PUNISHMENT, RESISTANCE, AND HOPE IN SCHOOL:
POLITICAL NARRATIVES OF URBAN YOUTH

A Dissertation in
Curriculum & Instruction

by

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ABSTRACT

This case study opens up space for educators and scholars to learn from six black and Latino/a youth (ages 12 - 13) who attend Septima Clark K - 8, an urban public school in the eastern United States. It describes youth political narratives that counter, fracture, construct, and/or re-construct the narratives of scholars, politicians, and educators that position black and Latino/a youth as politically disengaged, apathetic, and unknowledgeable and within the discourse of neoliberal school reform. The study is guided by three inquiries: What are the political experiences and activities of black and Latino/a youth who attend Septima Clark Pilot School in Oakton? How do these youth construct political narratives based on their daily experiences and activities? How can these narratives inform epistemological assumptions and pedagogical approaches to teaching social studies and civics to urban black and Latino/a youth?

Conducted over ten months, this study used methods of inquiry including focus group interviews, individual interviews, participant observation, and artifact and document collection. Informed by grounded theory, the study offers three overarching political narratives for analysis: (1) Youth as “powerless” within the systems punishment, control, conformity, and injustice that situate them; (2) Youth as imaginative political actors who resist systems of injustice and deficit positioning through identity performance, talking back, acting back, and sneaky resistance; and (3) Youth as political imaginers who hope for a politics of mutuality and authenticity. Ultimately, this case study raises the question: What might it mean to position urban black and Latino/a youth as competent, imaginative, political actors?
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As a twenty-six year old, fourth year middle school teacher, I recall sitting in my parents’ kitchen chatting about adventures of teaching middle school over a cup of sencha. My mother walked toward the freezer to retrieve yokan, a sweet bean treat that pairs well with green tea, when I noticed a sheet of paper, protected by a plastic sheet cover, adhered to the refrigerator door. Approaching to get a better view, I realized that my parents had printed out the lyrics to John Lennon’s song, Imagine. The first verse read:

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...

Giving my mother an inquiring look, I pointed to the lyrics. I knew my parents were Beatles fans, but I did not know why this song merited a coveted spot on the refrigerator door. My mother read my face and replied in Japanese, “Well, Roi, that’s the way we see the world.” My eyes danced back to the lyrics, and I re-read them.

Yes, I thought, that’s precisely what that is.

Prior to this, I had never read my parents’ values so lucidly written in words. They had always embodied ideals of humanism, civic-mindedness, solidarity, and peace; however, my parents never preached, wrote down, or directed me to read books that promoted these values. Rather, they acted them. For the past decade, with approval from the village, my father has cultivated and groomed a native wildflower sanctuary for public enjoyment. The gardens sit on a
plot land, once overrun by invasive plants, that runs parallel to a riverbank in a public park. He partnered with our neighbor of several decades years to build the sanctuary together. My parents speak with, check in on, and routinely take care of our elderly neighbors and neighbors with disabilities. They volunteer as teaching assistants for a summer school program that educate students with autism. For over a decade, they participated in community gardening, sharing their produce and farming knowledge with neighbors and other community gardeners. My mother has dedicated her professional life to educating students with severe disabilities at local elementary, middle, and high schools. My parents’ interactions with the community played a pivotal role in the construction of my understanding of how I should act as a citizen of my school, neighborhood, and communities. My sister coined the term “The Kawai Way” to describe this civic-minded philosophy: As humans, we work for and with each other. We contribute to society. We are in service to one another. We remain modest in our accomplishments and thoughtful in our contributions.

I wrote this dissertation in the spirit of the Kawai Way.

Mom, thank you. You moved my pen with your love, unconditional celebrations of my successes, and framing of my failures as grounds for growth. Dad, thank you. You are and have been my moral, spiritual, and intellectual compass in this process and throughout my life. Kanako, thank you. You have made a survivor out of me, challenging me to face difficulty with reason and confidence. Tasin, thank you. As my brother-in-law and father of my niece and nephews, you have helped me understand family differently, more richly. Ari, thank you. Your love of letters and questions, deeply-seeded compassion for others, gargantuan house architecture, and passionate renditions of Let it Go are pure joy. Vera, thank you. Your eagerness to share your life with me and unrivaled desire for adventure drive me to seek out my own. Emmett, thank you.
The way you exclaim, “Uncle Roi!” at the top of the stairs could motivate me to do anything.

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To my students, former and current, thank you. You are the heartbeats of this project.
PROLOGUE: DO AS YOU’RE TOLD!

I started teaching at a public school middle school at the age of twenty-two. I landed a job as an eighth grade reading, language arts, and American History teacher in Arlington Heights, IL, a largely white, middle-class northwestern suburb of Chicago. During my first year, the principal pulled me into her office for a goal-setting meeting. In preparation, she asked me to write out an ambitious, professional goal I could accomplish that year. While other teachers I knew focused on improving classroom management or writing data-driven lesson plans, mine goal was less conventional: I wanted to incorporate powerful service-learning into my teaching. After a few clarifying questions, my principal was encouraging. She advised me to try for one service-learning project this year as a test.

Quick backtrack—during my four years at the University of Illinois, I grew, socially and politically, through my involvement in community service. In fact, much of my identity on campus was wrapped up in service and volunteerism. I tutored at three different elementary schools, coached a third grade soccer team, played my viola for seniors citizens in hospice care, renovated homes, gave blood, and organized volunteers for youth recreational activities at the Urbana and Champaign park districts. I co-led two alternative spring break trips, the first to Zellwood, Florida at a transitional family shelter and the second to Lac Du Flambeau, Wisconsin, at a community center on an Ojibwe reservation. I crossed racial, class, age, and gender borders I had previously considered dangerous. I met people who made me feel both overwhelmingly uncomfortable and unconditionally welcomed.

So proud of my service record, I secretly tallied my hours, calculating that I had spent over 2,000 hours serving the community. This was my main identity—a servant leader.
extraordinaire. I still carry this identity with me (and remain proud of it), although I have come to understand its potential dangers.

I entered my first year of teaching with a service mindset. I was determined to immerse students in the worlds I had experienced in college—of diversity, peace, and charity—to enlighten them beyond the social traps of suburbia. I co-led the school’s service organization and supported charity drives as the advisor to the student council. I facilitated a discussion in my reading classes about social issues and problems my students saw at school. One class of students told me they observed that students with disabilities, often with Downs Syndrome or autism, were isolated and bullied. These students took the same, life-skills courses throughout the school day and were seldom included in mainstreamed classes. I took this discussion as justification to create a service-learning unit—my dream!

I constructed the unit with the zeal of a first year teacher. We read short stories and pieces of novels of about adults and kids with disabilities: *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli; *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick; *Al Capone Shines My Shoes* by Gennifer Choldenko; and excerpts from *Flowers for Algernon* and *Of Mice and Men*. We discussed how disabilities were portrayed across genre; how it compared and contrasted to our experiences; and how it informed our understanding of people with disabilities. We watched *Radio*, a movie about a relationship between a high school football coach and Radio, a black man with a (never-identified) disability.

Seeking a connection beyond school walls, I contacted Miner Elementary, a neighboring school in our district that educated students with disabilities. I partnered with a middle school teacher at Miner and set up four meetings between our classes. During each trip, we engaged in literacy, arts, or kinesthetic activities that my students designed. We co-wrote stories about our experiences at school, played balloon volleyball, and sculpted each other’s forms out of clay.
After we returned these visits, I would ask my students reflection questions: What did we learn about our friends? What surprised us about them? How might our perspectives have changed about disabilities? An adamant reader of service-learning literature, I also connected their experiences to academic content: How did our experiences compare with how authors portrayed disability in the stories we read? How might we write our own accounts through personal storytelling?

I left my service-learning projects, of which there were many, with feelings of accomplishment and joy. However, in my seven years teaching in Arlington Heights, I never considered the potential dangers of service-learning in the way I taught it. I never considered how I positioned my students as us, the server, in relation to Miner students, them, the recipient of service. We always organized and planned the activities, as an offer to them. We (or, at least, I) considered us enlightened about disability, having read about it, and attempted to enact this knowledge with them. Although we spoke of reciprocity, we never once talked about power dynamics, resistance to inequity, or social change. I thought my students were acting as kind, charitable, compassionate citizens—after all, what does service have to do with politics?

After my seven years in the classroom, I enrolled in a Harvard Graduate School of Education class called, “Civic Education and Identity in a Multicultural Context.” I saw the class title and was immediately drawn to it. This was my chance to explore service-learning intellectually, to reify its importance, to strengthen my expertise on the topic. The professor, Emma (a pseudonym), was a political scientist by scholarly training and had spent years as a middle school teacher in Atlanta and Boston Public Schools. During the class, she named the art of teaching as constant negotiation of and through power. Public school teaching, she said, is necessarily, and perhaps desirably, political. Regardless of how obvious this statement is to me
now, it pushed some buttons at the time. Politics only corrupts schools, I said to myself but never out loud, teachers are supposed to be neutral.

In the class, we explored service-learning as civic pedagogy. In most cases, Emma was critical. She argued that service-learning pedagogies were apolitical and insufficient in challenging larger systemic issues of injustice. In the oft-cited words of Westheimer and Kahne (2004), service-learning promoted a “personally responsible” version of citizenship, a conception that highlights individual enactments of virtue and charity as “good” citizenship. This notion of citizenship only worked to preserve the social status quo, I heard time and again, insufficient in a country so wrought with systems of injustice. At first, these critiques angered me. You can poke holes and critique anything, I grumbled, how dare you question my servant leader identity?

Despite my pushback, Emma’s class had left its mark. That summer I landed a job teaching a civic engagement and leadership course in the city of Chicago. Run through the local community college in Uptown (a diverse neighborhood in Chicago), I entered a classroom of students who were the same age as my students in Arlington Heights, twelve and thirteen. The majority of my students were black, several were Latino/a, and that summer, I also taught several Southeast Asian students from the nearby neighborhood colloquially known as Little Saigon. As an initiative for the community college, my students, all from low-income contexts, were given a tuition-free entrance into the course.

During our discussions about social issues that concerned us, my students and I brainstormed a list of issues far different from my classes in Arlington Heights. They spoke of how their uncles’ and aunts’ businesses were being boarded up due to creeping presence of gentrification. They spoke of racial tensions between black and Latino/a teens and the progressive, seemingly unstoppable, control youth gangs had over their neighborhood streets.
They spoke of confrontational experiences with police and the prolonged response times when they requested help. Many students were fearful of leaving their houses, particularly at night, without the protection of their peers or family. As a whole, my students agreed: when it comes to the police, they banded together, avoided, and, if all else failed, resisted. In regards to their experiences with people of power and authority, my students were resentful, resistant, and sad—and, I thought, rightfully so.

As we continued to talk, we agreed to focus on a single issue they considered most pressing: unrelenting patrol of police in their neighborhoods and unjust nature of their police interactions. Together, we set out collecting stories from Uptown locals—shop owners, school officials, people walking down the street, anyone who would speak with us about their experiences with police. We put the community members’ and our stories together, tallying how many residents agreed to the statements such as, “My experiences with police has been mostly negative”, and “The police in Uptown use excessive force.” Next, we brainstormed audiences who had influence over police matters. We resolved to contact Uptown’s Alderman and members of the police force.

Several students contacted the Alderman’s office, and his chief-of-staff graciously agreed to meet with us for a half hour. That same day, we arranged to attend the police precinct’s monthly community meeting at a local library. Dressed up in their best shirts, ties, shoes, and skirts, my students sat down with the chief of staff in a private meeting to share the stories they had collected. I chose not to attend the meeting, hoping it would open space for my students to speak candidly. Forty minutes later, I eyed my students’ reactions as they emerged from the meeting. The alderman’s chief of staff, a white man in his early to mid-thirties, approached me
and asked, “Are these your students?” I nodded proudly, expecting high praise for their interest and political engagement. “Well, you should teach them better,” he snarled. “They are so rude!”

On the walk back to the train station, my students chatted animatedly about the meeting. The chief of staff, they perceived, had assumed he would be teaching them about the workings of government, police, and policies. Instead, my students insisted on telling their stories and making suggestions for change. The exchange got heated, they said, and, eventually, ended in a passive stalemate. Throughout the meeting, they described, they progressively felt the chief of staff saw them as unruly, disrespectful troublemakers instead of informed citizens. “We kept cool, Mr. K,” a student promised. “He started yellin first.”

I wanted to process their experience, but we rushed to hop the “L” (Chicago’s elevated train line) to the public library where the police precinct meeting would be held. During the public forum, four of my students, anxiously waiting their turn, stepped to the microphone. Nubia (a pseudonym), one of our class leaders, delivered the most impassioned part of the speech. She described how she witnessed her cousin, a bystander, being shot during a gang-police exchange of fire. The audience, made up of older community members and a panel of local policemen, listened until the four students finished. After Nubia stepped away from the microphone, they sat silently for the next few seconds. Finally, a few members of the audience, followed by two policemen and women, applauded politely. They gave no further response. We walked out of the room proud of accomplishments for the day but also confused and wanting. Had we done anything? Did anyone even care? Why did it seem like we were speaking to closed ears?

What strikes me most about my two experiences was the differences in our experiences with power and authority. As a teacher of suburban students in a suburban context, I never
considered power or politics as a factor in our service-learning work. The primarily white, middle class teachers, principal, and parents were encouraging and supportive. I was blind to our exercises of power and how the systems of power subjected us. Aside from logistical complications, we hardly faced any resistance or semblance of doubt that we were being good, contributory, productive citizens. It strikes me now that I was “blind” to our politics because the institutional systems of power silently, invisibly, and passively aligned with us. There was no need to confront it.

However, when I shared the story of police project with a few suburban teacher peers, I was generally met with furrowed eyebrows. Why would I promote less police in a “dangerous” area? Why would I support resistance to police? One teacher remarked that I should have told my students to “Do as you’re told!” when confronted by police. If youth stopped causing trouble, she posited, the police would no longer have to be there. In those moments, I did not know how to respond without resentment, anger and frustration. There was just too much to explain. In our Uptown project, we encountered resistance by power and authority at every level. The Alderman’s chief of staff positioned my students as “rude”; the policemen panel, in their blasé response, did not respond to my students’ ideas. When I described my project to administrators at the community college, they warned me against it.

In both cases, we pursued social issues my students said interested them. In both cases, the students were between the ages of 12 – 14. In both cases, I considered my students engaged, interested, committed, and powerful. Why, then, at almost every level, was the “police presence” project considered irresponsible, rude, risky, and unworthy of response when service-learning project regarding disabilities was only met with unabashed praise? Why was one worth
repressing and the other worth promoting? And why were our experiences with power and authority so different in the two classes?
CHAPTER 1: NARRATIVES OF POLITICAL DECLINE

Despite my lingering question about the two projects, I felt I knew one thing for sure: both classes enacted different forms of political engagement. Given the space and time to explore issues they cared about, my students were interested, compassionate, and engaged. If my assessment is accurate, however, my students might also be considered the exception. A growing number of scholars, politicians, and educators are lamenting the political disengagement of America’s youth. In most conventional indicators of political participation, youth are considered disaffected (Galston, 2001). In comparison to preceding generations, scholars argue that youth political activities unequivocally on the decline (CIRCLE, 2003; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins, 2002). In 2003, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement conducted a cross-contextual, longitudinal study of civic and political engagement. They reported:

Young people… are less likely to vote and are less interested in political discussion and public issues than either their older counterparts or young people of past decades. As a result, many young Americans may not be prepared to participate fully in our democracy now and when they become adults (p. 4).

Young people are considered less interested in political issues, less trusting of their government and each other, less likely to vote, and less engaged in community groups (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002; Soule, 2001). In short, if youth continue this trend of political decline, Houston, we have a democracy problem.

Urban black and Latino/a youth from low-income contexts in the United States are considered particularly disaffected. Political scholars often point to low levels of political knowledge and skills (Delli Caprini & Keeter, 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998; CIRCLE, 2003),
jading of the political system, and interference of social toxins such as gun violence, police
brutality, redlining, and other consequences of structural racism and classism as key reasons
(West, 2004; Ginwright, 2007; Rubin 2007). Aside from a small number of teens who (laudably)
engage as community organizers, civil rights activists, and/or Youth Participatory Action
Researchers (Ishihara 2007; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fox, Medratta, Ruglis, Stoudt, Shah, &
Fine, 2010), urban black and Latino/a youth from low-income contexts are often positioned as
politically disengaged and under-informed about issues of power, politics, and social problem-
solving, especially in comparison to their white middle class peers (Lazer, 1999; CIRCLE, 2003;
Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo; Sherrod, 2005; Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007).

Political scientists and scholars have also called to attention the gap of political
participation between youth of different races, socioeconomics, and geographies. White youth
are found to be more politically active than minorities, particularly Latino/a and Asian youth
(Baldi et al., 2001; Niemi and Junn, 1998). Rich, suburban youth participate more than poor
urban youth (CIRCLE, 2003; Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007; Lutkus, Weiss,
Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazer, 1999; Sherrod, 2005). This gap has gone through multiple
nominative iterations (with nuanced definitional differences), including the Civic Achievement
Gap (Levinson, 2010), the Civic Engagement Gap (Pope, Stolte, and Cohen, 2011), and most
recently, and perhaps most notably, the Civic Empowerment Gap (Levinson, 2012). Levinson
calls the difference in political engagement and, consequently, political power between affluent
white communities and poor communities of color the civic empowerment gap. In her book, No
Citizen Left Behind, Levinson asks, how is political power distributed in this country, why does it
matter, and what opportunities can we create in schools to close the gap?

Although Levinson acknowledges that her argument seems to position poor youth of
color at the “bottom” of the empowerment gap, she argues that the demographic differences in civic and political knowledge, skills, and activities are still a worthy concern. “Gaps need not imply deficits,” she writes, “and it does no one any good to ignore the specific harms suffered by those who cannot or do not deploy traditional levers of civic and political power” (p. 319). Drawing from DuBois’s (1903) conception of double consciousness, Levinson argues that poor youth of color should be taught to act in their local communities/contexts and the larger state or federal political systems simultaneously. Youth of color, she argues, need to acquire power within the culture of power, “codes or rules for participating in power” (Delpit, 1988, p. 282), and the localized knowledge they have about their own, often-disenfranchised communities. To Levinson, understanding this gap in youth civic and political activity across demographics is the foundation of an empowering, engaging, context-specific approach to civic education for poor youth of color.

Parallel to Levinson’s (2012) her claim that “it does no one any good to ignore the specific harms suffered by those who cannot or do not deploy traditional levers of political power” (p. 319), I similarly assert that ignoring the political “micro-world of informants” (Anyon, 2011)—thereby not acknowledging the political realities that situate youth within their local communities—is equally problematic. This study seeks to understand localized political narratives of black and Latino/a youth the vastly under-researched, highly contextual study of everyday, youth politics. As youth political scholarship is replete with studies illustrating the lack of participation of urban black and Latino/a youth in traditional levers of political power, contextualized narratives of youth experiences are more important than ever. As my students in Chicago illustrated, urban youth are not blank canvasses; they are politically conscious, active citizens, informed by daily political experiences (Rubin, 2007).
Conducted over 10 months, this study enquires into political experiences and activities of six urban black and Latino/a youth in a space they navigate frequently, their public school. I describe how six black and Latino/a youth from two of the poorest neighborhoods in a large eastern metropolis—all of whom have little or no formal education in enacting formal political levers such as youth organizing, action research, or political activism—act politically in nuanced, knowledgeable, and complex ways as they navigate school spaces. Further, I position these youth as deliberate, knowledgeable, and contextually savvy political subjects, who construct and navigate systems of power often in creative, imaginative, and nuanced ways. As youth often positioned outside the culture of power, they illustrated a deep and critical awareness of the political systems that situate them and construct narratives of power and resistance along the way.

Research Questions

My study is guided by three research questions. The bolded words in each question indicate key terminology I use throughout my study that merit definitional clarity. Although these key terms are defined briefly in this section, I discuss them with greater epistemological depth in chapter 3. These definitions were selected to align with my epistemological stance; stay within the contextual boundaries that situate the study; and remain grounded in extant scholarly definitions. The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What are the daily political experiences and activities of urban black and Latino/a youth within their public school?

2. How do these youth construct and deconstruct political narratives based on these experiences and activities?

3. How can these narratives inform epistemological assumptions and pedagogical approaches to teaching civic and social education to urban black and Latino/a youth?
Guided by the analytical principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), I seek to construct political narratives based on the emic constructions of the youth who live them. I foregrounds the “micro world of informants” (Anyon, 2011, p. 8) within the context of their own narrative construction, documenting lay theories about political forces that they encounter and negotiate on a daily basis. Through this construction, I describe “discourses, processes, and activities that are politically important but scarcely visible” (Schatz, 2009, p. 305) for purposes of creating new ways of seeing the political world and challenging narratives to the existing hegemonic assumptions made about black and Latino/a youth as political actors, storytellers, and problem solvers.

**Key Definitions**

In this section, I provide a brief definition to the key terms (the bolded phrases) in my research questions. I discuss my epistemological stances of all of these concepts and terms, in detail, in chapter 3.

**Political.** A modifier used to describe knowledge, behaviors, and/or attitudes devoted to influencing formal and informal codes of power, privilege, and access to power. Formal systems could include rules, policies, laws, and structures of authority (Campbell, 2004); informal systems might include social norms such that involve organizations of power around racial, cultural, gender, or religious norms (Macedo, 2005).

**Political activity.** Interactions youth have in the social, physical, and/or electronic realm (including conversations, activities, and social networking) in which people confront, comply, act for, and/or interact with people in positions of power, formal rules and systems of power
(including school policies, laws), and informal, socially constructed norms of power (Bhavnani, 1991).

**Political narrative.** A story situated in historical, geographic, cultural, and social contexts that depicts the daily experiences of participants’ interaction with individual, institutional, structural, or social power. In short, political narratives describe “how power works”. Narratives have a beginning, middle, and end, and imply causality and consequences of action and discourse (Haste, 2014).

**Urban.** A modifier used to describe people who live in a place or the place itself characterized by a high population density, life organization around non-agricultural economic activity, and residential boundaries of a large city or metropolis. Urban geographies are often, but not always, distinguished by the ethnic, cultural, racial, religious, and linguistic diversity of its residents (Hall & Barrett, 2012).

**Youth.** People between the ages of 12 - 13. Although the word “youth” has been used to describe a wide range of ages and other social and cultural markers of development, all participants in this study described as youth range in age from 12-13. I note that I use the terms “youth” and “student” frequently to identify my participants. I use the term “youth” to identify my participants in social contexts absent of formalized, classroom instruction. This includes our focus groups, interviews, hallway discussions, the lunchroom, and classroom spaces when they likely do not position themselves or are not positioned by others as students in relation to a “teacher”. I use the term “student” in contexts where they are positioned as learners in relation to a teacher.
**Black youth.** Youth who self-identify as *black* within the social contexts bounding this study. These contexts include social spaces within Septima Clark School, or a surrounding neighborhood in which the participants navigate on a daily basis. In this study, race is considered a social construct. In this way, “blackness” is a construction of *how the student sees her or himself* and *how others position her or him* in relation to the others in these spaces. Although there are certainly other ways to consider what it means to be black, the youths’ self-identification is privileged for purposes of capturing their lived realities in relation to own construction of identity.

**Latino/a youth.** Youth who self-identifies panethnically as Latino, Latina, Hispanic; or self-identifies with a Latin-American country of national origin. In this way, “Latino/a” is a social construction of *how the student sees her or himself* in relation to the others in these spaces. Although there are certainly other ways to consider what it means to be Latino/a, the youths’ self-identification is privileged for purposes of capturing their lived realities in relation to their race.

**Definitional Tensions**

This study raises definitional questions not only about what is political, but also what counts as meaningful politics in the contexts of a representative democracy (explored with more depth in chapter 2). In the spirit of Macedo (2005), I use the word *political* to primarily implicate youth interactivities with power, a modifier to describe knowledge, activities, and/or attitudes devoted to influencing formal and informal codes of power, privilege, and access to power. Formal codes could include rules, policies, laws, and people and structures of authority (Campbell, 2004); informal codes might include social norms and values that involve discourses
of power around racial, cultural, gender, language or religious norms (Macedo, 2005). In their book, *Democracy at Risk* (2005), Macedo and colleagues argue:

...a vibrant politics depends on a vibrant civil society. Political voice can, for example, mean participation in formal government institutions, but it may also involve becoming part of a group or organization, protesting or boycotting, or even simply talking to a neighbor across the backyard fence (italics in original, p. 6 - 7).

Macedo, et al. promote a circular and less linear relationship between political and civic activities. In their “interdependence”, civic and politics are indelibly connected. Also demonstrated by Macedo et al.’s quote, the word “political” has diverging definitions, implicating a wide range of activities from government participation to personal actions. Similarly, I draw on the women’s liberation movement and critical feminist perspective that reframes the word ‘political’ in youth activity through a social conception (Flanagan & Gallay, 1995).

The phrase, “The personal is political” is well cited in critical and feminist theory, such as the work of Freire (1970), Hanisch (1970) and social justice scholars such as Nieto (2006). According to this view, youth are surrounded by systems of power and privilege that implicate un/equal access to opportunity and citizenship (Freire, 1996; Nieto, 2006). Youth act and make personal decisions that shape the inclusion or exclusion of others, often implicating identities based in races, cultures, genders, religions, sexual orientations, socioeconomic statuses, or dis/abilities by including certain social and cultural discourses and excluding others (Oakes, 1985). In this way, personal action becomes a political matter; actions are influenced by, and contribute to, the shaping of systems of power and privilege. I align with Vygotsky (1978) who viewed *political thinking* as a product of social discourse and activity. ‘Politics’ may imply “both
the regulation as well as the contestation of social life” (Bhavnani, 1991, p. 35). Personal issues—such as selecting childcare and health issues like AIDS—are as politically salient as action that regards national or international affairs (Flanagan & Gallay, 1995).

Influenced by a Foucaultian ontology of power, I investigate ways that youth position and reposition themselves within the flow of power in their social environments, negotiating the identities they perform and those being placed upon them by others. To Foucault (1991), power is a moving, flowing entity that exists within the subjectivities of people engaged in social activity. People do not “possess” or “develop” power; rather, it moves like a river current around within social subjectivities and are highly dependent on context.

Schools as Political Spaces

Schools are fascinating and important spaces to study power and politics, particularly in regards to the vastly understudied area of youth political life in schools. The overlap between schools and politics are numerous. First, power implicates knowledge. Power produces “regimes of truth”, or informal, often implicit norms and assumptions created by accepted discourses (i.e. knowledge) of the society in which it functions (Foucault, 1977). Schools are often the site of reproduction or creation of such discourses. Power can also repress knowledge (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1987). Educators who are not critically conscious of the systems of domination created in schools (e.g. the imbalance of power between teacher and student) will likely serve to recreate these oppressive systems. If power is not checked, knowledge can be repressed. As an institution built on the relationship between students, teachers, and knowledge, schools are inherently linked to power.

Second, power contextualizes almost all aspects of school. Students interact with people in formal positions of power—principals, teachers, deans—and create their own codes of power.
Educators teach curricula authored by people with power and enact their own power as illustrations or desires of dominance, control, acceptance, love, and movement toward a better world. Students and teachers create, resist, and reinvent institutional rules. As a result, students and educators interact within codes of power, i.e. implicit and explicit rules of power (Delpit, 1988) and construct narratives of power (i.e. stories about how power is and should be enacted) as interpreters of these codes. Power also implicates pedagogy. Schools are sites of explicit and implicit pedagogies. Extending Gage’s (1978) definition of pedagogy as “scientific basis of the art of teaching,” pedagogy also implicates the governing system of values, sets of assumptions, discourses and the instructional decisions and interactions that come within this system.

Finally, school is an active, civic space. School is the only compulsory civic space for most youth. They live within a set of governed rules that promote a closed set of values. They negotiate action to fulfill their individual needs in relation to the needs of the collective group. In other words, schools are spaces where students are citizens of a broader community. Despite the massive amounts of time students spend in this politically charged space, little is known about how students understand, experience, and act upon/with/without power in the context of school. In seeking thoughtful, deliberate pathways of action to address problems of injustice inside and outside of school; to gain a greater awareness of student background knowledge, experiences and assumptions about the workings of power, governance, and democracy; and to develop a wider understanding of youth political activity in context, we should look to a group of citizens whose voices are often tokenized and undervalued within current political systems – the youth who live them.
Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to inform scholars, teachers, curriculum designers, administrators, and policymakers how political experiences urban black and Latino/a youth, based on their daily political activities, can inform, nuance, contextualize, and guide how social and civic education can be taught in schools to urban black and Latino/a youth. I hope to open space for educators to learn from youth who engage in daily political activity inside Septima Clark\textsuperscript{1} Pilot School in the Oakton\textsuperscript{2} neighborhood of Vera City, a large eastern metropolis. The study focuses on how such youth author political narratives within institutional political narratives authored by media, their communities, schools, and scholarly research. These narratives position students in relation to all-characterizing “regimes of truth” in regards to the participants’ positionality, subjectivities, and story as producers of knowledge, problem-identifiers, and solution-makers. With this in mind, the chapters of my study engage in a variety of tasks, including the following:

- **Explore the political experiences and activities** of black and Latino/a youth attending Septima Clark Pilot School in a large eastern city, as informed by their daily activities inside of school. The study pays particular attention to those actions taken by these to youth “counter” or “resist” the metanarratives about political dis/engagement that situate minority youth in the scholarly research.

- **Understand the political narratives** of black and Latino/a youth constructed from daily political experiences and activities inside and outside of school; how and why they construct those narratives; and the language they use to describe such narratives.

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\textsuperscript{1} Septima Clark is a pseudonym used for both the school \textit{and} the sub-neighborhood in which it resides, since the school and sub-neighborhood do share the same name. I use the term “sub-neighborhood” to describe a subset of land (i.e. a “sub” neighborhood) within the encompassing Oakton neighborhood, one of the officially-recognized geographic neighborhoods by the city.

\textsuperscript{2} All references to geographic locations in this study are pseudonyms.
- Contextualize scholarly understanding of political engagement for urban black and Latino/a youth and use this understanding to inform the construction of social and civic pedagogies, instructional practices, and curricula.
CHAPTER 2: WHAT POLITICS MATTER?

A Conceptual Review of Political Narrative

This study raises definitional questions about what “counts” as meaningful political experiences and activities for democracy. In this chapter, I explore the pre-existing scholarship on youth political engagement, examining oft-implicit claims about meaningful political experiences for youth and the implications of such experiences. Since US scholars embrace multiple conceptions of democracy adding a layer of complexity to these questions (Ralston, 2001), I also clarify definitions for key terms I use and positions I take and situated within the pre-existing literature. In short, I seek to synthesize how scholars conceptualize what political activities matter for democracy and demonstrate how this knowledge informs my study.

In contrast to asking why youth political activity is declining and what to do about this decline, I seek to understand how youth political activity is currently being conceptualized; analyze the ontological and epistemological assumptions undergird these conceptions; and explain the conceptions I use to inform this study. Accordingly, this chapter primarily takes up the question: How has U.S. scholarship conceptualized narratives of youth political experiences and actions? In other words, how have US scholars defined what stories and histories are important to tell in regards to political experiences and actions of youth? Within the larger inquiry, I investigate three other sub-questions: (1) What assumptions do these scholars make about political outcomes that matter? (2) What tensions and limitations exist still within each conception? and (3) How do I address these tensions in the positioning of this study?

I take on this task acknowledging that no single conception can accurately capture the complex narratives or inquiries of any field. Each conception is entangled in contradiction,
tensions, and divergences—and perhaps desirably so. Scholarly conceptions come from different historical traditions; however, each field overlaps, influences, and constructs meaning from each other. Although this study strives to overcome the tendency to place scholarship in neat categories, it is important to elucidate the values, ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie these conceptions to identify and critically examine their implications on the narratives about our nation’s civic health and political equity and, ultimately, how we teach in schools.

**Fields of Scholarship and the “IT” Question**

Each field of scholarship prioritizes particular outcomes they consider important for the craft of youth political activity. Campbell-Patton & Patton (2010) call the underlying question about these priorities the “IT” question, i.e., “When it is said that something works or doesn’t work, what is the IT that works or doesn’t work?” (p. 596). The answer to this question helps conceptualize the theories of change taken up by each field. These theories are assumptions of cause and effect (often left implicit) within each field of study that produce desired consequences or results (Patton & Patton, 2010). So beyond locating the IT that works, what question do scholars ask to investigate the success for IT?

For example, *youth development* scholars and social psychologists often ask questions about the skills, competencies, and knowledge youth must build to become agentic citizens (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; & James, 2002; Yates & Youniss, 1996). These scholars might also inquire how political experiences and activity can influence future behaviors in youth. Urban youth development researchers often investigate how youth develop a sense of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and take action toward systemic social change (Cammarota & Fine,
Political scientists inquire how youth participation in electoral politics influences and strengthens our representative democracy (Delli Caprini & Keeter, 1996; Levinson, 2012; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Youth voice scholars generally take up the question of youth participation and empowerment in decision-making and policy creation both inside and outside of schools (Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2001). Finally, literary scholars may take up the question of how youth use literacies to read and author a variety of texts (including online and social networking spaces) that demonstrate their civic and political agency. Within each conception, what assumptions, tensions, and limitations of each conception can be constructed, considered, and called into question?

**Youth Development: A Psychological Perspective**

Youth development scholars and developmental psychologists often take up the questions, “What activities develop skills and competencies necessary (such as deliberation, active community participation, and public speaking) to further democracy?” Alternatively, they might ask, “What are the developmental outcomes of specific activity?” The developmental perspective assumes that “if a democracy is to remain secure and stable, each new generation of her citizens must believe in the system and believe that it works for people like them” (Flanagan & Faison, p. 4, 2001). Civic and political activities that develop skills, dispositions, and competencies for active democratic participation are considered most meaningful (Torney-Purta & Lopez, 2006).

In many cases, scholars focus on what Keeter, Andolina, and Jenkins (2002) would describe as *civic activity*, or actions taken to strengthen the communities in which they live. Youth who participate in social groups develop a stronger understanding of how to act and how
they fit in a community that has collective norms. Youth who participate in polities as a child develop an understanding of how to navigate political space. For example, Flanagan & Faison (2001) highlight civic and political activity that builds social capital and place youth in a position where they have collective accountability/responsibility toward a larger group. Examples include participation in local community groups that allow for greater voice and community decision-making.

Although youth development scholars study contexts that span the demographic spectrum, studies are especially plentiful about poor youth from rural and urban contexts. Conceivably, this focus comes from an ontological stance that poor urban and rural communities need the most development; that these youth are most disaffected from political life; and that they most lack the skills and knowledge needed to engage. Scholars such as Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh (2007) focus on extension activity and community building programs such as 4–H that foster the development of leadership, public speaking, and agricultural sustainability in rural youth. In their article, the authors consider the intersection between community-building and youth development to foster youth “skill enhancement, confidence building, and ownership that prepare them as they navigate toward adulthood” (p. 3). Youth civic and political activity is seen as fundamental necessities for community improvement.

More recently, developmental scholars such as Watts & Flanagan (2007) critique youth development scholarship for neglecting to support youth in challenging existing (and often unjust) social and political realities. They support a stronger social justice conception of youth development called Youth Organizing (YO). Coming out of a tradition of Positive Youth Development and Community Youth Development, YO takes a social justice lens, making it consistent with liberation psychology (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). YO scholars Ginwright &
James (2002) argue that educators should construct opportunities for poor, black youth to take a political position about a social problem, investigate the systems of inequality and oppression that contextualize the problem and their own circumstances, and take collective action toward political change. Through these opportunities, youth develop a sense of political awareness or black consciousness—a black person’s realization of his or her societal position of oppression and the need to take collective political action toward liberation—and black pride.

Youth development researchers often write about three conceptualizations of engagement for youth of color: youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), youth organization (Ginwright & James, 2002), and youth leadership (Fox, et al., 2010). Other scholars offer different names for similar conceptualizations, such as social justice youth development (Noguera, Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006), and youth action (Kirschner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003). These scholars cite engagement practices for purposes of social justice and developing “agents of social change”, a phrase often used to conceptions of engagement in which youth change social and politically oppressive systems, policies, and structures through collective political action.

The umbrella term used for these conceptualizations is *critical youth civic engagement* (Fox, et al., 2010; Kirschner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003). The assumptions and tenets that guide youth critical civic engagement literature as described by Fox, et al. (2010):

1. Youth carry knowledge and expertise about conditions of their everyday lives shaped in contexts of oppression, colonization and resistance.
2. Youth and adults can engage together in serious inquiry into the histories and contemporary conditions of injustice and struggle.
3. It is crucial to examine cross-sector circuits of dispossession and pools of resistance as they intersect across time, space, communities and bodies.
4. Research should be linked to organizing and action.
5. Effective research teams include youth leaders and adult allies.

(p. 623-624)

In this conception of youth development, youth are no longer positioned as deficit, lacking the knowledge, maturity, or insight in creating social change. Scholars reject youth as the target of intervention and instead focus on youth as assets in constructing solutions. In these conceptions of youth development, adults are seen as supporters, mentors, facilitators, and resources instead of “leaders” (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

A related conception to critical youth civic engagement is youth activism. Youth activism is an overlap of political activity and motivations, “deeply embedded in political, psychological, and social contexts” (Hart & Gullan, 2010, p. 68). Youth activity could involve protesting, rioting, rallying, organizing, and signing petitions of purposes of political gain. Although, historically, youth activism has been the capstone of youth subversive activity, activism might also connote a stance on protecting rights, freedoms, and democracy, which may not have a subversive intent (Hart & Gullan, 2010).

Urban and rural youth development scholars often disagree on the answer to the question, “What makes a ‘good’ citizen?” As I contend, this difference between urban and rural youth scholars might connote ontological differences in regards to the everyday existence of youth in different contexts. As illuminated in Watts and Flangan (2007), scholars who focus on rural youth often investigate experiences in which students develop community by developing individual skills such as leadership, public speaking, persuasive writing, and public decorum. This conception of a good, active citizen is in line with Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) conception of a “personally responsible” and, to a lesser extent, the “participatory” citizen.
Personally responsible citizens focus on individual acts of responsibility, such as recycling, picking up litter, and obeying laws and act within the boundaries of social and political ‘propriety’. The focus is on the development of the individual and crafting that individual’s sense of responsibility within a community. Participatory citizens focus on collective acts, often through leadership roles, in organizing groups of citizens to participating in community development projects.

Scholars focusing on urban youth often pay more attention to unpacking potentially unequal social or political systems that may contextualize the communities in which youth (particularly marginalized youth) participate, a conception in line with Westheimer and Kahne’s “justice-oriented” citizen. Citizens ask questions beyond, “How can I act to solve a social problem” and move toward the question, “How can we, collectively, act to understand the root causes of a social problem and disrupt that cause?” Urban scholars such as Ginwright & James (2002) and Cammarota & Romero (2009) consider race and class as salient contextualizing factors in the experiences of urban youth. They assume that youth must make meaning and take pride in these identities to develop the competencies to act within a largely oppressive, marginalizing world. In a society that consistently marginalizes poor, urban, youth of color, empowerment requires act of disruption or disequilibrium of that system. In this conception, actions that change communities define development.

**My position.** Although I do not take a developmental stance to this study, I do not take an anti-developmental approach, either. Certain political skills and dispositions are developed through a progression of experiences, reflection, and guided learning. Such skills and dispositions certainly can build complexity as youth construct more political knowledge. The
question of whether or not the development of such skills and dispositions is better or worse for democratic life merits a complex answer, the scope of which is beyond this chapter.

However, I contend that a development perspective, in itself, is insufficient to understand youth political knowledge. Aside from a few youth organizing scholars who explicitly focus on sociopolitical contexts and their influences on political activities (often of black youth, see Ginwright, 2004; Cammarota & Fine, 2008), developmental studies generally neglect how skills and knowledge change in different contexts. Just as salient, developmental scholars often ignore the salience of context in defining necessary, meaningful, and/or useful political knowledge and skills. It is often assumed that once youth acquire skills and competencies, these acquisitions transfer between contexts and that these skills are necessary for citizenry in any context.

From the developmental perspective, youth acquire such skills through social activity, scaffolding, and guided activity toward progressive levels of complexity and understanding. Epistemologically, knowledge is a cognitive construct that is developed through activity in social environment, and ontologically, youth development scholars assume that activities are youth enactments of previously acquired skills, knowledge, and competencies within a social context. In this sense, youth act primarily as a meaning-making gesture of any dissonance between “antecedent internal conditions” (Piaget, 1970, p. 91) and empirical evidence, such as physical experience. Activity is negotiated through cognitive decisions youth make (i.e. the mind directs the body) within the social contexts they are in.

The Kantian notion of rational activity—“I think, therefore I act”—foregrounds individual cognition as the precondition for action. In this study, I move away from such a conception, instead I focus on a social conception, framing activities as a highly social and contextual construction (Harding, 2008). Put plainly, individual actions and activities (the
difference between action and activity is discussed further in chapter 3) are socially constructed, in that they cannot be separated from the social contexts that situate them.

