase items. A few of the teenagers that attended this service learning trip were born in Westchester, New York into upper-middle class families, have highly educated parents, and have been educated in a solid school district. I think it’s important that they commune with women who were born in Mexico, for example, into lower-class, impoverished families, illiterate parents, and
never had opportunities for formal schooling. At the beginning of the service trip, many of the girls thought they needed “to help” the women they were meeting, but as the week continued, teenager after teenager had an “ah-ha” moment that the populations of people they were working with had much to teach and give to them. The majority of the students on the service learning trip came to the realization that we belong to each other. Principles of community, accountability, reciprocity, and equity were at the forefront of planning and creating this immersion experience, participating on it, and reflecting on it after it was over.

Keywords

Food, access, justice, women, capitalism, and immigration are keywords that have emerged throughout my research on Hot Bread Kitchen. As my research indicates HBK is, truly, a place where baking meets social justice. Whether or not HBK will be able to sustain its hybrid model of opportunity and economic justice for immigrant women remains to be seen. The unbridled capitalism that is our own within the United States and certainly in New York City could very well tear down this venture, unbridled being the keyword in the current moment of the United States economy. Small business capitalism coupled with humanitarian ideals can thrive, especially when it’s a business centered around one of our most basic needs: food. I am hopeful seeing the recent mass interest and participation in “the slow food movement” and of “food justice” issues. Wendell Berry has been a real pioneer in this area, seeing food as a multi-faceted experience, one that brings hearts and minds and bodies together, around a table. The fast food industry has brought about a myriad of issues; obesity, a breakdown in the family, unjust wages to workers, to name only a few. If education
could be a site of ethical transformation and engaged citizenship, then a service immersion experience like the one I’ve described here could be a part of the mandated curriculum in high school. It would be a curriculum informed by Shira Epstein’s political and democratic work. “Enlightened political engagement combines two concepts: political engagement and democratic enlightenment. Through political engagement, citizens take action; they speak out in reference to issues that motivate them. Democratic enlightenment refers to the moral, emotional, and intellectual insight that informs action” (Epstein 12).

It is difficult to implement such ideas in today’s climate of false “educational reform.” Teachers currently feel pressured to cover what is deemed “official knowledge” and teach to the New York State Exam. Teachers end up ignoring students’ perspectives that would question unjust power structures and often student voices, particularly those that are marginalized, are silenced. As Paolo Freire utters in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “teaching a prescribed set of content leads to a banking style of education in which knowledge is deposited in students’ minds and they are seen as passive recipients.” So often curriculum is not based on students’ local civic identities. It is noteworthy that what I am calling service learning projects, Epstein is calling civic literacy projects - the two have similar processes and aims.

Civic literacy projects are good for democracy in that they position citizens in an attentive role in which they take responsibility for particular civic issues and advocate for changes that will help themselves and their neighbors. As citizens work together in these ways, they promote a ‘strong democracy,’ where they consider the common good along with their own personal interests. Alternatively,
citizens may choose to civically engage in ways that promote a ‘thin democracy,’ where they act to meet their individualistic and private needs. In a thin democracy, citizens only claim what they want, while in a strong democracy, citizens determine what will be good for ‘us’ (Epstein 9).

I think it is important to expose certain young people to alternative realities in order for them to see what issues they care most about. Ergo, if working with a population of girls that come from middle-upper class backgrounds as I have at some points in my community organizer experience, first I would have them participate in “Bread and Roses” and secondly, have them identify the injustice that resonates most with them and finally, dive into a more robust civic literacy project as Epstein outlines.

Significance

In an era when the inextricable reality of bread and roses, body and soul, base and superstructure, has been lost, I find this topic of vital importance. Whether you are a poet, an activist, or an urban planner, you have to live in this world and work in it and eat in this world and get food from somewhere in it. Even if you realize the transient nature of this world, you still have to abide in it somehow. Where you live, and where you work, and what you eat, and where you buy your food have consequences, simply because our actions, as Mother Nature has ordained it to be, have consequences. Thus, I find it imperative that people wake up to the inextricable unity of their own humanity. How any given person wakes up to this reality, well, there lies the difficulty. People are stuck in their political ideologies, aren’t they? But what if they went inside the Hot Bread Kitchen workspace in La Marqueta and felt the dignity in the room? What if they tasted the artisanal breads of an Ethiopian woman and then wanted to buy
loaves of it for their upcoming dinner party? And then someone tastes it and says, “This is the most delicious bread I’ve ever tasted, where is it from?” Or what if someone realized that the surplus of bread baked that day in HBK went to those hungry, who happened to be just down the street. And from that, a person might have an epiphany that we belong to each other. Or, what if the person who brought the leftover bread to New York Common Pantry actually started to break bread with them? And, lastly, what if someone spoke of Jerome Oppenheim’s poem: “Hearts starve as well as bodies; Give us bread and give us roses.”

The nightly reflection students ponder and meditate upon is taken from eminent community organizer, Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker. She states, What we would like to do is change the world - make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And - by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of workers, of the poor, of the destitute - we can to a certain extent change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, there is nothing we can do but love, and dear God, please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as our friend.

This philosophy is wholly aligned with the both/and nature of charity and justice as discussed earlier, as such it informs each day of “The Big Onion” experience.

Education needs to provide radical possibilities for children and youth to question, wonder, imagine, and, ultimately, as Felix Adler noted one hundred years ago, reform
society! I have provided a myriad of ways where education can be a site of ethical transformation and activism instead of the status quo.

Conclusion

Ubuntu philosophy, “I am because we are,” can be a guiding torch in today’s conversation and praxis around education. It is essential that educators, administrators, families, and policymakers implement compassion, creativity, and solidarity within the classroom. School needs to be a place where learners ask existential questions and create answers through the arts. Where service immersion trips are part of the curriculum and students are mentored on what it means to be human, all the while advocating for emerging issues that young people themselves find vital. Democracy and education go hand in hand; we must educate citizens who are willing to rise up in the face of unjust power structures, activists who champion local issues of inequity, learners who can celebrate amidst the struggle for non-violent rebellion. “Rebellion is the common ground on which every human being bases his or her first values. I rebel--therefore we exist” (Camus 28). Such combats the intellectually dishonest dictum of Rene Descartes’ cogito, ergo sum, we are not a people defined by our individualism, nor by our rationality. We are a people bound to one another, each unrepeatable in her/his being, but at the same time belonging to each other. Again, it is a both/and. I am convinced that we can transition from the neoliberalism of today to this vision of ethics-in-action by implementing wonder, rebellion, and activism. I believe wonder can lead young people to being an advocate for what matters. It is my hope culturally relevant ethics-in-action curriculum would imbue a profound sense within learners that
we belong to each other and it is our collective duty to participate and further realize a stronger democracy for all.
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