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Megan R. Moskop

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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CARING CHOICES?
SUPPORTING AND DREAMING WITH STUDENTS IN NEW YORK CITY'S
STRATIFYING HIGH SCHOOL ADMISSIONS SYSTEM

by

MEGAN MOSKOP

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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Megan Moskop

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.

Date

Michelle Fine

Thesis Advisor

Date

Elizabeth MacAuley-Lewis

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Caring choices? Supporting and dreaming with students in New York City’s stratifying high school admissions system

by

Megan Moskop

Advisor: Michelle Fine

In New York City, all eighth graders attending public school must apply for high school. They have 400 schools from which to choose, and they must create a ranked list of twelve choices. They are then matched to one school. The results of this process play a large role in creating one of the most segregated and unequal school systems in the country. In “Caring choices? Supporting and dreaming with students in New York City’s stratifying high school admissions system,” I share an autoethnographic account that spans ten years of work as an activist educator striving both to support students and families in choice-making and to build political pressure for systemic change. Dipping into my own educational history, the story begins alongside my first 8th grade students in 2009, and ends with stories of celebration and growing solidarity within the current youth-led movement for school integration. Honest story-sharing, intersectional solidarities that centralize racial and disability justice lenses, changing logics of choice-making that foreground community care, and radical pedagogies all offer steps forward towards the creation and implementation of a transformative vision for our students.

Table of Contents

<i>ABSTRACT</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Welcome</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Chapter 1: Grounding</i>	<i>4</i>
Flying (Summer 2004)	<i>4</i>
Landing (Summer 2009)	<i>5</i>
“Getting it” the Ongoing Praxis Project	<i>7</i>
The Situation (Back to 2009-2010).....	<i>8</i>
<i>Chapter 2: What is there to “get”?</i>	<i>16</i>
Figuring out a first strategy for students (2010-2011 School Year).....	<i>16</i>
Researching Back	<i>19</i>
<i>Chapter 3: This hierarchy hurts everyone! An intersectional dis/ability framework</i>	<i>28</i>
Beyond inclusion, towards transformation.....	<i>28</i>
The pain of stratification	<i>35</i>
Flight was only a dream: My own struggle to stay “smart” (1993-2003).....	<i>43</i>
<i>Chapter 4: A praxis of struggle: Education Work Forward</i>	<i>51</i>
Changing logics of support, activism & research.....	<i>51</i>
Teaching agency and picking “good schools”	<i>60</i>
High School Match Day (March 18, 2019)	<i>64</i>
<i>Chapter 5: The here and now: Activist work forward</i>	<i>71</i>
Activist Joy! The week after “Match Day”	<i>71</i>
Following youth into the impossible	<i>75</i>
Adult Work.....	<i>77</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>86</i>

Caring choices? Supporting and dreaming with students in New York City's stratifying high school admissions system

Welcome Reader! Through this thesis, I invite you to see New York City's high school admissions system through an activist educator's eyeview. Before we jump in, here's a bit of context.

“New York City students applying to DOE public high schools have more choices than students living in any other city in the country. There are more than 700 programs at over 400 high schools across the city, and you can apply for 12 programs on one application. You can also test or audition to apply to the nine specialized high schools.”

This is the official introduction that rising 8th graders in New York City read when they opened the 2019 NYC High School Directory, distributed in June of 2018. As this paragraph proudly asserts, they have a lot of choices to make, but those choices, and the system within which they occur, are not free of context, as this introduction suggests. For me, the most troubling thing about this paragraph is the pervasive underlying assumption that having this many school choices is inherently good, something for a system to be proud of.

Since I began teaching in 2009, I've been dismayed with the process by which our NYC 8th grade students move from middle school to high school—sometimes it's called the high school admissions, sometimes it's called high school choice, both officially, by the Department of Education (DOE) and unofficially by students, families, and educators.

From 2010 until 2018, I was actively involved in guiding 8th graders through the system, mostly at my middle school in Washington Heights, but with some citywide work for various non-profits and the DOE in 2017. Every year, my disillusion grew as it became increasingly

clear that despite what hopeful plans, projects, phone calls, field trips, parent meetings, curricular shifts, policy campaigns, no matter what we implemented, when students received their Round 1 high school match letters in March, there would be heartbreak, or worse, resignation. Every year, I watched as the students I loved, already in a segregated system (my school was over 95% Black and Latinx), were increasingly segregated and sorted—those with the most privilege were rewarded with the most educational opportunity, and those who were already the most underserved, and who needed the most support, were relegated to more under-resourced schools. This sad phenomenon was not limited to my students, either.

Across the city, High School admissions sorts students along all-too familiar hierarchies. A 2017 Measure of America study showed that from 2011-2012, though Black and Latinx students made up approximately 70% of NYC high schoolers, they made up 82% of the student body at Educational Option high schools, the schools with the least selective admissions method, and the schools with an overall graduation rate of only 60%. At the most selective high schools, Specialized High Schools, where the graduation rate is 93%, only 16% of students are Black and Latinx. (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2017)

Over the years, spurred on by this structural inequality, I took leadership in activist organizing for educational and social justice issues, and eventually returned to graduate school to research and study educational theory and policy. This thesis serves as a map of where I've been, highlighting key take-aways, "a-ha" moments, and charting my growth both as a critically consciousness educator and a politicized community organizer. My aim in mapping the past, however, is not to dwell there, but to build a more nuanced understanding of the present, necessary for transformative change.

Chapter 1, “Grounding,” situates my 2009 start as a middle school special education teacher in New York City, and introduces the problem of high school choice as it was introduced to me, through the experience of two students. Chapter 2, “What is there to get?” provides an overview of the high school admissions system, first from the standpoint of my participation in 2010, as I sought to help students navigate it, and then from a “zoomed out” historic and academic research perspective. Chapter 3 “This hierarchy hurts everyone! An intersectional dis/ability framework” delves more deeply into my own experience within as a teacher and a student, analyzing experiences with a new Disability/Critical Race Theory, or DisCrit lens for understanding how racialized and ableist constructions of academic success, which high school admissions centers, ultimately hurt all students, including those like myself, who do receive material benefits within the status-quo. Chapter 4, “A Praxis of Struggle” centers my past attempts at change-making, through storytelling, work within the school system, and research, bringing us to the present Spring of 2019. Chapter 5, which concludes this paper, celebrates the flourishing youth-led movement for school integration and offers a path forward for how this movement can continue building strength and solidarity with a more intersectional understanding of integration and shared vision for schools as a common good.

Now, as a national college admissions cheating scandal fills news cycles, the US Secretary of Education promotes policies from which she will clearly receive financial benefit, and a mayoral proposal to change admissions policies to eight of the most prestigious New York City public schools is hotly debated, the conversation around school choice and admissions systems is ripe for new synthesis and theorizing. It is my hope that this collection of stories and ideas from an educator/activist may further that synthesis.

Chapter 1: Grounding

“Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness.”

(Tuck, 2009, p.417)

Flying (Summer 2004)

The summer before I went to college, I woke up regularly from dreams of flying. In all these dreams, my friends and I would begin simply by holding our arms out by our sides. Without even a running start, we would lift off in a spiral upwards like slow reverse whirligigs, drifting up in the way winged samara maple seeds float down to the ground. In other flying dreams, our outstretched arms caught a magically gentle breeze and we'd go gliding up over the rooves of our houses, over the magnolia, poplar and pine trees, over the railroad tracks and the high school parking lot... and in those dreams, there was no need to land.

I had just made my graduation speech, and I was headed for a prestigious university, where I had received a prestigious full-tuition “leadership and service scholarship” for students from the Carolinas. I was all set to begin my college journey with a three weeks in the woods on a pre-orientation backpacking trip. Once I moved into my dorm, I'd begin the “Humanitarian Challenges” themed freshman focus program, complete with a service-learning component, and my scholarship would pay for summers of service, one in rural South Carolina, and one in an international location of my choosing. I'd made a plan to learn what I wanted to learn, and I was determined to gain tools to make the world better.

I had been chosen and recruited by a college, I had done what my community expected of me, I was joyful, and it felt like smooth sailing ahead. I was taking off on my own, confidently choosing the direction of my future. In that summer, everything felt possible, even easy.

Outside of that summer, I never had another of these vivid flying dreams.

Landing (Summer 2009)

One year after graduating from Duke, after a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship in Malta, I choose to join the New York City Teach for American Corps. My portfolio for job interviews was full of rich color photos featuring me with various groups of students from Malta, South Carolina, Durham, and even Kathmandu, Nepal. Despite my efforts at a tan, and at traditional dress in each place, my pale skin and blondish hair make me easy to spot across the photos. The new assistant principal who hired me in August might have been desperate for a teacher, but she later told me it was those photos that convinced her that I was ready for the job of teaching literacy and social studies to two self-contained special education classes at a public middle school in Washington Heights.

My mother drove me and my fold-out sofa up from North Carolina, and helped me move into my rented room a few blocks from school. She helped me move into my classroom too, and we spent at least three days on the classroom door, featuring a red wolf, and the words “NCSU: The Wolfpack. Hungry for Knowledge!” On the first day of school, I told my students that our class was named in honor of my brother’s college, and that even though he had a learning disability in math, he had graduated from N.C. State, and that they could too. They all wrote goals for the year on colored construction paper, and I posted them the light blue wall at back of

the room, where they hung next to the “Tree of Reading Growth” on top of clouds, a sunshine, and the words, “Our BIG and lofty goals.”

My classes, in a configuration I later found out was illegal, consisted of students ranging from 6th to 8th grade, with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that labeled them with a range of disabilities, from the pathologizing “Emotionally Disturbed,” to the more innocuous-sounding but similarly damaging “Other Health Impaired,” usually indicating ADHD or Aspergers. Most were “Learning Disabled” which in this context often meant a first or second-grade reading level. The veteran teachers shook their heads sympathetically, and years later, at a school holiday party, several of them confessed their initial thought that “this blonde lady won’t last more than a few months with those kids!” I was determined to last, but I had a lot to learn.

So, when I learned that my two 8th grade students, Analisa and Roosevelt, would apply to high school, getting to choose from hundreds of options, I was excited for them. Remembering my own freedom, I imagined that like me five years before, they would be given an opportunity to explore different options, discover their interests, and eventually, chose and be chosen in a way that might reflect the joy of my own experience. They’d fly away from our cramped classroom and “all these little kids” that got on their nerves, and they’d get to be part of a more focused, grown-up learning community, one that they had selected.

When I expressed my enthusiasm for the choice process to Analisa and Roosevelt, Analisa shook her head silently, chuckling at me, but Roosevelt, ever honest, put his hand to his forehead and blurted out, “You just don’t get it, do you Miss?”

“Getting it” the Ongoing Praxis Project

A decade of effort later, this thesis is part of my ongoing attempt to “get it.” Just as stories can be powerful drivers of change, as I’ll explore in chapter five, they’re also tools for sense-making. I hope that this writing project may serve both functions. As I weave stories and theory, I’ll draw on academic research, participant observation, and autoethnographic accounts of my experiences as a middle school teacher and community activist from 2009 until 2019. In part, my goal is a deeper understanding of self through the “coordination of past, present, and future-oriented actions and identities,” such that I might be a more effective part of working in community to set “the conditions for new forms of agency central to realizing possible futures.” (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016, p.3) Through considering my own stories, I hope to unearth and undo “imbalances and incompatibilities” that have become “conventionalized” (Bruner, 2002, p.93) in dominant narratives about school choice, specifically across New York City’s High School Admissions Process. Through analysis, and eventual sharing of my narratives, I will be part of generating “cultural innovations”(Daiute, 2014, p.3), and a narrative that in the words of Jessica Senehi, can be a “rationale for action” and a driver of change (Senehi, 2002, p.44) in the crafting and lobbying for a new systemic narrative, based in shared values of intersectional justice.

Borrowing Weis and Fine’s “critical bifocals,” to look beyond myself in the struggle of which I am part, I hope to further illuminate emergent movement understandings and tightening circuits of solidarity that link struggles across geography, time, and those who are differently abled, raced, and classed (Weis & Fine, 2012).

This thesis will reflect my attempt to create a “living body” of theory, as I explore my own identity as a “gatekeeper” within a system that I now understand to be inherently unequal. As I work, I am committed to taking on what Stacy Holman-Jones outlines as the

“three central commitments or concerns of critical autoethnography. They are commitments to the ideas that (1) Theory and story work together in a dance of collaborative engagement, (2) Critical autoethnography involves both a material and ethical praxis. (3) Doing critical autoethnography engages us in processes of becoming and because of this, shows us ways of embodying change.” (Holman Jones, 2016, p.299)

I also commit to closely holding the ideals of Eve Tuck’s desire based research framework, in efforts to “yield analyses that upend commonly held assumptions of responsibility, cohesiveness, ignorance, and paralysis within dispossessed and disenfranchised communities. Desire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities.” (Tuck, 2009, p.417)

In loving patience with myself and my individual capacity for sense-making, I know that while this writing will forward my own movement, and a new combination of ideas that may be useful in our activist collectives, the future of a more just process for school assignment will depend on collective work!

The Situation (Back to 2009-2010)

During my first year of teaching, and my first experience of the high school admissions process alongside Roosevelt and Analisa, resources were painfully limited.

Analisa was the only girl in my class. She was 16, and a full head taller than I was. She lived with her mother in temporary housing near the school, and that year, she missed close to 50 days of school. Roosevelt, on the other hand, only missed school once that year, for a family vacation to Cancun, from which he returned with souvenirs for me, and for his classmates.

As part of Teach for America, I was enrolled in a Master's in Special Education at Hunter college, so in addition to meeting my students needs in the classroom, I was up all hours of the night completing graduate school assignments. So, when I was told not to worry about helping Roosevelt and Analisa with their high school applications, even though I was excited about the possibilities the application might offer, I didn't.

I was told to leave the job it up to Ms. Ruiz, the school social worker. When Ms. Ruiz didn't visit our class alongside the other 8th grade homerooms, Roosevelt was worried. He asked about high school often, and Mr. Cortez, the educational assistant who always really knew what was going on, rolled his eyes and shrugged in reference to the administration's assertion that "Ms. Ruiz would take care of the high school process." Ms. J, our class's other assistant, and self-proclaimed "Dominican mom," who mothered me just as much as the students, suggested that I go talk Ms. Ruiz after school. I remember timidly arriving at her office, where the radio was on loud, and imagine our conversation probably went something like this.

"Ms. Ruiz, is there information about the high school application process that I should be sharing with Roosevelt and Analisa?"

"I have 150 other students to help. Those two. Their parents never come in. I'll get to them in December."

High School Applications were due in December, and Analisa's mother came to school often- frequently choosing to walking her to school to make sure she made it there. Analisa was also sometimes escorted by truancy officers. But that year, I wouldn't have corrected or pushed Ms. Ruiz. I would have walked meekly away. She certainly didn't appreciate my presence, but at least she wasn't one of the teachers actively expressed their desire for me to leave.

