Rural Adolescent Education Reframed: Can Social Justice, Lewin’s Topology, and Aesthetics Aid Reform Efforts?

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RURAL ADOLESCENT EDUCATION REFRAMED:
CAN SOCIAL JUSTICE, LEWIN'S TOPOLOGY, AND AESTHETICS AID REFORM EFFORTS?

by

JUDITH FARLEY UPJOHN

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

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Rural Adolescent Education Reframed:

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Judith Farley Upjohn

Advisor: Susan Opotow

The aim of this thesis is to describe and analyze how changes in classroom-level conditions can help underperforming students thrive despite established school structures that discriminate against and exclude those students from learning opportunities.

Every year, millions of US public school students fail to graduate high school (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018), despite numerous ongoing education reform efforts (Berkshire & Schneider, n.d.; Strauss, 2017). A large percentage of these students attend rural schools (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Status of Rural Education, 2018). The rural conditions of adolescent students adversely affect their educational performance and achievement (Howley & Howley, 2010). However, the bulk of quality education research, policy, and funding targets urban regions (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Coladarci, 2007; Johnson & Strange, 2009; Sherwood, 2001).
Analyses and reforms that do extend to rural areas fail to recognize that a chronically underserved and underperforming group of students is being generated by the education structure itself. A focus on graduation rates distracts from the inequality and exclusion engendered by a hierarchical grading system backed by rewards and punishments. A school bias favors student productions that are linguistic, coherent, and conclusive, and subordinates those which are visual, creative, and ambiguous. These structural issues generate a chronic percentage of students who dislike school and regard academic knowledge as peripheral to their real lives—a situation that results in low attendance rates, skipped classes, low grades, and dropping out.

This thesis examines the everyday school lives of a group of “underperforming” rural US adolescent students in an attempt to understand how the norms of school structure affect classrooms and individual student experiences, achievement, and behavior. Concrete examples from a high school program operating in a rural New York State school district illustrate some issues and suggest means of change.

The analysis approaches the issues from particular positions: that student struggle can be addressed initially through changes in the classroom environment and teaching approaches; that privileging student inclinations and interests over hegemonic school practices and procedures best reveals the classroom situation; and that useful alternatives to revive stagnant systems can often be found through multidisciplinary explorations—in the case of this thesis, in the noneducational fields of peace and justice studies, social psychology, and aesthetics.

A fundamental proposal in this paper is that education consider all students to be capable of and interested in acquiring and applying academic knowledge to enrich their lives. My findings suggest that when student behavior and classroom situations are approached nonhierarchi-
cally and inclusively they can generate new classroom responses that positively influence all students.
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Introduction

Every year, millions of US public school students fail to graduate high school (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018), despite numerous ongoing education reform efforts (Berkshire & Schneider, n.d.; Strauss, 2017). A large percentage of these students attend rural schools (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). The rural conditions of adolescent students adversely affect their educational performance and achievement (Howley & Howley, 2010). However, the bulk of quality education research, policy, and funding targets urban regions (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Coladarci, 2007; Johnson & Strange, 2009; Sherwood, 2001).

This thesis examines the everyday school lives of a group of underperforming rural US adolescent students in an attempt to understand the multilevel influences on their school experiences and performance. Perspectives drawn from multiple disciplines beyond education suggest that underperformance can be influenced through classroom level changes.

This research was prompted by my direct experience running an alternative learning program (which I call “Indie”) intended to increase student attendance in a rural public high school (Onteora Central), in the Catskill Mountains of New York State. Within months, attendance improved, as did student engagement. Additionally, classroom participation and grades improved while detention and drop-out rates decreased. What was the Indie program doing differently to produce such results?

As I will describe, my analysis of classroom situations at Indie in relation to conventional classroom practices and the overall school normative structure reveals a structural difference in Indie’s equal participation approach from the conventional school hierarchy that privileged stu-
students designated as *good* and excluded struggling or nonconforming students from learning opportunities. This resulted in inequities that decreased some students’ access to resources and, therefore, their freedom to develop capabilities necessary for what they wished to accomplish. This was, unfortunately, a limitation that augmented another limitation: that attending rural schools also constrained students’ and families’ access to resources supportive of academic achievement.

The aim of this thesis is to describe and analyze how changes in classroom-level conditions can help underperforming students thrive despite established school structures that discriminate against and exclude those students from learning opportunities. To this end, I consulted the literature from within and outside education in order to show how alternative perspectives on classroom incidents can alter teachers’ and students’ interpretations of those incidents and lead to more positive, productive, inclusive classroom dynamics and improved student outcomes. To be specific, I use:

- literature on rural populations and condition factors (Singh & Siahpush, 2002; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2016), school conditions (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), rural education research (Nugent, Kunz, Sheridan, Glover, & Knoche, 2017), and school reform (Strauss, 2017) to identify issues specific to rural adolescent students;
- social justice constructs such as structural violence, the scope of justice, and moral exclusion to describe how students become marginalized and their capabilities limited by everyday classroom practices (Hafer & Olson, 2003; Kupfer, 2015; Opotow, 1990);
studies from social, cognitive, and neurological psychology to provide information about adolescent experience relevant to schooling (e.g., effects of exclusion on learning; effects of reappraisal on emotion regulation) (Harris & Fiske, 2007; Hughes, Ambady, & Zaki, 201; Xu, et al., 2018);

• scholarship on art and aesthetics principles and interpretive techniques to help students and teachers view situations anew (e.g., effects of juxtaposition; temporal effects) (Carson, Peterson, & Higgins, 2003; Goodman, 1978; Trope & Liberman, 2010); and

• Kurt Lewin’s (1936-1951) topological field and change theories applied to knowledge delivery and classroom behavior (Lewin, 1936; 1943; 1951) to permit a deep understanding of multilevel influences without relying on elusive factors such as individualized motivation or appraisal.

The major sections of the thesis that follow are: literature review of rural conditions, adolescents in rural schools, school reform efforts, the nature of hegemonic and exclusionary structures, Lewinian field theory and decision-making channel theory, and principles of aesthetics; a methodology section which includes materials, analysis, context, and researcher positionality; findings from analyses of documents from the Indie program; and a discussion of the Lewinian classroom, the implications for school reform, and possible future directions.

My findings indicate that when student behavior and classroom situations are approached nonhierarchically and inclusively they can generate new classroom responses that positively influence all students. These findings belie the idea that some students are bound to fail. They suggest that it is not the students who must be the focus of change, and instead propose that it is the situation in which students learn that must change.
Literature Review

This study’s examination of alternative means to address academic and behavioral underperformance among rural high school students is contextualized within the literature on rural conditions, education reform, social justice, and alternatives to educational conceptual models from aesthetics and social psychology. First, this literature review looks broadly at rural life conditions. Specific attention is given to comparisons of rural and urban conditions, rural and urban research, links between rural conditions and educational performance, and education reform.

I then look at the literature on individual student underperformance, defined here as an interaction of academic and behavioral outcomes (Malecki & Elliot, 2002). This necessitates attention to the measurement of academic outcomes, as it is an organizing feature of education at all grade levels at the classroom and school policy levels, and also relevant for federal policy reform, classroom grades, and individual behavior.

I then look at the literature on education reforms, which I describe in terms of their usefulness, relevance to rural secondary school students, and the goal level of the intervention (e.g., school structure, classroom intervention, or individual behavior).

The differentiation of students by their performance is examined in terms of equality of treatment and school policy and practice. I consider student output in relation to school and classroom structure, using social justice models to address multilevel aspects of school.

Finally, I examine literature on new perspectives on conventional school structure and practice in relation to student underperformance using multidisciplinary sources.
The Rural Condition

According to the 2010 US census, rural means an area of open country with low population density and people living at a distance from each other with settlements of fewer than 2,500 residents at various distances from cities (Cromartie & Parker, 2017). The stereotype of the rural environment as a low-stress easygoing life with close family and friend connections is not borne out by reality. To reside in rural America is to experience difficult challenges. Many people are trade-displaced workers, poor, and lack jobs. Of rural white women and men, 74% and 64% respectively say jobs are scarce (Morin, 2016). The dearth of resources and social services leads to untreated drug abuse and mental health problems. Drug and alcohol use, prostitution, racial hatred, and gun violence contradict bucolic notions of moral, cooperative rural communities.

Opioid and other drug use linked to social, cultural, and economic stressors has long been viewed as an urban issue, yet in 2008, overdose death rates in less populated regions exceeded those in metropolitan areas (Blakely-Armitage & Vink, 2017). In Ulster County, New York, more than one quarter of opioid overdose emergency visits in 2016 led to death, an increase of almost 40% from 2015 (County Opioid Quarterly Report, 2017, p. 107).

The rural student. In the school year 2010-11 in the United States, rural school students accounted for almost one-quarter (24% or 12 million) of all public school students (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2018, p. 1). According to the Office of Adolescent Health (2016), rural adolescents are more likely to be poor than their urban counterparts. Youth ages 10-14 and 15-19 make up 13.2% (42 million) of the population, a number expected to grow to almost forty-five million in 2050. Eighteen percent of those in the 15-19 age group live in poverty (i.e., $24,250 for a family of four).
The NCES Status of Rural Education (2018) also reports that one in ten rural 16- to 24-year-olds dropped out of school in 2004 (p. 1); among those living in poverty, the number was nearly one in four; and about one in five rural freshman failed to graduate in 2008-2009 (p. 7). Fewer than one in five rural adults twenty-five years and older have college degrees, compared with the national average (rural, suburban, and urban) where almost one in two adults has a college degree (Tracking America's Progress, 2018).

These data, however, are arguable. Jordan, Kostandini, and Mykerezi (2012) assert, “it is unclear whether youths living in rural areas face different socioeconomic characteristics or educational environments compared to their urban counterparts” (p. 3). They found similar dropout rates throughout the urban-rural continuum, and family level characteristics more predictive of dropping-out than geographic attributes. The authors attributed the rural-urban gap confusion to varying methods and definitions of graduates and rural. Nonetheless, what is clear is that conditions in rural America and rural schooling warrant more close attention.

Rural schools are closing (Eppley, 2017) while diversity, poverty, and the number of students with special needs increase in rural districts (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Gutierrez (2016) explained the illogic of the urban-rural situation in a breakdown of school budget uses. Urban districts receive 20% to 50% more funding than their rural counterparts, yet rural school budgets are depleted by poorer rural regions paying less in property tax; greater portions of rural school budgets are spent on transporting students who are spread across 72% of the United States; and internet service is less accessible and more expensive in rural regions—over 40% of rural schools lack access, and those with access pay up to 2.5 times as much as urban schools for internet that is too slow for teachers to use in classrooms (Harold, 2015).
Budgetary and other factors contribute to the low percentage of high school graduates going to college from rural places—from 27% to 59%. This compares to about 62% and 67% from urban and suburban schools, respectively (Buffington, 2017; Marcus & Krupnick, 2018). Miller (2012) observed that in general, teachers with stronger academic preparation are shown to be less likely to become rural teachers. Teachers at the high school level often leave within their first three years. Moreover, salaries are often lower, schools and communities are far from services that appeal to young people or newly formed families, and teachers are often asked to take on additional workloads, and to teach subjects outside their expertise. Of those teachers who stay in rural schools, few are available to offer college-preparatory classes.

Student inquisitiveness about curricular material is, on average, higher among children of college-educated parents. In classrooms with high proportions of disadvantaged children, remediation and discipline become the norm (Rothstein, 2013, p. 63).