Finally, I call into question the youth development focus on the future-oriented conceptions of citizenship. Youth development scholars often tackle the question, how do we ensure students become active, productive citizens? This question implies that youth are citizens in progress, not necessarily citizens already. Fewer youth development scholars ask, “How can we create supports, spaces, and experiences for students to be the citizens they already are?” which positions youth as citizens already. Future-orientation is problematic in that it could discount the youth in the present context, where they are constantly making meaning of the social, political, geographic, and physical worlds around them. Since black and Latino/a youth are citizens of the now, I position their experiences and activities of the now as meaningful and constructive as any skills, knowledge, or dispositions they might learn for the future.

Political Science: An Electoral Perspective

Political scholars often investigate the electoral activity of youth. In this conception, “electoral” activity refers to actions taken to influence government representation or public policy such as mobilizing others to vote, joining campaigns, calling legislators, and advocating for, and protesting legislation (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) at the community, state, or federal levels. The conception encompasses what Campbell (2004) would call political activity; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins (2002) call electoral activity; and Haste and Hogan (2006) would call voting behavior and making one’s voice heard. Political scientists view these actions are particularly important because widespread participation in government (and the equality of this participation) is a cornerstone of a representative democracy and an American democratic ideal (Gutmann, 2000). Political scientist Stephan Macedo and his colleagues put it succinctly,
“Given that such a wide range of activities qualify as civic engagement, we need to pick out those aspects of civic engagement that matter most for the health of American democracy” (2005, p. 8).

The capstone of electoral action is voting. Although most current-day studies look into complex activity beyond voting (see The National Council on Citizenship, 2008), voting behaviors are still considered an important measure of political engagement. However, since youth under the age of 18 do not have the right to vote, youth political scholars often look into actions, knowledge, or beliefs that might predict future youth voting behaviors, such as knowledge of the electoral system, why voting matters, and access to the necessary resources and social capital that increases voting likelihood (Levinson, 2010). In this way, political scholars often collaborate with youth development in attempting to understand what competencies youth should develop to compel them to act electorally in the future (Torney-Purta & Lopez, 2006).

According to Macedo, et al. (2005), the quantity, quality, and equality of electoral participation in the United States implicate the health of our democracy. Electorally active communities (often, rich, primarily white communities) almost unequivocally have more influence over public policy and political representation, particularly at the state and federal level, than those less active (Levinson, 2010). Poorer communities and non-white communities, often found to participate in electoral activity less, find their voices are “a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily heed” (APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004, p. 651, as cited in Levinson, 2010). Scholarly inquiry into youth electoral activity tells a similar story. Numerous quantitative studies have been conducted to measure youth electoral participation throughout the years, and, in almost all measures, the narrative continues to tell the
same story: youth electoral participation is on the decline (CIRCLE, 2003; National Council on Citizenship, 2006; Lopez, 2008). Perhaps the most cited study large-scale quantitative study about youth electoral participation (on ages 15 – 25) comes from Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins (2002), who argue that electoral participation for youth has been steeply declining across generations. Although scholars continually argue that youth electoral participation is in steep decline across demographic indicators, concerns abound about how to engage the least engaged population, poor youth (particularly non-white or immigrant youth), in electoral activity.

**My position.** I argue, as Macedo et al. (2005) contends, that both the qualities and quantities in which youth participate in government matters. Historically, political scholars measure such youth activities through quantitative surveys, asking participants to self-report responses to pre-defined, researcher-developed criteria for engagement. Qualitative studies that consider the multiple, complex dimensions of youth electoral activity are less available, although several studies have inquired into the electoral behaviors of urban youth. These studies tend to focus on youth organizing (YO) and youth-adult partnerships (YAP) efforts to inform public policy, largely at a school or community level (see Camino, 2000; Ishihara, 2007; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2003). Inquiries regarding the culture of youth electoral activity, youth experiences during the electoral participation, and youth conceptualizations of electoral citizenship (often ontological realities taken by qualitative researchers) are just as scant. Political scientists often root their research in the assumption that youth activity that affects the actions of elected officials and public policy “matter most to the health of American Democracy” (Macedo, 2005, pg. 8). In this sense, the ontological reality of youth electoral activity in civic scholarship has historically been constructed by “what” and “how often” youth participate in discrete acts, such as: voting, boycotting, protesting, and calling legislators. I argue that youth activities cannot be
understood void of context or void of the social nature of their enactments.

Second, I trouble the notion that diverse citizen participation in government, by itself, defines a participatory democracy. Instead, I argue that citizenship through government interactivity and daily participation in a public society is mutually interdependent (Olson, 1982). Perhaps the most salient critique of a more traditional electoral perspective is the notion that political demands, themes, and cultures are changing, therefore cannot be measured with the same criteria. Youth political actions are also changing, and therefore, scholars should adjust accordingly. For example, youth might not directly contact a government official, but they might participate in hip-hop activity (b-boying, graffiti, spoken word, spinning) or social media related activity that highlight youth political experiences and voices. These activities might not be aimed to directly communicating with public officials, rather to construct a narrative that demands public attention.

Political scholars do debate the assumption that widespread political participation in society makes a democracy healthier or “better”. For example, Macedo (2004) takes up the question, “Can civic engagement be bad?” (p. 10). Citing the ideas of Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005), Macedo argues, “Lack of political involvement may signal widespread satisfaction with the status quo rather than a crisis in democracy” (2005, p. 10). Increased political activity is maybe a sign of political unrest or dissatisfaction instead of health. Political activity can also cause citizens to feel injured. Open democratic participation can be wrought with disagreement and bureaucracy, resulting in citizens feeling powerless and inefficacious (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). In this way, some scholars, such as me, question if all activity that aims to influence government and policy are productive and useful for society.
Youth Voices: An Empowerment Perspective

Scholars who use *youth voice* as a theoretical framework often position youth empowerment and decision-making at the center of their research. Youth voice is used to define wide-ranging activities that support youth shaping their lives and the lives of their peers through empowered activity (Mitra & Kirshner, 2010). Certain scholars focus on youth voice in reform efforts within a school setting (see Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000) and others focus on activity outside of school, oftentimes for purposes of community development or social change (Collatos & Morrell, 2003; Fine, Burns, & Payne, 2004; Ishihara, 2007). Youth voice scholars often share epistemological and ontological similarities with youth development. For example, developmental scholars Ginwright & James (2002) promote Youth Organizing for poor, urban, black youth, a conceptualization that accentuates youth voice for purposes of accessing, and reflecting upon, power, knowledge, and leadership skills.

In this conception, youth activity might be considered inquiry. The citizens of a community (i.e. a school, a neighborhood, a city) are provided with equal opportunity to contribute to problem solving by discussing concerns or questions based in daily experiences, gathering resources and conducting research, seeking out a social network, and taking action based on the gathered information. In this conception of inquiry, political action is considered the means for attaining civic goals. Youth voice scholars often investigate ways youth act within decision-making processes, procedures, and deliberations around reform issues, which result in more access to power in schools or communities. For example, Levin (2002) researched middle and secondary schools in Manitoba, where student voice initiatives were implemented across the district. In his study, Levin found that teachers were more likely to find data taken *from* students about their school experiences—rather than *about* students from external sources—a compelling
reason to make active reforms. He described:

In one school, the discovery by staff that most of their students did not actually go on to university as they had been assuming created a crisis of purpose and galvanised some substantial and lasting changes in school organisation, curriculum and teaching practice (p. 159).

This quote exemplifies the power of youth voice research: unquestioned assumptions made by adults are often re-constructed by the voices of youth. Youth voice is heard through youth perspectives and the actions they take, often in response to adult inquiry. Scholars offer multiple conceptions of the ideal relationship between youth and adults in constructing youth voice related reform. Research suggests that extreme ends of youth development, completely adult-driven and completely youth-driven (e.g. teen drop-in centers), are ineffective models for youth engagement (Larson, Walker, & Pierce, 2005). Most conceptions float somewhere in the middle. Youth organizers forefront youth as primary actors and decision-makers, but adults maintain a strong presence as a supportive, behind-the-scenes, facilitator of ideas. Other scholars promote an equal collaboration between youth and adults in reform processes, or Youth-Adult Partnerships (Camino, 2000; Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2002). In this conception, youth and adults share decision-making authority and serve as mutual teachers and learners for each other. This dialogical framework of teacher-student/student-teacher as equal partners draws from the literacy work of Freire (1970). Camino (2000) references the work of Lofquist (1989), who offered a typology of adult attitudes about youth, including youth as objects, recipients, or resources. In the youth voice conception, youth should be positioned as resources and as recipients when the context demands it, but never as objects.
In this conception, youth *activity* and *empowerment* are assumed to be ontologically similar. Activity allows youth to access power and decision-making authorities shared by adults in the community. In this sense, youth voice scholars often come from a position of political critique. They challenge the assumption that adults know “better” than youth about what is best for learning in school or communities (Cook-Sather, 2002). Although variations certainly exist, many voice scholars build their research around the following assumptions: (1) youth have less power than adults; (2) youth want more voice; (3) youth learn better when empowered with decisions about their education or citizenship; (4) increasing youth voice in schools and communities supports/reflects democracy; and (5) creating political equality in schools and communities (particularly for purposes of school or community reform) requires a *transformative* approach, where the beliefs and structures of power between teachers and students must be transformed. Situated in critical theory, scholars often take a Freirian/Girouxian stance that schools and communities should be largely critical of existing political structures, and students should be positioned as collaborators in reform processes instead of as “recipients” (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2000; Levin, 2000).

**My position.** First, I question the assumption that youth have a singular, separate voice from adults. Youth voices might be assumed to be as variant, divergent, and complex as adult voices. Scholars who define youth voice as “singular” run the risk of tokenizing (i.e. picking one student to “represent” student voice in an adult-dominated conversation) instead of embracing multiple voices of youth through deliberation (Hart, 1997). Particularly in schools—where youth and adult are in constant social communication—social constructionists question the idea that youth ideas and adult ideas are separate instead of co-constructed (Buckingham, 1991). Coming from a post-structural lens of critique, I also call the structural assumption that adults universally
“possess” more power than youth into question. Perhaps, instead, power is a moving, contextually bound entity that consistently and erratically shifts from between youth and adults, instead of within them (Foucault, 1991).

Finally, I also question the notion that youth must be “given” power by adults. Lisa Delpit (1997) argues that traditionally marginalized populations must learn to navigate within the culture of power (by her definition, the white middle-class) and be prepared for struggles they will inevitable face in society—political, economic, and social injustice. To her, empowerment is about struggle. Instead of power being given by those already empowered, it's fought for. As argued by Freire (1994), those in power do not give power because it’s not in their best interest, and they often do not acknowledge a power disparity. Although this ontological stance is might be harder to replicate in schools and isolated communities—and is seemingly pessimistic—Delpit posits that, particularly for traditionally marginalized youth, it is more authentic to our political system.

**Literacies, Arts, and Media: An Authorship Perspective**

Literacy scholars who focus on civic and political life investigate questions about ways youth read and write the world and how these literacies enable democratic engagement (Kinloch, 2010). Freire (1974) used the terms “the word” and the “the world” to describe the political powers of literacy. Oppressed citizens, who develop a political awareness of the world, in turn “name” the world with acquired literacies. These literacies empower the oppressed to transform society and author democracy (Freire & Macedo, 1987). To Freire, literacies illuminate the worlds of (and for) students and allow them to critically question larger societal injustices.

Other scholars investigate literacies for purposes of democratic and civic engagement. For example, Shannon (2010) writes:
I’m searching for a definition of reading that will break that cycle [of viewing reading as human capital, a commodity to be bought and sold], reclaiming the so-called illiterates and pushing me to realize that quality of civic life depends upon reading our way through the 21st century (p. 3).

Shannon encourages us to read with “sociological imagination”, reading that considers social, political, and historical contextualization of all kinds of texts (symbolic, physical, and social); the reader’s positioning within those contexts; and what that positioning means about responsible democratic action. In this way, readers read “toward democracy” (p. 3) through daily experiences.

In her book, *Harlem on our Minds: Place, Race, and the Literacies of Urban Youth* (2010), Valerie Kinloch demonstrates how two high school youth read and write Harlem. Highlighting the literary practices of two black high school students, Phillip and Kaleeq, Kinloch illustrates how youth read the gentrification in Harlem through the frameworks of race and space. Phillip and Kaleeq also read spatial texts they encounter daily (such as buildings in their neighborhood; experiences at school; perceptions of community) and how this reading relates to their written “words”—a tool, both boys described, as their weapons against gentrification in their neighborhoods.

Urban youth scholars (such as Kinloch), in particular, have traditionally pushed on conventional measures political activity for youth. They cite scholarly failure to account for racial, economic, and political differences between poor urban and affluent non-urban cultures (Ginwright, 2011). To account for these differences, some scholars focus on political significance of youth-created art, poetry, stories, and multimedia (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Within these studies, several studies have emerged that focus how urban youth of color (most
commonly, black youth) use hip-hop culture to author their own civic spaces. Although disputed, the four pillars of youth hip-hop culture are often identified as b-boying (break dancing), graffiti, MCing, and DJing (Bruce & Davis, 2000).

Some scholars consider other artistic subcultures such as beatboxing, spoken word poetry, filmmaking, and fashion promotion as part of the hip-hop culture (Sullivan, 1997). The increasing popularity of youth spoken word venues such as “Louder Than a Bomb”, based in Chicago, and “Brave New Voices”, originating in San Francisco, have offered opportunities for civic scholars to explore youth civic activity through public poetry (Ingalls, 2012). Much like youth activism, expressions of hip-hop culture have often been considered empowering acts of political resistance, a counter-narrative to the thesis of marginalization, nihilism, and violence often perceived about poor urban youth. However, Ginwright (2011) suggests these activities might also reflect a tenor of “hope, healing, and caring” (p. 34); three dimensions black communities have historically valued but often get neglected in the discourse of youth political activity.

Youth activity on social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, Youtube, and social videogaming, are sites for investigation of political activity (Ito, et al., 2010). Scholars who study youth online activity ask if these spaces are enabling, encouraging, mediating, inhibiting, or unequally distributing the increased participation of various demographic groups. The place of “gaming” has been a particular point of contention. Youth who play video games are often considered by adults to be ‘wasting time’ or mindlessly internalizing visuals of violence and sex (Lenhart, et al., 2008). However, the associational nature of gaming has intrigued scholars to ask about a possible connection to civic and political interest. Although the quantity of videogames youth play has been found to have little or no
influence on youth civic and political activity, the *characteristics and contexts* in which youth play videogames, including games in which youth collaboratively develop societies and cultures, are strongly related to youth political and civic participation. Since almost 80% of all America teenagers play some sort of video games, digital media scholars question whether the act of playing videogames, in itself, is a civic, associational action (Lenhart, et al., 2008).

Mimi Ito, et al.’s (2010) work on youth activity in digital cultures investigates the ways youth understand, use, and produce online content for purposes of social and civic living. She contends that social networking spaces provide a rich, public landscape for civic scholars to understand youth-driven and youth-led civic activity that are not informed by top-down mandates from adult authorities. Recently, the use of social media spaces such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube have been studied as spaces for action. Youth organization proliferated over the past decade through the use of social media. In 2010, thousands of New Jersey high school students organized a walkout of school (almost entirely on Facebook), over the drastic cuts to education proposed by Governor Chris Christie. Thousands of Los Angeles youth and adults organized the “Million Hoodie March” in downtown Los Angeles to show their solidarity with Trayvon Martin and their contempt over the lack of legal action taken upon his killer, George Zimmerman. Students in elementary, middle, and high schools organized similar acts of solidarity across, donning hoodies, organizing fundraisers, and having rallies in solidarity with Trayvon.

In 2012, high school students in Minnesota created a Facebook page to organize a boycott of the “healthier” school lunches as mandated by Michelle Obama’s “Get up and Move” campaign. Called #Brownbagginit, the movement was youth led and youth organized. When an adult, a local politician, attempted to create space for his voice on the page (mostly by offering
encouragement and political advice), the high school students actively ignored his participation. In this way, the high school students in Minnesota protected the youth political and civic identities that defined the space. They negotiated the politician’s participation (who positioned himself as an “expert” trying to help kids out) by a pattern of non-response. Political and civic scholars often ignore these spaces, although youth pervasively participate in such space to construct their realities. Ito, et al., (2010) describes:

…we believe that some of the most promising directions for encouraging online civic engagement begin from youth-driven, bottom-up social energies, an ethic of peer-based reciprocity, sense of communal belonging, rather than top-down mandates form adults driven civic activity (p. 352).

Youth-constructed online spaces (and the ways they use their literacies to construct these spaces) offer an opportunity to investigate youth civic and political activity through youth definition and within a youth-developed culture.

My position. From an ontological standpoint, civic scholars investigating youth literacies and digital authorship often take up the position that youth make sense of their civic and political identities through interpretation and the authorship of languages and texts. As illustrated throughout my study, I take up a similar position, ontologically aligning the narrative with knowledge. Actions, then, are movements and youth make to author or perform identities through language within a social space. Although, as Shannon (2010) points out, the act of reading moves beyond script or text (and toward broader conceptions, including experiences, social situations, spaces and places), language is still the primary lever through which action is understood and motivated. Epistemologically, knowledge is gained through making meaning of
texts (including conversations) that surround the reader. Interpretation and authorship of text are influenced and bound by surrounding historical, physical, social, cultural, and political context.

**Schooling, Politics, and Citizenship**

The reality of a healthy, vibrant, self-critical, yet sustaining democracy is difficult to define, and perhaps necessarily so. Youth political scholars represent multiple democratic realities. Political scientists often push for equitable, diverse, and purposeful participation in governmental and public policy affairs; youth voice scholars laud a democracy in which youth participate in consequential, public decision making; and civic literacy scholars imagine a democracy where a wide variety of citizens engage in authorship and literacy in a variety of public spaces. Civic and political activities positioned as “good” for democracy are anchored in these definitions of desirable democracies. In considering the “reality” of such a democracy, I continue to seek out, understand, and represent multiple realities, including those of youth.

In this next section, I describe how I position this study amidst the above four conceptions of youth politics. If US public schools are charged with—and take up the responsibility of—providing students with the opportunity to learn about politics and, perhaps as important, enact politics for purposes of understanding their political identities, then what dominant narratives about “productive” citizenship are being inculcated (implicitly or explicitly)? How might these dominant ideologies be disrupted, particularly for citizens who come from a societal position and realities that are outside the dominant culture and why does this matter?

**Context and localization.** I take up the position that youth live in distinct contexts that inform their views of living in a democracy. Marginalizing the voices of a particular community of citizens runs the risk of devaluing political participation that might be contextually relevant
and meaningful to those in the context but inconsequential to those outside the context. Citizenship is intrinsically linked to social contexts, including race and place, and should be considered and understood within such contexts.

A tendency toward deficit thinking. Deficits are inherently subjective. A person or group placed at a deficit (i.e. “less engaged”) is positioned in contrast to an arbitrary point or level defined by another, often the viewpoint of those telling the narrative. Authors of the narrative are often those who have the resources and power to disseminate their ideas, or people who are represented anyway. If narratives about deficits in political participation (for example, between youth of color and their white peers) persist, scholars run the risk of positioning youth of color as deficit instead of understanding the deep, contextual differences that exist.

The school-research-policy link. Research often drives schooling practices. Narratives about empowerment gaps and declines in youth engagement should not be taken lightly. If measured by de-contextualized criteria, marginalized groups will continually be forced to “meet” the standard of a privileged group in classes and on assessments. I seek to understand how the lived experiences and actions of youth – specifically urban youth – represent their political narratives they author. Youth political scholars often argue for civic education that best lead to increased youth political activity. These views take up ontological assumptions about democracy that conceptualize the world within adult democratic realities in lieu of youth realities. They mirror the ontological position that youth are citizens of the future instead of citizens of the present, devaluing youth as important citizens in American society before they reach a particular “adult” age. This study suggests that scholars might consider moving toward the conception that youth are more than simply citizens of the future, rather youth are simultaneously citizens of the present and citizens of the future.
So who are we asking what meaningful political activity amongst youth is and why? Up to this point, the scholarly answer has been relatively simple – scholars have been asking other scholars. Similar to the way core curricular content in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies are largely decided upon by adults (i.e. education scholars, teachers, policy makers) proclaiming to know what’s best for youth, youth civic scholars often conceptualize what’s best civic education through their own conception of a desirable democratic society. The voice that’s noticeably missing in this conceptualization of political engagement is the youth themselves. The voices of minority populations—specifically black and Latino/a youth—are even less extant in the current literature on civic engagement. The discourse of what counts as meaningful or desirable youth civic and political “activity”, and what it means to be politically and civically active, is disconnected from contexts that embody youth culture (Kinloch, 2010).

Youth developmental psychologists and political scientists often argue that black and Latino/a youth are more disconnected from community, have less political efficacy, and are less civically empowered. I hypothesize that the weakness of this perspective is that the researchers pre-defined political activity in ways that were meaningful to them, but perhaps less so to the youth who construct their own conceptions within the sociocultural contexts that surround them.

Beth Rubin (2007) found that urban minority youth hold a different “typology” of civic identity, based in their experiences both inside and outside of school that disrupts the prevailing view of engagement. To understand more accurately the kinds and levels of youth political activity, perhaps youth scholars should begin investigating and asking youth point to as meaningful political activity and how they make meaning of these activities in the context of the spaces they navigate. This would ascertain whether, in fact, black and Latino/a youth of color subvert, justify, or remain complacent about the social, economic, and political conditions of
their communities and if some do, why.

Every action is influenced and performed within specific social, political, and cultural contexts. When political activities are measured discretely, scholars perceive actions as valuable (for society, democracy) if they produce specific outcomes. Often taken up by political scientists, this is the conception is de-contextualized from the sociocultural and political realities of black and Latino/a youth. It does not account for meaningful political activity engaged in by youth within the context of their daily lives. Rather, it seeks to understand the nature of civic and political activity by youth of color across scholarly fields (literacies, geographies, digital media, electoral). Civic scholars, civic literacy and digital media scholars as well as youth geography scholars should consider contextualized, social discourses in which youth seeks to position and re-position themselves within identities of power and privilege in a specific space. In this way, youth are assumed to engage in political activity every day, in a localized, highly contextual way. Youth of color participate autonomous within their political activity, and these activities matter for democracy. A checklist of electoral activity does not construct democratic citizenship.

Critics of embracing a wide variety of political activity argue that quantitative rubrics exist to measure such activity (Levinson, 2010). Further, no measurements exist that consider the efficacy of such activity in regards to inequity in political and economic power. Just as troublesome, such an expansive definition of meaningful political activities risks becoming an “anything goes” conception, in which scholars make meaning of any activity as politically or civically salient, when certain actions are simply not. Clearly, this critique applies not only to literary or digital media conceptions political activity; however, this study positions actions of youth of color as different instead of behind their affluent, white peers run the risk of ignoring the surmounting evidence that participation in civic and political life is not equitable.
In this spirit, diverse, rich, complex stories about politics must be told. Narratives that disrupt metanarratives about youth political dis/engagement (i.e. those narratives that are perceived to be “truth”) are particularly important, as they open up dialogic space for scholars and educators to question/challenge assumptions of how democratic principles are taught in schools. Political narratives of youth are hardly ever told, either in civic scholarship or within the educational literature, and the narratives of minority youth, such as black and Latino/a youth, are problematically absent.

The label of “disengaged” comes with a price. The government and other political decision makers tend to ignore citizens who are perceived to participate less or make less substantive civic contributions to our country. These perceptions impact public schools. Policies, resources, and political power tend to go to the civically active. Educational decision-makers are less likely to construct policies and pedagogies, distribute resources, or develop curricula that champion black and Latino/a students. This “disengaged” label tends to further exacerbate already existing inequalities in resource distribution, educational and economic opportunity, and social capital between white and non-white communities, between rich and poor communities.

As a study situated within the political scholarship, I seek to:

- Trouble the deficit discourse situating urban black and Latino/a youths’ political engagement by authoring narratives that position them as able, competent agents who have the right to make decisions, live with these decisions, and reflect on their choices, resisting the narrative of deficit, disengagement, and disillusionment.
- Trouble the characterization of youth political development as the rational progression of an individual and push against the presumption of a culture-free history of engagement based on the Kantian “rational” individual development by reframing it as a highly social
and contextual construction (Harding, 2008). The study captures urban black and Latino/a youth as democratic subjects “now” versus only of the future.

- Trouble the scholarly notion that political activity be measured by discrete, quantifiable criterion and captured by a binary (either to do it or they do not), detached from contexts race, class, and geographies.

- Trouble the epistemological characterization of political knowledge as discrete, compartmentalized “chunks” by reframing knowledge as constructions of narrative.

- Author away from a conception of the “good” or “right” citizen and instead seek divergences in political narratives situated within tight, nuanced description of the sociocultural contexts in which the participants of this study navigate.
CHAPTER 3: POSITIONING, THEORY, & METHODOLOGY

As a qualitative researcher who strives for *reflexivity*, I seek to examine my positioning within my research and how this positioning might interact with my study (Creswell, 1998). By positioning, I mean how my histories, identities, and experiences have shaped the subjectivities I bring to the study. In addition, I offer the ways in which I find myself in relation to the participants in my study. Next, I explain my theoretical framework and assert my epistemological stance on concepts that guide my study, such as power, narrative, subjectivity, and activity. I relate these concepts to each other in my conceptual framework, offered on page 69. I unpack the social theories that inform these stances and discuss implications of these perspectives to my study. Finally, I describe and justify my decision to use case study methodology with ethnographic approaches to data collection. I discuss the strategies of data collection and analysis and why I select these approaches over other possibilities.

A (Short, Personal) Sociopolitical History

I am the son of Japanese immigrants. When my parents immigrated to Waltham, Massachusetts in 1976, my father was twenty-nine and my mother was twenty-seven. They arrived in America with a newborn daughter (my one older sister), little money, and a very limited English vocabulary. Although my parents did not own much, they were well schooled. My father earned his Ph.D. in chemistry (specifically, polymer science) at Sapporo University in Japan. In Sapporo, he met my mother, an art major with a passion and talent for oil painting, sculpture, and stain glass. When my father received a post-doctoral fellowship with a leading polymer scientist at Brandeis University in Waltham, my parents moved so my father could pursue his scholarship. After my father’s post-doc, my parents moved to the University of Wisconsin in Madison so my dad could pursue a clinical faculty position. I was born there and
spent the first five years of my life surrounded by other families of graduate students. We then moved to Libertyville, a northern suburb of Chicago, after my father landed a job as a cancer research specialist at Abbott Labs in North Chicago. In short, I grew up in an environment largely devoid of material possessions but replete with educational expectations and opportunity.

I have only lived in contexts where I am in a racial minority. I have experienced subtle and overt racism throughout my life, although I have never (to my knowledge) faced significant challenges to educational or economic attainment based on my race. As a native English speaker, I have always lived within the lingual majority. However, as the son of parents who learned English as a second language, I can empathize with the struggles and barriers faced by non-native speakers. My chest beats faster every time I think about the time that my mother, despite her decades as a successful oil painter in Japan and America, was denied access to a community college oil painting class because she couldn’t pass an English grammar test. My father still tells stories about his time as a young man travelling in New Orleans in the late 1970s. Upon his attempt to board a city bus, he was first denied access by the bus driver. However, after my father’s travelling companion convinced the driver that he was Japanese and not Chinese, the bus driver said, “Oh, you’re a good Oriental”, and allowed my hesitant father to board. Despite knowing very little English at the time, my father still remembers those words with absolute clarity.

I live and only remember living in relative financial comfort. I have networks of support if I fall on hard times. By most traditional accounts, I am well-schooled. For twenty-three of the thirty-three years of my life, I have been a student. I have taken hundreds of classes, ranging from horrendous to the exemplary, through my public K – 12 schooling, a four-year undergraduate program in elementary education at University of Illinois, a two-year Master’s
program in educational administration, a one-year Master’s programs in school leadership, and
five years as a doctoral student.

Professionally, I spent seven years as a middle school teacher of algebra, American
History, American Literature, and language arts at a public school in Arlington Heights; three
summers as a part-time middle school civic/political engagement instructor in Chicago; and two
years as an undergraduate reading and social studies methods instructor at a large, public
university. To this day, I identify strongly with being a public school teacher and draw heavily
on my teaching experiences. Informal educational experiences such as service and volunteer
work, campaigning for Obama in 2008, “life” discussions about peace, prosperity, and equality I
had with my dad, and my daily conversations with colleagues and family also inform my
assumptions about the realities of teaching and learning. My personal experiences and
upbringing have certainly shaped the subjectivities and assumptions I bring to my study.

However, the question remains, what do these experiences mean about my worldviews?
And how do my worldviews shape my study? First, I assume that political engagement is a
highly contextual construction. My experiences with the world are shaped by a remarkable
number of factors, including my histories, where I come from, how others identify me, and how I
identify myself. In turn, what is meaningful political action in my contexts and worldviews could
certainly be different to those outside of the context.

Next, I tend to have a collectivist view on politics. My political participation has always
been about working for a collective good of humanity, particularly for the betterment of those
who need more support than others. The foundational goal of civic and political participation, in
my view, leans toward the equity. People have the right to have their basic needs met and rights
protected, and the responsibility to uphold that right is collective. Although government has a
responsibility to protect these needs and rights, so do our fellow neighbors.

I also tend to see the world through colored lenses. I use “colored lenses” to describe how I tend to see race, culture, class, gender, and sexual orientation (and other factors in identity, although religion does not register as strongly for me) as salient in almost every context of education—and, conceivably, our experiences—an ontological position further when I discuss critical race theory. Consequently, my scholarship tends to also focus on issues of identities even in contexts when some may consider these factors to not be of central importance. Similarly, I assume that the purpose of schooling is a social and civic one. I consider the purpose of schooling as teaching youth to inquire into whom they are; have pride in their communities, culture, and self; and how to contribute to a just society.

I believe that resources, time, and effort should disproportionately be spent on scholarship and schooling for youth who are positioned at a societal disadvantage. Given a finite set of resources and time, I believe more should go to students who are born into marginalized contexts and experience the racism, classism, and xenophobia in ways that shape their education. In the timeless debate between politically liberal and conservative values (i.e. do we privilege collective equality or individual freedom) I lean on the liberal side—privileging collective equality, even if it comes at the cost of personal autonomy. In this way, I tend to believe that considering and contributing to the social good/equality of people is the responsibility of our citizens and government.

**Theoretical and Epistemological Stances**

Although personal experiences are pivotal in shaping my lens to the world, I am also informed by existing theories and pre-existing scholarship related to my field of research. As a broad overview, I employ critical theory and post-structural theory to inform my ontological
stance on power, politics, and subjectivities, and I use *positioning theory* and *sociocultural theory* to frame my understanding of race, space, and place; actions and activity; and lingual concepts such as narrative, language, and discourse. In the section below, I delineate the concepts that guide my study, the social theories that inform these stances, and how I view the concepts as related. I start by describing epistemological tensions between two social theories (critical and post-structural theories) that I use to inform a central concept in my study, power, and how I position myself within this tension.

**Power**

Critical theory and post-structural theory inform my ontology of the political. Throughout the paper, I use the modifier “political” to describe knowledge, activities and/or attitudes devoted to influencing formal (Campbell, 2004) and informal (Macedo, 2005) codes of power, privilege, and access to power. Formal codes could include rules, policies, laws, and structures of authority; informal codes might include social norms such that involve organizations of power around racial, cultural, gender, or religious norms.

Although I am weary of the idea that sovereignties, institutions, and individuals categorically possess power, I also believe that power takes up institutionally reified patterns. In this way, I employ critical theory and post-structural theory as ontological tools to understand power within the context of the study. I also view power as a construct of “discursive systems” of language, texts, and activities, influenced by historical and habituated ways of thinking, talking, feeling, and being (Foucault, 1977). In short, I believe power is a cultural construct.

Kamberelis and Dimitriadis’s (2005) chronotype III, (skepticism, conscientization, and praxis, i.e. critical theory) and chronotype IV (power/knowledge and de-familiarization, i.e post-structural theory) simultaneously inform this conception. Freire (1970) and Giroux (1987),
scholars cited in chronotype III, highlight the destructive forces of power on knowledge such as domination and oppression. They critique systematized power inequity often hidden within our society. Freire (1970) argues institutions such as schools, governments, and businesses replicate power inequity by normalizing unjust ideologies. Unless the oppressed illuminate injustice and subvert these structures, they will remain oppressed, and the privileged will remain powerful (1970). From chronotype III, I take the idea that power can be destructive, particularly if the subjects take up the identity of “oppressed”; however, I do not believe power is inherently destructive.

I move toward Chronotype IV in the belief that institutional power is relational. Foucault, heavily cited by Kamberelis and Dimitriadis as a representative of Chronotype IV, rejects the idea of a singular “truth” of structural power (1970). In Chronotype III, oppressors are assumed to “have” power, regardless of context. The oppressed remain the oppressed until they liberate themselves. Foucault rejects this notion of absolution and argues that, although institutions and people accrue power through affiliations to these institutions, power is not structured in absolutes (1977). “Power is always a matter of both being positioned by proximal and distal forces and responding to positions in unique and agentic ways” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). In this way, power is complex, changing, dynamic, and unstable. Power can also be productive, creating discourses which are fundamental to knowledge (Foucault, 1977). It should be noted that Foucault does not imply that power is never organized or destructive. Instead, he posits that power is organized and unstable, destructive and productive. My study is informed by the assumption that although institutional structures are socially and historically constructed (and therefore, fluid, and changeable), they are also durable and resistant to change (Bordieu, 1990).
Theoretical Tensions

Epistemological tensions between critical theory and post-structural theory raise the question: *Can these two theories frame the same study with a political focus?* To situate my stance, I first discuss why this tension exists. In regards to ontologies of power and sociopolitical progress, post-structural theorists and critical theorists often disagree. Post-structural political theorists largely reject structural assumptions of power arguing that power flows within relationships between people, deeply embedded in context, instead of being possessed by socially and politically dominant groups, a widely held critical theory perspective (Gore, 1992). Post-structural approaches are often more concerned with the discourses of power and how such discourses influences social inequity instead of identifying the structures and finding the root causes of the structural inequalities (Gillborn & Youdell, 2009). Just as salient, post-structural scholars like Foucault, Derrida, and Butler resist the notion of fixed identities, often employed by critical theorists to demarcate the differences between oppressors/oppressed, privileged/underprivileged, black/white, rich/poor, and female/male (Gillborn & Youdell, 2009). In this view, the dichotomous assumptions of identity inherently construct an “other” and, therefore, deficit. Instead of identity/ies, post-structural theorists tends to focus on subjectivities, a stance that considers people as fluent within the social and political micro-contexts in which they situated or the social discourses that situate them.

Subjectivity implicates the fluid, slippery, complex, and contradictory construction of people. In this way, people are subject to and subjects of the normative discourses that situate them instead of identity markers, such as skin color, sex, or SES. In contrast, critical theorists often assert that power is held institutions and systems, such as governments and public policy, corporations and the economy, and news organizations and media. These institutions use power
to reify systems of domination, often that benefit people who constitute such institutions. Resistance and subversion to racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, etc., are the consequences of such systems of domination and require the “oppressor” and “oppressed” to be named and explicitly transformed. Critical theorists often converge on the belief that social, economic, and political justice, as a societal goal, only come through recognition of collective transformation of such unjust systems (Habermas, 1978; Friere, 1990).

The tension between the “grand” narrative and “local” narrative also divides post-structural and critical scholars. Post-structural theorists assert that the constructions of “grand” or “meta” narrative, overarching philosophies that guide explanations of history, create first order discourses that presume legitimacy. These presumptions are dangerous, in that they create a foundational history of the world (e.g. Marx’s narrative on class and the need for a proletariat revolution and Hegelian philosophies about the encroachment of the spirit upon knowledge) that are inherently marginalizing of histories that fall outside of them (Fraser, 1997). Critical theorists often accentuate social and political patterns in history, pointing to recurring marginalization, violence against, and purposeful disaffection for people of color, women, gays, youth, non-Christians, people with disabilities, and other socially constructed groups by institutions with power. In this way, critical theorists do not denounce the existence metanarratives, rather consider ways in which these stories can be countered or deconstructed (Kamberalis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

In line with Youdell and Gillborn (2009), I consider critical theory and post-structural theory as conceptual tools that can be “worked with in combination” (p. 183). To articulate my stance within these theories, I look to the work of political theorist Nancy Fraser (1997). Fraser argues that a “false antithesis” exists between the postmodern and critical feminisms, positing
that the rift between the two epistemological stances weakens feminism as a whole. To frame her argument, she analyzes a particularly contentious debate between critical feminist Seyla Benhabib and postmodern feminist Judith Butler. Although postmodernists and poststructuralists take up diverging epistemological stances (and often address different questions), I nevertheless find it useful to look to Fraser’s analysis of Butler and Benhabib. Although Judith Butler is often identified as a postmodern feminist, Fraser makes specific claims about the reconciliation of post-structuralism and critical theory, highlighting arguments in which postmodernists and poststructuralists align, particularly in regards to narrative, the political positioning of narrative, and how, if at all, such narratives should regard grand (i.e. meta) narratives. For example, Fraser argues, in to the relation to our political subjectivities, that feminists should:

...conceive subjectivity as endowed with critical capacities and as culturally constructed. Similarly, we might view critique as simultaneously situated and amenable to self-reflection, as potentially radical and subject to warrants. Likewise, we might posit a relation to history that is at once antifoundationalist and politically engaged, while promoting a field of multiple historiographies that is both contextualized and provisionally totalizing (italics in original, Fraser, 1997, p. 219).

Culturally constructed assumptions of identity, a view of critique as self-reflective, and subject to warrant are shared ontological assumptions between many postmodern and post-structural feminists and political theorists. In this way, the theoretical framework I employ does not view poststructuralist theory and critical theory as antithetical, rather, as mutually informative. Through the construction of narrative, I seek to understand commonalities in youth political experiences as a collective without attempting to universalize them, positing that thematic emergence does not equate “truth” or “voice” of the youth participants rather, a politically and
socially situated narrative that merits interpretation and consideration in itself (Ellsworth, 1992).

Although, drawing from a position of post-structural critique, I seek to *trouble* metanarratives that characterize the political participation of black and Latino/a youth, I also recognize that broad a patterns of differences in political participation exist across social demographics, an acknowledgement aligned with critical epistemologies. As I strive to understand the *emic* narrative constructions of my participants, I do contend that both these racial/political realities can and do exist simultaneously. Each may, from the perspective of my participants, not exist dichotomously. The characterization of social realities as merely divergence and context-contingent is problematic to critical theorists, who hold to larger social theories about history, science, cultural, and society for purposes of liberation from oppression or social change (Fraser & Nicholas, 1989). This also holds true in regards to realities of *race* and *class* and how, if at all, these social contexts are situate the daily experiences of black and Latino/a youth in school.

**Political Subjectivity**

My focus on political narratives of black and Latino/a youth ultimately stands on my assumptions about subjectivity, or what constitutes a political being. I suggest that black and Latino/a youth are both subjected to and subjects of power relations (Foucault, 1977). These subjectivities are exercised through their political activity and discourses. Urban black and Latino/a youth learn to be democratic beings by *acting* within democracy instead of learning “for” democracy for purposes of future action.

I resist Kant’s (1992) conception of rational subjectivity that positions our democratic beings only within individual, rational thought. My notion of democratic subjectivity expands Kant’s definition into social activity. In the same vein, I consider *activity* to be a discursive
construct, eschewing the idea that youth’ activities are simply an enactment of cognition (“I act alone; I act rationally”). Instead I draw heavily on Hannah Arendt’s conception of the *vita activa*, or active life (1958). In Arendt’s conception, activity is creative and brings newness into the world, and through lived activity, we construct and re-construct American democracy (Arendt, 1977). At the same time, I also take up the view although youth are subjected to institutional patterns of power, they also have agency to act upon and construct them (Foucault, 1977).

I acknowledge that many consider Foucault and Arendt’s views on subjectivity incompatible. For example, Foucault takes up an avidly anti-metaphysical stance to “being”, and Arendt considers metaphysicality central to being (Allen, 2010). However, as it relates to power, Arendt and Foucault are critical of the idea that power “comes from” sovereignty. They both challenge the characterization of power as inherently limiting, oppressive, or destructive. In the same way, I view power as having constructive and destructive elements, particularly in its relationship to knowledge.

**Political Activity**

First, I take up the position that political and civic action cannot happen in isolation. Informed by *sociocultural theory*, I view activity as a *social* construct, one that takes place in a social space and is informed by social discourses (Arendt, 1958). *Activity* differentiates from *action* in that action is taken up by an individual. Particularly in regards to political activity (which implicate *discourses of power*), actions taken in isolation do not construct democracy. In this social conception, action is unpredictable and produces unintended consequences because others always act upon action in unpredictable ways (Allen, 2010). I also consider the relationship between power and action to be reciprocal. I align my study closely with the
assumptions of Arendt, as cited in Allen (2010):

…power is a function of collective action; it emerges out of the kinds of actions that we engage in with others when we strive to achieve common ends. However, while power is the result of action (specifically, collective action), it is also, in turn, a condition for the possibility of action (p. 138).