"Well, please let me know if there's anything I can do to help them." I probably said.

I distinctly remember that she turned back to her work without answering, shaking her head and sighing, as if to say again, “You just don’t get it.”

And I didn’t get it, so I left it alone. Every Roosevelt would ask about high school, which was often, I’d respond, “I don’t know- ask Ms. Ruiz.”

Knowing Roosevelt’s persistence, he probably left the room without permission to do just that, each time with Mr. Cortez following him.

Finally, in December. Roosevelts’ grandparents told to come meet with Ms. Ruiz. Roosevelt was enraged when he returned to class.

“Miss, I didn’t get to choose, I didn’t even look at the book! She chose for me!”

“What did your grandparents say?” I asked.

“They signed it.” He replied.

And that was that. I never even found out where Roosevelt wanted to go. I’m not sure if *anyone* asked him.

In early April, when the 8th grade homerooms across the school opened their “Round 1 match letters,” together, Roosevelt and Analisa were pulled out of our class at the end of the school day. The next morning, when I excitedly asked, “So, where are you headed next year?”

Roosevelt shrugged. “I donno. Ask Ms. Ruiz.” Mr. Cortez and I exchanged a confused look. “Why don’t you show Ms. Moskop your letter, Roosevelt,” he suggested.

“I lost it.” Roosevelt replied.

Analisa returned to school the next day. Her letter was intact. She handed it to me and I read “Round 1: No Match.”

How could this be? I wondered. I didn’t get it, but, like so many struggles of that year, the question weighed heavy on my heart. My mentor told me to let it go, and focus on

celebrating Analisa's improved attendance and boosting Roosevelt, the fastest reader in my class, up to fifth grade reading level so that he'd have a chance of success with ninth-grade work.

Months passed. I carted books-on-tape from the library to the school. I had near-perfect attendance that year, but most mornings, on my way down the subway steps, I hoped for an accident that might give me an excuse to stay home. During the day, I implemented new behavior management programs on a monthly basis, decorated my classroom walls with colorful progress trackers, and eventually, learned how to teach phonics and lead community circles.

Spring brought hope, but Analisa and Roosevelt still faced an uncertain future.

Finally, during the last few weeks of school, they both received Round 3 match letters to DreamYard Preparatory High School, in the South Bronx.

I was relieved. This sounded great! But they were furious. Roosevelt ripped his letter into shreds, and both insisted that they wouldn't go.

"I didn't choose this school! I won't go there!"

I naively tried to comfort them. "This can't be so bad. It has a nice name, and it isn't too far away."

With an internet search, we found insideschools.org. We learned that the school, one of several new small schools in the large Taft building, had a "D" rating and a graduation rate of less than 50%. It had been off and on the list of failing schools slated for closure. Uh-oh, I thought. Roosevelt and Analisa were right. I tried to put on a brave face.

"It's an art school though, isn't that cool?"

"Miss, we don't even like art!"

The school year ended in relative chaos. Since my class contained 3 different grade levels, I wasn't excused from teaching to attend 8th grade graduation, but Roosevelt and Analisa

stopped by, proud in their graduation regalia, to visit the class. Ms. J, who attended the ceremony with them, fixed Analisa's hair and made pastelitos for the class in their honor. Roosevelt promised he would write, but I only saw him once, about three years later, when he rode his bicycle past a school fire-drill. I stopped in my tracks. We hugged, and after I had exclaimed over how tall he was, Roosevelt asked him how he was doing. "I'm good, Miss!" he responded, and then, through the Principal's megaphone, "Miss. Moskop, do you realize you're standing in the crosswalk and talking during a fire drill!?"

We both jumped, I moved to the sidewalk, and before I could catch him, Roosevelt rode off.

I saw Analisa only once also. That next year, on about the third day of school, during a first-period prep, I walked down to the office to make photocopies, and there were Analisa and her mother.

Analisa's eyes were wide. I excitedly jumped in, "Analisa! It's great to see you, how are you? I'm so happy you came to visit. But wait! What are you doing here? Why aren't you at your high school!?!?"

Analisa's mother stood behind her, her jaw set.

"I can't go to that school, Analisa said. It's not safe. I could get shot!"

"Have you been?" I asked, concerned.

"I don't even know where it is. My mom won't take me. We're not going there."

Again, the principal interrupted. "Ms. Moskop, we're not entertaining this nonsense. She can't be here."

She turned to Analisa's mother, "Analisa has to be in school, and she has to be in high school. You have to take her, or else the truancy officers will. She can't be here."

“Pero, este mujer...” Analisa’s mother began, as she pointed down the hall towards Ms. Ruiz’s office, her finger shaking.

A secretary emerged from her office to help translate, and the principal directed her. “Tell this parent and student that they can’t be here. They have to go to the high school to which they were assigned. It’s the law.”

Rapidly, she turned to me, “Ms. Moskop, go back to your class. This is not your concern.”

Like a scolded puppy, I forgot about my copies and I walked back towards the stairs, turning once to make eye contact and wave to Analisa. I never saw her again, but will not forget the look on her face.

Like the NYC “non-admits” in Susan Rasoki-Rosenbloom’s study, “My So-Called Choice: The Trappings of School Choice for Non-Admits” Analisa and Roosevelt’s didn’t experience the process of choosing as one of “entitlement,” as I experienced for college. Instead, their experience seems like one of “entrapment” (Rosenbloom, 2010, p. 16). Analisa and her mother struggled to escape this trap, but alongside the parents interviewed in Mary Pattillo’s “Everyday Politics of School Choice in the Black Community,” their agency was limited. Parents sought safe schools with an academic focus, but ultimately felt that instead of offering them options, choice was a process had been done *to* them. Like “Ms. Phillips,” who Pattillo interviewed, they “exercised tremendous individual agency—purposefully (although not wholly voluntarily) directing her energies despite tremendous barriers and hurdles—but saw that her efforts were ineffectual, lacking in agentic power, since she did not have “power over” the situation and could not realize an impact on the actions of others.”

Ms. Phillips' story ended in "surrender to the school choice process" (Pattillo, 2015, p. 59), but we can hope that after I saw them that morning in the hallway, Analisa and her mother brought their battle elsewhere, to a place where they were heard and understood.

In Ee-Seul Yoon's "Young people's cartographies of school choice: the urban imaginary and moral panic," I read echoes of Analisa's words. Yoon names a "dystopian imaginary," in which students use racialized geographic narratives of the city to fuel negative perceptions of spaces they haven't yet seen, but I believe that for Analisa and others, this panic is justified.

STAT! In line with the logic of school choice, she, alongside other students, was forced to "construct boundaries of where they belong and do not belong" (Yoon, 2016, p. 111). As Yoon concludes, though individual choices to comply do perpetuate a system, it doesn't make sense to blame individuals for the unequal distribution of students across schools when structural racism and dispossession are at the core of the system. "School choice, regardless of its policy intentions and goals, inadvertently facilitates the demonisation and marginalisation of already pathologised neighbourhoods and their schools, because school choice adheres to the neoliberal principle of individual choice rather than collective actions." (Yoon, 2016, p. 112) Both individual students, like Roosevelt and Analisa, and entire school communities, like Dreamyard Prep, aren't just faced with an emotional burden of failure. There are explicit material consequences to this labelling and rejection. Schools are denied the necessary resources to thrive, faulted for their own scarcity, and often shuttered, after which students must then choose their way into to another (often equally under-resourced) school community, perhaps even further away from their home. (Steggert & Galletta, 2018)

Eight years after Roosevelt and Analisa were assigned to DreamYard Prep, the category "failing school" was renamed "renewal school" a designation that came with financial resources

for improvement, but did little to remove the stigma of failure. DreamYard Prep's scores had improved, however, and the school was featured in a New York Times story of success, titled, "As A School Moves Out of Renewal, Can It's Progress Be Sustained?" But what did that success mean? I checked out Insideschools.org again, and read that in the 2017-2018 school year only 29% of students in special education, like Roosevelt and Analisa, had graduated. I still long for news from them, my first 8th graders, and hold out hope that either they found new places in which to thrive, or that they might have been part of that 29%. ("DreamYard Preparatory School - District 9 - InsideSchools," n.d.)

At the start of the next 2010-2011 school year (2010-2011), with Analisa and Roosevelt's situation an anxious alarm-bell in my mind, I was determined to make sure that this year's three 8th graders would feel proud of their next steps, or at least feel as though they were flying somewhere worth going, instead of being cast out of our middle-school nest.

They were reluctant to work with Ms. Ruiz, or 8th graders in other classes though, and when, Ms. Ruiz came to give them their high school directories, I had a better sense of why. "You won't qualify for most of the schools in this book, she told them. Since you're in a small class, you can really only apply to Educational Option Schools."

By this time, I had learned what that meant, and I angrily assured the students that it wasn't true, but the damage had been done. From there, still knowing little, I knew that Ms. Ruiz should have as small a role as possible in my students' high school application process, and they agreed. I knew only little more about the high school process than I had the year before, but as I had "looped with my class" to teach the same students for another year, I knew a great deal about my students and their families. I also knew that with over 400 schools for them to choose from, I had a lot to learn.

Chapter 2: What is there to “get”?

“As we will see in what follows, the structuring of universal rights as individual private choice ensured the market's embeddedness into the public and required the cultivation of a consumer-oriented citizenship predicated on exclusion, making it so that the commons-represented by public education in this case-was always already characterized by the production of social separateness that is integral to racial capitalism.” (Aggarwal, 2018, p.80)

Figuring out a first strategy for students (2010-2011 School Year)

My research began with an attempt to fully digest the Manhattan section of that year's phone-book sized NYC High School Directory. The next step was to attend the High School Fair in September 2010 at Brooklyn Technical High School. It was an overwhelming marketplace at which almost every single one of the over 400 schools had a table full of promotional materials and a team full of “promoters.” Six floors of the hot school building were crammed with parents, students, and educators, both “shoppers,” like me, and “sellers” like my friend Hiawatha, a high school teacher who had been paid overtime to attend the fair with students from his school. I didn't make it through the whole fair, and once I made it to Hiawatha's table, I gave up on adding more to my already weighty bookbag full of fliers and brochures. Another teacher came to replace him, and we went to lunch at a burger place around the corner. He was shocked to hear that I'd come to the fair to engage in “this bullshit” without being paid. Proud of his disengagement with the process and uninterested in selling his school, he'd been reading a book while he let his students do the talking. I tried to explain to him how desperate and high-stakes the process was for us in over in middle school, and he shook his head. “These kids are going to have to figure out how hard things are for themselves sooner or later,” he said. “And I don't think you're helping.”

“Well, should I recommend your school?” I asked, undeterred.

“Sure, it’s fine, if they like art.” He shrugged and changed the subject.

For the three 8th graders in my homeroom that year, his school wasn’t the right fit, but I was hooked on helping them find schools that would be. In my master’s program at Hunter College, when assigned the open-ended “Research a struggle you/your students are facing,” I created a poster about the high school admissions process titled with “IDK, can’t you just pick me a good school?”

That’s what Tiffany, one of my students, had written on a survey I gave her about her interests and hopes for high school. Like many students and parents unfamiliar to the choice process, she assumed that she would be assigned to a high school by benevolent school authorities. Specifically, she trusted me to make the decision. Not only did I not trust myself with that decision, I still had some faith in the “agency logic” of school choice, and believed that it would be a good process of self-discovery and growth for her to participate in choosing a school (Sattin-Bajaj, Jennings, Corcoran, Baker-Smith, & Hailey, 2018).

I was also glad that choice offered her an option besides the local George Washington High school, which I had heard horror stories of. Students called it “G-Dubs,” and in class, when Tiffany asked why, and another student explained that “Dubs” was short for “W” in the name “G.W” she said, “Oops, I thought the G just stood for ghetto!”

When Tiffany’s grandmother came to parent teacher conferences, she too was glad Tiffany would have other options, but she also wanted me to direct the choice process. Ms. J, in her mother-to-mother way, assured her that we would figure it out, and although Tiffany was accepted to a high school in Round 1, unlike Analisa the year before, I wouldn’t say we figured it out.

Together we explored some criteria. I had been told that “good” schools were those with at least a 70% graduation rate, but I couldn’t find many of those schools who would accept students from District 6 who didn’t have high test scores and who didn’t want to travel further than 45 minutes each morning. The schools that did have an above-average graduation rate had very few seats for new students, and gaining access to those seats was highly competitive.

In addition, all three of my students and their parents wanted to remain in small special education classes, and it was hard to tell which schools had them. Research for my project at Hunter confirmed that I was not alone in this quandary. In a 2009 report from the New School’s Center for New York City Affairs, titled “The New Marketplace: How Small-School Reforms and School Choice Have Reshaped New York City’s High Schools” the following excerpt from section titled “Unmet Special Needs” was particularly resonant.

“The schools have no way of knowing exactly which services the students need, and the students have only limited or outdated information about what services are offered at each school. This means students are frequently assigned to schools that aren’t equipped to offer the special help to which they are entitled, according to lawyers who represent special education students...parents need to call each school to see if it offers the particular service that their child needs. Services can change from year to year, depending on the student population of each school, says Sciabarra. “Not all services are available everywhere,” she says. At the same time, she says it is up to the school to get appropriate services for every student sent to them.”

(Hemphill, Nauer, Zelon, & Jacobs, 2009)

Based on our phone calls, Tiffany's matched high school did have small classes, and she would be able to take the bus there, but it didn't have a high graduation rate. The other two students and their parents each choose schools with higher graduation rates and longer subway commutes. When I met up with the three during the Spring of their freshman year, they seemed happy enough, and I didn't see Tiffany after that, so I don't know how her high school career continued, but I know that the other two students didn't remain in their matched schools. One student's mother won a suit against DOE for private school tuition, and he graduated from that school with an Regents diploma. I used run into my other student often, laughing and talking with friends near Amsterdam and 145th. Last I saw her, she was enrolled in a pathways program through which she could get her GED and earn money through internships, but after a certain point I stopped seeing her around the neighborhood, and I never heard whether or not she finished the program.

Over the next several years, between 2011 and 2017, I worked to help hundreds of students navigate the high school choice process. I hosted workshops, created a curriculum for our school, led tours, taught classes, and met with countless families and groups. I remained frustrated by Tiffany's question, though, and the larger policy questions embedded within it. Why couldn't I just pick her a good school? Why are students and their families burdened with such tough decision-making? And why are there so few good schools for certain students to choose from? Why does such a system of unequal choice exist and persist? Could the system change? How?

Researching Back

Though I could see that my choice-counseling was helping some individual students, I became more and more frustrated with the limited scope of this work. It became clearer and

clearer that by helping individual students and classes “successfully” navigate a broken system, I was only reinforcing the system as it existed. I became more active in social justice teacher organizing, but our work there felt limited too. What should our campaign demands be? What changes did we want to the system?

