Closing the Opportunity Gap, or Creating a New Opportunity?

Navigational Capital, Racialization, and Resistance in the Context of Neoliberal Multicultural Education

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Abstract

Historically, public schooling in America has disenfranchised students of color, evaluating these youth by their conformity to or defiance of the norms for curriculum and conduct dictated by the dominant white middle class. Synthesizing Bourdieu’s (1986) realization of academic qualifications as cultural capital with Robinson’s (1983) emphasis on the racial dynamics of this schematic, students of color can either pursue upward mobility within the existing political and economic structure by practicing identities of racelessness (Tatum 1997) or manifest their resistance through oppositional identities (Ogbu 1998; Ferguson 2000), with the discrepant material and social outcomes of each choice serving to legitimize the racial hierarchy of larger society. Presently, public schooling has adapted a paradigm of neoliberal multiculturalism that acknowledges racial difference as benign variation, without regard for the institutional and economic inequities that result from and reinforce racial discourse, and that looks to dehistoricize race by conceptualizing conflict as a matter of individual psychology (Mohanty 2003). Moreover, though neoliberal multiculturalism ostensibly offers a pedagogy with culturally responsive content and methods, it nonetheless adheres to hegemonic norms for knowledge and behavior, espousing navigational capital (Yosso 2005) for the agency of individual students of color within the existing structure rather than proposing social change. Thus, or education to work towards racial justice, a critical pedagogy geared towards deconstructing race and devising activist praxis is in order. Yet, in order to subvert the status quo, campaigns for critical pedagogy must work within the state - which inevitably influences social movements (Weldon 2011) - to create spaces that redefine cultural citizenship and challenge racial inequities inside and outside of schools. For this purpose, the politically
palatable, class-centered rhetoric of opportunity gap represents a proverbial foot in the door, but educators interested in societal transformation must be vigilant with regards to the potential for reifying, instead of reforming, the political and economic structure. Therefore, this thesis, through curricular analysis, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews at state-sponsored Growth Mindset Academy - all names are pseudonyms - looks to explore how educators might foster resistant capital (Yosso 2005). Specifically, this work inquires as to what constitutes cultural capital and, by extension, academic qualifications within a framework of neoliberal multiculturalism, how pedagogy and discipline inform the racialization or racelessness of students of color, and what steps teachers and students can take to transition from Freire’s (1970) hierarchical banking model of education to a more collaborative problem-posing pedagogy, in turn revealing to classroom participants the possibilities for different racial understandings and economic systems.
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Chapter One: Introduction

On the first day of Growth Mindset Academy, a group of 30 undergraduate Teaching Fellows representing various racial and class identities, regional origins, and academic concentrations gathered in the driveway of an empty public school in Denver, Colorado. Their faces affixed with expressions ranging from eagerness to anxiety, these aspiring educators coalesced into two lines, where they awaited the arrival of their soon-to-be students. Suddenly, one car, and then several more, pulled into the parking lot, and the Teaching Fellows broke into cheers, giving out handshakes and high fives as children emerged. The entire scene carried with it an ineffable optimism and a tacit consensus that it was going to be a good summer. After all, my coworkers and I had spent two weeks exhaustively preparing for this particular moment, as well as those that would soon follow in classrooms, at lunch tables, and on the recess fields. At the conclusion of a comprehensive training program, we had reached a collective understanding not only of the gravity of our purpose - closing the “opportunity gap” for low-income students of color in public education - but also of the means by which we would achieve this objective: practicing culturally responsive pedagogy in our lessons while building personal relationships with the “scholars” in attendance. As for the students, they had been similarly excited for Growth Mindset Academy owing to its promise of young teachers to whom they could relate, with whom they claimed common cultural backgrounds, and through whom they would participate in more creative activities than those to which they were accustomed during the school year. Growth Mindset Academy, therefore, was going to be both transformative and fun for all involved. Yet, as I would discover shortly thereafter, and as numerous Teaching Fellows and students would corroborate, this was not the case.
In comparison to similar summer initiatives for low-income students of color, Growth Mindset Academy imagined itself as radically aware of the racial and class inequities of larger society that serve as obstacles for educational success. More specifically, Growth Mindset Academy concerned itself not with standardized test scores, but with the context for these statistics, attributing differing results between middle class white students and low-income students of color to the under-resourced neighborhoods and schools of the latter, as well as the damaging effect of cultural deficit models that portray ethnic communities as incompatible with academia. In response, Growth Mindset Academy recruited a teaching staff whose identities either “mirrored” those of their students, or offered a “window” into perspectives that they might not otherwise encounter. Likewise, Growth Mindset Academy purported a culturally responsive social studies pedagogy that would situate democratic principles such as the need for prejudice reduction, the value of “dispassionate, objective reporting,” and the importance of First Amendment rights in the context of the shooting of Michael Brown and ensuing protests in Ferguson, Missouri. At the same time, students would practice their writing skills through daily journal entries and essay prompts that asked them to make connections between the class content and their everyday lives. In this vein, Growth Mindset Academy emphasized as a crucial underpinning of its philosophy a dynamic of mutual concern and understanding between Teaching Fellows and students, which would derive from and further their shared investment of in learning. At the same time, Growth Mindset Academy also incorporated elements of traditional education. Notably, the program stipulated that my coworkers and I cultivate an authoritative “teacher presence” that would discourage students from acting out, ensuring that each class could progress to its “Exit Ticket,” typically a writing assignment dictated by the
“Measurable Outcome” for a given day. Nonetheless, the leaders and Teaching Fellows envisioned that Opportunity Gap would become a place of belonging for all students, regardless of their previous school experiences, and that everyone would emerge from the program as a more informed citizen and compassionate human being.

How might one explain the discrepancy between the idealism of Growth Mindset Academy and its reality, wherein students remained in the halls long after class had begun, immediately completed and handed in their Exit Tickets in the hopes of receiving permission to leave, and verbally fought with Teaching Fellows and among each other, culminating in their dismissal from the program? Every day, my coworkers and I commiserated over our apparent inability to engage our classrooms with academic content that was supposed to correspond to their lived experiences and, relatedly, we lamented our struggles with discipline. For my part, I was perplexed; I had wholeheartedly invested myself in the development of students like Esmeralda, Rebecca, and Angelica, all of whom had shown a fervent enthusiasm for learning at the outset of the summer, and I was deeply hurt when they began to express an unambiguous contempt for me and my boring lessons on a regular basis. Momentarily, the thought occurred to me that there might be some validity to the deficit theories, suggesting that culturally responsive pedagogy was a futile endeavor after all. Even if race and class were constructs rather than immutable characteristics, the possibility remained that schools, in addition to the political institutions of larger society, irreversibly projected and sedimented oppositional identities onto low-income youth of color, thereby inhibiting their belief that they could feel belonging in a school setting. What if the culturally responsive pedagogy of Growth Mindset Academy amounted to too little and too late for its attendees? If low-income students of color could not
find success, or did not want to pursue it, within an environment that recognized the considerable challenges that they faced inside and outside of the classroom, what would these circumstances portend for their long-term academic and economic futures?

To be sure, even as Growth Mindset Academy demonstrated sympathy towards these obstacles, its mission was an ambitious and sometimes contradictory one. On the one hand, the program purported to proliferate an awareness of racism among its students, to serve as testament that teachers need not be distant authority figures who fail to comprehend cultural backgrounds other than their own, and to encourage students to lend their voices to public dialogue through journalism and social media. On the other, though, Growth Mindset Academy aspired to inculcate a greater comfort level with the writing intensive curricula of traditional schooling moments and to confer authority upon its fledgling educators through their performance of “teacher presence.” Idealistically, the program believed that it could accomplish all of these objectives over the course of six weeks, all the while assuming that Teaching Fellows and students would readily establish the mutual trust necessary for achieving any of these aims. In short, Growth Mindset had created a difficult predicament for its participants, to say the least, and given the program’s considerable scope and confusing patchwork of goals, one might have surmised that tensions would emerge so that teachers like myself would inevitably grapple with deficit paradigms. Yet, despite the chaos that characterized so much of the summer, moments like the lesson when Albert unexpectedly poked his head up from its typical resting place on his desk to denounce racial profiling as “bulls***” because “some people have melanin and that’s all there is to it,” or when Christopher gave me an in-depth explanation of his favorite smartphone game only minutes after he and I had engaged in a shouting match, affirmed to me the unique
individual curiosities and universal humanity of my classes. Through these interactions, my students evinced a clear desire to question, to understand and, ultimately, to be understood. In turn, I began to ask whether the program’s pedagogy went far enough in engaging the intellects of these youth and empowering them to challenge the manifestations of racism in their everyday lives. Certainly, the program’s willingness to talk about race at all, as well as its realization of teachers as “windows” and “mirrors,” represented a marked improvement over its’ attendees experiences with traditional schooling throughout the rest of the year. Yet, it became increasingly apparent to me that a culturally responsive pedagogy alone does not constitute a challenge to systemic oppression, nor does it imagine the possibilities for structural reform or a radical reimagination of race, both of which scholars have posited as vital to the liberation of individuals and communities alike.

Thus, following a review of literature devoted to defining equitable education for low-income students of color, in conjunction with curricular analysis, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews of Growth Mindset Academy, I contend that, along with cultural responsiveness, a critical pedagogy for social justice must problematize interactions between the state, race, and the accumulation of capital in order to understand the means by which institutions construct difference and how these narratives inform microcosmic interactions and eventual outcomes in schools and society. Moreover, critical pedagogy must be postmodern in that it addresses students’ specific communities and recognizes their distinctive cultural wealth, supplementing multicultural content with multiple means of assessment. Last, critical pedagogy should deconstruct the taken-for-granted power dichotomy between teachers and students, and instead facilitate their collaboration for activist praxis. All of these measures, in turn, would not
only resolve the issues that occurred during Growth Mindset Academy, but also fundamentally change the purpose of education itself. Of course, in defense of Growth Mindset and of public schools in general, the state apparatus limits the agency of revolutionary movements that look to disrupt the status quo, while simultaneously possessing the material resources requisite for large-scale critical pedagogy. Taking these circumstances into account, I also look to explore how teachers and students can collaborate to subvert a hostile structure by recognizing diverse forms of cultural capital and, in doing so, creating spaces of resistance and self-determination. Finally, because the state inevitably influences society, I will consider whether there exists a politically palatable means for realizing critical pedagogy - as, on some level, Growth Mindset Academy aspired - that would then be conducive to these ends. Although the pursuit of racial justice is a constant struggle, teachers, and students constitute crucial catalysts for change, and the fight continues in public schools across America.
Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

Outlining the Opportunity Gap and its Understanding of Culture

According to Prudence Carter and Kevin Welner, who introduced the concept in their work *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance* (2013), the rationale behind describing the academic performance of low-income students of color in terms of an “opportunity gap,” as opposed to the oft-belabored idea of “achievement gap,” is that the former “shifts attention from outcomes to inputs - to the deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational - and ultimately socioeconomic - outcomes” (p. 3). In other words, whereas the rhetoric of achievement gap quantifies discrepancies among schools by emphasizing metrics such as standardized test scores and graduation rates, in turn generating a high-stakes environment that yields more frequent testing, narrow curricula, and increasingly stringent discipline, the notion of opportunity gap critically analyzes the systemic factors that contribute to the struggles of low-income students of color. One cannot understate the significance of this ideological adjustment. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) explains, the identification of a gap has historically legitimized deficit theories that portray students of color as “victims of pathological lifestyles” - specifically, their families, communities, and cultural backgrounds - that “hinder their ability to benefit from schooling” (p. 4). Consequently, with education serving to exacerbate rather than redress these perceptions, failure for youth of color becomes normalized and cyclical, and the achievement gap perpetuates itself (Noguera 2008). In contrast, Welner and Carter draw upon literature such as Jonathan Kozol’s (1992) *Savage*
Inequalities to demonstrate how disparities in educational outcomes between low-income students of color and their middle class white counterparts stem from racially segregated neighborhoods, unequal school funding, and academic tracking. Moreover, proponents of this premise posit that such inequities manifest as increased exposure to health risks, housing instability, and class-based variance in parenting styles, all of which compromise the performance of youth of color (Rothstein 2004). In order to redress the opportunity gap, therefore, these scholars advocate for reforms along the lines of school integration via mixed-income housing, support for early childhood and after-school learning programs, and detracking. Given this optimism for affecting progress within the United States’ existing political structure, then, meaningful gains toward closing the opportunity gap would both derive from and result in a more participatory democracy. According to this vision, truly equitable schooling would ensure that youth develop and exercise skills of “listening, weighing evidence, and communicating with people from diverse backgrounds,” which, in synthesis, “collectively constitute a democratic character” (Moses and Rogers 2013, 209). Thus, the social studies curriculum at Growth Mindset Academy explicitly sought to promote all of these practices with the intent of preparing its students to become informed citizens and agents for change within a mere six week span.

Nonetheless, in light of the fact that Growth Mindset Academy did not entirely live up to this idealism, but instead encountered disengagement and disciplinary issues, it would seem that situating the shortcomings of education for low-income students of color entirely within the economic phenomena observed by the opportunity gap overlook, to an extent, the intersections of these material realities with cultural relativism and racial discourse. To be sure, Closing the
*Opportunity Gap* acknowledges that, by and large, classrooms and curricula value the experiences and understandings of white middle class students more than those of low-income students of color and, in response, briefly alludes to the need for educators to employ “a framework for the design of learning environments that examines what youth know from their everyday settings to support subject matter learning...so that differences between community-based and school-based norms can be negotiated by both students and teachers” (Lee 2007, p. 15). Along these lines, the work examines the problem of mismatch, which occurs “when some students enter schools in which the dominant cultural codes differ from theirs” (Carter 2013, p. 148), often culminating in academic disengagement and disciplinary issues; yet, the research cited by the book indicates that the nexus of this mutual mistrust between school officials and students lies in their respective evaluations of socioeconomic status. Still, taking into account the disproportionate attention devoted to white perspectives at the expense of all others, *Closing the Opportunity Gap* concludes that curricula should sufficiently speak to the cultural understandings of all students by incorporating multiple frames of reference (Carter 2013). This statement simultaneously echoes Emily Style’s (1996) conception of curriculum as “window and mirror” - a model of personal and contextual learning that addresses both students themselves and the multicultural world in which they live by recognizing the “actuality and validity of differences” in knowledge (p. 3) - and foreshadows Growth Mindset Academy’s realization of this theory as praxis by actively recruiting Teaching Fellows who share components of the identities present within their classrooms, as well as those whose lived experiences differ greatly from those of their students, under the assumption that all of these individuals will “teach who [they] are” (Palmer 1998, p. 2) and that youth will benefit from
exposure to a variety of viewpoints. Hence, the logic of the opportunity gap, while sympathetic to communities of color in its refutation of deficit paradigms, reiterates Lisa Delpit’s (1986) prescription for a pedagogical philosophy that promotes through meaningful instruction these school-based norms and skills with the objective of helping students “harmonize with the rest of the world” (p. 384) or, in other words, cultivate agency within the existing political and economic structure with the ultimate goal of reforming these institutions to work toward equity.