The range of types of vocations rural students can observe, try out, and aspire to is often narrow and includes few professions requiring higher education. This lack of wide exposure can lead to ignorance about available job, career, and higher education choices. Additionally, there are financial, familial, and cultural pressures to stay local. Rural students encounter unexpected difficulties if they go to college—those who enroll are more likely to drop out before their sophomore year for reasons of cost and culture shock (High School Benchmarks, 2018). Colleges are seldom located in rural areas, and the likelihood of enrolling in college diminishes as distance rises (Hillman & Weichman, 2016, p.3). Coming from small locations, the unfamiliarity and lack of friendly connections can be intimidating and overwhelming, leading to malaise and reduced motivation, which can also affect parents of rural adolescents. In 2016, about one quarter
of suburban and urban parents believed that their children would grow up with a lower standard of living than they did. This belief was wider spread among rural parents, especially white men, 40% of whom reported that they were resigned to a bleaker future for their children (Morin, 2016). Teens with the highest longer-term employment rates come from families with incomes over $120 thousand, despite college graduates’ delay in entering the job market. Low-income teens, who are the least likely to receive employment education in high school, are the most likely to enter the labor force directly after high school.

**Research neglect.** The established data imply serious limitations on the futures of the millions of US rural adolescents. Yet, just as “developmental research on poverty has concentrated on inner-city, ethnic, minority populations, and has largely neglected…[w]hite, low-income rural families” (Evans & English, 2002, 1239), education research continues to concentrate on urban populations, to the neglect of those in rural regions (Flanders, 2018; Lavalley, 2018; Sher, 1978). Despite calls in the mid-2000s for education scholarship that was distinctly rural (Howley, 2004; Sherwood, 2001), gaps in opportunity for rural students have been “overlooked for decades” (Buffington, 2017, 2nd paragraph). From 2004 to 2015, the top five education research journals published only five articles related to rural education, compared to the sixty-four urban-oriented articles (Howley, 2004). The *Harvard Political Review* (2018) reported that publications such as *Education Week* spend much more time discussing urban schools than rural schools (Gutierrez, 2016).

Recently, rural conditions have begun to gain national attention. A 2013 conference hosted by the National Center for Research on Rural Education (Connect-Inform-Advance) identified issues important to rural education research, policy and practice, such as rural context, culture in
research, and the use of interdisciplinary research partnerships to define topics and propose agendas for rural education researchers (Nugent, et al., 2017). Books that have examined established problems in rural education by positioning rurality as a central focus of analysis include *Why Rural Schools Matter* (Tieken, 2015) and *Rural Young Women, Education, and Socio-Spatial Mobility* (Geller, 2015).

Media attention gives low visibility to rural inequality (The 2003 Brown Center Report on American Education, 2003). In 2016, Gutierrez reported in the *Harvard Political Review*: “when most people think of educational inequality, they think of inner-city schools. Publications like *Education Week* spend much more time discussing urban schools than rural schools” (para. 1). He cited specific rural characteristics that, if overlooked, contribute to policy neglect and failure, and asserted: the “current state of rural education is bleak…solutions will require a concerted effort to effect substantial change” (para. 13).

The *Harvard Political Review* article went on to discuss adverse rural conditions, such as funding deficits, which, by influencing education at the macro level, lead to major disruptions at the classroom and individual levels. For instance, Title I funding, the federal program that provides financial assistance to schools with high percentages of children from low-income families “to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards” (Improving Basic Programs, n.d.) acknowledges that poverty can negatively influence academic performance. Nonetheless, rural districts receive much less Title I funding per poor pupil than urban districts. Furthermore, rural districts receive decreased school funding due to displacement of the population through emigration to cities; their transportation costs are higher due to population sparsity—rural residents are spread out across 72% of the US—thus decreasing funds available
for instruction; and rural districts suffer teacher shortages, due to lower pay, fewer school and community resources, the lack of technology infrastructure (41% of rural schools lack access to the Internet), and few opportunities for advancement. The New York Times reported that some rural school districts recruit teachers on temporary visas from countries like the Philippines because the teaching jobs are too low-paid to attract qualified US candidates (Goldstein, 2018).

**Contributing Factors to Rural Problems**

**Poverty.** More than one in four children in rural areas were poor in 2013, compared to about one in five urban children. Persistent rural poverty is a phenomenon tied to other rural family conditions, such as physical isolation, limited assets and economic opportunities, an overall lack of human and social capital leading to rates of parental drug and alcohol abuse, higher domestic abuse rates in rural areas (Child Poverty in Rural America, 2015, p. 3), and lower school achievement (Howley & Howley, 2010).

**Decentralization.** Whereas urban youth can be geographically confined by explicit boundaries and implicit cultural and family practices, rural youth can be confined by the lack of transportation in a widespread areas with few bus routes. Decentralization contributes not only to isolation and employment problems, but also to provincialism, the lack of exposure to aspects of the world not visible on the Internet or TV, and not directly experienced, in any case. Many rural students have not ventured beyond their counties and suffer from very real boredom and routinized lives. A study of class-cutting showed that students used the term boredom to refer to disengagement and alienation during school activities (Fallis & Opotow, 2003, p. 103).

Interventions to intergenerational poverty have permitted urban families to move from high- to low-poverty neighborhoods with the use of housing vouchers (Chetty & Hendren, 2016;
Chetty, Hendren & Katz, 2016). Children under thirteen whose families moved earned 30% more in their mid-twenties than the control group; as adults, they lived in better neighborhoods and were less likely to become single parents. Such promising solutions are unworkable in rural settings, for decentralization offers few, if any, alternative neighborhoods.

**Relative deprivation.** Deprivation is not absolute, but is determined by comparison with a standard (Crosby, 1976). People can feel unfairly treated when their standard of living compares poorly to others around them, as measured by income, consumption, and other indicators of social status. Relative deprivation can lead to a decreased sense of wellbeing and increased work dissatisfaction (Chen X. 2015; Crosby, 1976; Sakketa, 2018).

Although education is in the public sphere, the “public” often sees a distorted view of rural life, which is reflected back to poor rural adolescents through all forms of media, visits to nearby towns, and even the rural landscape. Artisanal displays at green markets reinforce the image of rural richness. Large tracts of farmland formerly owned by rural youths’ grandparents and great-grandparents, indicated by picturesque stone walls and roads that carry family names, are subdivided and sold.

In rural Ulster County, NY, 45% of households are below the federal poverty line or unable to pay for basic needs such as food, housing and child care (Smith, 2016). Even the wealthy town of Woodstock, NY has a poverty/ALICE rate of 40 percent—(the acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed designates families working low-wage jobs, whose household incomes are too high to qualify for government assistance programs). Many Ulster County students and their parents find jobs in highway departments, logging, utilities, or servicing homes of the more recent residents, who are often second-home owners.
**Food insecurity.** One result of poverty and low SES, as tracked by the USDA, is food insecurity (FIS). Low food security indicates reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet; very low food security adds incidents of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, & Rabbitt, 2017). According to authors of a 2016 examination of food insecurity (Shanafelt, Hearst, Wang, & Nanney, 2016), the literature has neglected rural communities until very recently (p. 473), despite health studies indicating that rural communities experience higher rates of food insecurity, a higher prevalence of obesity, and more struggles to access affordable healthy foods than nonrural areas of the US (Nanney, Davey, & Kubik, 2013).

Shanafelt, et al. (2016) report that food insecure adolescents experience poorer chronic and acute health, less physical activity, and lower grades. Lower cognitive functioning, school test scores, and attendance up to preteen level lead to those adolescents having a harder time getting along with peers and making friends. They are more likely to be suspended. Although the effects of food insecurity occur at home and school “the multilevel interaction” is the most critical. Adolescents in food-insecure homes:

are more likely to experience problems with psychosocial functioning and mental health, making school and peer experiences more challenging and reducing overall quality of life. Unhealthy diets may lead to chronic health issues, which may lead to chronic absenteeism from school and ultimately lower test scores. Hungry children are often more irritable, leading to poorer psychosocial functioning and a harder time concentrating and getting along with peers. The higher disruption in family functioning—food insecure adolescents live in homes with low family asset scores (safe and supportive, good communication with parents)—could cause, exacerbate, or result from food insecurity (p. 2).
Physical and mental health problems in secondary school lead to excessive absenteeism, trouble completing schoolwork, and weak individual attachment to teachers—consequences that negatively affect students’ academic performance (Needham, 2004).

**Homelessness and hypermobility.** The National Alliance to End Homelessness (Edwards, 2009) stated that the number of homeless people living in rural areas (9%) was likely to be “a gross underestimate” because methods used to estimate homeless populations in urban areas are inadequate in rural areas (p. 332). Economic insecurity and inadequate housing lead many rural families with children to experience hypermobility. Frequent moving, inadequate shelter, and doubling up with friends and family to avoid being on the streets, in the woods, or in homes abandoned by parents, are examples of rural strategies that can be physically invisible and difficult to document.

In 1998, one of a handful of serious efforts to count rural homeless youth reported that 8.4% of adolescents ages 12 to 17 had experienced a homeless episode in the previous twelve months; approximately 7% had slept on the street; and 7.6% had spent at least one night in an emergency shelter, public place, abandoned building, or with a stranger (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998). In 2007, researchers estimated that this amounted to a national prevalence of 1.6 million youth experiencing homelessness each year (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association [SAMHSA] 2011, p. 9).

**Single parenthood.** A report on the effects of economic stress (McLoyd & Flanagan, 1990) cited single motherhood as one of four major risk factors and predictors of poverty, in addition to unemployment, low education levels, and forming households at young ages. Families headed by single mothers are 14.3% more likely to be poor than other families (Rothstein, 2015).
The consequential effects are greater for rural than urban families, with the children more likely to be poor and in deeper poverty for longer, and the families less likely to receive public assistance and to receive less aid than city counterparts.

Despite relatively low prevalences of poverty risk factors in the US, the penalties for all four risks are greater. For example, the lack of a high school degree increases the probability of being in poverty by 16.4% in the US, but less than 5% in twenty-eight other rich democracies (Davis, 2017, p. 750). The risk penalty for low education in the US is the highest of all the countries; the single motherhood risk penalty is the third highest (Finnigan, 2018).

**Suicide: A special rural problem.** The US has the sixth highest youth mortality rate in the industrialized world—unintentional injuries, homicide, and suicide the leading causes. As of 2012 only one US study had examined rural-urban patterns in youth suicide risks (Singh & Siahpush, 2002). Rates were found to be significantly higher among rural than urban youth, in a 1996-2010 data collection period, even though during this time homicide and HIV/AIDS had raised the urban rate (Singh, Azuine, Siahpush, & Kogan, 2013). The higher rural rate held regardless of deprivation levels or the method used—guns, hanging, suffocation, intentional falls (Singh, et al., 2013, p. 388). One teacher in Ulster County, NY responded to the question, “Do you know any students who have killed themselves in the last few years?” with: “By gun, hanging, plastic bag suffocation, and jumping into a waterfall” (Indie Director’s Journal [IDJ], 2007). In 2015, a well publicized study reported that male and female youth suicides in rural areas—already nearly double those of urban suicides—were increasing (Fontanella et al., 466). By 2017, urban-rural suicide rates were being examined more closely, with calls for analyses of “the role
of rurality in the development and maintenance of suicidal thoughts and behaviors” (Hirsch, 2016, p. 189).

The works cited list suicide risk factors specific to rural areas, which include many issues already mentioned: limited availability and accessibility of mental health services; longer distances for health care and longer wait times for appointments resulting in more serious symptoms and more expensive and intensive treatments; low mental health literacy; stigma associated with mental illness and the lack of anonymity in a rural environment; a strong value on self-reliance and individualism and distrust of governmental authority causing help-seeking to be viewed negatively; lower population density and wide geography causing social isolation and associated feelings of loneliness and depression; firearm use more common among rural residents (suicide a major cause of rural gun deaths); population loss (nearly half of rural counties lost population through out-migration and decreased birth rates from 1990 to 2010) that weakens the economic infrastructure, reducing demand and supply for services. Moreover, rural communities were hit especially hard by the great recession of 2007-2009. These hardships and financial difficulties can precipitate greater feelings of hopelessness, depression, isolation, and substance abuse, with all being risk factors for suicide.

