Whose Common Ground?

student and adult perspectives on student voice and social justice education at Common Ground high school; relevant frameworks from Critical Pedagogy

I think the future is… well, as somebody said one time, 'it's out there.' It's not only out there, but it's ready to be changed. It's malleable, and there's nothing fixed that you can't unfix. But to unfix things that appear to be fixed, you have to not only be creative and imaginative, but courageously dedicated to the long haul.
—Myles Horton

Because there's some students that are just like, I can't really do anything…and so, I used to struggle with that a lot. I used to be like, I'm not—no, I don't think they need me. and so then I started realizing…maybe they…(laughter)…maybe, they probably do need a little bit of me…

—Keilly, Common Ground Senior

Introduction/Background

This essay first and centrally wants to share with you the work going on at Common Ground—a small charter high school of only180 students with a focus on environmental leadership tucked away at the edge of the forest in West Rock Park, New Haven. I will clarify my connection to the place shortly. Though I didn't know this about the place when I first started volunteering/interning/working there in the fall, the school is in the beginning? middle? of a process of an ongoing (always ongoing?) process of bringing a social justice framework to the teaching and learning that goes on in and outside the classroom.

I started my role as a Public School Intern, or PSI (through Yale's office of New Haven and State Affairs), with a fledgling conviction that schools should educate for social change. That is, that they should conceive of their purpose, their calling, their pleasure, as not just to prepare students for entry to the workforce on the one hand, nor just for civic engagement or democratic participation on the other. This second purpose is insufficient if we take *engagement* to mean primarily the teaching of the skills and the modes of participation in a system taken for granted as democratic, or democratic enough. I feel lucky in that in a modest way I've come to this conviction through personal experiences as a student and in schools with ideals they have productively and unproductively struggled to live up to. One of the insights I've found across much of what I've read for this project points to the obvious but unacknowledged fact that knowledge—a viewpoint or an interpretation of viewpoints—does not simply spring up out of personal experiences but is also a product of the social, historical, and political conditions that give rise to those experiences in the first place. For this reason, though I feel that the academic occasion of writing a senior thesis applies some pressure on me to gesture towards impartiality or objective rigor, I think it's more honest to not erase my voice as the author, or disavow the authority that voice gives.

Summary of role as Public School Intern

As a PSI I've spent time at Common Ground helping seniors with college essays, observing and assisting in Mr. Stone's Environmental History class, Ms. Foran's Senior Social Justice Experience (SSJE), and Mr. Richard's sophomore and junior Civic class. I've taught a mini-lesson about the indigenous movement at Standing Rock, and another on the separation of powers and their relationship to Trump's immigration plans and policies.

Most directly relevant to this project, I also spent the fall helping students work on a set of reflections about their time at Common Ground through the lens of Common Ground's environment leadership standards, which they have to "defend" (speak reflectively about) to a staff panel, alongside an accompanying research paper and "social justice project" they put together in the spring. It was during my time sitting in on the Senior Social Justice Experience course, taught by Ms. Foran (who is quoted a few times in this project), that I first started asking the questions at the opening and at the heart of this project:

Guiding Questions and Methods

What do students and adults at Common Ground think about school's social justice work and curriculum?

How could this work grow stronger and deeper roots?

The main resource I am drawing on to answer these questions are interviews I've conducted with students and staff at the school. I also draw on insights and frameworks from theoretical and practical iterations from the field within educational theory called *critical pedagogy*. I'll get to that in a moment, but first, the interviews:

Over the course of a couple of months, as early as February and as recently as last week, I conducted interviews with 12 students and staff at Common Ground. Of the students I interviewed, four were seniors and one was junior. As far as staff, rather than focus just on

classroom teachers, administrators, or another category, I took a varied approach. I interviewed the school principal, a classroom teacher, a school administrator, the college counselor, an after-school paraprofessional, a curriculum planner, and a member of the Common Ground's board. It feels unfair to reduce these people here to just their job title tags, because it seems to be the nature of schools but also of Common Ground in particular, given its size and mission, that the adults in the building take on multiple and overlapping roles. Though I benefitted greatly from the interview practice in Professor Deb's course last semester, my approach was looser and less rigorous than the traditional qualitative research approach.