**How Schools Reproduce Class Hierarchy: Which Students Can Obtain Cultural Capital?**

Even so, the endeavor of closing the opportunity gap and, to a lesser extent, Delpit’s (1986) thesis, seem to concede that these aforementioned school-based norms of white middle class hegemony will remain entrenched on an institutional level, and so these works fail to explore the possibilities of radical curricula that might subvert the status quo altogether by recognizing other forms of cultural capital. If these scholars convey skepticism about achieving cultural equity by deconstructing the terms of knowledge creation in public schooling and beyond, their misgivings are well-founded with regard to the propensity of the system for legitimation and self-reproduction. As Bourdieu (1986) illuminated, cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, experiences, and connections requisite for social belonging, and within this framework, “academic qualifications” rank among the most firmly institutionalized instances. Detailing the process by which cultural capital solidifies itself as academic qualifications and eventual class status, Bourdieu proposes that objectification, in conjunction with scarcity, allows for the translation of educational credentials into material capital, thereby reproducing the hierarchy from which cultural capital derives in the first place. Put more simply,
schools favor students whose backgrounds already correspond to the norms of the dominant
group, constructing these cultural expressions as objective knowledge and then replicating the
stratification of larger society by providing these same students the greatest opportunity for
upward mobility. Also, the reality that this cultural capital is not available to all students renders
it as a valuable commodity, in turn depoliticizing its racial and economic origins. To be sure, as
opportunity gap theorists diligently note, class status constitutes one component of the
hegemonic cultural paradigm espoused by public education, thereby disadvantaging low-income
students not only for the material difficulties of their daily lives, but also for differences between
their families and communities relative to those of their more privileged peers. In this sense,
then, adherents to the opportunity gap are correct to point out the occurrence of cultural
mismatch between students and teachers on the basis of discrepant socioeconomic status.

At the same time, theorists who attribute the opportunity gap primarily to pre-existing
economic conditions downplay the role of racial discourse as a means of manufacturing scarcity
in cultural capital and perpetuating the exclusion of people of color, both inside and outside the
classroom. On this matter, Tara J. Yosso (2005) expands upon Bourdieu’s (1986) theory with the
critique that the French sociologist apparently assumes “that people of color ‘lack’ the social and
cultural capital required for social mobility” (p. 70) and takes for granted that “some
communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor” (p. 76). To the contrary,
Yosso applies critical race theory - the idea that mechanisms of racialization and marginalization
are interwoven into the historical context and ideological framework of the US legal system (Bell
1992) - to the classroom, considering how cultural deficit paradigms interact with racial
construction. Furthermore, Yosso develops an index for the cultural complexity and wealth of
non-white communities, enumerating several types of capital that include, most pertinent to this work, navigational capital, or the skills and abilities to maneuver through institutions hostile to people of color, and resistant capital, the knowledge used to combat inequality and oppression. In theory, navigational and resistant capital alike represent routes toward equity in education as well as larger society; sometimes, however, they contradict each other if schools’ inculcation of the former strays towards legitimation - that is, when “stories are told which seek to justify the exercise of power by those who possess it and strive to reconcile to others the fact that they do not” (Thompson 1987, p. 527) - that naturalizes the social structure and settles for individual agency over collective revolution. By virtue of the participatory implications of the word “opportunity,” those who would strive to close the gap, as well as Delpit (1986) ostensibly endorse the teaching of navigational capital as a pragmatic and politically feasible pathway for working through the state to ensure the survival of communities of color. Yet, this work looks to examine how individual actors in contexts such as Growth Mindset Academy might also incorporate resistant capital so as to leverage the material resources of the state while concurrently contesting its norms of white middle class hegemony.

**Cultural Capital, Racialization, and Identity Formation**

As one might imagine, the low-income students of color at Growth Mindset Academy possess great potential for exercising resistant capital in the face of academic ignorance of their lived experiences. Schools and teachers regularly construct “knowledge” as synonymous with white middle class cultural capital. Thus, despite the ideology of those who lead initiatives such as Growth Mindset Academy - that conferring and situating navigational capital within students’
lives will afford these youth multicultural awareness as well as agency within the American socioeconomic structure - the micro-resistances of these students on a day-to-day basis reveal another limitation of the opportunity gap framework: that it does not fully acknowledge the impact that educational experiences in a hostile, racialized environment might have on identity formation. Indeed, the notion of opportunity gap as mostly determinant of class status that correlates with racial segregation does not contemplate the pervasiveness of race as a symbolic and material construct that influences students’ delineation of self and other, in turn culminating in tensions between students and teachers of differing positionalities. Describing how the state inextricably links and interpellates race and class through the continued subjugation of people of color, Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (1983) introduces the phrase “racial capitalism” to articulate the mutual reinforcement and sedimentation of these constructs; race, while not grounded in immutable biological traits, becomes an undeniable reality rooted in the political and economic exploitation of people of color. Hence, in its privileging of white and middle class norms, which are effectively one and the same, public schooling serves as an extension of the state apparatus by reifying racial, as well as economic, hierarchy.

In response, therefore, some students of color counter this systematic denial of their cultural backgrounds by eschewing navigational capital for resistance. Poignantly, John Ogbu (1998) hypothesizes that “involuntary minorities” - the descendants of those incorporated into American society against their will via slavery and colonization - respond to discrimination and racism by developing “oppositional collective or group identities” (p. 177) that inform their attitudes toward school as a white institution. Ogbu believes that these students and their families might interpret the contingencies for school success - mastering curricula and standard English,
in addition to exhibiting “good” behaviors - as social control “designed to deprive minorities of their identities” (p. 178). Thus, these students may feel as though they have to choose between “acting white” so as to pursue upward mobility within racial capitalism, versus resisting school norms that would potentially alienate them from their communities. For students who choose the latter option of rejecting white cultural capital, racial identity manifests through defiance of academic and disciplinary standards and, subsequently, through educators’ lowered expectations and frustrations (Howard 2010). Certainly, Ogbu’s (1998) thesis would certainly benefit from more nuance, as he seems to imagine that resistance is necessarily self-defeating - Solórzano and Bernal (2001) distinguish between reactionary behavior without social justice motivations and transformative resistance - but his scholarly contribution nonetheless testifies to the need for pedagogy that is not only culturally responsive insofar as it connects with students of color by promoting navigational capital for their daily lives, but also a critical one that refines resistant capital by deconstructing the hierarchy of racial capitalism and devising a plan for activism within students’ daily lives.

The Need for Critical Pedagogy

How might pedagogy redress the inequities of racial capitalism by valuing non-white cultures and encouraging resistant capital, so that “the very act of knowing is related to the power of self-definition” (Mohanty 2003, pp. 194-195)? Above all, in order for low-income students of color to challenge the racial and class hierarchy within the American social structure, it is critical that classrooms afford these youth a greater measure of autonomy than what Paulo Freire (1970) terms the “banking model” of schooling, wherein teachers deposit knowledge into
students, creating a power dynamic that constructs the educator as an authority and the pupil as a passive receptacle. In light of Bourdieu’s (1986) observations on academic qualifications, this relationship comes to represent the societal status quo in microcosm; the teacher possesses, defines, and determines who receives cultural capital, and students comply to these norms to the greatest extent that they are capable of doing so. Conversely, critical culturally responsive education “asks students to question, deconstruct, and then reconstruct knowledge” and constitutes “a mutual exchange...wherein educators are learning from students and vice versa” (Howard 2010, p. 76). Following this subversion of the traditional dichotomy between teacher and student, critical pedagogy in the context of racial capitalism proceeds to contest dominant ideologies that call for objectivity and neutrality in education, instead offering counter-storytelling as a liberatory methodological tool for examining oppression (Howard 2010). Rather than recognizing only the capital of the dominant culture, this critical pedagogy should offer academic content and teaching methods that cater to the repertoires, or “micro-level processes of meaning-making and decision-making - that is the way individuals in particular groups, societies develop an understanding of how the world works and make decisions based on that understanding” (Wilson 2009, p. 15), of racially and economically diverse students. To be clear, critical pedagogy should not merely substitute the knowledge of communities of color for white knowledge in its creation of intellectual authority - such “normative pluralism” (Giroux 1988, p. 95) would depoliticize and dehistoricize the idea of culture by imagining separate but equal spheres for white and non-white agency (Mohanty 2003) - but rather stipulate that its participants reflect upon cultural difference and its translation into power or lack thereof. Likewise, critical pedagogy cannot reduce itself to a “master narrative” that dichotomizes
between “oppressed” and “oppressor,” as this, too, diminishes the agency of communities of color to change racial capitalism. If critical pedagogy truly is to foster resistant capital, it must show that the existing social structure is not an inevitability by becoming postmodern and embracing “the productive, micropolitical, and less-than-rational dimensions of power relations” (Wendt 2001, p. 48). Moreover, critical pedagogy can invest teachers and students in disrupting the status quo through education by requiring that participants “go beyond the classroom walls to make instruction work” and “capitalize on cultural resources” (Moll & Gonzales 2004, p. 711), framing issues of race and class within a local context and collaborating to work towards direct action within their communities. Such a pedagogy of agency, as Mark Bautista (2012) terms this praxis, not only reverses the deficit paradigm of the achievement gap, but also shifts the very purpose of education. At its core, critical pedagogy aspires not only to confer navigational capital for the individual agency of students of color, but also to convert resistant capital into collective opposition to both the hegemonic norms for knowledge and conduct in schools and the structure of racial capitalism as a whole. In short, therefore, critical pedagogy is less a matter of closing the opportunity gap and more about changing the opportunity itself.

**Realizing Critical Pedagogy through the State**

Nevertheless, the rhetoric of opportunity gap remains useful from a policy perspective because it exposes as fallacy the “American Dream” - the premise that all students have equal opportunity to pursue upward mobility (Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003) - and consequently demands political action. Similarly, framing educational inequities in terms of the opportunity gap represents a strategic decision for actualizing relevant pedagogical changes as well, because
its concentration on socioeconomic class makes it more amenable to a predominantly white population of teachers who view race as a taboo topic and adopt approaches of colorblindness (Tatum 2007). In spite of these aversions, however, G.R. Howard (2006) professes that “most white educators want schooling to become more than a mechanism of social control that favors white children” (p. 51), which would present an auspicious outlook for the prospect of institutionalizing critical pedagogy. Taking these circumstances into account, it is possible that emphasizing the notion of opportunity gap could function as a proverbial foot in the door for leveraging the material resources of the state to reform it from within and extend American cultural citizenship to communities of color. To clarify, Renato Rosaldo (1997) conceives of cultural citizenship as “a process by which rights are claimed and expanded” in an increasingly diverse United States, and he proposes that “the manner by which groups claim cultural citizenship may very well affect a renegotiation of the basic social contract of America” (p. 96). As pertains to education, Rosaldo’s thesis would intimate that critical pedagogy achieved through the state might reconfigure understandings of cultural capital, whereby navigational and resistant approaches would coalesce towards the same end of national belonging. Nevertheless, Robinson’s (1983) analysis of the state as inherently racialized and hierarchical would evince a healthy disbelief about working through the mainstream political structure to secure meaningful progress toward equity. Relatedly, Rosaldo’s contemporary Aihwa Ong (1996) sees cultural citizenship as “dialectically determined by the state and its subjects,” who either “exercise or submit to power relations” (p. 738). In other words, Ong argues that securing cultural citizenship through the state invariably involves some degree of concession to the status quo, meaning that attempts to enact critical pedagogy predicated upon the politically palatable logic of the
opportunity gap might inadvertently compromise the revolutionary spirit of the movement. Of course, even within this schematic, individual teachers and students of color can share racial counternarratives and non-white cultural capital as self-determination and collective empowerment in opposition to hegemonic curricular and behavioral norms, and it is at this intersection that Growth Mindset Academy exists. This work, then, looks to explore what constitutes cultural capital at Growth Mindset Academy, which purports to offer a politically viable and culturally responsive model of education, in both knowledge creation and discipline, and how individual actors manifest their identities - participatory or oppositional - in learning and social processes. In doing so, the work will hope to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between racial capitalism and public schooling, and how racial and class identities are interpellated or deconstructed within this schematic.
Chapter Three: Literature Review

From Paulo Freire’s (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed to the present day, numerous scholars have sought to define critical pedagogy and, at the same time, to emphasize its importance in the context of an educational system that reflects and reproduces the inequities of larger society. A vast body of literature deals with the history of schooling as social control for people of color, ranging from the Native American boarding schools of Carlisle, Pennsylvania (Au, Brown, and Calderon 2016; Grande 2015) to modern neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed 2006; Mohanty 2003). Moreover, in response to these unequal evaluations of cultural wealth between white and non-white communities, additional works detail the socialization process by which interactions between curricula and behavioral standards pathologize low-income students of color or, conversely, construct these youth as “model minorities.” As a result, the need becomes manifest for a racially conscious approach to schooling that simultaneously affirms the experiences of students of color and inspires collective action against systemic oppression. Predictably, though, the racial capitalist state has largely problematized critical pedagogy from both a policy and teacher praxis perspective, while attempts at circumnavigating the state struggle in light of disparities in material capital. Socially conscious initiatives such as Growth Mindset Academy ostensibly imagine that they best serve low-income students of color by making some concessions to the status quo in order to secure student success by traditional metrics and their own economic viability. In doing so, however, these programs advocate for the agency of individual students within the structure rather than transformative change. This literature review, therefore, seeks to reconcile these contradictions by creating a dialogue between the revolutionary spirit of critical pedagogy and the reality of racial capitalism, so as to
comprehend how positionality within the latter informs identity formation among students, and whether it is possible to work within an inherently hierarchical structure to achieve reforms for equity.