**Underperformers**

The term *underperformer* marks an identity underpinned by a theory that condones a student performance hierarchy. As Morawski (2001) observed, theories are powerful in the world because their “originary, teleological, and reflexive” qualities have “emancipatory or subversive potential” (p. 437). In US public secondary schools, student academic performance is measured by grades in a series of courses. In contrast to common usage terms such as *high achiever, top*
performer, good student, the characteristics of the underperformer—low academic grades, and high truancy, detention, and drop-out rates—appear to form a legitimate profile of a student in need of help, and underperformer a factual, nonjudgmental term that implied the possibility of improvement. Thus, the underperformer comes into being as a kind of student “at the same time as the kind itself is being invented” (Hacking, 1986, p. 228).

The implications of academic performance in high school effect a variety of social phenomena on multiple levels. Academic struggles predict short-term problem behavior and dropping out; strain important relationships, such as parent-adolescent ties (Repetti 1996); can derail long-term educational and occupational trajectories; create disorder and undermine the overall mission of schools; and influence fertility, mortality, marital, and unemployment rates, and the development of human capital (Needham, Crosnoe, & Muller, 2004).

At the everyday school level, underperformers are often unable to participate in field trips, extracurricular activities, and more rigorous curricula (Dornbusch, Glasgow, & Lin, 1996), all of which can have positive influences on adolescent development (Crosnoe, 2002). Such constraints serve to separate students according to their performance abilities, and to impose learning limits on the underperformers. The suggestion of a hierarchy based on performance and high-performance bias raises concerns about exclusion and the equal distribution of quality learning. Moreover, students who fail a required course (even if they pass the state exit exam for that subject) must repeat the same course the following year. This puts them behind their peers, restricts their ability to take elective classes, and forces them into a possible fifth year of school. Students who are held back are less likely to graduate (Marcus & Krupnick, 2018).
Thus, in this thesis, the term *underperformer* is used to indicate not merely academic performance but the whole composite of interactions and effects.

**School Reform Efforts**

Students in the US are generally poorly educated in comparison with those in other postindustrial countries (American Schools, 2013). School reform research, funding, and public discourse tend to ignore the 6.5 million rural students (Rees, 2018)—more students than are enrolled in the twenty largest urban school districts combined (Marc, 2017). Studies focused on standardized testing and simple models of redistribution of resources ignore rurality or hold it up “as a geography of deficit and disadvantage to be treated pretty much like any other education problem space that needs to be brought up to the metrocentric standard” (Corbett, 2017, p. 2).

This despite pertinent information such as the 2002 study of five upstate New York counties that showed higher levels of distress among the rural population than among inner-city minority children, greater difficulties in measures of self-regulatory behavior, and elevated psychophysiological markers of stress, resting blood pressure and overnight neuroendocrine hormones (Evans & English, 2002).

Reform efforts focus on single-issue and nonstructural interventions, despite evidence that school variables considered separately have “at most small effects on learning” (Wallace Foundation, 2013, p. 4). A promising effort is Emerson Collective’s 2015 XQ Institute Super School Project, which proposes to galvanize the conversation about education by awarding 10 million dollars to implement ten community designed high schools. The project avoids top-down directives and emphasizes inclusionary discipline models. Supporters refer to the effort not as a model but an “open call to the country…to revolutionize the American high-school
experience” (Perry, 2016; Pinchuk, 2016; Strauss, 2017). However, all the chosen schools, charter and district, are in large urban areas, again neglecting rural residents (Strauss, 2017; Perry, 2016; Pinchuck, 2016; Glatter, 2017).

The ubiquity of education reform is evidence, to some, of a status quo in the US that ignores educational progress (Hess, 2016; “America’s Not-So-Broken,” 2016). The director of a nonprofit that assigns longterm mentors to adolescents in poverty described the situation for youths today (P. Retzlaff, personal communication, July 31, 2018): the hallmarks of thriving young adults are financial stability, health and wellbeing, engagement in the community, and social and economic self-advancement, yet high school graduation and college enrollment are no longer sufficient benchmarks of a path to success—a degree is only the “foot in” to living-wage jobs and careers that permit the pay down of college debt loads. Furthermore, adolescents raised in disadvantaged circumstances lack the necessary career fluency modeled by adults in the middle and upper classes, and the social capital—the uncle who can “get” the student a paid internship—to thrive financially and socially in adulthood. Work internships, which must be applied for by the sophomore year of college, are advertised in publications such as the Wall Street Journal, and many are unpaid—young people in poverty cannot afford unpaid internships, even if they come to know about them.

**Communities in Schools.** A regrettable feature of school reform is the absence of reliable data on programs’ impact and implementation. This is due to the lack of the additional funding for formal evaluations and recommendations, the variation of implementation at different program sites, and vaguely defined and inconsistently applied approaches and procedures. Communities in Schools, a widespread reform effort (serving nearly 1.3 million students in 3,400
schools, annually), benefits from strong philanthropic commitment, funding, and connections at national and state policy levels. The CIS website states that 91% of their seniors graduate or receive a GED, but the numbers are not supported in the literature. A formal evaluation concluded that despite positive nonacademic outcomes—students reporting better attitudes toward their school, better relationships with adults, and more involvement in school activities—“there was little to no improvement in school progress, achievement, attendance, or behaviors leading to disciplinary action, outcomes associated with achieving graduation” (Corrin, Granito, Haider, Somers, & Cerna, 2015; ICF, 2010).

**Grit.** One wide-spread program used in Teach for America and charter schools such as KIPP (Thompson, 2016) is based on the notion that low standards and expectations are responsible for low outcomes. The focus is on behavior and discipline as the means to “succeed in the dominant culture,” a premise criticized by those who point out that external factors, such as poverty and institutionalized racism, are viewed, under this model, as “excuses for lazy teachers, administrators, and even students who weren’t working hard enough” (Nathan, 2017, 80). Grit, conceptualized as resilience in the face of failure and deep, long term commitment to a goal (Duckworth, 2016), is a key component of such “no excuses” pedagogy. Grit is thought to lead to student achievement regardless of trauma, family poverty, mental health issues, and so on. Initial grit research examined differences between West Point drop-outs and graduates (Romer, et al., 2010); the model accepts systemic hegemony, imposes norm behaviors on all students without regard to context, and frames learning as a naturalistic result. The focus is on student agency and teacher responsibility for keeping students focused on a task and controlling their levels of distraction. A meta-review of grit literature (Credé, 2016) questions the construct validity, and con-
cludes that interventions designed to increase grit only weakly affect performance and success—
perseverance is the concept’s strongest and most useful feature.

The gritty student model can appeal for its simple causal logic, prescriptive nature, and
reference to the entwined Western myths of Horatio Alger and merit-based success. However, by
placing the onus of achievement directly on the individual—promoting an individualized solu-
tion to a social problem (Goodman & Fine, 2018)—it decontextualizes situational realities and
ignores structural implications entirely, letting education off the hook.

**SLANT.** An accompanying strategy to the notion that students are responsible for creat-
ing their optimal learning environment is the practice of SLANT, an acronym for Sit up, Lean
forward, Ask and answers questions, Nod your head, and Track the speaker (Meier, 2013). The
technique, meant to encourage and remind students to be attentive and active in class, mimics the
Western ideal of moral rectitude generated and indicated by physical posture (Gilman, 2018), and
is reminiscent of behaviorism in its emphasis on observable actions.

**Summary**

There is ample evidence that adverse rural conditions disadvantage rural students and
limit their future opportunities. Yet, the institution of education and educational research that
supports policy and funding permit a large number of rural adolescent students to be chronically
underserved. Numerous reform efforts focus on change of urban areas. Reforms generally allow
school structure to remain in place, aiming interventions further downstream. That even those
reforms that try to help rural students do not address systemic issues raises the question of re-
formers’ and educators’ ability to understand how structural norms influence downstream prac-
tices which may affect underperforming students.
Social Justice

Victims do not always recognize injustices, due to mechanisms of self-protective denial, self-blame, and internalization of norms (Crosby 1982; Deutsch, 1985; Fine, 1980; cf. Opotow, 1990, 1991). Reformers, who have the advantage of being bystanders, might be more apt to notice injustice when there exist fair alternatives (Fine, 1979). Underperforming students are bystanders to the good-student norm. The contrast between good-student performance and their own provides an objective-subjective perspective that permits them to sense, if not identify specifically, their role as victims of injustice—a position that can play out as a perceived separation of school from life and result in a hate-school mentality. The disengagement and alienation that can lead to class-cutting (Fallis & Opotow, 2003) implies a difference of experience between engaged students and underperformers. This difference might be found in their individual temperaments, states of mind and body, and behavior in school—the elements that reforms and interventions largely aim to fix. However, the school system itself might generate disengagement in the students with mediating characteristics resulting from rural deficits. A review of the literature regarding unequal groups and exclusion from desirable social categories reveals support for the idea that school norms permit and support inequity, which in turn excludes and demoralizes some students. Certain conceptions within the broad area of social justice, which are supported by neuroscience findings, examine the structures and processes that lead to and result from categorization of people.

Educational hegemony and structural violence. Hegemony, defined as “a paradoxical synthesis of consent and coercion whereby the former feels as though it is freely given despite the fact it is underpinned by powerful coercive structures and practices” (Buchanan, 2018), is
concealed through its embeddedness in “ubiquitous social structures normalized by stable institutions and regular experience” (Winter & Leighton, 99); the result is a set of apparently legitimate but imposed meanings or norms. Kupfer (2015) argues that the educational system permits and maintains social inequality through strategies of coercion, exclusion, and silencing. These are forms of structural violence, as Susan Opotow describes the concept.

[Structural violence is] gradual, imperceptible, and normalized as the way things are done; it determines whose voice is systemically heard or ignored, who gets particular resources, and who goes without. In structural violence, agency is blurred and responsibility is unclear; there may not be any one person who directly harms another. Structural violence normalizes unequal access to such social and economic resources as education, wealth, quality housing, civic services, and political power (Opotow, 2001, p. 102).

It makes sense that reforms are not fundamentally altering the mediocre state of education in the US when they are unable to discern imperceptible norms and borders delineating agency and responsibility. The reformist tendency to target students (and teachers) as the agents for change fails to ask how students are affected by structural norms and constraints.

Peace and justice studies have also engaged with Galtung's conception of structural violence—“asymmetric conflict between parties highly unequal in capabilities” (Galtung, 1969, p. 90)—to address the concern that limiting analyses to “violence that points solely to agents and intentions” neglects “pervasive forms of violence that are ‘built into’ structures, institutions, ideologies, and histories” (Dilts, 2012, p. 193). Whereas Galtung writes that the invisibility of violence allows its repetition, others recognize the constancy of its repetition to be the generator of its invisibility and that which permits it to be “inherited” across generations (Winter, 2012).
Symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1974) refers to conserving rather than liberating institutions, such as education, that reproduce the inequality of the cultural status quo by promoting and protecting the culturally privileged, and sidelining or eliminating students and families “whose cultural capital differs significantly” (Lakomski, 1984, p. 153).

For the purposes of this thesis, I generally use structural violence to include all these forms of nonphysical hegemonic violence in education, with a further differentiation from critical psychology research. Epistemological violence exerted on groups and individuals negatively affected by interpretations represented as knowledge, when “alternative, equally plausible interpretations of the data are available” (Teo, 2011, p. 247), is both a means to enact and sustain structural violence and an outcome of institutional cordoning-off of people with alternative knowledge.