Interview Themes

There are three key findings or themes that stuck out from the interviews:

1. *Lack of continuity and cohesiveness in Common Ground's focus on social justice*

2. *An absence of clarity about the connection between social justice and environmental leadership with regards to the school's identity.*

3. *A struggle over the viability and practice of meaningful student voice and agency.*

Based on Interviews: New Questions

In light of these three findings, I see the task ahead as threefold:

1. Coming up with ways to create meaningful continuity of emphasis and purpose in the social justice component of the curriculum (see theme 1); to help make it something that the students live and breathe at the school rather than a sudden "emphasis" that is sprung up in their senior year. Because, like Keilly (one of the CG seniors you'll hear a lot from in the coming pages) said: *if they don't know nothing about social justice I don't think they understand (laughter) life. Like, point blank.*

2.	Coming up with ways to make the connection between social justice and environment leadership at Common Ground stronger and more intuitive (theme 2).

3.	And helping think about how to turn Common Ground's emphasis on student voice (in theory and in practice) to one on student power (theme 3)!

The Context is Common Ground, But the Principles Expressed in this Project Apply Beyond

As I began to describe, in order to think through these themes and suggest potential points of pressure and commitment, I am drawing on the problems posed and insights shared by the people I interviewed. The interviews were designed so that students and staff could share about the points of struggle, concern, confusion, waning momentum, confidence, and so on that the social just education work at Common Ground was generating in them. This is not that say my presence in the interviews was hands-off or neutral during the interviews themselves. My instincts about what questions to ask, and which subjects to linger on grew stronger the more I heard from others. If I had the chance, I often tried to respond by paraphrasing a response I had heard from a previous interviewee that was related to or lightly conflicting with the current interviewee was saying, so as to create a collaborative, conversational effect.

I gained a great deal of knowledge and understanding from these interviews. But the knowledge and experience of place I've been slowly accruing at Common Ground from traditional sites of high school knowledge (like hallways, the cafeteria, the hallowed teacher's "lounge") about the more practical, pedagogical, and psychological difficulties of this social justice work has been really critical too. There's much about the mechanics of Common Ground here that I've included because it is necessary to make my point, but I hope that the place-based

focus doesn't distract from the broader set of principles and methods with which to approach social justice education that are applicable to many more schools than just Common Ground.

Common Ground, and I say this lovingly, talks a really big game. I don't bring this up for the purpose of shaming CG or pointing a finger at the gap between theory and practice. The gap is a good thing. One of the recurring phrases in the writings of Paulo Freire (we'll get to critical pedagogy soon) concerns the essential "unfinishedness" of human endeavor. It is because we know that we do not live in the world we *might* live in that we are able to fight to better the world we live in now. To meet people "where they're at" does not require hiding behind pragmatism, defeatism, or cynicism when it comes to understanding that schools as sites of transformative possibilities. The critical theorist Henry Giroux articulates a version of this when he writes that while schools often serve more as agents of social reproduction rather than as agents of social mobility,

> *it is nevertheless inaccurate to argue the schools are merely agencies of domination and reproduction. Missing from this discourse is any understanding of how authority might be used in the interests of an emancipatory pedagogy…*[and the] *irony of this position is that the left's politics of skepticism translates into an anti-utopian, overburdened discourse*[1]

Jesse, who is in charge of the senior leadership and social justice curriculum, says it better, simply: "students are our lifeline for being able to do this work". What I take her to mean by *lifeline* is that no matter the difficulties and structural pressures (from the school or from larger political forces) students make learning power possible.

Critical Pedagogy Sparknotes

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[1] Giroux, Henry A. "Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope Theory, Culture, and Schooling: A Critical Reader." Chapter 4. (1997).

Finally, to sharpen and radicalize, that is, to give grounding to my analysis and interpretations of the work happening at CG (and staff and student perception of it), I've turned to examples of critical pedagogy in theory and practice. Though only some of the people I've read would identify as critical pedagogues themselves, and not all (but many) cite Paulo Freire, a figurehead of this field, … I use the term "critical pedagogy" somewhat broadly to mean an education that helps create the conditions under which students might learn to analyze structures of power and the effect of those structures on their lives and their communities. Another important facet of critical pedagogy is responding to that knowledge by learning (and experiencing in action!) strategies for intervening upon and improving the world individually and collectively. I didn't appreciate before digging a bit deeper that critical pedagogy is not so much a methodology or a social justice how-to, but rather an approach to the act of teaching and learning and its relationship to individual and shared agency and power. Ultimately, I've found that critical pedagogy, though uncompromising in a few core values, is importantly dynamic and adaptable to varying contexts.

