

From Hierarchical Power Structures to Rhizomatic Possibilities: An Argument for Affective Systems in US Public Schools

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Abstract For more than 100 years, the US public education system has remained faithful to its hierarchical power structure, constructing knowledge at the top through state and federal efforts, then disseminating it down to districts, schools, administrators, teachers, and finally students. This paper argues that the assumed naturalism of this hierarchical power structure has resulted in a system that consistently fails to provide adequate services to urban, poor students of color as evidenced by the high rates of school dropout among this population. The contemporary issue of dropout in urban public schools is first located in the historiography of the Progressive Era. Next, a critically reflexive case study of the author's experience working as a dropout prevention counselor for a large urban school district is presented. Lastly, the issue of dropout is re-located through affective contextualization, articulating what could emerge with a shift from hierarchical power structures to rhizomatic possibilities.

Keywords: education, affect, dropout, urban education

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1. Introduction

Studies estimate that roughly half of all African American and Latino students who enter US public high schools do not graduate in four years, making high school graduation a 50/50 probability for minority students [1,2]. School dropout is not a static event. Rather, it results after a long process of disengagement and alienation from learning [3]. In order to properly contextualize the contemporary problem space of school dropout, it is critical to properly locate it in the historiography of public/formal education. As Lawrence Grossberg [4] states, "Cultural studies starts by recognizing that context is always already structured . . . by relations of force and power" (p. 44). Public/formal education is a system that has and continues to structure and administer relations of force and power in modern US society.

Discourse about the urban poor's experience with the United States public school system often begins during the Progressive Era, a time of political reform and expansion from 1890-1930 that constructed the public school system as we know it today. During this time, public school was envisioned as a place where the urban poor could be cared for, Americanized, and educated. From the 1890s to the 1960s, works of educational history consisted mainly of laudatory narratives of progress [5,6,7]. However as the United States entered the early Civil Rights era, more scholars began to examine the apparent inequalities in

public education, shifting the narrative of urban education to one of change.

The *Brown v Board of Education* decision in 1954 [8] ended racial segregation in public schools and the attempts at integration that followed demonstrated that public education was never "separate but equal." An achievement gap between white students and urban poor minority students became apparent. In *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* [9], Michael Katz charges that the public school system has never helped the urban poor, despite the fact that the progressive education movement has been mythologized as successful. According to Katz, educational reformers during the Progressive Era were an elite and homogenous group whose goal was to "re-make the rest of mankind in their own image" ([9], p. 131). Katz believes that the failed reforms of the past led to the failures in urban education in his time. Since then, several scholars have agreed with Katz's argument, [10-15].

Moving into the 21st century, urban school dropout became a serious concern, especially as it relates to the United States' ability to participate in the global economy [16,17,18]. Scholars reflected on the neoconservative and neoliberal narratives that were emerging, with the former advocating for stricter government controlled standards and the latter advocating for alternatives to the traditional public education system, such as charter schools [19,20]. In his article "Comparing Neo-liberal Projects and Inequality in Education" (2001), Michael Apple invokes Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital,

claiming that there is no truly neutral idea of education, whether through neoliberal efforts such as charter schools or neoconservative efforts such as standards. Rather, for both sides, “a class habitus tends to reproduce the conditions of its own reproduction ‘unconsciously’” reinforcing the “ways of understanding and acting on the world” that each side perceives to be normal (p. 420). Apple implores both sides to “analyse critically the production and circulation of these discourses and their effects on the lives of so many people in so many nations” (p. 421).

In his book *Experience and Education* [21], Dewey spoke to the Progressive Era critics of his pedagogy, but his argument could just as easily apply to his critics today. He maintained that it is incorrect to place his idea of child-centered, experience-based education in diametric opposition to “real” education, represented by the standards. He stated that it was challenges in the *implementation* of his method that created confusion regarding his theories: “The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative” (p. 25). Dewey's challenges implementing pedagogical reform in the Progressive Era remain the same today. Somewhere on the way down from the bureaucratic top to the teachers and students at the bottom, innovative ideas are corrupted, poorly implemented, or poorly supported. Still, this approach has largely worked for students who have the same cultural background as those in power: white middle and upper class children. However as history and current circumstance shows, it has consistently failed to provide services to urban, poor, minority students that ensure their success at a level equal to that of white students.

