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Beyond Fix It or Leave It: Toward Conflict-Centered Theories of Change in Education Work

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Abstract

This paper discusses the development of a U.S.-based undergraduate senior seminar toward a conflict-centered perspective of change in education. As practitioner researchers informed by Black, feminist and postcolonial studies, we analyze student writing from the course in order to elucidate the concepts of change, both explicit and tacit, that students draw on to make sense of the complexities inherent in educational work. Some student writing demonstrates a discourse of control, and thus a conception of agency, that both oversimplifies and promotes despair about the challenges at stake. By contrast, some student writing evinces an orientation towards struggle, rather than hope, which emerges as a more generative stance towards recognizing and responding to the structural violence in which education work is fully implicated. This perspective opens the analysis and the education course to understandings that situate power relationships more broadly and more historically than order-centered formulations of hope and change allow.

Introduction

This paper discusses the development of a U.S.-based undergraduate senior seminar toward a conflict-centered perspective of change in education and, as part of that development, analyzes student writing from the course to better understand and in time inform their frameworks for understanding change. Informed by Black, feminist and postcolonial studies, the course guides students to orient their work with a grasp of the historical context for persistent, durable injustices as they are reflected and furthered in the formal education system. Rather than encourage students to base their sense of agency and hope in an expectation of resolution of these challenges, we are increasingly concerned to engage them in exploring and creating theories of change premised on ongoing struggle. We present here a qualitative thematic analysis of student writing from the course in order to clarify dimensions of this struggle and the challenge of engaging student learning about and through it.

In the U.S. context it is a truism of a certain kind of progressive outlook to acknowledge that racism was not resolved by the civil rights movement, and that the presence of a Black president in the White House does not indicate a post-racial society. It is also habitual to disregard the transnational histories of racialized privilege and concomitant oppression. Nevertheless, within progressive circles and elsewhere, we, as white women, recognize a tendency among white people to ignore the way that “racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance” (Bell, 1993, p. 12). Coates (2015) calls this “the dream of whiteness:” a belief system in which white supremacy -- including a deep conviction of entitlement to dominate without risk -- is sanctified by culture and secured by violence. This dream depends on the denial of the ongoing impact of world history, on the refusal to awaken, in Hartman’s (2007) terms, to the fact that, “I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it” (p. 133).

The education program in which we teach is shared by two East Coast liberal arts colleges, historically and predominantly white institutions with a growing, and complicated, commitment to “diversity.” As we will discuss later, such a commitment does not readily free an institution from the issues under study here. Throughout program courses, we ask our students -- who aspire to enter the educational system in a range of roles and in both critical and creative ways -- to consider many structural issues working against students and communities in today’s classrooms, including: the racism -- tacit, systemic and structural -- of individuals, institutions, and systems; an unfair, class-based funding structure for public education with increasing favor for privatization; static pedagogical practices which discriminate against various learning approaches; and deficit-oriented notions of “help” and “neediness” which disempower and negatively represent both students and teachers. At the same time, we ask our students to respect

the work of teachers, communities, and young people themselves to thrive within and against these structures, and to study these issues via academic inquiry, experience in field placements, pedagogical interaction, and ongoing dialogue and reflection.

It is often difficult for our students to sustain recognition of daunting challenge and energy to respond without either giving up or resorting to what we call a fix-it or leave it mentality -- so common among people drawn to the “helping professions” (Dass & Gorman, 1985). We have conducted the study animating this paper in part to better understand how a certain kind of hopefulness actually leads to and naturalizes this “fix it or leave it” reaction. Heeding Eve Tuck’s (2009) call to “suspend damage” in research on marginalized communities even when damage is called out as a means to seek redress, we ask what “suspending hopelessness” can look like when the role of education in systemic violence is not denied and when “fixing it” in any immediate or complete way is impossible. How can we support our students to stay active here and build theories of change that recognize this impossibility without despairing or oversimplifying in order to ratify hope? In this, we take guidance again from Coates: “Perhaps struggle is all we have . . . This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope” (p. 70-71). How can we, as white Americans with our own complex investments -- chosen and inherited -- in malign systems, stay awake to the workings of the dream of whiteness?

We answer with a strategy we have developed in our capstone course for education minors to empower students to analyze their strengths and interests in relation to creating their own theories of change. Grounded in what we call a “theory of change framework,” we have found that analysis and articulation of the belief systems a student (or anyone) holds regarding change in an educational context offers significant insight and plays an important role in

educational practice -- whether intentional or not. Put differently, how an educator, administrator or policymaker thinks about change (who might be changed, how, and why) will inform what their goals are and how they will measure success. Importantly, beliefs about change will also inform what teaching and learning look like, whose perspective is valued and how a community is viewed and understood. We find that articulating one's theory of change with intention enables more thoughtful conceptions of educational change that can destabilize traditional power dynamics and leave space for more conflict-based conceptions of change to emerge.