When youth take action toward a collective purpose, power acts as a condition for that action and as an effect of that action. In this way, the relationship between power, activity, and subjectivity is a hopeful one. In an often unjust and uncaring world, power can be accrued from collective action, as well as create the conditions necessary for future action. However, as Arendt’s conceptions of action focus on the communicative aspects and not the strategic aspects of action (as suggested by Foucault), I also consider the strategic nature of activity as a lever for youth to position and re-position themselves within the spaces they occupy.

To understand the strategic and discursive aspects of youth political “activity”, I draw upon positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1999). Positioning theory challenges the conception of identities through roles i.e. a teacher and student, which implicate static social and institutional relations in regards to power, a stance closely aligned with critical theory. Through chapters 5 – 7, I describe how the participants in the study “act” and “perform” identities for strategic political positioning, often in rejection of deficit positioning by people in formal positions of authority or the threat of a negating label constructed by peers. I explain how youth attempt to position and re-position themselves within the local and institutional system of power that they (non-uniformly) understand. I describe political narratives that the participants both “take up” and fracture as authored through their political actions and activities. Wortham (2009) describes positioning theory as “an event of identification, in which a recognizable category of identity
gets explicitly or implicitly applied to an individual in an event that takes place across seconds, minutes, or hours” (p. 166). Throughout this study, I draw on Wortham’s definition of positioning as social categorization and labeling into the political, implicating the jostling for and within systems of power constructed by the school culture, the youth, and the state and federal institutions that influence the school.

**Political Narrative/Knowledge**

My study seeks to understand political activities taken up by black and Latino/a youth on a daily basis, how they make sense of these activities, and how they construct knowledge based on these activities. This sense-making process, or construction of narrative, is political knowledge. Of course, a focus on political knowledge raises the question of epistemology. First, I assume that the social realities of black and Latino/a youth are mired in ambiguities and are deeply influenced by our social interactions with the worldviews of others. In this sense, knowledge is a construct of their subjectivities and how they make meaning of these subjectivities. Broadly, this assumption mirrors a social constructivist epistemology. Social constructivism implicates my belief that we come to know the world through our own construction and situated narratives. Perhaps an objective reality exists (I don’t know); however, if there is, I believe our interactions with the objective world are influenced by our assumptions, biases, and our personal interpretations of the world (Maxwell, 2012). Accordingly, I assume that my study of youth-authored narrative can only be a partial, simplified version of complex social phenomena through the lens of my own subjectivities (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). I consider youth realities a construct of discourses that include language, texts, feelings, and political activity they take up, situated within the context of their activity.

The relationship between power and knowledge is complex. Although I take up the
Foucaultian notion that power produces knowledge, I retain some notion of truth as a basis to hold standards of valid argumentation (Kinchloe & McLaren, 1994). In this way, claims of truth and knowledge are consented by a group of people that issues validity to the claim, often those who are positioned by the truth “seeker” as someone in power (Carspecken, 1996).

In communicating with others during study, I presume that we used language not as an objective reflection of our realities, rather a construction of our realities through the lens of our subjectivities. The lenses we bring into the discussion and contexts that surround us during lingual exchanges influence this meaning making process. Consistent with a social constructivist perspective, I take up the ideology that knowledge is constructed by language and other symbolic relationships to the world (Heidegger, 1962; Vygotsky, 1962), not only as a reflection of our knowledge (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2004). In this way, I see language as storage of cultural meaning and as a way to make meaning of our daily lives. Similarly, I see the narratives produced by youth as both constructions of knowledge and reflections of prior knowledge. When youth author their world through narrative, they are creating knowledge instead of only reproducing it.

I spent a significant amount of time with my participants in focus groups. Informed by positioning theory (Davies and Harre, 1990), I take up the notion that my participants consistently positioned and re-positioned themselves within the discourses constructed during that time. In this way, my transcriptions of our conversations do not necessarily reflect the speakers’ truth or beliefs about politics and power, rather, a construction of a story/narrative in which they are attempting to position themselves within a discourse. In some cases, a participant may not have had access to a discourse (or the language to enter into it), which could have prevented a divergent/fractured narrative from appearing on the transcript. Acknowledging the
incompleteness of the narratives authored in chapters 5 – 7, I write them not as truths for urban youths—even for the participants themselves—rather an unfinished, co-constructed narratives in the moment that were influenced by a variety of contextual factors, such as our intersectionalities, described later in this chapter.

Social Spaces

All political activity takes place within social space. My study uses “space” from a social perspective. Physical boundaries do not define space, although they can certainly mirror them. Instead, the bodies that occupy it, activities within it, identities it takes up, and the cultural, social, and political norms that come with those identities define social spaces (Nespor, 1997). Spatial boundaries are flowing and constantly negotiated depending on social and temporal contexts. In an interaction with 9-year-old Lucy, Jan Nespor, renowned immigration and ELL scholar, quoted Lucy saying: “It’s almost time to get out of school. That means I’ll get to play outside anytime I want. And I won’t be stuck in a stupid windowless room without going outside” (1997, p. 120-121). Nespor argues that Lucy defines “inside” the school as a space of control and regulation and “outside” the school as a space of expression and movement. Similarly, my study defines and bounds spaces within the activities and identities embedded within them and as a co-construction between the youth participating in my study. However, all spaces also have a physical embodiment. This could be land, houses, playgrounds, classrooms, or even what take place “inside” human bodies. Although physical markers might “encase” the space, they do not define it.

In contrast, place “foregrounds a narrative of local and regional politics that is attuned to the particularities of where people actually live” (Gruenwald, 2003, p. 3). In this way, place is a locational concept with a social definition. Like spaces, places are relative and relational; they
offer a sense of position and ownership in relation to others—“our place”, “my place”, “that place over there”. This conception of place is also informed by Creswell (2004), who describes place as “humanized” space. Space can be transformed into a “place” once someone ascribes a sense of identity, ownership, or sentimentality over it. In this way, places are made and not found. In my study, I will use the word “place” to define the spaces in which the youth in my study ascribe or describe meaning.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this case study relies on specific definitions of power and narrative as described above. Consequently, my framework centralizes on the relationship between power and narrative, marked as “political narrative/knowledge and hope” (center circle). This relationship is a construction of youth experiences and activities within social spaces they navigate in schools. In this regard, power relations both produces political narratives/knowledge and has the capacity to position it in relation to the experiences and activities the youth take up on a daily basis. Drawing from Arendt, I position political activity and experiences as constitutive of youth political subjectivity, or how they position themselves with their narratives/knowledge of the political world. As I will visit thoroughly in chapter 8, I assume youth as both political subjects of the power relations that situate them socially and subjects in these power relations. In both cases, power is a condition of the youths’ political subjectivity. The political subject is both “an actor and sufferer” (Arendt, 1958, p. 184) of power relations and power relations always exist within a social context.
Race

My study is not fundamentally about race; however, it contextualizes the participants in my study. Race is a social construct (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998) and “obsolete as a biological concept” (Goodman, 2008, p. 5). Race is a human construction that, historically, been used for purposes of categorization, marginalization, and justification for exclusion. Just as salient, it has been a uniting force, and a social marker of identity, pride, and cultural celebration (Loveman, 2013). In accordance with these assumptions, boundaries between races are largely dependent on the social, political, and geographic relationships of people.

Through this lens, I refer to my participants as “black” or “Latino/a” youth, youth who
self-identify as black or Latino/a in the context of their school and community. In this way, “blackness” or “Latino/a-ness” is a construction of how the student sees him or herself in relation to the others within the contextual boundaries of my study. I refer to a “Latino/a” youth as youth who self-identify panethnically as Latino/a, Latina, Hispanic; and/or from a Latin-American country of national origin (Masuoka, 2007). There are many reasons why conceptualizing Latinos/as as a racial group is difficult or could be considered essentialist. Latin America has historically included people from Africa, Asia, and Europe (Masuoka, 2007), and Latinos/as often define race differently than other Americans (Rodriguez, 2000). Although there are certainly other ways to consider what it means to be black or Latino/a, the youth’ self-identification is privileged for purposes of capturing their lived realities in relation to their race.

Racial identities markers are fluent, changing, and often constructed within the sociocultural context. At the same time, some youth do self-identify as “black” across contexts and take pride in this identity marker. Similarly, I am aware that particularly Latino/a youth self-identify from a nation of origin, declaring themselves as Puerto Rican, Bolivian, Cuban, Mexican, Nicaraguan, El Salvadorian, etc., instead of Latino/a or Hispanic (Harris & Sim, 2002; Masuoka, 2007). Throughout my study, I am keenly aware of how racial contexts are influential and how these markers of identity can be enormously personal and political.

Informed by another tenet of critical race theory, I assume that racism is a daily, ordinary reality permanently sewn into the fabric of American society and, therefore, lives of black and Latino/a youth (Bell, 1992). In this way, race is a salient context for black and Latino/a youth through all narratives in their lives, including political ones. Individuals and institutions (such as schools, media, the government, and individuals within them) often enact these injustices through assuming deficits in intellects, abilities, and moral characters of these youth. However, I
also believe people have the agency to perform, subvert, eschew, and re-construct these deficit identities through political and civic activity (Ginwright, 2007). I position hope and agency in the daily activities of youth to construct justice in society and am less convinced of the idea that through discrete, grand activity (such as overturning a racist policy) youth will be “liberated” and make their oppressive realities disappear.

Although I am (ontologically) informed by critical race theory (Bell, 1992), I stop short of using it as a key tenet in my theoretical framework. There are a few reasons for this decision. First, power and politics are the central concepts in my study. Race as a construct and context of analysis, although related to power and power relations, did not emerge as a central context to my study as it is situated in critical race theory. Although my participants occasionally discussed race and its intersectionality with power, it often remained a peripheral part of our talks. This is not to imply that the participants in my study lack racial consciousness, rather, that the largely student-driven discussions tended to focus more on social and political discussions that did not explicitly address race.

I also want to acknowledge that within the grand epistemological models legitimated in education: positivisms, post-positivisms, neo-realisms, critical tradition, constructivisms, intepretevisms, poststructuralisms, and postmodernisms, several critiques have been made of over-reliance of all these epistemologies on white, Western authors and philosophers (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Termed epistemological racism, critics cite a strongly convergent “way of knowing” that reflects the narrative of the already privileged. Scholars coming from the critical tradition might refute this claim, arguing that they come from a rich tradition of anti-racist scholarship, highlighting their production of work that focus on communities of color. However, critical theory also comes from a long line of white, European paradigms and white axiological
frameworks (Gordon, 1993; Stanfield, 1985).

Acknowledging that much of my own education and epistemological assumptions come from a historically white, Western perspective, I should consider how this bias might influence my perceptions of data that is worth exploring and realities worth portraying. My study could certainly be critiqued for drawing upon the epistemological and theoretical leanings of primarily white men (e.g. Michele Foucault) instead of drawing more heavily on scholars of color who draw on constructivist and interpretivist traditions. Throughout my study, I do wonder: is race always a salient context when it comes to political activities for black and Latino/a youth in urban contexts? Answering “yes” is a grand assumption to make, but I acknowledge that race could very well be a salient context depending on the direction my inquiry takes.

**Researcher/Participant Intersectionalities**

Drawing on a tenet of critical race theory (CRT) and qualitative inquiry, I seek to reflexively confront their intersectionality of my own identities in relation to those of the study participants. CRT intersectionality refers to the idea that we have fractured, overlapping, and potentially contradictory identities that position us in our daily lives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Identities are explicitly tied to privilege, power, and access, creating conditions for certain discourses to emerge prominently and others to remain hidden. Since much of my study is rooted in discourses—from interviews, focus groups, and casual conversations with participants—these intersectionalities are worth a deep, analytical look, and a reflexive investigation into how my own assumptions.

Taking a critical race theory perspective, I assume that my participants and I perform and take up these identities differently based on people who surround us, privileged discourses in the context, geographies, and a variety of other contextual factors. This explicitly anti-essentialist
perspective pushes against the idea that any person has a single, unitary identity they carry with them regardless of context (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As this study is framed by both critical and post-structural theory, I also consider the Foucauldian and Derridaian critique of the very concept of “identity”, pushing on the idea that an identity label—e.g. black as a racial marker—constructs an “other”, the non-black, and therefore, a partition for marginalization. This critique gets at the very heart of a fundamental assumption that underlies intersectionalities—that we hold our identities, albeit overlapping ones, across social contexts.

Acknowledging this critique, I still lean toward a critical race theory perspective on the notion of identities for a few reasons. First, the racial identity markers of “black”, “white”; gender markers of “girl”, “boy”; and class markers of “rich” and “poor”, although potentially hegemonic in their construction, are common, everyday words by the participants in my study to construct their daily realities, as evidenced in their focus group discussions and interviews. Moving away from the liberation rhetoric that positions many critical studies, my study aims to understand what is and how it works instead of pushing for “what should be”, and the use of identity markers (both formal and informal) centered much of the daily discourse of the youth with whom I work. Second, identity markers are central my inquiry. I limit my inquiry to work with Black, African-American, and Latino/a youth because of their positioning, both in scholarship and in schools, as academically, civically and politically absent or apathetic.

The trick, of course, is to find relevance in the ways that my participants may answer questions to question I pose, share information, take pictures, and tell stories from a political lens, illuminating possible ways that my study could be influenced by our identities and subjectivities, and how they might coincide. Below, I focus on four markers of identity that, at this point, I find most apropos when situating a political study—gender, race and ethnicity, class,
Gender. I self-identify, and am most likely identified by others, as male. Taken alone, this position offers me unearned privileges, a result of living in a country where males are given opportunities and authority in ways that females are often not afforded with the same ease. I have experienced male privilege as a middle school teacher; students, particularly male students, heeded my words, reprimands, and physical presence with greater speed and less resistance than with most female teachers. This privilege might have carried over to my relationship with my participants; however, it is also possible that participants regard my male “authority” with skepticism. Clearly, my participants’ pasts with male adults will have an influence on our interactions and understanding of what it means to be masculine. Of the participants in my study, 3 identified as male and 3 as female. In this way, my presence—from a purely numerical perspective—tipped the scale 4 -3. However, as a contextual note, all of the seventh grade academic teachers who taught the participants in the study (ELA, reading, math, science, and social studies) were female. In fact, one female participant routinely (mistakenly) called me “Miss”, an error she attributed to the fact that all of her teachers were female. In this way, the participants experienced spaces where females were given formal positions of authority. Particularly in regards to the concept of “resistance”, I do question how often participants told stories to construct a sense of “maleness” and “femaleness” in relation to my maleness, and as the person given a “formal” position of authority.

Race and ethnicity. As a Japanese-American, I identify as ethnically Japanese and racially yellow. From a CRT perspective, all people of color are mired in daily racism and oppression, an inescapable reality woven into the fabric of all our social and political institutions. My experiences with racial oppression (which I characterize less by micro-aggressions and more
by structural and political institutions that deliberately exclude yellow people from attaining jobs, gaining acceptance into schools, and being considered “American”) are certainly different than those experienced by my black, Latino/a and African-American participants. However, as non-white people, we all experience oppression due to our race, a reality that needs to be named. Throughout my study, I wondered if my participants bought into the idea that East Asian people do experience racism and see me as someone who can empathize or, at some cursory level, understand. East Asians, I have experienced, are seen as having gained conventional, economic success, perhaps without the narrative of struggle taken up by black and Latino/a communities.

I also wonder if, in any way, this visual difference in our race obstructed or constructed opportunities for creating racialized discourses in relation to power and school. For example, I noticed that although the one African-American black male participant I had in the study expressed strong assertions about race within the context of punishment and power, he was also the first to eschew the topic if it emerged. One female participant, in what seemed to be an attempt to wrap her mind around her own racial identity, went around the table during one focus group and asked us all if we considered ourselves “black” or “white”. When I mentioned I considered myself “yellow”, she cocked her head at me and furrowed her eyebrows, as if to say, “That’s not a real answer.” When another participant answered he was “Mulatto”, I realized that the labels I use in this study to describe race are severely limited. This fracturing of racial identities was a complication and enrichment during our time together.

**Class.** My class identity also applied to my positioning as a researcher. I was a middle-to-upper income adult going into a context where over 90% of students are considered “low-income”. Solely by the school’s records, five out of the six participants in my study were classified as “low-income”, and they all received subsidized meals. When I came to Septima
Clark, I often wore shoes, coats, and clothes that might signify my middle-class background, when students always wore their school uniforms. Although throughout the study, I did not perceive any substantial way the perception of my socioeconomic class influenced the study, I did notice—during our one neighborhood walk—how the students came “dressed up” for each other, wearing markers of brand gear, including Air Jordan shoes and hats, designer purses and jeans. In this way, creating the identity of having (or being “with” instead of “without”) could have been more important than I perceived.

**Language.** Language is also a reflexive consideration. I was born in America and grew up speaking Midwestern, “standard” English. To many, I speak without an accent that might position me as an un-American. I am a native English speaker, and over 40% of students at Septima Clark speak English as a second language or receive Sheltered English Immersion services. This means—in regards to dialect, language, and positioning—my English language abilities might position me—both within the culture of the school and possibly by my participants—in a locus of power. Of the six participants, four were native English speakers, and for two, English was a second language. As a contextual factor, I spoke similar English to that of their teachers. However, as I often had to clarify what my participants were talking about when they used slang, youth dialect, and phrases that I did not understand. In this way, the participants who were able to easily access both discourses (English as the primarily language and youth dialect), they might have had more “air time” and, therefore, greater space to construct their truths.

**The Case**

I use a case study methodology (Stake, 1994) with ethnographic approaches to data collection and analysis. I inquire into the daily political experiences black and Latino/a youth
through a sociocultural lens (i.e. how youth socially construct political knowledge through activity within their specific contexts) and a political lens (i.e. how power is negotiated, re-negotiated, and understood by youth), asking how they “do” political activity and experience politics with a strong consideration for these actions within political, social, and cultural contexts that support such actions and narrative construction.

A case study approach is a good match for my ontological and epistemological stances to power, narrative, activity, and experience. My study also emphasizes the social dimensions of political activity, investigating what the phenomenon means and how it is enacted inside of the Oakton community. I was interested in the way youth experience the political worlds around them (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

My study also highlights the importance of context. Contextual factors have great influence on youth understanding of power, knowledge, space, and activity. Youth make sense of talk and text, informed by cultural, political, and social worlds that situate them (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Case studies also can highlight the intrinsic worth of individual cases and value the “particularity and ordinariness, this case itself is of interest” (Stake, 1995, p. 437). I align my study with Stake, arguing that not all case studies must seek to inform generalizability or grand explanations.

**Site Selection**

I selected Septima Clark as a site for study due to my social and historical connection with the school. Before I selected the school, I was already familiar with its history and core mission. Previous to my decision to become a doctoral student, I applied for and received a directorship for the extended learning day program at Septima Clark. Although I decided to pursue doctoral work instead, the process provided me with a preliminary understanding of
contexts surrounding the school. I researched the school structures at Septima Clark, student demographics, and the school’s educational point of view. I toured the school, gaining an understanding of its proximity within Oakton, and made preliminary connections with staff that work there. I also knew a small network of teachers who worked at Septima Clark, who helped me gain entrée into the school and informed me of relevant social and political contexts that situate the school.

Youth at Septima Clark represent the demographic and geographic population of students that interest me. Black and Latino/a youth are consistently placed at the “bottom” of the civic empowerment gap (Levinson, 2010). My study concerns black and Latino/a youth, and students attending Septima Clark represent a wide variety of youth that fit that description. Oakton is an urban landscape situated within a large, urban school district. This area of Vera City has a long, storied history of immigration, industrialization, white flight, segregation, de-segregation and economic fluctuation that mirrors the history of urban center across the country. With increasing population of Latino/a families residing in the area, Oakton represents the increasingly Latino/a demographic of cities, suburbs, and rural communities across the United States.

**Making Entrée**

Making entrée into Septima Clark required time and reflection. Although I made entrée into a variety of cultural spaces, in this section, I focus on my entrée into the school and youth culture. Acknowledging the layers of bureaucracy built into the Vera City Public Schools, I called the IRB office weekly, sometimes daily, to bring attention my IRB application. This back-and-forth process took three months, mostly requiring persistence and patience. My next order of business was gaining the trust of school gatekeepers: Principal Jermaine, the director of professional development, the director of operations (who was in charge of scheduling building
spaces), and a handful of Septima Clark teachers. This process was harder. Throughout my first days at the school, I struggled to balance transparency—being honest with the fact that I was there primarily to do research—and establishing genuine relationships with students, teachers, and leaders at the school and convince others I meant no harm.

At first, I thought the best way of making entrée into the school culture was to create an assuming yet consistent presence at the school. I wanted students and teachers to see me as a familiar face—one of consistency, responsibility, and under no pretense of being an “insider”. I visited the school for the first time on September 23, 2013 as the guest of a former co-worker who works as a seventh grade math teacher. In an ethnographic sense, Ingrid [a pseudonym] became my key informant. She was someone who I could trust to provide guidance, an honest opinion about my ideas, and access to school gatekeepers as well as other teachers. Ingrid took me around the building, situated me with the layout and, perhaps most importantly, introduced me to teachers who were in her tighter circle of colleagues. During that day, I became acquainted with the 8th grade math teacher, the building’s art teacher, and a sixth grade science teacher.

The tour was brief but helpful. I gained a preliminary understanding of the building design and the values promoted by the school. I took note of the student artwork mounted in the hallways, the murals in the main atrium, and the 12 Points for Superior Learning poster. The visit was my first in-school attempt at ‘casing the joint’ (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), a preliminary, observational moment in which I could consider important political situatedness of the school, students at the school, and how it might compare to their experiences in the Oakton neighborhoods at large.

As a recommendation from a committee member, I also took action steps to gain access and name recognition at the school through pre-designed structures. I sought out volunteer work
as an in-school tutor or during school programs designed for students in Oakton. Ingrid suggested that I get my CORI (my background check) through Vera City Partners in Education, a non-profit organization that provides volunteers for Vera City Public Schools. In this way, Septima Clark would not have the burden of doing the CORI process for me, and I would have a place—a consistent, thoughtful presence in the school even when I am not allowed to officially collect data. During the next month, I met with and connected with AmeriCorps volunteers, the director of the extended learning day, all seventh grade teachers, and the pre-service teacher residents. Due to my background as a public school teacher, my knowledge public service, the extended learning day program, and the urban teacher residency, I successfully positioned myself as an ally to the school.

Ingrid agreed to have a discussion with the school’s principal and director of professional development, provide a quick word of my credibility (us having worked together as teachers for six years), and sent an email to both men in regards to a possible time to meet together. Through a time-consuming back and forth between myself and the building principal—over email, phone calls, and visits—I received approval from the principal. Two months after my original entrée, I could start collecting data.

**Informal networks.** The network of gatekeepers that protect the school are far beyond my own comprehension. However, my journey required me to connect with staff members that worked at Septima Clark who were not the formal gatekeepers, rather, the implicit ones. This primarily implicates teachers. Through my time with Ingrid, I was also able to connect with two eighth grade math teachers, the art teacher, a sixth grade science teacher, and the entire seventh grade teaching team. I attended a few of their information meetings at a local restaurant, helped grade math team papers, and started to learn names. My housemate was a teacher educator for
the Urban Teacher Residency program, and I volunteered to co-teach a few classes with her. During my time teaching there, I became acquainted with four pre-service math teachers in the residency program who were placed at Septima Clark. We shared ideas about our lens to the school, and we established friendships that connected me deeper into the school community. I introduced myself to the extended learning day staff and explained my brief history with their work.

**Entrée into youth culture.** I began my entrée with youth doing field observations of students, teachers, and classrooms during the two weeks before the winter break. At Septima Clark, seventh grade students move in “travel groups”. These groups take the same history, science, writing, and electives such as gym and art classes and split off into two groups for reading and math. Within these travel groups, I followed one group per day, watching how students interact with one another, their teachers, and the ways in which they communicate.

Each group had its own personality. The first group I followed seemed to view me with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. A student named Rose (a pseudonym) who had recently returned from an out-of-school suspension, became suspicious that I was watching her behavior. I first met Rose when observing a math class in which she seemed to be putting on a show. During that class, she physically and verbally resisting every directive of the teacher and encouraged her peers to do the same. A few times, she made long, hard eye contact with me as I sat in the room, testing to see if I would avert he stare. I held her eye contact a few times and smiled. When I did, she would duck her head and break eye contact.

Out of sheer coincidence, I had scheduled time to observe her English class the next day. After she spotted me, her theory that *he’s here to watch me* seemed to be confirmed. She whispered to her peers, point at me, and pretended to hide behind her friends. I knew this posed a
problem. I did not want my first identity in the school to be “eyes on you”, someone who kept tabs on student behavior. In her next class, I walked up to her, introduced myself, and told her specifically about my project. I also told her that I was Ingrid’s friend, and she nodded. “I’m also not following you,” I told her explicitly. “It seems you think that. I’m really just here to learn about what students experience school for a paper I’m writing.” This seemed to satisfy her, and from that point, she smiled at me in the hallway.

My interaction with Rose reminded me of the imperativeness of trust and transparency. As a researcher, I did not have time to establish the relationships with students in the same way I did as a teacher. For every class I then observed, I asked the teacher if I could a quick announcement. I introduced myself to the students, gave a small speech about being a student like them, and told them I was here to learn about their experiences in schools. I made it clear I was not there to observe any specific student. Each time I made the announcement, several students nodded. After a few days, a few students started addressing me by name and saying hello.

My friendship with Ingrid was pivotal in gaining trust with the students. As a respected teacher leader in the school, students often spoke of Ingrid with reverence. I explained to students we taught together for six years back in the Chicago area. When I ask students if they remembered seeing me around, many students nodded their head, often adding a comment about Ingrid. In fact, the more time I spent in the building seen with Ingrid, the more students saw me as part of the school fabric. Soon, students invited me to play basketball with them during gym, to join them for lunch, and asked me for help with math problems. In many ways, this was my comfort zone; I felt like a middle school teacher again. I had to remind myself several times that, although I felt like a teacher, I certainly was not. I was a researcher. The students needed to
know that, and—perhaps most important—I needed to remember that.

Recruitment. I approached the recruitment process with the proposal to choose a typical sample for analysis by finding a group of 4 - 6 students who might typify the political experiences for seventh grade students attending Septima Clark. This type of participant recruitment is defined in Creswell (2002) as a case and/or cluster of students who are in civic contact through political acts of resistance and/or political elites in the school, and/or political “down the middle” kids, who don’t particularly stand out as popular/elite or as socially in the lower spectrum, etc.

I very quickly learned that such a case was near impossible to find, even with political and civic parameters. Any construction of the “typical” political and civic experience is entirely arbitrary, and the “typical” from a critical race theory lens implicates contextual factors beyond reportable factors of racial and cultural identity. For purposes of selection, I thought about several seemingly “reportable” factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, language spoken at home, neighborhood of residence, and age. However, I also found myself asking questions about more intuitive criterion for selection, which students might seemingly benefit most from the study. Who might benefit from telling their stories? Who seems to be excited and potentially critical of the study? And, just as salient, how might I tell students whom I didn’t select why they were not chosen? What damage might these choices have on students seeing potential researchers?

After my observations, I decided to focus my recruitment on seventh graders from Ingrid’s homeroom. I chose this group because my relationship with Ingrid gave me greater insight into the seventh grade students as individuals and a collective group. It also earned me credibility. In addition, Ingrid’s homeroom students seemed most interested in the study and—
based talking to several seventh grade teachers—represented a diversity of cultural, social, and political backgrounds. Since I was curious about both collective and individual political experiences and activities, I chose a group of students who were the same classes and spaces throughout the day.

I gave my recruitment speech to Ingrid’s homeroom in early November 2013. After giving my pitch, I distributed a general interest form and asked students to indicate if they were interested in participating in the study, needed to learn more, or declined participation. I provided space for them to indicate the language their parents and/or family members would be most comfortable reading. Of the 20 students in Ingrid’s class, 19 expressed interest as participants, and one checked, “I am not sure. I need more information.” After clarifying the project to the student who marked “unsure”, he declined participation. The next week, I passed out letters written in English, Spanish, and Cape Verdean Creole, contingent on parents’ first language. I set a deadline of one week for return, and asked students to talk to me if they thought they would need longer. One week later, 10 of the 20 letters came back, signed. I then moved to the next step: organizing a preliminary interview with all 10 students. During these interviews, I asked students questions about their neighborhood, experiences in school, interests, and identities. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes. Of these ten students, all of them fit the criterion for participation in my study, so the next level of consideration was logistical—who would be able to participate in the after school focus groups? Of the ten students, four participated in afterschool clubs, including double-dutch and math team. This would preclude them from being able to attend the bi-weekly focus groups, pivotal time for the study. I then talked to the six students to gain their assent as participants in the study.
Participants

I worked closely with 6 seventh grade students from Septima Clark School: Crystal, Tatiana, Amalia, Paul, Epic, and Star (all self-chosen pseudonyms), all between the ages of 12 and 13 during the time of the study. All participants were students in the same seventh grade “travel group” of twenty students who travelled together to each class throughout the day (with some exceptions for math). The group travelled together to physical education once a week, art once a week, homeroom, and an extended learning day period every day by the non-profit organization. The group was composed of three girls and three boys, three of whom lived in the same neighborhood as the school, two from the neighborhood immediately south, and one from the neighborhood immediately north. Although the six youth were my primary participants, I also observed, interacted with, and established personal relationships with the many students in the travel group, as they saw me at least three times a week during the school year, often more. Below, I list the participants’ pseudonyms followed by their age at the start of the study.

Star, 12. Star self-identified as an African-American black male and described himself as “cool, remorseful, and sometimes guilty”. Born and raised in a primarily black neighborhood south of Oakton, Star considered himself as a nurturer of others, a “compassionate person, a person who lets you cry on their shoulders”. An avid storyteller, Star often commanded attention of the group through with his leadership and strong personality.

Crystal, 12. When asked, “Where are you from?” Crystal responded, “Well, I’m from Puerto Rico; my family is. I was born here.” At different times in focus groups, Crystal adamantly stated that she was “from here” (i.e. the Vera City) although she identified as Puerto Rican. This seeming contradiction foreshadowed the fluidity (and occasional confusion) of how Crystal spoke about her identity and use of language, two of the primary ways she engaged with
power in school. She was an active member of the school volleyball team, a self-proclaimed One Direction superfan, and, as she quoted, “Someone who has many friends.”

**Tatiana, 13.** Tatiana’s family emigrated from Cape Verde when she was ten. She started at Septima Clark in the fifth grade, a year older than the rest of her classmates. Asked to describe herself, she said, “I’m unique, friendly.” Tatiana further described herself to have “sugary blood”, a term her mother used for someone who has an inherent ability to connect with and befriend others. True to her mother’s words, Tatiana was politically savvy and seemed respected by her teachers and peers.

**Amalia, 12.** Amalia identified as Cape Verdean (from her father’s side) and Puerto Rican (from her mother’s side). She considered herself “more” Cape Verdean because she was born there and practiced the culture at home and in church. She spoke four different languages (English, Spanish, Creole, and Portuguese) depending upon her company. She considered herself an athlete (a basketball and volleyball player) and a scientist; however, she grew particularly animated when given the opportunity to perform on stage. Amalia played Anne Frank, the lead role, in the play, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, in the seventh grade play. Energetic, compassionate, and quirky, Amalia was often a mediator and comfort-giver in the focus group.

**Paul, 12.** Paul, a native to the city, described himself as “respectful, nice, someone who doesn’t criticize.” Similar to Crystal, he considers himself as of the city, but he strongly identified as being Dominican. Paul was an athlete, playing both baseball and basketball, and he would often speak with passion about videogames and sushi restaurants he would frequent downtown. Paul’s consistency and diligence made him a favorite of teachers, although, like Crystal, he illustrated his own acts of resistance when his context demanded it.

**Epic, 13.** Epic proudly identifies as Dominican. When asked why he would consider
himself Dominican, he replied: “Because I am proud of where I am from, and I don’t care if anyone doesn’t like where I come from, I am proud to say it…” Epic was born in the Dominican, and his family immigrated to the United States when he was five. He described himself this way: “So I can pretty say I’m pretty honest. I like to sing a lot; I like to play videogames. I like to hang out with people and talk about them with them like with…interesting stuff.” Throughout our time together, Epic demonstrated a powerful array of thinking capacities, including scientific (he was fascinated with the solar system and space), artistic (he strongly valued creativity, openness, divergence through song, dance, and painting), and metaphoric (he spoke frequently in analogies to illustrate his experiences).

Sample

I base this paper on a 10-month case study design intended for explanation-building. The research sample is based on the representativeness of the concept of youth political narratives (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) rather than a representativeness of school sites or participant demographic. This research serves as a counterexample to the positioning of urban youth as politically disinclined and unknowledgeable and as an example of a strategic case (Yin, 1994) of students who take political action, constructs political knowledge, and embody political narratives in relevant, meaningful, and contextualized ways.

Modes of Inquiry

In the fall of 2013, I initiated a case study to understand the political experiences of students at Septima Clark with a focus on emic narrative construction. At the point of my entrée, Ingrid was a fourth year teacher, an active and respected staff member who vouched for me as a teacher and researcher. She granted me access to “case the joint” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), and I observed the daily routine of a school day for three weeks before recruiting and selecting
participants. Next, I worked to connect with the seventh grade core academic team (reading, ELA, math, science, and history), a group of five women who taught all the students in the seventh grade. After a few months of consistent non-participant observation, I began focusing my inquiry sharply on the political experiences and activities of students, as it seemed most salient in their daily lives at school.

Focus Groups

Between January 2014 and June 2014, I conducted 25 focus groups discussions. Each focus group lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and took place during the school’s mandatory extended learning time between 3:45 – 5:00 p.m. Every focus group started with a general check-in, often some variation of a “high-low” reflection, during which students could share generally what was going on with their lives. Although I did not transcribe the check-ins, on occasion I jotted down a note about a participant to gain stronger contextual understanding of their lives. During each focus group, I used semi-structured protocols, based largely on concepts, ideas, or narratives discussed in previous discussions or interviews. I set up activities, offered prompts for writing, and asked open-ended questions to facilitate youth storytelling and sharing of experiences. I digitally recorded each focus group discussion and transcribed each recording to capture their interactions, stories, and reactions to each other.

Interviews

In total, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews. I conducted two interviews each with Star, Crystal, and Paul; and three each with Tatiana, Amalia, and Epic. Each interview lasted between 20 – 25 minutes and took place during their lunch periods. Although I brought a list of set questions I planned to ask participants, most of my questions were written as elaboration questions from previous discourses from focus groups or observations. For example, I asked
Epic the question: “Epic, in the previous interview, you compared your experiences in academic classes to being a ‘robot’. Could you tell me more?”

I drew on Mason’s (2002) conception of semi-structured interviewing, an approach that treats interviews like “a conversation with purpose” (p. 67). Mason advocates for the development of a protocol that helps interviewers make decision in the moment instead of a rigid list of questions. Like Mason and Glense, I privileged emergent ideas in interviews, encouraging elaborations that come from participants instead of directed questions from the interviewer. Although Mason and Glesne helped frame my stance to interviewing, I conducted my interviews in the spirt of Seidman (2005), who argues “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Throughout the interviews with youth, I took the ontological stance foregrounding an emic understanding and allowing the insider’s voice to emerge.

Observations

I spent a total of 4,500 minutes (approximately 75 hours) as a participant and non-participant observer inside the school over 57 total different days. Every Wednesday for four months, I followed the travel group that included all six members of the focus group for the entire day, 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., including their times in the hallways, occasionally lunch, and during their extended learning time. I also observed students in multiple contexts of their schooling experiences, including a math counts competition, vocabulary bee, after school arts festival, a visit from Arne Duncan with an arts showcase, a “publishing party”, during which student writing was shared and commented upon, science fair, and a teambuilding day.

As an observer, I largely positioned myself as a non-participant, particularly when they were in class, interacting with the students only if they approached or addressed me first. I
interacted with students most during gym and art classes (where the structure seemed more flexible), and in the lunch, hallway, and after school. On several occasions, a teacher asked me to take an instructional or supportive role, such as asking questions about group science fair projects, helping students with math problems, or writing literary essays in ELA. During physical education periods, I often participated in the game they played, usually upon invitation from the students. Two more significant deviations from the non-participant observation role: (1) I co-coached the middle school volleyball team that included Crystal; and (2) I co-planned and co-taught a half-day curriculum about communication, team building, and collaborative thinking during the last month of the school year. Although these experiences were not significant to my study, I checked in with Amalia, who tried out but didn’t make the volleyball team, in regards to my dual role. During my observations, I largely took notes on discussions, interactions, activity, and curricula that struck me as relevant to my research questions.

Throughout my time in Septima Clark, I carried around two notebooks with me. First, I had a primary record notebook for “thick” descriptions of the study’s participants and their activity, dialogue, gesture, and sensory detail within specific social contexts (Carspecken, 1995). This notebook captured speech, context, time, verbatim speech, and diagrams of both physical structures and social proximities of participants to others, including peers, teachers, parents, and me. I used this notebook to collect field notes about classroom, other in-school spaces, and community spaces that participants point to as meaningful activity through interviews or the photographs they take. Second, I carried a field journal that captured information about daily, potentially relevant activity, communication, social interaction, and sensory details at other sites that may indirectly influence the case site (Carspecken, 1995).
Artifact and Document Collection

Throughout my study, I collected a variety of documents and artifacts as evidence. Documents included school schedules, maps, and class rosters. Electronic documents included emails and texts from participants and online blogs, news stories, and videos that provided context for the political narratives situating the school. Artifacts included photos of murals, student artwork, posters that outlined school values, goals students had written for the year, and photographs and images of spaces in immediate proximity to the school. On some occasions, participants allowed me/asked me to photograph their poetry, artwork, collages, and writing.

Analytical Framework

I selected grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) as the foundation of my analytical lens for two primary reasons. First, in regards to narratives of urban youth in schools, the theoretical base of literature is thin. Although the field is replete with knowledge regarding what youth should can, and are doing political subjects, scholarship regarding youth experiences with and within power relations, specifically in regards to public schooling, remains largely unstudied and under-theorized. Second, grounded theory aligns closely with my constructivist epistemological approach to the study. Throughout the study, I drew from field notes, focus group transcripts, and interview transcripts and wrote low-level memos to indicate preliminary patterns I saw in the data and/or to tease out anomalies or in my data (Stake, 1994). Through this process of memo writing, I analyzed narratives through an interpretivist lens, understanding each story as a relational construction between me, and my subjectivities, and those of my participants. The memos served the purpose of meaning reconstruction, making the tacit meaning explicit and using the explicit to inform my understanding of the tacit (Creswell, 1995). Through the process of data collection and memo writing, I wrote down the issue-relevant categories that emerged
within the case. Stake (1994) calls this process “categorical aggregation”, or coding. Throughout my study, I developed a running list of inductive codes that emerge from my memos and use these codes as jumping-off points for my semi-structured interviews and focus groups and lenses for my observation.

My first round of initial coding (Charmaz, 2006) took place when I took several trips to Septima Clark and the surrounding Oakton neighborhood to “case the joint” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) and gathered preliminary data as contextual and potential framing concepts. From this initial coding—primarily coming from field notes and photographs—I wrote several memos, noting several political contexts, e.g. the upcoming mayoral election and the murals on the walls of the school. During the next step, focused coding (Charmaz, 2006), I constructed 181 codes based on data that I thought could inform the theories of youth political culture and subjectivity broadly and as in regards to social, political, and cultural contexts that might be relevant in the construction of the narratives. The codes included data from my focus groups, interviews, artifacts, field notes, photographs, and participant-created artwork. After listening to and partially transcribing clusters of focus groups and interviews, I continued to memo on the data, lightly analyzing it for more emergent codes as well as potential new directions for my research.

An example of coding process can be viewed appendix D, or the “Coded Data Sample” for a focus group transcript. To filter, I coded data if I perceived that: (1) it directly or indirectly answered my research questions; (2) described, informed, or produced narratives about concepts in my conceptual framework; and/or (3) offered politically or socially contextualizing information about my participants or site. I selected codes that were categorizing concepts /descriptions that might have relevance across other contexts or ones that could stand alone as divergent narratives within a coding idea. The first line of coding, as exemplified in Appendix E,
resulted in codes such as: “Acting big (size as metaphor)”; “Confrontation between students”; “Changing identities”; “Control in the classroom”. For each code, I wrote a brief low-analysis description of the data point categorized by that code, the data source (e.g. FG5 = Focus Group #5; I2 = Interview #2), and the page number in the transcription or field note documentation where that data was located.

Appendix E illustrates an example of how I documented and organized my open codes. Although originally in Microsoft Excel (for easy sorting), Appendix E was written to fit the parameters of Microsoft Word. Within each description, I noted the participant who made the claim. Data location was particularly important so that I would not refer to the data out of context of the time of year, setting, and space in which it occurred. I always referred back to the original transcription or field note data when I used the data to evidence a claim to ensure I used the evidence with proper social context.