2. Case Description

According to the US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, every year in the United States our public school system produces more than one million dropouts [22]. A disproportionate number of these dropouts are students of color [23]. According to the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University [17], which analyzed cohort data for high schools across the nation, the graduation rate for white students is 75% while students of color (Black, Latino, and Native American) have only about a 50% chance of graduating with regular diplomas in four years. One in four African American and one in six Hispanic students attend a high school “dropout factory” while only one in twenty white students attend such a school ([24], p. 18).

Dropout factories are majority-minority high schools (those in which students of color make up the majority of students) that account “for about half of all African American and Hispanic dropouts” ([24], p. 18). Working as a dropout prevention counselor for Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) in both a direct services role and administrative role, I was able to see first-hand just how much of an impact institutionalized bureaucratic systems can have on the level of services provided to these students. Created largely as a district response to the bad press received for inaccurate record keeping and high numbers of school dropouts, a \$10 million district-funded

initiative created a formal Office of Dropout Prevention and Recovery. Our department became responsible for educating school staff on and enforcing their compliance with accurate record keeping—even if it meant their dropout numbers got worse before they got better, we were demanding that schools report their dropouts honestly. That type of approach was previously unheard of in the district, which had become masterful at manipulating numbers, statistics, and the actual location of physical bodies to make their numbers look good in the eyes of the state and avoid penalization from the policies of the federal educational policy. The department also funded 80 counselors who were assigned to the highest-need middle and high schools in the district. Each counselor was responsible for creating a tailored intervention program designed to address the needs of the students at their school who were most at-risk for school dropout.

Through a regressive analysis, our department had identified which students were at the highest risk for school dropout: students with 10 or more absences, 3 or more Fails, 2 or more suspensions, and/or students who scored Far Below Basic (FBB) on their state standardized tests. Our 80 counselors were highly specialized and experienced. In addition to cleaning up records and creating systems of accountability for the staff at our schools, we were encouraged to be creative and develop unique counseling interventions for our students based on the context of our school environment and the role we had carved out for ourselves within that environment. At my schools, my main interventions were running group counseling sessions, visiting the homes of my students to interact with their families, hosting parent meetings at our school, and teaching personal development classes to students after school and on weekends. Many of our interventions were based not on whether we could achieve immediate results, but on whether we could provide a systemic foundation for the long-term success of at-risk students. We were encouraged to be creative and to build sustainable programs that could impact school culture.

Our counselors provided services to a high-need population that had been mostly marginalized from the caseloads of other service providers for one reason or another. It may be surprising to those outside of education that “generic” school counselors in large districts like LAUSD typically do very little counseling. They mainly focus on scheduling and discipline issues. School psychologists work exclusively with students who have Individualized Education Plans through Special Education. School social workers do counseling, but are often bogged down with crisis cases. Many also have to account for their services under Medi-Cal (state-funded health insurance) making flexibility of services difficult. In this sense, our work was not only innovative, but it was also filling a gap in services at the school site. Eventually, I was promoted from a school-based position to a district position, helping to supervise about 20 dropout prevention counselors. I was also put in charge of our department's evaluation efforts, soliciting proposals from various firms and working closely with them on evaluation design. As the media firestorm against the district regarding dropout and record-keeping died down, our department began to receive a large amount of pressure and critique from other previously established departments. Many of them felt it

was unfair that we were receiving district funding as opposed to school funding. Our department was receiving counselor placement monies from the district without having to endure the much more precarious process of school funding, whereby individual counselors and departments essentially had to "sell" their services directly to schools in order to receive funding. The complaints of these longstanding departments were heard, and we were called upon to evaluate our program, formalize our interventions, and prove that our practices were evidence-based.