Inequities of Traditional Schooling: Curricular Genocide and Neoliberal Multiculturalism

Since Growth Mindset Academy and like-minded programs present their cultural responsiveness as a counterpoint to the typical academic experiences of low-income youth of color, it bears exploring how state-sponsored education has historically underserved these students and continues to do so today. In their work *Reclaiming the Multicultural Roots of US Curriculum*, Wayne Au, Anthony L. Brown, and Dolores Calderon (2016) illustrate the role that schools have played in denying the cultural capital of communities of color so as to elevate white knowledge and naturalize white hegemony. Specifically, Au, Brown, and Calderon trace the roots of this “curricular genocide” to boarding schools for Native American students in Carlisle, which sought to deny the sovereignty of indigenous peoples by eradicating their lived experiences in favor of white intellectual standards and behavioral norms (2016). Sandy Grande (2015) makes the case in *Red Pedagogy* that racial capitalism is both a cause and effect of this curricular genocide, and that the United States has constituted a racial hierarchy predicated upon and strengthened by the conflation of whiteness with civilization in its relations to labor and land development. Nonetheless, since such blatant exclusion of Native Americans, as well as other non-white peoples, exposed as hypocrisy the state’s rhetoric of equal opportunity, rising ethnic tensions within the classroom and larger society necessitated a new model for education-as-assimilation. Accordingly, as James A. Banks (1993) recounts, “intergroup
education” emerged in the 1940s to mitigate the outrage over racial inequity by promoting human relations while deliberately downplaying power differentials, with the idea being that learning “democratic values” would lead students to conclude that “[they] are different but the same.” Of course, this colorblind rendering of “sameness” essentially meant “Americanness,” or “occupying the place of the universal subject, for which whiteness was once the synecdoche” (Melamed 2006, p. 8). As a result, intergroup education continued to alienate students of color by devaluing their histories and lived experiences, and the divide between ethnic groups persisted. These circumstances, in turn, gave rise to the present day paradigm of neoliberal multiculturalism, which recognizes race as social construct, celebrates antiracism as a national value, and locates the solution to ethnic inequality in “market individualism” and “civic nationalism” (Melamed 2006, p. 2), thereby exempting capitalism and denying its racial components. As pertains to this study, the post-racial vision of neoliberal multiculturalism is precisely the paradigm that Growth Mindset Academy seeks to critique, yet one that it simultaneously risks reinforcing through collaboration with the state.

The literature on race and public schools thus reveals a pattern: formal education reinforces the norms of the dominant group and only evaluates students of color when their academic performance and conduct conforms to these norms. The oppression of whole communities continues both inside and outside the classroom, and the expression of ethnic frustration threatens the status quo. Temporarily, political compromises alleviate these problems, until inevitably they resurface. In examining the means and ends of this dynamic, though, it is also imperative to consider the role of racial capitalism. Because Melamed’s (2006) neoliberal multicultural model of “Americanness” in public schools continues to privilege white,
middle-class cultural capital, students whose backgrounds correspond to this paradigm enjoy the greatest opportunity to achieve upward mobility through education. Meanwhile, as Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) illustrates how students of color internalize this oppression and must decide whether to pursue school success by adopting identities of racelessness, or otherwise become tracked into remedial coursework. Then, given the role of schools in conferring academic qualifications that translate into economic capital (Bourdieu 1986), those who advance through this educational structure indirectly affirm its process and values simply by virtue of their solidified class status. Of equal importance, these individuals also directly leverage their material advantage to affect policy that reinforces neoliberal multiculturalism. Specifically, those for whom the exercise of white, middle class cultural capital has yielded school and economic success consequently possess the power to deny race as a causal factor for discrepant academic outcomes, and they accomplish this obscuring through the incorporation of multicultural content so as to sustain the illusion that students from diverse groups might have “an equal chance to experience success and mobility” (Banks 1993, p. 3). These curricular additions, in turn, allow for the dominant class to depoliticize high-stakes standardized testing - which similarly reflects white, middle class norms - as an objective metric of student performance and justify its use as a sorting mechanism in schools (Ferguson 2000). In summary, those who wield white, middle class cultural capital configure public education as social control that legitimizes the status quo by replicating racial hierarchy within classrooms and reproducing it in larger society. Ultimately, then, the students who enter school with the cultural background conducive to success go on to occupy influential positions in the social structure, while, for their counterparts of color, racial exploitation takes on a new form of wage labor.
Academic Disengagement and Disproportionate Discipline of Youth of Color

Perhaps more nefariously, the influence of racial capitalism in public education extends beyond curricula and teacher praxis that segregate schools and stratify society; in addition, several scholars have explored the means through which the systematic denial of non-white forms of cultural capital in self-expression influence identity development for youth of color. In particular Beverly Daniel Tatum’s (1997) *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* and Ann Arnett Ferguson’s (2000) *Bad Boys* attest to the process of racial formation in public education, as well as its repercussions. Tatum (1997) posits that low-income students of color who choose not to conform to school academic and behavior standards by portraying themselves as raceless construct their identities in opposition to these norms, disengaging from instruction that does not speak to their cultural backgrounds and disrupting class. More succinctly, Pedro Noguera (2003) proposes that “once they know that the rewards of an education - namely, acquisition of knowledge and skills and ultimately, admission to college, and access to good paying jobs - is not for them, students have little incentive to comply with school rules.” Elaborating upon these understandings, Ferguson (2000) contends that low-income students of color not only act out in protest of a school environment that ignores the richness of their cultural repertoires, but also derive unchosen racial identities from discipline and punishment. In this interpretation, youth of color, through displays of defiance as well as sexuality, make their claim to “counterauthority” in the face of curricular genocide and social exclusion. Nonetheless, as is typical of neoliberal multiculturalism - which reframes racial conflict as an issue of individual psychology manageable through attitudinal change (Mohanty 2003) - schools extract these students from their larger social contexts and treat them as
pathological and instrumental actors via referrals to counselors that result in disciplinary measures such as suspensions (Ferguson 2000), labeling these youth as “at-risk” and ridding their classrooms of non-conformists. Punitive strategies such as these, which remove dissident individuals from school environments altogether under zero tolerance policies, are especially damaging for students of color because they risk the entry of these youth into the school-to-prison pipeline. In a longitudinal urban ethnography of adolescent Black and Latino boys, Victor Rios (2011) demonstrates how the stigmatizing of youth of color as “delinquent” by school personnel simultaneously ensures that their defiance of school norms persists, precipitating their expulsion and entry into the criminal justice system. In short, digression aside, the literature implies that students’ compliance or non-compliance with school behavioral norms strongly correlates with whether their educational experiences promote a sense of belonging by recognizing their cultural backgrounds. As previously noted, some low-income students of color who conform to this system go on to accrue material wealth, but those who defy the status quo risk severe consequences inside and outside the classroom, and the socioeconomic repercussions of each respective pathway reinforce the interconnectedness of public education and racial capitalism.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Content and Methods for Agency within the Structure**

Under the premise that the academic disengagement and disproportionate discipline of students of color in traditional education stems from the restriction of cultural capital to formal knowledge and appropriate conduct within the realm of white, middle-class norms, it stands to reason that institutionalizing a culturally responsive pedagogy would represent an effective way
to reverse the inequities that public schools presently perpetuate. Crucially, culturally responsive pedagogy differs from neoliberal multiculturalism in that it encompasses teacher praxis as well as classroom content, and a great deal of literature has devoted itself to providing a framework for this philosophy. Tyrone Howard (2010) begins by explaining that culturally responsive pedagogy “recognizes the rich and varied cultural wealth, knowledge, and skills that students from diverse groups bring to schools” and, in addition to multicultural curricula, “seeks to develop dynamic teaching practices, multiple means of assessment, and a philosophical view of teaching that is dedicated to nurturing student academic, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, and physiological well being” (pp. 67-68). In order to realize this objective, educators must make inquiries into their students’ prior experiences with and perceptions of school, and also identify the tools and practices that their students use to navigate their communities (Howard 2010). Ironically, by this definition, a majority of pedagogical approaches in traditional school settings are already culturally responsive, but only for middle-class white students (Irvine & Armento 2001). Conversely, teaching to and through the strengths of students of color would mark tangible progress toward combating deficit perspectives and internalized oppression.

What might such implementations of culturally responsive pedagogy look like? At its most rudimentary level, C.D. Lee (2007) chronicles how students analyzed literary works like *Beloved* (Morrison 1987) without predetermined rubrics, allowing them use their own cultural capital in terms of both language and lived experience so as to “make connections between what they already do and what they are expected to do with canonical, school based problems” (p. 61). Similarly, N.S. Nasir (2002) shares findings from two studies in which that building on African
American adolescents’ knowledge of dominoes and basketball led to increased engagement in math instruction. Still, cultural responsiveness encompasses methods of knowledge transmission as well as content additives. Along these lines, other authors cite more robust examples of what Banks (1993) terms an “equity pedagogy” - techniques and methods that facilitate the success of students from diverse groups - such as the Kamehameha Early Education Project, which sought to promote the academic and social success of Native Hawaiian children by conducting reading lessons in their cultural linguistic style of “talk-story” (Tharp et. al. 2007), or teachers’ constant movement around the room coupled with students’ hands-on problem-solving and independent research at a predominantly Black charter school in Inglewood, CA (Howard 2010). That being said, Banks (1993) hardly advocates for a culturally monolithic classroom, and so he imagines culturally responsive teaching as a means for students to become “bicognitive” (p. 19).

Relatedly, Rogoff and Angelillo (2002) caution educators against viewing students from the same ethnic group as culturally homogenous and static - in their words, the “box problem” (p. 215) - and, in response, offer the simple suggestion that teachers familiarize themselves with their students’ preferences and meet them where they are. Indeed, a final, vital aspect of culturally responsive pedagogy is genuine care, which doubles as a basis for teachers to build relationships with students and as an underpinning for mutual academic and social engagement.

Even so, culturally responsive pedagogy alone may not be enough to fundamentally disrupt the oppression of racial capitalism, through which racialization outside of school informs preconceived notions of public education for both low-income students of color and their teachers. Surprisingly, much of the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy lacks a critical perspective for social progress and, in fact, assesses student achievement by metrics of neoliberal
multiculturalism. For instance, the Los Angeles Unified School District’s African American Learners Initiative acknowledges the rich linguistic diversity of its participants, but emphasizes the mastery of “Standard English” (Howard 2010), which reinforces the tension between “minority discourses” and “official language use,” and portrays the culture of these students as “other” with respect to traditional schooling (Fernsten 2007). Contrary to what this endeavor might suppose, reading and writing instruction is an intrinsically political act and, when students are unable to contest the dynamics of the academy that have made them outsiders, they develop identities as marginal writers. Likewise, the UCLA Sunnyside GEAR Up Program, which comprised a student body that was 50 percent Latino and 48 percent Black, evinced cultural responsiveness and intensive care for its students through home visits and financial support, but concentrated on standardized test preparation and mandated that participants be in good behavioral standing; as this literature review has discussed, both of these norms are dictated by the cultural capital of the dominant white middle class. Thus, culturally responsive pedagogy ostensibly aspires to inculcate navigational capital (Yosso 2005) for students of color within a hostile racial and economic structure, but stops short of affecting change to the structure itself.

Critical Pedagogy: Potential and Challenges

In light of this revelation, those seeking racial justice in public education and society at large must ask: can pedagogy go further? Is it possible for teachers and students to foster not only navigational capital for individual agency, but also resistant capital that meaningfully challenges the racial status quo (Yosso 2005)? In sharp contrast to neoliberal multicultural education - and some iterations of culturally responsive teaching - critical pedagogy actively
addresses racial power dynamics, conceptualizing difference as “conflict, struggle, and the threat of disruption” and grounding race as historical construction rather than “benign variation” (Mohanty 2003). Moreover, critical pedagogy aims to foster a relational space where students and teachers together arrive at a radical self-awareness so as to collectively heal from the legacies of colonialism and racial exploitation (Morales et al 2016). Like culturally responsive pedagogy, critical pedagogy situates academic content within students’ lives, but rather than targeting the acquisition of academic English or improved test scores, critical pedagogy proceeds to incorporate students’ voices and cultural knowledge into collective action against racial and economic injustice (Tintiango-Cubales et al 2015). Under this purview, therefore, schools no longer serves as “places for training youth for jobs in the corporate economy,” wherein one’s professional success hinges upon conformity to white, middle class cultural capital, but instead “connect students with the needs of their immediate neighborhood” (Omatsu 2003, p. 11), where their activism can further inspire efforts toward promoting critical pedagogy, and vice versa.