Through this process of preliminary analysis, I wrote and re-wrote my interview and focus group protocols, as well as identifying any codes that might be worth exploring during my next observation at the school. These advanced memos served as the platform for my development of code clusters. Each code cluster was, in essence, a conceptual category that brought codes together into broader conceptual ideas. Through this code clustering, I started writing low-inference analytical thoughts, as drawn from my memos through the lens of my theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This step was particularly important in the emergent construction of the narratives, or stories authored by the participants, particularly in regards to the way they discussed the cause and effect of power within the bounds of the school site. Appendix F illustrates how I clustered codes, based on the data from my initial coding, as a starting point for the narratives I describe in chapters 4 – 7.
The first column in Appendix F includes code clusters. This illustrated a group of codes that seemed to have similarities in conceptual idea and framing. The second column, emerging narratives, describes the “storied” aspect of my study, implicating people as characters within a story about power, possible cause and effects, problems or challenges faced, and resolutions and/or non-resolutions in each case. The last column, low-level analysis, implicates my personal response to the emergent finding as I continued my analysis. This analysis was foundational in how I weaved together the narratives in regards to my positionality.

During my analysis, I wrote 46 conceptual categories, careful not only to synthesize the codes but to look for nuance and divergence within them. From these categories, I began constructing narratives and sub-narratives, or stories within the stories of how participants understood the workings of power through experience, activity, and discourse. A sample of this narrative construction can be viewed in Appendix G. During my exploration of these narratives (and through my experiences within multiple facets of the school community), I began to notice the power of the institutional political narratives that situated the participant narratives. As such, I began authoring institutional narratives to provide context to participant narratives but also as means of exploring fractured narratives. These narratives became the central thesis of my study. They are authored, in full, in chapters 4 – 7 of this study. In chapter 8, the final chapter, I analyze what these narratives could mean to scholarship in regards to power, knowledge, political engagement, and citizenship. My study develops a basis upon which to build future research on youth political culture in schools, a topic of scholarship suffers from a paucity of research.
CHAPTER 4: ZERO TO HERO

A Brief Political History

Field notebook in hand, I walk down Vernon Street, a busy street that cuts through the middle of upper Oakton. This is my first trip into Oakton as a researcher, and the neighborhood is bustling with mid-afternoon movement. Dressed in school-issued baby yellow polo shirts and khaki pants, students attending Septima Clark stroll along Vernon Street in both directions in packs of two or three. Although I have not yet made entrée in the school, I recognize their uniforms and smile. Maybe I will get to speak with them later. Two black teens, donning athletic jerseys, pop in and out of side streets on their bikes maneuvering in and out of traffic like masterful slalom skiers. I narrowly miss one biker as I dodge the oncoming traffic to cross a major intersection.

I take note of the large, mayoral advertisements signs mounted on construction fences and above front entrances of corner shops, churches, and financial organizations that line Vernon. Two city police cars sit idly on side streets intersecting with Vernon, and another two police cars roar down the street, sirens blaring. In my time living in the neighborhood just south of Oakton, I have become highly acquainted with the sound. A Baptist Youth Center and the Samaria Iglesia Evangelical Church sit along Vernon Street near the center of town, a sampling of the numerous religious organizations in the area. I see a boxy, concrete community center located in the middle of Vernon Street, an organization seemingly offered to youth of all ages. I note the amount of social service agencies, religious organizations, Western Unions, and local corner stores that occupy the Square. As I venture toward SCPS, I cross paths with stoop sitters (older citizens who sit and watch the neighborhood from the stoops of their houses) who seem to eye me as I pass by. They live in a housing developed by a local community organizing group,
the same group that advocated for the development of a new Septima Clark School. I hear two gentlemen talking about the police presence in the area and how they plan on to deal with their next encounter with them. Since they are lining both sides of the sidewalk, I walk through the middle of their conversation, but my presence seems to have no impact on their lively discussion (Field Notes, September 16, 2013).

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I conducted research for my study at Septima Clark Pilot School, a K-8 nestled in a central neighborhood in Vera City, a large metropolis in the northeastern United States. The political experiences of Septima Clark students cannot be detached from the political history of Oakton, the neighborhood where the school is located and where many attending students reside, or Vernon Square, the once lively commercial hub of the Oakton area. In the past thirty years, Oakton community organizers, activists, and everyday citizens used civic channels to resist the “urban revitalization” efforts by Vera City government officials motivated by private interests and commercial monies. The renovation of the Septima Clark Pilot School is, in part, a product of the Oakton community’s fight for local control. The school was originally re-built through a collaborative effort by community organizers for purposes of serving the primarily black families that resided in the Septima Clark sub-neighborhood. The political narratives that situate neighborhood are primarily ones of contestation, mobilization, and grassroots community change. The Vernon Square community of Oakton remains a unique example of a city neighborhood that fought for and won local control—or, at least, a balance of political control—over determined city renovation authority.

I begin this chapter with a brief historical account of the political mobilization of Oakton
citizens with a keen eye to the Vernon Square area. In line with my theoretical framework, I author these histories through two analytical lenses: (1) a critical theory lens for purposes of analyzing how race, power, and systems of racial and class inequality position the neighborhood, and (2) a sociocultural lens with a keen eye for the social and cultural contexts that situate the histories.

Drawing on the sociopolitical framework of urban planners and Oakton historians, Gaston and Kennedy (1987), I also find it helpful to distinguish between the *community* and the *neighborhood* of Oakton. Throughout my study, I use the word *neighborhood* to describe the physical infrastructure that fall within the geographic boundary of Oakton—the streets, houses, the geographic boundaries, parks, and storefronts. This definition aligns with the city’s geographic definitions of the boundaries that demarcate the twenty-three neighborhoods of the city. Such physical structures house the *communities* that form around mutual interest in social or political issues. In this sense, the word ‘community’ implicates social organization, i.e. the African-American black, Cape Verdean black, and Latino/a citizens who collectively discuss, deliberate upon, and decide directions for action for their neighborhood. This semantic distinction also aids the process of considering the *political narratives* of the urban renewal proposal introduced by the city’s renovation authority and the ensuing contestation for political power between community organizers and the city’s neighborhood control, and the upshot of discourse between the two political entities that situate Septima Clark School.

**The Commodification of Oakton**

The geographic center of Vera City, Oakton is one of twenty-one official neighborhoods in Vera City (Vera City Landmarks Commission, 1995). Oakton is bordered by historical neighborhoods each boasting demographic diversity and compelling histories of gentrification
due to the influx of universities, corporate spread, and high-end housing. Until about 1900, Oakton was a neighborhood of primarily Irish, English, and German immigrants who sought out agricultural work. The neighborhood also became a Jewish hub in the early 1900s (Gaston & Kennedy, 1987).

Like other northeastern metropolises, the number of manufacturing jobs plummeted in the city following World War II. Between 1947 and 1975, the number of manufacturing jobs fell from 112,000 to 50,000 (Gaston & Kennedy, 1987), leading to signs of urban economic and civic crisis—loss of civic services, deteriorating infrastructure, and falling real estate values. White families living in city felt these were compelling enough reasons to leave and push into the suburbs, where high-tech industries, elite higher education institutions, and financial institutions boomed. As whites fled Vera City, people of color, primarily from the south, moved to the center of the city due to the abundance of available low-skill labor. City officials soon realized that the economic future of the city was in finance and administration (not in manufacturing or industrial work as in the past) economies that relied upon constant communication, networking, and interaction amongst financial consultants. Since the suburbs did not have the network or infrastructure to accommodate such an industry, the city offered corporations enormous incentives to move back into the center of the city.

This money attracted enough financing businesses back into downtown, providing justification for the city to clear away the “blight” of the city: the abandoned manufacturing buildings and, most problematically, low-income residencies that primarily housed working class, people of color. This focus on corporate economies shifted the primary interests of the city from the public it was meant to serve toward private monies and investments that brought wealth back into the city. By the 1970s, money started flowing back into Vera City, and this
“commodification” of Vera City opened the door for corporations to do what they do best: pump money that maximizes profits and promotes self-interest (Vera City Redevelopment Authority, 1986).

The privatization of the city came with racial and economic externalities. Residents of lower-income neighborhoods of color such as Oakton were drained of resources. Vast inequalities in resource allocation by the city, the disinvestment of the neighborhoods, and racially charged mechanisms of resource drain—including redlining, housing disinvestment, and community abandonment—left the Oakton community scraping for resources. Between 1950 and 1980, Oakton’s population decreased by 57% (Oakton Technical Assistance, 1986) and housing equity plummeted. People who had fully paid their mortgages in the neighborhood were forced to abandon because they could not afford the rising repair costs of the houses. With little to no support from the city, residents of Oakton turned to different means of political empowerment, including a strong charge of community organizers and activists who took it upon themselves to revitalize the community (Lipman & Mahan, 1996).

Community organizers, most famously long-time resident Nadia Rose3, aimed to work through political and economic channels to uproot the existing haven for criminals, drug dealers, and gangs that characterized the Septima Clark Neighborhood. When activists surged forward to “rebuild” Septima Clark in 2002, they sought to mobilize the community for purposes of building a safer, more robust black community. Nadia Rose Community Park, located to the south of Septima Clark Pilot School, commemorates this movement and advocacy for social change. The change sought to bring together the housing, education, and youth development sectors to reimage the neighborhood. With the support of the city mayor, Oakton activists

3 All names of people are also pseudonyms
focused their efforts on historically significant areas of the neighborhood, including Vernon Square, a long dormant square had once been thee economic and transportation center of the neighborhood. Although Oakton was once considered a hub of black culture in the city, the neighborhood has recently been undergoing a cultural Renaissance. Per the 2010 census, the Septima Clark sub-neighborhood was populated by approximately 77,000 residents, 21% of whom are white; 42% of whom are black; and 25% of whom are Hispanic/Latino/a; and 5% of whom are Asian.

**The Turnaround**

Located in the northern end of Oakton, Septima Clark Pilot School is immense. The three-story building rivals the size of most high schools I have seen. Seeing it in person for the first time, I was taken by how out of place it seems. The building takes up the space of roughly one neighborhood block, painted with a coat of unapologetic yellow with bright red and blue accents. It is a towering presence in an otherwise seemingly discrete, concrete jungle. The color scheme gives it the distinct look of a children’s museum, brightly colored to attract the eye, and architected for the use of little bodies. In contrast to the beaming yellow of Septima Clark, the local Spanish television station, WCEA TV *La Semana*, sits across the street in a squared-off grey concrete building. Orange construction cones, chain fences, and unassuming side streets surround the building to its northwest and southwest. A busy highway runs directly to its north, cars and ambulances brimming down the pass at about 60 miles per hour (field notes, September 9, 2013).

Septima Clark Pilot School re-opened in 2003 to “grand hoopla” (Heslam, 2011, line 6) and part of the revitalization efforts. However, in the first three years, the school lost 50% of its teachers every year, and hired and lost five principals. The economic and political investment
poured into the neighborhood failed to disrupt the underlying social and political inequalities situating the area, and students and teachers continued to struggle. Black parents who had the social capital, resources, and political savvy to get their students into the newly renovated Septima Clark were the same families who knew exactly when to pull their children out.

Flight of black population from the Septima Clark neighborhood ensued as the school’s test scores reflected a “failing” school. The flight of the once black super-majority made way to a larger native Spanish-speaking population, primarily students from the Caribbean and Central America. The recent population of students attending Septima Clark reflects this racial shift. During the 2013-2014 school year, Septima Clark enrolled 824 students. The racial demographics of the student population are listed in Table 4.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4.1. Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (2013-2014) at Septima Clark Pilot School*

Amongst the 824 students, 56% were English Language Learners and 16% required Individual Education Plans to meet special needs ([State] Department of Education, 2014.)

As I walk into the school building, I noted how the interior matches the conspicuous exterior, adorned with bright murals painted by local artists, student artwork, and bright purple,
red, and blue accents. The entrance way opens up to an atrium, the ceiling of which is a luminous rotunda. On the wall on the second floor of the atrium, a swirling, ethereal mural depicting black community organizer, civil rights leader, and educator, Betty Shabazz (also known as Betty X) and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is painted with black, grey, and white spray paint. The mural has a distinctly urban vibe; it mirrors the free, edgy vibe of outdoor murals in America’s largest cities created to capture civil and social progress. Two artists from a local non-profit organization dedicated to using art to create social change, volunteered to complete the mural in August 2013. On the second floor hub, a mural just as striking, one replete with bright yellows, purples, and blues, reads: Among the students of Septima Clark are the future artists, scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, engineers, laborers and civic leaders we desperately need. The school building, in all its architectural dissonance and sparkle, was built as a symbolic structure implicating the re-birth of the neighborhood.

In 2010, Septima Clark was one of twelve schools in the district categorized as Level Four, in need of “corrective action”, by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. Septima Clark was deemed a “Fresh Start” school ([Vera City] Public Schools, 2011), which required a change in principal and the release of at least half of the teachers (Heslam, 2011). Later in 2010, the state department of education enacted an educational reform law incentivized by federal Race to the Top (RTT) funds ([Vera City] Teacher’s Union, n.d.). The Vera City school district won Round II of the RTT competition and received $9 million per year over the next 4 years. Septima Clark received $3.7 million dollars from the School Improvement Grants (SIG) over the next three years (2010 – 2013) to finance the turnaround initiative ([Vera City] Public Schools, 2011).

In 2010, the district superintendent named Dee Jermaine⁴ the new principal of Septima

⁴ A pseudonym
Clark. Principal Jermaine came in with the reputation as a “results-oriented” leader who, if given the authority and autonomy to make drastic decisions, could turn the school around. He proceeded to select an instructional staff dedicated to his vision for school improvement. This vision included: (1) increased time for academic instruction (from 21.3 hours of instruction per week to 25.7); (2) improving human capital, only hiring the “best” of educators; (3) using data to drive instructional improvement; and (4) changing the school’s culture of low behavioral and academic expectations (National Center on Teaching and Learning, 2012). Jermaine also reached out to several community partnerships, including a non-profit organization that organizes the extended learning time after school support; Teach for America and Teach Plus, non-profit organizations that helped with teacher recruitment; Americorps City year for math and reading enrichment; and Mass 2020, an organization that supports extended learning days in Vera City Schools (National Center on Teaching and Learning, 2012).

According to Jermaine, increased learning time and community partnerships made a huge difference, particularly when considering how much improvement students illustrated from within the first year of turnaround. The Massachusetts Department of Education reported that 19% of students scored proficient or higher in the math portion of MCAS in 2010, as compared to 6% the previous year, and 20% scored proficient or higher in English, as compared to 13% the previous year. Those numbers moved to 30% in ELA and 35% in math in 2011. The state average, however, was 58% proficient in math and 69% proficient in English. Media critics, such as The Vera City Globe, questioned if the growth was good enough to be considered a success (Sege, 2012). In response to his critics Jermaine said, “The transformation is not yet complete, but progress has been considerable.”

Rebranded a “Pilot” school, Septima Clark received a 2 million dollar influx of cash from
the government. Seeing the need for drastic change, Jermaine fired 80% of existing Septima Clark teachers, bringing in young, primarily white, staff. Presently, the idea of black empowerment—from which the “new” Septima Clark was birthed—is seemingly waning. When the school district allocated a full autism and Sheltered English Immersion strand to Septima Clark—with a focus on Cape Verdian Creole and Spanish—the school population, once again, shifted. Dominican, Puerto Rican, Jamaican and other Caribbean black students started applying for entrance into the school, with a large Cape Verdean population attending from the an adjacent neighborhood.

After two months of observing classrooms, Principal Jermaine immediately stamped his imprint on Septima Clark. “We need to do something bold; we need to re-start Septima Clark,” he justified to CNN news reports in 2010. The 3.8 million dollars SIG grant allowed Jermaine to spend $1,500 more per student than in previous years, and the legislation permitted a significant amount of autonomy. In response to this newly found freedom he commented, “You’re presented with all this freedom: staffing autonomy, curricular and assessment autonomy, and an infusion of money, and it’s very exciting” (National Center on Time and Learning, 2009).

The story of Septima Clark’s turnaround became nation-wide news. City, state, and federal politicians all clamored for credit for the school’s progress. Below, I offer a story of one consequence of this political clamoring, the increased presence of elected officials and media at the school. In March 2013, Federal Secretary of Education Arne Duncan visited Septima Clark for the second time. I begin the story as I entered the school early in the afternoon.

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Walking into Septima Clark early in the afternoon, I immediately notice a difference in the amount of suits and surveillance. Police officers casually stroll across the hall. A news
reporter gussies up his hair and asks the cameraman to reposition the camera. Mr. Jermaine, the school principal, is suited up in coat and tie and observes the school from the middle of the rotunda. He nods at me as I walk by. A number of older white men in suits walk around the school with purpose. One gentleman makes his way to the members of the Septima Clark eighth grade chorus who are standing in the middle of the hallway by the office. The students shake his hand and pose for pictures. A group of four women and men, dressed in suits, walk in a loose cluster into the auditorium and sit in reserved seats in the front two rows. I follow them in.

Sixth, seventh, and eighth graders squirm in their auditorium seats. The room features theatre seating complete with usher aisles and a performance stage at the front. I sit in the back of the auditorium with several seventh grade teachers, observing the movement. This is a big day. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is visiting the school for the second time since the school’s turnaround in 2010. The students chat idly while several staff members stand in the back of the auditorium, glancing at their phones and speculating about the secretary’s arrival. The middle school band, including trumpet players Star and Tatiana, play majestic music behind the auditorium, and a small group of eighth grade chorus students, donning blue vests and white-collared shirts, are sitting in a small cluster in the front of the auditorium facing the audience.

Amalia walks by me wearing a long dress and white blouse. She seems to be mentally preparing to perform her monologue from The Diary of Anne Frank. I wave, and she smiles. We practiced her monologue several times the previous afternoon after our focus group. Epic, Star, Tatiana, and Crystal gathered together for a practice performance, during which Amalia pointed one hand to the sky and recited,
The sun is shining, the sky is a deep blue, there’s a magnificent breeze, and I’m longing—so longing—for everything! I walk from room to room, breathe through the crack in the window frame, feel my heart eating as if to say, ‘Can’t you fulfill this longing at last?’ I long for every boy, and to Peter I want to shout, ‘Say something, don’t just smile all the time, touch me, so I can feel the delicious feeling inside!’

Turning her shoulders inward, Amalia cracks a bashful smile. “This is when I have to turn to Alejandro and look deeply into his eyes.” The two boys bust out laughing and the girls give each other looks as if to say, “Yes, confirmed. That is awkward.” My interaction with Amalia in the auditorium is short lived as two teachers whisk her away backstage.

Students await the secretary patiently. I notice the cavalcade of adults stand in aisles: teachers, administrators, extended learning day staff, urban teacher residency pre-service teachers, AmeriCorps members, members of a local community organizing group, reporters, and photographers. Secretary Duncan is obviously late, although school leadership does not let this on. When he finally walks in, teachers and other staff quiet the students down. Secretary Duncan walks in with a stream of about 15 people, many who seem to be his aides or local reporters covering the story. Principal Jermaine then steps the microphone and calls for the students’ attention. They settle into silence. He begins his speech by exalting the students, acknowledging their great efforts and hard work as keys to their academic success. As I jot down field notes, I note how this language falls neatly into the discourse of “growth mindset”, a theory offered by Carol Dweck that argues intellect is developed by persistence, resilience, and effort in lieu of being “given” by innate ability. The development of growth mindset is a new school goal for SCPS this year. “You are role models for students across the country,” Principal Jermaine concludes. “Remember that.”
Damian Woetzel, former principal dancer at the New York City Ballet, is the next to speak. Damian is one of two world-renown artists who partners with Septima Clark for their turnaround arts initiative. Yo Yo Ma, a prodigious cellist, is the other. Damian reminds the students how powerful the arts are as a tool for engagement in schools. He tells the story of a Septima Clark eighth grader who told him the only reason he comes to school is to play the French Horn. Damian reiterates Mr. Jermaine’s message that the students are trailblazers who set an example for other students across the country.

Next, Principal Jermaine introduces a group of approximately fifteen first graders to the stage. The students’ square their shoulders to the audience and stand with hands at their sides. With the flick of their teacher’s wrist, they chorally recite Dr. King’s speech, I Have a Dream, loudly, sharply, and in unison. Their gestures are as crisp as their words. “I have a dream,” they shout, pointing their thumbs sharply at their chests. The students earn well-deserved applause. After the students finish, their teacher asks students to define key concepts in the speech: “injustice”, “transformation”, “self-evident”, “brotherhood”, and “oppression”. Many students raise their hands to answer, but the teacher only calls on one student to respond. Each student is clearly prepared. The show ends when the teacher asks the group what “oppression” means, and—amidst ten other flailing hands—she points to a little boy in the front corner of the front row. He shouts, “Oppression is the cruel exercise of power on people!” The audience applauds approvingly, and four men and women in suits, sitting in the front two rows, rise to their feet as if attending the State of the Union Speech. Everyone else in the audience follows.

After Amalia’s monologue from the Diary of Anne Frank, a choral performance by the eighth grade students, and a short number by the winds band, Secretary Duncan steps onto the stage to applause. He begins by asking students to applaud for the “hard work of your amazing
principal”, and the crowd responds with a smattering of claps. The eyes of the country are on you,” Duncan states, “you are showing the country and kids with your backgrounds what is possible.” Secretary Duncan continues by pointing to other schools in the country that have had a successful turnaround, reinforcing that Septima Clark students have been the role models and leaders in such a change. “You are in inspiration to the country,” he says. The audience applauds (Field Notes, March 11, 2014).

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I experienced cognitive dissonance during Secretary Duncan’s visit. Despite enjoying the first graders’ performance of I Have a Dream, I also felt it was tokenistic. It seemed they were being put on display for the political gain, an opportunity for picture-taking, publicity, and self-congratulating. This one-night showcase of the school’s “best” artistry also struck me as an inauthentic representation of the daily experiences of most students at the school. Instead, it was a moment for the same students to shine and the same students to be left in the background. The visual and performance showcase—albeit wonderfully illustrative of the students’ artistry—seemed to call out, “We want you to know that the millions in arts grant have not been wasted!” instead of “Here’s what we do and learn around here!” I also could not kick my aversion to Secretary Duncan’s neoliberal reform platform, and the narrative he often perpetuated about how to turn around urban schools. In those ways, his visit did not sit well with me.

However, making criticisms is easy from a cushioned seat in an auditorium. If I taught the first grade students, would I refuse this exceptional opportunity based on a principled stand against (my perception of) tokenism? Would I refute the message of a world-renown artist and our country’s political leader in education that my students are trailblazers for other youth? With the eyes of news reporters, school administration, my peers, and the students peering at me,
would I have acted differently? Most likely, I would have embraced the opportunity for my students. I would have done everything in my power to ensure they were enthusiastic and prepared for their performances. When Amalia performed her monologue, I felt a familiar sense of warmth; it was the same feeling of pride I felt watching my eighth grade students perform raw, vulnerable spoken word poetry in front of their peers and families. During her three minutes on stage, Amalia captured the imaginations of her classmates, teachers, Secretary of Education, and me. During our focus groups, Tatiana, Epic, Star, and Amalia all identify arts as a catalyst for their bright futures. In this way, the Secretary’s visit was a moment worthy of celebration.

**Institutional Political Narratives**

Secretary Duncan’s visit gave insight into several institutional political narratives that situate the school. In the next section of the chapter, I describe institutional political narratives that position the Septima Clark school community. I use the term “institutional political narratives” to describe stories about power, authored by people(s) in institutional positions of power, such as government officials, news media correspondents, and school administrators. Most of these narratives also implicate mobility, or the students’ power to move out of contexts of poverty by finding academic success, attending a high quality high school, and eventually attending a 4-year college. The word “turnaround”, a term used frequently by politicians and the media to describe Septima Clark’s story, conveys imagery of a single-trajectory, 180 degree rotation from a wrong/bad path toward a right/good one. These positions include Septima Clark school leadership; federal, state, and city government officials; and national and local media.

**My purpose in authoring these narratives is not to present “findings” of the study, rather to provide political context for the following three chapters.** These narratives are particularly important to unpack as they offer space for textured analysis later in the study.
Secretary Duncan’s visit also raised the questions: How do the students at Septima Clark read these institutionalize political narratives swirling about them? How do these narratives influence their own understanding of power?

The first narrative positions Septima Clark students as trailblazers who opened pathways for poor, non-white youth toward academic success. I call this the zero-to-hero narrative, the story of how the Septima Clark transformed from an unequivocal failure to a model for academic growth in an extraordinarily short period of time. You have the power to inspire students in failing schools across the country toward success, the story tells, the nation looks to you. Damian Woetzel, the world-renown ballet dancer, authored the second narrative. His story positions arts as having transformational power for academic and upward mobility. At school, this narrative is as visual as it is textual. Septima Clark’s hallways are replete with murals depicting historical social change and student artwork of a variety of genres. The arts are a powerful tool for expression, academic success, and upward mobility, this story tells. The final narrative describes the school’s journey towards heroism. It can be heard in Principal Jermaine’s speech during the assembly. I call it the persist-work-persist narrative. You beat the odds because you worked hard and persevered, the story says; and other poor black and brown kids can do the same. This narrative speaks to the neoliberal push for urban education reform. In 2014, Secretary Duncan promoted a similar narrative in an appearance on the Vera City NPR station. In the broadcast, he encouraged teachers and school leaders to tell poor, non-white children that their pathway out of poverty is hard work, persevere, and a focus on career readiness from an early age.

In authoring these narratives, I do not intend to diminish the work of teachers, students, and administrators at Septima Clark over the past four years. On the contrary, the students’ academic growth has been salient, unique in its speed, and, in many respects, worthy of
admiration. The educators I worked with at Septima Clark were compassionate, intelligent, and justice-minded. Instead, I seek to position the students within the larger discourses of educational politics and consider what these institutional narratives mean for the students that live them. In later chapters, I argue that although the six participants in this study fracture these narratives and understand them differently based on their in-school experiences, their read on these narratives are highly influenced by the political stories that situate their school from powerful institutions such as government and the media.

The Zero-to-Hero Narrative

In 2009, the year before the turnaround initiative, Star was a fourth grade student. According to him, things were different. Students walked out of the building during the day, fought in the hallways, and ran around with little regard for others. He explained:

This school used to be just everyone just running through the hallways. People would be beating up people in the bathrooms everything. Yeah, in fourth grade when I had my teacher Ms. Savannah (a pseudonym) my whole class was being disrespectful to her, so then she left by the half of the year (focus group, February 24, 2014).

Star iterated that Ms. Savannah’s story was common; many teachers left after only a few months before the turnaround. “Everyone used to be bad”, Star said. “We were bad kids.”

However, as the turnaround unfolded over two years, politicians, the news media, and Septima Clark leadership were telling a different story. With the hiring of Principal Jermaine, a significant influx of federal and district money, and the addition of the extended learning day, the school, they said, had emerged from the “worst performing” category to the “best performing”. Vera City, state, and federal politicians involved in the turnaround schooling reiterated this narrative with ferocity. In a 2012, the state governor gave a speech at the Democratic National
Convention. He used Septima Clark’s turnaround story as a shining example for the success of Obama’s educational policies:

What's at stake is real. The Septima Clark Elementary School…was in trouble. Its record was poor, its spirit was broken, and its reputation was a wreck. No matter how bad things were in other urban schools in the city, people would say, ‘At least we're not Septima Clark.’ Today, thanks to a host of new tools, many enacted with the help of the Obama administration, Septima Clark is turning itself around. Teaching standards and accountabilities are higher. The school day is longer and filled with experiential learning, art, exercise and music… Attendance is up, thanks to a mentoring initiative. In less than a year, Septima Clark went from one of the worst schools in the district to one of the best in the state. The whole school community is engaged and proud.

The governor delivered his speech with passion. With the support of the Obama administration, he proclaimed, Septima Clark transformed from a “wrecked”, “broken-spirited”, “weak”, and “troubled” school to one of the best in the state. The timeline of the story was also pivotal; schools can turnaround in less than a year, he promised. Vera City’s mayor also claimed Septima Clark’s turnaround as part of his legacy. In his last speech in 2013, the mayor proclaimed the school “a national success story”.

Officials at the White House further perpetuated the narrative to exemplify the success of the Race to the Top policies. After a group of Septima Clark first grade students performed, upon invitation, the I Have a Dream for President Obama in the White House, the White House Department of Intergovernmental affairs released the following statement:

These students are a part of a remarkable turnaround story. The once struggling school has transformed itself over the past year and a half. Thanks to state education reform
efforts championed by Governor [identifying name] and grants from the U.S. Department of Education’s Race to the Top Program, teachers and administrators have been able to implement new and innovative curriculums which are fostering student achievement today (James, 2012, lines 8 – 11).

Within the zero-to-hero narrative, several institutions clamored for credit. The Obama administration pointed to their own Race to the Top legislation; Secretary Duncan and Department of Education pointed to the role of the “turnaround” arts (another federally funded grant); and the governor and his office credit Obama policies, extended learning days, higher teacher accountability and learning standards. Despite the occasional exception, these institutional narratives pointed to everyone besides the teachers and students as the cause of the change.

“Arts as Transformative” Narrative

Four participants identified as visual and/or performing artists. Star and Tatiana each played the trumpet and piano. Epic identified as a singer and visual artist, and Amalia took the stage as an actor. Although Star and Amalia primarily considered arts as a freeing means of expression, Tatiana explained her trumpet playing differently:

Throughout high school, if you go through the music, if you behave, if you are only studying in each class and then you can go with the passion, just for music. And if you go through on with your instrument, that will get you into a good high school and a good college (focus group, March 27, 2014).

In this passage, Tatiana positions music as a tool for upward mobility. Passion for music, she argued, can lead to a good high school and college. Since the Vera City School District is
“school of choice”—i.e. students must apply to attend high schools in the city—many Septima Clark students have their eye on the city’s prestigious arts academy, a visual and performing arts high school that boasts 94% acceptance rate to college. Tatiana’s conception of the arts as a construction of another dominant institutional narrative situating Septima Clark: the *arts have transformative power* for upward mobility.

Politicians and media outlets such as NBC, BBC, and city papers described the school’s the arts turnaround similarly. After his second visit to Septima Clark, Secretary Duncan told a reporter: “People always want just one simple answer. There is not a simple answer. But are the arts a huge part of this turnaround? Look around here.” During the interview, the secretary stood in front of the rich display of visual arts lining the hallways. The news showed his interview immediately after a clip half dozen eighth graders taking a hip-hop class in Septima Clark’s dance studio flashed across the screen.

The Obama administration has continually positioned the arts as a powerful tool for the trajectory toward academic success. In the May of 2014, the First Lady gave remarks at the Turnaround Arts Talent Show in the White House. She said:

> And then there’s the story of [Septima Clark School] that’s in [Vera City]. Is [Septima Clark] here? (Laughter and applause.) Okay, just checking. (Laughter.) Well, let me tell you a little bit about this fabulous school. This school had had six principals in seven years, their teacher turnover rate was over 50 percent, and their test scores were among the lowest in the state. But they had a principal who believed in the power of the arts. So that individual replaced the school’s security guards with five full-time arts and music teachers. And today, Septima Clark is known as one of the most improved schools in the entire state of [state name].
In her comments, the First Lady told a simple story: start with a broken school, find a dynamic principal, replace the security guards, introduce the arts, and watch the school improve. Noticeably absent in this narrative was the teachers’ irrevocable and intense focus on improving their practice; the arduous hours teachers and students spent at school; student resilience in enduring the longer school days and rigorous testing schedule; or the collective work of numerous community organizations, such as AmeriCorps, a local community organizing initiative, an afterschool sports non-profit, the city’s teacher residency program. Such nuance is not quite as easy to share as part of the turnaround narrative.

Media narratives of Septima Clark have been just as powerful and simple. In the two years after the turnaround, the Huffington Post, CNN, and NBC, and every prominent paper in the city published headlines such as:

- Septima Clark Principal Dee Jermaine Fires Security, Hires Art Teachers, Revitalizes Schools (McGuinness, June 2013)
- The Remarkable Turnaround of Septima Clark School (Radio Vera City, June 2013)
- City School Turns Around With Focus on Arts (Brenchley, March 2014)
- Arts Programming Transforms Failing School (NBC News, May 2013)

A salient sub-narrative was Principal Jermaine’s firing of all security guards and hiring of arts teachers. The BBC started a news segment about Septima Clark this way:

It sounds like a script from a Hollywood movie. Take a failing school, introduce the performing arts, and watch the transformation take place. Of course, it’s not quite that easy. But a few years ago, Septima Clark was a very different place. Violence was
normal, and children carried weapons. No teachers stayed long...This is not about creating a great arts program, this is about using the arts as a tool for education.

In their segment, the BBC reiterated the same zero-to-hero narrative that the government and school leaders perpetuated. However, they were amongst the only powerful voices who articulated the distinction between art as a subject of study and art as a vehicle for academic gain. In the case of Septima Clark, the arts are positioned very clearly as a tool for engagement and academic successes.

Persist-Work-Persist

During the 2013-2014 school year, Septima Clark teachers and administrators took on a school-wide goal to teach the growth mindset. People with a growth mindset focus less on innate abilities and fixed notions of intelligence and more on resilience, persistence, and the pursuit of growth as reasons for success (2007). However, the concept of the “growth mindset” is often essentialized to offer a far simpler message: “Work hard, persist, and you will succeed.”

Principal Jermaine perpetuated this version of the narrative during the assembly. Effort, hard work, and personal growth were the keys to upward mobility and academic success. Septima Clark students are also taught to encompass PRIDE values: Perseverance, Respect, Integrity, Daring, and Excellence. Students who demonstrated these values were rewarded. Teachers asked students who personified PRIDE values to “give them a PAW”, a slip of paper with students names on it with a paw printed on the front. For each PAW earned, students gain a point for their homerooms, which lead to subsequently larger rewards, such as extra time for recess, PAW parties, and lunch for the homeroom provided by their teacher.
The first value, perseverance, encapsulates the “growth mindset” narrative. In a focus group, Amalia described her understanding of perseverance:

I’m going to have perseverance in all my classes. Even in math class, I got a C+ but it, [my teacher] said that even though my grade didn’t show what it is she said when I’m applying to high school—she said she’d make sure to tell them that like, my grades didn’t show things that I’m really in it, so she’s going to write a letter to any school, high school that I write, or to the 8th grade that score everything and I decide to persevere even if I don’t get good scores so they can send me to the right course (focus group, June 2, 2014).

To Amalia, beyond grades and test scores, perseverance was the foundation of her chances at getting into a good high school. Principal Jermaine authored the narrative in his speech to the students during Arne Duncan’s visit, and teachers, across content, reified this narrative by continually praising students for their hard work, persistence, and growth as a reason for celebration. This “growth mindset” narrative, in its essentialized form, exemplifies the neoliberal narratives of school reform. Broadly, these narratives hold that students flourish best under rugged individualism, free market schooling, and competition (Harvey, 2005).

**Counter-Narratives**

It should be noted that such institutional narratives have been met with staunch critique. Vera City Teacher’s Union and Diane Ravitch were amongst the prominent naysayers. In 2012, the union authored a statement harshly reprimanding Principal Jermaine’s release of 80% of previous teachers. They wrote:

A prime example of how blame has unfairly being laid on the steps of union teachers is Septima Clark K-8. This school was designated a Level 4 school based on its extremely
low test scores. *It has had six principals since it opened seven years ago.* Clearly there was a failure of leadership here over an extended period of time. Yet it was 50% of the teachers and paraprofessionals who were forced out of the school (italics in original, [Vera City] Teacher’s Union, 2012)

In this statement, union leaders placed blame on administrative shoulders. They disputed the claim that Principal Jermaine fired only bad teachers and hired proven ones, arguing that many dismissed teachers consistently received “excellent” ratings in their yearly performance reviews. Other teachers, they said, were never observed at all. Union leaders posited that the observations and evaluations Principal Jermaine had done were 15 – 20 minute “drive-by” evaluations that only took place during the final month of the year. Such processes, they argued, only brought harm to the teaching profession and, ultimately, student learning.

More recently, public intellectual Diane Ravitch took these narratives to task. In May 2013, she wrote a blog entitled, “Yes, Too Good to Be True”, offering incisive critiques and counters to Septima Clark’s “zero-to-hero” and “arts as turnaround” narratives. “The school originally opened as an empty promise, and the art and music equipment was left in storage,” (2013, lines 16 – 17) she wrote in reference to Septima Clark’s first re-opening in 2003. “That was for the old Septima Clark Children. After those children were replaced with higher socioeconomic children, somebody finally thought of hiring art teachers. The new Septima Clark replaced a failed, dysfunctional public housing development with a mixed income community of over 200 units of affordable family housing in an inner city neighborhood” (lines 18 – 22).

Ravitch argues that the *increase in the student population’s socioeconomic statuses* drove the increase in student test scores, not the firing of security guards, replacement of teachers, or the turnaround arts initiative. The actual story, Ravitch posits, is about gentrification. After the
construction of the affordable surrounding the Septima Clark neighborhood, poorer black families were pushed out and mixed income families—primarily Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cape Verdean—started attending the school. The change in *family income*, Ravitch argues, not neoliberal efforts for reform, was behind the increase in test score. “Affordable housing”, Ravitch added, “doesn’t mean low income” (2013, line 37).

**Looking Forward**

In the next three chapters, I describe how youth author political narratives in context with the institutional narratives described in this chapter. I focus on *emic* constructions of narrative, drawing upon Wedeen’s (2004) interpretivist tradition and Thaddeus Jackson’s notion of *monism*, positioning that the *seer* (me) and the *seen* (adolescents at Septima Clark) as inseparable. In this way, the purpose of the study is to create “new ways of seeing” the world, challenging narratives to the existing hegemonic assumptions made about black and Latino/a youth as citizens, as political contributors, and as problem solvers.

In chapters 5 – 7, I describe three overlapping political narratives: (1) power as an exercise of *punishment, conformity*, and *injustice*; (2) power as a tool for collective *resistance, protection*, and *resilience*; and (3) power as hope for a culture of *respect, trust*, and *reciprocity*. In chapter 5, I describe how the participants understand formal political systems that situate them in school. It speaks to their relationships with authorities such as teachers, deans, and the school principal and formal structures of power created by these authorities. In chapter 6, I discuss students’ collective actions within the political systems and what stories these actions construct. These narratives describe how students construct their own political culture through resistance to deficit positions and unjust systems of power. Finally, in chapter 7 I describe the political hope youth have within specific the context of school and how they use power to promote trust,
empathy, and love. The three narratives intersect to form an understanding of poor urban youth as knowledgeable, politically conscious, active, and reactionary political actors who understand power as a limited, yet useful, force for purposes of solving problems, political positioning, and protection within their social communities within schools.
CHAPTER 5: ARE WE ONLY ROBOTS?

Narratives of Punishment

Dominic, a black fifth grade student dressed a school-issue yellow-collared polo, trounces down the hallway. He holds a Gatorade-orange ball, playfully bouncing it on the ground and off the walls, catching it, and bouncing it again. Oblivious to the presence of three teachers chatting inside a classroom door, Dominic chases aggressively after his ball that has momentarily trickled away. One of the two female teachers chatting in the classroom steps into the hallway, picks the ball up, and pockets it. Dominic looks up, startled. The teacher furrows her eyebrows and shakes her head. Knowing he has some explaining to do, Dominic says, “I am on a bathroom break. My teacher lets me bounce the ball when I’m on break.” The teachers give him doubting looks. Dominic then displays his palm, anticipating the return of his ball.

This presumptuous gesture does not seem to sit well with the teachers. A second female teacher asks him how he should have been proceeding down the hall. Dominic shrugs, and after a brief verbal exchange, the teacher who confiscated the ball tells him he can have it back when he returns from the bathroom. Dominic grumbles inaudibly but complies, trudging down the hallway to the bathroom. One minute later he returns and promptly displays his palm again. This gesture seems to irritate the teacher who had confiscated the ball, and she refuses to return it. In response, Dominic rolls his eyes, crosses his arms, and turns his body away from her.

“Well, now you’re definitely not getting the ball back,” the teacher replies. The male teacher in the group tells the other two that Dominic had been caught playing with the ball in the hallway earlier in the day, and it had already been confiscated once. They nod knowingly.
Observing Dominic’s growing frustration, the second female teacher tries a new strategy. She introduces herself to him and asks for his name. He mumbles a response, turning his body at a 45 degree angle to avoid her eyes. The teacher cannot hear his response, so she asks again. He mumbles inaudibly for a second time. After a third iteration, the student blurts out, “DOMINIC!” and glares at the ground. Unreactive to his small outburst, the teacher tells him why the ball was taken away and why it will be given to his afterschool teacher. She finishes by explaining how he should have acted differently while walking down the hallway and especially how he should have responded to their questions. Defeated, Dominic walks away, ball-less and grumbling about his terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day (Field Notes, January 28, 2014).