For this reason, even though the relevant context here is an environmentally focused charter high school in Connecticut in 2017, we can learn from, for example, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire—who in the quite different political contexts of eastern Tennessee and eastern Brazil respectively—took on highly successful and important adult literacy campaigns in the late '50s and early '60s. Similarly, the learning context that bell hooks is writing from in her *Teaching Trilogy*[2] is the seminar rooms at elite universities like Yale, where she taught for many years in the

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[2] Hooks, Bell. Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope. Vol. 36. Psychology Press, 2003.

Hooks, Bell. Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom. Routledge, 2010.

Hooks, Bell. Teaching to transgress. Routledge, 2014.

'80s. This does not prevent us from learning about the difficult and painful conversations required to effectively fight "white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy" (a poisoned well we all drink out of). Nor does it stop us from imagining the kind of caring, and also difficult, communitarian classrooms and relationships required to sustain that fight and counter-vision transposed from a college to a high school context.

A lot of the reading I did for this project, I should say, did engage with the school context in particular. Christopher Emdin, a high school teacher, offers the framework of "reality pedagogy", characterized by what he calls the seven C's: cogenerative dialogue, coteaching, cosmopolitanism, context, content, competition and curation[3]. You might fairly say that some clarity is sacrificed for the sake of alliteration, but the pedagogy that the "seven C's" combine to create is radically student-centered. In *Learning Power: Organizing for Education and Justice*, Jeannie Oakes and John Rogers chronicle different teacher partnerships and school initiatives supported by the Institute of Democracy, Equity, and Access at UCLA to involve students in participatory research and grassroots activism for radical educational reform[4].

Before I go on, I should say that I am not undergoing a systematic review of the literature, as it were, in part because I haven't read widely enough for such a review to have standing in education and political terrain as charged and complex as I'm wading in. But also the reason I'm front-loading a quick mention of some of these sources is to explain their inclusion in the rest of the paper as partners in the conversation I'm trying to be the table for. The theory is not presented or reviewed here as if it had any greater explanatory power than the perspectives

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[3] Emdin, Christopher. For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education. Beacon Press, 2016.
[4] Oakes, Jeannie, and John Rogers. Learning power: Organizing for education and justice. Teachers College Press, 2006.

of people on the ground at Common Ground. I hope you will see this strategy borne out in the way I approach the structure of the rest of the paper.

Teaching is a Political Act

If there had to be just one guiding principle to critical pedagogy I think it might be the recognition that teaching is a political act. I went to a nominally "progressive" private high school in Santa Monica, California, and even there, where speech is far less restricted than in public schools, teachers couched their language under the thin cloak of bipartisanship and neutrality. But there can be no such thing as neutrality. Myles Horton said it helpfully: *It is a code word for the existing system.*[5]

That teaching is a political act is a statement at once obvious and transgressive. To imagine the function of schools as set apart from politics would be to ignore the obviously political factors that contribute to aspects directly and indirectly related to the learning conditions in schools. Further, to posit schools as politically unmotivated or neutral is to ignore the effects of an over-investment in the belief of schools as a panacea for all social ills and the concurrent material underinvestment in the schools themselves and in the social services outside the classroom (like housing and healthcare) that would make possible more and better learning in the classroom. Implicit in many political speeches and policy platforms misguided if not dishonest optimism about education's efficacy as a lever for social mobility. There a pernicious appeal to this trenchant belief and the language it is couched in. Well, would *you* like to leave a child behind? Would *you* like to be the one with an excuse? In the name of an uncompromising and touching belief in students, educational reformers (and the corporate interests they often represent) are able to muscle through policies (in favor of school closures, privatization, and

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[5]Horton, Myles, Paulo Freire, Brenda Bell, and John Gaventa. We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change. Temple University Press, 1990.

against teachers and teachers unions) that end up hurting students and undermining public education.[6]

The political nature of education does not however give teachers license to impose their beliefs on their students. This is something that critical pedagogues, if not their critics, are actually quite clear on. Nevertheless, setting aside first the legal question of the constitutional restrictions of teacher's speech in the classroom, it's fair to say that teachers might face feelings of fear or confusion about political indoctrination at a school that's pushing an emphasis on social justice.