So, following the research I had so appreciated from the insideschools team, in the Spring of 2016, I enrolled in the Milano school of International Affairs, Management and Urban Policy at the New School, hoping that from there, I would find a research launchpad from which to more deeply understand how high school choice came to be.

In January 2017, I wrote my first paper about the context of high school choice in Ujju Aggarwal’s “Political Economy of the City,” winter intensive course. I was struck by the links between school choice and school segregation across New York City’s history. Though many contemporary scholars and journalists frame “school choice” as a new set of policies that emerged either after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, with the “segregation academies” of the South, or more recently, with the creation of charter schools, I think it’s important to at least glance towards a longer view of history.

Within this longer look, we know that literacy and formal schooling were once a privilege of the wealthy, who certainly got to choose the method, the place, and the people by whom they would be educated. Zooming into New York City, we know that when white settler colonists arrived from Europe, they took land and lives from the Lenape people on the island of Mannahatta, and as part of building up their new walled city, they established religious schools, primarily for their male children. Just after the Revolutionary War, New York City’s first school to serve students of color, and the first school without fees, was the African Free School, founded in 1787. In 1809 The Free School Society (a different group) began serving “poor white

children of any religious background whose family was unable to afford private, paid education.” DeWitt Clinton, President of the Free School Society, and ten-term NYC Mayor, saw these public school precursors as part of a unifying, and radical American democratic project. He wrote, “The fundamental error of Europe has been to confine the light of knowledge to the wealthy. Here, no privileged orders—no hereditary nobility—no established religion—no royal prerogatives exist, to interpose barriers between the people, and to create distinct classifications in society.” (McCarthy, 2014)

At that point, racialized divisions were so endemic to society that Clinton didn’t even consider them “barriers between the people,” and perhaps he didn’t even consider people of color to be people. By 1900, “colored schools” in New York City were closed, and four years later, Stuyvesant High School, the first public school that all NYC students could choose to apply to, was opened. By 1934, admission to Stuyvesant required testing well on an entrance exam. Throughout the twentieth century, as the Great Migration brought increasing numbers of African Americans north, and international immigrants continued to settle in New York City, more selective schools, with admissions tests, were created. (Shakarian, 2015)

These standardized admissions tests, though guised as objective, were, like all standardized tests, created to sort and rank people, based on racialized notions of their inborn intelligence. With origins in I.Q. testing and eugenics—the belief that whites are biologically more intelligent than other races and ethnic groups—these tests were “used to “scientifically” declare the poor, immigrants, women, and non-whites in the U.S. as mentally inferior, and to justify educational systems that mainly reproduced extant socio-economic inequalities.” (Au, 2013, p. 9)

In 1958, black mothers known as the “Harlem Nine” choose to keep their children out of what they saw as harmful public school environments, and were sent to jail. (Aggarwal, 2015, p. 109) “By 1964, the average black students in New York attended a school that was over 90% non-white.” Teachers at these overcrowded, black-majority schools lacked experience, and parents were pushing for change. (Podair, 2002, p. 13) In 1968, the movement for community control over schools demanded more power determining conditions in their children’s schools. This push led to a racially divisive teachers strike and ongoing clash between the United Federation of Teachers and the black-led community control movement. One of the movement’s demands was that the exam schools become community schools that all students could access instead of remaining elite, opt-in-via-examination institutions. This demand was not met, but in 1971, schools chancellor Harvey B. Scribner created a commission to determine whether or not the admissions tests were culturally biased. In response, Bronx state legislators, Senator John Calandra and Assemblyman Burton Hecht sponsored and passed Hecht-Calandra bill in May 1971, (Mac Donald, 1999) which put admission to the (then) three Specialized High Schools, Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech, under state control, and entrenched the exam as it still stands today for those schools.

This movement for community control also resulted in the state legislature’s 1969 New York City School Decentralization Bill (Shakarian, 2015), which created elected school governing bodies in each district and across the city. Under this system of governance in the 1970s and 1980s, more magnet “schools of choice” were created. All 8th grade students were guaranteed a seat in their zoned neighborhood school, but had the option of applying to these magnet schools as well as the specialized schools and other selective vocational schools (Perez, 2011, p. 8).

In 2002, these elected school boards were dismantled when Mayor Michael Bloomberg used a narrative of segregated, “failing,” large neighborhoods schools to gain legislative and popular support for re-centralizing the school system under mayoral control. As part of his “Children First Initiative,” an overhaul of the high school choice process was designed by economists Atila Abdulkadiroglu, Parag A. Pathak, and nobel prize-winning Alvin E. Roth (Abdulkadiroğlu, Pathak, & Roth, 2005). Their system of Universal Choice, in which every child must submit an application with up to twelve schools, was first implemented in 2004, with no public vetting or announcement.

In a New York Times interview, appointed School Chancellor Joel Klein cited the new system as “the most efficient way of matching students to high schools while distributing opportunities as fairly as possible.”

"I have a chronic shortage of good high schools," Mr. Klein said. "I am trying to maximize what's good for 80,000 kids in the system. That's my obligation." He added, "The City of New York has gone to the model that is recognized by virtually any economist as the welfare-maximizing model." (Herszenhorn, 2003)

The “Children First Initiative” included the new choice system, increased autonomy for principals, and began the mass closure of and phasing out of “failing” community schools. (Perez, 2011, p. 9) The hard-won struggle for community control of schools was now reduced to some individual control over whether or not to attend a community school. (Aggarwal, 2015; Podair, 2002)

The introduction of marketized public school choice is not unique to New York City, and has been shown to, alongside other policies across a “circuit of dispossession,” (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) reinforce a stratified and racialized system in which some students and schools are labeled

“chosen,” and “successful” while other school communities and their students are deemed unchosen failures. (McWilliams, 2017; Rosenbloom, 2010; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018; Stegert & Galletta, 2018; Yoon, 2016)

Though school choice has a long history, and exists in various formations across the country, and the globe, many scholars frame the proliferation of choice policies, especially the growth of charter schools and private school vouchers, as a political structure of resistance to school integration (Aggarwal, 2016; Riel, Parcel, Mickelson, & Smith, 2018), or a profit-minded opening up of markets to privatize once seen only as a public good. In this vein of conservative (or neoliberal) economic thought, individual liberty is championed as the most important value to be upheld (Phillips-Fein, 2010). As Ujju Aggarwal writes,

“The structuring of universal rights as individual choices in education has allowed for inequality in education to be explained as a byproduct for which no actors (state or otherwise) are culpable, but rather as the historical residue of the aberration of state-sanctioned apartheid and as a necessary consequence of liberal freedom (understood as individual liberty).” (Aggarwal, 2015, p. 155)

This re-framing of public education as an individual, consumer good, which families should choose for themselves, was constructed and packaged by billionaire-backed advocacy groups as “commonsense” school choice, and “sold” as the “new civil rights movement” to both communities of color and mainstream media (J. Scott & Holme, 2016; J. T. Scott, 2011).

Though these choice policies are touted as providing individual agency, research shows that in reality parents and students often find that their control is extremely limited, and the process is one to which they must “surrender” (Pattillo, 2015). Schools are delegitimized as spaces of community, and lower income-students of color are often displaced into schools that

are under-resourced and far from home. (Buras, 2015; Corcoran, 2018; Lipman, 2009; Stegert & Galletta, 2018)

In 2014, a UCLA Civil Rights Project Report titled “New York’s Extreme School Segregation: Inequality, Inaction, and a Damaged Future” found that New York State’s Schools overall, heavily influenced by New York City, were the most segregated in the country. In a video that accompanied the report’s release, Orfield states,

“Recently, the city, which has well over a million students, and it’s the center of the segregation problem in the state, has created new systems of choice. It has done it in a way that was known 50 years ago to increase inequality, and it has ignored the civil rights provisions that are necessary to make choice equitable. So imagine creating a whole new system of schools that are virtually as segregated as the schools of the old south before the Brown decision, which we call apartheid schools.”

(Kucsera & Orfield, 2014)

So, who’s welfare did Joel Klein intended to maximize in 2002?

Quantitative research shows that school segregation in New York City isn’t alleviated by choice, and in fact, if students attended their neighborhood schools, the system overall would be less segregated (Mader, Hemphill, & Abbas, 2018). This is in part because not all families have access to the same choices. Research on “choice sets” shows that whiter, more affluent parents, have access to better schools, information, and time with which to choose schools (Bell, 2009).

Thus, the system of universal school choice remains the key mechanism for sorting both students and school programs into winners and losers, “achievers” and “failures” slated for closure. And of course, since the system is based on individual choices made by each family

(read “consumer”) across an array of over 700 options (the “marketplace”), individual families and schools are made responsible for their plight, not the policy-makers who constructed the sorting system of an application process.

In New York, the application process not only has the “potential to persistently stratify low and high achieving students into different schools” it actually does so (Nathanson, Corcoran, & Baker-Smith, 2013). According to a 2014 study by Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj,

“To date, the New York City Department of Education’s (NYCDOE) avowed pursuit of equity through high school choice has proven to have limited success. Analyses of eighth-grade students’ choices and high school assignments have found minimal evidence that high school choice is improving low-income and minority students’ access to higher performing schools than the zoned high schools (neighborhood high schools to which they would have automatically been assigned without choice), increasing school integration, or promoting equity in any other way. (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, p. 415)”

At a November 1, 2016, the High School Admissions Advisory Council at the Feerick Center for Social Justice, a group of which I’m an active participant, hosted a conference titled “The NYC High School Application Process I: Examining Educational Access and Equity” at Fordham Law School. Atila Abdulkadiroglu, one of the system’s creators, attended and defended the system as fundamentally equitable. He acknowledged the system’s problematic assumption that parents have enough information to make good choices, but cited that the number of first choice acceptance rates continues to increase, and the process is much more efficient than it was before (Field Notes, 2016).

Perhaps this process is more efficient than it was in 2001, but there is little to no evidence that it is more equitable. Thus far, the Department of Education's stated attempts towards equity (and the efforts of most researchers) have been focused on improving the quality of information, and improving the supply of well-designed schools in different interest areas, such as technology, health, and other popular professions (Conference Field Notes). This ongoing framing of the problem "as one of supply shortage, not of structural inequality" (Aggarwal & Mayorga, 2016) places the burden of ensuring quality education on individual families and their choices, instead of on the state, or in this case, the school system.

Chapter 3: This hierarchy hurts everyone! An intersectional dis/ability framework

“Instead of discussing impaired individuals, attention should go to determining which environments—which social, physical, bureaucratic, and communication structures—could incorporate the widest array of individuals in all their diversity of capacities and then determine which environments were impairing and how they could be modified.”

(Asch, 2001, p. 396)

Beyond inclusion, towards transformation

Late on Thursday, February 20, 2019, I teared up as I finished reading a beautiful chapter of the middle-grades fiction book, *Right as Rain*. My friend, and former teaching mentor, Lindsey Stoddard, is the author, and this climactic chapter describes a poetry slam in a middle school writing classroom. As I set down the book, I sighed, thinking about how the utopian ideal of the poetry slam wasn't too far from the reality of our classrooms, on their best days. My heart was holding Amelia, the character who reads a poem about her stutter, aloud, in front of everyone (Stoddard, 2019). My heart was also holding Lindsey, and my heart was holding my own students, frustrated teaching fellows wondering how to support their own students in my “Writing Methods for Students with Special Needs” course at City College. Finally, my heart was holding Akemi Nishida's hopeful “Critical disability praxis,” (Nishida, 2018) that I had read earlier in the day, and this project, about experiences within New York City's stratifying system of school choice.

So of course, with all this in my heart, my brain was moving. I decided that I'd read that chapter of the book aloud to my students, as a model of what inclusive writing classrooms could look like, and I decided that I'd tweet to Lindsey about how much I was loving her book,

because a little more Twitter buzz can't hurt a new author. After I tweeted to Lindsey, the allure of Twitter pulled me in, and I landed on a tweet from the American Federation of Teachers, linking to "How we can help our students succeed," by Fedrick Ingram, the president of the Florida Education Association, in the Miami Times. Ingram wrote, "Inequity is baked into the whole voucher proposition, and it's baked into the idea of so-called "education savings accounts." If getting a good education means buying education, people with a money advantage will always do better." (Ingram, 2019)

I agree with his argument that public neighborhood schools need funding instead of voucher or charter schools. But that's not what hit me. The phrase "inequality is baked in," was like an oven timer, and I realized that I need to look more deeply at an ingredient to the unequal school choice system in NYC that I had previously overlooked- it's so obvious, it's like the flour in a loaf of bread.

Ableism. Students are judged and grouped into schools by ability, or more accurately by dis/ability. This term with the slash, is used to indicate the way in which both ability and disability are socially created categories that center the idea of an (actually mythical) "normal" person. (Davis, 1995)

The judgement, categorization, and separation (based on flawed metrics of academic ability) are fundamental parts of how this system was created, and what it is set up to sustain. The headline draw of screened schools, magnet schools, or specialized high schools is that students should be separated from each other, and the not-so-subtle subtext is that they should be separated because they're better.

I wasn't the only one thinking about this on the night of February 20th. Lori Podvesker, vice-chair of the city's Panel for Educational Policy, and the mother of a son with cerebral palsy,

also published a blog that night , titled, “Students with Disabilities the Most Segregated in NYC Schools,” in which she outlines the unequal treatment that her son, who has cerebral palsy, and an intellectual disability, has received in New York City schools (Podvesker, 2019).

“Jack’s school occupies half of the top floor of a huge school building. There are two other schools in the building, yet like many of the more than 400 Citywide District 75 programs, there is no sign on the building for his program or even acknowledgement that its students exist. Jack and his classmates very rarely interact with other students in the building outside their school. 90% of the 25,000 students in District 75 identify as being students of color. Jack and his disabled peers are among the most segregated in the city...The City and the School Diversity Advisory Group, which released a report on diversity and integration last week, did not mention District 75 once in their report. They did not acknowledge the intersection of class and race with students with disabilities even though 80% of all students receiving special education supports and services are students of color.”

Lori is right, but it shouldn’t simply be the role of advocates or members of the dis/ability community to center the needs of certain students with diagnosed struggles. Everyone concerned about the welfare of our education system, about the welfare of society, has a vested stake in undoing the pervasive ableism of our school assignment systems, which are actively dis/abling, and not just for the students who are labeled “disabled.”

Intersectionality teaches us that any single-issue struggle is bound to result in further marginalization, so when we consider integration primarily on the basis of racial integration, or socioeconomic integration, and leave out students of different abilities, we’ll never achieve

integration in terms of any metrics, especially since the disability label is placed disproportionately on students of color, and poorer students.