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As a former public middle school teacher, I recall stories like Dominic’s. More often than not, I was one of the teachers in the story. Without thinking twice, I confiscated cell phones, wrote hundreds of “hallway violations”, and lectured students on their responsibility for ensuring the safety in the hallways. However, as a researcher observing the story, I immediately empathized with Dominic. He seemed happy and free. After witnessing the amount of sitting and listening students do throughout the day, I recognized his probable need to move, to shake, to play. As a researcher, I had the luxury of standing back and analyzing the story from afar, a luxury afforded to neither Dominic nor the teachers in the moment. However, time and distance did allow me to consider a question with regard to the contextual factors that frame it. What might we learn from this story about students’ daily experiences with power, punishment, and control? Below, I offer two competing but non-dichotomous interpretations of the story, considering the teachers’ and Dominic’s actions in context with the larger political narratives that situate school and his social environment in the moment.
Why did all three teachers seem united in the belief that Dominic’s actions merited immediate reprimand? First, consider the political narratives situating the school. Septima Clark is post-turnaround. Four years prior, students ran unimpeded in the hallways throughout the school day. The hallways were the site of weekly physical fights, and during the day, students often fled the school building for fun to little or no consequence. After the turnaround, politicians and media outlets exalted Septima Clark students and administration for extraordinary academic and organizational change. The school earned a reputation as an academic “success story”, an image administration and teachers worked tirelessly to re-earn and uphold.

Politicians and educational reformers, particularly in regards to schooling for poor black and Latino/a youth, advocate for policies and schools that promote routinized, controlled, and strictly monitored learning environments. For the past three years, Septima Clark has been the shining example of the political reform. During the 2013-2014 school year, teachers or other adults chaperoned students from class to class. They directed students to line up in a single-file line behind the teacher, face forward, and walk silently to their next class. If Dominic would have kept within these expectations, calmly walking down the hallway and bouncing the ball, he likely would have taken his break without incident. If Dominic would have responded effusively to the teachers upon losing the ball, they likely would have returned it. The teachers might want Dominic to learn that in a different context, he could have harmed another student. They might have wanted to reiterate that running down the hallway—with little regard to whom or what is ahead—is potentially dangerous, and therefore, unacceptable. Considering the larger political context, the actions of the three teachers were arguably justified.

On the other hand, Dominic’s actions seem to be that of a fifth grade boy who craves physical activity. He likely had been sitting for most of the day. No other students were in the
hallway, so he was unlikely to hurt anyone. He was not screaming or disrupting learning in other classrooms. The incident also took place during extended learning day, a time when Septima Clark students often move more dynamically, more physically, more freely, than in-school hours. Dominic might have been told by his teacher that he could bounce the ball in the hallway, but the three teachers did not pursue the possibility. Although he stated his position, the teachers seemed to consider his justification as merely resistance and implied that it was dishonest. A teacher promised to return the ball after he used the restroom, but the promise was not fulfilled. Dominic’s “injustice” meter might have been tilted a bit too far, which caused him to respond to the teachers as he did. Indignantly, Dominic reacted to this broken promise with bodily resistance: hands crossed, eyes glaring, and body turned. These actions, in turn, were considered disrespectful, and what was once a reprimand was now a punishment: the confiscation of the ball. In this moment, the power flowed back. Dominic’s resistance constructed a moment when the teachers were forced to respond to his frustration to re-assert a sense of control. Just five minutes prior, Dominic was a happy, energetic fifth grade who trounced down the hallway bouncing a rubber ball during his new-found freedom. In an instant, Dominic became a “bad” boy—a resistant, punishable, indignant, and ultimately ball-less student. When considering the immediate social context, Dominic’s actions were arguably justified. So what happened?

**Power and Control: “He Can Just Kick You Out of School in an Instant”**

To understand the teachers’ response to Dominic and his response to them, this chapter enquires into the narratives of power constructed as part of students’ daily experiences. What stories are being authored and told about how power works? What narratives are constructed about the relationship between power and punishment? Power and in/justice? Power and race? In
stories like that Dominic’s, how and why do these narratives matter about the stories students construct about politics?

I describe how the participants authored narratives of power for purposes of control, punishment, and surveillance. This narrative implicates the participants’ definition of power as the capacity to create systems of control others through punishment, threats of punishment, and putting eyes in the sky. Authored primarily by Epic, the second narrative links power and conformity, the capacity to subjugate others toward a singular ideal of behavior or being. The third story speaks of power as a perpetuation of system of injustice. The participants authored these stories primarily about their experiences with the school’s punitive system, fracturing stories about systemic injustices from their daily experiences with trusted teachers or peers. The fourth narrative, race and power as a fractured context, implicates the differences of understanding between participants in regards to the interplay between race and power.

Within these systems of power, the participants also authored the final narrative of powerlessness, predicated on a sense of in/ability to change systems of injustice at the school. Although I author each of these narratives separately, they merit relational analysis. These stories certainly inform, nuance, challenge, and even contradict one another, the institutional narrative described in chapter five, and the narratives of power these youth author through their collective political activity. The youth constructed contextual, practical, and creative political knowledge through a structural lens and within everyday social contexts.

During the first three focus groups, Paul, Star, Amalia, Tatiana, Epic, and Crystal were asked to define power; explain how people acquired it; and describe how power moved within the school community. I began the second focus group by asking all six participants the question: “What is power?” Perhaps unsurprisingly, the students’ responses were related to control and
Collectively, their answers seem to point to an understanding of power as the exercise of control to make others do as you want. In response to the question, “Who has power?” students universally agreed that Mr. Jermaine, the school principal; Mr. Royal, the dean of middle schools; and the teachers wielded the most power at school. When asked why they considered these people to be in power, their responses were telling:

**Star:** Mr. Jermaine does…cuz he’s the principal. So he can just kick you off the school in an instant, like flash.

**Paul:** Mr. Jermaine and the teachers. Because teachers, they can like, they control the students. And they can tell you what to do, and they can send you to…for example, the buddy room, or you can have a detention or whatever.

**Tatiana:** Not the teacher(s) who basically…have power over school, but Mr. Royal do…Because I think people like, if someone get in trouble right now, and they cursing out the teacher, he can get expelled from school at that moment (focus group, February 10, 2014).

All three participants indicated the adults’ capacity to punish as power, referring to the power to kick students out of the classroom, give detention, and expel students. Mentioned by Paul in the second quote, the buddy room is a space where students are taken after having received three verbal warnings in class. Once they enter the room, an adult monitor sets a timer. Then, the

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5 All names are pseudonyms
student sits to cool off for about five minutes, and reflects in his or her behavior before reentering class. Throughout our focus group discussions, the participants referred to the buddy room as an explicit attempt for people in power to assert control through the threat of punishment.

However, these systems of power and control were not always present at Septima Clark. Star described how he perceived the shift the school made from “out of control” to “in control” after the turnaround:

Before everybody turned around, before the turnaround came, this school used to be out of control. Everybody was runnin’ around in the hallway, basically, everybody be runnin’ around the hallway. Everybody would do nothing but just sit there and be there.

[Teachers would say] just “be careful” if you fall, you fall. And they [the students] be runnin around the hallway (Star, individual interview, January 30, 2014).

In this quote, Star painted the image of students running chaotically in the hallways to personify the lack of control prior to the turnaround. He identified the turnaround as pivotal juncture of the school’s movement from out of control to in control. His used the phrase, “If you fall, you fall”, to describe his understanding of pre-turnaround punitive system, one governed by “natural” consequences in lieu of codified punishments. When I asked follow-up questions about these systems, Star, Paul, Amalia, and Crystal—the four participants who attended Septima Clark before and after the turnaround—identified two forces behind the “regaining” of control: (1) the arrival of Mr. Jermaine and; (2) the “turning on” of the surveillance cameras.

First and foremost, participants described the arrival of Principal Jermaine as pivotal. Star explained:
Mr. Jermaine came in like, cuz then, not that I e’reybody was still runnin and everything. And next you know after like, after ten minutes of him experiencing that they was like this, he changed the whole thing. He went like, after the whole day he didn’t say nuthin to nobody, after that they, this whole school was never, it was never like this. E’rybody changed (focus group, February 24, 2014).

In this quote, Star narrated the story of a man who wordlessly stepped into Septima Clark and after ten minutes, transformed the “bad” school into a “good” one. His explanation almost seemed magical—everybody changed, Star claimed, the whole thing changed. Crystal, Amalia, and Tatiana authored a similar story. Since Crystal brought Mr. Jermaine during our check-in, I asked the participants about their thoughts on his acceptance of a principalship in a neighboring, suburban school after the year ended. The following discussion transpired:

*Crystal:* You guys know that Mr. Jermaine is leaving, right?

*All:* Yeah

*Interviewer:* Okay, so tell me a bit about that. What are your thoughts?

*Tatiana:* Go back down.

*Amalia:* It’s gonna go bad.

*Star:* It’s gonna go bad.

*Interviewer:* Okay, what do you mean by going bad?

*Star:* So yeah, all the good teachers, like all the elected teachers, all the good teachers that you connect with is going to end up leaving because he’s leaving. Because you know they’re not going to end up controlling us without him (focus group, May 5, 2014).
In this exchange, Tatiana, Amalia, and Star described Mr. Jermaine’s departure with imagery of downward movement and regression. Tatiana used the phrase “go back down”, presumably implying that the school would regress to its state before the turnaround (i.e. “down”). Similarly, Amalia and Star described movement in a negative direction, “going” bad, which Star associated with the idea of losing control. The elected teachers Star refers to in the final comment are the teachers Mr. Jermaine brought on board after having released 80% of the teaching staff. In his eyes, the “good” teachers, those teachers students could relate to, were linked to the “goodness” of Mr. Jermaine. However, in his mind, even the good teachers would not be able to control the students; that power was in Mr. Jermaine’s hands.

The participants also pointed to the power of the security cameras as a tool for control. Star argued that the surveillance cameras kept students accountable, prevented bullying, and stopped the kids from walking out of the school. Without constant surveillance, physical, verbal, visual prompting from teachers, Star posited, students will not know how to behave properly. He commented:

Back then [before the turnaround], so it’s that the principal didn’t say nuthin’. The cameras were never working, and it’s like, there was bullying, there was fights right in the classroom, directly right there…There are cameras that are working now, but it was never workin’ then…Dem cameras never worked. When you wanted to see who they were, you could never see it. They say, ‘Hey!’, and you just walk right by. You just walk right out the door (focus group, February 24, 2014).

Before the turnaround, the security cameras in the school that were not in operation. According to Star, now that students knew they could be identified, they were held accountable for their actions. In the following exchange, Amalia credited the school’s cameras for stopping students
from just walking out of the school, a common practice before the turnaround. Star and Paul further indicated that it did not matter if the cameras are actually working, it mattered that students believed that they would receive consequences if caught by the camera:

*Amalia:* You could walk out that door.
*Tatiana:* Like, just walk out right in the middle of the—
*Amalia:* Yes! [Crosstalk] There be no cameras to spot us.
*Star:* We could go home if we felt like it.
*Amalia:* We just go around downstairs and go out.
*Paul:* Like the teachers can see us but—[crosstalk]
*Tatiana:* They didn’t say nuthin’?
*Amalia:* Because they don’t have…
*Paul:* Yeah, they didn’t say nuthin’ (focus group, February 24, 2014).

In the discussion, Amalia connected the lack of cameras to the students’ decision to leave school during the day. In this way, the cameras wielded great power. However, Star and Paul furthered argument, positing that teachers used to see students walk out the door, but they never attempted to stop them. In this story, Amalia and Paul displaced the power from teachers—claiming that they saw students leave but did not take any action—and placed it in the surveillance cameras. In their discussions of power, the participants identified Principal Jermaine as a locus of control of control of over the students and the surveillance camera as his tool to maintain control.

These discourses of control, surveillance, and punishment were in constant negotiation. Teachers used a variety of gestures, words, and physical movements in an attempt to control student talking, body movements, and timing of vocal and physical outbursts. These codes for control—symbolic teachers used to signal greater physical or verbal restraint by students—were used daily in classrooms, hallways, the lunchroom, and particularly when students transitioned
from room to room. Teachers and students engaged in bodily, textual, and gestural discourses of control and resistance, seemingly harmless yet salient movements of power that author compelling stories about how power works.

The seventh grade vocabulary bee, that took place in late January, exemplified such discourses. The entire seventh class, approximately 90 students, gathered in the auditorium for the bee during the mid-afternoon. Students chatted idly, sitting in their homeroom groups, and waited for the assembly to begin. The seventh grade social studies teacher, the organizer of the bee, stood close to the microphone, adjusting the height setting. Several other seventh grade teachers were scurrying about, placing seats for contestants, assuring the buzzer works, fidgeting with the Power Point, and directing student movement as they came in. Although much of the bee seemed rather mundane, students and teachers engaged in an unrelenting push-and-pull for control throughout their hour and fifteen minutes together.

The social studies teacher started the bee by explaining the rules for the contestants. The expectations for audience participation—i.e. when to cheer, when it is appropriate to applaud, and how to respond to correct answers—were far less explicit, and the students in the audience cheered loudly for contestants, occasionally shrieking when their friends or homeroom contestant answered correctly, and chatting loudly to each other during small moments of inactivity. These activities alerted many of the teachers in the auditorium, and throughout the bee, teachers and other adults (e.g. AmeriCorps members and staff from the school’s extended learning day program) signaled a variety codes for control to enforce verbal and physical restraint by the students. Teachers used the following gestures, words, and physical movements to retain control over the student discussion (verbally), body movements, and timing of vocal and physical outbursts:
• Circling students in the aisles and talking to students individually, particularly during competition.
• Bringing the index finger to the lips
• Appealing to compassion—for example, a special education teacher told students that students should let the bee participants “have their shine” and reiterated the fact that the judges couldn’t hear the participants’ answers
• Pulling students out of the audience and placing them in a different part of the auditorium
• Making a shushing noise
• Modeling silent applause or using it as an indicator when students applaud loudly
• Sharp, disapproving looks with fingers over mouths
• Making occasional announcements about when and why students should be quieter

Students, in turn, had plenty of ways to actively and passively illustrate their resistance to these codes in a variety of ways.

• Putting legs over the seats in front of them
• Laughing out loud
• Applauding loudly instead of silently
• Calling out names of students in the bee
• Lounging, i.e. laying slumped over in the seat
• Chatting to their neighbors
• Screaming loudly when students in section or their friends got a question right

The bee ended quite unceremoniously, and the contestants all scurried off stage once the bee was done. Once that was done, the social studies teacher made an announcement in regards to what they learned from the bee—that they were capable of doing great if they put in the hard work.
This consistent toggling for control illustrated the subtleties and movement of power throughout the school day. Although teachers are held responsible to use their official positions of power for control, students illustrated a wide variety of resistant activities, underscoring their capacities to create their own discourses of power. As discussed in detail in chapter 6, students’ activities of resistance (particularly in relation to the codes for control) were often socially expected constructed amongst the peer group.

**Power and Conformity: “They Just Expect One Thing Out of All of us.”**

At the time of the study, Epic was no stranger to the buddy room. “I’ve actually, like most people, go a lot, like more than 10 times [per year]…” (Epic, individual interview, January 30, 2014), he said. Although he prided himself on being sent to the buddy room less during his seventh grade year, Epic still had plenty of experience with the school’s punitive system. To him, use of power seemed to go beyond just the capacity to punish; it included the capacity to enforce conformity amongst students. Below he described the warning system enforced at the school, speaking specifically about his experiences during time allocated for homework after school:

> If we get up out of your seat, maybe to throw away trash, you get a warning. Ah, if you sneeze, you get a warning. If you laugh, you get a warning. I mean, are… are we people? Are we only robots? Like robots, we aren’t allowed to do like, write this, write that; we are people, too (Epic, individual interview, February 3, 2014).

In the above quote, Epic, true to his penchant for metaphoric thinking, gave a small glimpse into how he saw power work at school. Although he speaks of his experience during the after school homework time, his robot metaphor implicates his experiences throughout the entire school day. Epic compared his existence as a student to the existence of a robot, programmed to do what his
“programmers” (i.e. adults in power) allow for him. Furthering his narrative of (de)humanization Epic described why he felt particularly stifled at school:

….it’s kind of frustrating because they’re [school authorities] are not treating us like who we are, but who they want us to be…We want to learn, but we also want to be ourselves. We want to talk, socialize, and in here in school, they just expect you to be quiet, sit, do the work, respect the teachers…So, they don’t get every person is different. But they expect just one thing from all of us (Epic, individual interview, February 25, 2014).

Epic’s quote illustrated his resistance toward school authorities who stifle expressions of individuality. His consistent use of the word “they” was particularly compelling; he used the pronoun to “other” school authorities, in contrast to his use of “we” to describe his fellow students. He asserted that authorities at the school push students to conform toward one way of being, arguing that those in power should treat kids as they actually are not who they “want us to be.” To Epic, humans are social creatures who require time socialize, create, and express. In his experience, people in power at schools are attempting to impose one, mandatory ideal on students, disregarding the diversity and individuality of the student body. A student who values his creative and artistic abilities, Epic considered the use of power for conformity more egregious than its use only for purposes of punishment.

Power and Injustice: “This School Got A Lot of Unfairness…”

Four of the six participants spoke passionately about how the punitive system at Septima Clarke was unjust, and, as a result, merited resistance. Below, Amalia describes her experience after she had returned from a suspension after being involved in a fight after school:
Me and Ronalda (a pseudonym) fought. When me and Ronalda fought, we both fought each other, right. And the next day, we got in trouble, but I was the only one that got suspended, and she didn’t get suspended. ‘Cuz when I came back, everybody was saying, ‘Why weren’t you in school? Ronalda didn’t get suspended, you did.’ And that’s unfairness. This school got a lot unfairness between the conflict between student and student. Just because they don’t know me very much because I never make trouble—it was my first time making trouble. And the other person that they know make a lot of trouble, they don’t suspend her, but I do (focus group, June 2, 2014).

In this quote, Amalia pointed to the inequality of the punitive system (i.e. Ronalda did not receive a suspension when she did) as the primary problem. She believed authorities who made punitive decisions used personal biases to decide consequences. Amalia considers the discipline system (“the school”) to be unjust, biased toward students who are “known” by authorities. Star articulates a similar sentiment in a story he told about a confrontation he had in an after school class called Fair Trade:

That time I flipped the table in Fair Trade or whatever…Janise⁶ (another student) cuz she pissed me off, cuz she throw the desk in front of me. So then I pushed the table back, and she pushed it, and the next thing you know, Ms. Chin (a teacher) called Ms. Cerelli (the academic dean)—forget snitchin’ Ms. Chin—so then that’s when she told me to come up here. And I was like, when I come over there, the teacher’s trying to get me in Saturday School…That means basically she’s (Ms. Cerelli) giving me one but she (Janise) don’t,

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⁶ All names in the quote are pseudonyms
but she don’t. And my then mother was like, if she don’t get one, then you’re not going (focus group, June 2, 2014).

Similar to Amalia, Star did not deny they should receive punitive consequences; rather, he pointed to the unfairness of the system. Star also disapprovingly talked about the teacher of the class, Ms. Chin, as a “snitch”, someone who rats someone out students involved in conflict. Beyond illustrating distrust in the punitive process, he also distrusted a person who enforced the process. As discussed in the third narrative more explicitly, the concept of trust is linked inherently with students’ experiences and interactivities with power.

It should be noted that although the participants described larger system of power (i.e. the disciplinary system designed to handle detentions, suspensions, and expulsions) as unjust, they often spoke of systems upheld by individual teachers, whom they illustrated most trust in, as fair and necessary. As discussed further in chapter 6, students’ decision to individually or collectively resist systems, comply, or act outside of systems of power were related how they felt positioned by teachers or others in formal positions of authority. In these ways, the political narratives authored by the participants, just like their activity within such narratives, were contextually bound.

The participants also pointed to two stories where their friends were expelled unjustly. First, Tatiana told the story of a student who was expelled for bringing a knife to school. According to her, the student was actually caught smoking marijuana on the bus. In the following exchange, Tatiana described the incident as she understood it:

*Tatiana:* The person I’m talking about…is that the person in like the bus stops like right next to my house…So the rumor going around in school…I heard it today. Cus [the school said] you’re expelled from school.
Star: Cus he got caught.

Tatiana: Yeah, he got caught smoking on the bus.

Interviewer: Okay, all right.

Tatiana: And now they’re saying he got expelled because he brought knife to school (focus group, May 8, 2014).

Although she recognized this story as a rumor, Tatiana still told the story with a sense of outrage. In her eyes, “they” (school leaders) knowingly misinformed students and parents to justify an expulsion based on a lesser infraction: smoking marijuana. Star seemed to interpret the story similarly. Later in the focus group, we discussed why the school might give misinformation:

Tatiana: [School officials told us] that it was a knife. That he brought to school.

Interviewer: But why wouldn’t they tell the truth about that?

Star: Because they know that [student name]’s a bad kid—

Tatiana: Yeah.

Star: And they know that, his parents know that he’s smoking (focus group, May 8, 2014).

To Star, school officials misinformed students because they wanted a good reason to expel a “bad” kid. Later in the focus group, Star argued that the student’s parents would probably kick him out of the house if they heard he was smoking marijuana in school. Although Tatiana disagreed with his assessment, Star remained steadfast that the school officials’ decision was linked to the students’ parents. Not understanding why this mattered, I asked Star why he brought it up. Star replied:
…they know that he’s going to get kicked out of they house because…one of my cousins, he like go to school but he still smokes at home. So basically his parents don’t have to worry about him, but his brother, he don’t even go to school. He go to school, and then he leave, and then he come home, and he be like, he sit home right there in front of the t.v. and be smokin’ and when he go to school. He be smokin’ in the bathroom and teachers be, like, so then he got kicked, his parents kicked him out that same day (focus group, May 8, 2014).

In this quote, Star linked his personal experiences with his cousin’s use of marijuana to predict what might happen to classmate. In this sense, Star positions the school officials’ deliberate misinformation as protection for a student from potentially being kicked of his house, complicating his original narrative that school officials suspended the students to get rid of a “bad” kid. In both versions of the story, Star described expulsion from school as being less punitive as an expulsion from the home.

This recent expulsion sparked another story, one that ignited Star, Tatiana, Amalia, and Crystal’s passion and sense of injustice. The participants often referred to a girl in their homeroom class named Ursula (a pseudonym), who had gotten expelled earlier in the school year. Ursula physically confronted a teacher earlier in the school year. Often spoken about with reverence, her story seemed to carry a torch and represent the four participants’ frustrations with the punitive system. Star described Ursula this way:

I don’t even know who’s like, the speaker of the class before, but Ursula had to get suspended for what she did. She used to speak up for the class and…telling [the teacher] what we actually need. She be telling this like, she be telling her [the teacher] like that we have to switch seats because some have people don’t get along with the people who sit
next to each other. So it’s like she don’t want to listen to nobody, so…that’s why [she was expelled] (focus group, February 3, 2014).

In this quote, Star mentions Ursula’s expulsion (although he used the term “suspension”, Ursula was expelled) but not the circumstances behind it. He also exalted her as a class leader, someone who spoke for students’ needs and told teachers how students experienced their classes.

Throughout our discussions about the school’s system of punishment, Ursula’s story came up repeatedly as a quasi-martyr in the students’ fight against injustice. Below, Tatiana, Amalia, Star, and Paul recount the moment when Ursula took action against her teacher:

_Tatiana:_ So, this girl, Ursula, she used to be here. And she got expelled from school because she punched one of our [after] school teachers. [Group Laughter]. She was about to punch Ms. [name omitted]…just punch her in the face.

_Interviewer:_ She almost punched?

_Tatiana:_ Yeah.

_Amalia:_ She harassed her.

_Paul:_ She only swore. [crosstalk]

_Amalia:_ They also arrested her.

_Star:_ Mhm… she be a handful (focus group, February 10, 2014).

When asked to interpret the events of that day, the participants positioned Ursula as a defender of herself and, by extension, her classmates. Similar to how Star lauded her as the “speaker” of the class, Tatiana described Ursula’s actions in defiance of the teacher as “gallant” (focus group, February 10, 2014), a demonstration of bravery to speak out against unjust treatment. Within the
systems of punishment and injustice, the participants also told stories of students who staunchly and explicitly resisted the system *outside* of themselves, seemingly not positioning power within themselves. Even the “gallant” Ursula, the speaker of the class, fell to the mighty system of punishment.

**Power and Race: “She Thought it was me Because I was Black.”**

One fracture in the participants’ narrative regarded the relationship between race and punishment. To Star, the only self-identified African-American black male in the group, race was a primary factor in how teachers and other authorities decided to punish students. He argued continually that the punitive system was biased against black students. This idea seemed to fall flat with the other five participants, two of whom, Amalia and Tatiana, self-identified as black.

During a focus group, Star described an incident in third grade when he was suspended for pushing other students in class. According to Star, the students behind him pushed him first, causing him to push another boy, who crashed into the door. He described how he experienced the punitive process at home and in school:

> Cus basically they [school authorities] wouldn’t like it if we blamed them, and we told our parents that they were basically discriminating us… She [the dean] suspended me for no reason… I went home to my mom, basically, told her, and she was like, ‘We’re going up to the school tomorrow.’ And my mom was like, ‘Why you suspended my son for?’ And she [the teacher] was like, ‘Because he pushed this boy into the door.’ And she thought it was me because I was black (focus group, May 5, 2014).

Star’s understanding of his suspension was explicitly tied to his race. During our discussions, Star would often call upon his mother as the sole empathizer and defender of his understanding of racial bias in the punitive system. In considerable contrast, Paul and Amalia understood Star’s
Paul attributed the suspension to a simple misunderstanding. He explained:

I think that the teachers, any kind of teachers, doesn’t really pick on people just because of their race or something… It’s not impossible, but the teacher saw him first. Pretend she got the misunderstanding about it, about him pushing the other student …she didn’t really care about the skin color, I think, she was just seeing who was right there, closest to the person that was pushed (focus group, May 5, 2014).

In this quote, Paul pointed to the teacher’s misunderstanding/misreading of the situation as the basis of the suspension. He considered race as an improbable, albeit possible, contextual influence in the teacher’s decision to punish Star. His use of the word “pretend” to situate the misunderstanding was particularly telling, offering his interpretation as a possibility, and perhaps calling for empathy for the teacher’s perspective, rather than a hard truth. Amalia responded to Star’s experiences in the context of a larger system of values. She argued the impossibility of race as a factor in the decision to suspend Star:

He was just on the floor, and maybe the teacher thought that he was the one that pushed and fell…I think that since America’s like a free country, and also like they don’t base people of skin color…Obama, the teachers, everybody because they got equal rights in America, so I don’t think it could like happen. It’s like this school, especially how they have changed, and stuff like that, I don’t think it’s possible to happen right now (focus group, May 5, 2014).

Amalia’s response in particular points to a post-racial narrative. She perceives Star’s interpretation of his suspension as “impossible”, basing her claims that, particularly in an Obama
age, America is a country of equal rights. This fractured narrative about the intersection between race and power was a common thread within the focus groups. Star commonly argued, often vehemently, that his blackness was the primarily factor in the unjust punitive actions against him and other black classmates. Although they did not explicitly negate Star’s interpretation, his other classmates often remained wary of his explanations, choosing to tolerate the possibility, however unlikely it seemed to them, seemingly disengaged with his racialized narrative.

Powerlessness: “Wait, There’s Nothing We Can Do.”

Epic, Amalia, and Crystal forwarded the narrative that they were powerless in cases of oppressive of discriminatory taken against them. Although Amalia argued that students had the “privilege” to speak up in school, she still located the power for social change in Principal Jermaine, Mr. Royal, and a small group of teachers. Aside from stories about individual acts of power, all six participants hardly positioned themselves as powerful actors within the system. During our discussion of Star’s suspension, I pursued a line of inquiry into how participants perceived their position in stories of injustice. In particular, I asked the group what they could do if they perceived a teacher picked on, punished, or suspended a student due to race:

*Interviewer:* Do you do anything, especially if you notice this happening and this is going on?

*Amalia:* I don’t know what to do.

*Epic:* Wait, there’s nothing we can do.

*Amalia:* Cuz they have power over us (focus group, May 5, 2014).

Similar to Epic (see “Power and Conformity”), Amalia used the word “they” to implicate adults in formal positions of power at the school. In this way, Epic and Amalia both distanced
themselves from the system of punishment constructed by school authorities. They considered “we”, the students, as objects in the system, over whom “they”, the teachers, as subjects in the system, have power. She reiterated these narratives of powerless when discussing possible actions students can take when faced with unjust suspensions or expulsions of themselves or a fellow student, “We can’t solve it,” she said, “cuz the teacher got power over us.” In response to the Star’s story about his racially motivated suspension, Epic commented: “…if that were to happen, for example, I mean there’s nothing you can do, actually.” Amalia and Epic positioned their powerlessness in relation to the powerfulness of school adults who made punitive decisions. Crystal extended this narrative into a discussion about how they might act if they heard a student was going to bring a weapon to school. This line of inquiry emerged when Tatiana brought up how the suspension of her friend was based on allegations of bringing a knife to school. Beyond feeling powerless, Crystal explained why she preferred inaction even given the opportunity to make a difference:

_Interviewer:_ Well…what would you do if you heard this rumor going around on Facebook and via text that someone was going to bring a weapon to school the following day?

_Crystal:_ I’m sorry, but I wouldn’t do nuthin’.

_Interviewer:_ Okay, tell me why.

_Crystal:_ That person might want some revenge, and you don’t know what they’re going to do to you, so, yeah, I would prefer to stay quiet.

_Interviewer:_ Okay.

_Crystal:_ And pretend I didn’t hear nuthin’ (focus group, May 5, 2014).
Crystal went on to explain that she had been in situations where inaction was the right decision. In some experiences, like above, Crystal preferred inaction for out of fear and a desire to self-protect. Crystal went onto describe another experience in fifth grade during which a friend came up to her and showed Crystal scars from cutting herself on the arm. “I was really scared because I didn’t know what to do, so I stayed quiet,” she said. When approached by the elementary dean of students for any information she had about the student who cut herself, Crystal again decided on inaction. “I got scared so I told nobody,” she explained. Similar to Amalia and Epic’s narratives of powerlessness, Crystal positioned herself outside of the problem-solving structure. “Yup, it’s their problem”, she said, in regards to the student who cut herself. “Somebody else could save them.”
CHAPTER 6: I AM THE BUCKET DIPPER

Narratives of Active Resistance and Performance

Tatiana enters her classroom in the afternoon, flailing her arms in the air and slamming down her backpack. The teacher looks up. “Miss, this isn’t fair,” Tatiana huffs.

“What isn’t fair?” her teacher asks.

“This. This isn’t fair.” Tatiana points to her desk and draws circles with her hands to indicate the entirely of the classroom space. She sits down and puts her head on the desk. The teacher seems confused with her response. Although I am also slightly confused, based on discussions I have had with Tatiana, I have an inkling she is referring her perception of how the class is run. As students trickle in, Tatiana’s intense, frustrated energy seems to diffuse into the classroom. In the next two minutes, the volume escalates in the room, slowly and intensely. Students shout across the room, sit on desks, and socialize as if the teacher is not there. After five minutes pass in the after school homework period, the teacher makes her first announcement:

“There shouldn’t be any talking right now.”

Basso, an athletic boy sitting the corner of the room, puts his head on his desk.

“All right!” he snaps, dodging his head into his hood.

“That’s a warning; why are you yelling out?” the teacher responds. She walks over the white board containing all the students’ names and ticks off a mark for Basso’s first warning. She turns to Edmundo, who has gotten up out of his seat. “That’s another warning. You know the rules; stay in your seat,” she says. Edmundo returns slowly to his seat and whispers,

“You make no sense...”
Edmundo’s whisper, however inaudible to most, strikes like the upbeat of a conductor’s baton. A slow crescendo of noise rises from the class. Mio coughs loudly, followed Edmundo, followed by Star. Miguel then starts to beat box at his desk, bits of saliva shooting out of his mouth. Epic notices the music and adds to the beat, tapping his knuckles on his desk and bopping his head. It’s now a symphony. Miguel notices me watching him. As he looks over to me, I smile. He drops his head, smiling back, but discontinues the beat. Epic does the same. Thirty seconds later, Miguel again starts beatboxing although no one else responds. Dee, another boy, then walks into the room, squealing a movie quote in a high-pitched voice. The teacher prompts him to leave the room twice, asking him both times to walk back into the room without making a sound. Although Dee leaves the room every time, he continues to say his quote and receives two consequent warnings. Miguel then increase the volume of his beat and Edmundo adds some vocals.

“I am the bucket dipper,” he sings. A few students laugh. Edmundo then stands up and walks over Crystal’s desk. He sits next to her in an empty seat and attempts a conversation with her. The teacher issues him another warning and re-directs him to his desk. Edmundo smiles, walks back to his desk, and reaches for a small round container filled with pencils in the back of the room. He places it on his desk, and proudly announces, “I am the bucket dipper!” Epic picks the beat back up again and gets out of his seat. He gets a warning. Moments later, the teacher asks Star to “come here”. Star pauses to consider the command, and he burps in reply.

“That’s what I’m trying to say,” Star tells the teacher, “You just be like, warning!” indicating his frustration with the warnings she gives that he perceives as arbitrary. The teacher then comes up to his table, hunches down, and attempts to talk to Star privately. Star turns his body away, refusing to look her in the eye. Instead, he raises his hands and says,
“Miss! Miss!”

The teacher responds,

“I have not finished my sentence. You are showing me gross disrespect right now.” She then turns to the whole class. “You guys are lowering your grade by the minute by now,” she announces. The grade to which she refers is the one the class receives for overall behavior and attitude for the period. The grade is reported to the students’ homeroom teacher daily. For the rest of the period, Star remains in the spotlight under the eye of the teacher, who takes out her phone and begins to text furiously. Paul, in contrast, remains limelight, in his seat, focused on the homework on his desk (Field Notes, March 5, 2014).

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After I observed this class in early March, I pulled out my computer and looked up the phrase, “Bucket Dipper”. When Edmundo sang it amidst the symphony of resistance, it seemed meaningful, but I had no idea what it meant. Googling it, I located an entry in the Urban Dictionary: 1. bucket dipper. A first grade term for describing someone who is extremely mean. Upon further research, I found that the term is used in character education programs to describe someone who takes joy from others through meanness, anger, and jealousy (dipping into their buckets) instead of filling them with joy. Although unclear if Edmundo self-identified as a bucket dipper or indicated that the teacher positioned him as one (or both), he performed the label remarkably well. Edmundo’s actions seemed to say, if you are going to make me a bucket dipper, I will become your bucket dipper. His seemingly individual act of resistance is one example of a larger array political activity: using deficit labels as tools for political resistance.
Taken during the after school period, the story above illustrates the simultaneous jaggedness and fluidity of student resistance. I documented it with an empathic eye to the teachers’ perspective while attending to the students’ collective resistance. I want to note that, in differing contexts, the teacher interacted with her students with great care and empathy. She asked them about their after school sports and arts, spent long periods of time to help them solve math problems, and spoke lovingly about the students to me during our informal conversations. I also note that the teacher was enforcing expectations for the homework period (silence/independence) authorized by the non-profit organization in charge of the extended learning day. As I verified with informal conversations with others in the program, teachers were expected to keep students silent from 30 to 45 minutes after the end of the official school day, a daunting task. Having been in the program for the past two years, seventh grade students are aware of these expectations, and they seem to consciously avoid the expectations.

Given these contextual nuances, the struggle and resistance illustrated in the field note took place on most, if not all, occasions I observed this period of time after school. Student resistance in the story was an interwoven array of talking back, acting back, and being sneaky to send a message to the teacher: *justice is not here, and we choose to resist*. The story only describes five minutes of a collective student resistance in a class during which all six participants routinely spoke of lack of trust and empathy by the teacher. Crystal explained simply, “She don’t understand us.”

I found that the participants (and many of their classmates) engaged in collective political in/activity to resist their perception of deficit positioning, subvert unjust structures of authority, and protect identities. Active and passive resistance were justified in contexts where they felt a person or people in formal position of authority position youth as distrustful, disrespectful, or
hopeless. In this way, youth subverted the formal power structure and constructed power within a
collection of deliberate, organized, and resistant activities.

Resistant activities were also socially expected. If a student abstained from these
activities or reported them to teachers, other students considered her or him a “goodie-goodie” or
“snitch” respectively, two decidedly pejorative tags. Although they navigated spaces at school
replete with systems they considered unjust, students remained resilient and committed to
protecting their sense of fairness. Student resistance was also bounded by specific political contexts and spaces. They consciously, and seemingly collectively, chose to organize their
resistance. During most academic classes during the school day (e.g. English Language Arts,
science, social studies, and math), students were largely curious and engaged learners who
aspired to please their teachers, school leaders, and each other. Resistant activities were bound to
primarily classes and spaces in the school day during which they felt treated unjustly or
positioned as untrustworthy, immature, irresponsible, or lazy.

The study shows that youth illustrated resistance and resilience through five interwoven
channels (1) “talking back”; (2) performing identities; and (3) acting back; (4) “being sneaky”;
and (5) direct confronting. Each activity illustrated diverging levels of social and political
salience; however they were joined by the seemingly common purpose of resisting unjust
systems, negating deficit labels, and positioning themselves politically. Although actions were
taken by individuals, the collective social parameters and norms contextualizing these actions
implicated them as collective activities. Together, they wove a tapestry of political resistance to a
system of power the felt unjust. In the latter half of the chapter, I call attention to the
participants’ call for authenticity within political systems, their understanding movement toward
fairness and justice. It should be noted that some students in the travel group did not participate
actively in these activities. Those students that did not engage either condoned the activity (by laughing at them, giving the actors an audience) or, like Paul, often remain passively distant from it.

Talking Back: “You have to keep fighting, fighting…”

The most frequently used resistant activity was “talking back”, or giving verbal resistance to teachers or peers who positioned them as less than. Although students talked back to teachers and other students as individuals, it was clearly an organized activity with social dimensions.

Below, Crystal spoke about when she started “talking back”:

*Crystal:* So like, in fifth grade, I used to not talk back to the teachers or anybody.

*Star:* [Makes clicking noises]

*Crystal:* And like after getting into middle school, I started talking back to anybody.

*Star:* [Grunts].

*Crystal:* It’s just that I was just, I was like…I got tired of saying yes to everything…and I had to say no to something (focus group, February 10, 2014).

In this interaction, Star’s disapproving “clicks” and grunts positioned “talking back” as a social expectation. Although Crystal represented herself as someone who now “will talk back to anyone”, Star tacit disagreement with Crystal’s self-representation seemed to indicate his perception that she was not being authentic. In fact, Crystal expressed concern about this very
position, being considered too compliant, and the perceptions of being “weak” as a consequence of compliance. In an interview, Crystal described her aversion to a particular label:

Crystal: The other classrooms, they act in a way [talking back to teachers and each other], then I want to act, like it starts getting to me to act that way…Like, I don’t like to think that I’m a goodie-goodie, cuz I’m not that, like that.

Interviewer: Yeah. What’s wrong with being a goodie-goodie in this school?

Crystal: I know but, I, cuz I’m not. Cuz if I’m, I have to stand up for myself… And you have to keep fighting, fighting (Crystal, individual interview, March 5, 2014).

Crystal explained that her desire to start “talking back” was linked to social pressure and desire to be seen as a “fighter”, someone who would stand up for herself. Further, Crystal explained that she actively worked to fight the label of “goodie-goodie” through talking back. Although she illustrated a desire to act “that way” on her own volition, her decision to start talking back seemed to stem from a need to push back on the deficit label of “goodie-goodie”, a socially constructed label. Similar to Crystal, Amalia discussed her decision to talk back as an active choice she made as a result of social contexts and demand:

I used to be all quiet and stuff like that. And after I hit sixth grade, like, I started talking back to people. They bully me because I was like so quiet; when they talk bad about me, I don’t respond and anything, but when it came to seventh grade, I have changed because of other people bullying me, I got tired, I’m like, oh my gah, I’m going to turn into a whole new person. And when I got…and when they started talking trash about me in seventh grade, I step up my act, and that’s why I became a little more open, and also,
when someone talk bad about me, I just go right and confront them (focus group interview, May 12, 2014).

To Amalia, “step[ping] up my act” described a performance of a new identity, the becoming of a whole new person. She performed “talking back” to resist bullying and posture for a different position of power amongst her peers. As with Crystal, Amalia talked about talking back as a socially constructed decision in response to dooming deficit labels given by peers or teachers: being small, quiet, or weak. Similarly, Tatiana described how she performed an identity when she first came to Septima Clark:

*Tatiana:* I see that in the beginning of fifth grade, I see that like kinda quiet, and then the teacher, just pick on me…but I am, and then when I know the answer, they’re like, “good catch.” And in sixth grade, I start, I start acting Gucci. He-ey!

*Interviewer:* Honestly, I don’t know what that means.

*Star:* That means, basically, at the beginning, she goof off.

*Tatiana:* Yeah, they be like, I’m a seventh grader, why I so quiet and [not] participate in class? I’m just going to…be Gucci now. But, but, and like, in the beginning of seventh grade, I was back to old Tatiana again (focus group interview, May 12, 2014).