Ms. Foran often opens class with a monologue or story that only sounds effortlessly improvised, but that I suspect she often gives some prior thought to. In class a couple of weeks ago, she expressed a worry, one that she alluded to in her earlier interview with me, that she wasn't properly balancing her desire to empower her students with the need to keep them safe. *I don't want to trade teaching for propaganda,* she says. *If six Republicans or Trump supporters were in my classroom, would I be an effective teacher for those students*? She meant it rhetorically, but it's nevertheless a remarkable question to pose to a class. No doubt she is feeling these anxieties personally and professionally. The way she performs them though, and lets students engage with these ideas that most teachers would keep to themselves, is suggestive of the spirit of trust and collaboration required by critical pedagogy.

But, to the substance of what she's saying: I wonder what the critical pedagogue's response to her concerns over balancing safety and empowerment (her words) might be. I think one approach to Foran's concern might be to encourage her to try to hover above the fray of electoral politics and engage the political and historical conditions that made Trump's rise and

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[6] Ravitch, Diane. Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools. Vintage, 2013.

appeal possible. The educational response to the kind of party polarization that might make students feel unsafe in the school environment if they supported Trump isn't to pull back and offer boilerplate bipartisanship, any more than it is the news media's responsibility to give equal air time to "both sides" if the terms of the debate themselves are fundamentally unjust. "Rather than focus on issues of safety, I think a feeling of community creates a sense that there is a shared commitment and a common good that binds us,"[7] bell hooks reminds us in *Teaching to Transgress.*

One such issue that that binds us necessarily to a common good is the issue of climate change. It's also a helpful test case for revealing the untenability of political "neutrality". Shaelyn, a helpful and confident senior I interviewed, recognizes this.

> *It's really funny because Ms. B was trying to be neutral. She was like, "I'm trying to be neutral". But like she was struggling because the fact that 99% of scientists say that climate change is real and proven…and then to have a president and people in charge of this stuff be like nah…CO2 has nothing to do with the warming of the planet…it's like WHAAAT!*

Shaelyn's commentary here helps reveal the silliness of "neutrality". Because who would advise the teacher—at an environmentally focused high school no less!—to not be honest about the threat that climate change poses? And yet, on an issue where the political and existential stakes literally could not be higher Trump and the overwhelming majority of the party that has propped him up in power has nothing to offer but destruction and self-interest.

I wish you had seen how physically expressive Shaelyn became as she said this. She leaned forward and clenched her firsts but smiled in angry irony as she said WHAAAAT! For me this was an example of Freire's conviction that "knowing is not a neutral act, not only from the point of view of [the] body, the sensual body. It is full of feelings, emotions, tastes."[8]

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[7] Ch 3 Embracing Change: Teaching in a Multicultural World
[8] Horton, Myles, Paulo Freire, Brenda Bell, and John Gaventa. Chapter 1.We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change. Temple University Press, 1990.

Teaching is a Relational Act

Keeping in mind this emphasis on feelings and the knowledge they take part in, I want to briefly

explain the guidance counseling structure at Common Ground. In their freshmen year students

are placed in a "guidance" with a teacher and a group of students that will follow and grow with

them for the duration of their time at the school. A 45 minute "guidance period" is built into the

schedule everyday after lunch. What the space consists of is somewhat open but broadly speaking

it's a space designed for academic and personal support. It's important too to point out the

political potential built into it. Every guidance choses a student council representative. This

means that every day any student is potentially only one degree removed from having an opinion

aired or engaged with in student council! More than that though, it is clear that guidance is an

important source of community and emotional comfort for students. All the students I

interviewed spoke gushingly about guidance. Ms. Foran describes it sort of breathlessly:

> *These kids are—I'll be with them forever. They'll be in my life forever now. It was a really intense bonding. We lost kids through tragedies. We gained kids. We're just a really tight group. We do community service together. We have parties together…*

To empower students to become agents of social change there must be trust and mutual

commitment between teachers and students. As such the kind of community that the guidance

model seems to foster at Common Ground can guide our understanding of the way that political

and the relational dimensions of teaching are closely interwoven.