So, to achieve integration and justice in school assignments, we must adopt an intersectional lens, informed by DisCrit. Or, as Subini Annamma, Beth Ferri, and David Connor write, we must intentionally “become more responsive to and accountable for how marginalization occurs in multidimensional ways and over time – DisCrit calls upon us to produce more authentic, creative and human solutions to systemic inequities.” (Annamma, Ferri, & Connor, 2018, p. 236)

That Thursday night, in my journal, I wrote,

“Even if these ‘academically selective schools’ aren’t set up to reinforce racism or classism or sexism, they do. They can’t help it, because oppression is intersectional, and they obviously are oppressing students who don’t have strong traditional “academic abilities.” They’ve set up screens to discriminate against differently abled people, those who have “disabilities,” and those who just aren’t good at book learning., Isn’t it obvious that this discrimination makes everything worse for everyone- because it sets everyone up to fight to prove that we’re “better than THOSE people- those people who aren’t smart enough, etc.”

Remember when Stuyvesant was founded? Just after the officially separate systems of black public schools and white public schools ended in NYC, and while the eugenics movement was building momentum. Who went to Stuyvesant then? Who was most abled?

To better understand the harmful effects of this competitive ranking and sorting of young people, it is helpful to start from the fundamental tenant of DisCrit that both whiteness and

ability are types of socially and legally constructed property that confer material benefits to those who can claim them (Annamma et al., 2018). Cheryl Harris's foundational work in Critical Race Theory defines whiteness as property because of the way in which the legal system is designed to protect a status quo in which white people receive benefits.

“Materially, these advantages became part of the settled expectation of whites—a product of the unalterable original bargain. The law masks as natural what is chosen; it obscures the consequences of social selection as inevitable. The result is that the distortions in social relations are immunized from truly effective intervention, because the existing inequities are obscured and rendered nearly invisible. The existing state of affairs is considered neutral and fair, however unequal and unjust it is in substance...it is seen by whites as part of the natural order of things, something that cannot legitimately be disturbed.”

(C. Harris, 1993, p. 287)

In the same way, Alicia A. Broderick and Zeus Leonardo argue that “smartness” (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011) and “goodness” operate as forms of property (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016). In “What a Good Boy: The Deployment and Distribution of “Goodness” as Ideological Property in Schools,” they argue,

“Our contention is that students’ identity as constructed as either “good” or “bad” produces material consequences vis-à-vis their access and sense of entitlement (or not) to opportunities, privileges, and myriad forms of cultural capital. In short, goodness is a form of property.” (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016, p. 57)

As student’s identities are constructed as good or bad

“these identities are used and materially manifest as tools of both stratification and exclusion within schools. This work is accomplished in deeply raced, classed, and gendered ways; all of it strategically deploys the ‘mechanisms of dis/ablement’ (Davis, 2003 p.29; slash inserted) as both a means of accomplishment as well as a source of legitimation. Our usage of the term *dis/ablement* is meant to draw explicit attention to the fact that students are not only actively *disabled* through these mechanisms, but others are actively and simultaneously *enabled*, or granted cultural privilege.” (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016, p.58)

Starting early, with star charts and teacher judgement, children learn a meritocracy, and understand it not as a reflection of their actions, but as a function of “who they are” as “good” or “bad” at something. In reflecting on her own son’s early elementary classroom experience, Broderick writes.

“If children on both sides of the aisle can accept that it is because of who they are—because I am a good listener or because I am a bad listener—it is easier for them to later accept why one of them is granted a scholarship over the other... Every child in that classroom was harmed by the deployment of this ostensibly meritocratic rationale, even as my son was among those positioned to be materially advantaged by it. However, that material advantage comes at a cost, which is complicity with the deeply inequitable structures that reify one’s privilege, and one’s very identity.” (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016, p.63)

The authors argue that the “ability line” drawn from Du Bois (1904/1989) pronouncement of the “color line” as a defining structural and social construct) dehumanizes

those who fall on either side of it (as abled or disabled) as it upholds the “Raced, classed, gendered mechanisms of dis/ablement (that) are central to the constitution of the normative center of schooling and society.” (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016, p.67)

This normative center of society, constructed around whiteness, maleness, and ability, is reinforced by the very fabrics and structures that underpin our society, from linguistic to economic systems, and we’ve built diagnoses, stratifying systems like high school admissions, and even prisons to uphold it. Though the racism, heteropatriarchy, classism and colonialism inherent in these structures of stratification has been made clear to me time and time again, a dis/ability lens brings new clarity to my understanding of social stratification. Ableism has been so naturalized, internalized, and fundamental to the set-up of neoliberal US society.

“Though it remains largely unexamined in the political economy of education, neoliberalism is an ableist project. Neoliberalism aims to nurture productive workers who contribute to capital production and accumulation in the global economy. Children, youth, and adults are expected to overcome misfortunes and austerity measures that cut social and educational services, while adopting ableist ideals that are confined to narrow and individualistic conceptions of personhood that privilege autonomy, independency, and entrepreneurship (Goodley, 2014). Individuals are measured in terms of their economic value, which trumps values based on human rights and dignity. Goodley (2014) named this identity project neoliberal-ableism, arguing that individuals become normalized through economic and social policy and judged by the neoliberal ideal of human beings. Any physical and mental inclination to interdependency creates grounds for anxiety and intervention, as they are perceived as threats to economic productivity (Shildrick, 2012).”

(Waitoller & Super, 2017, p. 8)

The pain of stratification

No wonder there are systemic designs in place to force students into individualism! With these theoretical underpinnings in place, it is easy to identify the ways in which the stratifying system of High School Admissions reinforces the property rights of whiteness, smartness, and goodness, with real material benefit, and the promise of “success” in a neoliberal society. In a less concrete realm of health and community relationships, however, I argue that this stratifying system comes at a cost for all students, even those who materially benefit.

Students who are accepted into “high status” schools, like Brooklyn Tech, Stuyvesant, or Eleanor Roosevelt fight to remain there, often developing unhealthy strategies to cope with anxiety, academic-related stress and the unhealthy pursuit of perfection (Buiso, 2014; B. Chapman, 2017). Students of color in these schools report facing racist stereotypes and even overt incidents of racialized harassment, sometimes resulting in student protest, such as the #BlackatBrooklynTech campaign, and a recent sit-in at Eleanor Roosevelt High School (Boyer & Chapman, 2019; Chung, 2016; Crane-Newman & Chapman, 2019). At first, it seems as though acceptance into a high status school is a reward, but at what cost? Although I didn’t participate in New York City’s High School Admissions system as a student, I believe my own experience as a white, “gifted and talented” student who achieved “success” in a stratified system offers some embodied perspective on the nature of this struggle, which I will share at the end of this chapter.

Another group of students, feeling confident, perhaps bolstered by their family and community, aims for these “high status” schools, only to be rejected. This rejection is traumatic for some, and though it might not lead to a systemic branding as “disabled,” it inevitably changes

those students perception of their own ability (and by unfortunate extension, in neoliberal capitalism- their value). In “My So-Called Choice: The Trappings of School Choice for Non-Admits”, Susan Rasoki-Rosenbloom writes about the emotional trauma, social isolation, and resulting lower achievement that many of these students, who she terms “non-admits” build throughout high school (Rosenbloom, 2010). Her study illustrates this gradually mounting frustration once students are in high school, but as a middle school educator, I witnessed this dis/abling process begin the moment the students opened their high school offer letters.

At approximately 2:50pm, on March 4, 2016, when Michigan State University, my 8th-grade homeroom, opened their “high school match letters,” it was an unexpected and acutely gut-wrenching moment.

We teachers had looked over a list of matches in advance. I had already met privately with the two unmatched students. We knew that a few students, receiving choices low on their lists, would be disappointed, but this class was a tough and tight crew, so we figured they’d hug each other, honor each other’s feelings, and be fine. Over the past several months, with our guidance, they had researched schools together, visited open houses, and learned the nuances of the system. For the most part, they had been accepted to the schools that they had decided on, under our watchful oversight. We were prepared with tissues, and we had prepared the students for this moment for days in advisory. They knew that if they weren’t happy they’d be able to enter round 2, and that I’d be ready to meet with their parents to help them make a new list. I had already send home a parent e-mail that said the same. As in past years, and as per DOE guidance, we knew we’d give them their letters with the suggestion that they bring them home to open them, and we knew they wouldn’t listen to that, so we planned to give them some time before dismissal to process the news under our loving supervision.

First, I passed out pink letter for parents, letting them know in Spanish and in English about next steps, and to contact me with questions. Ms. Valdez, a veteran teacher of both 8th grade literacy and 8th grade feelings, made her usual speech, something along the lines of, “It’s okay to have feelings when you open your letter, but be aware the others in the room will be having different feelings, so be kind to each other about how you express those feelings. If you’d prefer to wait to open your letter until you are with your parents, please do so.”

We expected smiles, we expected sniffles...but we did not expect Joseph, who had gotten into his 2nd choice school, to scream out in anguish, run out of the room and crumple to the hallway floor.

Ms. Valdez and I looked at each other and she wordlessly communicated, “I’ve got these guys, you go!”

His whole body was wracked with sobs and dry- heaving. I sat down next to him, putting a hand on his shoulder to let him know he wasn’t alone. He kept crying as the class next door was dismissed. They looked at him curiously, but were wrapped up enough in their own dramas of the day not to get involved with this one.

Eventually, Joseph found some words.

“I’m a failure, I’m a failure, I’m an idiot! Why did I ever think I could get into Manhattan Hunter?!” he sobbed.

And the sobs began again.

I attempted, in vain, to rationalize with him, “Joseph, you’re not an idiot, you got into a great school, one of my favorites.” I tried.

“I’m an idiot! I’ll be going to school with dummies!”

He was inconsolable. The rest of the class left, and together, we called his mother, who was just as surprised by his reaction as we were. Once he had calmed down enough to go home, Ms. Valdez and I sat together in the empty classroom.

“Woah. We weren’t prepared for that.”

As I look back, with this systemic dis/ability lens, Joseph’s reaction is less surprising, and my response to him is even more disappointing. By validating his rhetoric of good schools and bad schools, “you got into a great school,” I was upholding the narrative that smarter (read: better) students get into better schools. Joseph’s idea that since he didn’t get into the top school, he must be “an idiot,” isn’t so much of a logical leap. In fact, he was just loudly feeling and reflecting back the logic of the whole system, and my own logic. A selfie that I sent to co-workers that morning shows me leaving the DOE office on 125th street carrying a sticker-sealed box that read “SEMS High School Choice: Round 1.” My gritted tooth-smile and raised eyebrows read as mixture of over-caffeinated, anxious, and purposeful. I had captioned the photo with “Most important box of the year.”

Though this moment with Joseph was a visceral wake-up to the harsh reality of a disabling system, Joseph isn’t part of the group of students for whom I feel the saddest. This group of students, embodied by Analisa and Roosevelt, who you met in Chapter 1, are already disabled by the system, either formally or informally, and don’t even aim for the schools society tells them are “good.” They automatically assume, or are told, that these schools aren’t for them. The 25,000 students with the most severe disability labels are already housed in a completely separate school district- District 75, and they’re assigned to high schools without choice. There’s no census taken, however, of all the students who don’t have Individual Education Plans, but who can tell that school wasn’t planned with them in mind, and who, albeit with good reason, are

checked out and disinvest from these processes of competition. In October or November, when I would sit down with a student like this, perhaps playing on the computer instead of researching high schools, they'd angrily say,

“Miss, I don't care. Why are you making me do this?” Or, “I don't want to go to any of those schools. I'm not gonna finish high school anyway.”

In reality, this refusal is rational, but in their noncompliance, they became further relegated to schools labeled as failing. Inevitably, in March, once they had been matched to a school, several of these students would come knocking on my office door.

“Miss, my mom wrote this school down, but I don't know where it is, and I don't think I like it. No one else is going there. Do I have to go there?”

I made a point of providing Round 2 and appeal information to any students who asked, but I'd be real about the options left. “Dear student, I wish you had worked with me in the fall, and I had known you didn't like this school. Now, most of the schools are full, but here is a list of schools that have seats left. You can fill out a Round 2 application, but on it, you can only list these schools.” Depending on my assessment of the severity of the situation, and/or the student and their support systems, we'd sit together, highlighting possibilities, and I'd ask the student to compare the leftover schools with the one to which they had been matched, thinking critically about what they'd truly prefer.

More often than not they'd decide to stay with their offer, and usually, I'd agree. After all, in the fall, I worked hours of overtime in efforts to make sure that they got the best offer possible. Even if they “didn't care,” I did, and an “agentic counselor,” on a social-justice mission to improve outcomes for my students. (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018)

My undeterred attempts in the fall to provide guidance to students like this, and to collaborate with their parents or influential peers, resulted in each student turning in a round 1 list of schools that at least weren't "failing." With students who would refuse to choose, ultimately, I had lead a triage-like decision-making process, and usually, that triage worked. Even though they weren't enthusiastic about the school they had been matched to, after looking over the Round 2 "leftovers," they'd decide it was better than the alternative. Occasionally, they'd opt into Round 2 with gusto, this time attending the fair, or visiting a few open houses. Often, they'd be misled by desperately-created glossy advertising, towards schools that were slated for closure, or a long commute from home. If this did happen, they'd come back to my office, "Miss, why did you let me apply here? My cousin said it's a terrible school."

In a system predicated on individual choices of a student and their family, though I often became a very involved advisor, ultimately, when students and parents insisted, when they signed a form and refused to change it, my role was to enter their choices as written, even if I knew (and in a system of 700 options, I often didn't know!) that their choices might lead to disappointment. In this way, the system of choice has an obvious handicapping influence on the potential of each student. On match day, what might be a algorithmic misfortune is most readily interpreted by students as a judgment on their ability, and their future potential. Many students don't bounce back from this, despite best efforts to boost their self-esteem, and just as Fanon writes that racism and colonialism rest in the psyche and become internalized inferiority, ableism can rest here too (Fanon, 1967). In a 2013, Lori Nathanson, Sean Corcoran, and Christine Baker-Smith released a report showing that "lower achieving students tended to choose schools that were less selective, lower-performing, and more disadvantaged than their higher-achieving peers." (Nathanson et al., 2013) Do these choices reflect internalized inferiority, were those

students making choices based on other criteria, were they reading the expectations of the system appropriately, or all of the above?

To counteract the possibility of this internalized inferiority, we sought to provide a deeper understanding of how the system works, so students would be able to shift blame from themselves as dis/abled students back towards the system as dis/abling. After that year of Joseph's grand disappointment, I redoubled my efforts to help students understand the de-personalized nature of the system, creating detailed powerpoints and math mini lessons to help them understand the competitive odds. We also created an "admissions ambassador" program, for the springtime, in which volunteer 8th graders, with various experience of high school choice, would teach 6th and 7th graders how to be "smart consumers" well in advance of their official induction to the marketplace of choice. These lessons, often centering decision-making games and discussions were intended to boost the students' sense of agency and motivation, but often, in de-briefs the 8th grade volunteers and I would have tough conversations.

"They just don't care, and I'm worried for them! If they don't do their best, they might not get placed, just like my friend Sam. Or they might have to go to G-dubs like my cousin. I wish they understood how much this matters."