Despite the fact that critical pedagogy aims for nothing short of radical racial awareness and transformative social change, however, its proponents must first overcome the obstacle of working within the existing structure in order to realize their goals on a large scale. At this time, critical pedagogy primarily exists independently of the state through grassroots movements, and Jodi Melamed (2016) goes so far as to argue that critical pedagogy is entirely irreconcilable with neoliberalism because of the aforementioned pattern that receiving recognition from the state unavoidably compromises the spirit of revolution. Tuck and Yang (2012), as well as Sandy Grande (2015), also posit critical pedagogy as an oxymoron within the racial capitalism because the land on which public schools are built does not belong to the state in the first place, and so
these scholars name literal decolonization as a requisite condition for widespread critical pedagogy. Yet, though these ideologies are certainly valid, they admittedly do not translate into pragmatic solutions for the immediate future. Fortunately, other scholars convey a greater optimism for mobilizing state resources to realize critical pedagogy from within the existing political structure (Uruchima 2016). Addressing a potential relationship between ethnic studies and the socioeconomic structure, Tania Uruchima’s effectively proposes a policy equivalent to the “survival strategies” that James A. Banks (1993) attributes to indigenous students: superficially complying to curricular standards while resisting curricular genocide via private cultural practices. Specifically, Uruchima imagines that relevant actors can secure state funding for a “politically palatable” vision of critical pedagogy that celebrates increased academic achievement among low-income students of color, yet simultaneously guarantees that their communities maintain control of pedagogy so as to preserve its subversive intent. Though Uruchima fears that government involvement may reduce critical pedagogy to “test knowledge,” she sees a precedent in California’s implementation of a statewide ethnic studies program (2016). While Melamed (2016) would undoubtedly problematize this development, it is worth noting as a last word on the subject that the state apparatus cannot help but shape society and thereby intervene with social organizations, and so the question becomes not whether it should become involved, but how it can contribute (Weldon 2011). Thus, it is within this paradox that initiatives such as Growth Mindset Academy exist.

Will attempts to reform public education through a political structure that both results from and reproduces racial capitalism deny the value of cultural wealth of non-white communities as “academic knowledge,” or legitimize the current ethnic and class hierarchies by
promoting navigational capital at the expense of resistance? What are the implications for identity formation among low-income students of color within a pedagogical framework that is culturally responsive but not explicitly critical? How can teachers and students collaborate for shared understandings and activism that subvert the status quo? As movements toward critical pedagogy gain political traction, these questions will become increasingly frequent, and so this thesis looks to explore such inquiries in order to inform future praxis for working towards racial justice inside and outside of schools.
Chapter Four: Methodology

As previously noted, I employed three methods of data collection in my efforts to
determine what constitutes capital within a state-sponsored culturally responsive pedagogy, how
students manifest racial identities in response to curricula and teacher praxis, and whether
classrooms can constitute spaces of resistance wherein students and teachers challenge the
hierarchies of larger society. More specifically, my methods included curricular analysis,
participant observation, and semi-structured ethnographic interviews. Alone, each of these
strategies would have provided an incomplete picture of the complexities of academic and social
life at Growth Mindset Academy; together, they constitute a more robust mixed-methods
approach for a holistic overview of the program and its significance Nonetheless, there remain
limitations to my work. For one, my study addresses exclusively the social studies curriculum at
Growth Mindset Academy, and though Banks (2009) contends that social studies and language
arts in particular allow teachers to explore concepts, issues, themes, and events as context for
democratic decision-making and social action, Growth Mindset Academy aspired to cultural
responsiveness in other content areas as well. On the one hand, this concentration on social
studies should allow for the most precise and context-specific definition of cultural capital; on
the other, it would be neglectful to imply that language arts, mathematics, and the rest of Growth
Mindset Academy's offerings did not influence students’ identity formation within the program.
Likewise, in keeping with this specific focus, all four interview participants taught social studies
- albeit, in addition to their own unique elective courses - because these individuals could share
both their general impressions from managing classrooms and building relationships and
personal testaments to the impact of social studies instruction. Regrettably, the interviews
occurred in the fall and early winter of this past year, and while participants could readily recall anecdotes from the summer, this project undoubtedly would have benefited from more recency. Last, the component of participant observation entailed brief, informal conversations with the students soliciting their feedback on the program; with respect to their status as minors, our discussions did not delve deeper than relatively cursory check-ins, but their sentiments have still proven valuable to my findings. In summary, there exists room for improvement within this methodology, but, on the whole, my work purports a multifaceted analysis of academic capital, identity development, and resistance within a state-sponsored culturally responsive pedagogy.

Under the premise that there is a “hidden curriculum” in schoolwork that functions as “tacit preparation for relating to the process of production in a particular way” (Anyon 1980, p. 11) and that, in synthesis with Robinson (1983) and Bourdieu (1986), this hidden curriculum differs depending on the racial and class demographics, respectively, within a given classroom, this work seeks to discern from the social studies program at Growth Mindset Academy the implicit messages for individual and collective agency of low-income students of color within the American political and economic structure. Similar to Davies’s (2007) examination of the New Jersey Curriculum Framework for social studies, my thesis considers the standards imposed upon teachers - in this case, Measurable Outcomes and Exit Tickets - with the intent of determining what constitutes cultural capital within this pedagogy. Additionally, expanding upon Davies’ framework, my study also takes into account the prescribed strategies for knowledge creation in classrooms at Growth Mindset Academy, paying close attention to whether lessons call for traditional reading and writing or more active learning methods. Both of these factors, in turn, shed crucial light on the role that Growth Mindset Academy expects its students to fulfill
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inside and outside the classroom. Thus, curricular analysis represents an important lens through which to gain insight into identity formation, cultural citizenship, and the possibilities for collective resistance.

Participant observation served the same purpose. Here, it is imperative to provide context for Growth Mindset Academy as well as an explanation of the capacity in which the researcher witnessed the events of the program. Growth Mindset Academy - the result of a collaboration between a nonprofit organization and Denver Public Schools, and realized by a voter-signed fund within the district - transpired over the course of two months during the summer of 2017. Among its 200 attendees, most of whom were referred to the program by teachers and administrators during the school year, 40 percent of students identified as Black, 40 percent as Latino, 12 percent as multiracial, 6 percent as white, 1 percent as Asian, and 1 percent as Native American students. Roughly 80 percent of the students received free or reduced lunch, and their ages ranged from 11 to 14. The academy took place at a school in the Montbello neighborhood in northeastern part of the city, which predominantly comprises working class Black and Latino families; many of the students and some of the Teaching Fellows lived in this area. The majority of Teaching Fellows and I, however, were not from Montbello. During the program, I taught three sections of social studies and also led a newspaper elective for rising sixth grade students. While not teaching, I interacted with students at breakfast, lunch, and recess, becoming familiar with their personal interests, home lives, and thoughts on the program, and recording field notes whenever appropriate. I took care to document relevant information from the other Teaching Fellows and program leaders, too; in short, the observations of my study are not
all-encompassing, but they largely succeeded at accounting for all of the participants at Growth Mindset Academy.

Finally, my study made use of ethnographic interviews through four semi-structured conversations with the other social studies Teaching Fellows. Spanning 45 minutes at the shortest to 90 minutes at most, the interviews began with inquiries as to how these individuals came to work at Growth Mindset Academy, what they hoped to accomplish over the summer, and whether they were able to integrate their own cultural background and lived experiences into their praxis. Eventually, questions segued into more direct inquiries about which lessons and activities had resonated with students, which had not, and how the Teaching Fellows had managed conflict in their classroom. True to Spradley’s (1979) protocol for conducting ethnographic interviews, I took painstaking aims to transcribe participants’ words verbatim and to chronicle instances when they adapted rhetoric from the program - such as “windows and mirrors” or “growth mindset” - into their speech. In my endeavor to derive meaning and identify themes across the interviews, therefore, I concerned itself not only with the content of participants’ sentiments, but also with linguistic choices that evinced strong enthusiasm, meaningful reflection, and even resistance. All in all, I approached the sometimes self-contradictory perspectives of both students and Teaching Fellows with seriousness and empathy in equal measure, and the citations to follow attempt to reflect the emotions and intentions of these individuals as accurately as possible.
Chapter Five: Data and Analysis

Academic Capital within Neoliberal Multiculturalism

In accordance with Bourdieu’s (1986) realization of academic qualifications as cultural capital, it stands to reason that an analysis of the content and methods comprising the social studies curriculum at Growth Mindset Academy lends insight into how a state-sponsored culturally responsive pedagogy defines “knowledge,” and into the implications of this “knowledge” for students’ agency within both public education and larger society. Before delving into the significance of specific lessons, however, an overview of the program’s structured approach to learning is in order. At Growth Mindset Academy, every class begins with a “Do Now” activity intended to engage students from the outset; typically, this task involves a written response to a short essay prompt such as “Predict how people’s identities influenced the way they responded to the news and information about Ferguson.” After students jot down their ideas, Teaching Fellows ask them to discuss with partners or share with the entire room. Following this procedure, for which the lesson plan usually allots five minutes, Teaching Fellows connect the content to their students’ lives through the “Why Care?” element and explain what the “Measurable Outcome” calls for students to accomplish on a given day. Having established these guidelines, the Teaching Fellow progresses to the central feature of the class, which varies but often entails students’ writing a journal entry, before concluding with a final writing assignment couched within the “Exit Ticket” so as to assess students’ engagement with the material. In discerning what constitutes cultural capital within this pedagogy, therefore, each component of this routine - especially the explicit goal of a given lesson articulated by its Measurable Outcome - doubles as a vital data point.
Having elaborated upon the regimented framework for learning at Growth Mindset Academy, I will now provide a summary of the social studies content which, as I have alluded, purports cultural responsiveness through themes of prejudice reduction and democratic participation in the context of the community response in Ferguson, Missouri to the death of Michael Brown. On the first day, students contemplate the myriad ways through which people become aware of current events and fill out a chart with information that they already know about Michael Brown, in addition to information that they want to learn. As students become more familiar with what transpired in Ferguson, the next several lessons look to make a connection between identity - racial, class, gender, or otherwise - and interpretation of current events, inquiring as to how self-image informs opinion. Along these lines, the curriculum proposes that students familiarize themselves with three distinct types of bias - implicit, explicit, and confirmation - by reading newspaper articles about Michael Brown, watching videos that present police officers’ testimonies in order to entertain contrasting perspectives, and taking a test to identify their own implicit assumptions, all with the goal of considering how stereotypes might inform collective memories. Thus, transitioning into the importance of verifying information, the curriculum seeks to examine the benefits and shortcomings of social media as journalism, paying particular attention to the credibility of Twitter accounts, as well as the limitations of photography and firsthand footage for “telling the whole story.” These lessons involve students in reading newspaper articles and video transcripts, after which they generate a list of factors for determining the validity of these platforms. For the last week of the program, the curriculum advocates for the necessity of free press within a democracy by enumerating First Amendment rights and sharing the account of a reporter whose freedom was infringed upon in
his coverage of the Ferguson protests. At the same time, the curriculum prescribes for students to watch a press conference held by Ferguson police and read the Department of Justice report exonerating Darren Wilson so as to “hear both sides.” Finally, the curriculum encourages students to practice journalistic skills in their daily use of social media, ultimately conceiving of the press as an arena in which there exists equal opportunity to share one’s voice and, by extension, as a forum for reducing prejudice and working towards racial equity.

Universally, the social studies Teaching Fellows spoke to an initial excitement about working with a culturally responsive curriculum that directly addressed race. Across my interviews, a consensus emerged along the lines of Derrick’s recollection that “At first, I thought that the subject matter was interesting, relevant, and powerful, and those are things that students should think through and place in context.” Moreover, according to Rose, the students of Growth Mindset Academy shared this enthusiasm; when asked about her classes’ reception of the curriculum, Rose narrated how “kids would come up to me and tell me, ‘I like how we talk about real stuff with you.’” Nonetheless, Rose continued to note that “[the curriculum] did get repetitive” insofar as “we talked about bias every single day,” and Tom corroborated that students quickly grew frustrated with these concepts. Surely, these frustrations derived in part from sheer mundaneness, in terms of both discussing the same concepts and articulating them through rote reading and writing activities. Yet, it also seems reasonable to imagine that the low-income students of color at Growth Mindset Academy took umbrage with a pedagogical philosophy that posited the solution to cultural deficit narratives and material inequities within human relations and dialogue rather than transformative structural change. Indeed, several lessons illustrate how, in keeping with neoliberal multiculturalism, Growth Mindset Academy
draws upon a “psychologically based race relations analysis” that “focuses on prejudice rather than institutional and historical domination,” thereby “erasing all power hierarchies” and “defining experience as fundamentally individual and atomistic, subject to behavioral and attitudinal change” (Mohanty 2003, p. 209). More succinctly, Rose described the program’s understanding of race as “a personal idea” instead of a systemic one; to this point, two consecutive lessons within the program’s first week attempt to educate students on stereotypes and prejudice by presenting a cartoon depicting the judgmental thoughts of a white man and a Black man as they encounter each other on a city street (Trudeau 1994) and by reading aloud an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros’s (1984) *The House on Mango Street*, respectively. The Exit Tickets for these lessons call for classes to critically examine their own preconceived notions regarding those from different cultural backgrounds by asking students how they can “unlearn stereotypes,” portraying prejudice as a function of one’s attitude rather than historical and material inequities. To be clear, I do not seek deny the value of prejudice reduction, which Banks (1993) notes as important not only for challenging deficit paradigms, but also for reconciling an observed distinction between personal and group identity among youth of color. Likewise, in her interview, Zoe affirmed that “making friendships with people of different races is great,” but was deliberate in her emphasis that doing so “won’t solve all of the structural issues.” By positing the problem within personal biases instead of political and economic institutions, however, the social studies curriculum at Growth Mindset Academy obscures the power dynamics that inform prejudice, as well as how prejudice contributes to the marginalization of communities of color, ultimately fostering the illusion that the racial capitalist state need not change so long as individual actors work to disabuse themselves of deficit paradigms.
Progressing chronologically through the curriculum, Growth Mindset Academy’s later focus on freedom of speech as a vehicle for equity similarly leaves the state apparatus unchallenged. This unit in particular - with its verbatim reading of the First Amendment and of a letter from the Reporters’ Committee for Freedom of the Press to the Ferguson chief of police - exemplified Davies’s (2007) finding from the *New Jersey Curriculum Framework* for social studies that students “need only to acquire the core knowledge in order to participate in the great public dialogue” (p. 55). Likewise, just as Davies discovers that, in belaboring the notion of a universally available “economic literacy,” the New Jersey curriculum sustains the capitalist system, the premise of equality through journalism suggests that all involved in the aforementioned dialogue are privileged with the same platform, regardless of the differing status and visibility that result from discrepancies in material and cultural capital. In situating the solution to discrimination and inequality within civic participation, the Growth Mindset Academy social studies system “reifies” the status quo, which is to say that it “reestablishes the dimensions of society without history at the heart” (Thompson 1987, p. 527). Moreover, in its aspirations toward “dispassionate, objective reporting” - a Measurable Outcome for multiple lessons - the curriculum eschews critical inquiry into the very notion of objectivity in favor of agency within an unjust structure. Notably, an earlier lesson presents a video from the *New York Times* wherein police officers of diverse ethnic, class, and gender identities express a wide variety of ideologies on race before arriving at an uneasy consensus that the problem of profiling lies not within the police force itself, but within the biases of individual members due to the pervasive racism of larger society (Gandbhir & Peltz, 2015), which Zoe would go on to characterize as “whack” in her interview. Here, true to the interpersonal emphasis of neoliberal
multiculturalism, the message is that police officers need to become more open-minded towards people of color and, at the same time, students of color need to become more sympathetic toward police officers. Accordingly, subsequent Exit Tickets ask classes to identify “the challenges that police faced after Michael Brown’s death” and to consider “how the need to keep a community safe can come into conflict with the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment.” Overall, then, the curriculum trends closer to legitimating the status quo than it does to devising activist praxis for identifying and redressing the racism trenchant within institutions such as the journalism industry or the police force. In its insistence upon prejudice reduction and the pursuit of objectivity as the answer, then, social studies at Growth Mindset Academy reiterates that change occurs at the level of the individual attitudes, and that racial equity occurs not from resisting, but from learning to navigate the current political and economic structure.

