

# URBAN SCHOOLS AS FRONTIERS AND AWKWARD RESEARCH STANCES: THE INNER-CITY STUDENT EXCHANGE PROGRAM

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Currently, my research interests include intersections of neoliberal education reform and schools (see Helfenbein & Huddleston, 2013; Huddleston, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017; Huddleston & Helfenbein, 2018; Huddleston & Rocha, 2018). As such, I see my researcher positionality as crucial as I continue my research. This paper, relying on *currere* (Pinar & Grumet, 2014), attempts to simultaneously explore my positionality and explore the ways in which urban schools are positioned in the stories we tell about public education. My story is from my teenage years when I participated in a school exchange program in which students from my predominantly white school spent a day at an urban school with mostly students of color and vice versa. Revisiting this experience is an example of what Pinar (2017) calls the regressive phase in which “one returns to (not simply recalls) the past, or to aspects of it” (p. 1). In this sense, this autobiographical inquiry is a recursive excavation through which I hope to further inform my own positionality as it relates to my current research, but it is also a means to demonstrate the ways in which privilege can obscure and marginalize urban schools. My narrative is full of well-intentioned, white students who, blinded by their own privilege, reinforced their preconceptions of the “urban” and, in doing so, lost an opportunity to break down barriers of misunderstanding and difference.

As Pinar and Grumet (2014) note, *currere* is a shift from understanding curriculum as a racetrack to the actual running of the race. *Currere* turns one’s gaze not only inward, but outward as well. It demands that we not only pay attention to our experiences as we “run the course,” but that we ask questions of others so that we might better understand. Pinar and Grumet argue that we should move towards a curriculum stripped bare of what we believe to be important—starting with ourselves first, then building outward. My experience in this exchange program, which at the time was positioned as a rich opportunity for students in both schools, was actually bereft of meaning because it lacked the type of productive introspection *currere* demands.

This process is essential in my own work, but I also use the subsequent stages of *currere* to posit implications beyond my own work. In the progressive stage, I envision the implications of the exchange program in relation to research with(in) schools. In the analytic stage, I pull key ideas from the narrative that I believe have resonance for our current moment of public education in the United States and arrive at the concept of frontier-making. Lastly, in the synthetic stage, I imagine what implications frontier-making has for research in public education and imagine how an awkward stance might be useful for researchers to adopt.

## THE EXCHANGE PROGRAM

It was 1994, and our football team was pretty good that year. To be clear, I did not play on the team, having long before given up any notions of toughness by demonstrating an unwillingness to be tackled or tackle someone else. Traditions and rituals, representing my normalized view of school and schooling, played heavily into my senior year experience. I would (and did) follow them religiously. I remember myself as the all-American teenager because my actions would mark me as such.

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These actions included attending every football game, home and away. My Friday night routine was set for the fall semester, and to alter it was blasphemy.

As the season progressed, we looked towards sectionals with a certain level of hope. To our surprise, our opponent would be a school no one expected, a school from the state's capital or, in other words, an urban high school and one that happened to be closing, due to budget cuts, at the end of the year. To top it all off, we would play the game there. The concept of an urban school, let alone one that was closing, was so foreign to us that misconceptions and stereotypes started to creep into our conversations. Could we still attend the game? Would it be safe? How would they treat us? Would there be fights in the stands? All of these questions were no doubt informed by the countless movies we had seen, not actual experiences.

A collective agreement was made that we would go to the game, but we would caravan together (a sign of our privilege was that we had enough cars for so many students to go), we would all sit together in the visitors' stands, and we would "back each other up," so to speak, if trouble came to pass. The game came and went, our team lost, no one was threatened, no one was harmed, and it was generally uneventful. We walked away with our perceptions of this school neither denied nor confirmed. The school still remained an unknown—the only thing that I was struck by was the relatively poor condition of the field and the stands. Others must have felt this general inconclusiveness because it would certainly help to explain what came next.

Out of this general confusion came a solution, not only to the social rupture the game presented, but how, in our own way, we could create a more multicultural world. Student council members, including myself, were upset that our lives and the ones of our classmates were so sheltered as to have ill-conceived notions of our previous week's opponents. Surely these misconceptions were dangerous, and they needed to be rectified. At our next meeting, we brought up our concerns to our sponsoring teacher who agreed and suggested an exchange of students. Contact was made with the opposing school's student council and the dates were set for students to visit on consecutive Fridays sometime in January. The question was: Would the school be anything different than our previous conceptions?