The scope of justice and moral exclusion. Scope of justice and moral exclusion concepts are relevant to the state of underperforming rural students in that both rural and underperforming identify these students as belonging to a nondominant group that might be considered less socially useful, and possibly harmful, to education and educational reform approaches.

The Scope of Justice construct (Deutsch, 1974) delineates “who counts” in considerations of fairness, shared distribution of resources, and sacrifices for others’ wellbeing (Opotow, Moral Exclusion, 1990, p. 3). For those outside the scope of justice, “distributive and procedural justice can be irrelevant” (Opotow, 2006). Justification of the exclusion of others by those within the scope of justice are “based on shared social perceptions,” for example, of similarity and dissimilarity, or usefulness-uselessness, that become “institutionalized, invisible, and accepted as if in-
evitable” (Opotow, 1990, p. 174; Opotow, 1987, 1990a, 1993), a process that operates in small
everyday and larger social issues.

A certain level of belonging is thought to be a constant human requirement associated
with identity (Callaghan, 1998). The scope of justice can describe moral communities (Hafer &
Olsen, 2003, 311) characterized by their enforcement of boundaries, such as the psychological,
legal, and political, which designate difference: “moral exclusion emerges when group differ-
ences (or ‘we-they’ distinctions) are salient and when difficult life conditions (such as harsh so-
cial circumstances, destructive conflict, or threat) exist” (Opotow, 1990a, p. 174).

Sometimes, moral exclusion is blatant; but it can be “difficult to detect” when it is social-
ly accepted or perceived as natural (Opotow, Gerson, & Woodside, 2005, p. 306). The “barring
of some categories of students from particular educational contexts” (Opotow, 1990a, p. 174)
starts with perceived conflicts of interest and the generation of group categories. The norm of
labeling students as underperformers is an early step toward the moral damage that can be in-
flicted through such othering and exclusion. Class-cutting, academic productivity, and dropping-
out are connecting steps in an exclusionary educational process (Fallis & Opotow, 2003), with
“marginalizing, silencing, rejecting, isolating, segregating and disenfranchising” students the
“machinery of exclusion” (Taket et al., 2009, p. 3).

Opotow (1990) further observed that although “dissent, divergent opinions, and a plural-
istic perspective” help fight moral exclusion by enlarging the scope of justice, dissent and divers-
sity can also narrow the scope of justice, so “it is important to identify conditions that support
pluralism and the right to dissent” (p. 173). A non-comparative cooperative school and classroom
structure—students working together, peer tutoring, group outcomes—has the potential to positively influence social and academic outcomes for all students (Kagan, et al. 1985, 278).

Mental and physical disorders resulting from exclusion are pervasive (Baumeister et al., 2002). Exclusion impairs key components of executive functions, such as response inhibition, an important feature of creative thinking, and working memory, which is “essential for effective cognitive functioning” and “could account for more than 40% of individual differences in overall performance on a broad battery of cognitive tasks” (Xu, et al., 2018, p. 92).

**Neurological support for in/out group membership.** In-group/out-group construction is a reality of human life implied by brain research at the cellular network level: self and others are specifically represented by two different networks; in-group and out-group categories are stored in different neuroanatomical locations; at the level of person perception, the faces and actions of in- and out-group members are perceived differently; and while one’s in-group is associated with certain cortical regions, no specific neural activity accompanies neutral (unstigmatized) out-groups (Morrison, Decety & Molenberghs, 2012). Furthermore, trust of in-group but not out-group members automatically activates reward systems, whereas trust of out-group members requires the additional activation of the region associated with social cognition—a controlled, not automatic process (Hughes, et al. 2016, p. 379). The profound dehumanization that occurs when people encounter extreme others, such as low status out-groups (e.g., addicts, homeless) is evident in the failure of person-to-person cortical networks to activate; these individuals are perceived with disgust (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Harris & Fiske, 2007). The implication is that when people’s social status is sufficiently lowered they are morally excluded from a scope of justice to the degree that they are viewed more as nonhuman objects.
Lewinian Topology and Decision-Making

In the 1930s, social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) began to draw from physics and mathematics to develop theories that addressed the processes of decision, habit, and change (Lewin, 1935, 1936, 1943, 1951). His topological diagrams (1936, 1936/2015) described individual and group responses to all pertinent environmental, material, and psychological factors operating in a dynamic, transactional situation in the present. Visualized in terms of patterns of interaction—people’s areas of freedom and restriction, and their movements and routes toward goals—Lewin’s theory avoided the need to observe or understand motivations or intentions, or to analyze modes of being or levels of influence separately. Situational forces and boundaries determined individual actions. A situation was a totality of possible events or actions, which responded to every social change (e.g., in friendship, social status, family circumstance, or employment). Movements were bodily, social, and psychological “locomotions” (1936, p. 16). As he described:

The space of free movement of a person or a social group can be represented as a topological region encircled by other regions that are not accessible. Mainly two factors prohibit the accessibility of regions. One is the lack of ability, for instance, lack of skill or intelligence. The other is social prohibition or any kind of taboo which stands as a dynamic ‘barrier’ between the person and his goal (1936, p. 5).

Lewin’s interest in how society could change education led to his assertion that facts would not lead to an understanding of the dynamics of a situation. The changing of programs and organizations based on demographic information or academic records, for example, would not
sufficiently determine the dynamic factors of the educational situation, that is, those factors which constitute the influence of education on the behavior, the personality, and the ideals of the growing child. The degree of pressure under which the child stands is generally more important than any particular educational measure or single educational act (1936, p. 4).

Ideally, education would increase both accessibility and capability for all students, permitting a weakening or loss of boundaries and leading to the whole-field “fluidity” that is a necessary condition for change, and to accomplish the change itself (1936, p. 47).

Lewin’s field theory model is a method of analyzing causal relations in continuously changing situations composed of multiple individual and group movements toward and away from goals—movements that describe incentives, motives, emotions, urgency, resistance, desire, refusal, through forces, vectors and barriers. The condition of the person-situation dynamism—the “life space”—expands and contracts as other people, factors in the environment, and the biological-psychological development of the person change moment to moment, or through longer time periods, as defined by the examiner’s parameters according to the scope of the situation (1943c). Whatever period is defined, the situation encompasses all information regarding individuals’ present, past, and imagined future—the totality of internal and external factors (memories, perceptions, desires, physiology, temperament, emotions, thoughts, anticipation, etc., no matter the source) that surrounds a person at a particular time and place (1936, 1951). No matter the time period, psychological processes are not generalized or averaged, but are derived “from the relation of the concrete individual to the concrete situation” (Lewin, 1935, p. 41).
Lewin’s model of adolescence describes a whole situation of equally valued interacting facts. Profoundly contextual, the model and the described situation can be content-rich or content-free. As a human grows and is increasingly permitted and able to encounter the world her life space expands to include more undifferentiated space of free movement and fewer areas strongly or weakly bounded by prohibitions or incapacities (legal, psychological, emotional, etc.) imposed by self or others.

Psychological mobility accords with degrees of attraction and resistance to certain boundary areas in relation to a person’s goals. Everyday behavior is determined by the dynamics of situation, pathways relevant to behavior, and gatekeepers at various positions whose decisions (self-interest, psychological states, ideologies, social responsibility, etc.) govern those channels. Lewin stresses that value systems are responsible for forces that determine decisions and bring about conflicts (1943b, p. 38). Visualized diagrammatically, his theories can identify points of potential conflict, in a classroom, school or policy system.

One has to distinguish within a life-space not only regions in which the person is entirely free to act and others which are entirely prohibited, but regions of an intermediate type: A certain activity may not be altogether prohibited, yet the person may feel somewhat restricted and hindered within this region. The different social groups a child belongs to, the atmosphere in the classes of its different teachers, the different social activities in which he is involved are often regions of different degrees of freedom (Lewin, 1948, p. 16).

**Stasis and resistance to change.** To effect change in established organizations, the nature of institutional stasis must be understood. In Lewinian terms, schools can be viewed as part
of a “social stationary process,” a “historic constancy” that resists forces of change (1947, p. 32). Normally, an added force, such as individual deviating behaviors (e.g., a sudden shift in student test scores) could change the character of a group’s social field, which is in a continual process of adaptation to the driving and restraining forces (dynamically shifting in velocity, direction and strength as a result of person-environment transactions). However, there are periods of relative stability when the social field attains “quasi-stationary equilibria” (1951, p. 199). In the case of institutional custom, the group organization acquires a positive value, i.e., becomes dogmatic. This condition acts as an “additional force field” retaining “vested interests” (1947, p. 33) in the established balance of forces. Change must occur, then, not in single properties, but in the total social field. Groups, subgroups, values, and relations must be reorganized so the “social events flow differently” (1947, p. 33).

Crucially, this implies that any education plan meant to substantially reform or intervene in a widespread or sustainable manner must analyze and account for the totality of the social field, the whole situation’s existing driving and restraining forces. Single-issue changes (e.g., smaller class sizes) are not enough to bring about fundamental change if the vested interest forces remain unchanged.

**Channels of influence and delivery.** Lewin (1943b) asserted that to effect change, one must first identify the “social channels of delivery and decision-making” (p. 17). His (1943c) studies of how American food habits emerge, solidify, and change (National Research Council (US) Committee on Food Habits) addressed ways in which everyday behavior can be altered. This conception of decision-making could also help clarify processes involved in knowledge delivery to students.
In education, legal mandates that education be free to the public and that children and youth must attend an approved school, and organizational structures about where, when, and how schooling takes place combine with motivations and meanings that people ascribe to learning to create pathways of knowledge delivery. The pathways are channels that express how values, needs, and obstacles select from what is objectively available to determine the content and methods of teaching particular students in their classrooms. For instance, college-prep courses are available to top students, but unavailable to students achieving below prescribed levels. This is an obstacle that reflects the higher value placed on academic scores, a value that is linked to perceived social needs, and the presumption that the top students can convey such needs through their better educated skills.

As Lewin explained (1943a, 1943b), in every channel there are “gates," sections governed by rules or people with the power to make decisions about who/what are in and out. These decisions, in the context of education, would include policy, knowledge content, categories of people, and learning accessibility techniques, such as national standardized tests, bilingual classrooms, and vocational training. Decisions influence which channels will succeed and which will be eliminated, and they are based on ideologies and perceptions of the situation—physiological factors, cultural tradition, historical events and interpretations, collective memory, habit, generational knowledge channels, and so on. Social change is produced by changing the “constellation of forces” at channel gates—for example, by replacing or influencing the gatekeepers. This can open new channels of thought and action.

A prominent education channel is the Western belief in economic progress; related is the particular knowledge assessed by national and state education exams. A congressional resolution
declared, “adding art and design into federal programs that target the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields encourages innovation and economic growth in the United States” (113th Congress, 2013, 1). In this case, the fear that the US was falling behind in science knowledge and development revealed a blockage in a channel leading a goal of national economic progress. The recognition of the fundamental role of science opened up a new channel and increased resources for STEM curricula. Subsequently, recognition that creative thinking and artistic design were also important for innovation in science opened a channel permitting the addition of art (STEAM) (Gunn, 2017).

Controversy about this newer formulation exemplifies Lewin’s (1943b) notion of conflict situations, which arise when there is a “drive to engage in a certain activity” and “a force opposing that activity” (p. 19). The drive to connect art and the sciences is opposed by some gatekeepers’ perceptions that inclusion of the arts will reduce funding for the STEM channel, or the hard sciences.