Drawing on this "theory of change framework," we endeavor to engage the power of formal education to disturb, rather than affirm, patterns of privilege and violence in relation to a vision articulated by each individual student, and for which he or she takes responsibility via the writing of their own "theory of change." Grounded in course discussions, texts and experiences in field placements, students practice naming, analyzing and critiquing conceptions of change across a number of sectors and from various perspectives through the writing of peer-generated reflective papers. Analysis of current events in popular culture and on our college campuses deepens students' comfort with grounding conceptions of change theoretically.

The course asks students to think about theories of change from a range of disciplines and fields, starting with more traditional definitions of "theories of change" via perspectives from the business (Duck, 2011) and nonprofit sectors (Reisman & Gienapp, 2004). Eve Tuck's call to "suspend damaged-based research" offers a grounding for why a theory of change that is desire-based is important. This offers a lens through which to analyze theories of change we read for the rest of the class. Practitioner research (Ballenger, 2009) and social network theory (Daly, 2010) as theories of change are considered, as are engaging in mindful and "contemplative" teaching (O'Reilly, 1998), being a "healing presence" (Miller & Cutshall, 2012) and practicing spiritual

pedagogy (Parker, 1993). More recently, we have incorporated texts (Alexander, 2012; Coates, 2015; Rankine, 2015) that directly address race, racialization and racial violence to inform the very idea of a theory of change with an orientation to memory and conflict rather than progress and resolution. In other words, we are centering the course (which we each teach and develop during different semesters) in a conflict-centered paradigm that supports inquiry as part of struggle rather than of its resolution, a lens which has emerged through the research and analysis presented in this paper. In this way, we seek to teach and here write against current neoliberal presumptions that would simplify the complex work inherent in educational practice (Fabricant & Fine, 2013), as well as counter the drive to hold painful educational problems at an intellectualized distance.

An important aspect of this course, and of most of the courses in our education program curriculum, includes a weekly field placement of three hours per week in a local school or other educational organization through which students work as participant observers and keep detailed field notes in order to consider and expand on key topics explored in class and learned from practitioners (including young people) engaging in educational practice. In this paper, we examine student writing (specifics discussed in the Methods section below) to better understand various concepts of change students draw on to make sense of the complexities inherent in the educational work just described. The theoretical framings (Ahmed, 2012; Coates, 2015; Pierre, 2012; Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Ree, 2013) we employ here guide us in making sense of these data in terms of Coates' (2015) formulation of struggle, rather than hope, as the needed stance towards recognizing and responding to structural violence in which education work is fully implicated. This perspective opens the analysis and the course to understandings that situate power relationships more broadly than popular, national discourses often admit.

Theoretical Framework

Ta-Nehisi Coates insists on a formulation of Black identity, white identity and embodied experience as continuous with the enslavement of Black men, women, and children. Writing to his son in *Between the World and Me*, Coates insists: “You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold” (p. 71). Coates refuses a linear conception of oppression that would leave slavery in the past, rendering it instead part of the ground of his and his son’s present being. Jemima Pierre (2012), discussing contemporary Ghana as a way of charting parallels between continental and diasporan experiences of postcoloniality, writes similarly against a linear/progressive view of history, arguing that: “. . . the perilous conditions of the present establish a link between our age and a previous one in which freedom too was yet to be realized” (133).

At the same time, Coates defines whiteness as a dream that white people refuse to awaken from. Using the term, “the people who believe they are white,” rather than “white people,” he draws readers into an understanding of whiteness as a persistent delusion of deserved safety -- physical and moral -- secured by historical, systemic, and violent patterns of advantage. While America, like other colonial projects of White civil society, depended and continues to depend on the theft, plunder and death of Native American, Black and other people’s bodies, property and status as full human beings, whiteness acts as a dream of freedom from this horror and its cause, as well as a dream of entitlement to freedom from vulnerability of all kinds.

With the turn from a linear sense of history and progress, the concept of haunting assumes importance. In “A Glossary of Haunting” Tuck and Ree (2013) define haunting as:

. . . the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society's assurances of innocence and reconciliation. Haunting is both acute and general; individuals are haunted, but so are societies. The United States is permanently haunted by the slavery, genocide, and violence entwined in its first, present and future days. Haunting doesn't hope to change people's perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation.