Our group of student council members, all seniors, visited first. We were each assigned a fellow classmate who we would follow for the rest of the day. My student was the student council president and star of the basketball team. He was a tall African-American, and I was a short white kid, but we seemed to hit it off. I had never been in a school so diverse, let alone one that was on the verge of being closed down permanently. The very idea that a school could be closed was an extremely foreign concept, especially when it wasn't closing on the promise of building a newer, improved school. Our hosts that day would be divided into other schools within the district. I remember entering the school looking for signs as to why the school was going to be closed. There were no signs of decay or debilitation, nothing that indicated that the school needed to be closed from a building perspective. So, why was it closing?

I do remember that the school felt crowded, loud, and chaotic. Students moved through the hallways in a qualitatively different way than at my school. There was a frenetic pace to everything, and students seemed to be working themselves up to a rapid pace as the tardy bell was fast approaching. Whereas in my school, once the bell rang things became quiet rather quickly, here the energy continued beyond the bell. While everyone moved quickly, my personal host did not. He moved through the

hallways with relative ease and did not seem in any hurry to get to his class. I followed his lead and reveled in the glow of his popularity.

The memories of that day are blurred, so I do not want to embellish them, but I do have two very distinct ones. The first is of sitting in class led by a substitute teacher. The most mischief my classmates and I would engage in with a substitute was to get her or him off topic and waste the time period, but this class was on a whole other level. The teacher tried and tried to get the class started, but nothing happened. Students were loudly ignoring her, and the period never achieved a level above my own conception of chaos. I remember feeling nervous but was reassured by my companion's status among his peers that I would be unharmed. I kept wondering when the class would start, but it never did. I looked to my host, but as was his general disposition, he did not seem worried in the least. Students were still coming into the class well after the bell, and the teacher continued to struggle to get things under control.

At one point, I asked him if it was always like this in class, to which he replied that what was happening was not that bad and could be far worse. Next, he gave me a look that I recognized as "watch this" and leaned over to a fellow classmate, a male, who then proceeded to stand up and yell at the teacher. The entire class fell silent to watch the scene play out. Eventually, the student was led away from the class, and the teacher left. She not only left us there unsupervised, but she never came back. My fears were confirmed, but in a manner that left me feeling exhilarated. Here I was, protected by my guardian, experiencing the very danger I had come to expect.

My second memory is of the pep rally held in the gym later that day. The school had just won the city basketball tournament—made more important by the upcoming closure. I remember being both amazed and envious as the pep rally was entirely run by the students with the adults in the room standing on the sidelines. I distinctly remember the teachers looking on, not with stern supervisory looks, but looks of true joy and pride as their students enjoyed every moment. While our own pep rallies rarely got more than a few students excited, this one seemed boundless with students cheering, singing, and dancing everywhere from the bleachers to the court. It was difficult to tell where the leaders of the cheers and the fans themselves began and ended. A sort of organized chaos moved the action forward until the bell rang signaling for students to move out into the world, truly pumped up for the weekend.

I was intrigued by the relative indifference with which both the students and the teachers regarded our visit. Certainly because of my privilege, I expected more of a welcome. Looking back, perhaps this school had participated in this type of exchange before, or maybe our presence was seen as a low priority compared to other things. One thing was for sure, the visit lacked true discussion and conversation between the two groups of students, and many questions would go unanswered. It was as if the experience were enough—no need to talk about it.

A week later, we reciprocated in the hosting duties, following a similar format. The details of that day are less clear outside of a faint notion of wanting to impress my newfound friend, the same star basketball player from my visit. It was clear that he didn't need me to guide him through the school like I needed him at his. He relished his role as outsider, and while I had spent most of my life learning the various social navigations to secure my place as a "popular" kid, he interacted with everyone with such skill as to astound me. I chalked it up to his status as an athlete that seemed to transcend any otherness his skin color contained. The day ended with our own more gentrified version of a pep rally, at which I would serve as emcee, an honor at any other

time but with increased importance given our guests. I hesitate to say more because my memories are so cloudy, but I have no idea what our guests thought as we never spoke once they boarded the bus returning to their world.

### WHERE CAN MY RESEARCH GO?

In the progressive phase of *currere*, “one imagines the future” (Pinar, 2017, p.1). While Pinar starts with clear cut, defined phases at the beginning of the aforementioned article, it is evident that such phases have, at most, blurred lines of definition—allowing for flexibility and slippage. As such, I see this section (in its various stages of writing and rewriting) beginning with the progressive and slowly bleeding into the analytic. I start with this thought, “What does this story from my past portend for my own academic future and, possibly, others working in similar areas?” The urban school discussed in this memory is the same school, since reopened, in which I found myself conducting research as a graduate assistant. Such a linkage forced me then to revisit this memory. Moving forward, I build on this memory by reflecting upon my own privilege. I see this as important if I hope to continue to work within schools and with students of color. In other words, much like Rosaldo (1989) discusses his own specific past as it relates to one research project as a means to consider his and others’ larger work, my story has implications for further research beyond its own place and time.