New channel: Noncognitive skills. While student educational achievement and assessments of school reform efficacy primarily focus on measures of cognitive ability, research recognizing the correlation between noncognitive skills and higher earnings, productivity (Garcia, 2014; Heckman & Rubenstein, 2016), and the transmission of intergenerational social economic status (Bowles & Gintis, 2011) is changing education discussions. Noncognitive skills such as motivation, tenacity, trustworthiness, self discipline, reliability, and perseverance support processes critical to learning, such as critical thinking, problem solving, social interaction, creativity, and self-control. Education policy is also recognizing the essential role of “patterns of thought, feelings and behavior,” which lead to productive thinking, emotional health, academic confi-
dence, effective communication, and community responsibility (New York State Board of Regents. 2011, p. 2).

This recognition of the importance of environments that support noncognitive traits does not necessarily extend to disciplinary measures intended to combat misbehavior. In-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, referrals to law enforcement, and zero-tolerance policies, which have been “increasingly used to punish low-level infractions…need to be refocused away from sanctioning wrongdoing and toward supporting and promoting better noncognitive behavior, and toward preventing misbehavior” (Garcia, 2011, p. 16).

The possibility exists, through this new channel of knowledge delivery, for the easing of the boundary generating the reward/punishment dichotomy between students who perform well and students who fail to achieve and are punished for their lesser noncognitive skills. Situations conventionally viewed as socially unproductive and demanding disciplinary action could serve as opportunities to increase students’ inquisitiveness, cooperation, and critical thinking abilities, lower resistance and heighten the attraction to learning. This could change the hierarchy of students and question the definitions of at-risk students.

**Schooling through an Aesthetics Lens**

Following the 9/11 Commission Report citing “failure of imagination” on the part of security agencies as one of four catastrophic shortcomings that permitted the attacks, the US Education Reform and National Security Task Force report concluded that creative analysis and innovative problem solving are “vital skills” that must be woven into academic curriculums and tested interdisciplinarily (Klein & Rice, 2002, p. 48).
Expert artists discern different paintings differently than nonartists (Shourie, et al., 2014). An aesthetic experience is an “exceptional state of mind” qualitatively different from everyday experience in its characteristics: heightened attention, cognitive engagement, and a strong feeling of unity with an object (Markovic, 2012). Aesthetic experience can alter appraisal and expand necessarily fragmented individualized meaning (Royce, 1959). The open-minded ability to permit irrelevant ideas or information to remain in memory until seconds before conclusive decisions are made is associated with original thinking and creative achievement (Carson, et al., p. 499).

The different concerns and questions raised by aesthetics could offer innovative views of education in general and classroom work in particular, by suspending judgment about what actions and events are irrelevant. The dissociation of habitually bound elements allows them to be freely accessible to innovative pairings and new meanings. The absence of norm-based clarity could encourage dialogue about various interpretations. These processes might generate situations that could, as Dewey (1934) remarked, transcend the prejudices formed by group belonging, when “the whole personality may interact freely” (p. 250). An aesthetic perspective permitting a wider field of looking could allow educators to understand how an adolescent student could experience beauty or fascination where school officials see irresponsibility or pathology.

A magnificent feature of art is its capacity to conflate global and situational contexts and support multiple appraisals of a perceiver, thereby confusing simple single-source meanings and offering multiple possible meanings to exist at once. Students in lower SES categories demonstrate low noncognitive skills in many categories—lower self-control, attentional focus, teacher closeness, rule-following, completion persistence. The exceptions are social interactions and cre-
ative tasks, where they are nearly as highly functioning as the highest SES group (Garcia, 2014, p. 12, Fig. A). This implies that artistic or innovative settings and evaluative frameworks could benefit these students and open to them new channels of learning. The STEAM curriculum movement, for example, focuses on the utility of art as an “on-ramp to STEM for underrepresented students” (Jolly, 2014).

An aesthetic perspective can further students’ capabilities in other subjects by building self-efficacy, a person’s belief that she can successfully meet, carry out, and complete a task (Akhtar, 2008). Self-efficacy, which is “one of the strongest predictors of grades, school persistence, and expectations of academic success” (Weiser & Riggio, 2010, p. 378), exerts strong influence on self-regulation (Bouffard-Bouchard, 1991). Self-regulation affects attribution, which influences how teachers and students perceive one another (Schunk, 1994).

Art is praised when it resists dogma, challenging our notions of normal. In school, student actions too often are considered artistic only when they conform to constraints of subject/credit classification and specified content and material. Understood in contexts of genuine open-minded inquiry, the most unlike-school work could be the most fruitfully mined for critical extension of thought, subject-matter depth, concepts such as symbolism, analogy, ideology, context, meaning, and communication. [Examples are explored in the Findings section of this thesis, especially the subsection American flag.]

**All student work as art.** According to Dewey (1934), the compartmentalization of art and education is the result of education’s literal methods. They “exclude the imagination” and fail to touch “desires and emotions,” whereas, through communication, “art becomes the incomparable organ of instruction” (p. 347). Aesthetic readings encourage plurality and inclusion. In
schools, the “sidelining of non-verbal and aesthetic modes of communication” creates a “dividing practice separating the confident, articulate students from those who don’t fit the dominant discourse and academic aspirations of their schools” (Mayes, 2016, p. 106).

The expansion of ways to understand and engage with unconventional knowledge and material weakens boundaries that strictly describe types of students and student work. Pluralism of communication, medium, intention, and so on, “interrupts the progression of moral exclusion at all its stages” (Opotow, 1990a, p. 177). In a pluralistic environment, moral justifications lose their normative power, and must “prove their worth” in each particular situation. Pluralism and diversity of expression enlarge the reward-field of all students, eliminate hierarchical top-students-take-all/underperformers-take-little scoring system, and open new fields of endeavor.

**Sustained attention and odd-angle viewing.** Art critic John Berger (1976/2005) observed that sustained attention is required to differentiate the world.

Whereas the sight of a tree is registered almost instantaneously, the examination of the sight of a tree (a tree being-looked-at) not only takes minutes or hours instead of a fraction of a second, it also involves, derives from, and refers back to, much previous experience of looking…. (p. 44).

The benefits of sustained attention can be understood, and experienced, though the artist Ad Reinhardt’s “black painting” series (1953-67) (Figure 1). He sought to dispel “the tyrannies of oppositional thinking” and regarded differentiation as anathema to binaries (Spector, 2018, n.p.).
The oil on linen paintings (1960-1966) appear to be large all-black canvas squares. A few minutes of sustained looking, especially from an angle, reveal tiny perceptual shifts in hue, value, and luster. Rectangles and borders emerge; the surface deepens and begins to reflect regions of color (orange, blue, yellow, purple). The painted areas are so close in black tone that boundaries are barely discernible. In a way, Reinhardt equalized facts (boundary, color), creating a dynamic situation that demanded close reading, rejecting any sense that the work “could summon an ‘elsewhere’” (Foster, 2017, p. 398). In other words, interpretation of the work could only rely on the work and meanings generated by the interpreter.

Slow learning, a play on “slow art” as described in an article about Reinhardt (Reed, 2014), would be a set of encounters, experiences between a learner, and the object of inquiry. In slow learning, as in slow art, we “come to see more, and feel differently, than what we remark at

*Figure 1. Ad Reinhardt, “Abstract Painting” (1960-1966). Oil on canvas 60 x 60 inches. [Source: Guggenheim website “Collection Online”] Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. By exchange, 1993].*
first glance” (Reed, 2014, n.p.). Facts and information turn into stories, critiques, experiences, events, rather than remaining inert. The circumstance (setting, facts) does not alter, but our experience of it does—in Lewin’s terms, creating new situations.

**Methodology**

**Materials**

The main research question of what the Indie program was doing to increase students’ attendance, engagement in learning, and improve their academic and behavioral outcomes, raised a larger question: How can the experiences and outcomes of underperforming students be improved within a hierarchical structure that places limitations on their learning opportunities?

To answer these questions, I relied on Onteora Central High School and Indie program archives, and conducted interviews with Onteora administrators and teachers, Indie staff, Indie students, and experts in the field of education. Archival Indie program documents included teacher, staff and student journal notes, meeting notes, student outcome reports, classroom materials, video recordings, emails, and news articles. Onteora Central School documents included student records, legal documents, board of education agendas, meeting notes, and video recordings. The time period covered by the information is September, 2000 to June, 2007. Most of the documents had been in my possession, stored in file cabinets, boxes, and on hard drives in a storage unit in Saugerties, NY, since the spring of 2007. I obtained additional documents from Onteora Board of Education (BOE) meetings and minutes schedules and newspaper searches conducted online.
Analysis

After gathering the documents from the Indie files for the specified period, I examined them, noting patterns and looking for interrelationships among interactions. I compared outcomes of similar events occurring in Indie classes and conventional classes, and examined the differences in the interactions leading to those outcomes. Using a strategy similar to word and phrase coding in life studies, I closely read student quotes and teacher/staff summaries of incidents to discern psychological and behavioral shifts. Two repeated sentiments in the writings of Indie staff guided my analyses: that school should be viewed as an inherent, not separate, part of students’ lives; and that a general rule for Indie was to respond to students in whatever manner was the opposite of how school convention dictated.

Context

Indie classes were held in a set of office and work spaces converted to classrooms I call the “Indie building” near the Onteora Junior-Senior High School, and occasionally in the main Onteora School building.

Approximately 200 unique students in grades 10, 11, and 12, ages 15 to 19, who resided in the Onteora school district were assigned to the Indie program by the Onteora principal based on their records of attendance, class-cutting, detention, grades, grade retention records, and underperforming student status, as identified by teachers, guidance counsellors, and the school psychologist. Approximately 90% of these students were from low socioeconomic status (SES) families, and 2% from middle or upper-middle SES families. Ninety-nine percent were Caucasian and 1% were Hispanic or African American.
The large majority of students were enrolled in New York State Regents Examination courses and a handful qualified for Special Education Services. Some students were referred back from Ulster Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES), an “educational leadership and support program” for public schools in Ulster County, NY (Ulster BOCES). In 2001, Indie created Indie-Alt, a small program for up to nine students who were in grades 11 and 12 but had very few high school credits.

Each semester, students took various combinations of four academic classes and electives taught by Onteora School teachers. Indie staff worked with teachers to help design and support curricula and execute lesson plans. They incorporated video editing and digital media into the coursework.

The class sizes ranged from 9 to about 30, with one or two teachers for each class. Onteora teachers assigned to Indie classes were 99% Caucasian and 1% African American. Indie teachers and staff were 80% Caucasian and 20% African American.

**Researcher Positionality**

Indie (1999-2010) was founded by me and a teacher-colleague. The program was based on the positive student academic and behavioral changes we had observed, especially among the struggling students, in a 1997-1999 independent study program operated by me at a local private school. My purpose in initiating Indie at Onteora was to bring resources usually reserved for private, charter or city schools to rural public students, in a public-nonprofit partnership designed to work flexibly with existing school structures and components (schedule, teachers, testing, etc.). I served at Indie, from 1999 until my departure in 2007, in the following roles: founder, director, teacher, event planner, contract negotiator, daily manager, and fundraiser for equipment and ex-
tras not covered by the contract with Onteora. My position at Indie extended my lifelong interest in how all students, especially those who seem disengaged from schoolwork, no matter their intelligence, learning abilities or giftedness, could be excited by and engage with learning.

My colleague helped teachers incorporate video production and performance projects into their lesson plans, taught after-school video editing, networked with visiting experts, and consulted with regional school districts.

**Findings**

**The Indie Program**

The initial Onteora Board of Education mandate for the Indie program was to increase attendance. Every year, the famously polarized (conservative vs. progressive) board unanimously voted to approve Indie’s contract (Onteora Central School District BOE Meeting Minutes and Schedule, 2000-2007). Still, Indie was regarded by some teachers, aides, and middle administrators as a “dumping ground” for “lost causes,” the “bottom of the barrel” for “disrespectful” students and those who had “fallen through the cracks” and “didn’t even care about themselves” (Indie Staff Journal [ISJ], 2000-2002). When Indie students were loaned videocameras to record local political events, objections from outside the program centered on the sentiment expressed by the comment, “bad kids shouldn’t be rewarded” (ISJ, 2001).