As haunting, injustice does not present as a problem to be solved, a wrong to be righted, a structure to be transformed. In this frame, the idea of "social justice" appears as another example of "the dream of acting white" -- in terms of the fantasy of living free from past, present and future threats, free as well to take one's path heedless of how it was constructed. As Tuck and Ree state: "The promise of social justice sometimes rings false, smells consumptive, like another manifest destiny. Like you can get there, but only if you climb over me" (p. 647). What is change, then, from the perspective of haunting?

To consider this question, we turn to Sarah Ahmed's (2013) research on diversity work in higher education. Working within the British context, Ahmed spotlights the possibility that an institution's diversity commitment actually postpones diversity work, especially when people whose dominant status protects them from the discomfort of difference set the terms:

. . . [D]iversity workers acquire a critical orientation to institutions in the process of coming up against them. They become conscious of "the brick wall," as that which keeps its place even when an official commitment to diversity has been given. Only the practical labor of "coming up against" the institution *allows this wall to become apparent*. To those who do not come up against it, the wall does not appear -- the institution is lived and experienced as being open, committed, diverse (p. 174).

Here change is not orchestrated neatly from the outside with a kind of executive planning approach. It is, rather, an essentially conflictual, embodied, and invested process:

Things might appear fluid if you are going the way things are flowing. When you are not going that way, you experience the flow *as* solidity, as what you come up against. In turn, those who are not going the way things are flowing are experienced *as* obstructing the flow. We might need to be the cause of obstruction. We might need to get in the way if we are to get anywhere. We might need to become the blockage points by pointing out the blockage points (p. 186-7).

As a theory of change, “getting in the way” is fundamentally different from common conceptions of change in the field of education, such as “leveling the playing field” or “closing the achievement gap.” It locates the change agent in a conflictual field with an uncertain outcome. It also insists that the “change agent” is fully implicated in the system in question, not an outsider or expert with the privilege of immunity. One could argue that there is hope in the willingness “to become the blockage points by pointing out the blockage points,” but it’s a costly hope, one founded in struggle. In other words, struggle is the goal, not release from struggle, and thus desire rather than hope serves our inquiry better. In Tuck’s words, “Desire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the *not yet* and, at times, the *not anymore*” (p. 417). Desire, then, evades the linearity of “fix it or leave it.” The idea of change within a paradigm of struggle and desire -- as opposed to the kind of hope produced by the dream of whiteness -- grounds the thinking we strive to foster in our students and continue in ourselves; challenging all of us to resist simplistic notions of hope so rampant in educational discourse.

Methods

Data Collection

This inquiry is fueled by two goals: to investigate the ideas and frameworks our students bring and develop through the course, and to strengthen the capacity of course content and pedagogy to guide students in this development. With this intention, we take a practitioner inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) on our own practice as instructors and developers of the course to clarify conceptions of change in the educational sphere. Our goal is not really to assess -- and certainly not pass judgment on -- student's thinking in a narrowly evaluative sense,

but to situate students' understanding as it manifests in their writing and to learn from students' conceptualizations of change in order to support their growth.

Our chief goals grew to identify the range and variation of students' uptake of what we call the theory of change framework (defined above) and to understand how students perceived its value, what it meant to them, its use to them. Theories of change that were largely linear and based in a conviction of the need for total or final change were highlighted. Theories of change that left space for inconclusive, evolving, partial, and/or “messy” conceptions of change were also highlighted. These examples, taken with shifts in our own thinking and learning about the role that memory and struggle play in change, solidified focus on these contrastive conceptions of change found in student work. In this way, student work both informed our conceptions of what might be missing in complexity for what is taught in the course while also offering examples of what we might accomplish and further support. This iterative and informative process of analysis supported a deepened understanding of how both course texts and student thinking and writing can inform course aims: to question simplistic frameworks for educational change and instead conceive of change that is reflective of the complex terrain of education, teaching and learning in our current and historical context.

To these ends, we drew on two data sources. The first includes the final theory of change papers across two successive graduating cohorts from 2013-2015, forty-nine final papers in all. Each was between eight and ten pages long and responded to an assignment that asked students to “revisit their own theory of change, consider it in relation to the learning they accomplished in their field site and discuss the roles they encountered or imagined for themselves in taking it to action and interaction.” Students were thus required to revisit material they had previously written in order to write their final theory of change, including a paper considering the theory of

change most evident in their field placement, a rough draft of their own beliefs about change and an analysis paper about the theories of change explored through course readings.

