

Access and Failure

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“Remembering Edwin’s experience provokes questions as to the purpose of schooling and my personal complicity within the structures of *urban* schools, which have been designed to perpetuate hegemonic systems.”

Many art education advocates call for expanded arts offerings in schools, particularly in urban settings. These calls for greater and more equitable arts access are presented as efforts toward racial and social justice, yet often lack a vision for a culturally affirming pedagogy. Through the dialogue of the author and her former student, this article explores how more arts *access*, without significant pedagogical revamping, may in fact reinforce the persistent *failure* of urban schools to provide purposeful education, particularly for Black male artists.

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An era of national policies toward curriculum standardization continues to result in diminished arts offerings in school (Au, 2007; Berliner, 2011), with the greatest decimation occurring in urban settings (Finn & Ravitch, 2007; Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). Over the past 25 years, Black students have experienced an alarming 49% decrease in childhood art education (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). Although some Black students may benefit from arts-rich homes and communities, the colossal failure of *schools* to provide arts education for Black students is a violation of their civil rights, with an especially pronounced sting affecting aspiring artists.

In response, advocacy initiatives call for greater arts access for students of color, yet there is little exploration of *what* we envision them having access to. In this reflection, informed by the narrative of my former student in a specialized art high school, I will illuminate a nuanced failure in providing a next-generation artist with the nourishment he required, even within a progressive urban public arts high school. This failure is just one facet of many, in which dignified schooling for Black male students is unrequited. In what follows, I use italics in the manuscript to demarcate my remembrance of a student I am calling Edwin (pseudonym) who continues to teach me lessons about the meaning of schooling.

In 1999 we opened the doors of Public Arts High School (pseudonym), the city's public high school for the visual and performing arts. On that very first day, the very first student I met was Edwin who was sitting with his grandmother in the cafeteria eagerly awaiting our family orientation. I sat down and introduced myself, and from that point on, Edwin became a student

against whom I measured my purpose as an educator.

Edwin had a sense of himself as an artist from a very early age, and was an active street artist and comic book illustrator outside of school. He had great promise and ambition as a visual artist and profound struggles academically. He was the undisputed leader of his tight-knit cohort of boys, with his humor and jovial naughtiness earning him credibility among his peers and aggravation among his teachers. Even among my Black visual arts colleagues, Edwin was a source of frustration. Edwin, although almost never absent, did not "buy-in" to the institution of schooling. I found myself advocating on his behalf on a regular basis, as his resistant behavior was persistent, and likely the cause of teacher divestment (Lee, 2009).

I continue to reflect on just what it was that kept me positively invested in Edwin, a young artist with finely tuned skills of non-compliance. Perhaps it was because he was the first student I met at our new school, or that we shared a self-identification as painters. Or perhaps I just happened to find his antics amusing. I was committed to Edwin and his artist trajectory; he was exactly the kind of student for which I felt the school existed- one with raw ability, a dedication to urban concerns, and artistic ambition. I felt that it was our duty, as the gate-keepers towards higher education in the arts, to insure that students like Edwin had the skills and credentials to move forward in their art schooling.

Remembering Edwin's experience provokes questions as to the purpose of schooling and my personal complicity within the structures of *urban* schools, which have been designed to perpetuate hegemonic systems (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Contrary to the faith in schools to parcel out opportunities to achieve the American Dream, schools secure

the social reproduction of economic and racial disparities (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; MacLeod, 1987).

Art Schooling

Because they are formulated for social reproduction, schools are strange institutions in which to expect transformation through the arts. Maxine Greene offers that our schools “ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said” (Greene, 1995, p. 43). Yet even in a progressive school such as the Public Arts High School, Greene’s vision can still remain at bay, as described below by Edwin (personal communication, May, 2012).

BB: Where did you feel most powerful as an artist?

Edwin: I felt more powerful ... amongst my friends because you know I was around people that more so understood my goal as an artist... what type of voice I was trying to have as an artist...you know... those type of similarities is where I felt the most comfortable.