Furthermore, as a junior faculty member, I am searching for ways to work towards social justice, both in and outside of my research. I have found this to sometimes be a struggle and is often a question of scale. Where does an academic fight for social justice? On campus? In the community or schools? Politically? In research? *Currere* is helpful here as it focuses on a commitment to social justice on a microlevel (Pinar, 2014), similar to what Berry (2009) insists as presence and enactment of social justice in our everyday lives. To look critically at one’s own “story” is to question how and where effectively enacting and embodying social justice is possible.

As a cultural studies scholar, I cannot help but see connection from *currere* to Hall’s conception of articulation (Grossberg, 1996), as I am using cultural relationships and interrelatedness as the focal points of an introspective examination to articulate them with(in) ideological formations surrounding urban schools. Hall’s work within cultural and postcolonial studies presents a bridge to other postcolonial scholars (Chakrabarty, 2006; Clifford, 2006; Spivak, 2006) who seek to decenter and dislodge Euro-centric history because it has come to define the entirety of knowledge for all places, resulting in a world where the subaltern is rendered voiceless (Spivak, 2006). Additionally, Fanon (1967) places an emphasis on the subjective as a means to examine larger societal and historical issues. The postcolonial project is twofold: an examination of the construction of such a history and the (re)inscribing of a new history. As Chakrabarty (2006) writes, “The idea is to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and the ironies that attend it” (p. 342).

As I imagine the future, I see cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and curriculum theory as providing guideposts. Indeed, the marriage of these theoretical frameworks provides one possible avenue to dislodge or disrupt the ways neoliberalism has shaped the current discourse surrounding education reform. To that end, I imagine ways forward that expose the role white privilege plays in the mythmaking of the dysfunctional urban school—I very much want to engage in the project Chakrabarty describes.

Furthermore, what can I still see about my present self in the past? Tugendhat (1986) describes identity formation as a social process informed by language and society. Much of my identity at the time was informed by an overwhelming need to fit in with my peers and societal structures (mass media, government, and education) that told me what being a white high school senior in middle America meant. At the time, I did not recognize this carefully constructed reality as constructed at all, but rather a representation of what I believed to be the normalized experience of an American teenager. Now, as an adult, surely such a process hasn't stopped. Indeed, my identity is still formed in the same way, and while I may be more consciously aware of such a process, this awareness only means that, in imagining possibilities of my life moving forward, I must be in a consistent state of self-reflection. As I type these words, such a task seems daunting, but I am encouraged to find myself in fields (curriculum theory and qualitative research) and influenced by theory (cultural studies and post-colonial theory) that encourage and demand such self-reflection.

Privilege allowed me to view my own experience as "normal" and to obscure the fact that such normality was shaped by what my peers, white society, and I deemed as "other." For most of my life, such an "other" was an imaginary one, always at play but never seen. It is into this world, with me as its privileged center, that I was confronted with an "other" in the form of another school. As I look to the future, my privilege does not ebb, wane, or disappear, but it remains as an essential part with which I must continually contend. So, the question is, how must privilege be dealt with? To answer this question, I believe the concept of frontier-making is helpful.

#### SCHOOLS AS FRONTIERS

Others have described how privilege works in education similar to the ways in which I note above (Delpit, 2006; Leonardo, 2000; Tatum, 1997). It is a process that not only obscures and marginalizes the experiences of people of color, but also positions the white experience as central and normative. In my own experience, my town's lack of cultural diversity, combined with an unexamined discussion of privilege, made for a truly poor curriculum where my notions of school went largely unchallenged. Such a lack only came into my awareness when I was directly confronted with what had been completely absent. Films such as *Lean on Me* (Avildsen, 1989), *Stand and Deliver* (Menendez, 1998), and *Boyz in the Hood* (Singleton, 1992) painted these schools as places so foreign to us that we gave them little thought or serious consideration (Trier, 2005). At that time, through the connection of a high school football game, these images and misconceptions flooded our minds, as we had to make sense of this new "other" as it moved into closer orbit with our world.