Tatiana used the phrase “Acting Gucci” to describe her deliberate performance of an identity in fifth grade. In between sixth and seventh grade, Tatiana toggled between Gucci Tatiana and Old Tatiana based on her context. Later in the focus group, Tatiana explained that Old Tatiana emerged because of the sudden influx of Cape Verdean students into Septima Clark in seventh
grade. Within that context, the Cape Verdean students started to gain political status, and they considered “Gucci” Tatiana inauthentic and awkward. Similar to Amalia, Tatiana discussed her conscious decision to reposition and resist the negating label. Although they talked about these activities as individuals, both Amalia and Tatiana’s activities were deeply political; they sought to position themselves differently to assert a sense of strength and power within specific social contexts. In this way, Amalia and Tatiana authored the narrative that how you act/perform are directly related to the social contexts you are in, i.e. the social and political position you have been placed in amongst your peers. Activity can be used to construct a particular political identity amongst your peers and/or within a space with a formal authority figure such as teacher.

However, this desirability of political performance—i.e. knowing how and when to act identities in specific contexts—seemed to diverge from the simultaneously and equally powerful narrative, acting authentically. Throughout the study, participants authored the narrative that powerful people do not act beyond or differently from whom they actually are; they act authentically. Paul called this authenticity “acting normal”. He explained:

…to show power with a group of friends, you just acting normal how you always act, like, cool, stuff like that. Like not acting weird, like not being annoying or nutin’, just without bothering people, just acting yourself (focus group interview, March 11, 2014).

In this quote, Paul related normality and power. According to him, if one acts true to herself—centered, normal, and seamless—one wields power amongst her peers. In this sense, acting “normally” across context seemed the narrative of power. Interestingly, Paul also linked normality with the lack of “bothering” others, i.e. acting weird or annoying to others. Paul’s narrative of consistency and authenticity diverged from the narrative of political performance that Tatiana and Amalia authored. Crystal used slightly different terminology to explain
authenticity. In a one-on-one interview, Crystal introduced several terms to me that helped me grasp the language of “acting” in school. This discussion began with my question about Crystal’s decision to start “talking back” to her parents:

Crystal: Cuz like now, I’m not as like, my friends are acting more like they’re “big”, I guess, and like, now that I realize I have been like doing, like I’ve been lying to my mom and fighting with her all the time.

Interviewer: Yeah, and what does “acting big” mean? [Laughs] Cuz these are things that I, I think I have an idea of what it means but, you might have a different definition.

Crystal: Like, they think they’re tough, and they’re the boss of everybody.

Interviewer: And is that important? Do you think it’s important to act that way or to be tough?

Crystal: I mean, it’s important to act mature, but not like, not like “way off.”

Interviewer: Not “way off”? What’s the difference? What’s the difference between acting mature and acting…

Crystal: Acting like their age, and not acting like they’re big, like older (individual interview, March 5, 2014).

In this small conversation, Crystal used the terminology acting big, acting mature, acting way off, acting their age, and acting older, placing each activity into a box of what youth “should” and “should not” act. Youth should act mature, although they should not act older. They should act their age, and should not act big or way off, beyond who they actually are. My interview with
Crystal seemed to capture the divergent narratives about performance identity and political context. One should act authentically, (“normally”) to position themselves powerfully; however, they should also know how to perform identities (e.g. acting Gucci, “stepping up” their act) that change in relation to social context, for purposes of resisting deficit positioning.

**Acting Back: “I be trynna fake sneeze just to make her go away sometimes…”**

Students also exhibited collective resistance with their bodies and non-verbal sounds, i.e. “acting back”. Similar to “talking back”, students’ decision to “act back” was bound to specific political contexts and spaces such as their art class. As soon as all six participants were handed off from their ELA teacher to their art teacher in the stairwell (students were chaperoned from room to room), their body language changed immediately, almost spontaneously. Their walks were bigger, more dynamic and fluid. They swatted at each other in line, chased one another down the hall, and threw pencils at each other and on the floor. As they entered the art room, they took selfies on a cell phone, discussing crushes, putting each other “in their place” by short, curt remarks: “Stop talking” “Shut up!” “Be quiet” “Get out of here!” During an observation, the art teacher told four students to move to different tables, and a student snapped back, “How we supposed to do that? There isn’t room!” The whole travel group, including Epic, Tatiana, Paul, and Star, became more animated, fluent, and dynamic in this space. When asked to explain their change in movement and activities, Epic explained:

> It depends on the relationship you have with the teacher. Like the reputation the teacher has; how good is the teacher; how do you get along with the teacher; what different class, it just depends (focus group, April 30, 2014).

Epic’s comment captured his understanding of political context, social relationships, and his own political activity. The students’ decisions to actively resist were contingent on their relationship
with and understanding of teachers. Such resistance was particularly prevalent in contexts where
teacher deficit positioning of students was explicit and verbal. On several occasions, the art
teacher turned to me and, audibly to the students, asked, “What’s wrong with these kids?”
exasperated that she had to “keep on the students 24-7” for them to behave. Although this
teacher clearly wanted the best for her students, she made often comments about the students that
located deficiencies in their behaviors. Throughout my eight observations of her class, the
teacher directed the following comments to students:

“When you sit and waste time sitting there talking to people, it doesn’t get done!”
“This class, for the past few weeks, has been very needy.”
“You guys got enough done today. I was surprised.”
“Why do I care more than you?”
“This is like babysitting. Really? You guys are going to be eighth graders next year?”
(Field Notes, March 19, 2014).

These comments promoted several possible narratives. First, it could be presumed that the
teacher advocates for student self-sufficiency. She could be pushing students to develop a greater
sense of independence, work ethic, and pride in their own artwork. However, her comments can
also be interpreted as promoting the deficit narrative that students were time-wasting, needy,
unmotivated, uncaring, immature and too dependent on her help.

Students also used sneaky activities to resist deficit narratives. Sneaky activities are
defined by their everydayness and covertness, the capacity to seem spontaneous or involuntary.
Such activities included laughing, sneezing, coughing, clearing throats, and asking innocuous-
sounding questions. When collectivized, the students created a political message. Below, the
participants explained their experiences after school during their homework time:
Paul: I think it was last week or before last week, I remember [a student]. He was making some noise \( [\text{Group Laughter}] \). It was funny but and then, he got a warning, and like, I understood that... And then, after that, he like sneezed, like loud, not to do it on purpose or nothing, and then he got a warning. \( [\text{Crosstalk}] \)

Tatiana: Yeah, cuz people have a different type of sneezes, and that’s why...

Crystal: That and like laughing. You can’t laugh at all.

Epic: One time I laughed, and I laughed so hard... I got a warning. I mean, what’s that all about? I tried to stop laughing, but I couldn’t like, sometimes you just can’t stop yourself from laughing. And I’ve heard like the best medicine to live is laughing (focus group, February 3, 2014).

In this discussion, the four participants pointed to a seemingly unequivocal injustice: being punished for seemingly innocuous, inherently human actions such as sneezing and laughing. However, all participants were forthcoming that they collectivized and politicized these sneaky activities as resistance, knowing that they could always state the case that their actions were involuntary or a consequence of simply being human. As Star put it: “I be trynna fake sneeze just to make her [the teacher] go away sometimes.” If decontextualized and individualized, the proclamation of innocence for a sneeze is quite convincing; however, if these activities are considered within the context of an organized political system, these students are engaged in masterful political resistance. They collectivized “human” activities that were perfectly within the rules to form a tapestry of political resistance (e.g. coughing together because they get punished for coughing individually).
Direct Confrontation: “…just play it back, and they won’t ever mess wichu again.”

The study also found that participants told lauded stories of direct verbal and physical confrontation against someone (usually a peer) who “calls you out”, i.e. questions your authenticity, cultural loyalty, or trustworthiness. Paul, Tatiana, and Amalia discussed direct confrontation as purposeful activity for self-protection and assertion of courage. When discussing the reasons why students fight in schools, they explained their eye-for-an-eye mentality:

*Tatiana:* Yeah, my mom said if someone touch me, like, what do I have hands for? Hit them back.

*Amalia:* My mom says if someone, hits me I should… if you don’t hit them, they’re going to keep on picking on you, and think you’re scared and stuff. So just play it back, and they won’t ever mess wichu again.

*Paul:* My mom, she told me story of when my brother was little. There was this kid messing around with my brother, when he was little and then, my mom said, go out there and just beat him up. And then, guess what he did? He went outside, he fought, and he came into my mama, and he said, “I won! I won!” [*Laughter*] Because they kept bothering my brother, and then, after that, nobody bothered him (focus group, May 5, 2014).

In this exchange, the three participants discussed the social expectation of confrontation: if someone messes with you, give it back. Amalia’s use of the phrase, “so just play it back, and they won’t ever mess wichu again” demonstrated the *value* of direct confrontation: protection from emotional or physical bullying at school. In the longer term, verbal confrontation also
served as a tool for fighting enduring deficit labels: “small”, “weak”, or “quiet’. Participants also indicated that protection for cultural and political identity was worth direct confrontation.

In the story below, Tatiana described a confrontation she had with a peer she once considered a close friend. According to Tatiana, this friend repeatedly called her out on Facebook, a particularly cowardly act. “Nobody wants to say it to my face [but] by on Facebook,” Tatiana said, “and it bothers me, like, oh, stop being what you are—stop being what you’re not, and I be like, what you talking about? Who are you?” (focus group, May 5, 2014). According to Tatiana, if she condoned this attack on her authenticity—not being who she actually was—she was relenting to a position of weakness. In her eyes, the use of Facebook was indirect, and therefore, more insulting. Tatiana explained how she directly confronted the girl after school:

So this is how it happened. I was outside, on the playground, and we came back with the bus. I went to get water, now she was looking at me like, I owe her something. Oh, what, I was calm, like, why you saying things behind my back and not to my face. And she was like, ‘I didn’t say…’ Then like, then she said she called her dad up on me. I’m like, this is between me and you, not me and your family and things, [inaudible segment]. And every people were like, ‘Oh, do something about it’ cuz she like, she knows that she can get beat up by me. That’s why she knew there. You know, like, you know what, I’m going to stand up because you know this is not the first time or second time you were playing around with me. I was like, ‘You know what, girl?’ Next time, next time, I get you real good (focus group, May 5, 2014).

After her story, I asked Tatiana what she thought the girl meant when she accused Tatiana of “being what she is not”. Tatiana immediately identified it as a critique on her Cape Verdean-
ness. The assertion that Tatiana acted “bigger” than she actually was implied that she was pretending to be more powerful and important than her Cape Verdean credibility could afford her. In this way, the girl called Tatiana’s cultural authenticity and and political positioning into question, both of which Tatiana would fiercely and confrontationally protect.

Star told a similar story of direct confrontation with a classmate who was talking about him behind his back and on Facebook. Crystal and Tatiana identified this kind of indirect, non-confrontational talk as “acting fake”, saying one thing (or nothing) in the presence of a person and saying something else, often pejoratively, behind their back. In this way, the participants correlated authenticity with directness and transparency. In the below story, Star discussed how he directly confronted a girl who he perceived as acting fake:

…the one time, she was talking about me, right. I was like, you talk about me again, I’m going to make sure my cousin come up there and beat you up, watch. And then she went to continue, so that’s when one day she got, that my cousin ratched her on her on Facebook, and she didn’t want to say nothing else. And I was like, oh, what happened to you replying to my cousin, hm? I thought you were so big and bold, right? Oh, no, you see, she act like a little girl, she wanted to act like a little sissy so, basically she didn’t reply, because she know that if she did, my cousin would go up to her, and punch her right on the mouth (focus group, May 8, 2014).

Star seemed to tell a story about his use of verbal aggression to threaten physical aggression. However, his bigger goal was an assertion of power: he wanted the girl to back down due during the confrontation. In this way, direct confrontation was a tool used to restore the political pecking order. Star decided who should be acting “big and bold” and who needed back down. Similar to Tatiana’s story, Star called the girl out for acting “bigger” than he thought she should
on an indirect platform, Facebook. When confronted face to face, Star considered her lack of confrontation back at him as acting “like a little girl” and “like a little sissy”, pejorative terms used to describe someone who backs down from confrontation without a fight.

Amalia and Star furthered argued that direction confrontation was the best way to authentically solve problems and avoid future strife. In the consistent posturing for power, a face-to-face confrontation was also the most honest way to handle a problem. Amalia explained:

Me and my mom, my dad, the way I was, like, taught, is like, for someone to say something to your face, because that’s much better than talking behind you because you get much anger when they’re talking to you behind your back with their friends. Because that’s not the honest way of solving problems, or anything. Why don’t you just confront them in a nice way? You just say sorry for this, and this, and this, and this. And then you just be friends by the end of the day; you can just be friends or anything like that (focus group, June 2, 2014).

Amalia also pointed to the possible negative consequences of not confronting problems directly: lingering anger amongst peers. From her perspective, talking behind people’s back (i.e. “acting fake”) allowed festering negativity, and in this way, Amalia considered direct confrontation a tool for maintaining political stability amongst peers, not an incitement of instability. In spite of its seemingly destabilizing capacities, Amalia and Star explained direct confrontation as the way “mature” students handle social problems. Star described: “The mature people just walk to the people; try to talk it out. But the person he’s trying to talk to just keep doing what they do, like, talk about them in a different language, seeing all that other stuff, but when they try to get, solve the problem, so you can be friends again at the end of the day.” In this quote, Star reiterated Amalia’s narrative that direct, transparent conversation was the best way to solve social
problems. Perhaps more telling, Star’s reference to students who “talk about them in a different language” implicated students who spoke Spanish to one another in school. During the focus group discussion, Epic asked the rest of the group why some native English speakers seemed to resent students who spoke Spanish to each other in school. Star explained:

The only reason do that—I’m not trying to be rude—some people, like, Spanish people, like Dominican people, every time they get into an argument with each other, they always go back to what they, they always go back to they group and they always start speaking in Spanish about that one person. And that’s when someone says something about their thing because they’re always talking about that someone in Spanish. They don’t like it. But then they get, you’re cause of this problem, so why you, why you trying to get mad about it? (focus group, June 2, 2014)

In this quote Star described how language related to power at Septima Clark. Over 50% identified as English Language Learners, Septima Clark students consistently weaved in and out of cultural, lingual, and social circles that implicated their political positioning. According to Star, Spanish speakers (who even Crystal referred to as “Spanish” students) used Spanish to exclude non-Spanish speakers, a notion that particularly enraged Star because Septima Clark was located in an American city. However, Epic vehemently challenged Amalia and Star’s “direct confrontation” narrative. During this particularly contentious focus group, Epic explained his take on face-to-face confrontation as a problem-solving process:

You may think that all of them are fair, and you may have your reasons, but who do you think is the most fair, the most mature person? The person who ignores what the other person is saying instead of fighting and getting hurt and becoming worse? It’s like Romeo and Juliet, the feud, it can lead to bad things. Or…the person that just ignores what the
other person is saying, and just like live your life, do what you have to do, you don’t have to fight with other people because of their language, fight other people because they can’t say things to their face? (focus group, June 2, 2014).

True again to his penchant for metaphoric thinking, Epic alluded to *Romeo and Juliet* to evidence his narrative that direct confrontation leads to feuds and continuing violence. To him, a mature person knows how to walk away from potential confrontation and put aside differences, like spoken language, during social interactions. In this way, Epic fractured the narrative of direct confrontation. Rather than being activity that promoted political stability and peace, Epic described it as inciting more confrontation. Notably, Epic was often “recipient” of confrontation by peers, who often loudly positioned him as “annoying” and “too loud” in classes and after school. In this way, Epic seemed to experience direct confrontation as repressive, a means to reify the systems of power that exist amongst the students.

**Language and Power: “They take so long, and like they’re not even talking right.”**

Embedded in the Star and Epic’s comments about direct confrontation was the salience of *spoken language* to political positioning. Crystal, an American-born student of Puerto Rican descent, explained with great nuance her conscious decision exclusively speak English in school. She considered speaking Spanish to be a deviation from the “normality”, American-ness, a label she adamantly tried to uphold. Similar to Paul, she positioned power in normality. When I asked how she experienced being her Puerto Rican-ness in school, she replied:

*Crystal:* It’s just like, I’m just saying, I don’t feel like other people. It’s just normal, like a normal person would look at act. To me.

*Amalia:* Whoop.
Crystal: I feel like people don’t act like if I was from another place, like…

Interviewer: Is that okay for you? Is that okay with you or do you want people to act like you’re from another place?

Crystal: Like, it’s okay because I understand why. Like I don’t talk Spanish a lot, so… (focus group, March 5, 2014).

Crystal went on to explain that, “I’m really not in that category [Spanish speakers], cuz I don’t speak Spanish in school. Depending if I have to translate, I don’t like, I don’t like Spanglish.” When Paul, an American born student with Dominican descent, asked her why she chose not to speak Spanish in school (with a tinge of challenge in his voice), Crystal replied, “They be like, all like, ‘Oh my gosh, they take so long, and like they’re not even talking right.’ And then some people be like, ‘I don’t understand her, what is she saying?’ (Crystal, individual interview, March 6, 2014). She understood that her choice not to speak Spanish positioned her amongst her peers. Throughout our discussion and interviews, Crystal promoted the narrative that English was the language of normality, and, therefore, power. Her peers considered those who spoke English fluently as within the realm of normality—“talking right”. When asked who “they” was in the above quote (“they be like, all like, ‘Oh my gosh…’”), Crystal responded, “Um, basically like African Americans; like, whoever doesn’t speak Spanish.” In a space of linguistic diversity, Crystal made the decision to associate with the non-Spanish speakers, a conscious choice with political implications amongst her peers. “I used to be with all Spanish kids in fifth grade. And now I’m with African Americans and different types of people, Crystal commented. The diversification of Septima Clark created new contexts for Crystal to navigate, and she ultimately acted with political intentionality.
Amalia—who spoke English, Spanish, Creole, and Portuguese depending on her social contexts—authored a narrative about power and language with intricate contextual nuance. A self-identified Cape Verdean and Puerto Rican, Amalia described how she understood the propriety of speaking non-English languages during moments of confrontation:

So, it’s like, I think it’s appropriate sometimes and inappropriate at one time [to speak Spanish]. Like if you’re having an argument between like someone from Cape Verde who’s Hispanic, and they’re fighting they go back to other group, they started talking in Spanish, in which know how to speak English. It’s different if a girl comes new here and don’t know how to speak English, is talking in Spanish. But you already used to speaking in English, and knows English and talking, and you guys was discussing and fighting, why would you go back to another group and talk trash about the other girl? Why can’t you say it right in front of the space and confront them, and then they’ll see what’s wrong and what’s right (focus group, June 2, 2014).

In several ways, Amalia reinforced Star’s narrative of the exclusive nature of language. Similar to Star, she argued that speaking Spanish during a moment of confrontation was a veiled way of “acting fake”. A student who knows how to speak English should do so given a moment of confrontation. This statement held to her previous assertion that positioned confrontation as a just and authentic means of problem solving. However, Amalia focused on authenticity and transparency as prominent values within confrontational spaces. She also acknowledged that students who “don’t know how to speak English” were excluded from such a critique; in such cases, speaking Spanish was not only accepted, but expected.

This chapter concerns political narratives authored through acting, action, and activity. Within these narratives, the word “act” takes up several meanings, including acting as
performance (as in acting out a character stage) and action and activity as constructions of “being”, an authentic, contextually-transcendent sense of self. As such, I come back to the base word act, first, as a word describing individual performance in a social space. Tatiana acted Gucci to position herself away from labels of weakness, feebleness. Similarly, Amalia stepped up her act and consciously started confronting others as a means of pushing away negating labels and social problem solving. Crystal acted normal by only speaking English only in school and “talking back” to stand up for herself. Paul authored a narrative of power forefronting authenticity and acting yourself as positions of power. Political subjectivities were also constructed through collective activities that resisted, were predicated by, and created through the fluidity of power. Collectively, students engaged in political activities as a construction and protection of who they were and who they wanted to be. The symphony of resistance documented in the opening story authored a narrative of resistance against deficit positioning and constraint. The symphony’s instrumentation included “human” activity such as sneezing, laughing, coughing; rhythmic activity such as beatboxing and headbopping; and musical activity such Edmundo’s impromptu song, “I am the Bucket Dipper”. The youth constructed individual and collective political subjectivity through a variety of imaginative, nuanced activity throughout their school day. Within such activity, they also authored narratives about political hope—a belief in a better, more just system of politics—authored in the next chapter.
After five hours of state standardized testing, Amalia, Tatiana, and Star trudge into the focus group room. Amalia sits down, crosses her forearms on the table, and buries her head in her arms. Tatiana slumps in her seat and closes her eyes. This activity is unusual for both of them; if they are the first two to arrive, they normally chat with me about dates with cousins and friends or share pictures of their nephews and nieces. Crystal, Paul, and Epic walk into the room next. Crystal sits next Amalia and wraps her arms around Amalia’s shoulders. Amalia’s head stays down. Paul looks at me and smiles. “Hey Mister,” he says.

“Hey Paul,” I reply.

“Can we do something fun today?” Tatiana asks, popping her eyes open. I know this question well; my eighth grade students used to ask me this question at least twice a week before any given lesson. I find myself almost instinctually giving the same response I used to give my students.

“Every day is fun with me!”

Getting out of teacher mode can be hard.

Star cracks a toothy smile, and Tatiana groans. Yup, that’s also the reaction I remembered. I can tell that the group isn’t feeling a structured discussion today, and I start toggling in my head possible alternatives. I notice a poem that Epic has written sticking out of his folder, and I point to it.

“Did you write this in ELA?” I ask. I know they are currently studying a poetry unit.

“Yes,” he replies.

“Mr. Kawai!” Amalia yelps, picking her head up from her desk. “Can we just share
poems today?” Crystal perks up.

“Yeah!” she cheers.

I look around the room at six pair of tired, expectant eyes. I look at my laptop screen with the focus group protocol I had re-constructed for a few hours the previous night. I push the computer aside. That’s for another day.

“Of course we can,” I say. “What have you got?”

Amalia claps. For the next twenty minutes, we discuss and share poetry. Amalia, Crystal, and Star first read their personification poems. They each personify an inanimate object—writing it in first person as the object—and the others guess what the object is. It’s a simple activity, but one they seem to enjoy.

Epic changes the tune by sharing a metaphoric poem.

“So, this poem kind of connects back to what I was saying a long time ago that they treat us like robots that they expectate [expect] us to do something,” he explains. The “they” to whom he refers seems to be the teachers, the dean of students, and the principal. “But they didn’t treat us like how we actually are, they should just, how they expect us to be without knowing us. They just like, I mean, that’s not good. We are, like I said, we are people. We deserve to be treated as people, not as robots.” Epic then shuffles his paper in his hand and reads:

If I was a bird, I would learn how to fly.
I lean and spread my wings and fly and sing
It takes much courage to fly above
It is not that easy without falling down to the ground
We spread our wings and fly but there are those smaller birds
Who bother not to fight
It’s not about if you’re a bird
It’s about what you do to success
And all on the ground, I wish them luck
To get a life, to get a job
And those who fly and fight and fight all day
And night and not afraid of heights
They will sing until the end and teach people to fly after them
If you can’t fly, then spread your wing
That’s when it all begins.

Epic looks up from his paper. Crystal is smiling.

“You rhymed that last part,” she comments. Star, who has remained silent during the reading, pays a rare compliment to Epic.

“Good job,” he says shortly. Epic grins.

Twenty minutes into the session, all participants seem to be in their element. They find personally meaningful musical lyrics and poetry online on their phones and my iPad and chat about them. Star finds an online poem and announces he would like to share. Once he has our attention, he flips his phone vertically and reads:

Sitting all alone with a broken heart
Broken hopes, broken spirit
Everything is broken
Why did you ruin everything
What did I do wrong?
I wanted to...I wanted to gain your love
But all I did was lose my best friend, and everything I love.”

The room stirs a moment after he finishes.

“Why did you read that?” I ask a few seconds later.
“Cuz, I was thinking of my friend, that, friend slash brother that I used to like, always like rely on for... I could talk to about everything. Ever since that day, it was like March, no, it was April, no, it was like August seven, it was like August ninth. That day was like, he just outside at a barbecue or whatever, like his cousin’s barbecue... they was like, we could walk home. Cuz we like, his house, his cousin’s house is all the way up here, his house is over here, my house is over here.” Star uses his fingers to illustrate the spacing between the houses.

“So he walked me past his house, we was walking to his house, but they said don’t walk alone,” he continues. “But we walked alone, and the next thing you know, this guy just got out of his car, and was like, he wanted to give us this gun, but then that’s when we said we don’t want it. And we was running, and he got shot.”

“He got shot?” Paul repeats.

“He was trying to save me, but he got shot,” Star replies. The rest of the group looks down at the table. I look up at Star and say, “Thanks for sharing that, Star. You got something else to share?”

“Huh? Yeah,” he replies. “I was doing something with my cousin, so we’s like, we was doing snapchats to his cousin, like his friend. And he updated already, so it’s like, ‘Love isn’t warfare, it’s compassion for others that you truly love and want for...’ and because if you have love, you won’t have warfare, if you have warfare, then you won’t get loved. So yeah, I just wanted to say that (focus group, March 31, 2014).

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This impromptu poetry reading was a pivotal moment for the group. Until this point, we had shared food, joked, laughed, taken silly pictures, and told stories. Just as frequently, we quarreled with, annoyed, and frustrated each other. However, we found it difficult to be
vulnerable with one another, sharing what might portray weaknesses, flaws, or insecurity through discussion. In some cases, I understood the hesitation to be vulnerable. Tatiana and Star would, on occasion, sharply put Epic in his place, telling him to “shut up!” or “be quiet!” when he started talking about ideas with which they disagreed. I saw this pattern replicated in classes, and it troubled me. As a researcher, I struggled to determine how often I should indulge my desire to intercede, and how interjection might obstruct unfettered discussion. I wanted the group to feel safe, but I also did not want them to feel constrained from speaking freely. Although I sought to create a space bounded by values of freedom, safety, and trust, I found it hard. This poetry reading made me re-frame from asking, “How can I minimize interjections and still create an emotional safe space?” to “How can I create conditions and opportunities where emotional safety is a condition for success?”

During the poetry reading, Epic chose to read a poem he had never shared before. Despite his prior experiences with being shut down, he still braved it, shared his poem, and received some much-deserved praise. When Star told the story about his cousin, he too was being vulnerable. Although Star was amongst the most vocal participants in discussion, he hardly ever told stories about his life outside of school. In this way, he was illustrating his trust in the group. Star was not the only participant to discuss violence close to the family. In a later focus group, Amalia shared that her cousin was killed in a gang-related shoot out, and her uncle had been shot in the chest. Crystal shared the story of witnessing her aunt self-harm and the paralyzing fear it caused her. Tatiana and Epic swapped stories of the shootings they heard about in the public parks located close to the school. Every once in a while, the sheer amount of social toxins that contextualized these emotional, loving, and resilient youth struck me. I was also struck by the quote Star shared as his final point after he read the poem. “If you have love, you won’t have
warfare”, he said, “If you have warfare, you won’t get loved”. After he made the statement, all participants paused for a moment, as did I. This was not the first time Star discussed a moment of violence he experienced with the group, but it was the first time he authored a counter-narrative to the violence—a call for love.

At the beginning of my study, I did not intend on inquiring into narratives of youth political hope, or stories about a better political world. However, as I listened to Star’s words, I was reminded of a talk I attended by Dr. Shawn Ginwright, a youth development scholar and educator who focuses on pedagogy of healing in the black youth community. In his talk, he argued that civic and social educators’ focus on the 3 P’s – problem, prevention, and pathology—obscures other, more hopeful sides of black male lives. Dr. Ginwright called for greater authorship and ignition of youth hopes in the education of black youth. Drawing on Duncan-Andrade’s (2009) framework for nurturing hope for urban youth, Ginwright called for a politicized conception of social education with a focus on hope and healing. As I continued spending time with Amalia, Star, Epic, Crystal, and Paul, the concept of political hope stuck with me. In this chapter, I explore these emergent questions: What stories do urban youth author about their hopes for a better political future? What stories of political hope do they author every day through their discourses, activities, interactions?

**A Politics of Mutuality**

The study showed the youth in the study called for a system of politics centered on values of mutuality: empathy, understanding, trust, and reciprocal respect. In these contexts, mutuality implicates values of “both”-ness and reciprocity in lieu of an “us versus them” construction of power. In this chapter, I connect these values of mutuality with the concept of political equality, a vision for a system of power in which people have equal opportunity to take explicit actions for
their own interests while simultaneously acting in regard to the interests and struggles of others. The participants constructed narratives of mutuality anchored in two, inter-reliant actions: listening and understanding. Although the participants’ narratives of a better political system were by no means utopian, they offered insight into optimistic and grounded political directions for educators and scholars to consider as possibilities for political and social justice in schools. Extending the narratives of authenticity as introduced in the previous chapter, this chapter authors narratives of political hope that position politics and power as hopeful, productive, useful, and just.

**A Hope for Empathy: “I Just Want People to Understand Other People…”**

According to Star, empathy—the consideration and understanding of multiple perspectives—is fundamental to just systems of power. Similarly, he spoke to the salience of empathy and listening:

> A lot of the kids respect perspective. Before Mr. Bruin left, he used to hear the students side first…because he would trust us a lot more than the teachers because he knows that some of these teachers (focus group, February 10, 2014).

All participants shared an admiration for Mr. Bruin, the former dean of students at Septima Clark. Mr. Bruin was a long-time teacher at the school—one of a small group of teachers who taught before and after the turnaround—who had earned students’ respect through his time there. In his comment, Star discussed his understanding of the relationship between fairness and several intertwined concepts: trust, empathy, and perspective. He pointed to how Mr. Bruin demonstrated his trust in students by empathizing with student perspectives before making

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7 A pseudonym
disciplinary decisions. In a fair system, the voices of teachers were not assumed as truth; students and teachers’ voices were considered equally viable truths. Similarly, Paul discussed his relationship with an after school teacher he had from the previous year:

We always respected her. Last year, we didn’t have no warnings—we had minus one, minus 2, and stuff like that—and if we got a minus two or minus one we still almost talk back, but we didn’t as much, as this year. And last year, we always understood her, and she understood us. She used to hear what we said; we used to hear what she said (focus group, February 3, 2014).

Paul and Star argued that the punitive system itself (i.e. “warning” system vs. a minus one/minus two system of punishment) mattered less than the assumptions built into the systems. Paul’s statement that “we always understood her, and she understood us” illustrated his desire for reciprocity and understanding between students and teachers. Teachers earned the respect and respect of students not by downplaying their power—i.e. acting, perhaps disingenuously, as if they were in equal positions of power with the students—rather, by using their power to promote justice/fairness through mutually understanding and empathic relationships.

Of the six participants, Epic was most adamant about the importance of empathy. In slight contrast to Star and Paul, he also discussed his own sense of empathy for the teachers students often resisted:

Especially in [the after school program] we, actually, sometimes call out, and our teacher from gets very frustrated. And she’s trying to teach us, and sometimes I get pretty frustrated, too, because, I imagine to be in her place. She’s trying to teach us, and we aren’t appreciating it. I mean, we say the problems we have, but sometimes, we don’t fix it, we just accept it (Epic, individual interview, January 30, 2014).
In this passage, Epic’s use of the word “imagine” was compelling. Empathy requires imagination about how others think and feel; and in this way, Epic hoped for a system of power in which students and teachers would be more imaginative. Although Epic empathized with his teachers’ perspective, he was forthcoming about his ambivalence toward “fixing” the problem. Instead of taking personal accountability for addressing problems, Epic stretched the accountability to the whole class, “we”. According to him, students have accepted the system as is, reiterating his narrative of powerlessness as authored in chapter 5. To Epic, the need for imagination and empathy went beyond the teacher-student relationship; he called for it in relationships between students. During a focus group in which students discussed how they treated each other, Epic made an emotional appeal for more peaceful, less aggressive, less confrontational problem-solving mechanisms between students. During his speech he began to cry, but spoke clearly:

I know that I’m crying right now; I know I am a very sensitive person, but I’m just saying, all this time I’ve just been trying to fit in. And I just want somebody…I just want people to understand other people. How do you feel when they insult you? How do you feel when you’re trying to be nice to them, and you get a reply, “Go away.” It doesn’t feel; it doesn’t feel good at all. You said, you wanted to be treated that way, how would you react to it? You would just insult them back, but would that help? Or would that just make it worse? (focus group, June 2, 2014).

Epic’s long, emotional plea (that lasted over three minutes) can be seen as an outcry of a socially castigated student. However, the power in Epic’s statement rested in his argument that perpetual conflict (“You would just insult them back, but would that help?”) did not solve anything; it only perpetuated more problems. Similar to his Romeo and Juliet analogy, Epic explained that direct confrontation, especially if motivated by vengeance, was ineffective as a problem-solving
process. Instead, he called for understanding and emotional empathy. Epic’s call extended into our interactions as a researcher and participant. During an individual interview in December, I asked Epic if he had any ideas to improve his experiences with focus groups and interviews.

After a long pause, Epic said:

_Epic:_ I think, like I said before, it’s pretty nice someone, like for someone to listen to us. Because that doesn’t happen much, and to do discuss it, I mean, we get all of those, like, our satisfied, satisfied when we get all that stress out of ourselves, saying what we feel. And for someone to be able to understand us.

_Interviewer:_ Yeah.

_Epic:_ And I think it, like, even though if we only talk, and we get interviewed, I mean we like it, because it’s not something that the teachers do, or because they don’t even have time to listen to us (Epic, individual interview, February 25, 2014).

In future discussions and informal interactions, Epic reiterated his appreciation for simply being listened to in our group and having a space to feel understood instead of always being forced to understand and comply with the demands of others. In his last commented, Epic why teachers do not listen to their students: they don’t have time. His adamancy for empathy relates to his resistance to a system of conformity, which implicates one-ness and suppression (I demand, you relent) in lieu of a system built on empathy and understanding, which implicates multiplicity and mutual engagement.
A Hope for Reciprocal Respect: “Whatever we give them comes back to us at the end of the day”

All six participants in the study authored narratives of a hope for reciprocal respect as a value in the political system. At first, Star, Epic, Amalia and Tatiana authored the narrative of reciprocal respect through a lens of disallowing disrespect. Similar to how Tatiana, Amalia, and Crystal’s performed identities as way to resist negating labels, Star described how he responded to feeling disrespected in school:

In school, I like to walk through the hall, I gotta short temper for people. It’s like, people can’t get along; it’s like, I just can’t take a lot of disrespect. So it’s just like when you say something to me, Imma hafta say something back (Star, individual interview, January 30, 2014).

Interestingly, Star gave this answer to my open-ended question, “How would you describe yourself?” In this way, Star has constructed one identity (of many) through his interactions with others based on a show of dis/respect in the specific contexts. Star drew a hard, fast line between himself and those who disrespected him, a line he advocated for everyone to draw. In a focus group discussion, Amalia and Star further explained disallowing of “disrespect” as both reciprocal (i.e. equally deserved) and redemptive—“what goes around, comes around”:

Amalia: Because if a student is disrespectful to a teacher, the teacher might as well be disrespectful for them because once they had this rule that said, “Treat others the way you want to be treated…”

Interviewer: Right.

Amalia: And if you treat…mistreat teacher, the teacher has the right to mistreat you, too.
*Star*: So yeah, it’s not good for a teacher to mistreat, it’s not good us to mistreat a teacher, but then at the end of the day, it’s not for us to mistreat them anyways, so whatever we give them, it comes back to us at the end of the day (focus group, February 10, 2014).

In he assertion that people should “Treat others the way you want to be treated”, Amalia authored a narrative of reciprocity—do kindly onto others, and they will do kindly onto you. In contrast, Star authored a narrative of redemption, the notion that disrespect would “come back to get us at the end of day”. In this way, Star described disrespect like karma, the notion that action and intent will influence the future of the individual.

As with narratives of resistance, the narratives of reciprocal respect were authored within specific political contexts, primarily by students’ collective activities in class. In one such context, the participants’ reading class, students acted *with and in collaboration* the teacher—carefully considering her questions, asking their own questions, and working rigorously to understand her lesson. Amalia described her relationship with her reading teacher:

And Ms. O, she’s my closest teacher, too. I’m very open with her; she’s like the only teacher in this five subjects I’m very close to…Because she cares about other people’s, like, way of learning and things like that (focus group, June 5, 2014).

In this description, Amalia pinpointed the openness and caring as the primary values of their relationship with the teacher. According to Epic, if a person in power seeks to understand students, gives respect in return, and offers something to students beyond demands for compliance, then they receive respect from students. Epic described an interaction he had with Ms. O in a reading class:
One time, so, at the beginning of the year, at the middle of the year, we were in class, and I really wanted to share something, and it was my turn, and she picked me. But then she cut me off and picked another student. And I was really mad, and then, I yelled out what my comment was. And then she, she told me like, ‘Epic, I can’t have you yell and interrupt my class’ and step out. And she didn’t yell at me, she just told me like that, and after a while, she went out and spoke with me. And then we, we could, it was like, a misunderstanding, and I understood that I did something wrong because I should not have yelled out (focus group, June 5, 2014).

In this story, Epic looked beyond the fact that he was asked to leave the room or that Ms. O cut him off. Instead, the focused his story the way she addressed him—calmly saying, “I can’t have you interrupt my class”—and upon his outburst, how she spoke with him to address the “misunderstanding”. Within this political context of mutual respect, the six participants in the study and their classmates performed different identities, acting in compliance to Ms. O’s request and in extension. The following field note illustrates student activity in Ms. O’s ELA class. Throughout the class, they illustrated little collective resistance or absolute compliance; instead, they seemed to collaborate with each other and with Ms. O to further their understanding of the poem they were analyzing:

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*I walk Ms. O’s room first thing in the morning, as I do every Wednesday. As I enter, the students are sitting in a forum seating, facing the front of the room. Ms. O sits at the front of the room reading the poem, “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou. Her calm, centered energy seems to encompass the room. While she reads the poem, the most students appear to be listening attentively. A few students lay their heads on their desks, but their eyes track the teacher.* After
she finishes reading the poem, Ms. O asks the class to share their answer to the question, “What clues do you have that this poem is written by an African-American woman?” The room buzzes with conversation. Mrs. O asks for students to share their responses.

Epic puts his hand in the air. Ms. O calls on Rolando, a boy with curly hair with his hand up in the back of the classroom. He reads a line from the poem:

“I am a black ocean.” Ms. O nods at his response and prompts him to draw out the symbolism of the line. He explains how the word “black” implies the race of the reader, since she uses the phrase, “I am”. She calls on Epic next.

“With your bitter, twisted lies...you may tread on me like dirt, but still like dust, I rise.” Epic reads. Ms. O responds,

“Why do you think that connects to her being African-American?”

Several students in the class begin to murmur their dissent to Epic’s response, a common occurrence. Epic hesitates to respond. Ms. O., seeing his struggle and the classes’ obviously dynamic response to his answer, poses another open-ended question to the class, “Do you agree or disagree with Epic?” Students shoot up their hands with either a thumbs up, thumbs down, or in between signal, a protocol they follow in all of their academic classes.

Ms. O calls on Star first to state why he disagrees. He interprets Epic’s selection of the line to mean that Epic is equating the color of dirt—brown and black—as implicating the poet’s skin color. He disagrees with the idea of blackness being connected to “dirt”. Maira, a vocal class leader, also expresses disagreement with Epic, as does Joselia, a student known for her academic prowess. Hearing his classmates’ disagreement, Epic relents.

“I disagree with myself and agree with Joselia, Star, and Maira,” he says. Ms. O turns her body slightly toward Epic.
“The thing is I kind of agree with you,” she says. “There is a subtle metaphor there; dragging someone in the dirt, even the ‘dust’ is suggestive of African-American history. I like that you brought it up even though it’s not one that’s the most noticeable.”

For the next ten minutes, Epic sits and listens to other students share their references about symbolism and the blackness of the poet. He sits forward in his seat, arms crossed on his desk, lightly taking notes as his classmates talk (field notes, March 19, 2014).

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Ms. O’s class was not absent of resistance, exclusion, or exercises of power. Instead, students dissented in different ways in this political context, as their interactivity with power was situated in mutual respect and trust for the teacher. Although most students dissented on Epic’s idea about the poem, Ms. O constructed a space where dissent heard and supported as a construction of political discourse. Ultimately, Ms. O “legitimated” Epic’s unpopular response by “kind of” agreeing with him, praising his perceptiveness in lieu of disagreeing with Epic’s dissenters. In this way, she illustrated respect for Epic’s original answer, Star’s dissenting response, and one of Epic’s strength as a student—his capacities to think divergently.

Mutual respect was also linked trust, a cornerstone of youth political decision-making. During our first individual interview, Star described what he considered to be the root cause of conflict amongst people at school:

Star: The problems is mainly like people disrespecting each other, so it’s like, everyone just don’t know how to trust [inaudible segment 7:16 – 7:19] everybody tries to trust the ones that they really know.

Interviewer: Okay. And how do people figure out who they can trust?
Star: They actually have to talk like, they actually meet them, be friends, and if they do tell them a secret and they go behind their back and say it to somebody, then yeah, that’s not, that’s not somebody to trust (Star, individual interview, January 30, 2014).

Respect was linked to being able to trust one another and having each other’s backs during difficult times. The participants’ call for reciprocity and empathy extended beyond the systems of punishment at Septima Clark; they called for reciprocal respect as a basic, human interaction—respect as people.