Implementing an evaluation program for such a creative and responsive program was challenging. It was clear that if we were not able to prove our effectiveness the entire program would lose funding. However the counselors found that accounting for their every intervention was time-consuming and that it was near impossible to operationalize the various methods they used to intervene in myriad students' lives. They had not been required to produce a certain numerical result every month or every year (such as a reduction in the number of tardies or an increase in overall attendance) like those who had to secure school funding were made to do, so they did not have much quantitative data to pull from. Many of the students we worked with who were failing had been failing since Kindergarten and moved through the system as a result of social promotion. To expect an increase in something numerical, such as grade point average, was unrealistic for our students who had received such a small amount of targeted intervention. In many students, what we were trying to increase was simply their *desire* to stay in school, as many of them felt it was irrelevant to their lives. Such intrinsic motivation is difficult to quantify. Since the program's inception, our counselors had been evaluated mainly based on qualitative data we collected from the counselors themselves, their students, their supervisors, their peers, and other staff. Because the work our counselors did was relationship-based and highly individualized to their school setting, it could not be generalized or duplicated.

In the first year of the program, there was high morale among the counselors, because they felt that their innovative interventions were setting a precedent for further work with students at-risk. And anecdotally, we *knew* the program was working. Our professional development meetings were exciting and motivating as everyone shared what they were doing at their schools and collaboratively came up with new ideas for interventions. As the calls for more "traditional" methods of evaluation increased though, their work was put under scrutiny in a quest for "proof" of immediate outcomes and results. This created an alienating dynamic between our counselors and administration. Eventually, due to political pressure from other departments and our inability to show that we were worth the money we were costing the district, the Office of Dropout Prevention and Recovery was effectively dissolved and all 80 dropout prevention counselors were either reassigned to counseling positions or realigned under another department.

3. Affective Contextualization

Gregory Boyle is the founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries, the largest gang intervention program in the United States. In his book, *Tattoos on the*

Heart (2010), Boyle asks, "What is success and what is failure? What is good and what is bad? Setback or progress" (p. 167)? Throughout the book Boyle discusses the "tyranny of success" that has infiltrated funding support for public service programs and, consequently, affected how and to whom services are delivered. Boyle recounts that "Funders sometimes say, 'We don't fund efforts; we fund outcomes'" (p. 179). This mindset pushes many service providers to only focus on those who will be responsive to their services. But where does that leave the most vulnerable? How does this idea of success affect "the belligerent, the surly, and the badly behaved" (p. 179)? Boyle warns, "If our primary concern is results, we will choose to work only with those who give us good ones" (p. 178).

Boyle's philosophy of staying "faithful and persistent in our fidelity even when things seem not to succeed" has led to many economic hardships at Homeboy [25,26]. The program is not easily generalizable and funders continually criticize it for its lack of "sustainability." However, the organization remains a blueprint for gang-intervention, receiving visits from service providers all over the world who are looking to address gang problems in their area. And certainly for current and former gang members in Los Angeles, it persists as a place of rehabilitation and hope [26]. Despite pressure to demonstrate more clear and rapid outcomes, they persist in their commitment to "stand with the least likely to succeed until success is succeeded by something more valuable: kinship" (p. 179).