It is interesting to note that, even though nothing untoward happened to my friends or myself at the game, my conception of the school did not change. I was unscathed and unharmed, yet the only real takeaway was that the school's field was in worse condition than ours. Did I only choose to see what would reinforce my perceptions? Or, was my position of privilege so entrenched that I did not have to consider any actual experience with the "other"? Indeed, the strongest aspect of this memory is the plan we came up with after our little excursion. It is here that a tourist gaze (Urry, 1992) begins to take hold, one that viewed the school as a new land to be visited or experienced, but not really understood. Looking back, I exemplified the version of anthropology that Rosaldo (1989) problematizes and stands as a troublesome historical foundation today for social science.

A formal student exchange program demonstrates that this was more than a casual meeting of possible new friends, but rather an expedition with the goal of learning something new about us and this other school. Did we consider how this might benefit the other school? If it was discussed, I have little recollection. While, on our end, the exchange was not fully thought out, clearly some thought was put into its organization. It wasn't an accident that I was placed with a student who would protect me and ensure that I would come away with a positive impression of the school. This controlled experience furthered the feel of a learning expedition in the spirit of a colonial era researcher who was to carefully catalogue his or her experience.

The scene with the substitute teacher offers a stark contrast in how worlds are socially constructed and the role of the subject therein. My student opposite possessed an enormous amount of sway and power demonstrated by his ability to increase the level of chaos simply at a moment's notice. While my own social construction was done in strict adherence to what I perceived as the norm, his was an exercise in power and self-assertion at which I could only marvel. And yet, was this what I perceived as an exercise in agency? Or was he simply constructing what he thought I expected? Was he subject to the discourse that constructed him as the "other," and he was playing the part? Was I witnessing what Fanon (1967) describes as the black man living up (or down) to the white man's expectations? Did my presence create a rupture in his world that (re)enforced his conceptions of himself and me? In that spirit, was the pep rally a performance put on for us? Were the students trying to prove or disprove our preconceptions? Was it truly chaotic or only in comparison to our own controlled school chaos?

The saddest example of the privilege I took for granted is my hazy memory of the day the urban school students visited my school. In the end, my story demonstrates that, even though the initial goal of the student exchange was to "learn more" about another school, it actually had the opposite effect. It posited the school as an urban frontier, ripe for exploring and conquest. Once positioned as a frontier, the school I visited could never really be known; it could only be confirmed or denied in terms of its predetermined definition as such.

Tsing's (2005) ethnographic work on the rainforests of Indonesia demonstrates how globalized capitalism posits parts of the world as frontiers, areas in need of desperate reform as a ruse so that corporations can pillage the resources of those areas. This has also been defined by Klein (2007) as disaster capitalism. Working within a postcolonial frame, Tsing examines the mythmaking essential in such a process, in which, over periods of time, areas rich in their own culture and resources become homogenous frontiers waiting to be conquered and civilized.

Frontier-making offers keen insights into the ways in which schools in the U.S. are positioned to be victims of neoliberal education reform. Neoliberalism, which has a strong connection to globalization (Andreotti, 2011), shapes the reform discourse to paint urban schools (and eventually all schools) as frontiers of violence, underperformance, waste, corruption, and incompetence in order to justify radical reform. Looking at neoliberal education reform with a postcolonial lens allows one to see a twofold process—the shaping of schools as needing reform before actually attempting to reform them. While this process happens at a macro level (see Apple, 2001; Buras, Randels, Salaam, & Students at the Center, 2010; Helfenbein, 2011; Ravitch, 2010; Taubman, 2009; Watkins, 2012), my story demonstrates that it can happen on micro levels of everyday interactions as well. Indeed, as Tsing (2005) notes, these smaller examples contribute powerfully to a larger hegemony of control

and domination. Consider our ill-conceived student exchange program. The intentions were conceived out of a desire for a multicultural world—we would seek to unite with places heretofore separate from us. However, it was built on given universals such as urban, suburban, and rural, not to mention white and black, safe and violent, order and chaos. These universal notions, uncomplicated and unexamined, impacted the ways in which we interacted with our “sister” school and the people therein.

Other scholars have discussed how universals or societal norms/structures diffuse themselves into everyday interactions. Hughes (2012) elucidates how race and privilege work to reify students of color and urban schools as othered. Laura (2014) presents the story of her brother, who not only is subject to the school-to-prison pipeline, but was positioned as a “problem” because of the everyday interactions of oppression, discrimination, and othering. There are other such examples (Ayers, 2010; Baszile, Edwards, & Guillory, 2016; Berry, 2009, 2014; Buras et al., 2010; Casemore, 2008; Stovall, 2016; Whitlock, 2007) that all point to a process similar to frontier-making in which the “unknowns” we seek to understand are always-already fully formed as “other,” preventing us from truly learning more about them.