For the vast majority of students at M.S. 110, high school admissions did matter. Where students went to school had a very real impact on their safety, their chances of graduation, and their ability, someday, to get a good job. Once seventh grade class, when we began our visits, groaned and moaned. We had a community circle to find out why, and they stated very real fears about the future, that "they just didn't want to have to think about yet." We could all hope that no matter where they ended up, they'd be getting the education they needed, but in our school community we all knew that this wouldn't always be the case, and our goal was to motivate

students to do their best, with some awareness of the flawed system. On a systemic level, our work together wasn't immediately transformational, we were just working to help more of our community members get ahead in the existing hierarchy. But as part of a radical pedagogical project, it is my hope that those students developed greater agency, a sense of themselves as change-agents, and a stronger analysis of unequal systems. When students build relationships of mutual support and solidarity, seeds of possibility are inevitable.

The work of undoing ableism isn't limited to changing systems. In the Special Education student-teaching seminar I lead at Hunter college, I hear from someone working at an elite NYC high school. He recounted that during the last week, he ended up at a faculty meeting in which everyone was concerned about changes to admission. They had been told they needed to admit more students with IEPs, and they felt that the school quality would suffer. "I was shocked," he recounted. "It was ugly. I didn't know what to do. I didn't feel like I was even supposed to be there, but I wanted to speak up and say, if this is such a good school, isn't it a good school for everyone? Can't we teach all students?" Worried I might be taking these tired teachers too far into a dispiriting conversation around my own interests, I consciously shifted the conversation back to pedagogy, and perhaps mistakenly, back into the zone of individual responsibility; "So, there's a need for us to do political work, here, isn't there! And, we're up against a lot, but what are we doing to undo deficit mindsets in our own classrooms?"

A better question might have been, what are we doing to undo deficit mindsets in our brains, and towards ourselves?

Flight was only a dream: My own struggle to stay “smart” (1993-2003)

After writing down and reflecting on Joseph’s story for several weeks, I remembered a similar episode from my own adolescence. Cringe. Let me set it up with a little history.

As you may have gathered from my flying dreams, I fit the privileged profile of a white and academically enabled student. I don’t remember a time when I hadn’t internalized the message that I was smart, but I do remember that in Kindergarten and first grade, I struggled to read aloud, and the whole class snickered when it was my turn to read. I tried to read ahead, and memorized lines like “Eve sleeps behind the stable. Eve sleeps and dreams.”

In Kindergarten, our whole-school book was *The Little Engine that Could*. Our principal, Ms. Oats, a tall black woman who my parents respected a great deal, and who wore thick gold necklaces and business suits that I loved, read it during at least one assembly in the gym. Like the engine, “I think I can” was our assigned mantra, and saying “I can’t,” was explicitly discouraged. For electives, my mother signed me up for Spanish, and the class turned out to be full of second and third graders who already knew how to write. I couldn’t write in English yet, so Spanish was a major stretch, and I struggled openly. A while later, when I was awarded “Citizen of the Week,” my homeroom teacher got word that I had been saying “I can’t” in Spanish class. My award was temporarily withheld. Before I could take home the trophy and book that my classmates made for me, I had to write an apology letter to the Spanish teacher. Not only that, I had to deliver and read the letter in front of her whole class. I sobbed and choked my way through it, the faces of the second graders blurring in front of me. I remember weaving class, I remember not wanting to be quiet during nap time, I remember the kitchen station, I remember the shame of not being able to tie my shoes, and I remember forgetting the letter H during a one-on-one alphabet assessment, after which I was made to wear the letter H, written in

sharpie on a countertop sample that was pinned to my favorite fluffy pink sweater. The punishment for a lack of academic success, or for outward struggle was made clear to me. It was public shaming.

I wasn't feeling too great about adults when, during the summer after first grade, I discovered Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, and her adult-defying magic cast a spell on me too. When I asked that my father read the book to me again, he suggested that I read it to him instead. I did. And then I re-read it to myself. In second grade, I knew how to read, and when my family spend the second half of the year in cold Milwaukee Wisconsin, where my father had a visiting professorship at the University, books were my constant companion.

The school where I attended the second half of second grade, on Hartford Avenue, was three stories tall, with a paved playground. It has closed, and re-opened as charter school now, but that's another story, along with the work my mother did to support my older brother's admission to an arts-themed magnet school during that half- year. In Milwaukee, I didn't have too many friends, and I read constantly. I worked quietly and independently on my homework, but my parents spent hours supporting my brother, who had been diagnosed with a learning disability in math. After I had been sent to bed, I could hear them laughing and working on projects, but I had given up trying to join the party years before, and with my bedside lamp on low, I'd re-read my dog-eared copy of *Bridge to Terabithia* until I fell asleep.

In those early years, the school system taught me I had to choose between humiliation, or domination, but that I was a smart one, who should be independently successful in this competition. With two PhD parents who had also competed successfully in academia, it was easy to gain tools for battle, namely books. So, when testing began in third grade, I was classified as "gifted", alongside only one other student at my diverse public school. I'm certain

that I scored well on that test because I read constantly, and I read constantly because in books I found friends.

At that point, it didn't seem like my public elementary school had stiff enough competition, so my parents moved me to a private, Catholic school, where I would be challenged. In fourth grade, I often missed monthly movie-days because I hadn't completed my math homework, but I won the reading Olympics, narrowly beating my best friend Kathryn. In seventh grade, I won the state history-day competition, and in 8th grade, I came in second for the school-wide geography bee.

For high school, I went back to the public school system, where J.H. Rose, the comprehensive city high school had close to 2,000 students. A rumored statistic was that our freshman class would begin with close to 1,000 students, but end with 400. I didn't know the student who were dropping out though. The vocational wing was at the back of the building, past the gym and the orchestra room, and when I walked through it, usually on a journalism mission as part of the school newspaper staff, I felt as if I were unwelcome, heading into a place I didn't belong. I could tell that the general English classes looked very different from my own, and when I tutored at the writing center, I found out that the expectations within them were very different too. I was curious about all this, and beginning to develop a reputation for strong political opinions, but even while I was speaking out about oil pipelines, the Patriot Act, the war in Iraq, and No Child Left Behind, the segregation in my high school seemed too close to touch, to normalized to talk about. Apparently I talked about it during my college scholarship interview with a history professor though, and according to him, it's what won me the scholarship.

But back to my "Joseph" moment.

By my junior year of high school, my resume was full. I was enrolled in four AP classes, too many honor societies to count, and I was an elected leader in several clubs. On paper, all was perfect, but about a month after I got my drivers' license, my mother was diagnosed with lymphoma.

It must have been November of that year when, during last period, an announcement came on. "The following students have been nominated for the Governor's School of North Carolina, and should report to the guidance office for a meeting."

I smiled as several of my friend's names were called out, and then the announcement ended. I hadn't been nominated. The details of what happened next are hazy, but there was no soccer practice, and I jetted to the parking lot, where, because of her illness, my mom's car awaited me. Either I drove the five minutes home in tears, or I burst into tears when my mother greeted me there. Hysterical, I explained the situation. I couldn't believe that after all my hard work, I had been denied this opportunity. My mother, sick, and desperate to help me in whatever ways she could, must have suggested that we go back to school and talk with the guidance counselors, which is what we did.

We must have made quite a picture there, my face red, my mom's head bald, in front of the cinderblock 'Help Window' with its yellow formica countertop. The guidance secretary looked at us, wide-eyed, and immediately called in Ms. Cohen, guidance counselor and mom to a friend of my older brother. She took one look at us and jumped into "soothing counselor mode." The problem was easily fixed, she said, and must have been an oversight. I could "nominate myself" and she would add me to the list. She handed me an application.

That rejection moment and the ease with which it was resolved reeks of entitlement, for which I'm embarrassed, but in the façade of ease and success around my academic ability, it was

a moment of rupture, a symptom of the systemic psychological damage wrought on those at the top of the “ability” hierarchy, and a glimpse toward oncoming struggles.

Throughout that year, my parents encouraged me not to spend much time at the hospital. I needed to focus on school. It was my junior year, the year that mattered most for college admissions, and I had a job to do. I remember crying in that moment of rejection, and I remember my mother crying often, and my father crying when she was diagnosed with cancer, but I don’t remember crying with my mother during the first half of that year. My parents didn’t want me to miss school. My friends and a few teachers knew what was going on, but outwardly, I kept it business as usual. Though I struggled, receiving my first report-card C ever in pre-calculus, my teacher, also a friendly acquaintance of my parents, offered extra credit, and connected me with a tutor, who happened to have a PhD in math.

Over Christmas break, while my parents were traveling to Houston for a second opinion about radiation treatments, I read *The Bell Jar*, and identified so wholly with Plath’s character, that I too, felt as if I must be going insane. Well-meaning neighbors and church friends brought endless casseroles, and as they asked, again and again, how I was doing, and I responded, again and again that I was doing fine, I felt just like they were peering into the glass sides of a bell jar, and I was like that rose in *Beauty and the Beast*. I was trapped, and holding tightly to my petals.

The night before I was to go back to school, I refused. I couldn’t take the pressure and didn’t want to face everyone expectations. I stayed up past 1pm crying on my Dad’s shoulder, but the next day, I was back at school. I went to see another friend of my parents, a pediatrician who had decided to specialize in adolescent mental health, and even though I didn’t love the idea of taking anti-depressants, I did want to follow directions, and I didn’t want to rock the boat, so I dutifully accepted a prescription for Paxil, and then Effexor. For the next month, my emotions,

my sleep, my thoughts spiraled in and out of control. I researched what was going on, and decided that I had bipolar disorder. At the hospital, I made a scene that got me admitted to the emergency room, and given the choice between going home to see a doctor the next day, and being admitted to a psychiatric hospital, I chose the psychiatric hospital. I wanted a break. I needed to rest, and I didn't think I could do it at home.

I spent two torturous weeks there, and it was anything but restful. Though I developed caring relationships with a few of the staff people, and other patients, I learned that the mental health system, at least the version I was in, wasn't a place of rest and abundant caring. The stories and situations of the other girls there were heartbreaking, and it was easy for me to see that though I felt incredibly unwell, I had a life of relative safety and care to return to. Quickly, I earned the right to have prohibited pencils in my room, so that could be allowed to work on the homework I was missing. My parents came to visit, dad in a suit and tie, mom in a wheelchair, and after I consented to taking more mood-stabilizing medication, I was allowed to return home. I continued to see a psychiatrist on Friday afternoons, but my entire mission became to prove that I was okay, and that I wasn't bipolar after all. I had misdiagnosed myself, and the psychiatrist at the hospital, who I only remember having three short conversations with, had been negligent in his agreement. After many months, the medical community agreed, and the disabling label was removed. My official diagnosis became "adjustment disorder with mixed emotional symptoms," and that summer, while my mother recovered from a stem cell transplant at Chapel Hill hospital, I went to UNC's journalism camp, and attended North Carolina Governor's School for Social Sciences.

I could see my privilege, and relate to the pain of the world with pain of my own, but I had learned that it wasn't a good idea to show that pain. I learned that the system comes down

hard on you when you're "smart," supposed to be successful, and you struggle. Since I couldn't look at my own struggles, I turned my attention back to those of others. I embraced our Episcopal church's message of servant leadership, and heard my mother's reminders me that "with great privilege comes great responsibility."

Those flying dreams were just that: dreams. And even they didn't last. Perhaps this is the nature of individual success. It's fleeting, and there's always more work to do. As I sit by myself to write this paper, my chest hurts, and I have to keep reminding myself to unclench my teeth. I've been working to find another way to be in community, a non-hierarchical vision of the future that doesn't even include the notion of success, and a sense of inherent value based in being, not doing. But the pain and pressure of striving to prove my ability isn't easy to shake. At the end of college, when my dentist found out that I was becoming a teacher, he made me a bite guard to keep me from grinding my teeth in my sleep, and I still need it. Many of my teacher friends have them. Many days, I wake up feeling overwhelmed. My neck and shoulders ache, and my stomach churns with anxiety. Will I be good enough? Am I helping enough? Will my service make a difference?

I try to teach myself, again and again, of the counter-hegemonic lessons I've been writing about here; that binaries and social hierarchies are a construct. There's no real good and bad, smart and dumb, abled and disabled. We are all valuable, we are all okay. Can systems reflect that? Can communities?

"That Whiteness is nothing but false and oppressive means that it exists only as a tool for oppression. Likewise, that smartness is nothing but false and oppressive means that it, too, exists only as a tool for oppression. Whites and smart people are only real insofar as social institutions like education, and formidable processes like common sense,

recognize certain bodies as White and certain people as smart. Historically and materially, these ideologies have operated not in isolation from one another, but as inextricably intertwined systems of oppression and exclusion. Theoretical and political efforts to address one system of oppression without simultaneously addressing the other (as well as other inextricably interwoven oppressive ideologies, such as patriarchy, capitalism, and heterosexism) are incomplete at best and actively (however unwittingly) oppressive to others at worst... As challenging as such work is, we argue that such theoretically integrated efforts to act in material solidarity against oppression of all kinds is nothing less than an ethical imperative.” (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011, p. 2226)

Chapter 4: A praxis of struggle: Education Work Forward

“The time will always come when teachers must ask themselves if they will follow the mold or blaze a new trail. There are serious risks that come with this decision. It essentially boils down to whether one chooses to do damage to the system or to the student.”

(Emdin, 2016, p. 206)

Changing logics of support, activism & research

As outlined in Chapter 2, my mission to better understand NYC’s high school admissions began by supporting the 8th grade students in my self-contained special education classes. Still serving in this role, I finished graduate school, became my school’s delegate to the United Federation of Teachers, and received tenure. I became more active in teacher organizations, primarily the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE-UFT), Teachers Unite, and NYCORE, the New York Collaborative of Radical Educators.

After four years of teaching in New York City, I was prepared to move back to North Carolina and teach at the Durham School for the Arts, when a senior colleague left to teach at a private school. Her overwhelming position of Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS) provider, 7th grade team leader, and High School Admissions Advisor, was offered to me, and though I knew it would be too much work, I accepted the offer, partly because it was a new learning opportunity, but more because I wanted to remain a part of the educator communities in which I had begun to put down roots. The part of the job that excited me most was the chance to support students across the school with their high school applications. Ms. Ruiz, the guidance counselor with a social work degree, who had once held this job, had been

laid off a few years earlier, in part because of complaints that she had changed schools on high school applications without student and parent consent.

Across the school, it was even easier to see flaws in the high school process, and I began to have more and more conversations about the obvious injustices of the process. I hadn't dismissed the overall logics of choice, and despite tenure, I was too scared of retaliation from my principal to be identified by my school number, but by October of 2013, I was ready to speak up publicly, and allowed Emma Sokoloff-Rubin, a reporter for Chalkbeat, to quote me in her story about the lack of translated information about high schools.