But how do we measure kinship? Boyle relatedly asks: "What is the delivery system for resilience?" then answers his own question stating, "In part, it's the loving, caring adult who pays attention" (p. 86). Should one set a benchmark to "become a loving, caring adult who pays attention to their clients" in a program evaluation of resilience? In his book *Parables for the Virtual* [27], Brian Massumi provides insight on why a linear method of evaluation based on articulated goals and a foundational notion of progress does not serve the evaluation needs of every program. In examining the ontology of bodily movement and materialism, Massumi discusses how "a linear trajectory made up of a sequence of points or positions" is insufficient to describe movement, because a path made up of points and positions does not account for the passage in between each point and position (p. 6). The continuity of that movement "is of an order of reality other than the measurable, divisible space it can be confirmed as having crossed" (p. 6). We can relate this to the appraisal of Homeboy and the dropout prevention counselors by comparing the results-driven models of funding and evaluation as being focused more on whether or not service providers and receivers hit certain measurable points. This point-hitting sheds light on only a small aspect of what is really going on, though. The true work takes place *in between* the locations of the points—it is, as Massumi says, a path "not composed of positions" but rather "a dynamicity" that is nondecomposable (p. 6). This non-linear path that is not composed of positions is where affect is transmitted, the process that precedes relationship-building and the creation of new emotional states and calls to action. Any linear path then, like that which drives current program evaluation, misses the infinite world that lies between points—the world where all the work actually happens.

As dropout prevention counselors, we were engaging in what Boyle refers to as the “slow work”—that waiting and hoping and endless work that we believe will one day result in change. Receiving district funding as opposed to school funding allowed us the latitude to do that slow work. But perhaps the “slow work” of relationship building that Boyle describes is only slow when examined in the context of linear paths. From an affective perspective, the work is not slow, but rather infinite. Massumi contends that “points or positions really appear retrospectively, working backward from the movement’s end” (p. 6). We could say, then, that it is only after a student has experienced a desired change that we can plot the points and positions that got them there. This is what is known as “best practices” in education, which provides the basis for evidence-based models of intervention. But that does not mean that such points and positions will work for all students. It is in the inscription of a single “practice” as generalizable “evidence” that an infinite process is reduced to a linear one for others to follow. In this sense, “We are stopping the world in thought. We are thinking away its dynamic unity, the continuity of its movements. We are looking at only one dimension of reality” (p. 6).

Boyle’s story resonates because as part of the Office of Dropout Prevention and Recovery, we worked with those who the system tells us are “least likely to succeed”—students of color who are at-risk of school dropout. When the initiative started, the dropout prevention counselors were content to be what Boyle calls a “community of resistance . . . locating ourselves with those who have been endlessly exploded” (p. 177). At the heart of our work we were trying to reconnect students to a system that had outcast them. We were trying to show them that they had a place in education. We were teaching them to be more hopeful, to believe in themselves, and above all, to be resilient to the various family, peer, institutional, and environmental factors that made failure the easiest option. We were trying to instill in our students a certain feeling described by Rosi Braidotti as “potentia,” an affective force that is “power to repeat beyond negativity” ([28], p. 154). Potentia is a localized and immediate force of affect that “engenders the possibility of a horizon of hope, a productive consciousness that yearns for a future” (p. 154). But what is the delivery system for potentia? How do we measure the effectiveness of hope?

Boyle is steadfast in his commitment to his target population, maintaining that, “In the end, effective outcomes and a piling of success stories aren’t the things for which we reach . . . *It’s about the disruption of categories that lead us to abandon the difficult, the disagreeable, and the least likely to go very far*” (p. 186, emphasis added). How can we disrupt the categories within the traditional hierarchical power structure of the public educational system that have led to dropout, pushouts, and dropout factories? How can we create new systems of power based on the affective force of potentia: the power to repeat beyond negativity? It begins with a philosophical shift.

4. Rhizomatic Possibilities

An affective contextualization of my experience serving those who are “least likely to succeed”—students of color

at risk of school dropout—reveals two important themes. These themes are offered to individuals working within these systems as a way to rethink power structures and assist in the development of ethical interventions in urban public school systems.