If schools are continually posited as frontiers in need of neoliberal reform and if curriculum is what Pinar (2012) calls the “lived experience” of schools (p. 37), then schools are full of small, interpersonal interactions that reify them as such. This begs the question: What hope is there for people wishing to tell stories to work counter-hegemonically against frontier-making? And, where would we start? It is my contention that before we begin to answer those questions we must begin awkwardly.

### A SYNTHETIC CONCLUSION

As I’ve discussed elsewhere (Huddleston, 2015), awkwardness is a quality I believe to be essential as a scholar. Riffing off Spivak’s (2012) discussion of double binds in which one finds oneself forced to choose between two options either both equally positive or equally negative, I contend that scholars seek to explain double binds away—moving out of them as quickly as they enter. Instead, we should embrace the awkwardness that double binds represent, basking and staying in them as long as possible. Schools as frontiers presents a double bind in that they remain so if we choose not to engage with them, but our interactions with them risk reifying them as such. Looking back, we should have sat with the awkwardness of our double bind longer and questioned the very idea of a mostly white, small-town school interacting with an urban school of color.

It is striking to see that exposure to the urban school did not necessarily challenge our preconceptions but, in some cases, reinforced them. The chaotic environment seemed to be in line with what I understood as a hallmark of an urban school, even though I emerged from the chaos unscathed, as my wellbeing was never really at risk. While such an exposure seems to echo Spivak’s (2006) notion that to reach towards the subaltern from a privileged position through a Western lens is problematic, I do not believe she thinks we should not reach at all, but we must do so carefully. A reach towards the subaltern and little to no critical reflection is pointless. For a time, the only thing I took away from the experience was a t-shirt I bought—a token of a trip, a souvenir of my tourism, but not a touchstone of a deeper understanding of those who I visited.

There surely were moments of awkwardness in my day at the other school. However, the planning and implementation of the overall exchange was built on elegant confidence. The very concept of an exchange program between schools less



than 30 miles apart seems ludicrous at face value. However, it speaks to how foreign the schools (and the teachers and the students and the communities, etc.) were to each other. We easily believed that the inner-city school represented a frontier to be explored and catalogued. For us, its *a priori* classification as frontier was justification enough for us to have the audacity to ask for an exchange in the first place. If we had undermined our assuredness with some awkward questions about our own privilege and racial difference, perhaps we would have not planned an exchange, but a conversation. Such a conversation might have produced more double binds that we could have all awkwardly experienced.

So how do I, and perhaps others, learn from my previous mistakes in our current neoliberal context? To begin, as Andreotti (2011) notes in her discussion of Spivak, it is not enough to simply deconstruct the “other,” but it must also be combined with a hyper-self-reflexivity that acknowledges the complicities and complexities in the relation between privileged and the oppressed. If we are to truly understand how neoliberal reform has gained so much traction in our schools, we must first understand how the urban school as the constructed “other” has come to be, while at the same time, not ignoring our own complicity as privileged researchers in the construction thereof. In other words, it will be awkward. Indeed, we as scholars, especially those with privilege, must learn how to counterweigh our expertise and knowledge with strategic ignorance so that we might offer insight while still listening and seeking to understand.

*Currere* might be one such way to awkwardly seek this balance. It forces us to critically examine our imperfect past as a way to deal with the present in productive ways. While I believe I have excavated several lessons out of my personal story, in the end, the largest feeling I am left with is a yearning to hear the star basketball player’s telling of this tale. The opportunity to truly learn from each other never materialized. Instead, I experienced the version of “multiculturalism” outlined by Sexton (2008) in which well-intentioned exposure to different ethnicities lacks an in-depth discussion of how racial difference is built on a history of violent oppression. The sense of loss I feel in not having a more in-depth conversation with him haunts me. I can only hope such a haunting encourages me to awkwardly seek “complicated conversations” (Pinar, 2004, 2012, p. 29) as I work in schools and communities.

Stories, such as my own, can demonstrate the destructive and deforming effects schools-as-frontiers can have on our interactions with each other. In terms of neoliberal education reform, the dichotomy of “successful” versus “failed” schools, when unexamined, leads to dangerous assumptions that tend to leave schools as “frontiers” destined to be tamed and positions those of us on the outside of them as graceful know-it-alls. The story of the school exchange program crystalizes this relationship, the school as foreign and ourselves as exchange students waiting to have a “valuable” visit. The result was, at best, an urban school seen as beneficial only because it exposed a group of middle-class, suburban, white kids to a new culture and, at worst, a reification of existing structures of privilege, race, and oppression that continue to undermine our potential as an inclusive, equitable, and diverse society today.

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