Strength and Weaknesses of Student Voice in Practice and in Theory

In Practice

In my estimation, the primary way the school is conceptualizing the social justice work in

and outside the classroom is through the lens of "student voice". Its strength as an operative

framework relies on students actually feeling like their voice is being heard and responded to in

practice. That's a tough target, and it's clear from the few student interviews that it's not always met. Senior Idonia Thomas puts it succinctly: *It's always a hierarchy. It's always someone that has the final say telling us.*

Even the arenas most specifically designed to promote student voice do not always live up to their promise in the eyes of students. For example, Town Halls are organized every month or two as a way for student council to bring proposals for school changes to the full student body in a democratic, consensus based model. Town Hall Meetings are a chance for the full student body to discuss and potentially make changes to a community issue or norm. Their content is decided by the student council members in consultation with each of their guidance groups. Members of the student government are then tasked with the critical if perhaps unenviable task of facilitating a student-body-wide discussion that is meant to lead to some kind of actionable consensus. Recent Town Halls have been about changes in the school dress code and cafeteria conduct. Not exactly radical propositions…though important in their own right to the students' sense of their agency and power. I would even suggest even that it's precisely the standing of the space as a venue for student voice and leadership that makes adult intervention glaring and discomforting for some students. Here's the way Shaelyn puts it:

> *The issue with [Town Halls] off the bat is that they had [teacher] lead them. And that kind of dissuaded students from really talking and they were kind of intimidated. And it still felt like it was… staff.*

Idonia on the other hand had a seemingly different take about staff participation in Town Halls that's worth quoting at some length:

> *It's more student voice, but it's about staff voice too. I feel like sometimes, you know? We do put it on admin, you know, admin has control of this... But I feel like sometimes staff doesn't step up, and say how they feel. I feel like they restrict themselves because they feel like their opinion is too much, or they feel like their opinion won't be heard, when in reality some of the opinions of staff are important and very true. And so there's been town hall meetings […]that teachers could comment on and they don't want to comment. I really wish we could hear those voices.*

Though Idonia and Shaelyn seem to be diagnosing separate problems—a presence versus a lack of teacher input—if viewed from the perspective of critical pedagogy they might be connected. In the first case, Shaelyn thinks that a teacher's heavy hand isn't reflective of the capacity that she and her classmates have to set the agenda and run the meeting. In the second case, Idonia thinks that the teachers' invisible hand isn't reflective of their potential contribution and insight in the community-wide discussion.

What these two responses have in common is the feeling that these spaces where student voice are meant to be valued and engaged with are not always sites of genuine reciprocity. In bell hook's language, the student/teacher relationship can be *life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student work together in partnership[9]*. Liz Cox, the school principal, would not put it quite that way but maybe wants something similar. In her view, the key to the social justice work from a staff perspective is *all about being in community with [students] and really recognizing them as partners, that you're doing this work together.* This might mean an explicitly collaborative endeavor. For example, it is a necessary feature of Christopher Emdin's reality pedagogy that *students in traditional k-12 schools have to be viewed as partners with the adults who are officially charged with the delivery of content and be seen/named/treated as fellow teachers or co-teachers.[10]*

Student/Teacher Relationship and Student Voice: The Walkout

A student walk-out was planned to some success last fall to bring attention to the lack of staff of color at Common Ground—which is almost three quarters black and brown students with "just a little handful" of POC staff, as senior TaQuann put it. To give some context, here's

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[9] *Teaching Community*; introduction
[10] Emdin, Christopher. Chapter 5. For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education. Beacon Press, 2016.

Keilly describing showing up to Common Ground in the fall after a couple of staff of color resigned last summer:

> *it was very heartbreaking when I came into the school and I was like oh like this is a totally different atmosphere right now…*

TaQuann described the situation in even starker terms saying he felt *overcome by all this whiteness*, and calling out the school directly, saying,

> *I feel like it's kind of hypocritical of the school to like talk about social justice in certain things within the school is happening…I feel like they should just get themselves together.*

Whether TaQuann's call-out of the school's hypocrisy is an entirely fair claim is immaterial to the larger dynamic it gestures to. The teachers and the principal responded really positively to the call for a walk-out. I was at the staff meeting where the principal warned teachers. There was some light grumbling, but mostly, everyone was on board. Ironically, their responseThat is, that if students don't recognize or trust their teacher or school as a partner in the work of social justice then the work will inevitably stall if it ever gets off the ground at all.

In Theory

I have a critical pedagogy-based challenge to the language of "student voice," beyond the more immediate challenge that at common Common Ground there still lots of work to do for student voice to be genuinely heard and engaged with. The concern is that the language of "voice" conflates *knowledge of power* with power itself. Just as knowledge is not in itself power, being able to speak is not the same thing as being able to use that speech to act upon and help remake the world. *I feel like awareness is making a change in a way,* says Idonia, which depending on how you read that is either reflective of her faith in the transformational potential of knowledge or an indication of her potentially underdeveloped analysis of power.