As a closing remark on the reification of American society in his curricular analysis of the New Jersey social studies program, Davies (2007) contends that “nothing short of a radical reexamination of the ideological concepts that are accepted as a fundamental part of this society will allow us to transform this society into the type of democratic society that would place justice and equality ahead of competition and capital, people ahead of profit, and democracy ahead of capitalism” (p. 66). Within a pedagogy that is both culturally responsive and critical, foremost among these ideological concepts in need of reexamination is race. On the one hand, the social studies curriculum at Growth Mindset Academy directly refutes the colorblind approaches conducive to cultural deficit by deliberately engaging the discomfort that teachers and students feel when broaching the subject of race (Tatum 2007), engendering potential for the development of a critical consciousness. On the other, though, the curriculum stops short of engaging with
race as a form of social control for the political and economic subjugation of communities of color, instead trending closer to Mohanty’s (2003) neoliberal multicultural paradigm of “benign variation” (p. 193). To this point, the second lesson of the summer asks students to fill out an “identity chart,” comprising a list of descriptors, including racial identity, that they would apply to themselves, as well as descriptors that others might apply to them. On this occasion, I vividly remember the social studies Teaching Fellows, especially those who identified as people of color, expressing ambivalence as to whether this activity would be productive or triggering; somewhat similarly, Camangian (2010) employs autoethnography as “an act of seeing the self through and as the other,” although he does so with the caveat that this activity becomes an “exercise in self-centeredness” (p. 184) if not geared toward hope and social change. Thus, this lesson embodies a paradox. On the one hand, experiences of race are grounded within individual identities and, through the eventual reading of Cisneros (1984), cultural practices. On the other, though, the curriculum does not uncover how the hegemony - “the active structure of the culture and experiences of the subordinate class by the dominant class” (McLaren 1989, p. 74) - of the white middle class conflates cultural capital with its own norms so as to denigrate the practices of communities of color, thereby withholding cultural citizenship and economic mobility. Again, a narrow focus on prejudice reduction masks the power dynamics behind racial meanings, and the focus on “harmony in diversity” (Mohanty 2003, p. 193) downplays the possibility for disrupting the political and material realities of racial capitalism.

On that note, the curriculum calls for Teaching Fellows to show students public opinion polls concerning the shooting of Michael Brown, and to inquire through Exit Tickets whether white and Black people would have processed the news differently. Here, to its credit, the
curriculum makes a connection between racial identity and bias - albeit, without illuminating the disparate repercussions of white versus Black biases - but it falls short of critical pedagogy by virtue of the fact that it “addresses people as though they have a fixed and coherent position about identity categories such as race, sexuality, and gender” and “creates an ideal of how they should respond,” ultimately serving to “perpetuate vocabularies of deficit and hierarchy and, in turn, human relations that detail the inadequacies of those who do not compare favorably” (North 2007, p. 232). Taken at face value, this claim ostensibly contradicts the need to recognize the reality of race as a historical and economic phenomenon. In synthesis with other literature on critical pedagogy, however, these two understandings are not mutually exclusive; it is challenging but possible to conceptualize racialization as an institutional mechanism for labeling and oppression while simultaneously comprehending that the shared experience of racialization among communities of color does not necessitate a homogenous perspective, and that these communities can contest racial narratives through a variety of means. For this reason, Davies (2007) contends that a critical social studies curriculum must not “reduce itself to a ‘master narrative’ that dichotomizes ‘oppressed and oppressors,’” (p. 65) because to do so would deny students’ agency within both schools and larger society. Conversely, a robust pedagogy of agency ascribes to Wendt’s (2001) postmodern archetype, which “recognize[s] the productive, micropolitical, and less-than-rational dimensions of power relations at the same time it follows the post modern imperative to problematize rational thought and master narratives” (p. 48). In addressing race as an essential component of identity, however, the social studies curriculum at Growth Mindset Academy seems to concede racism as inevitable without much regard for its institutional and material origins; as a result, the program does not propose alternatives to the
racial capitalist state, but rather looks to inculcate within individual students the requisite knowledge for mobility within a hostile system. In other words, Growth Mindset Academy’s rendering of race as ineffable reality, in conjunction with its reification of the political status quo, suggests that knowledge within the context of neoliberal multicultural education constitutes navigational, rather than resistant, capital.

Fittingly, because Growth Mindset Academy seeks to espouse capital for its students’ agency within the existing socioeconomic structure, its preponderance of literacy-based activities mirrors that of traditional schooling. Keeping with the theme of navigational capital, review of the social studies curriculum reveals a disproportionate emphasis on reading and writing aptitude; in addition to the daily Do Now, journal, and Exit Ticket prompts, lessons often entail students responding to video transcripts, newspaper articles, and government documents with several paragraphs of analysis. Consistent with what C.D. Lee (2007) observed in studying culturally responsive pedagogy, Growth Mindset Academy does not apply any grading rubrics or prose guidelines to these procedures, attempting, in turn, to meet students where they are. Taking into consideration the circumstances whereby low-income youth of color perceive themselves as marginal writers (Fernsten 2007) in the face of alienation from the hegemonic definition of standard English, therefore, Growth Mindset Academy conceives of this approach an effective way to involve its attendees in the learning process (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade 2005) and to build comfort with teaching methods that will typify their traditional schooling experiences, so that they can later cultivate the survival skills for which Delpit (1986) advocates in her work. Yet, true to its vision that students can reconcile and thrive within oppressive systems by adapting positive individual attitudes, Growth Mindset Academy overlooks the extent to which
its attendees may have sedimented marginal writer identities, and its pedagogy lacks the methodological diversity needed to engage these youth. A particular instance from one of my classes illustrates the consequences of this singular focus on literacy; Christopher, a Latino student who came from a bilingual household, left his paper entirely blank while his classmates worked on a three paragraph summary of a video that they had just watched and, later that day, shared that he had felt incapable of completing the assignment because his writing routinely received poor grades during the school year. Although curricular endeavors such as these would purport to encourage students like Christopher to cultivate more confidence in their writing - and, eventually, to hone the skills that constitute navigational capital - this activity served the opposite effect. Across their interviews, the Teaching Fellows reported similar responses within their lessons to the equation of academic knowledge and the written word; Derrick contributed that “when [he] got too bogged down in one mode of learning, [he] risked losing [his] students,” while Tom attested that his classes came to see the curriculum as “a series of very repetitive concepts and very repetitive mediums through which we were trying to introduce those concepts.” Notwithstanding the marginal writer identities that some students exhibited, then, even the “two or three kids who just wanted to stay at their seat and write” in Rose’s lessons, frequently found themselves disinterested in the instruction of a given day. Thus, while I would not argue against the practice of culturally responsive writing, my observations and those of my coworkers suggest that a fully inclusive pedagogy should cater to the repertoires of all young learners by incorporating a wide variety of teaching methods.

To its credit, the social studies curriculum at Growth Mindset Academy can claim cultural responsiveness through the inclusion of comparatively non-traditional learning methods,
since Howard (2010) stipulates that teachers whose students claim a wide variety of racial, class, and cultural identities should ask themselves how often they allow for means of assessment such as role-playing, skits, poetry, rap, or newspaper creations to be part of their classroom. To this end, the majority of social studies lessons at Growth Mindset Academy incorporate at least one non-verbal assignment and, ironically, some of the previously referenced classes that reify the racial and structural status quo - in particular, the lessons that involve the identity chart and the interview with police officers - make use of teacher praxis that challenges the norms of traditional schooling. Specifically, the former occasion encourages students to draw cartoons that display the diverse components of their identity, and the latter facilitates a “gallery walk” through which students choose quotes from the police interview, transcribe them onto paper to be taped onto the wall, and circle around the room to discuss which excerpts most resonated with and troubled them. These culturally responsive techniques not only engage students to a greater degree than other learning tasks, but also momentarily redefine what constitutes cultural capital in an academic context. Even so, because every lesson culminates in literacy-based activities couched within journal entries and Exit Tickets, the language of which - “How can reporters and consumers verify the credibility of information about an event?” - was often inaccessible to students in my classes, Growth Mindset Academy appears to accept the conceit of traditional schooling that is it “good and correct” for the learning process to heavily rely upon reading and writing. Therefore, despite its culturally responsive approach to evaluating students’ transcription, the writing pedagogy at Growth Mindset Academy mirrors the content of the social studies curriculum insofar as academic capital amounts to agency within the structure rather than a radical reimagining of the possibilities for school and society.
On the whole, the social studies curriculum at Growth Mindset Academy suggests that a state-sponsored culturally responsive pedagogy eschews resistant capital for navigational capital or, in other words, that this educational context conceives of equity not by proposing alternatives to the racial capitalist state, but instead by inculcating within individual actors the requisite knowledge and skills for mobility within a hostile system. Moreover, the curriculum defines and confers navigational capital with its implicit message that cultural citizenship for communities of color entails civic participation in forms of public dialogue such as journalism and social media, simultaneously reifying that freedom of speech alone suffices as a means of overcoming oppression and contending that the solution to racism lies within the prejudice reduction of individual actors. Likewise, Growth Mindset Academy acknowledges the racial identities of its student population, yet also takes for granted that these constructs are essential to society, glossing over both the historical and economic repercussions of racial discourse and problematizing “raciology,” or “idea of an authentic, immutable connection between bodies, selves, and identities” (Melamed 2006, p. 20). Though the program’s confrontation of racial stereotypes is commendable, in ignoring the nuance of racial identity and the potential for subversion of these narratives, the curriculum takes for granted the racialization of its students and, in doing so, determines that navigational capital represents the more viable route to social justice. Accordingly, while Growth Mindset Academy caters to the vast breadth of cultural repertoires among its attendees by incorporating non-traditional learning methods, and manages to avoiding the “box problem” (Rogoff & Angelillo 2002) of assuming that students from the same identity learn the same way, the dominance of reading and writing tasks naturalizes the emphasis on these activities in traditional schooling where, in order to succeed and pursue
upward mobility, students of color must conform to the conventions of Standard English without recognition of their own linguistic wealth. Overall, then, the social studies curriculum at Growth Mindset Academy intimates the shortcomings of a pedagogy that is culturally responsive without offering critiques of the institutional and material inequities resultant from racial discourse. Within a neoliberal multicultural framework, navigation ultimately means understanding diversity not as a threat of disruption, but as a celebration of “how Black it [is] to be an American, how Latino, how Asian, how indigenous it [is] to be an American” (Chang 2014, p. 110), and the possibility of resistance finds no place in this academic discourse.

Pedagogy, Discipline, and Racialization

To reiterate, in addressing its students as though their positionality within a system of racial meanings is a fixed one, and subsequently extrapolating this understanding to events such as those that occurred in Ferguson, Growth Mindset Academy legitimizes the racialization of larger society, all the while ignoring the context and consequences of this phenomenon. Yet, in light of the disciplinary issues to which I have alluded, it bears asking whether the pedagogy of the program directly contributed to the racialization of its students. After all, Derrick’s finding that “many of [his] issues stemmed from students who weren’t able to manage reading or writing at a certain level, or who weren’t as vocal or weren’t proficient with English” hardly seems coincidental, and in fact echoes Noguera’s (2003) argument that the students most inclined toward reactionary behavior are those who lack the cultural capital privileged by hegemonic definitions of “knowledge.” As much as Growth Mindset Academy looks to support these youth in particular, however, its structured approach to learning actually exacerbates their struggles. In
contrast with Mohanty’s (2003) claim that critical pedagogy must combat any pressures toward standardization that would seek to deny students and teachers autonomy in the learning process, the stringent scheduling of Growth Mindset Academy - five minutes allotted for the completion of each Do Now activity, five minutes for the explanation of the Measurable Outcome, and so on - necessitates that Teaching Fellows gloss over student passions and concerns in order to reach the daily Exit Ticket. Here, as one might expect, is where classroom tensions arise, in no small part because this progression hinges upon students’ order and conformity at the same time it denies their agency for affecting change inside or outside the classroom. Of course, if culturally responsive pedagogy fails to critically examine traditional schooling or the racial capitalist state, then navigational capital in settings like Growth Mindset Academy manifests as an acquiescence to and naturalization of authority, to which any student resistance registers as pathological and in need of correction.