The second source of data for this paper was an optional end-of-semester questionnaire (following the course evaluation) in which we asked students in each class at the close of the course to reflect on the experience of constructing their own theories of change, asking the following questions: “1) What did you think of the TOC concept? 2) What was useful about writing your own TOC? and 3) What was useful about studying the TOC of others? Feel free to name particular theories we studied.” We turned to these student essays and questionnaires to:

- help us understand how students were employing the theory of change framework explored throughout the class in their final work;
- identify a range of ways of conceptualizing change that emerged as students worked through this analytical frame;
- and to attend to students’ self-reports on what they learned from the process.

Study Participants

All 49 students across the two classes from which we gathered data were seniors in college at the time, all of traditional college age. Among those enrolled in the course across the two years, three identified as men and forty-six as women. Aside from largely female-dominated classrooms, each group was diverse in other ways, including where in the country students came from (at least eight states were present), racially (fifteen of the forty-nine students are of color, four African-American, four Asian-American, five Hispanic and two bi-racial), social class locations on a wide spectrum, various religious beliefs and traditions, sexualities, and a broad range of future plans (from those interested in policy work and politics to those applying for graduate school for elementary teaching to those entering medical school) were among the

various identities in the classroom. To situate ourselves as authors of this paper and professors of this capstone course, we are both white women, from different original class positions, working to stay in relationship with what being white means in general and in relation to our work.

Data Analysis

The processes of data collection and data analysis employed are rooted in Strauss and Glaser's (1967) "constant comparative" method, a facet of the grounded theory approach in qualitative inquiry. This methodology entails a recursive cycle of data coding, analysis, and interpretation in which emergent themes are considered and re-considered not against a pre-set template or hypothesis, but rather with an eye to letting theory emerge from the reading and re-reading of documented emic perspectives in dialogue with framing literatures. For this analysis, student papers were each read four times by each author, each of whom kept a reading log of observations, questions, and categorizations and subsequently prepared research memos to share with each other in six dialogue sessions spanning several months.

Recognizing the potential value of students' own reflections to this analysis, we then developed a survey to invite students to offer feedback on the usefulness of the theory of change framework to their learning (see details of survey above). Thus, two kinds of student writing inform the following analysis: one was an academic paper/performance inside a course; the other a voluntary assessment exercise in which they offered insight and opinions. Survey responses (about half were submitted each year) were compiled by one of the authors in a data matrix alongside brief descriptions of each respondent's theory of change and course texts referenced, as drawn from their individual final papers. Each author read independently across papers and survey responses, so as to gain a fuller picture of each student's perspective, followed by several joint meetings to compare data logs and memos, coding schemes, and key areas for

consideration. Through this constant comparative approach (Strauss & Glaser, 1967), we arrived at a sense of an important dimension of contrast in the student writing, which became the basis for this analysis. While the analysis could have led in a range of directions, and could have been more granular, we are confident that this one dimension of contrast usefully characterizes and also aids in an understanding of the data set.

In what follows, we quote solely from the student essays, though the questionnaire responses also informed the analysis offered. For example, some students mentioned in the questionnaire implications for the theory of change framework on their future plans. This helped us understand the intention of their theory of change paper or the role it played in the articulation of their goals. This analysis is conditioned by the way in which the composition and dynamic of the class shifts year by year, as well as the students' field work and the various experiences they have had prior to the course and/or entry to the education program. It is also important to remember that students', and all of our, thoughts and beliefs are in a constant process of becoming. It is with that framing we next offer student writing and thinking about change as order or conflict based, an analytical concept across student writing which emerged as salient and instructive.

Order-Based Attempts to “Fix” Education

Reductive “fix-it” frameworks are prevalent within school reform initiatives and policies as well as in the media. Take the so called “achievement gap,” for instance. Peter Sacks (2011) in *The Huffington Post* asks (and answers): “Can Public Schools Fix the Achievement Gap? Yes, But They Won’t.” In *The Washington Post*, Jay Matthews (2012) offers a “Startlingly Sensible Achievement Gap Fix.” The fix-it mentality is also echoed by popular discourse in the persistent use of the term “broken.” We hear that teacher preparation is broken; the promise of unions is

broken; the system as a whole is broken. This language isolates features that are part of a dynamic whole, not a mechanistic assembly of pieces. It also conceals the ways in which the system's failures actually satisfy various political agendas, such as command of ever more wealth and power by elites (Fabricant & Fine, 2013). This discourse of fixing what is broken, a discourse of control, and more deeply of order, sometimes conditions our students' expression in ways that limit their capacity to articulate more complex theories of change. It is at this place of challenge where we want to dig deeper and trouble the order-based perspective with one oriented to conflict.