B.B.: But do you feel like your voice as an artist was useful in your school experience?

Edwin: not moreso toward my school experience... I figure my voice was more heard amongst my peers ... in school moreso you’re being TOLD what to do all the time ... back then I was already trying to learn on my own... I was trying to teach myself.

In Edwin’s perception, his innate “voice” was his crucial asset as an artist, and his art schooling did not recognize it as such. In his framework, being “TOLD what to do” equates reducing his artistic growth, a

phenomenon akin to subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999).

The power of schooling to reinforce systems of hegemony is monumental. Bourdieu frames the structure of schooling as a refined machine for the reproduction of a stratified society (Swartz, 1998). Yet some argue that even within the firmament of this system, there is a possibility of transformation (Sewell, 1992). Perhaps there is room for urban schools to transcend their function as tools for social reproduction. Perhaps there is hope that the dynamism of structures can, in fact, co-evolve with the agency of individuals. It is not until urban schools become responsive to the voices of artists like Edwin that transformation- of students and schools alike- can begin.

Most schools do not reflect this dynamism, and the traditional school model may not be an optimal setting for free, generative creative development. Often, knowledge is structured into discrete content areas while learning is construed as the acquisition of finite understanding. In school, visual arts often take the form of other traditional subject areas, with shortened working blocks, quick transitions, and prescriptive curricula. It is disappointing that even in the arts, a field that professes the development of student expression, Freire’s “banking model” (2007) still reigns, with technical skill being the content “deposited” by the educators.

Visual arts instruction most often takes the form of technique development, of building skills in the “elements and principles” of art. Even attempts to include multicultural themes or traditions often result in technical projects. “Such approaches also tend to subsume art from every culture and context under narrow formal or technical concerns which are themselves derived from European modernist aesthetic frameworks” (Cahan & Kocur, 2010, p. 7).

The commonly heard art teachers' tenet, "you have to know the rules to break them", is dominant over notions of activating the arts in "writing the world" (Freire, 2007), which should have permeated Edwin's art schooling. Our current educational climate fosters a delay of purpose and relevancy for the artwork done in school, which can play out caustically for students like Edwin. The street and hip-hop stylistic roots of young, urban, self-actualized artists deserve to be nourished as assets, and must inform the pedagogy and advocacy for access in art education.

There are some strong voices in art education that call for a pedagogy embedded in the contemporary, emphasizing concepts over techniques (Desai, 2005; New Museum, 2010; Sullivan, 2002). Art education can model the "institutional critique" performed by international contemporary artists and take issue with dominant structures in the cultural sphere- a perfect sounding board to validate a contestation of schooling such as Edwin's. Making critical inquiry a curricular component could inspire the engagement of resistant students to see the process of schooling as expansive versus confining.

Investigations of how street artists have infiltrated the ranks of the recognized and revered in a global art world may also give students like Edwin a renewed sense of purpose and impact. To present artwork that is fractured, contentious, subversive and resistant- like some student action in urban schools- might alter perceptions of what school can be. Honoring the practices of these artists can extend to a celebration of the voices of students within a school structure that is otherwise silencing.

The progressive nature of these investigations is unlikely to become normative practice in art education for some time. In our standards-based era, the scramble to *justify* the arts in the service of

other domains of learning has dominated research (Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007). Predominant arts advocacy research calls for more *access* to art education for students of color, without uncovering the nature and the impact of arts pedagogy (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012; Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011).

Arts advocacy research is only beginning to identify the pedagogy that we are advocating for within urban schools. Because the curriculum in the arts can specifically address culture, adopting an anti-racist position is especially important. Yet the art education field has yet to frame the work of culturally-sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012).

The report *Arts Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools: 1999–2000 and 2009–10* (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012) focuses on *access* to arts instruction. This study provides a comparative report of the nature and conditions of art education available to students in public schools across the nation, along with teacher conditions. The result is a far-reaching documentation of the school conditions in which the arts exist, with obvious implications for policy. The study finds students in high-poverty schools have significantly less arts exposure, less variety of offerings, and markedly less dedicated physical space in their schools for the arts (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). Yet this comprehensive picture of public arts education does not address concerns of curricular relevancy or cultural empowerment through the arts.