Negative perceptions were altered by the experience of working in the program. As a social studies teacher remarked: “I didn’t want to teach here. I was ordered by [the principal]. The first week…I couldn’t believe how actually smart they are, and creatively kind of brilliant. No wonder they have trouble in regular classes” (Interview with teachers, 2002). Initially, the students at Indie called themselves “super speds” (sped standing for special education), then “emo...
speds” (emotionally disabled). New students to the program were similarly self- and other-depre-
cating. Soon, the students’ general term for themselves was Indie, as in “I am an Indie” (IDJ).

Likewise, students’ perceptions of school played a critical role in the approach used by
the Indie teachers and staff. In fact, students’ detailed evidence for school as oppressive appeared
to form such a strong backbone of student resistance to behaving in ways conducive to learning
that Indie leaders adopted a nonschool template or awareness to guide certain decisions and prac-
tices (ISJ, 2002-2005). A second maxim, that school was as real as other aspects of students’
lives, arose from the students’ insistence that school and life were in separate categories and
should be thought and felt about differently (ISJ, 2000). Staff regarded student perception change
to school as inherent to real life as crucial to changing students’ views of school hours as wasted
and education as irrelevant to their futures (IDJ, 1999).

Student Stories

The following student and situational examples from the Indie program illustrate points
made in this thesis. Initially, I will be discussing students (to which I have given pseudonyms),
followed by a discussion of contexts and objects. The first three student stories especially illus-
trate how rural conditions affect educational experiences.

Maria. Maria’s older brother had hung himself. Her mother locked her out of the house
when she missed curfew and threatened to call the police if Maria ever returned. She could not
retrieve her identification or belongings. She stayed in school to look after her younger brother
who “was a criminal and probably mentally ill” (Interview with student, 2002). She lived with
other students or sympathetic adults, under a bridge, and behind a video store. Summers, she mi-
grated to pick oranges in Florida. Indie helped her contact Family Services and a case worker, who found her space in a teen shelter and helped with her paperwork to obtain identification.

**Brett.** Brett, a bright, articulate boy, was on a path to failing his repeated year of global studies—the teacher said that he had failed to hand in the written assignments (IDJ, 2006). Brett did well on the final exams, but because the school required students to pass all courses Brett expected to have to repeat the class. He would not be able to graduate with his peers. Brett observed:

In elementary school, everyone said I would be a lawyer. In ninth grade, they said, You should be a lawyer. I thought about college. I wanted to go to college. Now, I’m a junior. They say, You could have been a lawyer. It’s hopeless. I’m doomed to be an HVAC repairman like my father. He's a good guy but… What choice is there? Why even bother to graduate? (Interview with student, 2006).

Further probing revealed that Brett could not arrange his thoughts on paper. There were possible attention and organizational problems in his family. The teacher agreed to listen to Brett’s essay papers on a voice recorder. The principal was informed about the possible need for a learning ability assessment. Brett passed the course and graduated on time.

**Clarice.** Clarice is an example of a talented student challenged by society’s constraints. “I just need to get one foot over the line, then I can drag myself out [of the underclass],” she said, in an interview (2000). Despite her disadvantages, she persevered—in Lewinian terms, she detoured and backtracked to locate alternative routes to her educational and career goals. According to the Grit/SLANT system, her perseverance and passion should have made her goal directly accessible. It was not, due to socioeducational configurations that limit opportunity capability for
low SES individuals. With few resources among her family and friends, it is uncertain that she would have been able to locate funding and education alternatives without Indie staff efforts.

She flitted from place to place; she slept in class. “At least I come to school, that’s a change” she said (ISJ, 2000). Her poor posture was due to aching back and teeth, conditions of her family’s inability to pay for medical care. Unpaid utility bills and rent had forced her family to move often. She held two minimum wage jobs to help support her parents. Although school rightly seemed more inconvenient than relevant, she was determined to graduate, until her close friend overdosed and died at the beginning of their junior year. Clarice’s grades dropped to failing. She considered dropping out of school. Indie staff together with her mother advised her to leave school, against the strong advice of her school guidance counsellor, who cited her need to develop study habits. She dropped out, earned a GED and a small grant from a community foundation to attend community college, which she finished with a 4-point average. She then graduated from a local state college at the top of her department in International Relations. She sought an internship that would further her goal toward working in human rights, but all the paid internships were filled by students from private and ivy league schools. Clarice had taken on a third job, but still could not afford an unpaid internship. She returned to school, this time to study chemistry and other courses that would prepare her for a program in pre-med. Still unable to secure an internship, she joined the local a volunteer fire department and earned an EMT certificate, where she discovered emergency medicine.

It took Clarice eight years of struggle and diversion to accomplish what more privileged youths could manage in four. Eventually, she studied medicine at Yale, and is now a physician running a free clinic and a nonprofit medical team that trains immigrants to bring better health
care to their communities (personal correspondence, 2015). Despite Clarice’s grittiness, it was active and material help from people outside the school that operationalized her perseverance. They supported her in the extra time it took for her to detour around proscriptive social borders, such as internships filled by better-connect middle and upper class students, to realize her goal.

The next five illustrate the unpredictability of sources of motivation, and the potential for student initiated engagement, in situations that allow freedom of psychological movement.

**Jennifer.** Jennifer was a pugilistic outcast at Indie, until confronted (privately) about her hygiene. Her mother, she said, sobbing, would not let her wash her clothes, because it would insult her mother’s many cats. The principal took her and Stephanie, her nemesis classmate, shopping for new clothes, and a system was established that would allow Jennifer to wear clean clothes to school. Her demeanor and status in the group changed immediately, as did her relationship with her former nemesis.

**Joshua.** Joshua was a student trying to learn in a fluctuating field of opportunity and social deficit. With a brother in prison and an alcoholic mother, there was “only beer and maybe milk” in the refrigerator (Interview with student, 2001). The little money Joshua made occasionally bagging groceries after school went to keeping a car in order—too young for a driver’s license, nonetheless, he often was called to pick up his mother from bars. Joshua was frequently late to school—too late for the free bagels in the cafeteria—and usually tired and feeling poorly. An older Indie student with a car took charge of driving Joshua to school. Indie stocked the staff refrigerator with yogurt for him and informed the school guidance counsellor that Joshua might need medical attention for his chronic stomach ache, and possibly depression.
Known as a sullen, disorganized, indifferent student, he returned excited from an Indie
global studies field trip to a local coffee roaster. Joshua eagerly expounded on the countries that
grew coffee, how it was grown, what the trees and the beans looked like, how villages thrived
and were destroyed because of the coffee market (IDJ). A teacher remarked, “We’re stunned.
Josh woke up! He has a brain and it seems like he wants to use it” (ISJ).

The field trip had been deemed insufficiently educational to warrant the expense of a bus
or school van. Liability concerns prevented students from riding in unofficial vehicles, despite
that the condition of some official vehicles was acknowledged to be hazardous (Interview with
Principal, 2003). Many of the Indie students had never been out of the county. Several field trips
—to interviews at a Muslim student association, the district congressional representative, and the
chief of police, following the terrorist bombings in 2001; an environmental state hearing in Al-
bany; and college campuses—were scheduled before or after school hours, so that parents and
staff could drive. This is an example of cost, union, and bureaucratic requirements that diminish
rural students’ exposure to a wider world.

**Mark.** Mark, who sat by the wall with his arms folded and refused to participate in class-
room dialogue, was regarded, by a school-appointed aide from the local community, as “even too
stupid for Indie” (ISJ). When Mark became inspired by a project sequencing images of the af-
termath of Hurricane Katrina, he asked for help to write a grant proposal, received $1,200 and
launched a successful campaign to have his county of residence repair a local bridge that threat-
ened to flood his neighborhood (ISJ, 2005). As in Joshua’s case, exposure to a world beyond his
local rural experience, even though it was not deemed conventionally academic (and would not
be on an exam), woke Mark to the pleasures and the value of knowledge.
Raphael. Raphael provides an illustration of Lewinian theory: school officials (gatekeepers) can channel and constrain a student’s learning by blocking certain pathways using conventional school procedure. The student can psychologically (and in Raphael’s case, materially) move toward a free space to avoid school boundaries and achieve his goal.

At his parents’ urging, because Raphael was failing math again, a Committee on Special Education (CSE) meeting was called to determine whether he should be classified as a Special Education student and permitted an Independent Education Plan (IEP) that would allow a classroom accommodation, such as a math aide. As documented in the Indie director’s meeting notes (April, 2004) Raphael, his teachers, parents, the school principal, a counsellor, and the Indie director met at the Onteora school. Raphael never spoke, except to say, “Yeah, I guess” to rhetorical questions such as “That would work, right?” To improve his academics the decision was made to remove him from music classes and substitute remedial math. He was instructed to wear a “homework pad” clipped to his belt and to check the assignments written there with each teacher before leaving class. These actions were to “make him get serious” about school.

Raphael soon dropped out of school, and formed a band, in pursuit of his dream to be a musician (ISJ).

Coping behaviors, including normative responses from teachers and other school officials, can be maladaptive, neither resolving the problem nor improving the conditions that led to the stress and conflict.

Martin. Martin illustrates that attention can address poor coping strategies even when the nature of a perceived threat is unknown—in Martin’s case, by mitigating his felt need to flee the situation. Agitated and restless in his seat, Martin asked to leave class. With only ten minutes
left, his teacher told him to wait. His agitation increased. An observing Indie staff member knelt by his desk. Their whispered conversation followed these lines: “You seem anxious.” “I need some water.” “Can I put my hand on your shoulder?” “Okay.” “You know that anxiety, even though it feels awful, won’t hurt you.” “I can’t stay in my seat.” “How about for ten seconds. Can you do that?” After ten seconds (both watching the clock), “Thirty seconds? Or even forty?” Martin relaxed and stayed to the end of the period.

Later, staff realized that his urge to flee might have been related to the upcoming math class. They decided to give him similar close attention during math, and to try to discern the nature of his dislike and possible fear of math (IDJ, 2005).

In Lewinian terms, Martin’s forceful locomotion was toward freedom and away from a strong psychological boundary around math class. Addressing the stressful situation directly changed the forces operating in his life space at that moment, eliminating his urge to escape.

Martin’s long history in the district, his siblings’ and cousins’ notoriety as former students, his habitual maladaptive coping strategies (leaving class, throwing teaching materials out the window) and self-harm (punching lockers and telephone poles), and adults’ general frustration over his intelligence “going to waste” had led even his school counsellor to “stop trying” (Interview with counsellor, 2002). In the face of teachers’ ultimatums, he was conditionally removed from Indie. Given a list of strict behaviors (e.g., stay in the classroom; do not talk out of turn or disrupt the class) that he had to perform to be allowed back in Indie, Martin demonstrated his grittiness by sitting in the back and keeping his “lips zipped.” Intelligent and curious, he achieved more than passing grades. The teachers who had expected him to be a problem remarked what a good student he had become. Martin’s explanation: “No one ever kicked
me out before. No matter what I did they just put me in detention and kept passing me. Finally, someone took me seriously….I had to use my will to get back in, so I did” (ISJ, 2003; IDJ).