It would be an understatement to say that the Teaching Fellows and I did not expect to encounter the behavioral conflict that came to characterize our summer at Growth Mindset Academy. Although the two week teacher training briefly featured “classroom demos where we role played as rambunctious students,” Zoe recalls, “we took that as a joke.” Continuing, Zoe laments that “[disciplinary issues] were our lives for the rest of the summer, and we weren’t prepared for that.” Obviously, in retrospect, the idealism behind this disregard for the potential of student disengagement seems so naive as to be comical; nonetheless, I remember how I, too, had wholeheartedly believed that our culturally responsive and racially conscious pedagogy would guarantee students’ total investment, and so I had hardly entertained the possibility of class disruption until it became my daily reality. Why did my coworkers and I take discipline as a
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joke? In his interview, Derrick succinctly described the training as “having been built in a very vacuum environment,” and clarified to recount how Teaching Fellows “were given this ideal of a model school and led to believe that it was going to be that way.” Along the same lines, Zoe found that this idealism had “glossed over some of the baggage that students had brought to the program” by neglecting to address learning disabilities or to talk about the “very real needs” of northeast Denver, and, as a result, she often felt “helpless” and “like [her] job was to babysit.” Ultimately, at the heart of the problem the idea, articulated by Rose, that Growth Mindset Academy had purported to “collect a bunch of black and Mexican kids and raise them up.” By all accounts, this mission and rhetoric had resonated with the Teaching Fellows when the program leaders presented the purpose for the summer; evidently, though, we had collectively failed to consider whether our students had agreed to be raised up, or if perhaps they desired more autonomy in their own liberation.

Indeed, one potentially relevant piece of information that Growth Mindset Academy had failed to provide Teaching Fellows during the training was that *the majority of students did not want to be there*, as these youth so readily volunteered in my informal conversations with them. To clarify, some students had believed that the program would be “like camp” and that they would make new friends, but most acknowledged that their parents had wanted them to improve their reading and writing skills in the hopes that they would receive higher grades. Some students were referred to Growth Mindset Academy after garnering impressive standardized test scores, while others’ families discovered the program independently, and a few even alluded to having been enrolled by their parents after they had gotten in trouble during the school year, with the idea being that additional structure and discipline would reconcile these students to an
educational system that routinely alienated them from their lived experiences. Importantly, these windows into students’ home lives offer an intriguing counterpoint to Ogbu’s (1998) thesis - that communities of color necessarily see their cultural traditions and the norms of public education as mutually exclusive, and respond by developing oppositional identities - and suggest that marginalized families continue to value the accumulation of navigational capital through schooling as a means for obtaining the knowledge requisite for success within the status quo.

Nevertheless, if this is the case, the students at Growth Mindset Academy did not embrace this pursuit as readily as their parents did, demonstrating their resistance to the program’s behavioral norms by playing music with explicit content at recess, openly discussing sexuality, and defying the prohibition on hooded sweatshirts - mirroring some of the strategies employed by the African American students from Ferguson’s (2000) Bad Boys in defiance of their academic and cultural disenfranchisement - as well as verbal and physical fighting. Given Derrick’s account that the training had led Teaching Fellows to think that “the worst thing a student would do was say ‘Frick you!’ in the middle of a lesson,” all of these tactics served as a wake-up call of sorts. To say the least, such substantive challenges to the idealism of Growth Mindset Academy catalyzed a significant shift in the program’s approach to discipline and restorative justice, in contributing not only to the legitimation of racialization, but also to its genesis.

During the training, the leaders of Growth Mindset Academy shared their aspiration that 85 percent of enrolled students would attend the first day of the program, and that 85 percent of first day attendees would finish the program. Admittedly, although I do not have a precise figure, I can attest from my observations that the final enrollment was significantly smaller than this projection, due in large part to student disengagement coupled with disciplinary actions. Whereas
the training had espoused a “Core Belief” that “all students love learning and want to learn” in its attempts to reject deficit theories - concerning itself with semantic differences between phrases such as “these students” versus “our students” and “bad kids” versus “kids who make bad decisions” - the ensuing punitive dismissals seemed to concede that the program was unwilling or unable to deliver upon its promise of closing the opportunity gap for every child, especially since the Denver public school district had pledged to reimburse Growth Mindset Academy for any attendee who missed no more than six days of the summer. Thus, even if students’ infractions of the program’s disciplinary code did not constitute serious offenses by any standard, the discrepancy between reality and the “vacuum environment” that Teaching Fellows had optimistically come to expect magnified their response to any oppositional dynamics that developed in their classrooms. Without a doubt, in recognition of the prior disciplinary experiences that many attendees of Growth Mindset Academy may have had - the students to whom I spoke shared that their teachers during the school year were “mostly white,” “old,” and likely to “get mad easily” - some measure of conflict was likely to occur simply by virtue of what “school” had come to mean for these individuals: a hostile and culturally monolithic environment. Yet, instead of “[making] it so that [Fellows] learned more about the area, why students feel the way they do about teachers, and what the best ways of building relationships with students from Northeast Denver would be,” as Derrick would have desired, Growth Mindset Academy again posited prejudice reduction as the solution to institutional inequities, providing guidelines for students and Teaching Fellows alike to adapt a “growth mindset” - explained by the program as “the belief in the power of positivity” - as well as a protocol for “critical conversations” with kids who make bad decisions in order to complete the perceptive shift from
systemic oppression to manageable psychology. In short, therefore, the approach to conflict resolution at Growth Mindset Academy addressed the symptoms rather than the cause, and if the symptoms persisted for long enough, then clearly there existed an incompatibility between the treatment offered by the program and the students who were supposed to beneficiaries, and, in these extreme cases, dismissal represented the only reasonable recourse.

In addition, the neoliberal multicultural focus of Growth Mindset Academy on individual attitudes at the expense of systemic issues further manifested and contributed to students’ racialization through the program’s practice of teacher authority. While it cannot be said that Growth Mindset Academy ignored the relationship between race, privilege, and power altogether - the training devoted an entire day to Teaching Fellows’ self-examination of the advantage or stigmatization that their identities had conferred - the program failed to account for the fact that, against the backdrop of a predominantly white teaching force (Ingersoll & Merrill 2012), the relationship between educator and student is often microcosmic of that between white authorities and marginalized communities of color. Certainly, a culturally responsive pedagogy centered on prejudice reduction and dialogue through “critical conversations” works towards reconciling tensions that emerge, but it cannot redress the racial narratives and material realities of larger society. The same is true for the program’s translation of Emily Style’s (1996) conception of curriculum as window and mirror to the its population of Teaching Fellows. On the one hand, students expressed an appreciation that their teachers “had different stories” and “were at the same [developmental] stage as them,” and Teaching Fellows evinced the same enthusiasm for diversity. In his interview, Derrick talked about the importance of “being the first Black male teacher, or one of the few Black male teachers, that these students had,” after he, as a student
from the Deep South, had not met a Black male educator until his first year of college; similarly, Zoe, a Denver native, spoke to the city’s dearth of Black woman teachers and the pivotal opportunity for the program to connect with students over the summer. On the other, however, my experiences at Growth Mindset Academy made plainly evident that cultural representation, as well as responsive pedagogy, loses much its their impact if the classroom, no matter how diverse, retains a hierarchical structure.

Indeed, daily lessons at Growth Mindset Academy prescribe for the mastery of a “teacher presence” to “nonverbally communicate authority,” which, in turn, entails standing straight, speaking in a measured tone, cautioning students against misbehavior with stern eye contact. Within this purview, Teaching Fellows continue to convey their control of the classroom by conducting an “entry and exit routine” involving a firm handshake and brisk instructions for beginning the Do Now activity. Ultimately, then, the fact that students at Growth Mindset Academy were expected to passively receive orders from teachers who looked like them mattered far less than the fact that they were expected to passively receive orders at all. Moreover, the dynamic of “windows and mirrors” presupposed a level of trust that Teaching Fellows simply could not build over the course of a mere six weeks. Even if, as Tom observed, it seemed as though “the Teaching Fellows who spoke Spanish were able to immediately connect with the students who spoke Spanish at home and for whom English was a second language,” a the novelty of teachers’ sharing a cultural background with their students could not the reverse years’ worth of interactions with a hostile schooling system that the latter had experienced. Surely, Ladson-Billings’s (1996) finding that student perceptions of a teacher’s race - as well as class, gender, and sexuality - necessarily inform their receptiveness to instruction supports the
idea that diversity constitutes an important component of an equitable classroom. Of equal if not
greater significance for preventing racialization in classrooms, though, is that “students feel safe
and cared for” and “valued as whole beings” (Tintiango-Cubales 2015, p. 114). For this reason,
pedagogy that is not only culturally responsive, but also critical must go beyond representation in
content and personnel by reconfiguring the power dynamics within the classroom (Mohanty
2003), one example of which is Paulo Freire (1970)’s model of a problem-posing pedagogy that
“breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education” (p. 80) and engenders a
non-hierarchical classroom wherein all participants learn together. Despite the fact that Growth
Mindset Academy proposed an additional “Core Belief” that “we are students of our students,”
its emphasis on maintaining authority through learning routines and “teacher presence” meant
that, in many situations, navigational capital amounted to little more than conformity. It should
come as no surprise, therefore, that students resisted this denial of their agency by lingering in
the halls during lessons and turning in their Exit Tickets at the beginning of class. Still,
unfortunately for these youth, in their efforts to reclaim their humanity from an inflexible and
hostile structure, their exposure of the program’s utopian vision for both conduct and curriculum
as a facade set the stage for stringent discipline and subsequent racialization.

As I have noted, prior experiences with traditional schooling had taught the students with
whom I spoke to be suspicious of teachers who had more often proven themselves interested in
maintaining discipline than building relationships, and so the program’s philosophy of classroom
management fell flat at best and provoked frustrations at worst. At the same time, it bears asking
whether the pedagogy itself - in particular, its focus on writing and essentialization of race - also
served to alienate students and exacerbate tensions between Teaching Fellows and their classes.
To return to an earlier anecdote, a few weeks after confiding his insecurity in his writing, Christopher shared in a moment of anger and vulnerability that teachers were “always trying to get [him] in trouble” and that he could not help but be disruptive in his classes because he was a “bad kid,” foreshadowing Derrick’s observation in his interview that the students who could not follow his lessons were those more inclined to act out. Poignantly, Pedro Noguera (2003) goes so far as to argue that these two sentiments are related, positing that “in any educational setting where children are viewed as academically deficient, and where adults view large numbers of them as potentially bad or even dangerous, the fixation on control tends to override all other educational objectives and concerns” (p. 345). In other words, the students subject to frequent exclusion and punishment are those who lack the baseline navigational capital for academic success and subsequently recognize that the academic qualifications and upward mobility promised by schools are unavailable to them. Therefore, Christopher and students like him reject the notion that they should acquiesce to institutional expectations for their conduct - in part because there exists a discrepancy between these expectations and their own cultural backgrounds, and in part because they realize the fallacy of equal opportunity in education - and they respond with reactionary behavior that posits them as “counter-authority” (Ferguson 2000, p. 95). As a result, this context for identity formation further underscores the need for mutual trust within a critical, culturally responsive pedagogy; had Christopher felt that the Teaching Fellows were truly concerned with his holistic growth instead of conformity in class, perhaps he would have felt more comfortable taking risks and exploring his identity as a writer. Because Growth Mindset Academy assumed that Christopher and his peers would already feel safe by virtue of the circumstances that the Teaching Fellows looked like them and that the social studies
curriculum discussed race, however, the program did little to facilitate the friendships that must first exist between teachers and students in order to realize a welcoming and affirming learning environment, and as a result of having overlooked this step, the leaders simply could not make sense of the disciplinary issues that developed as the program progressed.

Likewise, though well-intentioned for navigational capital just as the writing activities, the rendering of race through which the social studies curriculum explored the events of Ferguson also seemed as though it may have alienated students, based on both testimonies from the Teaching Fellows and observations from my own classes. For one, in Rose’s words, the program’s definition of race was “literally black-and-white,” with Derrick adding that “we didn’t necessarily speak to our Latinx students.” Moreover, given Tom’s resident knowledge that the city of Denver, as well as his classes, comprised “a high Latino population,” this represented a fundamental disregard for the specificity of students’ lived experiences. Per Rose’s account, the program CEO’s assuaged her concerns about this subject by insisting that race was “such a big concept that the students could probably only understand it in those (black-and-white) terms.” Nonetheless, Rose frequently “would get some Exit Tickets of just ‘I’m bored, I’m Mexican, I don’t care about this stuff,’” and “felt like [she] had to bridge a gap and make connections along the lines of ‘let’s talk about how this could affect Hispanic people, or Asian people;’” similarly, Derrick relayed that one of his students had lamented at the program’s conclusion that “[they] talked about Black identity this whole class and we didn’t discuss any Hispanic or Latinx leaders, and Latinx people deal with a lot of these same things.” Here, then, it would seem that Growth Mindset Academy’s social studies curriculum embodied precisely the “master narrative” between oppressed and oppressors that Davies (2007) discourages, de-essentializing the
Blackness of Ferguson by assuming that its Latinx students would be able to empathize with Michael Brown and his community because they shared a common status as “oppressed.” Paradoxically and concurrently, though, the curriculum also adheres to a notion of fixed racial positionality in its supposition that all of the Black students at the program would identify with the oppression in Ferguson, which portends damaging effects on the collective self-image of these youth. Expressing frustration that “it’s easy to make things like Ferguson and police brutality academic and abstract when, in reality, these phenomena are distressing and painful, and they weigh heavily on our students,” Derrick recalled his own reaction as an adolescent to the shooting of Trayvon Martin, after which he “didn’t want to walk around [his] neighborhood with a hood on, and just felt this anger all the time.” Continuing, Derrick resolved that “when you talk about your identity and injustice, there are a lot of strong emotions that come up, and we didn’t have enough space to process and respond.” Because situations like Ferguson may serve as an introduction to the sort of critical consciousness conducive to individual empowerment and structural change, it is of paramount importance that students in contexts such as Growth Mindset Academy discuss these issues in-depth. Again, though, an earlier focus on building trust and forming relationships would have proven more conducive to the “collective healing” (Morales 2016) that characterizes critical pedagogy, thereby counteracting racialization rather than inadvertently contributing to it.