In analyzing students' writing to track how they think about change, we found certain discourses – including metaphors such as level the playing field, school turnaround, levers, and brokenness as just described – as limiting or confusing student thinking. As we will show, order-based thinking tacitly leads students to simplify the process of transformation. Then, in the face of a call for transformation that is both massive and impractical because it insists on coherence and order, students' writing sometimes loses the human aspect of education, employs rhetoric that favors the perspectives of those in power, and falls into a sense of hopelessness before work that feels impossible.

In what follows, we illustrate key points with examples from students' writing. In each case, we only quote when there were at least three similar examples across the data set. Here, we begin with a consideration of how an order-based theory of change is mutually reinforcing with a limited sense of student/family/community agency. For example, in her paper one student centers her theory of change on the importance of “communication across stakeholders” and effectively draws on course texts to bring multiple perspectives to bear on her ideas and analysis. Yet, she demonstrates the persistence of a “fix-it” mentality and order-oriented discourse by

positioning those already in positions of power to enact change while students are portrayed as in need of service. About her theory, she writes, “My theory of change involves many micro-level players, or people in the field directly interacting with children, with an eye toward the macro picture of equitable access for all in the education system.” The use of rhetoric such as “equitable access for all” (reminiscent of “no child left behind”) as the goal of this student’s conception of change inhibits consideration of barriers preventing equitable access, some which may be extremely difficult, even impossible, to tackle. It also demonstrates the persistent tendency to include the perspectives of “micro-level players”-- such as students and teachers -- as an afterthought with the location for change solidly remaining in the hands of those with the “macro” view. By calling those who work with children “micro-level players,” or referring to them as “those being served,” this theory of change portrays those most immediately invested as small, less empowered and in need while the eye that holds the “macro picture” is powerful and distant.

An image of the educational system as inherently designed to “serve” students -- another facet of order-based thinking -- can also contribute to confusion when the students are clearly not served, and when their capacity for advocacy and activism may be important vectors of change (Gillen, 2014). Like others in the course, another student positions deep listening and communication across the various “stakeholders” involved in educational work as central to creating “horizontal power structures.” She genuinely seeks to create a more equitable educational system, yet her articulation of the work needed to achieve equity leaves her theory embedded in an educational rhetoric which assumes convergence of ideas, rather than a more conflict-tolerant, *movement toward* equity within a contested field. The language of “those being served” effectively conceals conflict -- what about the many ways in which they are *not* being

served? Too, the rhetoric of “access for all” universalizes what is actually very specific, conflictual terrain. There are power struggles here; some interests are privileged and others’ dispossessed. This helps to highlight what we mean by the trouble with “order-based thinking,” particularly when applied to actors who hold vastly different positions of power, knowledge, and investment in the educational sphere and beyond, where the urgent desire for results leads to a perpetuation of power structures which runs counter to the intention of the initiative or reform effort.

The question of agency, and urgency, is both raised and troubled in many of the students’ papers. Another student’s writing advances a limited notion of who and what should inform change in the education sector, despite trying to include the perspectives of students and teachers and the importance of relationships and trust. He describes his theory through the lens of “a patient urgency that takes into account the voices of those on the ground alongside the hard data that directs reform agendas.” He argues this might be accomplished through “bringing stakeholders together to implement strategies gained by consensus and understanding” in order to “find ways to collaborate and serve students together.” This student effectively cites a course reading on social network theory (Daly, 2010) to describe the importance of relationships as central to his theory, which, according to Daly, “often become lost in the din of legislative mandates and the seemingly constant press for technical reforms which are typically enacted using a variety of formula structures, processes, and accountability levers to improve performance” (p. 1). This student demonstrates an intention to focus on relationships as a key aspect of this theory of change, yet he calls on similar “accountability levers” warned against by Daly (2010) when he positions “voices on the ground” alongside “hard data that directs reform agendas” and the work of educational change as “serv[ing] students.” Here, decision making is

based on the impersonal “hard data” and while the “voices on the ground” are “taken into account,” their role is secondary to the “urgent” work of change he describes. In each example, educational change is viewed as a finite or fixable project with students being “served” and the “macro” perspective maintaining authority as the change enactor, despite attempts within the students’ theory of change to include the perspectives of students and teachers. Interestingly, both students chose to be placed in district level or non-profit administrative positions for their field placement which was sure to inform how they conceived of change in practice.

In their theory of change papers, these students and others often face the challenge of trying to respect student, parent, and community perspectives without seeing or portraying them as fully authoritative or empowered. Given how systemically devalued they usually are, it is difficult to maintain hope in the system as coherent and at the same time advocate for the legitimacy of these perspectives. One student offers an approach that, in the press to affirm harmony and hope, leads her to discount some of her lively findings from her own field experience in an urban charter school, in order to align with order-based thinking. In this way, order-based thinking entails the sacrifice of complexity:

Although the teaching of direct instruction to young children and student-parent-teacher-community partnerships can be seemingly different theories of change, I feel they can harmonize very well. Having a young child in a traditional learning environment requires a great deal of relational involvement between parents and teachers.