Stylishly sidestepping the rules. As exemplified above, public education has an incredibly long history of changing process without changing results for students of color. The dynamicity that Brian Massumi mentions in *Parables for the Virtual* [27] is inspirational for those of us seeking to provide interventions that induce change, and Massumi agrees that “The ultimate aim is to find a place for change again” (p. 69). But in terms of education, how do we imagine, much less describe, the infinite possibilities of what could happen in the “in-between” space of dynamicity? The farthest educators have come is best-practices, which is essentially when we “back-project a stencil of the already-constituted to explain its constitution” (p. 70). If we are to plan interventions that work towards changing the system of education, how can we intentionally focus on the infinite world that exists between the positions and points of society’s linearity without reifying the systemic practices that so limited us in the first place? For Massumi, in order for change to be conceptualized “as anything more than a negation, deviation, rupture, or subversion” we must provide a way “to conceptualize the in-between as having a logical consistency” (p. 70). That logical consistency of the in-between is “the being of a relation” (p. 70).

Massumi illustrates the logical consistency of this realm of relationality using the analogy of soccer. Once unformalized with “a wide range of variation,” soccer as a practice pre-existed its inscription into sport (p. 71). With its inscription into sport, rules were applied retrospectively, taking precedence in how the game was framed and regulating the play. Massumi asserts, “It might be argued that all foundations are of this nature: ex post facto regulatory framings rather than effective foundings” (p. 71). If we apply this logic to the historiography of education, it is clear that we continue to base education on the “rules of the game” established by the liberal (pedagogical) and conservative (administrative) reformists of the Progressive Era. The hope of being able to change this foundational system comes from style: “small but effective ways of skewing the potential movements composing the field” (p. 77).

The case description explores how the newness of the dropout prevention unit allowed us the freedom to use non-traditional methods in order to reach our students. Traditional methods would be tutoring or problem-based counseling, but we were encouraged to use Council, a student process group similar to a Native American listening circle that fosters the intention to speak from the heart and listen from the heart. In addition to creating positive relationships and communication experiences for our students, the design of Council “neutralize[d] hierarchical dynamics fostered by inequality of status, race, economic stature or other social factors” ([29], p. 2). For me and the other counselors who were trained in and implemented Council, it was a very impactful experience that our students, somewhat unexpectedly, loved and looked forward to.

The dropout prevention team was operating on an "already constituted" field of counseling and education that had rules and regulations, but "through stylistic, free variations" of method, we pushed the field to evolve. Our efforts were interrupted by the various referees of resentful departments and district politics "that open[ed] the way for an application of the rules" ([27], p. 78). But the point is that now the referees were applying the rules to a variation of the norm, so the rules had to change in order to accommodate us. Our unique variations were successfully contained by the foundational rules, but "Positively, it preserves the game for repetition" (p. 79). In this sense, we did succeed in that we expanded the possibilities for counseling students at risk of dropout. Just as people still study Dewey's pedagogy today, our variation on the traditional form of school counseling will continue on in the methods used by counselors who were a part of our unit and who now train or supervise counselors in other units. Ultimately, the work we did and the work Homeboy Industries does is about creating fields of potential for those who are "least likely to succeed," where they can experience their infinite potential through relationality. With the above example, Council acted as a space in which students could have such an experience. Such interventions can be seen as "differential emergences from a shared realm of relationality that is one with becoming—and belonging" (p. 71). Cultivating an environment that fosters moments of dynamism can lead to infinitely innovative, stylish practices.

Occupying nomadic subject positions

A rhizome refers to a plant that has a horizontal system of roots that produces self-relying offshoots. The rhizome, like bamboo or ginger, is seen in contrast to the tree. The tree's root system is seen as being hierarchical. The roots grow, but they do not form self-sustaining offshoots. Many of the structures we have in our current society, including education, are modeled after the tree, but a tree eventually dies, because it is dependent on one trunk, one system. A rhizome on the other hand has the capacity to live forever, because it is constantly growing. Deleuze and Guattari [30] see human experience as being naturally rhizomatic. In this model, education can be understood as the original root and its goal is to create root offshoots that grow into their own independent, yet still connected, plant.