Another theoretical limitation to the framework of "student voice" is its potential to privilege the individual over the collective. The high-water mark of the Common Ground

experience is the portfolio defense at the end of senior year. Therein the students reflect on the school's "environmental leadership standards". The acronym they make is POWER—pride, ownership, wonder, effort, and responsibility. I am not challenging the validity or importance of any of those values on their own, but the sum of them paints a pretty individualistic picture of student growth. Shifting to a communitarian stance is no easy task. In *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*, Duncan-Andrade contends that

> *it can be a struggle to develop a classroom culture where students act as a community because students typically come to the classroom with little school-based training on how to work collectively. (68)*

Another example of Common Ground narrow conception of "student voice" is the way that the student' input about the curriculum is mostly happening on the level of giving students the choice to pick electives rather than giving them a seat at the at the table of curricular co-creation. *That's 80% of it,* remarks Ms. Foran confidently about letting students elect some of their classes. There's some movement toward a more substantive student involvement in curriculum work, but some of how that will play out is still up in the air. Says Joel:

> *there's a lot more student choice and voice [to be explored] about what is in their academic schedules as well as within classes, but I feel like right now we are a little bit fixated on students choosing what classes to pick.*

One place to shift the conversation about "student voice" to one about student *power* is in relation to the way the school promotes student activism and organizing.

Activism and Organizing

Critical pedagogy places a relentless emphasis on praxis—the way in which a theory or an idea is tested *in action* to then be reflected upon later toward the

end of better action, and so on in an endlessly iterative process. Common Ground, as evidenced

by this picture at April's *People's Climate March*, is committed to supporting student activism. The

importance of direct on-the-ground action cannot be overstated as part of any education for

social change. Jean Anyon states the issue uncompromisingly in *Radical Possibilities* when he writes

that:

> *We do not typically get people involved in activism or social movements through exposure to critical pedagogy, social justice curricula, or books like this one, although these are crucial to providing information and analysis. Rather, as labor movement, peace movement, and civil rights activists will tell you—people are radicalized by actually participating in contentious politics.[11]*

bell hooks puts it even more plainly when she paraphrases Freire in saying that *we cannot enter the*

struggle as objects in order late to become subjects.

The fact that Common Ground took a bus down to D.C. for the Climate March in itself

evinces tremendous support for student activism. But there's a way that the activism might

operate at too far a remove from the heart of the social justice work on campus and in doing so

lose some of its power. Shaelyn articulated this concern before it was even on my radar:

> *I think it was my sophomore year we went to a rally for charter schools, as a school, but that was really all we kind of did. There wasn't any kind of talking about it, or well, how do we effectively rally? or what is the significance of this necessarily?*

I think here Shaelyn is identifying the absence of reflection about action, reflection that might

lead to knowledge about "how to effectively rally" that could then be used in later action. Freire

states the need for both sides of the praxis coin in a funny way when he writes that *otherwise theory*

simply becomes blah blah blah and practice pure activism.[12]

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[11] Chapter 9. "Building a New Social Movement"
[12] *Pedagogy of Freedom, Ch. 2*

Shaelyn's message here underscores the need for Common Ground to view the activism and related social justice work that it advocates for as both challenging and building from the curricular work that happens inside the classroom.

Curriculum

For the last few years Common Ground has partnered with an organizational non-profit called CEIO (Co-creating Effective and Inclusive Organizations). The fruit of their first couple of years of collaboration is a detailed workplan with five priority outcomes:

> *1) Build organizational understanding of race, racism, systems of oppression, and our capacity to dismantle*
> *and transform.*
> *2) Build equitable, inclusive systems of evaluation, accountability, and decision-making.*
> *3) Build an integrated, whole organization that breaks down silos, where people understand and contribute mission and values into action*
> *4) Build an inclusive, collaborative, liberatory social justice curriculum and pedagogy.*
> *5) Students lead the change*

I have waited to share this work plan. I've done this because as you can see CEIO puts it so succinctly that I worried about adopting too quickly frameworks whose formation I've had no access to and which I haven't built myself through the synthesis of the interviews and theory. I am sharing now because it helps show how the building of a social justice curriculum and pedagogy is just one part of a broader organizational vision. The curricular component of the work seems to have the most momentum behind it right now and so deserves to be quoted on at length. Here's Joel:

> *So the goal is to move to a system where a student experience where 9th graders share a common experience that is interdisciplinary in nature, where math, science, social studies and language arts are taught as an interdisciplinary core and there are strong environmental and social justice themes that run through that core. What's unclear yet is what those themes will be. Is it about identity exploration and discovery of self? The idea is that there will be a 9th grade core experience and next school year we will build the tenth grade experience that builds on that…*

Two separate but related questions are posed here: what will the curriculum consist of? and how will that question be negotiated?