There are numerous claims, both substantiated and problematized, that access to the arts improves the achievement of city kids (Catterall, 2012; Fiske, 1999; President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2011). Yet there is scant evidence of a critical pedagogy for the arts, one that conscientiously seeks to foster transformative experiences. The call for

more arts exposure drove the founding of Edwin's school, and the similar programs described in *Transforming Urban Schools Through the Arts* (Hutzel, Bastos & Cosier, 2012). There is a need for further examination of how such art education programs may implement critical pedagogy and lay the groundwork for more transformational experiences in art education.

For example, in the Hutzel, Bastos, & Cosier anthology, we learn of exemplary moments of counter-hegemonic arts experience occurring in city schools. This fulfills a qualitative gap that the advocacy reports calling for more access are lacking. One can imagine Edwin's experience, as it is mirrored through many of these field-based accounts. In the chapter, "Counternarratives; Considering Urban Students' Choices in Art Education," we learn that:

Art education experiences can provide significant opportunities for students to articulate, represent, and imagine their histories, experiences, and cultures in richer and more in-depth ways. Recognizing students as sources of knowledge and information encourages teachers to also utilize their students as a primary asset to their own educations and to the schools they attend (Whitehead, 2012, p. 25).

In Edwin's school, he was afforded the opportunity to tell his personal counter-narrative through the content of his work, *when relevant to the assignment*. The stance of his schooling was one, like that above, in which student life experience was deemed worthy. It wasn't the story, but that mandate of how to tell it, the particulars of *style*- that was the cause of Edwin's greatest resistance and he allocated a great deal of his school efforts toward this resistance.

Although resistance has become normative in contemporary art, typical urban school culture does not foster opposition. In fact, there is credible evidence that perceived *compliance* is often heralded. Lee (2009) finds that the stereotyped compliance of Asian students in city schools is subconsciously pitted against the perceived resistance of Black students. Casting racial groups in this polarity produces an antagonistic climate that serves few well. For the Black students of Lee's study, school identity was precarious as the embrace of teachers remained at bay.

Many scholars have illuminated the brutal impact of negative white teacher perceptions of the Black males in their classrooms (Howard 2013; Noguera, 2003; Shujaa, 1995). Many white teachers hold lower expectations of their Black male students. They fear and criminalize them, leading to practices of disproportionate, harsher punishment (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). In this climate, the perceived resistance of these students is hardly welcomed, and compliance is demanded.

This compliance in typical art classrooms mandates a style to which students are expected to conform. "School Arts" (Efland, 1976) -- recurring products that fall into predictable teacher-driven tropes - mandate a certain form of expression, right down to the size of the paper and brand of the paint. Success in "school arts" requires *a compliance* on behalf of the maker. Student "buy in" insures that students work toward developing a college-ready portfolio that is appropriate and viable. It is widely assumed that quality arts curricula in urban high schools can provide progress toward these goals.

Edwin was able to graduate from our arts high school and then become the first in his family to graduate from college. I am not

sure if this would have been the case were he in a non-arts environment. He is currently the lead designer of a hip-hop clothing company. By all accounts, he has obtained artistic success while maintaining loyalty to his aesthetic roots, *despite* all of his art schooling. He remains tightly bound to his cohort of graffiti artists both professionally and socially, yet he is the only one of his original crew to achieve career success.

Edwin has succeeded on his own terms, utilizing (or perhaps co-opting) the credentials of the power structure while continuing to draw support from his social milieu. His story is not unlike those described by Elmesky (2005):

youth have found their own resources for navigating their lifeworlds and exercising agency or direction over their lives. In fact, the isolated, segregated aspects of inner-city neighborhoods reinforce a structure that tightly binds communities together and supports the emergence of communalism (p. 95).