Switching from the tree model of education to the bamboo/rhizome model of education is not something that has to be passed through congress or legislated through educational policy. It is a systemic shift in perspective. It is a belief that there are unlimited possibilities for how we can exist in the world, and the more open we are to these possibilities, the more chance we have of embracing them. Politicians and educational policy administrators are setting up binaries for students based on what they believe proper knowledge looks like. Students are too often responding by disengaging themselves from the learning process, dropping out of school and into black holes of deviance. As Braidotti states, "The truth of self lies in its interrelations to others in a rhizomatic manner that defies dualistic modes of opposition" ([28], p. 161). As educators, the best way we can effect change is by resisting power-based binaries as much as possible, looking to our students to understand the multiplicity of experience that exists in the world, and seeing them as rhizomatic vessels

of infinite potential. This demands an intentional disengagement from linear models of progress. An antidote to the hierarchical system of education is to empower students to occupy nomadic subject positions. Rosi Braidotti theorizes the nomadic subject as "a multi-layered entity that is not unitary and is still capable of ethical and political accountability" ([28], p. 144). Braidotti sees the body as an active entity that seeks connection, however "the limits of my body are the limits of my awareness" (p. 148). So those who exist in isolation from others are not able to fully become themselves because they are limited in their interactions with others. The key is understanding that the body is always already interacting with others—this interaction will happen whether we are conscious of it or not through affective transmission. But the mind is capable of believing that we are in fact self-contained individuals. When "consciousness fails to understand its interconnectedness" our ability to grow in our own self-knowledge and enhance our own power suffers (p. 149). For Braidotti, "The crucial factor concerns the borderlines, or lines of demarcation, between my and other external bodies" (pp. 148-149). In Braidotti's examination of Deleuze and Guattari, she notes that they "posit processes of becoming as the antidote" to "the sedentary gravitational pull of addictive and coercive consumption" (p. 153). Certainly one could argue that processes of becoming are not always positive, as is the case with gang involvement, but for Braidotti, "Affectivity is understood as intrinsically positive: it is the force that aims at fulfilling the subject's capacity for interaction and freedom" (p. 148). Freedom in this case is defined as "the capacity to express and explore the subject's ability to affect and be affected, i.e. His or her interactive capacity" (p. 148).

Though these students may not have a choice to remove themselves from a system that marginalizes and alienates them, they can be encouraged to envision their own subject position as one that is "fully immersed in relations of power, but ethically compelled to strive after freedom in the form of adequate understanding" ([28], p. 151). We cannot change the modernist system of education overnight, but change is possible for individuals at any time once they are made aware of their subject position. Examples of this can be ethnic studies classes, global awareness curricula, study abroad opportunities, facilitated service learning experiences, and social-justice oriented teaching, counseling, and curriculum development.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the dropout crisis is a direct result of the US public educational system failing to provide adequate services to urban, poor students of color. One way to provide more adequate services is for the system to be open to supporting individual and systemic innovation by ceasing its perpetual insistence and reliance on hierarchical methods of regulation and control. Those who are the most in need should not be guinea pigs for experimental methods; as Dewey said, not all experiences "are genuinely or equally educative" ([21], p. 25). Like Greg Boyle, it is important to acknowledge "how sensible, practical, realistic, hard-nosed, and clear-eyed" the search

for results and outcomes is (p. 179). But when it is *so clear* that traditional methods and structures of power are not addressing the needs of these students (and have never), a thorough, critical, and contextual examination of the ontology and discourse upon which education was and is constructed must be undertaken. I have attempted to provide an example of such an examination here, however such a singular effort is not enough. Teacher, counselor, and administrator training programs at universities can be helpful in initiating this philosophical shift away from hierarchical power structures. Of vital importance is that all change stems from student-centered, school, and community-based grassroots efforts; the methods of a philosophical shift would have to match the intended outcomes. By believing in the rhizomatic possibilities of our students and ourselves, perhaps we can begin to see education as a field of potential that could change for the better.

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