“Megan Moskop, a teacher and high school coordinator at a middle school in Washington Heights....said, barriers to information about school options undermine the system of choice championed by the Bloomberg administration. “The DOE is all about, this is about choice, it’s about choice,” she said. “But not everyone has the same access to information about their choices.”

Educators, parents, and advocates have come up with various workarounds. Moskop said her school prints a few copies of the translated guides to share with parents who need them. But that can't happen until they are available, which is after the English guide is released — something Moskop said gives English-speaking families an automatic leg up in the school selection process.

“The advantage is that over the summer you have time to sit down with your kid and look over [the directory],” she said about using the annual high school guide.”

(Sokoloff-Rubin, 2013)

But choice wasn't just a challenge for families that didn't speak English, or for students in small classes. Even though both 8th grade teachers, who I knew well from my first for years, and the 7th grade teachers who I now led in a weekly meeting, had a basic awareness of the high school admissions process, and were actively involved in sharing information with parents, many students were still ending up without matches, and in schools where they weren't happy. The next year, we got High School Directories in Spanish, but the problems persisted.

At the International Dyslexia Association's meeting, I attended a presentation with includeNYC, about their work to help students with disabilities navigate the high school admissions process. They were offering to partner with schools, and for a nominal fee, would co-facilitate workshops, and, Spanish-speaking staff would meet one-on-one with families. They'd also lead workshops for our students with disabilities, and I could use the curriculum to lead the same workshops with other students. Together we developed curriculum and resources. Matt also invited me to join the "High School Admissions Advisory Committee" a gathering convened as part of the LEEAP Education Project at the Feerick Center for Social Justice. There I met other equity-minded folks, most of whom worked for non-profits, who were working to help students and families navigate the high school admissions process.

Always hunting for more community, and learning to think as an organizer, I attended a DOE-led "College and Career Readiness" conference for counselors about how teaching students to navigate the high school process could be seen as a step on the way to preparing them for college. When I asked if other participants would be interested in sharing resources and staying in touch, there was a good deal of interest. So, I circulated an e-mail sign-up sheet, and sent an e-mail with links to my google folders of high school application resources.

Several guidance counselors, all of them women, replied enthusiastically, either thanking me for the tools, asking questions of the group, or sharing resources of their own. Once or twice a year, that list is revived by a question, usually about one of the more technical aspects of our role or about the conditions at a specific school.

In 2014, I also signed up to receive new high school process teaching resources from the NYC High School Admissions Study, then led by a well-funded team of researchers at NYU. In exchange for access for our students to their “informational interventions,” I agreed to do telephone interviews each semester, and to complete online surveys about the efficacy of their tools. The DOE would share my student’s data. Invested in the possibilities of this research, I remember talking on the phone with researchers until after dark in my cozy office at school, and noticed that in later years of the project, some of the tools distributed matched tools that I had already created for my students. For this autoethnographic research project, I requested transcripts of my interviews, and was told that they could be provided, but I have not received them, or received a response to follow-up e-mails.

In 2016, as I entered graduate school, and read the first several chapters of *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* in my Policy Analysis class, I felt seen. I was a street level bureaucrat! I had been given limited resources, but a great deal of autonomy and discretion, and in my interactions with students and families, I was already a policy maker at my own school. I knew I was living this already, which was partially why I had taken the high school support job in the first place, but the theoretical framework, “fancy” title, and idea that my ideas and the ideas of my colleagues were in essence, already making policy, made me feel like singing! (Lipsky, 1980) Clearly, since this was the case, we should be

considered authorities in the making of larger policy too. Under the auspices of the DOE and the teachers union, counselors could be gathering all over the city to shape a better system!

That second idea of participatory policy-making, although so clear to me, wasn't the framework being taught in my graduate program at the New School. Instead of learning how to engage community members in conversation towards building policies that would work for them, we studied how to apply the Rational Actor Model to a variety of case studies, always considering the efficiency, cost, and feasibility of a limited menu of analyst generated options. This type of policy research did not interest me, and after a year, I transferred to the CUNY Graduate Center.

That next year, I was glad to see the partial release of results from the NYU study in which I had participated, and because I knew it was "about me" I read the article "Surviving at the Street Level: How Counselors' Implementation of School Choice Policy Shapes Students' High School Destinations" with great interest, and some frustration. Though initially delighted by the use of Lipsky's frame, I couldn't place myself simply within the categories the article created. Certainly I had been one of the "approximately one in four counselors (who) sought to meet the needs of individual students by enlarging their role despite the resource constraints they faced," (46) but I also knew that at times I fit into, and admired the group of counselors who "are assigned a complex task but receive few instructions and lack sufficient support to successfully carry it out...They also clearly defined for themselves (and for students and parents) what they believed to be the appropriate role of a school counselor in a student's high school selection." (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018, p. 63)

The article goes on to name those who “go above and beyond” as agentic counselors, and it shows through quantitative analysis that they do have a positive impact on the schools their students get into, at least in terms of average graduation rate. The study suggested, that given this data, the roles of counselors should be expanded. But by this point, I had expanded my own role as a counselor, and the roles of all the eighth grade teachers at my school around admissions, and we could feel the ways in which it helped, but ultimately didn’t help enough. We counselors can do more, and more, and more, and more, throwing our bodies, our time, and our mental health between our students and the system, but the system will still be unequal. Further, what does it say about the health of a system that depends on the labor of mostly women going "above and beyond?"

As I studied at the New School, I tested this solution one last time. My school’s administration agreed to hire me half-time so that I could go back to school, and continue to support students with the high school admissions process. Three and a half days a week, I was teaching a class named “College and Career Readiness” for 8th graders, that was actually all about how to apply to high school. My hypothesis was that if all students had regular, graded “High School Homework” that included regular check-ins and surveys for their parents, as well as opportunities for structured group work and my targeted support, they would navigate the high school process with less heartbreak and greater success. By November, when I had hoped to have draft applications from each student, I could tell my hypothesis had been incorrect.

I helped plan the Nov 1, 2016: HSAAC Conference at Fordham. Chalkbeat’s new reporter, Monica Disare, covered the event.

“Megan Moskop, a teacher and high school admissions coordinator at M.S. 110 in Manhattan, is running a class for her eighth-grade students on high school admissions.

Moskop praised the DOE for helping to craft the curriculum, but she said there is a limit to its potential success. While some students have supportive families, who keep spreadsheets of schools and visit as many as 10 open houses, others are new arrivals to the country barely managing to navigate the shelter system, she said. One class alone is not enough to level the playing field, she added.

“What I’m finding is, even with all those resources and guidelines and set structures, the process is too much to navigate for many of my eighth-graders,” Moskop said. (Disare, 2016a)

Based in part on what she heard at that conferences, Monica covered high school admissions inequity closely that year from a lens of systemic inequality. We stayed in touch for her stories, and the next one covered geographic screens.

“The day before the city’s high school application deadline, Megan Moskop, high school admissions coordinator at M.S. 110 in Washington Heights, encountered a parent whose child wanted to apply to Baruch College Campus High School, a highly sought-after school in Manhattan with a 100 percent graduation rate.

Moskop had to explain to the family that the school is essentially off-limits to them, she said. It’s not that the student is low-achieving, Moskop said, but the family does not live in District 2 — and 99 percent of last year’s incoming class at Baruch came from that district.

The fact that students who live in certain geographic areas have “priority status” is just one way in which a system with over 400 high schools is, in practice, narrowed for students and families. By Thursday, when high school applications were due, Moskop said, many New York City students had likely abandoned their favorite schools.

“It’s almost, how quickly are the kids willing to give up on their dreams?” she said.” (Disare, 2016b)

Ironically, that year I did have one student get accepted to Baruch College Campus High School. His father, a statistics professor, worked at Baruch College. A few days later, Disare wrote another story about academic screening. I remember weighing my words, perhaps too carefully, as I talked with her on the phone, becoming late for a policy analysis class. I wanted to talk about how academic screens were a mechanism for segregation, but I didn’t know how to frame this in terms of my own school, where almost all students were Black or Latinx, but clearly differentially privileged in terms of socioeconomic resources, ability, and other intersecting struggles. I told her.

“Academic screens are a mechanism for sorting the students who have had educational privilege into places where they continue to get educational privilege,” said Megan Moskop, high school admissions coordinator at M.S. 110 in Washington Heights “And the students who don’t have that privilege continue not to have it.” (Disare, 2016c)

Around the same time, my statement was illustrated starkly by a “data tower” my friend Nicole Mader created with her team at the Center for New York City Affairs. The tower vertically stacks each middle school in the city, ranked by seventh grade state test scores.

Horizontally, it shows the racial demographics of the student body, and how many of the students are “high achievers” based on the 2014-2015 state test data. 60% of all the students who attend Specialized High Schools in New York City come from only forty-five middle schools. Only 9 students, or .2% of the Specialized High School students, come from the 124 “bottom” schools (Mader, Cory, & Royo, 2016). I was relieved to find my school, despite its tiny sliver of white and Asian students, near the middle of the list, far above our neighboring schools... but immediately, I’m dismayed by myself. How can I be proud that we’re “winning,” in an extremely-high-stakes competition that’s guaranteed to have losers?

In early January of that next year, I had several long conversations with Elizabeth Harris, a NYTimes reporter, who later wrote what I think is still the best news feature regarding the high school process. Near the end of the story, Harris asks a central, and related question. “But no matter how well the algorithm works or how much information families have, as long as there are low-performing schools, there will always be children assigned to attend them. And who are those children likely to be?” (E. A. Harris & Fessenden, 2017)

The story makes it clear, again, that those students are likely to be Black and Latinx students, poor students, and students from the Bronx, the same students that we already know, most need systems and communities to work for them. Through featuring Ayana Bryant, the veteran guidance counselor at Pelham Gardens middle school, and one of the regular contributors to our counselors e-mail list, Harris’s story makes it clear that no amount of excellent counseling and care can make up for a process that is built to reinforce the status quo.

When I read the story, I e-mailed Ayana in gratitude, and she replied, “My goal was to speak for all those who continue to work hard to assist our students... Thank you again for all the resources, keeping us together, being a spokesperson, and advocate for the students we serve.”

(e-mail correspondence June 2, 2017) That year, Ayana and I both believed that if we were able to communicate the story of how the process was hurting our students, it would lead to change.

The change hasn't come, but surely our stories, and our work with students, planted some seeds.

Teaching agency and picking “good schools”

As explored already, both narratives of “good students” and of “good schools” have been socially constructed in ways that uphold status quo power relations. Though I was beginning to understand this, we (led my me) were determined to support students as well as we could to be successful within the existing systems. As I've said before, high school matches continued to have real material and psychological consequences for our students.

I also felt that helping the students realize more about their own interests, articulate their strengths, and take agency in researching and choosing their own school did have some pedagogical value. So, I designed strength assessments, interest inventories, concrete positive-self talk plans, open-house note-taking sheets, and interview practice sessions. A series of incidents, however, made it increasingly clear that this system wasn't set up for 13-year-olds to navigate, it was set up for white middle-class parents.

The first of these signals was when the parent coordinator and I were called down to the main office to speak with the principal because she had just gotten an angry call from another principal that there were two students from our school, without an adult, trying to attend their morning open house, and they didn't know if they should call the truancy officers or not. These students, independent city kids, who had taken our guidance seriously about the importance of

attending open houses, and who fully intended to return to school with notes they could share with classmates, were barred from visiting the schools they had traveled to see. Since their parents could not be contacted, the parent coordinator was sent to pick them up and bring them back to school.

From that point forward, we made it very clear that students should attend open houses with adults, and we knew that for some of them, this wouldn't be possible. My colleagues on the High School Admissions Advisory Committee and I pushed for the elimination of "Limited Unscreened" Schools, for which students would have to visit an open house to demonstrate interest, and in 2017, those schools were eliminated and either became screened, on the basis of academic or other factors, or educational option, meaning that they could screen half of their students, and the rest would be randomly assigned.

During my "College and Career Readiness" (high school admissions) class, one lesson featured a protocol that encouraged students to call high schools they were interested in, prepared with questions. In the self-contained special education class that I was teaching, one student volunteered to model making a call in front of the class. His goal was to find out if the school had a time when he could visit with his mother, so he planned out the questions he would ask, but when the guidance counselor on the phone heard his voice, she demanded to talk to his parent. I heard him reply, "My parents aren't here, I'm at school, but I just want to know if you have an open houses scheduled so that we can visit." She continued to demand that an adult be placed on the phone, and he passed it to me. Before I could get a word in edgewise, she launched in. "What business do you have bothering me with these student phone calls. Choosing a high school is the job of a student's parent!"

But what about when parents weren't available? Experiences like this made it so clear that even if we explicitly taught students to practice the "skills" of white-middle class culture, they would be met with systems of rejection, and people ready to uphold those systems.

In January 2017, when I finally tried my hand at writing about the process myself, for a class paper, my frustration was evident. I wrote,

"I've made myself part of conversations regarding all aspects of this process, with all types of stakeholders. The conversations feel circular though, and every year, a new group of my students needs shepherding through the same system. Despite slight tweaks each year, the process feels more competitive, more overwhelming, and more unfair than ever before...My own anguish as an agent of this process, and the desire to see larger policy change around it, is a large part of why I chose to study policy...while I feel closer to understanding the political theory and breadth of research regarding school choice "markets" across the globe and here in NYC, synthesizing ideas remains a challenge. Coherent and transformative policy proposals seem far out of reach. In the meantime, the work I've done to help students make better individual choices has been celebrated as "leveling the playing field," and the Department of Education (DOE) has asked me to help develop tools and curricula to be used across the school system to "promote equity" within a structure that is proven to reinforce existing structural inequalities. In repeated conversations with DOE officials, when I raise the idea that fundamental systemic change is necessary for real equity, heads nod along with me, and then, once what I've said sinks in, the officials look down and change their tone, saying things like "for that we need parent pressure," or "that's a political issue outside of our control."

In bringing parents together, and into critical conversation about the system, as we navigated it (i.e. making it clear in meetings that, no, even though Baruch high school looked like a good idea, it wasn't an available option for those who lived in Washington Heights) I was planting seeds for parent pressure. Partly, it was that hope that led me to accept a part-time position for the next semester at the DOE's Office of High School Enrollment, but partly, it was out of necessity. The director of high school admissions had heard me mention that funding for the part-time "high school advisor" position at my middle school was in great danger of being cut, and she was interested in creating curricular tools that emphasized agency and community building for other counselors to use. Across the next few months, for 3.5 days a week, the amount of time needed to maintain health insurance, I was a member of "Team High School."