As for the first question, by starting with 9th graders and taking on a four-year process, Common Ground is poised to help create the continuity in its focus on social justice that both students and staff I've interviewed have identified as absent. How will they get there though?

Examples of practical ideas that might bring together the questions and the critical-pedagogy-inflected reflections on student voice, activism, curriculum in this paper:

—A participatory action research elective that starts every semester with a fully blank slate and engages students in process of forming research questions and "data" collecting—doing qualitative research about a social justice issue of the class' collective choice. The final project or product for the class could be a class-led Town Hall where other students could talk-back their responses, ask questions, and brainstorm further action items that related to the class's findings.

—Rather than have the participatory action research be based in a class, guidances could be really powerful loci of social justice work. To the degree that the deepening of the social justice work needs to happen not just on the level of curriculum but on the level of the relationships between students and teachers and their sense of partnership and collaboration, it makes sense to turn to the place at school where the human bond is intuitively at its strongest. All four seniors I interviewed commented on the need for strong connections between older and the younger grades. TaQuann puts it pretty endearingly when he says: I hang out with the woke kids. They know what's going on. I help them. I tell 'em. I'm imagining a model in which guidance doubles as a social justice project working group senior year. The peer mentorship component could happen here by pairing a senior guidance with a younger one. It would really help drive home the school's emphasis on "creating a sustainable change" if the project that a senior guidance

group took on together had to be continued and passed on to the younger cohort they had been

mentoring and learning from.

 —A class co-taught by a High School teacher and the farm manager or assistant farm

manager. The final project for this class could be the creation of a student-created farming/social

justice walking mini-tour. Interested students and teachers could hear from the students about

how the tour they planned showed learning at the intersection of farming and history of farming;

or soil science and social justice; or even math/budgeting skills and strategic farm planning.

These open farm tours would give students the opportunity to flex their autonomy in creating

tours that fit with the courses themes; and also give students practice reflecting not just on what

they've learned, but on what the social justice stakes of that learning are, and how those stakes

could be most impactfully shared out to the larger school community.

 —I think there's an opportunity for Common Ground to engage students in political

contention over questions of school choice and educational equity. When TaQuann and Keilly

approached the administration about their intended walk-out to protest lack of minority teachers,

the school responded really well on the face of it. They understood, like Win, an after-school

teacher told me, that from the perspective of a school:

> if your students are organizing around issues of racial justice, it doesn't mean that you're
> the most racist school necessarily in the city, it means that your students are equipped and
> organized and confident enough to organize around this.

The schools supportive response seems to have had the unintended effect of alienating the

students from the administration somewhat on this issue. It struck TaQuann as hypocritical.

Keilly wondered what the point of a walk-out is if all the teachers plan their schedules around the

action? This is her:

> *I felt like to do a walkout it needed to be like on the spot, let's go. And it was just like, so
> different cause everybody, teachers were just like OK i'm gonna change my*

> *schedule because this is gonna happen and it was just like, that's not the point, the point is to really show that this is what's going on.*

So much for disruption of the status quo. I wonder what could have happened if the school's first response was to try to help students deepen their critique and ask political questions about the structural features exacerbating the problem they are critiquing. The general question is, when the activist critique is of a problem of the school's making or complicity—how does the school support the students?

Before they planned the walkout, TaQuann and Keilly went to a board meeting to voice their frustrations. On the one hand, it's amazing that they felt empowered to advocate for themselves in that forum. On the other, the board's response suggests to me a missed opportunity. TaQuann relays their response:

> …they kept shutting us down and telling us we don't have enough money [to hire more POC staff] because of the funding and stuff like that. That was always their go-to word. like they don't have enough money to do that.