A Hope for Trust: “If You Roll wid us, You Don’t Get the Disrespect”

The participants also authored narratives of trust as the cornerstone of individual and collective political decision-making. Breaking an individual or group’s trust is a primary, justified impetus for violent retribution, social exclusion, or resistant activity. If trust is gained or earned, you are included; you are part of the community; you are “wid us”. During several focus groups, Crystal, Amalia, and Paul all positioned the breaking of trust as the reason as to why fights broke out amongst students. Crystal went onto argue that breaking trust was a good reason to fight; protection of trust was worth going

Interviewer: Okay, um, this maybe be an unfair question but, why do you think you think people fight? Like why do you think people, you know, that are outside of your neighborhoods…

Amalia: [Crosstalk] Like, they have disagreements or one might not be like, trustworthy to the other person.

Interviewer: Okay. Trustworthy. What do you mean by that?
Amalia: Like, if they tell lies, like not always telling the truth to their friends. And that thing that they’re like close friends (Amalia, individual interview, January 29, 2014).

During our first focus group, I began the session by telling the participants the purpose for the focus group and co-constructing expectations for them as participants. Then, I asked the participants what their expectations were of me as a researcher and adult member of the group. This was our first open discussion, and I wrote down each expectation, attempting to clarify their meanings. The only person to not participate orally in the discussion was Star. I looked over to Star, who seemed to be busy drawing a picture. Toward the end of the discussion, I nodded in Star’s direction and asked him if he had something to share. Star held up a sign that said, “Trust Us” in big, block letters, and drew a heart on the back of it (field notes, February 3, 2014).

When I saw the sign, I smiled. Star’s curtness and candor struck me as important. When I asked Star if I could put it in my binder as a consistent reminder for us all, he agreed, seemingly confused as to why I took such interest in his sign. For the rest of our time together, the sign served as a constant reminder to me as a researcher and to us as a focus group that trust served as the foundation of our relationship. In the discussion below, Star explained the relationship between respect and trust. In this exchange, “Ms. [S]” is Star’s former elementary school teacher with whom he felt a close bond:

Star: If you roll wid us… you don’t get to disrespect. That’s how Ms. [S] did it. She roll wid us.

Interviewer: Well, what does that mean?
Star: Like. You don’t go snitchin on nobody. Like if you go… I’m not trynna be inappropriate for school, like, say you go hurt somebody. I’m not trynna put you in this Paul; say me and Paul went to go hurt somebody. Paul wouldn’t try to go…

Interviewer: Let’s put this out there: This is not going to happen. [Laughter]

Star: So if we were going to go hurt somebody, he wouldn’t go runnin to the police saying it is only me; he would roll wid it and try to hide.

Interviewer: He wouldn’t, he wouldn’t rat you out (February 3, 2014).

Star emphasized how the ability of teachers to “roll wid us”—remaining trustworthy despite challenging circumstances—as a source of political hope. Although Star’s hypothetical example with Paul seems to imply that youth should “hide” from authorities upon committing acts of violence, his mention of Ms. [S] at the beginning of the exchange positioned the example as a metaphor for trust rather than a condoning of violence. In the comparison, Star described how youth need trusting relationships with people in formal positions of power. To him, both teachers and students can create a system of mutual respect (i.e. “you don’t get the disrespect”) given a system based on trust. Upon further questioning, Star explained “snitching”, the act of reporting. As an example of how this trust could be constructed, Star explained how former dean of students Mr. Bruin, constructed such a system with the students:

Star: And so… before Mr. Bruin left, he used to listen to the teacher…no…he used to hear the students side first…Before he asked the teacher…

Tatiana: Yeah.
Star: Because he trust, he would trust us a lot more than the teachers because he knows that some of these teachers, I’m trying to be rude or anything but, Ms. [E], she was like try to write something on a paper and then say lies about what we did. Like say if I was talking in class, she would say I’m out the classroom (focus group, February 10, 2014).

Star, Amalia, and Crystal further explained how the lack of trust between teachers and students was the primary reason why the exhibited political resistance when they did. As the above quote emphasized, Star did not considered the presence of a system of punishment a problem; rather, he challenged the assumptions upon which the system was constructed and the way it was executed. Similar to Paul and Epic’s call for empathy, Star called for a system of power situated in mutuality, assumptions of the “good” in lieu of deficit, and an end goal of understanding in lieu of control.

In an individual interview, Epic described his understanding of the difference between the structures of trust in the United States and in the Dominican Republic.

From what I know, they’re similar to the people in DR, but the goal is— not to be offensive—but I find that people in this country, Americans, so, Dominican Republic, people get along more. Like we treat each other like brothers even though we don’t know each other, for example, if you need help or something, if you ask someone for help in this place, it would more likely they ask you why, where, and who, and I mean it gets you frustrated because you need to do something fast. But then if you ask someone in the DR, they help you and you become good friends with them (Epic, individual interview, May 7, 2014).
To Epic, one primary difference between Dominican and American interactions are *assumptions* of trust. In the Dominican Epic experienced others treating him “like brothers” and helping him without question. Living Vera City, he felt viewed with much far more suspicion and mistrust—“they ask you why, where, and who”. In this way, the level of *given trust*, or how trustworthy someone is assumed to be, differed between the countries. Although Epic may have been romanticizing his past, his narrative of Dominican *trust* points to his hope for a social system built around assumptions of trust.
Public schools are politically vibrant spaces. Across age, students experience, create, and exercise power, implicating their political and civic understanding of the world. Before I discuss my study’s implications for teaching and learning, I start with a description of a conversation I had with an associate professor of educational policy at another large, public university. Our conversation confronts a question I asked back in chapter 2, what kind of political experiences and activities matter for our democracy? I return to this question first, because it remains at the heart of my inquiry and second, because it implicates how and why we teach civic and social education in our urban public schools. Next, I connect my study to broader social theory and political philosophy, scholarship on youth civic and political engagement, and the teaching and learning of civics in upper elementary and middle schools. After each section of analysis, I discuss teaching implications of the study to 6 - 8 social studies instruction and, if appropriate, pre-service social studies teacher education at the university level.

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I sit down at a local breakfast diner with an associate professor of education policy. After we order, we discuss my research talk from the afternoon before. Her first comments cut right to the chase: “I disagree with your conception of politics you presented in your talk (as social bound, relational, and about power broadly). I also have a hard time making the connection between your study and why it matters for how we talk about political engagement. To me, politics is about decision-making for and within the public domain; it’s about public goods, resource allocation, and decisions made with public money. This implicates policy. Help me make the connection between the politics you discuss and teaching for political engagement.”

“I think my study is about politics in the daily sense,” I state back. “I’m discussing how
power works in informal systems of governance within our public schools. At school, students must consider governance in relation to their own personal interests and collective interests of the school. I think that we often ignore how these implicit systems of power and opportunity are built and what they teach students about how power does and should work. I think the question, ‘How does power work?’ is a core question in civic education. Student experiences with power are a form of civic education in itself and an often unexamined one. This education can be more powerful and ‘sticky’ one than official curricula taught in schools, particularly because civics is taught so infrequently at the elementary level.”

“So I guess I have trouble finding examples of ‘everyday’ politics that matter in the public domain. To me, everything connects back to the governmental and policy decisions,” she states. “If a bus doesn’t run to certain neighborhoods in the area, it’s government systems that provide the resources and schedules. If a local park isn’t maintained or built, it’s government money paying for it.”

“Yes,” I agree. “And I think the political world I discuss is linked to governmental politics, but I don’t think—when dealing about issues of access and opportunity—that it is the only politics that matters. For example, although the government might have, or have not, given funding for a public park, the citizens of that community have created rules, often unwritten, that govern access and use of that space that has nothing to do with people in elected governmental seats. No government official is walking in enforcing equal use or access of that space. People create their own systems of governance about who has access, who doesn’t, who how the public spaces are used. Same goes for schools. We create informal systems of politics—that implicate access to quality education, yes—but also that inform our students’ understanding of how power works.”
The professor smiles, nods, and we start talking about the oncoming presence of charter schools in the local school district. Driving to campus from breakfast, I was left thinking: if a person as politically versed as this professor was having a hard time understanding the implications and positioning of my work, how might I clarify its importance to a broader educational audience?

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Political Matters

Throughout my conversation with the professor, I was continually confronted by a question I discussed back in chapter 2: what kind of politics matters (and in what context)? As a natural extension to the first, I was also forced to consider, matters for what kind of democracy? Clearly, no answer to these questions—regardless of rigor and detail—will ever be comprehensive or complete. However, I would like to submit ideas I believe are within the purview of this study, anchored in the sociopolitical and spatial contexts that situate my research.

In response to the first question, (what kind of politics matters and in what context?), I offer the answer: the daily political experiences and activities of students in public schools matter. Of course, I do not contend that it is the only politics that matters. For example, youth who act to influence, change, or resist policies at the local, state, and federal levels are clearly doing important work. Case studies and ethnographic work highlighting how urban black and Latino/a youth engage in advocacy, organizing, and collective change-making of policy outside of school are plentiful (Kirschner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003; Noguera, Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Ishihara, 2006). However, scholarship regarding daily exercises, interactions, and systems of school politics and power—as discourses that inform our teaching of social studies and conceptualizations of political life—merits deeper, broader, and nuanced study. The
oft-invisible world of micro-politics in schools, the “discourses, processes, and activities that are politically important but scarcely visible” (Schatz, 2009, p. 305), at least partially, construct youth understanding of their own positionality, power, and political subjectivity. As political researchers and teachers, youth narratives of power should not only inform, but be at the center of, our inquiries.

If, as narrated by the Septima Clark students in this study, urban youth experience power as exercises of punishment, creation of conformity, and reification of unjust system of discipline, urban educators must examine how such narratives influence student understanding of power in contexts outside of schools. Do students replicate such systems of power in other contexts? Do they normalize them? Challenge or nuance them? Additionally, when students perform “symphonies of resistance” as described in chapter 6, using collective “sneaky” resistance (coughing, sneezing, laughing), musical resistance (beatboxing, singing), and/or talking back, what does this say about the political system surrounding them?

Edmundo’s self-proclamation as the “Bucket Dipper” should also cause us to stop and consider how unexamined systems of power contribute to deficit labeling and positioning. As educators and scholars we should continually challenge these structures and support our students in doing the same. Septima Clark students took actions with a political context of punishment, conformity, and injustice, both to protect themselves and their identities. Tatiana acted to protect her Cape Verdean-ness and Crystal’s fiercely defended her American-ness. Through such activities, Septima Clark students authored a striking political message: we refuse to comply in unjust political systems.

Everyday student resistance and political imagination matter not because these actions, in themselves, are teachable “tools” or “mechanisms” for overt social change. Rather, they give
insight into how urban youth make political sense of and respond to varying political contexts. These experiences are a building block of social and political change: a united message of resistance. In understanding these experiences, scholars and educators can explore implications for social studies teaching and learning, such as the relationship between student resistance and political narratives they learn at home; considerations of how their acts of resistance relate to the larger scope of black and Latino/a struggle, historically and presently; and how youth might extrapolate their experiences within school into action in other contexts outside of school, i.e. collective civic action.

Next, I argue that everyday politics within public schools matters. Although not a perfect proxy for public life and democratic living, public schools are compulsory, enduring civic institutions. They are governed by policies at the district, local, and federal level, and are funded by public monies. Necessarily, public school educators are accountable to both the policies that situate and the public that funds them. For many young citizens in urban contexts, schools are their most influential and enduring experience as a citizen of a space governed by a common set of policies (Hart & Atkins, 2010).

Particularly in regards to schooling for poor non-white youth, these trends of school reform—i.e. expanding the academic school day, increasing math and reading rigor, and creating opportunities to “keep kids off the street—are seeping into educational discourses on how to “fix” public school education. As such, urban youth are spending larger and larger quantities of time at their public schools and less time interacting with their local communities and neighborhoods. During our first interviews, I asked all six participants to give me a general description of their daily lives, from the moment they woke up to the moment they slept at night. Epic, Crystal, Paul, and Star all described a life that involved walking to school or catching
public transportation, spending 7:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. at school, coming home, taking care of family, surfing the internet, and occasionally spending time at public parks to play sports or hang out with friends. During the months of August through June, they spend a significant part of their day in school. The only time they spent in a publically governed space was during their time in school.

**Teaching Implications**

First, I argue explicitly for *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (Paris, 2012). Such pedagogy requires teaching “more responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of our young people” (p. 95). In this conception, educators support youth in sustaining cultural and lingual capacities of their communities while simultaneously teaching culture competence in the dominant culture. Paris’s conception of sustaining pedagogy is a response to nearly two decades of scholarship and teaching drawn from Ladson-Billings’s (1995) *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP), which calls upon teachers to provide rigorous academic instruction, develop cultural competence in students, and support students to understand and critique the existing (inequitable) social order.

In his investigation of CRP literature, Paris argues the words “relevant” and “responsive”, in their connotations, fall short in fulfilling our democracy’s need for sustained cultural and lingual preservation and growth (Paris, 2012). In the political realm, Delpit (1996) asserts similar ideas, arguing for explicitly teaching poor youth of color to navigate within and outside the *culture of power*. Delpit posits that educators should teach poor youth of color to enact and empower their own lingual, cultural, and political practices while simultaneously learning to navigate and traverse the culture of power, i.e. white culture.
In the social studies, culturally sustaining pedagogies require scholars and educators understand to students’ political experiences and stories with an authentic civic context. Students could discuss, narrate, publish, and analyze their own experiences with power, privilege, punishment, authority, and governance in their schools (a collective experience for all students) for purposes of reifying, advocating for, challenging, resisting, and/or changing them through civic action. Students and teachers should consider these stories as mutually owned texts for political analysis. By “mutually owned”, I mean the class as a community, including the teacher should strive to listen fully, understand the account, and empathize with the experiences of fellow classmates. These stories could serve as the basis for defining and re-defining key terms central to social studies education: How do we experience our schools, neighborhoods, state, and country? Who are we within these communities? Across our stories, where do we stand as citizens? These questions can serve as the basis of considering next steps for collective, civic action.

In the story Star told his story about his third grade suspension, he positioned himself as an innocent victim of a racially biased teacher. By his account, he was powerless since no one at the school would believe his story. However, when he and his mother met with the dean of schools, Star suddenly had a fierce ally, someone who would defend his story that his blackness, more than his actions, was being punished. In this moment, power was fractured, and Star could explicitly call his experience with racism. In contrast, Paul and Amalia’s argued that race could not have played a part in Star’s suspension. Racism was dead, they argued, and racist teachers could not exist in an era where civil rights have been granted, across race and creed, and Barack Obama is president. Within this small moment of storytelling, teachers and students can engage in naming assumptions about racial struggle, such as the “post-racial” narrative, and how their
experiences might speak to one conception or the other. A teacher could ask how power was exercised in the story and how the actors within could re-imagine the story through a series of possible, alternative actions.

**Schooling and Democracy**

In regards to the second question, (matters for what kind of democracy?), I contend that my study informs politics in a *living democracy* (Moore Lappe, 2005). Clearly, articulating narratives of politics that are “good” for our democracy rests upon questions of civic life that undergird our understanding of democratic living. Is there one or are there multiple conceptions of desirable democracies? Should a thriving democracy remain in motion or stay the same? Should we protect our current civic and political institutions or seek change? Is our democracy a product of daily, human construction or is it an inherited form of government?

Acknowledging these questions as unfairly dichotomous, I point to them to illustrate the tensions that exist in defining the actions, dispositions, or knowledge of the “active” citizenship. This is not to say that all political activity strengthens democracy. On the contrary, political actions are often ambiguous, serving the “good” for some and resulting in dangerous externalities for others. Regardless, the political experiences and actions of many go unrecognized and are, just as often, misunderstood. I position this study within these nuanced understandings of politics and seek to strengthen a conception of *living democracy* discussed by Frances Moore Lappe (2005):

*Democracy is more than a particular form of government. It is a way of living, an evolving culture of trust grounded in the values of inclusivity and mutuality. We shape norms and expectations as workers, students, employers, parents, community members, clients, and citizens. Living Democracy is something we do. It is never finished* (p. 319).
In this conception of democracy, *daily* activity (listening, reading, speaking, writing, negotiating conflict) construct structures and values of the democratic life. Good citizens actively do these things, every day. Dewey described democracy as a “form of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience” (1916, p. 93). Experience in community life, Dewey asserted, was education for democracy, where associated activity was inclusive and diverse. Giroux (1993) politicizes the everyday-ness of democracy, arguing that it is also daily struggle and resistance informed by principles of freedom, equality, and social justice. To Giroux, “[Democracy] is expressed not in moral platitudes but in concrete struggles and practices that find expression in classroom social relations, everyday life, and memories of resistance and struggle (1993, p. 1).”

Similar to the politics of hope as narrated by Epic, Star, and Paul in chapter 7, “living” democracy positions listening and understanding as the foundations of a political structures that promote *trust*, *inclusivity*, and *mutuality*, fought for through resistance,

In chapter 7, Paul and Star both discussed a teacher who created a just political system her class. “We always understood her, and she understood us,” they commented. “She used to hear what we said; we used to hear what she said” (Chapter 7). In such a conception of democracy, there is no “end goal” or utopia (i.e. an “achievable” end society in which equality and justice have been attained for all) rather, one that is constantly changing based the activities of its citizens. Democracy is living and adapting to the citizens that live in it, putting responsibility upon those citizens to remain active in their daily lives to construct democracy together. Moore Lappe’s further argues that “creating, developing, and maintaining” structures of *trust* and *mutuality* are the responsibility of the citizens closest to the community the structures govern. Her argument magnifies the importance of the political activity taken up by students at Septima Clark. Amalia theorized that fights take place in the school between students due to
breaks in trust; Star called for people to “roll wid us”, or stay beside each other during difficult or challenging times. A living democracy, then, is situated around values such as trust, mutuality, inclusivity, and activity in lieu of binary, measurable activity, such as voting, contacting a politician, and contributing to a political campaign.

Teaching Implications

A “living” democracy compels teaching and learning for purposes of civic engagement. It implies schools and places where students can see, hear, feel, and reflect on the everydayness of their citizenship, through writing, reading, sharing, listening, talking, and taking active political steps in promotion of a more hopeful political world. Within this conception, the “art of democracy” (Moore Lappe, 2009, p. 219) is never dynamic and never-ending, changing with the political actions and hopes of its citizens. Public school are spaces where youth can create a more hopeful world—based in values of mutuality, trust, empathy, and inclusivity—by embodying these values through daily activity.

Urban educators can focus on the development of their own classroom community as a living democracy. Drawing inspiration from Star’s quote, “If you wid us, roll wid us during times of trouble” (Chapter 7), teachers should focus teaching and learning around the development of deep, caring, and mutually respectful relationships with their students, especially in moments when students trip, stumble, make mistakes, or face trouble. This, of course, implicates the power of care. Numerous studies have supported the old saying, they don’t care what you know until they know that you care (Akom, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Epic noted that “they [teachers] don’t have time to listen to us” (Chapter 7), calling for a greater mutual and empathetic relationship within all members of the classroom community. Tatiana described it plainly: “We show respect to the teachers that cares about us.”
The capacity to care, however, should be balanced with the pursuit of fairness. Epic experienced these values through this daily interaction with Ms. O in her reading class. Although she reprimanded Epic when he spoke out of turn, she returned back to him at the end of the class to consider his end of the story. She empathized with Epic’s individual desire to share without relenting to the class’s collective need for fairness. In her class, students also read about and toward democracy, considering Maya Angelou’s poem through her lens as a black woman and engaging in deliberative discussion where they were open to agree and disagree, as long as they argue with evidence. Angelou’s poem, as with many texts students read during my time in her class, also had a political purpose: to construct the narrative of struggle, resistance, and resilience in the face of oppressive systems of power. Teachers, teacher educators, and scholars can look to Ms. O’s masterful, deeply embedded use of culturally relevant pedagogy, as well as her construction of a living democracy in her classroom based in values of mutuality, trust, empathy, and care.

Further, civic educators and scholars should explicitly ask urban youth what political world the hope for. Within the conception of a living democracy, “hope” is the engine for change, movement, and reflection. Duncan-Andrade (2008) and Cornell West (2004) call for teachers to support “critical hope,” a hope that rejects dejection and “cheap American optimism” (West, 2008, p. 41), instead focusing on struggle and resistance within the social toxins within their immediate environment. However, “resistance” is not enough; educators should ask students to consider values, stories, and examples of their hopes for systems of power and channel directions for civic action within toward those directions.

In Duncan-Andrade’s conception of critical, he “wrestles apart” three elements of hope that construct it: material hope, audacious hope, and Socratic hope. Material hope cultivates the
sense that youth have the resources to control immediate factors in their lives. Perhaps the most salient “material” is academically rigorous classes geared explicitly toward justice. Teachers should learn to teach within the realities of youth like Star, a witness to his cousin’s shooting; Crystal, a witness to her aunt’s self-harm; and Amalia, living through the shooting of her cousin and her uncle. Teachers should select academic materials—short stories, poems, and movies—that illustrate struggle through the presence of such toxins. In school, these toxins such as bullying, social exclusion, physical fights, and unjust systems of punishment should be named. Youth should be asked to re-imagine their schools through shared values and construct civic action projects to bring such hope to life.

Social Theory: On power, activity, and subjectivity.

Especially when discussing realities of power, the participants in the study narrated stories through critical and the Foucaultian ontologies of power. These narratives implicate the tensions in ontological stances of power and subjectivity between the two theoretical positions. The youth in the study authored the narratives within contexts situated by neo-liberal and meritocratic stories of upward mobility, a seemingly rationalist notion of individual, cognitive growth as the foundation of power. This blurring of the lines between institutional possession of power in the critical tradition and micro-contextual power relations in the post-structural tradition speaks to Nancy Fraser’s (1997) analysis of the debate between Selma Benhabib and Judith Butler regarding critical and postmodern feminisms.

Although the participants’ discourses—constructed in focus groups and interviews—pointed to an institutional, repressive ontology of power (of control, punishment, and institutional domination), their actions and activities point to power as exercises within the micro-contextual, a day-to-day context specific definition of power. Each construction of power
is embedded within the other, and each has its own salience to their subjectivity as citizens. In 
this study, the youth demonstrated how each of these ontologies can be held in mutual regard, 
with equal importance, as conceptions of power, politics, and democratic subjectivity.

During the focus groups, the participants’ words tell stories of power as institutionally-
owned systems of injustice. As illustrated in chapter 5, Star, Amalia, Tatiana, Crystal, Epic, and 
Paul all discuss how they understand power: as located within the hands of a few authorities 
(principals, deans, teachers) who, as an institution of punishment, use it as a form of control. In 
this way, their narratives mirror what Foucault calls a juridical model of power (1982) and 
Hannah Arendt describes as a command-obedience model (1969). Within this chapter, the 
participants broadly speak of power as negative, a force that prevails due to its capacity to 
control through punishment. Epic describes how authorities exercise power by restricting 
students’ humanness, the freedom from conformist ideas. “Are we only robots?” he asked, “Like 
robots, we aren’t allowed to do like, write this, write that; we are people, too” (chapter 5). Epic 
made multiple illusions to the idea of humanness during the focus groups, referring to the 
concept within his plea for empathy from his classmates (chapter 7). “And I just want 
somebody…I just want people to understand other people”, he remarks. In this way, Epic spoke 
to the desire for emancipation from the conforming (and very durable) discourses of “ways 
people should be” from his peers and his teachers within his schooling experience, an ontology 
of power often discussed by Freire (1970) in his work on conscientization, work that is primarily 
about humanization and liberation.

Star and Amalia both author ideas that the institutions of punishment, and therefore 
power, are designed to be unfair. To Amalia, the unfairness comes from lack of sameness; she 
got suspended from school when caught fighting, and Ronalda did not. To Star, the lack of
justice is located, at least in part, in the racist systems built into the school. Out of all the students pushing each other in class, he was the one suspended because he was black. In both cases, Amalia and Star located the injustice within the school systems of power and punishment rather than within the individual making the decision. As illustrated in chapter 3, the institutional narratives of power authored by the media, government, and the school authorities locate power within institutions, like themselves, and within the students as individuals.

The “zero-to-hero” narrative as described in chapter 3 illustrates such a political narrative: if poor, black or Latino/a student works hard, perseveres, and pushes themselves to achieve academically, they, too, can “achieve” the power of upward mobility. Then, they might attain power by aligning themselves with institutions “with” power, including universities, corporations, businesses, and governments. This narrative, considered side-by-side with Star and Amalia’s narrative of Principal Jermaine’s heroic entry and exit of Septima Clark, are distinctly neo-liberal and representative of a narrative of power within a rationalist conception of subjectivity and agency. Youth in the study author narratives of power within rational, critical, and post-structural ontologies, pointing to the fluidity of ontological political realities instead of “fixed” or “contradictory” ones.

The narrative of powerlessness (chapter 4) also resonates within the of stance power “immovability” within institutions. Crystal, Amalia, and Epic’s concession that they “can’t do anything” within moments of racism or oppression authored an understanding of the permanence of institutional asymmetry. In this narrative, the youth position themselves outside of the institution of power and decision-making, almost as non-citizens of the space. In many ways, I write this study in a politically strategic way—as a positioning of these youth as capable political actors within systems of oppression that they experience at school. These narratives are meant to
do more than inform us of stories; rather, propel change through civic action (which I will make calls for later in this chapter). This positions this study, in part, within what Denzin and Lincoln (2000) call key imperatives qualitative inquiry.

The first imperative is developing research within a system of praxis, a focus on the convergence research and practice for purposes of social justice, collective understanding, and democracy (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005). The second imperative involves “creating lives with others with the many words of our experiences through loving, imaginative, exploratory, critical sense-making reflection, which informs our future actions and experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 6). Particularly with chapter 7, a politics of hope, I propose that the youths’ conceptions of a better political future are not only hopeful, but imaginative and loving. As teachers, scholars, and other civic practitioners, we can consider the oppressive realities of power that situate our youth while, in the words of Ginwright (2012), cultivating practice of hope for a better political future.

However, if I take a closer examination of youth daily political activity, the participants in the study authored narratives of power within the ontological positions of power relations, illustrating how social context and discourses (particularly deficit discourses) contextualize their individual and collective exercising of power (Foucault, 1980). This implicates a more capillary movement of power, the injection of power within the “very grain of individuals…touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, and their everyday lives” (p. 102). It also implicates power as non-absolute, rather, capricious and changing within social context (Lyotard, 1984). When Tatiana “acts Gucci” at the end of sixth grade in response to the discourse of “weakness” that positioned her in class—both by her teacher and fellow peers—she is exercising power in relation to others around her. “Gucci” Tatiana immediately switches to
“Old” Tatiana in context where her Gucci-ness is immediately considered inauthentic and, therefore, undesirable by the growing number of Cape Verdean students at the school. Her movement between these identities is fluid. If power was only implicated at the institutional or organizational level, Tatiana’s identity performance in pushing against a deficit label yields no production of power. However, at a collective level, the tension between acting authentically and performing identities within specific contexts of power illustrates ontology of power within the tradition of power/knowledge and de-familiarization.

Further, the relational realities of power are reflected within the students’ actions in their after-school time. Through sneaky resistance (i.e. collectivizing coughing, laughing, sneezing) and acting back, the students exercised power in a collective, politically imaginative way. These constructions of resistance, however, are bound to a political space is “governed” by a teacher they believe position them at a deficit. The students’ body language during the transition from ELA to art is a prime example of this relational politics. As students were handed off to the art teacher—whom often spoke of the students as deficit—they immediately embodied a collective, fluid, “back turned” resistance. Their activity within the after school time—the symphony of resistance illustrated through their beatboxing, singing, and coughing—was collectivized within a space in relation to the teacher in the room.

The narratives of power as punishment, control, and conformity and power as resistance of deficits positioning through identity performance and collective activity, considered side by side, represent the fluid ontologies of power – the co-existence of critical and post-structural ontologies of within differing contexts. Further, the youth narrate such stories within institutional narratives of power as authored by the media, politicians, and school leaders—the zero-to-hero, arts as turnaround, and “we look to you”—that represent a rationalist, neo-liberal ontology of
mobility and power. Within this conversation, I also consider ways in which these youths’ narratives concern citizenship. As I discuss in chapter 3, I entered this study with a conception of subjectivity within the *vita activa*, Hannah Arendt’s (1958) conception of democracy within activity pre-conditioned by and as a consequence of power. She locates subjectivity within the condition of power, and power as an “end” in itself for the subject. In contrast to Arendt’s conception, the participants and their classmates in the study create a sense of subjectivity within their power to resist. In the study, I discuss how Amalia, Tatiana, and Crystal “act” in ways that make them political subjects through positioning.

This activity engages political subjectivity (i.e. as an “agent” or “actor” of power) within their interpretation of political positioning and how others position them (Alcoff, 1988). They perform identities for political movement, action that Foucault might call “strategic.” Crystal’s short but convoluted constructions of acting (chapter 6) speak to the fluidity and social nature of the link between action and power. To Crystal, a person should act “their age” and “mature” but not “older”; they should not act “bigger” than they are, rather, “themselves” and not “way off” from their “normal” identity. Paul spoke of power as “acting authentically” another identity upon which all other identities are compared. Their activities and discourses of resistance and struggle are “modes of criticism” (Butler, 2013, p. 156) that can considered performative and fractured. However, as these acts also function as a “critical and universalizing function” (p. 156), they also part of democratic theory, and should be considered as such.

**Teaching Implications**

As social science scholars, we make assumptions about power, politics, and democratic subjectivity as it relates to our research and teaching. Often, these assumptions are shaped by social and political theories, e.g. critical theory, post-structural theory, feminist theory. As
educators, we promote political knowledge, experiences, and subjectivities that we believe shape “good” citizenry and democracy. However, both scholars and educators should acknowledge that youth navigate political worlds through and outside these boundaries of social theory and our personal conceptions of good citizenship. To understand youth political worlds, educators must ask youth about how they experience power, authority, and punishment. We must also reflect on politically salient questions: In what ways do our narratives of the political relate to youths’ political narratives/knowledge? What values does each narrative promote? How do these narratives position youth as political beings? When we ask such questions, we also need to ask practical questions about our teaching.

We, as educators, should also reflexively inquire if the system of punishment and authority we are creating in schools replicate the very systems of domination and oppression we seek to deconstruct. If we are committed to creating socially and politically just schools and create spaces for students to enact citizenship inside and outside of school, we must consider such our everyday systems, policies, and protocols of punishment as civic education. If Star and Tatiana’s political narratives are primarily about punishment, exclusion, and injustice, they are likely to replicate this within different contexts of their own communities. Upper elementary students might read, write, and share stories of personal and historical in/justice. For younger students, we might use the term “fairness” or “unfairness” to position such stories. Within these stories, we can have explicit, guided discussions and explorations of power. The term power could be introduced early as a key term for examination. As teachers, we can ask students their experiences with the word; definitions of the word; and how they see it in everyday life. Students might encounter the word in popular culture—cartoons, graphic novels, television shows, and movies. They might be asked to consider “power” in the context of their school at the personal
level. Depending on their previous experiences, such examinations can regard histories of punishment and discipline in schools (like in the case of Star or Amalia). They should read and write such narratives with a keen eye to their own position and actions: how did they see power move, flow, and get exercised in such stories? Where did they position themselves within this movement of power? As powerless bystanders? As agents of change?

Pre-service teachers could be asked to analyze the written codes of discipline within their school district. Based on such codes, they could be asked to consider what narratives of power the document tells and what this might mean for their own systems of discipline and punishment. For example, the Detroit Public Schools published the “Students Rights, Responsibilities, and Codes of Conduct”. This free, public document states that students may receive a level 1, a short suspension for “student demonstrations”, defined as “any form of protest or demonstration that disrupts the normal educational process or that is conducted in a manner that violates legal restraints” (2013, p. 12). Pre-service teachers could be considered to inquire into these codes: what values do they perpetuate? If students identify a system of injustice built within the school, what courses of actions are being rewarded and punished? What conceptions of citizenship as a student? About what “fairness” is? Pre-service teachers might be tasked to think about how these narratives implicate their own classroom rules, structures, and systems of punishment and reward.

Second, we should teach our youth to name, read, and analyze institutional narratives of power that surround the school, in the media, and their governments. Students should read local newspaper articles, listen to speeches from politicians, and consider the messages sent to them by school officials. Despite the persistence of the “zero-to-hero”, “arts as turnaround”, and “growth mindset” narratives perpetuated by the media, school administration, and government, Star and
Amalia’s interpret the power of “turnaround” as in the hands of one person, Principal Jermaine. Principal Jermaine came in to replace the previous principal, a black male raised in contexts similar to the students in the Septima Clark Community, who, according to Star, was a fatherly figure for himself and the students. This “white savior” narrative, one perched in the neoliberal reform narrative of “turnaround schooling”, is a dangerous and powerful one. It posits that poor black and Latino/a youth need “saving” from their communities and themselves (recall Star’s remark that, before the turnaround, “we were all bad”) and their own communities and positions power and agency in the hands of an elite few.

Narratives of Youth Political Life

One of the larger goals of this study is to consider the narratives of the youth in the study in relation to the broader political narratives situating them. How do such narratives align, diverge, or inform one another? What do these narratives mean for the teaching and learning of civics? First, I would like to address the narrative perpetuated by Levinson’s (2012) argument regarding the civic empowerment gap. Levinson posits that, in general, poor black and Latino/a communities wield less political power than white affluent communities, citing the salient differences in political participation within multiple measures of political skills, knowledge, and activity.

The less influence black and Latino/a communities have over “formal levers of political power”, the less influence they have on policymakers and the creation of policies. This gap in political power, Levinson argues, is shameful and hurtful, and public school educators must call to action if we agree that the pursuance of a justice and equal democracy is a goal of public education. Within this argument, Levinson points to guided, experiential civic education as the “gold standard” of civic education for low-income youth of color. She posits that experiences in
civic institutions, such as participating in mock trials at court houses and advocating for policies in front of elected officials. She encourages the examination of youth of historical narratives of struggle, particularly of poor black and Latino/a communities.

I find Levinson’s urgency about the civic empowerment gap useful. If civic scholars and educators are to gather the attention, resources, and political backing necessary to improve, enhance, and expand civic education, a call of urgency much as Levinson has made, is imperative. Instead of authoring a counter to her narrative, I analyze how the narratives constructed in my study contribute the discourse around the civic empowerment gap. Although, as Levinson asserts, that I find it important to consider how youth can employ traditional levers of political power, I also find that learning for and about the “micro-politics” of daily life an instrumental direction for civic education. In this way, my study reframes the question from “what should we teach urban black and Latino/a youth so they can gain access to equal political power their white peers as citizens?” to “what can we learn from the experiences and activities of black and Latino/a youth to inform how we teach civics?”

For example, in chapter 6 I discussed the participants’ use of direct confrontation as an illustration of strength, protection from deficit labeling, and an authentic means of social and political problem-solving. Considered on its own, teachers might perceive verbal confrontation between students only as a gesture of violence, inappropriate for school, and merit for punishment. If we listen to the stories of our youth, we might learn their conception of confrontation as authentic problem-solving that, in the end, promotes sustained peace instead of citing violence. “Why don’t you just confront them in a nice way?” Amalia asked, “You just say sorry for this, and this, and this, and this. And then you just be friends by the end of the day…” As teachers, this means we are also tasked with teaching how and when direct confrontation is
productive and useful as a tool for “problem solving” and change. If, as Amalia implies, that peace is the desirable ending, then educators should also teach explicitly for the hope for peace.

As asserted in chapter 2, I take the stance that youth development, as a model of civic education, is not enough to understand youth political engagement. I further suggest that civic scholars and educators should question that skills and knowledge as primarily “givable” by experiences educators create and “receivable” by youth within civic contexts. This singular narrative of youth development is worth calling into question. Youth development scholars might consider that narratives of youth political experience and understandings are fractured and cannot focus onto one “trajectory” of success based on list of attainable skills. Instead, we can ask how these stories and divergences, contradictions (in regards to race, in regards to performativity/authenticity) inform our understanding of the “skills” and “knowledge” that they need to develop.

The fractured narrative of race and power as authored in chapter 4 illustrates this claim. Star’s narrative of race and punishment seemingly contradicts the experiences of Amalia. Within his narrative, race was the primary factor determining his punishment, and, to Amalia, race could not be a factor in the decision. If, as civic educators working with black youth, we want students to develop a sense of black consciousness—a black person’s realization of his or her societal position of (white) oppression and the need to take collective political action toward liberation (Ginwright & James, 2002)—we must acknowledge that youth experiences with race and power have contrast, texture, and nuance. The development of such a sense of consciousness relies not only on their experiences with race, but the narratives about race they learn from their families, their assumptions about racism in America, how they position themselves, and how others position them racially. To understand and work with these differences, we must enquire into

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youth experience, activity, and personal storytelling as the basis of our work. Amalia self-identifies as Cape Verdean Youth already possess a set of skills and knowledge – in many ways – far more complex and contextual than we can understand. They are also bound by racial and cultural parameters.

This study calls to attention the political knowledge and skills of urban youth constructed through their daily experiences in schools, an explicitly civic space, in addition to the political activity and experiences designed for an explicitly civic purpose. For example, Crystal has learned to explicitly navigate two political systems—those of her peers and those with formal authorities such as teachers. Although the six participants in the study did not participate in lessons or experiences in schools designed by teachers for an explicitly political purpose, their narratives of power demonstrate a layered, nuanced understanding of the political systems.

**Teaching Implications**

First, teachers can create multimodal opportunities for students to *embody* and *share* their stories of power before we consider our pedagogies for civic action. When I taught a civic education course (alluded to in the prologue) to seventh and eighth graders in Chicago, I started each course with an exercise, stepping over the line, which a students to step into the circle if they had experienced specific moments of unfairness, powerlessness, hopelessness, injustice, oppression (e.g. “I have been treated unfairly because of my gender”), and, just as important, of freedom, liberation, exhilaration, and creativity (“I have experienced a moment when I felt completely free.”). These *physical* movements are purposed to create a sense of solidarity and difference—“we have gone through similar things at different times and places”—and lead to an impromptu, open-ended storytelling session. Most sessions are a combination of intense, powerful, candid, sad, awkward, ambient, and serious. I hear stories of bullying, encounters with
police, aggressive gentrification, confrontations with personal sexuality and homophobia, and xenophobia.

Sometime during the class, I perform a spoken word poem about a series of racist encounters of my life. The poem, “At My Dictation” tells my story as a third grader, a reflection of multiple instances across my time as an Asian-American boy in a primarily white elementary school. In the poem, I talk about how a fifth grader would come onto the basketball court when where I played daily. After going through his daily thread of racist comments that I still remember clearly, (“Hey slanty eyes, America has no room for Japs!”; “Go back to Japan, samurai boy!”), I talk of the day that I summoned the courage to throw my basketball in his face, causing his nose to bleed. I end triumphantly with how I thought I felt in the moment: as a “taker down” of a racist.

I always ask, at the end of the questions students almost always have, to describe how power moved throughout the story. Who had it and when? During the time when the bully was badgering me, did he unequivocally have power over me? What about the school system? Further, were my aggressive actions just? Did they change anything? Why? These stories become the basis of our critical examinations of power that guide our civic action projects. We compare our stories and look for similarities, differences, and ask ourselves: what does this mean about how our communities function? What does this mean about who we are within such systems of power? What does this mean for our political decisions moving forward?

This sharing can be followed by explicit political analysis. Teachers can draw from Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974) as instructional texts for political change. During my civics class in Chicago, I invited a teacher thoroughly trained in Boalian theatre. Together, we enacted several Boalian exercises, such as human sculpting, an exercise where
students are asked to sculpt, using only their bodies, abstract concepts such as “power”, “oppression”, “violence”, and “freedom” based on the stories of injustice they told. Within such sculptures, other members of the class are tasked with re-sculpting students to “change” the dynamics oppression, for example, to one of freedom. How do our bodies change? How do our spatial relationships to each other change?

I also used Boalian spect/acting as a form of theatre in which my students performed their stories of injustice on a stage. With the help of a small group of peers, my students went through the scene one full time without interruptions. The students then performed the scene again, and in subsequent performances, the spectating audience was positioned as potential “actors” in the scene, i.e. spect/actors. These students can interject into the scene by saying, “Stop!” and introducing characters, of their own imaginations, into the scene to change the direction of the play and offer a solution to the problem being posed. New power relations are exercised, and the existing actors must react accordingly. After the several iterations, we collect together and reflect. What solutions seemed more feasible than others? Why? In what ways did the new characters change the dynamic of power? How did power move and why did that matter? In my class, this storytelling—that drew from the embodied experiences of my students—were the basis of our mutual learning, community building, and our vision for our ensuing civic action projects.