The next summer, inspired by Martin Carnoy's book, *Cuba's Academic Advantage: Why students in Cuba do better in School*, I thought that seeing "state sponsored social capital" in action would help moved my thinking forward. So, under the auspices of the New School and Casa De Las Americas, I explored schooling in Havana, where I found that though ideals of community schooling and care were powerful, they weren't immune to market-driven competition, or its impact on equity. When I returned from Cuba, I met with my old school principal to share the curricular resources that I had created the year before in the central office. She rejected my suggestion that an interested staff member should be given release time to oversee high school admissions, and instead, split the job across three support staff people, none of whom were eager to take on the role. I worked for a few weeks to help them, and the eighth grade teachers, set up a system of support for the next year, then transitioned into a job supporting student teachers at Hunter College. I was ready for some thinking distance from high school admissions.

High School Match Day (March 18, 2019)

It's been two "match days" since I directly supported students with their high school applications, but even though I'm not in a school, this year's match day is a flood of memories, overwhelm and news updates. Folks from all over my life, from my Dad to my former college roommates, are e-mailing and texting the New York Times link to "Only 7 Black Students Got Into Stuyvesant, N.Y.'s Most Selective High School, Out of 895 Spots" (Carnoy, Gove, & Marshall, 2007). Twitter is aflutter, both with this NYC-specific news, and the news of celebrities gaming college admissions. The weight of feeling like I should say something, but not feeling sure about what to say, is almost too much to keep moving through, so I generally keep my mouth shut.

In the evening, I get a text that feels like it really matters though.

"Results are in!" Texts the current admissions advisor at M.S. 110. "How did it go? How are you doing?" I reply instantly.

"They didn't all find out today, only the ones with log ins. They will all get printed letter tomorrow."

"How are you feeling?" I reiterate, wishing that more people had asked me this.

"Pretty good. Got a bunch of good matches. A few likely 2nd rounds. 3 LaGuardia matches, 2 specialized."

"Congrats. I'll be curious to see what the 2nd round looks like this year." I wonder.

"Thanks! I'll let you know how it goes."

The next day I get another text. "It went well. Many excited kids some disappointments but over all good."

"And how are you?"

“I’m good. I feel like I’ve done enough work for the entire week but I feel good. The excitement makes all the work seem worth it.”

Oof. I can feel that emotional work too. I’m curious what the larger conversation at school is though. Will the students accept these offers to specialized high schools?

As part of a (now failed, based on this year’s data) pilot program boost enrollment of Black and Latinx students at the Specialized High Schools, this year they offered the admissions test during the school day at M.S. 110 and other strategically selected middle schools. That wasn’t the only initiative meant to diversify enrollment either. During that Spring of 2017, when I worked three days a week at the Office of High School Enrollment, five people were hired, five days a week, to make outreach phone calls encouraging Black and Latinx parents to enroll their kids in SHSAT test prep program over the summer. High-level staff people, (including one who is now director of the office of HS admissions) spent days planning and delivering outreach presentations just to get more students to sign up for the test. Heck, they even redesigned the test. They were spending millions on tweaks to get more Black and Latino students into the Specialized High schools. I shook my head then, and thought “what a waste.” In so many ways I tried to tell them I thought more overhaul was necessary, but now, being able to say, “I told you so,” isn’t satisfying at all. I knew then, and I hope more people know now, that desegregation doesn’t happen in tweaks. Meanwhile, the work that I did that year, the pedagogical tools my students and I designed to help foster student agency and community conversation are in a computerized file somewhere. Perhaps it’s for the best, because even though fostering community *can* be subversive and transformative, if those communities are grounded in helping students succeed in a process that rewards individual accomplishments, I doubt that it will be.

Through the text conversations with my colleague, I realize that feeling connected to the work at my old school gives me a pleasant sense of immediate purpose, and I wonder again if my motives for this project are as transformational as I think they are. How is the choice to research towards systemic change wrapped up in my own sense of self as an abled-person? Am I just trying to prove my worth to a community?

At a celebration of the Special Education team near the end of one school year, my assistant principal, and beloved teaching mentor, passed out Marge Piercy's poem "To Be of Use." and the words, "The people I love the best/jump into work head first...I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart..."(Piercy, 1982) echo in my head as I applaud the overwork of this colleague, another white, abled women, who graduated from an elite college, and now works as a Special Education teacher. What if we women stopped? Our collective overwork might be what keeps the city school system, in its current incarnation, with all its white-middle class norms running, something that Dana Goldstein delves into quite deeply in her book, *The Teacher Wars* (Goldstein, 2014). By mitigating the most stratifying parts of the system, we doing important and heavy harm reduction work, or are we sustaining injustice? Is it possible to do one without the other?

This Round 1 match day was the first yet in which no students were left unmatched. If they didn't receive an offer to one of the schools on their list of twelve, they were assigned to a school not on their list. I wonder how much this has to do with a conversation I had with the then-director of high school admissions on match day two years ago, while she was my boss. That year, I was so fully dedicated to the high school admissions process. Through "college and career readiness class" each student's application had been drafted, re-drafted, and then reviewed again. I kept track of parent outreach in a spreadsheet, and had done literally everything in my

power to maximize the possibility of each student being accepted into a high school during Round 1. Just before Christmas, I remember pleading with a parent to list more than three schools on her daughters' application. Frustrated, she hung up on me, saying, "Well, it's in God's hands now."

On that match day, her daughter was one of the five students who hadn't been matched to a school, but the other four had followed my instructions fully, listing safety schools, and making sure they met the requirements for all the schools they had listed. Perhaps we had only gone wrong in "aiming too high." (Gross. Should internalized inferiority, and settling for the best you can get, be a part of the choice-making logic?)

Quickly harnessing myself to the cart that day, I looked over the complex chart of schools with available seats in Round 2 of the process, prepared to help them process the information, cleared my calendar for the Saturday of the Round 2 fair, and cried over lunch with a colleague.

Having learned from Joseph the year before, I called the students to meet with me together, in my cozy office. I hoped that they would see each other, recognize each other's goodness, and understand this crushing moment better as a systemic failure, not as a reflection of their individual worth. At least on the surface, it worked. They didn't cry. Instead, they called parents and we made plans to attend the high school fair together that next weekend.

That afternoon, exhausted, I showed up at the Office of High School admissions, where, to my surprise, my supervisor had time to talk to me, and was eager to hear how match day had gone. I was equally eager to convey to her the gravity of the day, and to present my evidence that—no matter how well you "played the game," certain students would still lose. I remember her asking, "Do you think it would be better if we assigned matches to those students?" and I'm sure I agreed that it would be far less painful.

Was this where the policy change was born? And back to this year, what shifts might this policy change cause? Will those who “expect too much” from the system be forced to explore its most under-resourced schools more deeply?

I wonder what parents will do with their assigned matches. A white Park Slope Dad and Facebook friend wrote the following in trying to make sense of his family’s situation.

“Dear ed friends,

My daughter was assigned to Secondary School of Journalism in Brooklyn. It's not a school I know much about. I've reached out to the principal and the parent coordinator. The school has a minimal listing in the high school directory, no website and no staff list. Does anyone have any information about the school, know any teachers, have children who are attending, so that I can find out more about the school and the program? Please, no comments or reactions, just DM me.”

My heart goes out to this friend...I know him through education activism, and he’s stood with teachers, students, and me in solidarity on several occasions. But in this situation, what does a response of solidarity look like? How do we respond when the system doesn’t do what it’s designed to do, when it doesn’t protecting the “property right” of white people to “good” schools? I looked up the school, and it is indeed under-resourced. Students protested their online curriculum there this past year, and I wouldn’t encourage any of my students to go there. I don’t have any information that I’m sure he hasn’t found already, however, and I’m not sure what advice I would give, so I don’t respond to the message. Should he be encouraged to send his white daughter to a school that I wouldn’t encourage any of my students, no matter their race, to go to? Perhaps.

Another person sends that New York Times story about Stuyvesant, and I skim it. Though I agree with Eliza Shapiro's personal hope that she hopes she doesn't have to write the same story again next year on admissions day (Shapiro, 2019a), most of the editorials across the Times, and other mainstream news sources don't feel like they're saying anything new. Neither do the many de-segregation plans offered by elected officials. My March 28, "Rise and Shine" education news round-up e-mail features separate announcements from two city councilors and the newly elected Public Advocate regarding their plans for de-segregating public schools (Viega, 2019). But hope lies elsewhere.

A friend's facebook link takes me to something more exciting—it's not new information, but it's presented in a new way, and to a new audience. In *Teen Vogue*, Mariana Viera, nails the connection between eugenics, standardized testing, and the maintenance of structural inequality.

"When we accept the myth that these tests are merit-based, we also accept the idea that race and class gaps in standardized-test results, which have remained essentially unchanged over the last 20 years, are due to individual and group shortcomings, not structural ones."

Viera goes on to describe how the tests are "scientifically validated" in a way that ensures reproduce existing racialized ideas of intelligence.

"In essence, questions for future tests were deemed "good questions" if they replicated the outcomes of previous exams; specifically, tests where black and Latinx students scored lower than their white peers." (Viera, 2018)

She's writing about the SAT, not the SHSAT, but she could be writing about any standardized test, including the yearly ones that determine teacher ratings, and admission to

most of the screened schools across NYC. I've known this since my first social justice teacher bookclub, when we read Wayne Au's *Unequal by Design* (Au, 2010), but in presenting information directly to youth, she's pushing a movement for change ahead by leaps and bounds.

I'm hopeful for all the truth and power that's building among young people, and proud to be an adult ally to the movement work of Teens Take Charge and IntegrateNYC. I'm also proud of my teacher community, and the work folks are doing in classrooms, with support from organizations like Teaching Tolerance, who also added to the news cycle of the week with suggestions for how teachers might help students "tap into their power" (Dillard, 2019). This is a good start, but as Natasha Capers, from the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice reminded the audience as part of the panel at a youth led event later that week, "We have adult work to do" to end the "apartheid of resources" and address the root causes of inequality in our school system and society (Teens Take Charge & Education Law Collaborative, 2019). Although teaching our youth, supporting their activism, and sharing our stories are a big part of choice, there's a lot of organizing work to be done.

Chapter 5: The here and now: Activist work forward

Justice, in short, “always addresses itself to singularity, to the singularity of the other.” But if this is so, then we are obliged in the very name of justice to keep the unforeseen possibility of the incoming of the other, the surprise of the “invention” of the other, open. It is for this reason that Derrida argues that justice is “an experience of the impossible,” where (and this is crucial) the impossible is not that which is not possible, but that which cannot be foreseen and calculated as a possibility, that which “exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth.” (Biesta, 1998)

“...resistance to, or the slaying of the (neoliberal education) hydra will not be addressed through incremental policy changes, piecemeal reforms, or charitable giving by well-intentioned non-profits. Rather, transformative change will require a coupling of policy/institutional work to social movements.” (Picower & Mayorga, 2015, p. 12)

The activist work to end school segregation, and undo the stratification across NYC schools is well underway on many fronts, and movements are growing. In the two weeks following the release of high school admissions results, I joyfully attended four youth-led events about school integration. e

Activist Joy! The week after “Match Day”

On Tuesday March 26, at 5:30pm, a line of adults waited to go through the metal detector at the Martin Luther King High School Campus. They move slowly, not accustomed to this daily dehumanizing ritual for students at the school. A man in front of me asked “Did he say belts?” and incredulously removes his as he reaches the front of the slow-moving line. The line was for “Desegregating Manhattan Public Schools: A Community Discussion.” Hosted by

leaders from all six of the Community Education Council (CEC)'s in Manhattan, the adults introduced themselves, congratulated themselves for collaborating, briefly presented some ideas, and set the agenda, but then wisely let youth activists take over that agenda, and for over two hours, I was on the edge of my seat, frantically taking notes. (Manhattan Community Education Councils, Epic Theatre Ensemble, Teens Take Charge, & IntegrateNYC, 2019).

The students presented bold ideas through beautiful words and actions. Epic theatre's production of "Nothing Without Us," based on interviews with parents, students, and education "experts" put conversations about "school quality" on blast as "beating around the bush," as the actors quoted parents saying things like "I just want my child to be comfortable" and beat their shoes into the floor while marching around "the bush," an actor holding a sign that read, "white supremacy."

They acted out a machine-like "system" replying in auto-tuned voices to a parent wondering what school could meet his child's special need for nut-free lunches, robotically directing that parent from room to room, and repeating canned messages of accessibility. Then one actor broke character and told us there was danger in thinking of things as only a system because it "absolves the people who make choices in the system of their individual responsibility."

Across the performance, they made us all cheer, hold our breaths, and smile at the idea of everyone getting, "not white schools, but Wakanda schools!"

The play ended with a standing ovation, and during the audience talk-back, adults hung back, while other youth responded enthusiastically to the actors they had just seen perform. The new deputy superintendent for community engagement, Hydra Mendoza, jokingly introduced herself with "Hi, I'm the system!" and pointed out how happy she was that such a diverse group

of CEC presidents, was hosting the gathering—"Imagine if our schools looked like this group of adults taking leadership, that's what they should look like!" she said. I couldn't help but one-up this wondering to ask myself, what if our school system was under the democratic control of these diverse CECs, instead of under mayoral control? With that kind of direct representation, would we be in the same mess, or would increased ownership, local control with voter oversight, result in a better system?

Youth took back the stage as Teens Take Charge students shared testimonials, including one from student who shared her empathy with educators that had tried to help her through the process—"When I didn't get in, my teachers didn't really know how to help me. Should they be honest, or tell me optimistically that everything would be okay?" She related that after a year in a small school, where she had a 99.9 average, she transferred to a school that promised to make her dreams come true, but was ultimately a let-down, and a "test-prep factory."

After a brief presentation from Amy Stuart Wells about culturally sustaining pedagogy, the evening ended with a youth panel discussion featuring leaders from Teens Take Charge, and IntegrateNYC.

They took questions from the audience, and one student, from Eleanor Roosevelt high school, shared how after a widely publicized racist incident at her school that week, she and her classmates had begun a campaign to create a more diverse student body by ending the geographic screens on their high school. She shared her frustration with the responses she had gotten so far from her schools' administrator, and received a business card and invitation to meet from the deputy chancellor. (Amin, 2019)

Near the end, an adult asked the young people, "How do you define taking care of yourself, and what resources do you need for that?"

Across the panel, students responded with sentiments of self and community. “I’m practicing self-love as much as possible, because this counteracts oppression, and me loving myself spreads to other people. If I’m gonna shine, you’re gonna shine too!” said Leanne Nunes, IntegrateNYC’s Director of Equity, and Dulce, from Teens Take Charge, agreed with her, citing the power of “being in a room with people who are all about change,” and adding “I hope Chancellor Carranza has a therapist too!”

Even though the teens were from two different organizations, and very different places in the city, their love and respect for each other, for themselves, and for their transformative work, was evident, and inspiring. After the panel, I hugged a few activist parents from Washington Heights who I hadn’t seen in a few years, and went to give the adult coach for IntegrateNYC a high five.

“Wasn’t this amazing?” She beamed.

“This was amazing! This whole week is amazing! And I can’t believe all the news stories this week are finally saying what we’ve been telling them for 6 years!!” I replied.