I've been in another board meeting and have been following Gov. Malloy's latest education budget enough to know that the board isn't necessarily speaking in bad faith here. No doubt there are real material and political constraints to building the kind of school students and staff would want Common Ground to be. But that should be the beginning of the conversation, not the end of it. A conversation about grassroots community organizing; about legislative advocacy; about the strengths and weaknesses of social movement tactics. Most importantly, Common Ground should seek to pool and build the resources and strengths that students, their communities, and their family already have. Like one of the posters students took the Climate March read, building a critical justice education requires *all hands on deck* to help fight for and create the school Common Ground wants to be and the society whose radical hopes and political possibilities the school could reflect and help work towards.

Conclusion

> *the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule.*
> *—Walter Benjamin, 3 Theses on History*

In the week following the 2016 U.S. presidential election the Southern Poverty Law Center collected more than 400 allegations of election-related intimidation and harassment nationwide. Over a third of such cases took place at K-12 schools and universities—hallmark sites of democratic life. The right to vote—another democratic cornerstone—has not been under such trenchant (or, I should say, successful)[13] attack in half a century. There were nearly 900 fewer polling stations in the 2016 than in the previous presidential election[14]. Even on it's own most vocal terms, democracy is under strain. These facts are alarming and deeply underscore the need to imagine and create educational structures and practices that empower students to make impactful social change. But if I bring up Trump it's not to fall victim to a moral panic, or moment of political exceptionalism that would require. To chose to focus on the continuities, of which there are an abundance to pick from, between Trump and the ruling elites that have come before him does not have to come at the expense of being alert to the particular political dynamics of the moment. But in the kind of education this project is suggesting any good analysis requires also good practice—brave practice, "dedicated to the long haul" as Horton puts it.

In a recent political and literary forum for the Boston Review titled *What is Education For?*, Danielle Allen, a political scientist and professor at the Harvard School of Education, argued for the revaluation of an educational model based on the promotion of civic agency. The excitement I felt reading her piece was a big part of what prompted my decision to focus on just Common

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[13] See amazing book Berman, Ari. Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America. Macmillan, 2015.

[14] https://www.thenation.com/article/there-are-868-fewer-places-to-vote-in-2016-because-the-supreme-court-gutted-the-voting-rights-act/

Ground for this project. Allen claims that the dominant educational discourse and educational policy paradigm, which since at least the Sputnik era National Defense Education Act, and certainly since the Reagan administration's ominous and influential *A Nation at Risk* report, has focused on vocational training and on the preparation for integration into a global economy. Both approaches (civic and economic) share the belief that education is a lever that can be pushed on to counter economic inequality. Allen's intervention is to remind us that economic inequality is inextricably linked to politics and to political judgment and decision-making. If we are to envision education's role as working toward a more just world we cannot do so without also re-envisioning schools' role in teaching and learning alongside students in common purpose and struggle, the values and skills required for a fuller, more actionable forms of political life.

Post-Script

  I transferred into Yale in the fall of 2014 after graduating from Deep Springs College in California. This is not the place to say all I'd like to say to you about those years in my education. Deep Springs has some pretty large limitations (it's small size, gender, isolation). Depending on who you ask these limitations are there by design. Having learned what I have from Common Ground students and staff, and from reading critical pedagogues, I'd now add to the list another large political limitations as well. At Deep Springs we tried share in an education that included the occasionally joyful, occasionally frustrating process of collective decision making. We negotiated an often thorny, maturing relationship with authority (our own over each other; teachers and staff over students)—sometimes it seemed like the responsibility we had was too little, and often for some it felt like too much. Myles Horton says memorably in multiple places that democracy is the most radical idea we have conceived of. I think that's probably true. With a hundred and one caveats aside, I will say that our education at Deep Springs posed the problem

of democracy, of how to make decisions fairly about the kind of life or at least college we wanted to live in. In a somewhat grandiose and depoliticized way we mishandled the question in some of the ways you might expect 20-year-old boys in the middle of the desert to (overconfidence, lack of perspective and historicity). But the feeling of contention in community is not easy to forget and one I've carried with me and that and has shaped the emotional and intellectual reception to all the amazing learning that I've done and tried to share through this project.

Acknowledgments

Despite the title, this is not for me a capstone to mark the culmination of any path tread. A truer stone-related metaphor would have these interviews, this essay, conceived as a cairn, built carefully here in a point in the trail where the going isn't entirely clear, to make and make visible the road I am walking.

It is for to all my teachers and all my students—known and unknown, in name and in spirit, in the past and in the future—that I leave this small stone.

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