Clearly this student is grappling with the tension between a more formal and decontextualized approach to instruction and family/community perspectives. The drive for harmony in effect favors the school’s theory of change and casts the relationship between home and school as less than reciprocal. The problem is that real relationship is two- or multi-way and is thus unpredictable, especially when actors are positioned differently with respect to a power structure.

Later in the piece, this student writes:

Parents and community need to be involved in the academic learning and achievement of the school. In my experience at Ronald Charter School, I do not feel the school does everything in their means to nurture this parent-school-community partnership. With regard to students with poor attendance rates, this charter school has the ability to toss out students who are frequently absent after repeated offenses and after contacting a parent. These students then lose their spots and are replaced by waiting list candidates. . . . [I]f stronger relationships were formed, teachers can act as advocates for children and connect parents with proper community programs to assist their needs.”

In light of the practitioner research presented in this essay, we now see that this analysis could be strengthened by a perspective that centralizes conflict and ensuing struggle rather than seeking a “fix” -- “connecting parents with proper community programs” -- that under-recognizes the depth of the tensions and challenges involved. The terms of the relationship appear to set up the families and communities to be addressed in terms of outsiders’ formulations of their needs, and also, more fundamentally, in terms of needs, rather than of knowledge, plans, or desires (Tuck, 2009). A struggle-oriented conception of change could help the student recognize how the perspectives of school and family-communities refuse to align, thus empowering a deeper analysis. In order to arrive here, the student would need to shift from discourse that knots together fixing, deficit, and order. The student could then consider that a school’s “poor attendance rates” and “ability to toss out students who are frequently absent” may be understood as part of a system of structural violence, part of a system that while indeed coherent, is not fair or responsive.

As we have described, much of the structural inequality inherent in our education system makes a simple “fix it” solution impossible. In light of this reality, we have observed a tendency among students to express frustration and give up on working towards fair and equitable education. Given how difficult educational work appears, one student, whose placement is at a private, Quaker elementary school, writes: “The issues facing education and the harm some of the systems are causing are incredibly daunting, and make it seem like a system-wide overhaul

and change is necessary.” This student reaches an understanding that institutions meant to support justice at times inflict injustice and finds the work impossible without an overhaul of the system. Given her position as a senior graduating from college, the likelihood that she will be able to enact a “system-wide overhaul” is limited and she (like many) looks beyond the field of education for work that feels more possible and less doomed. This approach, which we’ve termed “hopelessness,” prevents many from entering the field of education. This can in fact be read as more than individuals making career choices, rather, as part of a broader social process of divestment in public education except when under terms that require simplistic aspirations to “change the world.” To consider hopelessness as the product of a default theory of change that itself can be changed offers a way forward.

In each case, we see the need to support students to develop the capacity to view and articulate change in ways that speak to their desires and intentions without minimizing the role of students, teaching/teachers, communities, and *process* rather than *end*. This often means resisting or challenging dominant notions of reform which involve privileging the voices of those already in power, harnessing data as the only source of knowledge from which decisions should be made, forcing voices to “harmonize” when positions are in opposition or giving up or moving on in the face of such complexity .

While the student writing explored in this section illustrates order-centered conceptions of change as “fixing,” other students framed analysis in more provisional, processual terms, in part through drawing on a non-traditional field placement. In the following section, we discuss this alternative discourse and explore what it could mean to guide students to become more comfortable with a conflict-centered approach and its attendant messiness, opposition, and non-resolution.

Toward a Conflict-Centered Theory of Change

An expectation of messiness, process, complexity, opposition, tension and non-resolution has emerged as important to educational change through the theories and literature referenced previously. These perspectives were also evident in student work. While we found examples and coded indications of this approach across a range of student writing, for the purposes of this inquiry, we focus here on the work of three students whose field work took place in an innovative, new high school context where traditional frameworks for teaching and learning, motivation, assessment, and leadership differed from the typical. We center on the work emerging from this field placement context with intention, as the space provided a fresh look at what change might be in an education sphere where traditional tropes in teaching and learning were abandoned for more disruptive conceptions of education that included student-based motivation, destabilized loci of power, and design thinking. While in process and imperfect -- and more complex than we can do justice to here -- this context supported students to conceive inventive notions of change on the part of the students from which they, and we, learned a great deal.