“Yes, well, that’s organizing! our work is working! It’s been bubbling and bubbling, and here we are, Kapow! Also, I see we’re having a meeting together next Tuesday, I can’t wait!”

“Yes, we’re being organized so well! I had it in my calendar, but I love that she (one of the youth leaders) sent me an google calendar invite. She’s basically the best boss ever.” I grinned. By this point, without realizing it, the two of us had begun happily dancing back and forth.

“Why are y’all dancing? What’s going on!?” Asked Leanne, leaving the cluster of adults who had come to talk to her on her way down from the stage.

“We’re so happy to be led by you!” And we all high-fived.

As I typed up this memory the next morning, I couldn't help the smile from stretching out my cheeks, and the tears from forming at the corners of my eyes. There's contagious joy to go-around in this rapidly expanding community, so much so, that it feels like our dances are beginning to take in a better direction that we can even imagine. Maybe, just maybe, if we can create the community of our dreams, there won't be a need to fly anywhere.

Following youth into the impossible

Four integration-related events later, on Monday, April 8th, Chancellor Carranza spoke to over a hundred youth in the gym of the Clinton School for Writers and Artists at the first School Diversity Advisory Group Youth Symposium. He introduced himself as someone who the current president would stereotype as a criminal, as a Mexican-American man whose ancestors hadn't crossed the border, but instead had been crossed by it. He assured students that he was serious about school integration and that he wouldn't be "so busy keeping my job that I don't do my job." Near the end of his speech, he repeatedly promised the audience "we will not wait" to undo segregation, and ended by thanking attendees, and inviting them into a still-to-be-determined transformation, "Thank you, and Gracias... those people that are going first are us!"

His talk was followed by a shortened version of the Epic Theatre performance I had seen the week before. This time, in addition to extra-loud "beating around the bush," the actors critiques of the larger scarcity mindset that fueled the supremacist marketplace, as well as their indictment of "schools that feel like jails" rang out across the gym.

After a brief presentation of graphically organized data regarding the disparate impact of gifted and talented testing and academically screened high schools, we were sent up to the

cafeteria to grab sandwiches, and engage in small group discussion about the performances and the data. The framing questions for our discussion: “What? So what? And Now What?”

I ended up at a small table with three high schoolers, one from the Bronx, one from Staten Island, and one from Queens. We didn’t have a formal facilitator, which worried the student from Staten Island, but I told him I thought we could self-facilitate, and if we needed, I could pinch hit, since I was a teacher, after all. Over the course of the conversation, and in hearing about student experiences so different from his own, that student’s thinking moved all the way from, “This presentation made me uncomfortable!” to “Wait, there’s a test for 4-year-olds? Hold on. Imagine having to think about being successful when you’re 4! I feel like I only had to start thinking about that last year when I was a sophomore, and it’s too much pressure already. They just should get rid of that test!”

The student from Queens, a white girl who attends Bronx Science, one of the elite Specialized High Schools nodded vehemently, “Yep. I had to test into middle school and into high school. I know this comes with privilege, but the pressure is real. These tests make you feel like that’s who you are.”

The Bronx student, who had earlier stated, “I’m from the Bronx, but I don’t know anyone who goes to Bronx Science,” shook her head. As the group reflected on their identities, the student from Staten Island broke in again.

“Gosh. They should even change the name- why gifted and talented? Because anyone can be gifted and talented, isn’t that the point of education? Education means that you can teach anybody anything, and people all have gifts and talents!”

The group settled on the idea that if Gifted and Talented programs were to exist, they should have random and (just to be safe, because they all agreed that though summer youth

employment jobs were supposed to be random, that wasn't true) anonymous admission. In only twenty minutes of conversation, they had a plan for transformation, and they were planning to invite friends back to the next forum on May 1st. Is the Department of Education itself creating in the kind of transformational learning and organizing spaces that I think they are, or is this all the grassroots work finally starting to bubble up in ways better than my wildest dreams?

Perhaps both things are true. What's certainly true is that the young people I've met across the city this year are determined not to rest until they see systemic change, and at each event, they're sharing straightforward and compelling evidence for change, and with clear roadmaps for policymakers and others to get in line with.

Adult Work

So, what is the adult work? In addition to supporting youth movement and transformational learning, there are several parts of growing coalition work to highlight and build on.

Parents choosing for the common good

According to the neoliberal logic, loving parents, especially mothers, embodied by racialized tropes like "Tiger Moms" and "Security Moms" (Grewal, 2006) take on a fear-driven fight for the best opportunities and most secure successes for their children, at the expense of other children. There is much written about this "opportunity hoarding," behavior, and Carolun Sattin-Bajaj and Allison Roda argue that this is facilitated, if not built, by choice policies themselves (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018).

Some parents, however, are following the example of Nikole Hannah-Jones a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist on school segregation, who shared the narrative of her own family's choice to send their daughter to an under-resourced, segregated neighborhood school.

At an October 16, 2018 forum, hosted by the new Alliance for School Integration and Desegregation (ASID) titled “Real Talk: School Integration in New York City,” Hannah-Jones spoke to a full auditorium at Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn. She presented the choice-making dilemma in no uncertain terms. “You can make a choice for your own child or for all of our children, but you have to understand that if you’re choosing just for your own child, you’re choosing to sacrifice someone else’s.” she said.

Both nationally, and in New York City, individual parents are taking the charge to consider choices in this light. The best intentions of parents like there are well stated by K.A. Dilday, in her October CityLab 2018 article, titled “The Fight to Integrate New York City Schools is Misguided.” She writes that the current media narrative around integrating the best schools, specifically the Specialized High Schools, “affirms a supremacist mentality,” and “affirms institutions and ideas that affirm hierarchy, conveys a narrow definition of worth and success, and, by exclusion, diminishes other values.” In reference to her own, alternative vision, she writes

“I am choosing for my daughter to be “left behind. With her father, I made these choices in location and education because we find beauty and value in our neighborhood, and reward in schools where students leave with a broad idea of what achievement looks like, an expansive idea of the path to happiness, success, societal contribution, and fulfillment—and the capacity to choose their path.”

(Dilday, 2018)

Parents are supporting each other towards these choices as well. In New York City, groups like ASID, are hosting community gatherings and participating in town hall meetings, where they hope to organize other parents. Jackson Heights People for Public Schools, an

organization in Queens, regularly tables at their local farmers market, and hosts gatherings at which they explicitly outline their intention to build a community of parents who choose schools based on investment in the democratic project of schooling and view of education as a “common good.” (Roda, 2018)

In addition to alternative narratives around the logics of individual choice-making, a new coalition of parents and school staff has emerged to offer counternarratives to the logics of school ranking. In response to a state report that designated their schools as failing, they offer the “Measure This” Campaign, promising “True Stories from Schools on the NY State ‘List’” (“Measure This,” n.d.). Unlike the stories of damage and scarcity spread by neoliberal school reformers, these are stories of learning and joy that celebrate community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and explicitly reject all measures based on standardized test scores. Many of the parents leading the initiative have long been active in the movement to Opt-Out of state testing.

This logic of choice-making within an ethos of love and care for all children in a community, is a departure from the rational actor and cost-benefit analyses that frame neoliberal policy-making, but it is not new. Feminisms outside what Arvin, Tuck and Morrill call “whitestream feminism” such as Black and Native feminisms have long operated with this type of care in mind. (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Combahee River Collective, 1986)

Based on her choice-making research alongside mothers of color with limited resources on the Upper West Side, Ujju Aggarwal writes

"Yet it is within this context (bounded also by income and geography)-where children are understood to represent more than one family's future, and more than one or two parents' responsibility--, that the consumer citizenship and market logics that neoliberalism relies upon, fails. Here, motherhood becomes a political foundation for col-

lective action rather than a descriptive category of individual women's experiences, requiring us to extend our political horizon (Collins 2000; Gilmore 2007). And so it is from this shared space, which stretches both temporally and spatially and yet is grounded in the quotidian of a particular place and time, that we find an immanent architecture of rights and belonging that gestures the contemporary echoes of the Black radical tradition, and as such presents the possibility of reaching beyond the repetition of confined citizenship-where in each other we might be able to recognize the possibilities for a different kind of freedom" (Aggarwal, 2018, p. 97)

It's possible that families with privilege will only gesture towards investing in the common good, as they create isolated "public" school communities for their children in certain schools, as Aggarwal documents happening in one Manhattan district (Aggarwal, 2014). I believe, however, if organizers continue actively create more and more diverse communities and learn from an intersectional anti-racist feminism, like that taught by the Movement for Black Lives and its antecedents, this can be avoided.

New Solidarities and increased sovereignty

In addition to building new narratives and hosting events like those mentioned in this chapter, New York City community organizations are actively building new coalitions and solidarities. During the February 2019 Black Lives Matter week of action in Schools, over 90 community organizations, all focused on slightly different policy issues- from Culturally Responsive Curriculum to Restorative Justice, all gathered to rally around broad demands for resources and policy shifts built from the policy platform of the Movement for Black Lives. As those organizations continue to work together with the welfare of our New York City youth in

mind, possibilities for action are only growing. Further, the School Diversity Advisory Group, the DOE entity that hosted the Symposium I attended last week, includes youth and adult leaders from many of those same organizations. That group has released their first set of policy recommendations and promises to release another, both framed by the 5 R's of real integration, written by the Youth in IntegrateNYC. These R's stipulate that real integration must consider (1) race and enrollment: students of all identities—racial, socioeconomic, dis/abled, etc. are equally supported and empowered, and see their identities (2) represented in school leaders and staff, with whom they are able to build strong (3) relationships. (4) Resources are sufficient, or even abundant, and (5) restorative practices are used both to build community, and to sustain it when there is harm. (IntegrateNYC, 2018)

This work towards equity is right to center racial justice and youth organizing, but demands might be even more powerful if considerations of dis/ability justice were included. If this framework isn't incorporated, it's too easy for racial stratification to continue under the more innocent-sounding guise of "ability screening." With the framework, we can more clearly see that categories based on "smartness" are oppressive and racialized as well.

In an attempt to offer a unified DisCrit voice on school reform, Susan Baglieri makes two suggestions applicable to this project. First, she recommends we "resist the meritocratic practice of schooling and normative assessment structure," reminding us that on norm-referenced tests, 50% are always below average. They are a primary tool in building up what Leonardo and Broderick call "the ability line." (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016) She also writes that we must "support community based control of the economies built up around disability and disaster capitalism." (Baglieri, 2016, pp. 177–178)

In *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*, Joan Tronto argues that increased sovereignty for local actors changes the way people think about their responsibility to each other, undoing market logics and creating new structures of care.

How do we go from a society that is primarily concerned with economic production to one that also emphasizes care? How do we change our concepts about humans so that instead of thinking of them as autonomous, we also recognize them as vulnerable and interdependent?...To do so, we have to re-imagine democratic life as ongoing practices and institutions in which all citizens are engaged. This engagement presumes that relational selves, who need ongoing participation as both receivers and givers of care, will be central in making judgments about responsibility. (Tronto, 2013, p. 169)

For New York City, the might mean that some revival of the 1960s push for community control of schools might also be worth considering. After all, mayoral control of schooling was the tool that allowed Bloomberg to institute this system of school choice in the first place. Currently, the closest thing to an elected school board that exists are the Community Education Councils- that diverse group who hosted the first event described in this chapter. I, for one, would be delighted to give them more power in determining the direction of city schools.

The final key, in my mind, toward building the solidarity and strength needed to develop a more equitable admissions system is the development of a new shared vision for the transition into high school. Though most of the community organizations mentioned across this chapter share values and general goals, there have been few shared conversations to brainstorm transformative alternatives to the choice system as it stands. The School Diversity Advisory Group may be building such a vision, through the organizing of thoughtful conversations, and if so, its incumbent on us all to participate fully. In the event that their vision comes up short, it's

our responsibility as activists to create our own spaces of dreaming and dialogue. I wonder what system or community would keep us dancing together, not wanting to fly away?

Ongoing Educator Effort

Being part of an educator community that dreams together is part of what keeps me in the city, and as the stories in this thesis illustrate, families aren't making school choices alone. Educators play a huge role in helping shape both individual decision-making processes, and educational systems. We educators also have the unique perspective that comes from being deeply invested in the success of our many beloved students, and from seeing how they are all differentially but profoundly shaped by educational policies.

We educators must step further into the public conversation—it isn't enough to employ radical or transformative pedagogies within our classrooms—we must bring those techniques into popular education, and into movement building.

My friend Jose Vilson, a popular education blogger who teaches math at a middle school in Inwood, and who is a few steps ahead of most educators in terms of public conversation, wrote an editorial for Vox this month that named these admissions methods as a tool of structural racism. In their place, he shared a loving vision for the day when, on match day, students can proudly say “I got into a school that loves me back.”(Vilson, 2019)

In addition to centering a pedagogy of love, we educators can't forget our policy-making power as street level bureaucrats. As we help our students recognize the value they bring to a community, and strive to find the schools that “want them,” where they'll also want to stay, we are actively re-defining the terms of this process for the students and families we serve.

Our role is complex, however, because as we seek to transform the system, we can't neglect the harm-reduction work of supporting our students within the system that exists. In this

direction, we can stand up for our values in recommending schools where we know liberating pedagogy is at the center of the school's mission, even when it means directly confronting parent's racialized and status-based assessments of school quality.

We can continue to build transformative relationships as we stay in touch with our former student; we should connect them with current students so that their collective knowledge and power can grow. And, most importantly, we must debunk the myth that students should choose a school solely on the basis of their individual interests and aptitudes. Going to a school "because your friends are going there" is a better rationale than we think.

I'm still in close touch with two students from my 3rd group of self-contained special education graduates. One is finishing up college, and one is nearing the end of a prison sentence. The one who is in college visited high schools with me, but ultimately followed his brother to a school not far from their home in the Bronx, and the one who is in prison told me to write about how he got "catfished" into a mess of a school on the Lower East Side. In hindsight, he believes that if he had gone with his classmates to a small school on the Upper West Side, his best friend, who he credits with having kept him on track in middle school, would have given him the support necessary to graduate.

On at least a bi-monthly basis, I run into a different former student as we both commute home on the one train, and too many of those students to count have transferred out of the high-status schools (Bard, Fashion Industries, Pace, Environmental Studies) that I helped them apply to. Usually they've moved closer to home, to schools with more friends, and with less pressure than their original match.

In addition to continuing to press for systemic change, we have to make our school communities so transparently transformative that our students know exactly what they're

shopping for when they enter the marketplace. To that end, we have a lot of work to do. We must implement culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), “cross-pollinated” by universal design for learning (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016). Informed by a deeply felt sense of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and we must do what we can at the school and system level to build intentionally integrated communities that uphold the 5 R's of Real Integration. Finally, and most importantly, we need to be sure our students know about these ideas, and are ready to look for schools where they see the same transformative values and pedagogies from which to build their own communities, visions and futures, far beyond and far better than what we might imagine for them.

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