Indeed, the “negative emotions” that Derrick identified in his adolescent self and among his classes necessarily “need some kind of release,” but within a framework that stops short of Freire’s (1970) problem-posing pedagogy, which yields “a deepened consciousness of [one’s] situation” that “leads [one] to apprehend that situation as a historical reality susceptible of
transformation,” students come to see fixed racial positionality and a hierarchical society as inevitable, and, understandably, this conception engenders feelings of despair. For example, during the lesson that attempted to reconcile the “competing truths” of the Ferguson police press conference and Department of Justice report, Georgia, a consistently conscientious participant in my classes, suddenly interrupted discussion to ask me, “Why are we even having these conversations? It’s depressing! The police are always going to be able to kill Black people and get away with it, so why should we even talk about it when we can’t do anything?” Realizing that the solution to the disenfranchisement of communities of color did not lie in prejudice reduction, yet inhibited by the curriculum’s failure to consider alternatives to racial capitalism, Georgia spoke for many of her peers with her simple query, which boils down to “What’s the point?” Moreover, since the social studies curriculum at Growth Mindset Academy did not offer any answer beyond reifying the political and economic status quo and encouraging attendees to cultivate navigational capital through dialogue, obedience, and writing, students were left to resist on their own terms. Interpreted through this lens, the actions of students that registered as problematic to program leaders - listening to explicit rap music, keeping their hoodies on, and lingering in the halls - constituted what Solórzano and Bernal (2001) would term reactionary behavior without social justice motivations, which differs from transformative resistance in that actors demonstrate their discontent with the norms of the existing structure, but cannot organize to change the entire status quo. In addition, contrary to what one might expect, the stance that Growth Mindset Academy initially took toward these subversions was one of sympathy; even if the program’s focus on individual psychology amounted to a “no excuses” policy of sorts, restorative interactions with program leaders - who doubled as experienced local teachers of
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The program - "made [students] feel like [they were] treated fairly" and allowed them to "talk out [their] problems," as my earlier conversations with attendees corroborate. Thus, although the regimented learning structure, disproportionate emphasis on writing activities, and somewhat fatalistic approach to racial relations all served to provoke within students the negative emotions to which Derrick alluded, the conversations that students had with culturally diverse educators familiar with the material and symbolic challenges of northeast Denver evinced both representation and trust, and so allowed students the release for which Derrick advocated.

Nevertheless, disruptive behaviors, as well as bullying, persisted to a sufficient extent for the CFO to assume exclusive leadership of the program “for financial and behavioral reasons” halfway through the summer; immediately thereafter, the new regime would institute drastic changes to the existing disciplinary system that, in turn, illustrate the corrupting influence of racial capitalism. Specifically, the program adopted a “three strikes” policy for behaviors such as fighting, sexual expression, and the use of derogatory language, devising “behavior contracts” for students who had evidently “made bad choices” a few times too many. Following any incident that qualified as a serious infraction, one of the leaders would notify the student’s parents, and a third occurrence meant that the student could no longer attend the program. In the same vein as behavior contracts, the CFO also posted a “frequent flyer” schedule on the wall of the Teaching Fellows’ workspace, intended to proliferate an awareness of which students were likely to remain in the halls during class time and where these individuals should be. Suffice it to say then, that this manner of responding to reactionary behavior was far less trusting of students or sympathetic to why attendees might be manifesting oppositional identities. Without a doubt, cultural mismatch between the now predominantly white leadership and students of color played
a role in this dynamic, as Zoe likened this turn of events to a similar development at the Denver school where her mother worked, which had introduced a group of all-white teachers to a predominantly black and Latinx population and, in turn, witnessed “students [get] reprimanded for their actions instead of teachers establishing relationships with them.” Crucially, however, the circumstance that had directly catalyzed the demographic shift and stringent discipline that Zoe relayed from her mother had been the fact that “one of those chain charter schools took over,” intimating the unfortunate truth that educational enterprises must be mindful not only of their financial viability, but also of the symbolic concessions to the state apparatus necessary for their survival. Not coincidentally, during the leadership change at Growth Mindset Academy, the program played host to a number of “special visitors” from both the Denver public school district and private foundations, with Teaching Fellows periodically receiving instructions to refer their “model students” for conversations with these visitors while ensuring that the rest of their classes conducted themselves appropriately. Relevantly, this phenomenon mirrors Maia Cucchiara’s (2013) account of a Philadelphia elementary school that looked to secure its own economic sustenance by appealing to city government and charter corporations, highlighting a predominantly white and Asian American group of students who embodied a “middle class ethos,” while excluding through tracking and punishment students who the administration viewed as threats to the disciplinary system and who just so happened to identify as Black. Within both Cucchiara’s observational site and Growth Mindset Academy, then, students themselves became more or less marketable depending upon their accumulation of navigational capital and performance of “racelessness” (Ferguson 2000, p. 107) or race, respectively. Yet, whereas a critical pedagogy would look to deconstruct these disciplinary standards, in addition to
problematizing methods and curricula conducive to reactionary behavior, Growth Mindset Academy sought to inculcate agency within the status quo. As a result, the students who found success at the program were those who managed to adapt identities of racelessness, while their peers who would or could not conform to these expectations earned behavioral contracts, phone calls home, and eventually, dismissals, all of which further sedimented their racialized self-images as “bad kids” incompatible with the norms of traditional schooling.

On multiple occasions, the program CFO implored Teaching Fellows to “not be afraid of our students” and to feel secure that their practice of authority, in conjunction with the culturally responsive curriculum, would guarantee the compliance of all program participants. Yet, the language of leadership and Teaching Fellows alike revealed a preoccupation with control and a “need for bodies to express respect” (Ferguson 2000, p. 66), with open discussions of how to physically separate students who were fighting and keep students in their seats during class. Therefore, as a consequence of Growth Mindset Academy’s recognition of white, middle class academic and behavioral norms as appropriate knowledge, the program wholly failed to recognize the role of fighting in the daily lives of its low-income students of color. Ferguson’s (2000) Bad Boys offers several anecdotes of adolescent Black boys who describe themselves as “fighters” (pp. 124-126) with the resignation that these “survival practices” (p. 184) from their everyday lives necessarily come into conflict with school disciplinary codes; likewise, Nikki Jones (2009) describes how African American girls in the inner city manifest “ghetto” identities as a mechanism for self-defense, but are pathologized by schools and the criminal justice system for the same reason. Though I do not suggest, by any means, that schools condone fighting, I propose that a culturally responsive and critical pedagogy should consider the context for these
behaviors and, through both trust and curriculum, celebrate the resilience of students and recognize the agency of these youth for controlling their own bodies and reclaiming racial narratives.

Unfortunately, this was not the case at Growth Mindset Academy, and one particular example from my observations vividly illustrates this point. As previously mentioned, among the changes that occurred during the leadership transition from local teachers of color to the CFO of the organization was the creation of “frequent flyer” schedules to catalog which students often stayed in the hall during lessons and where Teaching Fellows should direct these individuals. It was within this context that the following events transpired:

*DeMar had arrived early for his flag football elective and, instead of waiting for the Teaching Fellow, had walked out to the basketball court where the class took place.*

Because the program leadership had identified DeMar as a “frequent flyer,” though, several Teaching Fellows were looking for him. Eventually, a Fellow found DeMar at the court and referred him to the CFO, who informed DeMar that she would have to call his grandmother and excuse him from the field trip planned for that afternoon. Immediately after this interaction, DeMar became angry and unresponsive, referring to the CFO as a “b****” and to himself as a “bad kid,” and repeatedly pushing away his lunch tray despite the insistence of other students. Previously, DeMar had explained that his grandmother “never believes [him]” and “never lets [him] tell [his] side of the story” when he gets in trouble. In light of these circumstances, several Teaching Fellows consulted the CFO and asked that DeMar’s grandmother not receive a notification of this event. After sharing the suspicion that DeMar had actually been at the basketball court
by himself because he had planned to smoke marijuana with a group of older students, who had been reprimanded and dismissed earlier in the day, the CFO agreed not to call DeMar’s grandmother and to allow him to remain on the field trip.

Despite the insistence of Growth Mindset Academy that “there are no bad kids, only kids who make bad decisions,” the “frequent flyer” policy and the incident with DeMar mirror a phenomenon outlined by Victor Rios (2011): the surveillance of students of color in urban public schools and labeling of youth as “delinquent,” prompting reactionary behavior in the name of counter-authority. Moreover, the program’s dehistoricized conception of racial difference, coupled with its emphasis on resolving conflict by improving individual attitudes, obscures the institutional and economic inequities that this system of monitoring and labeling derives from and legitimates. Here, in its assessment of student behaviors, Growth Mindset Academy not only eschews racialized resistant capital for raceless navigational capital, but also excludes “frequent flyers” like DeMar from obtaining the latter because of the oppositional identity that disciplinary policies project. Meanwhile, among “frequent flyers” and compliant students alike, the curricular and pedagogical reification of the status quo engenders a sense of futility that renders meaningless the dilemma of whether to conform. Both DeMar and Georgia, who had plaintively asked why we were having depressing conversations every single day, understood that the promises of equal platform in public dialogue and of prejudice reduction as a solution to systemic issues were nothing more than illusions and, in different ways, these two students had resigned themselves to the inevitability of racial power dynamics inside and outside of schools. Each of these individuals, then, distinctly left Growth Mindset Academy with the impression that, as people of color, their agency within a hostile social structure was limited, to say nothing
of their ability to catalyze transformative change. To be sure, the program’s recruitment of young teachers from diverse backgrounds, along with its inclusion of culturally responsive learning practices, marked a significant improvement over the typical experiences of its attendees during the school year. Without taking the time to build trust between students and their “windows and mirrors” (Style 1996) as well as eschewing a critical consciousness for navigational capital within the existing status quo, however, the behavioral expectations, social studies curriculum, and writing pedagogy at Growth Mindset Academy ultimately reified and contributed to the racialization that it ostensibly sought to redress.

Spaces of Resistance

Considering the academic alienation and racial stigmatization that occurred at Growth Mindset Academy, as well as Teaching Fellows’ frustrations with an inflexible structure inside the classroom and harsh discipline outside, one might conclude that a state-sponsored culturally responsive pedagogy is a futile endeavor, if not an oxymoron. After all, how do students of color learn to raise their own voices in advocacy for social justice when their environmental cues emphasize silent obedience so that their teachers can reach the Exit Ticket? Do these youth really derive any meaningful benefit from a curriculum that pays lip service to their backgrounds and experiences while retaining a fatalistic perspective on race and disregards possibilities for activism? Why would any teacher expect that learners who have come to think of themselves as marginal writers will readily churn out several paragraphs a day, on a tremendously challenging subject no less? Truly, it would seem as though Growth Mindset Academy substantiates Aihwa Ong’s (1996) resolution that cultural citizenship and, by extension, academic knowledge as
cultural capital, is “dialectically determined by the state and its subjects” who either “exercise or submit to power relations” (p. 738), and that any extension of an apparatus emergent from and legitimated by racial capitalism will perpetuate the oppression of those whose exploitation sustains a hierarchical society. Yet, even within the structure of Growth Mindset Academy and similar initiatives of neoliberal multiculturalism, there exist spaces of resistance. Absent an explicitly critical pedagogy, teachers and students can still collaborate to subvert Freire’s (1970) banking model and realize problem-posing education that places equal value on the perspective of each participant and devises strategies for transforming an unjust structure, thereby inspiring hope for Rosaldo’s (1997) rendering of cultural citizenship as claimed by marginalized groups in the face of hegemonic discourses. To be sure, I do not mean to suggest that the social studies Teaching Fellows and I accomplished all of these objectives over the course of a mere six weeks; if we had done so, my thesis would tell a much different story. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that our assertions of agency and, more importantly, those of our students, suggest that it is possible to contest the state from within, a necessity given that, notwithstanding its official position, the government has always influenced and will continue to inform racial narratives. Clearly, on some level, direct action against the state must occur in order to redress material inequities, but internal challenges constitute a vital endeavor as well, and this spirit of resistance manifested at Growth Mindset Academy.

From the outset, the Teaching Fellows and I felt some measure of skepticism toward the academic and behavioral norms of the program. As we reviewed the curriculum in training, we noted the consistently high volume of reading and writing; would students really read a series of newspaper articles and painstakingly identify three kinds of bias, much less an entire Department
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of Justice report? Perhaps cynically, Tom “knew it wouldn’t happen.” Taking a moment to “remove his academia goggles,” Derrick wondered if it would be triggering for students to catalog their racial affiliations in an “identity chart,” and he and Rose shared an apprehension that students would find Ferguson too upsetting to discuss. Finally, Zoe asked, how would students respond to our collective “teacher presence” when they had come to understand educators as “intimidating hawks in the sky,” and would we be able to stop ourselves from going on a “power trip” when we needed to maintain order in the classroom? As enthusiastically as we had cheered in the parking lot on that July morning, we had also subliminally feared that our idealism would contrast with a reality for which we were unprepared. At first, these concerns seemed ill-founded; attendees diligently lined up for the entry and exit routines, participated in class discussions or at least quietly put their heads down, and cooperated with each other and with Teaching Fellows in lessons and at recess. Certainly, some hung out in the hallways or hid their faces in their hoodies, but it seemed as though restorative conversations consistently set these students back on the right track; in short, Growth Mindset Academy was fulfilling its promise of closing the opportunity gap. Gradually, though, it became clear to the other Teaching Fellows and me that something was amiss. Every morning we would sign in fewer names when we took attendance, and every afternoon we would receive fewer Exit Tickets from our increasingly disinterested classes. Eventually, this disengagement precipitated to the point where Rose, in the aforementioned lesson that tasked students with reading newspaper articles and identifying biases, struggled to reconcile the daily agenda with the fact that “no one was writing and I was getting more and more upset, like, ‘Guys, we have to write!’” Gradually, after reporting similar developments among our students, the Teaching Fellows and I came to a
consensus that we had to meet these youth where they were, deviating from the predetermined pedagogy by adopting a simple yet radical approach of asking our classes what they wanted to learn and how we could make it interesting for them.