**Challenges and Tensions**

**A Limited Explanation**

Locating the “authorship” of narrative, even in embodied performance, is difficult. Clearly, the narratives I describe in this study, although evidenced by my participants’ words, are not entirely of their own construction. As the writer of this dissertation, I chose to describe and
categorize their stories to “make sense” of them, resulting in my organization built around narratives of punishment, resistance, and hope. As I listened to the recording of our focus group discussions and interviews, transcribed the tapes, and chose how to represent their ideas, I brought my personal biases—such as my desire to narrate youth political capacities in a school context—which, no doubt, influenced how I chose to frame and construct stories. I also grew very fond of all my participants as time progressed, which furthered my desire to consider their stories accurately and through a counter-deficit framework. In this way, the “youth” narratives in the study should not be considered the “voice” of these youth as a whole, rather, a constant negotiation between their individual and collective discourses, my interpretations of such discourses, and the filters I use to decide what to write and what to exclude. In this way, I consider these narratives partial, simplified version of complex social phenomena through the lens of my own subjectivities (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

As the year progressed, I befriended several members of the teaching staff, served as one of the girls’ volleyball coaches, and supported students in their academic instruction. In this way, I knowingly positioned myself within the formal systems of power at the school. I did this consciously for several reasons. First, I wanted to gain a deeper sense of trust with my participants. I had come aware of the utmost importance of trust based on our talks, and I hoped for a relationship that extended beyond a mere researcher/participant dichotomy. Second, and selfishly, I wanted to feel like part of the school community. This decision almost certainly influenced my positioning in the focus group. I started the study as an unknown, suspiciously viewed adult in the building. Ten months later, I was an active, adult member of the school community. In some ways, this gained me more access to the participants’ world; they seemed to trust me and knew I would return three times a week to ask about their stories. However, it is
equally feasible that I also was excluded of important discourses of politics because how I positioned myself (and was positioned by others) within the systems of authority at the school. Finally, I note that the stories of many are excluded from this study. Perhaps most notably, the words of the teachers are largely absent, as are the stories of Principal Jermaine, Mr. Royal (middle school academic dean), and parents of participants. These exclusions alone leave much unanswered in regards to political narratives at Septima Clark.

**The Centrality of Race**

Throughout my writing and data collection process, I struggled with the question: how central should race be in framing my study? I acknowledge that I might receive pushback for framing my study within theories based in white social thought. For example, Foucault was a French, white, male philosopher, and Arendt was a German, white, female political theorist. Both wrote political theory, in part, as a rejection of the philosophy of history as constructed by Hegel and Marx, two white, German men (Allen, 2010). In contrast, none of my participants were white, and they attended a school educating 99% youth of color. One could argue that my decision to not frame my study explicitly through race theory as it relates to power (i.e. critical race theory) is epistemologically misaligned or irresponsible.

Some context: when I began this study, I looked to critical race theorists Bell (1992), Ladson-Billings (1998), and Delgado & Stefancic (2006) to frame my political narratives as related to race. As my study proceeded, however, I chose not to centralize race for several reasons. First, I framed my focus group and interview protocols primarily around my participants’ emergent talk. Within our discussions, the discourses of race seldom emerged. I realize there are several possible explanations, including the possibility that my participants perceived race as an unacceptable/undesirable discourse in the focus group and/or within school.
Star, who brought up race as a central construct in his stories of punishment, was the exception. However, as Amalia, Tatiana, and Paul remained adamant that race could not be a factor in his suspension, Star immediately abandoned his explanation. At these junctures, I was unsure how much to push talks about race. Although I believed that race and systems of punishment were correlated, I questioned the effects of asserting my political lens as truth. Although I followed up on Star’s story of suspension during an individual interview, Star was visibly weary of retelling the story, so I dropped it.

At times, I considered asking explicit questions about race in their schooling experiences. As an Asian-American man, I subscribe to the tenet of critical race theory that racism is a normalized, often invisible, part of the daily experience of non-white people in America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006), and—as an extension—I assumed my participants did, too. Even as I write this, I grapple with the question, how might my study have turned out differently if I had been adamant about my assumptions of race and racism within the context of the school? This question, at least for now, remains unanswered.

**The Politics of “Using” Kids**

This question of racial politics speaks to the primary tension I encountered while writing my paper. When I entered my doctoral studies, I was resolute on research that burst at the seams with words like empowerment, social justice, and agents of change. They sounded so robust, so sexy, so invigorating. I was determined to find a way to merge my beloved service-learning pedagogy and teaching for social justice. Abigail (a pseudonym), a senior lecturer on family and community engagement at Harvard, (and a woman I admire greatly), challenged me and my fellow classmates to become “warriors for social justice”, a metaphor she used for educators committed to fighting for educational equity. My experience as a teacher in suburban and urban
contexts informed me of the power of civic education. My time at Harvard helped me put a
critical, justice-oriented lens to it. And now, I had a metaphor inspiring my charge forward.
What, then, would be the next step in building thoughtful, critical, civic pedagogies and
instructional applications? How would I teach students to develop a sense of critical and political
consciousness in such civic experiences? How would I develop their desire to further this work?

However, at the early stages of my study’s formation, I received an email from a
professor in my doctoral program. She had my read my annotated bibliography of articles, book
chapters, and studies about how we teach civic education for purposes of social justice. Her
email put a kink, albeit an important one, in my warrior armor. She asked me to consider:

What do the kids themselves have to say about our attempts to engineer them through
these projects? Wherein actually lies the experience of political agency? Is it somewhere
in the relationship kids experience with a teacher who listens to them or is it in a teacher
who uses them for her own political goals or somewhere in between? I was once asked to
consider the ethics of using kids in achieving the goals of my own feminist politics, and
that question had a huge impact on me (italics added, personal communication,
September 29, 2011).

The professor’s email was disruptive but important. She forced me to ask a question I was
unwilling to ask myself: How are the politics we aspire to as teachers taken up by the students to
whom we subject to those same politics? In other words, if we seek to teach for social justice as
our “politics of hope”, how are our students experiencing these politics? And why—for the most
part—aren’t we asking them? Is it because we don’t want to know?
Herein lays the tension: I want to believe I am still a warrior for social justice. I want to believe I know what kind of teaching is best for students. Education needs strong, directional, assertive, and, most of all, practical ideas on how teachers can to improve and master their craft. However, in my dissertation, I do not explain direct, linear implications for justice-oriented teaching. My study is descriptive, explanatory, and contradictory. When other scholars or teachers ask me how my work applies to teaching, I cower a bit. I articulate “possible” implications, a series of “maybes” for future teaching.

Yes, I wrote some teaching implications early in this chapter that I consider important. However, I still ask myself: if, as the author of the dissertation, I cannot confidently articulate how this study directly applies to powerful teaching and learning for the political world I hope for, won’t it be far more difficult for other teachers? Will my dissertation be sitting in electronic clouds for decades to come without having any significance to teachers in urban context? What if I would have studied teachers who use culturally relevant pedagogy to teach civics for social justice and cogently described the powerful outcomes? I want to know if my study has any—even if nuanced—potential to bring about educational change. If my dissertation is to inform better teaching and learning, is description good enough?

Concluding Thoughts

The answer I have come to, as of now, is: I don’t know, but I hope so. Of all the experiences I have with schools, teaching, and learning, I am confident of at least one idea—that powerful, memorable teaching is relevant to students’ lived experiences. As educators, we should, of course, continue discussing how best we teach students. We should continue to look at the consequences and results of our teaching and consider powerful theories, practices, and discourses of education inform pedagogy. At the same time, educators should do everything they
can to understand their students’ stories, histories, and experiences of our students—and learn in the process. Star, Amalia, Epic, Tatiana, Crystal and Paul remind me of the power of a shared experience. Together, we shared food, giggled, whined, supported each other, and recoiled with disagreement. We forced our ideas onto each other without permission. We challenged each other’s perspectives, sometimes with compassion and other times with righteousness.

One month ago, I visited Septima Clark after school. A teaching fellow from the extended day learning program asked if I would volunteer as a mock interviewer for eighth grade students in preparation of their high school interviews. Rejuvenate my service identity and an opportunity to see “my kids”? I jumped at the chance. As a school of choice district, the Vera City high schools required all incoming freshman to interview as part of the admission process. Upon arrival, Amalia spotted me from down the hall. She ran up to me, hugged me, told me she missed me, and started telling about her weekend at her cousin’s house. Paul, considerably less energetic, gave me a brief nod. “Hey Mister, are you here to help with interviews?” he asked. While I was chatting with Rose (who I introduced in chapter 3) about the girls’ volleyball season, Tatiana stepped between us and gave me a firm hug. She then turned, gave Rose a hard look, and wordlessly stepped away. Rose, a powerful physical and social presence in her own right, looked down at the ground. Tatiana is a powerful girl. I caught up with Star, who had grown about two inches, outside of his math classroom.

“I’m here to do mock interviews,” I told him, “Don’t you want me to do yours?” Star shook his head.

“No, I want Mr. M to do mine,” he replied. “Are you coming back tomorrow?”

The organizer of the interviews, who knew my relationship with Epic, put us together in hopes we would have time to re-connect. After I conducted the interview, I chatted with Epic
about our experiences last year. Voice changing and facial hair sprouting, Epic first thanked me formally. Assured that his interview was over, he turned to me and said,

“Mr. Kawai, you know, I miss our group. I miss being able to talk about what we think is important and share it.” To me, that was the foundation of our experience together. We shared poetry, stories, and song lyrics. We formed were community bound by our mutual experiences.
References


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8 To protect geographic and personal identities, all identifying references to name of the city, state, or neighborhood of the school are replaced by pseudonyms [in brackets].


APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol #2: Framing Place, Space, and Daily Experience

Semi-structured interview with students:

To say: My name is Roi, and I am from Penn State University. I’m doing a research study on how you define citizenship, what activities you do every day that are important to you, and how you think you contribute to society. I also want to know about places you go both inside and outside of school that are important to you. Do you mind if I take about 30 minutes to talk to you? I want to remind you that your parent and/or guardian said it was okay for me to interview you.

If you do not want to be interviewed, you can say so and no one will be upset. Is it okay if I interview you? I will also be recording our interview on my computer (show computer) on a program called Garageband. From these records, I will write a paper that captures what was said. Do you mind if we record the conversation? If there is anything you want to take back or erase from the file, please let me know so I can go do that.

1. Please tell me a little about yourself. What do you like to do on a daily basis? Who do you like to hang out with?

2. Tell me a little about the neighborhood of [Oakton]. If you were to take me on a tour of the neighborhood and show me where important or interesting places are in [Oakton], where would you take me?
   a. Out of all those places, where are the places you like to hang out?
      i. Starting with (place 1): Describe to me what you like to do in that place. Why do you do it?

3. Where are some places that you hang around at school? Could you describe that place/those places for me?
   a. What do you like to do in those places in school?

4. Where would you say your neighborhood is? Can you show me on this map (show a large map of [Oakton] and point to where we are) where that is? How would you mark the boundaries of this place (give the participant a highlighter)?

5. How about community? Is this any different from where your neighborhood is? If so, where would you say your communities are located?

6. What are online social networking spaces you visit on daily basis?
   a. How would you describe the primary reason why you visit those spaces?
7. I am going to now ask you about the positive and negative social aspects your neighborhood. By social aspects I mean problems, issues, concerns, benefits, or assets about the way people interact with each other in this neighborhood.
   a. What do you absolutely love about your neighborhood? What are things that the people or citizens do that makes your neighborhood great? [If definition of community is different, repeat question for neighborhood]
   b. What are some problems or concerns you see in your neighborhood or community on a daily basis? Probe further as necessary.
      i. How do you know these problems exist?
      ii. Without naming names, can you describe some of what you see or hear about?

8. What are some problems you see outside of school (in your neighborhood, in your community) on a daily basis? Probe further as necessary.
   a. How do you know these problems exist?
   b. Without naming names, can you describe some of what you see or hear about?

9. Descriptive Question: Could you tell me what a typical day is like for you on the weekdays when you go to school? [Probe further as needed; hone in on the times they interact with civic institutions or within political spheres]

10. Descriptive Question: Could you tell me what a typical day is like for you on the weekends? [Probe further as needed; hone in on the times they interact with civic institutions or within political spheres]

Thank you so much for your time
APPENDIX B: SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Group Protocol #3: Conceptions of Citizenship

Nice to see you again! As a reminder, I’m doing a research study on citizenship, what activities you do every day that are important to you, and how you think you contribute to society. I also want to know about places you go both inside and outside of school that are important to you. Do you mind if I take about 30 minutes to talk to you? *I will also be recording our interview on my computer (show computer) on a program called, Garageband. Do you mind if we record the conversation? If there is anything you want to take back or erase from the file, please let me know so I can go do that.*

Last time, you drew this map and talked a little about what you do on a daily basis, where you go, people you hang out with, and what you think of your community—at school and in your neighborhood. In this interview, I’m wondering if you can talk to me about wh

1. How would you describe what it means to be a “citizen”?

2. What is the difference between a “good” citizen and a “bad” citizen? Let’s start with a good citizen. What does a good citizen do?

3. What does a bad citizen do?

4. Are you a good citizen? Why or why not?

5. So citizens usually identify with being connected to a place, usually a country, a state, even a school. If I were to ask you to complete this sentence: “I am a citizen of _______” what would you say? Why? Do you have any other examples?

6. Can you give me examples of activities that people who are good citizens do? What activities do they do? Why?

7. So, based, on your previous answer, what do you do on a daily basis as a citizen of your school?

8. So, based, on your previous answer, what do you do on a daily basis as a citizen of Roxbury?

9. So, based, on your previous answer, what do you do on a daily basis as a citizen of _______ (community mentioned in question 5)?

10. Why do you take such actions?

11. What have you learned when taking such actions?
American “Values”

1. What rights do you think all citizens of the United States have? How about citizens of Septima Clark

2. Which of these rights are given to you as a student in this school? As a citizen of [Oakton]? Why do you say that?

3. Which of these rights are not given to you as a student in this school? As a citizen of [Oakton]? Why do you say that?

4. When you find that one of these rights are taken away, what do you do? How do you act?

Injustice

1. When you think of the word, “justice”, what do you think of?

2. How about the word, “injustice?”

3. What is an example of an injustice you may see on a daily basis in your neighborhoods? In your school?

4. What do you do as a result of this injustice? Do you act? Why or why not?
Criteria of Field Notes/Journaling

Field notes will be taken if or when I am invited by participants to join or observe any civic or political activity (inside or outside of school) they find particularly meaningful. I will also jot down field notes when I have interactions/informal conversations with participants. I hope to journal about information about daily, potentially relevant activity, communication, social interaction, and sensory details at other sites that may indirectly influence the case site. These mostly include qualitative observations and direct quotes. I might also include any low-level analysis or potential questions I have in the process.

As most of my field notetaking will be inductive, I have wide-open protocols for most of my study. These will lead to low-level inductive memos in which I will write down the occurrences of the day/interactions as records. Sample protocols and organizational schemes are located below.

My field notes might include:

- Date, time, and places of observation
- Specific facts, numbers, details of what happens at the site
- Sensory impressions: sights, sounds, textures, smells, tastes
- Personal responses to the fact of recording fieldnotes
- Specific words, phrases, summaries of conversations, and insider language
- Questions about people or behaviors at the site for future investigation
- Page numbers to help keep observations in order

(International Relations Research, n.d.)

Example: Field Notes: March 19, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Notes: Strategies for Reading Poetry (read the title; determining the subject; understanding who the speaker is in the poem; set a purpose; figure out what the poem says versus what it means) Poems: Still I Rise &amp; Invictus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political Narrative: Regardless of the circumstances and who “keeps you down”, you must rise up. Narrative focuses on racial and sexual oppression.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Context: One of my participants is not here today—Paul (at least not in this class). Students are sitting in a forum format, as usual, facing the front of the room. The lights seem to be dimmer today in the classroom; the curtains are drawn. Marie pulls out Tatiana out of the classroom. Ms. O reads the poem, “Still, I Rise” by Maya Angelou. When the poem is being read, the rest of the class is very attentive to the reading, some with their heads on the desks,
others leaning back in their chairs. C and Amalia (sitting in front of me) seem to be attentive with their body language. On the white board, the DO NOW reads: Adjusting reading based on genre; SWBAT: Read and interpret images in a poem; Homework: (1) Read “Big Bog”; (2) Analysis questions

7:44 AM  Following S: When asked to split into partners and re-read the poem, S is left a bit to himself, although he is sitting next to N and Esthela. S spends none of the time reading the poem and most of the time trying to get M’s attention.

7:50 AM  S: his head is placed on his fist, his fist on his desk. While Amalia explains that the poem is about “people hating her with words”, S looks up. S’s black binder sits on his desk, on the left of his desk. B: “People may doubt, people may not believe in her abilities…” S looks straight ahead. When Ms. O asks the students to read the poem a second time, S takes his chair and moves himself around the desks in the side of the room, implanting himself behind M and next to Mauro. This movement seems to be a chore, a task he doesn’t want to do, but it’s better than the alternative of being excluded from the group of N and Esthela. M’s body language seems to be pointed away from S, but he’s relentless about talking to M and C about the poem.

7:54 AM  During the time, S leans forward, toward the two other boys, and the boys lean back. When Ms. O calls the class back to order, S remains in front of the class. When S offers the answer, “[I didn’t hear it]” Ms. O comes back saying that it’s not a figure in nature. S seems to take a bit of offense to it, but he mutters under his breath.

8:00 AM  [Discourse] When asked to respond to the question, “What clues do you have that the poem is written by an African American woman?” and the students are asked to share in partners. S puts his hands up and Mauro offers his answer: “I am a black ocean.” S says, “With your bitter, twisted lies, You may tread me in the very dirt, But still, like dust, I’ll rise” to which Ms. O asks, “Why do you think that connects to her being African-American?” She asks S to clarify because it’s making people murmur. Then, Ms. O asks the class if they agree or disagree, and C says that he thinks S is saying that the colour of dust is brown or black like her race. K raises her hands and disagrees, too. M disagrees with S, too. During this time, everyone disagrees with S, for the most part, and my guess is that the ey’re reading Ms. O’s questioning and tone of instruction. S says, “I disagree with myself and agree with M, C, and K”. Ms. O turns a little and says, “The thing is that I kind of agree with you” in regards to the subtly of the metaphor—the dragging someone of the dirt, even the “dust” is suggestive of African-American history. “I like that you brought it up even though it’s not the one that’s most noticeable.”

8:05 AM  While listening to other references to symbols of the blackness of the author, S sits and looks forward, arms crossed. C and M chat, while S takes off his glasses, opens his mouth, and looks to M seemingly for attention. C has now taken S’s glasses, and S crosses his arms, leans forward, and says, “I need my glasses!” While Ms. O is talking about the lines in the stanza, S continues to talk to M about… Once Crystal gives her answer about the images (looking for things), S looks back up at Ms. O.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:12 AM</td>
<td>Currently, S is playing with a bottle of hand cleanser, and he puts his hand up to answer the question. Ms. O: “The look”… K says, “she’s confident!” (and says, “ohh…”) referring to the JB song. Ms. O gives her a chiding look and asks, “Was this before or after jail?” to which K says, “BEFORE!” (how Ms. O uses pop culture to connect with/balance off her students).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:15 AM</td>
<td>Ms. O asks what does MA mean when she writes, “That I dance like I’ve got diamonds at the meeting of my thighs?” S says he wants to comment on something he notices: that diamonds are something people want, etc. “What makes her a woman…” Kids giggle and stretch in discomfort regarding the question about “the meeting of the thighs” and how it connects to the diamonds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:19 AM</td>
<td>Kids are asked to describe the speaker and the theme of the poem. When sharing, S pulls away from M and C (physically) his chair is moved away. He leans forward, jotting down answers to the question after having asked her to repeat the question again. I feel like Ms. O’s class is the one class—it’s so interpretive—that S’s ideas get recognition (at least by Ms. O) but certainly not by the class students as a whole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:23 AM</td>
<td>Ms. O introduces the poem, <em>Invictus</em> by the poem William Ernest Henley. When asked to discuss the poem, S spends most of his time sharing his glasses with C and M. He says, “HD TV for free” as they pass the glasses around, and he leans forward. He wears a half-smile; I can’t tell if it’s one of happiness or almost a faux smile (with the complexity that he’s not truly been invited or included) when he talks to the boys. His hands are crossed, under his chest, as he laughs at a comment made by M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30 AM</td>
<td>For S, his glasses (and the ensuing attention) seem to be his #1 priority. All answers he gave within the discourse of the class were challenged by the students and questioned by Ms. O (definitely more than others) although, in the end, was supported by the explicit power in the class: Ms. O.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:34 AM</td>
<td>Epic asks what the word “clutch” and “loom” mean. Ms. O answers him outright.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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APPENDIX D: CODED DATA SAMPLE

Me: What kind of problems do you see?

Epic: Especially in [the after school program], I see that people, I mean sometimes I do, accept it, that we, actually, sometimes call out and, I mean, our teacher from [the after school program], gets very frustrated, and she’s trying to teach us. And sometimes I get pretty frustrated, too, because, I imagine to be in her place, and I mean, I think she is pretty frustrated, and she’s trying everything she can, like, to she’s trying to teach us, and we aren’t appreciating it. I mean, we say the problems we have, but sometimes, we don’t fix it, we just accept it.

Me: Okay. Why do you accept it? Why don’t you try to fix it?

Epic: I mean, I fixed it for the most part, but I mean, sometimes you know, you get a little distracted, you start making noises, but isn’t happening to me as much. And I mean, I’m trying to keep myself from it.

Me: Right. So you’re trying to make sure that you’re responsible yourself.

Epic: I mean there’s something called “the buddy room” in this school. I’ve actually, like most people go a lot, like more than 10 times, and I mean, from sixth to seventh grade, in sixth grade I only went like two or three times. In seventh grade, I’ve been like [inaudible segment 15:32 – 15:34] of school, I went like three times.

Me: Okay, so what is it? What kind of room is it?

Epic: Buddy room.

Me: Buddy room. What kind of room is that?

Epic: Like ah, so you can calm down and then, one person calls Ms. [X], she talks to us, and tells us like, “Why did you come here?” and tries to say like, “I don’t want to see you in the buddy room again; why don’t you sign this” saying you’re going to change. But I don’t think this actually much effective, because I mean, you just sign something and you go, but I think it works because for the most part, you become more relaxed from the buddy room to your class.
## APPENDIX E: SAMPLE OF INITIAL CODING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bad kids (self-deficit positioning)</td>
<td>Star states that &quot;because everybody used to be bad&quot; - (on why officers came to the school; why teachers rounded students up during fights and put them into small rooms)</td>
<td>FG5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad kids (self-deficit positioning)</td>
<td>Epic expresses surprise at the pre-turnaround characterization of SCPS and SCPS students. Star seems to take his inexperience as a flaw.</td>
<td>FG5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad school</td>
<td>Star states that pre-turnaround, &quot;everyone just running through the hallways, people would be beating up people in the bathrooms everything&quot;</td>
<td>FG5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad school</td>
<td>Star and Epic claim that weapons as commonplace (knives) before the turnaround</td>
<td>FG5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad school</td>
<td>Amalia argues that students brought weapons that are brought into school and others, not there before the Turnaround. Tatiana expresses disbelief.</td>
<td>FG5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting &quot;Way off&quot;</td>
<td>Crystal describes acting “way off” as acting differently than you actually are; acting beyond yourself</td>
<td>I2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting Big (size as a metaphor)</td>
<td>Star pushes back on students who are Caribbean (DR/PR) who &quot;act big&quot; beyond their own social standing</td>
<td>FG7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting Big (size as a metaphor)</td>
<td>Crystal describes this as trying to act tough, bigger than who you are, older than who you are. Different from acting maturely.</td>
<td>I2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# APPENDIX F: SAMPLE OF CODING CLUSTERS AND CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Codes</th>
<th>2. Emerging Narratives</th>
<th>3. Low-Level Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Authority and respect are given to those people who are consistently present (“she not in our classes”) and teach something useful.</td>
<td>I would imagine that the political narrative authority as thought of by adults and the institution differ from the personal narratives. In this way, the participants are looking for respect to be reciprocal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>Authorities at the school, namely teachers, administrators, other adults, are teaching kids to <strong>conform toward one way of being</strong>: they should treat kids as they actually are, not who they “want us to be”. Those in power at school are attempting to create “robots” out of students, not humans.</td>
<td>I particularly like Epic’s metaphor about being treated as a robot. This certainly fits within the scholarly narrative of turnaround schooling and the influence it has on students’ sense of openness, creativity, and divergence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geographic neighborhoods are <em>not</em> spaces for social interaction; rather, they are often isolating. The only exception is Paul, who feels a sense of community in his apartment complex because the kids help out with projects, occasionally.</td>
<td>The definition of “community” seems to point to (for Paul), a space where people come together to work on a common project. It is compelling that most students don’t feel a sense of community, outside of their family, within their physical neighborhoods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>According to S &amp; C, the protocols for discipline and punishment (the warning system and the buddy room) are both unjustly strict and ineffective to correct student behaviors. To L, K, J, and G, the system is fair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>Expulsion of a class leader was done unjustly, without regard for the students’ side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expulsion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Confronting others, even if it’s physical aggression, toward those who “call you out” is necessary as a means of self-protection and illustration of strength and power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Protection/Defense</td>
<td>Conflict is created when two or more people desire the same thing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
but everyone cannot have that thing (i.e. a person, material goods)

APPENDIX G: SAMPLE SUB/NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Themes</th>
<th>Sub-narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-narratives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sub-narrative #1: Adults in power—including teachers, principal, and school deans—use power for purposes of conformity, stifling individuality and humanness.**

Epic, in particular, asserts that authorities at the school, namely teachers, administrators, other adults, teach students to **conform toward one way of being.** He believes those in power should treat kids as they actually are, not who they “want us to be” and attempting to create “robots” instead of better humans.

**Sub-narrative #1a: Power is equated with control, surveillance, and punishment.**

All six participants argue that power and authority is synonymous with control over others, the right to give out punitive consequences (i.e. dean of middle school, principal), or to have strength over something or someone.

They all identify teachers, principals, dean of schools are the people in power, as they hold the power of punishment. In general, **whiteness** is the face and race of power at the school.

Star argues that **surveillance** keeps kids accountable, helps gain control over students. The “eyes in the sky” security cameras help keep control at the school; they prevent bullying, kids walking out of school, and students ignoring teacher directions. Without constant surveillance, physical, verbal, visual prompting from teachers, students will not know how to behave properly.

**Sub-narrative #2: Systems of discipline and punishment are designed and enforced unjustly—and, therefore, merit resistant activity and calls for change. Those who subvert the injustice merit praise and reverence.**

Star, Tatiana, and Amalia Expulsion of a class leader was done unjustly, without regard for the students’ side. Building leadership also purposefully misinforms students about expulsions.
All six participants argue that the discipline and punishment system was unjustly developed and is unjustly enforced; therefore, resistant activity is necessarily justified.

According to Epic and Star, the protocols for discipline and punishment (the warning system and the buddy room) are both unjustly strict and ineffective to correct student behaviors.

Sub-narrative #3: Race is a primary factor when it comes to disciplinary decisions made by teachers, and it should be called out for what it is. Race is a primary factor in schooling experiences with those in power.

To Star, the only self-identified African-American black male, race has a significant role within the doling out of punishment to students, based largely on his experience with being suspended. Similar to his critique of the entire “warning/buddy room” system, he seems to be the only one to believe that the whole process is biased against black students, and his blackness is a strike against him.

Sub-narrative #3a: Race is a virtual non-factor to disciplinary decisions made by teachers because we all have equal rights so the injustice cannot occur.

To Tatiana, Amalia, Crystal, Paul, and Epic, race is a non-factor when it comes to disciplinary decisions made by teachers. These decisions, although they are no always just, come from misunderstandings between students and teachers. Race is generally a non-factor when it comes to experiences in school. All students have equal rights and therefore racial injustice cannot occur.

Sub-narrative #4: Students are powerless toward making decisions about their schooling or if any dangerous, discriminatory, or oppressive action is taken by those in power.

Students are powerless in schools; they do not make consequential decisions nor can they affect change. Students are powerless toward making decisions about their schooling or if any dangerous, discriminatory, or oppressive action is taken by teachers in school. They may have the “privilege” of being able to speak up in school, they need to be heard more, heard actively, by those in power at the school, including teachers.
APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT (ENGLISH)

Title of Project: Civic and Political Counter-Narratives of Black and Latino Adolescents

Principal Investigator:
Roi Kawai
Email: roikawai@psu.edu
Cell: 224.715.2952

1. Purpose of the Study:
The purpose of my study is to understand the civic and political experiences of your child on a daily basis. The research questions are:

- What are the daily civic and political experiences of seventh grade OGPS students in school and their neighborhoods?
- What meaning to they make of these experiences? What civic and political knowledge do they construct based on these experiences?
- What civic and political narratives they are constructing on a daily basis?

2. Duration/Procedure:
If you and your child grant permission for participation, your child will participate in three activities during school hours. These include: individual interviews, focus group discussions, and photography exercises.

- Individual Interviews. Interviews will take place during lunch (12:10 – 12:35 p.m.) once or twice a month. Your child will have ample time to eat lunch during the interview. I will obtain recordings (audio and/or photo) of individual interviews.

- Focus Groups. Focus groups are small-group discussions facilitated by the researcher. These discussions will take place during your child’s “Global Awareness” class during Citizen Schools extended learning time, from 3:30 – 4:15 on Thursdays. The campus director of Citizen Schools has already agreed to the arrangement. Your child’s absence will not affect your child’s report cards. Both focus group and individual interview times will not interfere with your child’s in-school activities. I will also obtain visual and textual recordings of focus groups.
- **Photography Exercises.** Your child will also be asked to take photographs of their daily activity that relates to societal contributions and sense of identity with their communities. He or she may also have their photos taken for purposes of the study, both inside and outside of school. All photos will be stored in password-protected documents on my computer. Photos may be used in research publications and/or presentations but audio recordings will be used only by the investigators and destroyed on July 1, 2018. Renderings from any of these data will never be associated with your child’s name.

This study will last for half the academic year, from January 2014 to June 2014. Individual interviews should last approximately 25 minutes each and occur no more than 6 times during the semester. Each focus group should take roughly 45 minutes and will occur approximately 3 times per month.

3. **Discomfort and Risks:**

There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday school scenarios. I will remind your child that even if you said he or she could participate and decides not to, he or she does not have to. I will also tell your child that his or her participation is not for a grade in school and that no one will be upset if they do not want to participate.

4. **Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to your child from participating. Although the benefits of discussing experiences and participating in civic projects can be powerful, the experiences that occur in the school are not created by this research, rather by the everyday context of their lives.

5. **Statement of Confidentiality:**

Your child’s participation in this research is confidential. All participants and school names will be given pseudonyms. The data and pseudonym key will be stored and secured on a Pennsylvania State University school laptop in a locked and password protected file. Only I will have access to this file. Publications or presentations resulting from the research will contain no personally identifiable information. In the event that photographs accompany a publication or presentation, your child will not be identified by name in photographs. If your child speaks about the contents of the focus group or interviews outside the group, it is expected that they will not tell others what other individual participants said.

Audio-recordings will not be shared with anyone. The Pennsylvania State University’s Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board, and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this project.

6. **Right to Ask Questions:**

Please contact Roi Kawai (me) at roikawai@psu.edu with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number (224.715.2952) if you feel this study has harmed you or your child at any time. If you have any questions, concerns, or problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania
State University’s Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. I can answer questions about research procedures.

7. Voluntary Participation:

The decision of your child’s participation is yours to make. You or your child can withdraw at any time. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you or your child would receive otherwise. If you agree to allow your child take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below. You may want to make a copy of this consent form for your records.

8. Permissions:

Please read both selections carefully and place an “X” in the box you feel most appropriate.
Please ask your child to return to his or her homeroom teacher.

☐ Box 1. I agree to allow my child to be recorded and photographed in regular classroom activities for the purpose of documenting their experiences in school projects. I also agree to allow my child to be interviewed both individually and in a small group with other children by the principal investigator for the purpose of understanding what they have learned from their experiences.

☐ Box 2. I DO NOT agree to allow my child to be recorded and photographed in regular classroom activities for the purpose of documenting their experiences in school projects. I DO NOT agree to allow my child to be interviewed both individual and in a small group with other children by the principal investigator and other approved members research team of this study for the purpose of understanding what they have learned from their experiences.

Child’s name: ____________________________ Homeroom: 7L

_____________________________________________ _______________________
Parent and/or Guardian Signature Date

_____________________________________________ _______________________
Parent and/or Guardian Name (Printed) Date

Optional:

_____________________________________________
Parent and/or Guardian Email Address

_____________________________________________

Parent and/or Guardian Phone Number

Please Return This Form
APPENDIX I: INFORMED CONSENT (SPANISH)

Título del Proyecto: Contra-narrativas cívicas y políticas de adolescentes latinos y negros

Investigador Principal:
Roi Kawai
Email: roikawai@psu.edu
Número de celular: 224.715.2952

1. Propósito del estudio:
Mi proyecto de investigación busca entender las experiencias cívicas y políticas de cada estudiante a diario, dentro y fuera de la escuela. Las experiencias cívicas se refieren a cómo su hijo(a) entiende, actúa, y trabaja para resolver los problemas de la escuela o comunidad, y las experiencias políticas, a cómo su hijo(a) entiende, actúa, e interactúa con el poder.

Las preguntas de investigación del estudio son:

• ¿Cuáles son las experiencias cívicas y políticas cotidianas de los y las estudiantes de séptimo grado de OG en la escuela y en su vecindario?
• ¿Qué significado dan los y las estudiantes a estas experiencias? ¿Qué conocimiento construyen sobre la base de estas experiencias?
• ¿Qué relatos cívicos y políticos construyen a diario los y las estudiantes de séptimo grado en OG estudiantes?

2. Procedimiento/ Duración:
Si usted y su hijo(a) conceden el permiso para la participación de su hijo(a) en este estudio, el (la) estudiante participará en tres actividades durante el horario escolar. Estos incluyen: entrevistas individuales, grupos de discusión, y ejercicios de fotografía.

• Entrevistas Individuales. Las entrevistas se llevarán a cabo durante el almuerzo (12:10-12:35 p.m.) una o dos veces al mes. Su hijo(a) tendrá suficiente tiempo para almorzar durante la entrevista. Las entrevistas individuales serán registradas por medio de audio y fotografía.

• Grupos Focales. Los grupos focales son discusiones en grupos pequeños facilitadas por el investigador. Estas discusiones se llevarán a cabo durante la clase "Conciencia Global" durante el horario extendido de Citizen Schools, de 3:30 p.m. a 4:15 p.m. los jueves. El director de la escuela de Citizen Schools ya ha aceptado el acuerdo. La ausencia de su hijo(a) no afectará los boletines de calificaciones de su hijo(a). Ni los grupos focales ni las entrevistas individuales interferirán con las actividades de su hijo(a) en la escuela. También se harán registros audiovisuales y textuales de los grupos focales.

• Ejercicios de Fotografía. También se le pedirá a su hijo(a) tomar fotografías de su actividad diaria en relación a sus contribuciones a la sociedad y al sentido de identidad.
con sus comunidades. Sus fotos podrán ser usadas para propósitos de este estudio, tanto dentro como fuera de la escuela. Todas las fotos se almacenan en documentos protegidos por contraseña en mi equipo. Las fotos podrán ser utilizadas en publicaciones y en presentaciones de investigación pero las grabaciones de audio serán utilizadas sólo por los investigadores y serán destruídas el 1 de julio de 2018. La interpretación o representación de cualquiera de estos datos jamás serán asociados con el nombre de su hijo(a).

Este estudio tendrá una duración de medio año académico, de enero de 2014 a junio de 2014. Las entrevistas individuales durarán aproximadamente 25 minutos cada una y se producen no más de 6 veces durante el semestre. Cada grupo focal debe tomar unos 45 minutos, y se producirá aproximadamente 3 veces al mes.

3. Molestias y riesgos:

No hay riesgos en la participación en esta investigación más allá de los experimentados en los escenarios escolares cotidianos. Le recordaré a su hijo(a) que incluso si usted ha dicho que él o ella podría participar y él o ella decide no hacerlo, él o ella no tiene por qué. También voy a decirle a su hijo(a) que su participación no es para calificación alguna en la escuela y que nadie se molestará si no quieren participar.

4. Beneficios:

No hay beneficios directos para su hijo(a) relacionados con su participación. Aunque los beneficios de hablar acerca de sus experiencias y de su participación en proyectos cívicos pueden ser potentes, las experiencias que se producen en la escuela no son generadas por esta investigación, sino más bien por el contexto cotidiano de sus vidas.

5. Declaración de Confidencialidad:

La participación de su hijo(a) en esta investigación es confidencial. A todos los participantes y nombres de la escuela se les dará seudónimos. La clave de datos y seudónimo será almacenada y asegurada en un computador portátil de la escuela de la Universidad Estatal de Pensilvania en un archivo cerrado y protegido con contraseña. Sólo yo tendrá acceso a este archivo. Publicaciones o presentaciones derivadas de la investigación no contendrán ninguna información de identificación personal. En el caso de que fotografías acompañen publicaciones o presentaciones, el nombre de su hijo(a) no será asociado con las fotografías. Si su hijo(a) habla sobre el contenido de los grupos focales o entrevistas fuera del grupo, se espera que no mencione a otras personas aquello que otros participantes dijeron en el grupo.

Las grabaciones de audio no serán compartidas con nadie. La Oficina de Protecciones para la Investigación de la Universidad Estatal de Pensilvania (Penn State), la Junta de Revisión Institucional, y la Oficina de Protección de Sujetos Humanos para la Investigación del Departamento de Salud y Servicios Humanos, puede revisar los registros relacionados con este proyecto.

6. Derecho a hacer preguntas:
Por favor, póngase en contacto conmigo, Roi Kawai, a través del correo electrónico: roikawai@psu.edu para todas las preguntas, quejas o dudas acerca de esta investigación. También puede llamar al número telefónico 224.715.2952 si siente que este estudio le ha hecho daño a usted o su hijo(a) en cualquier momento. Si usted tiene alguna pregunta, inquietud o problemas acerca de sus derechos como participante en una investigación o si desea ofrecer retroalimentación acerca de este estudio, por favor comuníquese con la Oficina de la Universidad Estatal de Pennsylvania para Protección de la Investigación al teléfono (814) 865-1775. La Oficina de la para Protección de la Investigación no puede responder preguntas acerca de los procedimientos de investigación. Yo personalmente responderé sus preguntas sobre los procedimientos de investigación.

7. Participación voluntaria:

La decisión de la participación de su hijo(a) es suya. Usted o su hijo(a) pueden retirarse en cualquier momento. La negativa a participar o retirarse de este estudio no incluirá ninguna sanción o pérdida de beneficios que usted o su hijo(a) recibiría de lo contrario. Si está de acuerdo con permitir que su hijo participe en este estudio de investigación y la información que se indica más arriba, por favor firme su nombre e indique la fecha a continuación. Es posible que desee hacer una copia de este formulario de consentimiento como constancia.

8. Permisos:

Por favor, lea las dos selecciones cuidadosamente y marque con una "X" en la casilla que se considere más apropiada. Por favor, pídale a su hijo(a) comunicarse con la Srta. Kim o el Sr. Roi.

☐ Casilla 1. Estoy de acuerdo en permitir que mi hijo (a) sea grabado(a) y fotografiado(a) en las actividades de aula regular con el fin de documentar sus experiencias en proyectos escolares. También estoy de acuerdo con permitir que mi hijo(a) sea entrevistado(a) en forma individual y en grupos pequeños con otros niños(as) por el investigador principal con el fin de entender lo que ha aprendido de sus experiencias.

☐ Casilla 2. No estoy de acuerdo con permitir que mi hijo(a) sea grabado y fotografiado en las actividades de aula regular con el fin de documentar sus experiencias en proyectos escolares. No estoy de acuerdo con permitir que mi hijo(a) sea entrevistado(a) ni de manera individual ni en grupos pequeños con otros niños(as) por el investigador principal o por el otro equipo de investigación conformado por miembros aprobados para este estudio con el fin de entender lo que ha aprendido de sus experiencias.

Nombre del hijo(a): _________________________________ Salón: 7L

____________________________ ______________________________
Firma de los padres y / o guardianes Fecha

____________________________ ______________________________
Nombre de los padres y / o guardianes (impreso) Fecha
**Opcional:**

________________________________________________________________________

Número de teléfono de los padres y/o guardianes

________________________________________________________________________

Dirección de correo electrónico

**Por favor devuelva este formulario**
Curriculum Vitae of Roi Kawai

EDUCATION

2010-2015  Ph.D., Curriculum & Instruction
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

2009-2010  M. Ed., Urban School Leadership
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

1998-2002  B.S., Elementary Education
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

TEACHING

2010-2012  Instructor of Education
LLED 297A  Language, Literacy, and Technology in Educational Research
SSED 430W  Teaching Social Studies in the Elementary Classroom
LLED 400  Teaching Reading in the Elementary Classroom

2002-2009  Middle School Teacher, South Middle School, Arlington Heights, IL.

PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Journals


SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2014  Kawai, R. (November). Power, resistance, and hope: Political narratives of urban black and Latino/a youth. Paper presented at the College University and Faculty Assembly (CUFA) of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), Boston, MA.


2013  Kawai, R. (November). Personal as political: How story can inform political teaching. Paper presented at the College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA) of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), Seattle, WA.

2012  Serriere, S, Kawai, R. (November). Fostering civic efficacy and action through fifth graders’ civic ‘zines. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA) of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), Seattle, WA.