Like others, Edwin's story is one of resilience and the sophisticated enactment of a strategy for success. One has to wonder if his schooling was like that of many students of African descent, described by Shujaa as "virtually worthless" (Shujaa, 2005, p. 194). Edwin's time in school facilitated credentials, but from his perspective it was not time well spent.

BB: If you could change your school experience in any way, what would you change?

Edwin: (interrupts) I wouldn't have went to school (laughs) I wouldn't have went to school. If I could change it all again I wouldn't have went to school...

BB : Why?

Edwin: I would have really just self-taught myself... and read some books and ...went online... you know nowadays kids can just go online and teach themselves anything..

BB: so what about school wasn't useful?

Edwin: school was not useful because I felt that it was just ... a slow process of learning and ...it was never directed towards an individual's goals... nobody ever asks 'what do you WANT to do ... what skills to you want to hone... what do you see yourself doing in the future?' ... I think from the get-go it should have been... a situation where... a kid would explain their goal and the teacher would help them achieve those goals rather than 'this is the only way that I've learned art... and this is the way you're gonna become a better artist.'

One has to wonder at the trajectory of Edwin, what was gained through his schooling, what was lost, and if we are in a new era in which schools are better equipped to utilize the arts for transformation. From his perception, school "time" reads more like "doing time", a prison regime climate that is experienced like enclosure (Schnyder, 2010). Perhaps Edwin's disposition toward resistance or his artistic rebelliousness particularly informs his opinions of schooling. In any case, if school has functioned for him as oppressive, there is cause to applaud his resistance, while also imagining how it could contribute to a greater agenda. As Giroux attests:

it must be strongly emphasized that the ultimate value of the notion of resistance has to be measured against the degree to which it not only

prompts critical thinking and reflective action, but, more importantly, against the degree to which it contains the possibility of galvanizing collective political struggle around the issues of power and social determination (Giroux, 1983, p. 111).

The arts have a long history of extending the imperative called for by Giroux. Working with young urban artists provides unique access to the nuanced resistance of our students, and opportunities to validate and nurture their collective agency.

Subversive contemporary art practices can be made curricular, validating resistant cultural production as capital *within the system of schooling*. Curriculum and pedagogy can underscore the connection between youth culture and historic and contemporary art world trends. If educators begin to embrace their artist-resistors, the urban school may become a transitional sphere. The credentials of street art can build further capital in the dominant sphere-- one that is beginning to value artistic subcultures and undercurrents as “high art”, as evidenced in the groundbreaking museum exhibition *Street Level* (Schoonmaker, 2007). The gifts of the young artist-resistor may become more valued when connected with global contemporary art trends.

Perhaps the most credible function for an arts education for Edwin, and others like him, is to provide validation for his voice, to help build his practice from the margins to the just core of experience. Perhaps this degree of inclusion could inspire action from Edwin, and his assets could be used to affect change beyond the aspirations of his own life, approaching the experiences of the more *activist* resilient students described below:

The resilient students ... also internalized the belief that through

collective actions of protest and resistance marginalized individuals like themselves could transform the structures that oppress them.

Accordingly, the resilient students were cognizant of educational inequality but took advantage of education as a starting point and vehicle to combat injustice (Evans-Winters, 2005, p. 37).

These exceptional students embraced a sense of collective agency, and were driven toward dismantling the oppressive structures of schooling. If the camaraderie of Edwin and his cohort were nurtured and aligned with a global trend of art-as-resistance, perhaps his time in school would have been less agonizing. Perhaps the school would have moved closer to true transformation. Perhaps this failure to provide meaningful schooling could have been avoided.

The testimony of students like Edwin is critical, especially from within a supposedly transformed environment. These voices must frame new foundations for art education in urban school settings, moving us beyond the simple rhetoric calling for more access. If we fail to learn from student practices of resistance, then *more access* may mean *more failure* to provide a sound, purposeful, and culturally sustaining art education for our urban students of color.

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FAILURE