An important and surprising new component of Martin’s situation had led him to act unpredictably and positively. As Lewinian analyses suggest, individual trajectories are complex and ill-defined by a collection of facts; direct situational influences, and their interactions, are too numerous to identify. Strategies intended to reduce stress and anxiety, which can greatly affect student performance and behavior, must incorporate problem-solving behaviors (Bala & Sangwan, 2018), but the problem, and the best solution, can be unconventional. This was exemplified also, in the situation with Jennifer, and backed up by an article about two school districts that discovered a surprising “secret to raising attendance rates in schools in low-income areas”—they provided laundry machines (Today Online, 2017). Jennifer’s situation can also be viewed in Lewinian terms, with her mother acting the gatekeeper and blocking a pathway to Jennifer’s wellbeing at school. Laundered clothes that she could access without her mother’s objections removed the blockage and permitted more freedom of psychological movement.

A few more examples of student situations extend the notion that solutions to class problems often can be better addressed by following students’ lead, rather than adhering to school norms and rules.

**Stephanie.** Stephanie had been remanded to Indie for hitting students and threatening the adults in a CSE meeting with a raised chair (IDJ). When she was able to focus, her school work was exemplary; however, several times a day she “felt like lifting up the table and crashing it into the window” (ISJ, 2005). Periodically, Stephanie stopped taking her prescribed medication, putting herself and her peers in jeopardy. Because of her interest in math—she worked ahead of
the teacher’s lesson plan—the Indie director gave her a job logging inventory of consumables, such as toilet paper, pencils, yogurt, etc., to keep her busy—the “pay” was credits toward lunch from the deli. Stephanie would “give a sign” when she felt she might “explode”—teachers and staff knew to point her to a bookcase that needed reorganizing, whether it did or not, or an errand that required physical movement (IDJ). These actions were not in keeping with school convention, which would have sent her to after-school detention or study hall when she failed instructions to keep still and focus. Moreover, the unorthodox solutions were generated in conversation with staff and Stephanie herself, to encourage her sense of control and prevent the humiliation or anger that can result from imposed discipline.

**Kimberly.** Kimberly illustrates how permitting a low-pressure setting—in Lewinian terms, an expansive field of locomotion—in the absence of specific information about a student’s motivation or state of mind can help student engagement, until more information about the problem can be gathered.

A voracious reader, Kimberly wore her long hair over her face, stared down at her desk, and remained silent in class, despite repeated invitations by teachers to add what they believed would be her valuable comments to discussions. The school psychologist suggested that Kimberly had a “rough situation” at home. Speculating that the pressure to join in was itself preventing Kimberly’s participation, teachers allowed her to sit in the back of class and read silently, despite their concern that she would fall too far behind to pass the grade. A few weeks later, Kimberly appeared with bangs, her face fully visible, and joined the class by pulling her chair closer to the group and looking up. She began taking part in the conversations, hesitantly but with growing confidence and collaboration over time (ISJ). Later, it was revealed that a classmate had cut
Kimberly’s bangs in celebration—the uncle who had been sexually abusing the girl had been arrested. This possible explanation for her hiding behavior and sudden change was unnecessary information; what mattered was Kimberly’s behavior, and the teachers’ trust in Kimberly’s preferences.

When teachers fail to converse with students or to include them in decisions, and instead guess what students need, the situation can backfire, despite well-meaning intentions. A beloved English teacher who assigned a book about adolescent homelessness and familial abuse meant to generate trust and to “relate” to the students, instead found that students were “uninterested” in reading the book and were less participatory in class (Interview with teacher, 2003). The teacher had expected the students to be attracted by the book’s content; a different force moved them toward avoidance (freedom from the restricting or threatening assignment). Had the teacher discussed the book with students before giving it as a reading assignment, she might have discovered their resistance, and gained insight into some of their feelings and thoughts.

It was not atypical for Indie students’ actions to be construed as “inappropriate” by school officials, due to the officials’ habitual adherence to conventions and norms, and the failure to understand the students’ points of view. On the other hand, the students’ misbehaving actions could have been framed as gateway interests, and linked to school subjects, thereby encouraging students to pursue learning they might have eschewed. The following four illustrative incidents are from Indie staff and director journals and interviews; all occurred between 2002 and 2005.

**Daren.** Daren was frequently searched by the school police officer for drugs. When his brother, a known heroine dealer, hung himself, Daren was referred to the principal for bringing
the autopsy report to school. He said that he intended to consult his science teacher about the medical terms. Though failing most classes, Daren was passing biology.

**Tomassina.** Tomassina was sent to the school psychologist for reading aloud a paragraph about a body being crushed by stampeding horses. She said the paragraph showed her that the right words could “make” sound. Tommie wanted to write novels.

**Michaela.** Michaela brought a deer hoof to school. It was confiscated and thrown in the dumpster. A homeless student who lived in barns, she spent nighttimes walking the streets and collecting roadkill, which she made into polished bone jewelry to sell.

**Tiffany.** Tiffany wrote an article for the school newspaper about the plight of homeless students. Whereas the first three students were questioned and reprimanded, Tiffany was praised for her good intentions and worthy initiative. Tiffany’s action fit the accepted norms of school behavior; she expressed herself through “proper” linguistic and distributive channels.

However, research shows that teens often use nonlinguistic expressions to distance themselves from adult evaluation, bring attention to a problem, or communicate difficult ideas and feelings without exposure (Marwick & Boyd, 2017). The students whose expressions deviated from school’s structural norm were expressing direct lived experience, without mediation or abstraction. John Dewey, in his writing about education reform (1938), regarded experience as a moving, social force, and education as a development “within, by, and for experience” (p. 28). “Above all, [educators] should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while” (p. 40).
Whatever their individual motives, the students’ actions could have been clearly linked, and with some finesse, easily incorporated to official school subjects: Daren’s to Biology, Michaela’s to English, and Michaela’s to Biology, Cultural Studies, and Art. Viewed aesthetically, each interest/event could have generated group projects that taught new skills and favored students’ visual, aural, physical, and tactile abilities. A few possibilities could include: anatomical drawing (Daren’s autopsy); website design (for Michaela’s jewelry); graphic story writing (Michaela’s horses), or musical composition (sounds in literature); and demographic charts (Tiffany’s interest in homelessness).

**Contexts and Objects**

The following situations that occurred at Indie describe the classroom as a dynamic event comprising transactions among students, teachers, and environments. They illustrate the potential for learning from ambiguous, rather than unequivocal, contexts and objects.

**Poker table.** A teacher-initiated “nonlesson” intended to demonstrate the benefits of inquiry for its own sake generated unexpected behavior with a small group of the most disruptive students (IDJ). Her strategy can be viewed as clearing the table of preconceptions.

The setting was a round table, which the students mockingly called the “poker table” for its deep green color, suggestive of illegal gambling. The teaching materials were unusual objects that students picked from a bag: tools and fittings used in domestic work, cooking, industry, graphic design, and ocean navigation. The students were instructed to answer the question, “What is your object?” silently and without helping each other. They smelled, shook, tasted their objects, and tried out various possible uses. Using gestures, some students traded objects. They
growled, grunted, laughed, and made sounds of curiosity, frustration, and triumph. The teacher reported that in the end,

no one particularly cared what the objects were. That wasn’t the point, the point was the process. It was lunch time but they sort of lingered, then drifted away in a group. No hitting, yelling, running, throwing stuff. I watched them all the way across the parking lot. I couldn’t believe it (Interview with teacher).

There were likely a multitude of reasons for the student-group mood change. Possibly, the resultant calm was due to the absence of competition; another possible explanation is the suppression of mechanisms of distraction and conflict that occurs in mindfulness states (Jankowski & Holas, 2014, 66).

When student productions and expressions appear to be extracurricular or cannot be evaluated according to school conventions that privilege written and oral abilities, clear explication, and communication (cognitive transparency), educators can choose whether to consider the behavior relevant to learning or an incident to ignore or punish. The following two situations, “Porn board” and “American flag,” illustrate two different choices. The first shows how an unconventional approach generated from student’s actions turned around a potentially dead-end or negative event. The second illustrates how unquestioned structures, symbols, ideologies and norms, when not determinedly addressed, can reproduce adverse student conditions.

**The porn board.** At the end of a Friday, students adorned the whiteboard in the Indie-Alt classroom with drawings and words related to sexualized acts and body parts. Possible motives for the students’ action could include: reproduction of their “bad lot” reputations; rebellion against the “good student” status quo; establishment of an antiauthority stance; lowering of ex-
pectations about their performance potential; an attempt to get attention or enliven a boring day; or the use of a communal transgressive act to form an inclusive subcommunity and delineate its borders, or to test a new student’s allegiance.

Conventionally, a teacher would have erased the board and ignored, reprimanded or punished. However, whatever students’ motivating reasons, affirmation in a manner typical of the status quo would only have served to repeat the students’ experience of school as separate from real life and themselves as troublemakers, outsiders to the successful dominant school society. The Indie teacher, following the strategy of reversing norms and expectations, in order to open the situation for nonhabitual emotions, thoughts, and actions, treated the students’ production as a serious effort akin to an assignment.

In a corner of the board, she wrote and scored components of the work: Ingenuity, Technical Execution, Composition, and Originality of Idea. On Monday, she teacher explained the scores. She admonished the students for their “juvenilia,” which had resulted in the low Originality score, saying, “You are better than that.” She agreed to advance the Ingenuity score for their “group coordination.” She then addressed “the most important element,” the words “Idiot Noah” in the corner next to a drawing of Noah, the newcomer, in his everpresent backwards baseball cap.

Noah was a new student from a neighboring district who isolated himself, laughed at odd times abruptly and loudly, and called himself “the village idiot.” The teacher suspected that the students found his behavior strange and threatening. “Name-calling is not allowed in this building, or in life, ever,” the teacher said (IDJ, 2005).
After the break, the students displayed their revised work. On the board were only the words “cause” and “affect” [sic] and arrows pointed toward a smiling Noah, who sat in a chair with his finger on the light switch, and toward the ceiling light.

American flag. This incident lends itself to examination through Lewinian and aesthetic lenses. A student had found the remains of an American flag in a burned, abandoned trailer in the woods. He burned small holes, apparently using a cigarette, in the center of each of the fifty stars, and draped the flag over the fence in back of the Indie building (Figure 2). A few days later, the front page of a local weekly newspaper displayed a large color photograph of the flag, with the headline “Flag Desecrated,” and text beginning: “Local veterans are outraged over an American Flag that has been torn, burnt, and left hanging on property used by the Onteora Central School District’s Indie program” (Killin, 2004). The principal and school board members were contacted, and students were interviewed. No Indie personnel were contacted.

Perceptual relativity and appraisal bias have been widely examined, for instance, in studies of confirmation bias (Trope & Bassok, 1982). Lewin (1948) insisted that differently believed content produces different facts. In his forward (p. 7), Gordon Allport wrote, “In all face-to-face conflicts we learn that the way in which the individual perceives and interprets the social situation is decisive.” The outcome of the Indie student’s action was clear, but his intention was not. However, the facts of the event quickly gave way to a narrative of condemnation: the newspaper reported the flag as “desecrated,” an act that presumes negative intention.

In Lewinian terms, the situation became one where people were separated by strongly bounded forbidden zones that allowed little free movement. Gatekeepers whose decisions influenced the flow of information included the student who altered, then displayed the flag out of
public view; VFW members who entered Indie property and photographed the flag; the editor of the *Townsman*, who decided to publish the photograph and quotes from VFW members without contacting Indie personnel; and the Onteora school principal, who on seeing the newspaper, removed the flag.