Student papers that attend more centrally to individual subjectivity tended to open space for thinking about change less rigidly. Centrally positioning the “community” as both the decider and implementer for change was also a consistent finding. For example, one student positions her concept of change as “community-based” and “revolutionary” and encourages a letting go of a linear notion of change that involves a “scientific” process and an “objective” outcome. With a deepened focus on the individuals to whom change “is happening” in more linear conceptions of change, this student finds that attention to the human dimension of a system or community necessitates divergence from a standards-driven framework. In describing her own theory of

change and learning process, she writes: “Although it may be tempting to approach change in a scientific and objective manner, it is imperative to remember that change is not just happening to a theoretical system, but to every human being who is a part of it and makes for its existence.” Often clear and objective plans for action, particularly those from the business and nonprofit sector we explored for the course, had laid out strategies for involving community members in confined and explicit ways, at times appearing to harness their “voices” only as a means through which to convince the community to get on board with the change initiative. This can lead to the conception of community involvement we discussed in the previous section, where hierarchies are maintained and community members are viewed from a micro level. This student challenges this perspective of “community” and instead positions the community as the deciding factor for both the change plan and implementation. The role of students in this conception of change is paramount -- in contrast to student writing from the previous section where students are being “served” by an educational institution, the following example instead frames students as “users of the space.” This orientation to the community, to the student, runs counter to conceptions of change which aim for simple fixes and order to “serve” students.

Students working from a conflict-centered view of change seem to value incomplete understanding and the uneven realization of goals. For example, another student in the same placement considers the messy and uncertain aspects of educational work she found so prevalent in her field placement as deeply informing her own conception of change in fruitful ways. Focusing on the important role of “communication, critical listening, compassion and sharing ‘humanness’ with students” as key strategies necessary for enacting change in her site, she writes,

The theory of change that seems prevalent in my field site is one that finds change to be a continuous and necessary process that is intentionally open—drawing upon the critique

and desires of the *users* of the space. The charge to place “users’” dreams, hopes, and needs at the core of change is at the root of my own theory of change as well.

Moving away from the more linear approaches to change, where a clear goal or endpoint is evident, she instead expressed the desire “to look at the idea of ‘chaos’ and the messiness of change” as she conceptualized her own theory of change through the course. When faced, then, with this context in which the challenge of strong educational practice was in process and not easily “fixable” with no clear endpoint, she leaned into the “messiness” to both articulate the strengths in that approach and learn about the important roles of process and receptivity. She writes:

While I have appreciated being in spaces where change is very delineated and rigid at times, I have found that a more continual process of change that responds effectively to those involved in the changing community and leverages the existing knowledge and experience, while striving to meet the desires is one that I have really learned from.

Through defining change as in process and grounded in community desires and conceptualizations, she is able to view “moments during the change process that do not seem settled or fully formed” as “moments from which to learn, to reflect, to better understand how to move forward.” For her, this messy and challenging aspect of responsive teaching and learning is necessary to enact a theory of change that is actually grounded in the involvement of every member of the community. Arguing against the tendency to “be[come] distracted by the messiness that sometimes masks pure ingenuity,” this student asserts a goal to engage in process over product and to actively position critical listening and engagement as key aspects of her educational work in order to “learn from the richness that is taking place in various spaces.” This openness to learn, engage and make space for the process of change to emerge through communal teaching, learning and listening represents a direct challenge to the tendency to look

for simple “fix-it” solutions and to conceive of a change initiative as something that happens just to people “on the ground.”

Adopting a nonlinear theory of change can be very challenging when problems and limitations are stark. When we say that “acceptance” of conflict is part of it, we don’t mean that this acceptance comes easily, without wrestling or struggle. A final student experienced a great deal of frustration in this field placement; her own sense of challenge was intense, but so was her determination not to give up. She was concerned when she saw many students not complete daily work or overtime assignments, engage with electronic devices and otherwise ignore or disrupt classroom activities and also not attend school. It was sometimes hard to gauge how concerned teachers and administrators were about what often felt to this student like an urgent set of problems. It was a challenge to embrace the school’s model and its determination to place trust in students while seeing these daily and dramatic problems.

A turning point for this student came when she re-framed the frustration and judgments that fueled them. It’s not that she forgot about her concerns, or gave up the priorities that made them meaningful, but rather she haltingly embraced a different way of seeing. This process, never easy or final, contributed to the theory of change that she went on to develop in her final paper for the seminar, what she called “the constant need for reflection or looking back to go forward.” She wrote:

These mishaps and the continued challenges I have seen since the school began in August inform my theory of change: the constant need for reflection. My theory of change is to use reflection and assessment as a tool for change. Assessment here does not mean testing, but rather an evaluation of a person, school or company, and system as a whole through reflection or looking back to go forward.