At first glance, it might appear as though the Teaching Fellows and I had given up on our ability to provide an intellectual challenge for our students, resigning ourselves to the reality that they did not want to be at the program and would not participate in any activities that qualified as academic under its purview. As a white teacher who was not from Denver, I often shared Tom’s lament - that “unless you have an immediate connection with a kid, it’s much harder to overcome an initial head-butting” - and sometimes felt, as he did, that “there were definitely students where it was like, ‘I would love to spend time with you on the playground or something like that, but I really cannot be your friend because the way you’re acting is just so inappropriate for a classroom.’” Nevertheless, despite our differences and in-class disagreements, I did get to know and appreciate the cultural wealth of students like Christopher, and I, as well as the other Teaching Fellows, began to reconsider what was appropriate for a classroom and who had delineated where propriety started and ended. Thus, we began to personalize our lesson plans, initially with small changes such as altering the language of Exit Tickets like “How can reporters and consumers verify the credibility of information about an event?” in order to make the concepts accessible to more students. Following up on Derrick’s idea that “there should have been a balance with the positive representations of Black people in media” as a “flip side to affirm students’ identities and help encourage them towards activism” in the face of the negative emotions evoked by Ferguson, we highlighted prominent Black scholars in a lesson that dealt with implicit bias, showing how these individuals had transcended stereotypes. Allowing her
class to choose a subject for conversation, Zoe recounted how she and her students “had one
debate over the difference between Black Lives Matter and ‘all lives matter’ that was really
productive.” Moreover, contrary to what one might assume, the rigor of all of these lessons
directly related to their spontaneity; in opposition to the rigid agenda that the program had
prescribed, the uncertainty of this student-driven instruction created space for youth to share their
passions and make personally salient critical inquiries. This less hierarchical classroom dynamic,
in turn, corresponds to Morales’s (2016) “rasquache pedagogy” for Chicano youth in Salt Lake
City, which manifests as a “militant praxis of resistance to hegemonic standards of teaching,
learning, and schooling” (p. 71) by bringing student voices to the forefront of dialogue as a proxy
for their agency outside the classroom. Within rasquache pedagogy, the classroom becomes a
space that is “relational” and “healing” (p. 71) by “fusing together messy, complicated, yet
beautiful subjectivities” and allowing students to “see beneath the surface of dominant narratives
and locate other histories, other ways of being,” yielding a state of mind “in-between dominant
social constructions of the world and new, emerging constructions” (p. 70). Therefore, rasquache
pedagogy is both postmodern (Wendt 2001) and problem-posing (Freire 1970), and it bodes well
for working through the state structure that our reconfigured vision for instruction at Growth
Mindset Academy trended closer to this paradigm.

Of course, a key aspect of problem-posing pedagogy is that it “leads [students] to
apprehend [their] situation as a historical reality susceptible of transformation,” allowing them to
“overcome authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism” (pp. 85-86) by rallying for
collective action. In our attempts to engage students even further, the Teaching Fellows and I
came to see this as the next step in our resistance to the norms of Growth Mindset Academy. For
example, although the curriculum to which we had been assigned “was really just about individual awareness” and “didn’t come up with any sort of plan or way to use all of this information about Ferguson,” Zoe genuinely believed in the possibility that her students “could be the ones to start the revolution.” For her, then, greater student involvement in discussion was a positive first step for a critical pedagogy, but even better were lessons like the one that called for students to “make [their] own fake news articles,” where they “just went off the rails.” Indeed, creating an actual product of their learning engendered in students a greater sense of purpose, as evidenced by one of Derrick’s classes wherein “students got to use their phones and film an eyewitness account, and then built from that scenario to talk about how to identify real news.” Thus, much like the model described by Omatsu (2003) in his work Freedom Schooling, these instances facilitated students’ empowerment as “sharers of knowledge” (p. 25) within their own communities. Admittedly, with our diverse geographic origins, not all of the Teaching Fellows felt familiar with our particular setting, but all of us followed Tom’s lead in asking whenever possible “Where else could this happen? and “Could this happen in Denver?” in our efforts to go beyond retaining students’ interest among his classes and fully affect a pedagogy of agency (Bautista 2012) for our students to subvert racialization.

On some level, the Teaching Fellows and I felt comfortable taking these risks in changing turning our classrooms into spaces of resistance because we shared the underlying belief, put succinctly by Zoe, that “this wasn’t real.” Elaborating, Rose explained her rationale that “academics at Growth Mindset just aren’t really life-or-death, and it’s not like we’re damaging the students in any way since it is just a summer program,” and so “relationships were the main goal.” Thus, while we may have found program’s brevity disadvantageous had we only sought to
progress through the curriculum, we collectively chose to view the six weeks of Growth Mindset Academy as a unique opportunity to collaborate with students in exploring possibilities for education that did not posit pedagogy as a repetitive series of reading activities and writing prompts, or educators as distant authority figures who exercised discipline at the expense of compassion. To this point, Derrick especially demonstrated a mindfulness that his students’ teachers during the school year might not respond to disruptive behavior with the patience that he could offer, which he evinced in his narration of a conversation that he had with Terrence, who had gotten in trouble for fighting. Specifically, Derrick emphasized to Terrence that “in the world...there are not second chances, and people will judge you by the color of your skin” and implored him that “if he didn’t make these changes now, things would get rougher for him.” According to Derrick, “it was a conversation that we couldn’t have had without me being a Black male,” and although some of his other sentiments evinced an inclination toward revolutionary pedagogy, this particular instance revealed his belief that the inculcation of navigational capital, coupled with trust, is equally necessary for equitable education. Likewise, Rose described her “breakthrough case” of Monique, whom she had dismissed from class for announcing that the day’s lesson was boring. After a few days, Rose explained to Monique that she “had gotten so mad because [she] felt disrespected and saw red;” in response, Monique offered that “she also had felt disrespected and saw red,” yielding “a common understanding” between teacher and student. Like Derrick, Rose understood that her students might feel anger in response to formulaic curricula and behavioral norms that do not correspond their lived experiences. Yet, Rose realized that “the tacit classroom rule not to express feelings” potentially silences students and denies their agency (Berlak & Moyenda 2007, p. 198), so she affirmed
Monique’s emotions by empathetically volunteering her own. In contrast to the aforementioned “three strikes” and “frequent flyer” policies that stigmatized students and projected oppositional identities, therefore, these Teaching Fellows infused their praxis with the care conducive to collective healing, contesting a disciplinary process in which students lacked autonomy and, by extension, awakening their classes to new possibilities for a less rigid positionality.

To the extent that the Teaching Fellows and I individually articulated educational philosophies, we were diverse in ideology as well as identity; whereas Zoe had envisioned her classes as an incubator of activism, Tom had only wanted to show students that there were adults who “believed in the possibility of [their] success.” As a result, when we began to change our curriculum, we did not consciously set out to create a critical pedagogy or to challenge neoliberal multiculturalism. Rather, drawing upon our greatest commonality - a genuine concern for our students - we only sought to redress the academic disengagement and stringent discipline that had come to characterize our summer. Each of us had a different threshold for exercising and fostering resistant capital, with Tom describing of the eyewitness account lesson as “right on the edge of total chaos” and “right on the edge of not remotely academic to engaging and useful,” but all of us inadvertently worked to expand belonging in our classrooms and, by extension, cultural citizenship beyond the parameters of conformity established by the racial capitalist state. In subverting the banking model, the Teaching Fellows made a case to our students for the possibilities of disrupting the status quo within schools as well as larger society, revealing that no authority is absolute. As Derrick indicated in his conversation with Terrence, the stakes for youth of color are high, and current curricula cannot neglect the need to confer navigational capital. Nonetheless, in resistances both large and small, there exists hope for the radical reexamination
of the ideological foundations of society that Davies (2007) envisioned, so that schools might not only “close the opportunity gap,” but also allow students to see different opportunities altogether.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

The story of Growth Mindset Academy is one of idealism, wherein Teaching Fellows and program leaders cheered for students as their parents pulled into the parking lot of an empty school on a hot July morning, wholeheartedly believing that our “windows and mirrors” (Style 1996) model of diverse representation, as well as our culturally responsive, racially conscious pedagogy would facilitate an educational environment unlike any that its participants had previously experienced, engendering total engagement and mutual trust. Shortly thereafter, the story of Growth Mindset Academy became one of failure, or at least of a tremendous discrepancy between expectation and reality, as students responded negatively to rigid classroom routines that too often disregarded their curiosities and struggles in order to reach the daily Exit Ticket, to a disproportionate emphasis on the very same learning methods - reading and writing - that had intimidated these youth during the school year and compelled their parents to enroll them at Growth Mindset Academy, to a social studies curriculum that posited race as a fixed characteristic so as to offer only prejudice reduction and dialogue while ignoring structural and material inequities, and, finally, to the hierarchical schematic of “teacher presence” that continued to complicate their relationship with authority figures. Though the leaders of Growth Mindset Academy were undoubtedly well-intentioned, students responded to the inadvertent fatalism of reifying the political and economic status quo via navigational capital by manifesting their opposition through reactionary behavior that, in turn, further exacerbated their interactions with disciplinary actors and led to disruption, dismissal, and racialization. Ultimately, however, when the Teaching Fellows and I began to concede control of our classroom to our students in the hopes that doing so would redress disengagement and build trust, thereby transitioning from
the banking model to a more problem-posing vision, the story of Growth Mindset Academy concluded as a tale of cautious optimism for challenging the state from within by supplementing individual agency with collective resistant capital. All in all, therefore, we did not “close the opportunity gap,” but instead collaborated with students to explore different opportunities altogether. Still, given Zoe’s assessment that Growth Mindset Academy “wasn’t real,” the question remains: to what extent is critical pedagogy feasible in a more consequential context? What does Growth Mindset Academy suggest for other summer programs for low-income students of color, and what are the implications for revolutionary praxis within traditional schooling?

With regards to the former, Growth Mindset Academy was, on some level, undone by its own ambition. All at once, the program sought to build trust while maintaining discipline, to employ culturally responsive teaching methods while encouraging reticent writers, and to celebrate diversity while highlighting a dynamic between “oppressed” and “oppressor” (Davies 2007). In short, other summer programs would do well by trying to achieve less. Moreover, summer programs like Growth Mindset Academy can and should take advantage of their relative leeway from the racial capitalist state by imagining alternatives to the status quo of both traditional schooling and larger society; concurrently, though, these initiatives cannot neglect entirely need for navigational capital, and so they must include some measure of agency within the structure as well. Thus, even as future iterations of Growth Mindset Academy might deviate from its obsessive standardization - Do Now, Measurable Outcome, Exit Ticket - in favor of a more spontaneous and student-driven system, reading and writing activities constitute an important component of a robust social justice pedagogy. In light of the fact that all of these
programs will enroll at least a few students who identify as marginal writers, I cannot overstate the importance of building trust to the accomplishment of this objective. Without an entire year over which to bond with their students, the Teaching Fellows at Growth Mindset Academy found themselves in a difficult situation; nonetheless, several possibilities exist for building meaningful relationships in a short span of time. For one, teachers can and should familiarize themselves with students’ home lives - parents, neighborhoods, and extracurricular interests - and, whenever possible, defer to students’ expertise in these areas, perhaps even leaving the classroom. Additionally, writing activities can meet students where they are by engaging their lived experiences through “generative” dynamics that inquire, in so many words, as to what they want to talk about; specifically, what is an issue that matters to them, and how would they go about solving it? Of course, these activities should coexist alongside skits, poetry, and even eyewitness accounts so that students are constantly doing rather than passively receiving instruction. Ideally, this academic enfranchisement would make discipline a non-issue, but realistically, this would not be the case. Even so, discipline could become significantly more equitable if teachers handled classroom disruptions with an understanding of their students’ prior schooling experiences, just as Derrick had strongly desired background information on northeast Denver. Yet, although Derrick and the rest of us may not have known a great deal about our surroundings, the empathy that he evinced in his conversation with Terrence serves as a reminder to all teachers that responses to disengagement and disruption should be restorative rather than retributive, meaning an end to “three strikes” and “frequent flyer” policies that contribute to racialization, and the beginning of a mutual critical consciousness for examining why these behaviors occur and what teachers and students can do to change these overarching
circumstances. Notwithstanding their varying baselines of navigational capital or oppositional identity, there is no student for whom teachers should conclude that “closing the opportunity gap” is a futile effort, and, in addition, all students should be allowed to conceive of new opportunities as well as the the activism for their genesis.

Of course, the heightened presence of the state apparatus within traditional schooling during the year complicates this equation, and the prospects for realizing rasquache pedagogy on a large scale are, admittedly, more than slightly grim. Moreover, just as rasquache pedagogy corresponds specifically to the experiences of Chicano youth in Salt Lake City, or Omatsu’s (2003) knowledge-sharers studied the particularities of ethnic tensions among Asian-Americans in Los Angeles, a state-sponsored postmodern pedagogy is a contradiction in terms; the students at Growth Mindset Academy largely felt disconnected from Ferguson unless Tom asked them “What if this happened in Denver?” Nevertheless, relevant actors should still work to challenge the hegemony of neoliberal multiculturalism so that cultural citizenship does not become a matter of subjectification by the state (Ong 1996) but instead determined by and for communities of color (Rosaldo 1997). Here, despite the fallacy of “opportunity,” the logic of “opportunity gap” - politically palatable owing to the taboo of discussing race (Tatum 2007) - works to the advantage of those seeking to affect change within the structure. To an extent, Growth Mindset Academy’s culturally responsive pedagogy in itself corroborates Uruchima’s (2016) thesis that interactions with the racial capitalist state - an inevitability, since the government necessarily influences the social world (Weldon 2011) - that expose its hypocrisy by using its own rhetoric might allow room for subversion. Ideally, leveraging state resources in order to realize culturally responsive teaching for navigational capital would simultaneously encourage teachers and
students alike to question the norms of knowledge in public schooling and begin to inculcate resistant capital, thus replacing racialization with trust and ideas for collective action that, in conjunction with each other, interrupt discourses of cultural deficit with celebrations of resilience and imaginations of a more equitable society.
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