No student came forward to claim the action, and none was named. However, the consensus, among the principal, Indie teachers and staff, and some students, was that the flag had been altered and placed by David, a student who, after being missing for six months, had been recently court-ordered back to school. David was known as a personable boy who did no schoolwork (ISJ). Nonetheless, his visible artistic leanings—meticulously sewn clothing, hair, and piercings that suggested an interest in design and order, and a previously (anonymously) placed grid of pencils stuck into the acoustic ceiling of a classroom that was reminiscent of the grid of holes burned in the flag—gave reason to believe that the actor’s intentions were not destructive.
The altering and careful draping of the flag was artistic, although the flag or the performance of it cannot necessarily be identified as art. It demonstrates aesthetic symptoms, as recognized by art critic Nelson Goodman (1978), in the object’s density of meaning, complex reference, and relative completeness. Manipulation of material is a hallmark of the artistic process, and grids are legitimate and well explored artist topologies—the creator’s hand was evident in each burned hole.

Contrastingly, the flag revered by the VFW is generic, public, universal, and devoid of any hand of a maker. This permits symbolic potency. A flag altered artistically—materially or by context—can operate symbolically, but must be read as more than a symbol; an example is artist Jasper Johns’ mixed collage painting on wood, “Flag” (1954-55) (Figure 3).


Further examples of flag art illustrate how context can alter perception and meaning. Had the teachers and staff made use of the Indie flag incident, the following examples of artworks
might have generated critical discussions of cultural, historical, political, aesthetic, and affective influences far beyond the flag, or art in general.

Cady Noland’s sculptures are altered everyday objects that suggest containment, control, punishment, and group identity: metal gates for livestock; an aluminum stockade; and five large round holes in an American flag design draped over a stockade. Alexander Calder’s mobiles have been considered “lyrical” (Sartre, 1947). Yet, when works by Calder’s steel *Rhombus* (1972) (Figure 4) was placed under a jagged ceiling hole and exhibited near Noland’s sculptures (Antelo-Suarez, 2017), the geometric planes of Calder’s abstract artwork “enacted a violent act” (Petrossiants, 2018).

Dread Scott’s (1989) “What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?” (Cohen, 2018) (Figure 5) invited viewers to stand on the flag as they wrote their responses to the title question, illustrating that propriety varies depending on context and intention.

Barbara Chase Riboud’s “Little Gold Flag” (1985) (Figure 6) suggests both military insignia and western everywoman’s necessary fashion piece, the little black dress. Both are rendered in gold, the currency of commercial capitalism.

Michelle Grabner’s “Untitled, 2014” (Figure 7) uses image and suggested word play to question the terms of domesticity and security, with her flag-like design in colors and weave suggestive of traditional boy/girl gender dichotomy and women’s work. The flag, a symbol of exclusion, oppression, nationalism, and patriarchy is domesticated, and security—normally represented militaristically—is instead assured by the places and the work of women.
Figure 5. Installation image of Dread Scott’s, “What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?” (1988), 80 x 28 x 60 inches. The installation is comprised of: a silver gelatin photomontage print of South Korean students burning US flags, holding signs reading ‘Yankee go home son of bitch,’ and flag draped coffins in a troop transport; text printed on the photomontage, ‘What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?’; books (originally with blank pages) on a shelf; ink pen, shelf; a 3 x 5 foot American flag on the ground, and an active audience. (Source: Dread Scott)

Given reflection, David’s flag display, and other student actions deemed inappropriate, could have yielded a variety of interpretations. They could have been viewed as expressions of the conflict of driving needs in adolescent maturation: individuation and belonging, destruction and order, visibility and anonymity, and so on. From an aesthetic perspective, accurate interpretation is unnecessary; the process itself prevents stereotypic responses and expands opportunities for inclusiveness, participation and exchange, and critical practice among teachers and students.

Aesthetic perspectives could have separated the flag as an object and an idea from the heated context of ideology and impulse. Discussion could have placed the event in a fruitful context as a teaching opportunity. However, other than writing a letter to the editor of the *Townsman*, neither I nor other staff took advantage of the opportunity. The school adults (on the board, teachers, administrators, etc.) also chose to attend to the accusations, and failed to transform the
incident into a teaching opportunity or a chance to model, for students, ways to think beyond the superficial.

A way to understand this neglect is through Lewin’s (1935) notion of detours taken when a goal is blocked by strong resistance forces or prohibitions. The VFW presence and the news photo rallied supporters and increased forbidden spaces (pressure from anti-Indie stakeholders), making detour to a teaching moment goal an overly difficult, time-consuming endeavor, in the face of constant funding pressure and threats from the conservative groups to eliminate the program.

**Discussion: The Lewinian Classroom**

*Education tends to develop certain types of behavior, certain kinds of attitudes in the children or other persons with whom it deals* (Lewin, 1936, p. 3).

Education’s deficit-oriented perspective of some students results in a narrative of under-achievement, low SES, and youth at-risk. It presumes limited ability and categorical homogeneity, and maintains the dominant good-student/bad-student dichotomy built into schooling’s hierarchical structure. In her presidential address for the 2010 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Carol Lee (2010) stressed the need to understand people’s challenges and decisions at the level of ever-changing routine settings and interactions. How individuals function in “social, physical, and material contexts...must be understood inside a complex and dynamic ecological system” (p. 644).

Lewin’s field theory (1935) suggests a way to detect general movements of resistance by students and teachers in classroom situations. Decisions leading to a particular outcome reflect
conflicting pressures, such as desire to conform, to use group resources responsibly and/or efficiently, and willingness to trust others to restrain themselves (Messick, Wilke, Brewer, Kramer, Zemke, & Lui, 1983). Lewin’s model permits an understanding of psychological movement without trying to discern individual intention, which can produce biases. For example, people attribute more intentionality to negative than positive outcomes (Leslie, Knobe, & Cohen, 2006; Pyke, Kamawar, & Ridgeway, 2007). Given the usual categorization of some students, often underperformers, as “trouble,” their actions, if ambiguous or not conventionally understood as positive, are likely to be perceived as negative, and therefore intended. Moreover, the flag situation at Indie illustrates how “a mere piling up of facts can only lead to a chaotic and unproductive situation” (Lewin, 1936/2013, p. 15).

The gap between the ideals which the educational procedure pretends to follow and the actual procedure is often remarkable. A more reliable symptom seems to be the technical procedures the teachers use, such as the frequency of intervention, the conditions under which they intervene, whether they talk commonly with loud or low voices, etc. (Lewin, 1948, p. 16).

Imagined as a classroom, the combination of constraints, capabilities, and freedom of psychological movement in the diagrams below (Figure 8) can be understood as describing the limitations produced by the good/bad student dichotomy in the conventional school structure, and the experiential effect of the absence of such constraints.

In both diagrams, student (C) resides in a space of free movement. The top drawing (a) is the common situation of underperforming students, where lower ability (conventionally construed) and many “taboos” generate multiple spaces that are forbidden (f) (field trips, debate
team, etc.) or inaccessible \((i)\) (psychological wellbeing, academic standing, benefit of the doubt in ambiguous behavioral circumstances, etc.). The bottom drawing \((b)\) can represent a higher achieving student in a situation with fewer prohibitions.

Social status is one factor that differentiates students’ freedom of movement (Lewin, 1936/2013, p. 46). From the point of view of the educational institution, academically accomplished students possess high status regarding their benefit to society, regardless of their SES status—a much more difficult position to attain for low SES students.

A student who passes exams, graduates, or is accepted to college has made real movement, a “step forward” toward an educational goal. Lewin (1948) explained, “facts do not sufficiently determine the dynamic factors of the educational situation, that is, those factors which constitute the influence of education on the behavior, the personality, and the ideals of the growing child” (p. 16). Differences in psychological freedom can influence behavior. For example, people derive different meanings from appraisals that are formed in stress and coping contexts (Park & Folkman, 1997). Lesser status students who encounter daily constraints on freedom might act differently than conforming and well performing students who have more psychological freedom to roam, and are less apt to encounter resistance when they need help or feel inefficacious.
Figure 8. Differences in space of free movement for underperforming student (a) and adequately performing student (b). Source: Lewin, 1936/2015, p. 45.

Applied to the porn board incident, the top diagram describes how a conventional disciplinary response could have limited the students’ psychological free space of exploration by strengthening barriers around forbidden actions and ideas. The teacher’s unconventional response (lower diagram) lessened and eliminated taboo regions, permitting “a real psychological event” (Lewin, 1936/2013, p. 50)—more freedom of movement and increased progress in thinking.
Thus, changes in the academic and behavior records of underperforming students referred to the alternative learning program Indie indicated that when the epistemological exclusion and social othering they had experienced in regular school classes were ameliorated by an inclusive approach, their records and engagement in learning improved. Examination of Indie events through the disciplines of social justice, aesthetics, and social psychology illustrate ways to reframe student misbehavior or performance failure: as psychological movement away from restriction and toward freedom, rather than in terms of intention or failure to comply; and as opportunities to guide student interest and expressiveness toward deeper learning situations.

**Implications for School Reform**

Whereas an abundance of school reform efforts and education research have failed to improve the experiences of the millions of rural students who barely graduate or drop out each year, the focus of such efforts and studies is largely on aspects of education that do not include school structure. Students who underperform, according to school measures, are disadvantaged by their rural conditions, and further constrained in their learning opportunities by school norms. The educational structure itself supports social othering and exclusion through a performance hierarchy that stresses individualistic tasks and competitive rewards that favor certain individuals. Students who deviate from sanctioned behaviors are marked, contained, and watched, their freedom of movement delineated, and their academic trajectories aimed toward further segregation, such as suspension or expulsion, and encounters with school enforcement, such as on-site police officers and juvenile court truancy decisions. These means describe steps in the process of excluding such students from a scope of justice that encompasses the well-behaved and academically stronger students. Attempts to rationalize social inequity often target the victims as deserving of
their plight (Winter & Leighton, p. 100). Terms such as *anti-social behavior* promote the individual as fully agentic and responsible and “prevent consideration of schooling itself as problematic” (Osler, 2006, p. 577). Inflicted harm “can seem appropriate and even necessary to bring about some ‘greater good’” (Opotow, 2011, pp. 205-206). However, unforgiving practices of containment and deprivation used to correct misbehaving students can generate a standard of student lawlessness, in response to their failure to live up to cultural expectations.

The Indie alternative school program sought to ameliorate structural norms at the classroom level. The aim of equalization of student status and learning opportunities was approached in several ways: what normally would have been deemed rewards—the borrowing of video cameras, eating lunch at the Indie building rather than the school cafeteria, going on field trips regardless of academic performance or homework completion, and so on—were treated as normal activities available to every student; student actions and productions normally considered deviant or inappropriate were examined for educational or social value, and transformed into group discussion or projects.

**Future Directions**

A recent review of norm perception and social change interventions (Tankard & Paluck, 2016) stressed the importance of understanding and incorporating perceived norms into social intervention evaluations, especially those involving institutional change. Education research, school reforms and interventions, and policymakers, can aid rural students and their teachers by looking at the effects of structural school norms on student experience, and identifying alternative learning situations that address structural effects at lower levels. More research on rural students is imperative. If the general view is that rural areas are pleasant and benign, and that rural
schools are more equal and less violent than urban schools, systems that segregate and oppress struggling students are more likely to remain in place.

Further study of the effects of nonlinguistic assignments that engage tactility, sound, and vision, especially in noncompetitive settings, might reveal correlations useful to new conceptions of classroom activities, and reveal ways to include students otherwise reluctant to participate.

Most importantly, every effort should be made to analyze school and classroom systems that might affect the performance of students through invisible norms. The ideals that underlie advocacy of seemingly beneficial practices and interventions (e.g., heterogeneous classes, tracking for some subjects and not others, and grade based classes) should be scrutinized ecologically, in their actual situations, and students interviewed in depth about their everyday experiences in these settings.

Multidisciplinary and multilevel analyses of students’ problems and achievement in a public high school can be useful to help resolve the patchwork nature of education reform and invigorate the tremendous opportunity that public education should be for all students.
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