Here, the student articulates a holistic, non-linear, theory of change: “looking back to go forward.” Harmonious with the call to remember and even be haunted by history, this way of

thinking about reflection engages the “history” of the situation in a way that de-centers judgment to serve the greater goal of going forward. Thus, the student takes “assessment” out of the testing discourse, out of work done to sum up something about a person or place, and moves it into a process mode, something done in order to enable something else. Rather than be shut down by “mishaps and continued challenges,” which could precipitate a “fix it or leave it” reaction, the student pulls challenge into a rationale for “the constant need for reflection” -- in a word, struggle.

Conclusions and Implications

This study has strengthened our commitment to challenge students to move beyond the “fix it or leave it” binary. Indeed, this exclusive choice, which easily appears as the only possibility within an order-based paradigm, actually conceals and fuels the structural oppression and violence that it purports to address (Tuck, 2009; Welch, 1990). In the name of clarity of commitment to resolving social injustice, this totalizing approach may be said to confuse the commitment and continue the injustice. Thus, hopelessness and resignation are better understood not as a reflection of “how things are” but rather the byproduct of a theory of change that tracks to the “dream of whiteness:” it leads students to see how things are when order and control are the measure of their validity. In this default approach systemic oppression is obscured by the kind of hope Coates tells his son to put aside -- hope that is actually an unearned privilege (McIntosh, 1989; Rothman, 2014). In advocating a conflict-centered approach to education work, we seek to displace this kind of hope and at the same time to challenge hopelessness -- not with an “answer” that soothes the drive for order and reinstalls the dream of whiteness, but with a grounded, and grounding, acceptance of ongoing struggle. The path of acceptance and the path of activism are not often seen as one, but our work here suggests that

sometimes they need to be. Accepting struggle as ongoing allows for activist engagement that is also ongoing. It opens a possibility of agency that is not tied to pre-ordained results, either as a vision or an achievement. Such a sense of agency fulfills a control agenda (Welch, 1990) that actually works against the kind of struggle we want to encourage students to undertake. Given these intentions and findings, below we offer implications for our course, for foundations in education courses in general and for further research.

Course Implications and Further Research

In addition to the changes in course readings and the evolving discussions which challenge order and resolution already implemented, new pedagogical ideas and strategies have also emerged. Drawing on the findings of the foregoing analysis, in future iterations of the course we plan to ask students explicitly to write about change from an order and a conflict based approach, to engage explicitly with the differences between approaches of hope vs. those of struggle. This will enable this concept to be used in analysis in the theories of change students find in their placements, among the course texts and within their own emerging ideas about change. Another way we will guide them to recognize and apply the contrastive frameworks is to build into the course a unit in which students read each other's theory of change papers and actively comment on/contribute to revisions of them with this conceptual frame (and others) in mind. .

Given the importance of field experience to students' evolving theories of change, we have come to recognize the need to help students to think integratively about their field experiences in the course and throughout the program and to think about how their field placement choices and experiences both reflect and contribute to their evolving theories of change. We are also interested in further investigating the relationship between individuals'

theories of change and those of organizations, in the context of organizational mission and practice. Though the Education Minor already includes a comprehensive program portfolio assignment, we will now add an assignment asking students to track and synthesize their field experiences and how these have informed their conceptions of change and education work in general. Toward these goals, we hope to continue to investigate these issues alongside our students, inviting students to conduct data analysis or read drafts with us in future explorations into our practice and theirs.

We advocate for other education programs to offer a theory of change framework in some part of their program as well and encourage students to analyze the theories grounding the policies and practices they study. The tendency toward order and resolution has emerged as a useful lens for us, through which students have been able to analyze their own thinking and construct for themselves a theory of change that better aligns with the work they hope to accomplish and the commitments they hold close. Drawing on a theory of change framework would enable other significant lenses to emerge in programs across the country.

We extend these thoughts to consider those who create, analyze and advocate for educational policy, and urge that attention be paid to the theories of change grounding policy decisions and ensure that they leave space for process, conflict and memory, even when this resists resolution. The very characteristic of policy as something measurable or attainable might need to be questioned.

Going forward, then, we will guide students to ground their sense of agency within theories of change that centralize struggle. We will ask students to choose, not simply inherit or imbibe, their own theories of change and to see their work as a blend of challenging, working within, and strengthening conceptions of change within the world of education and

beyond. These actions ultimately support our commitment to apply a theory of change framework across the range of educational work, research and practice.

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