“But, I Don’t Care About This!”

Exploring Attitudes and Practices of Student Agency and Voice at the Guild of St. Agnes

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Abstract

This project explores understandings and protocols of student agency in the after-school program The Guild of St Agnes- Quinsigamond (GOSA). This praxis project attempted to identify existing opportunities for student-driven agentic behavior and prevailing feelings of ownership and autonomy within programming through gathering two-months of observational field notes followed by interviews with the students.. Results from this process revealed a widespread disillusionment and skepticism regarding curriculum that students did not perceive as authentic to their realities. After interrogating the extant state of agentic pedagogy, students met weekly with me as a community and utilized Freire's notions of Conscientization (critical consciousness) to interrogate existing conditions of schooling structures and develop conceptions of agentic student behavior. The design portion of this project evolved to grapple with learner malaise and disengagement, encourage the development of critical consciousness in educational settings, and reframe mechanisms at GOSA to embed opportunity for student voice. The findings from this exploration on critical consciousness reveal that while "student voice" may be offered to students as the opportunity to select curricular materials and methods of knowledge representation, epistemological agency, that offers students the tools to critique pedagogies of knowledge production, is less present. As ideologies of agency and student choice become increasingly relevant in the pedagogical canon, it is critical to examine how choice is implemented in educational spaces, and to investigate the capacity of epistemological agency to challenge conventional educational hierarchical ontologies that stratify students across hierarchies by equipping learners with tools of agentic discourse as it includes practices of critique, meaning-making, and autonomous advocacy.

Introduction

The beginning of first-grade was a juvenile blur. Twenty-six new children, clusters of tables encircling the alphabet spelled out on a big blue rug, the teacher's desk tucked in the corner in front of a large black filing cabinet. I do not remember much from that day, but one recollection continues to surface: our teacher's presentation of student expectations, written with a thick Expo marker. The teacher outlined the guidelines like this: "Good learners remain quiet and pay attention to the teacher, students will remain in their assigned seats unless told otherwise, classwork and homework will be done in our designated workbooks, and let's have fun!" The last guideline seemed like an odd outlier. None of those expectations seemed like much fun. In the ensuing school year, I admit I did have fun. As a young white boy in the schooling system, I felt a comfortable ease within educational structures that were built for me to succeed. But I remember a distinct fear and intimidation brought about by my teacher. I was afraid she would chastise me for leaving my seat to show my friend a book I had liked. I was afraid she would tell me I did all my work wrong again and raise her voice. She had said my math skills were below grade level, that counting numbers while doing addition on my fingers indicated a lack of practice. "But I don't understand the grouping method, and this helps me!" I recall rebutting.

Moving into middle school, expectations became even more restricted. Our desks were in rows, and we learned from textbooks. We began to follow the state test schedule closely, dictated by the Pearson Common Core curriculum. To perform well on the state tests, we were required to analyze readings, demonstrate our math work, and recall science facts in particular ways.

Like most classrooms, the formative years of my school experience were in a classroom that operated within an educationally hierarchical framework. Common school experiences

observed through a critical framework reveal understandings of educational structures with an inherent stratification. Teachers are positioned as central bodies of knowledge, social, and disciplinary power. Students are conceived as recipients of academic and social instruction, expected to absorb and intake principles and content.

This hierarchy is an intentional production of the schooling system, which aims to socialize learners to fulfill a particular tacitly assigned role in upholding social reproduction (Anyon, 1980). These hierarchical frameworks implement an innate "sorting process," in which ability to adhere to expectations is labeled "better", "more successful", or "more capable." This process produces and reinforces a socially conceived passivity of children, in which youth are considered 'blank slates' to imbue social knowledge upon. This 'empty bucket' idea is a myth, and upholds traditional capitalist notions of success predicated on student achievement within narrow educational epistemologies. It acknowledges neither the intricacies of positionality within the youth experience, nor youth as individuals of autonomous value.

This is a familiar experience at the Guild of St. Agnes (GOSA) at Quinsigamond Elementary, in which hierarchies pervade curriculum and social processes alike. GOSA is an afterschool program that operates over 15 sites, serving youth as young as infancy up until 6th grade. Throughout the school year, GOSA school-age runs as an after-school program, with full time hours operating during school breaks, including summer vacation. In terms of educational content, GOSA operates in a seemingly traditional teacher-student hierarchical framework. Most classes begin with a lecture-style information presentation, in which educators outline a topic, then introduce a previously designed activity, and ask students to demonstrate understanding of the activity with limited opportunity for modification. Students are rarely asked to generate feedback or reflect on the learning process. Youth are held to these expectations, and receive

infractions or ‘write-ups’ when deviating from academic and social rules. This is a concrete extension of this stratification process, as students who demonstrate ease with pedagogical processes rarely interact with disciplinary or redirection procedures, reinforcing labels of learner quality and capability. Furthermore, the organizational atmosphere, particularly the one created amongst staff, categorizes youth based on their ability to abide by guidelines.

Interestingly, hierarchical models also seem to impress upon youth thinking and self-perception, as children who more readily adapt to learning guidelines accrue social capital both within and outside of instructional spaces. These children are often the first picked for social activities, most accommodated by staff, and popular amongst peers. In this way, educational hierarchies constructed during instructional time seep into social processes, and create penetrating hierarchical frameworks through which youth and educators move about spaces at GOSA.

This is why, within my praxis project, I addressed feedback practices in educational spaces at the Guild of St. Agnes. The term “feedback practices” is used to describe instances of students expressing perspectives, opinions and/or interest in a particular topic, lesson, or epistemological content. Feedback practices encompass expressions that are both solicited and unsolicited, but include an intentional assertion from a student to communicate their response. From my observation, hierarchy within educational practices at GOSA promote the following conditions: 1) student roles as passive recipients of education, failing to consider student positionality and agency 2) pernicious ‘sorting processes’, in which the social and intellectual value of learners is dictated by their ability to operate effectively within current pedagogical structures, dispossessing and discouraging students who fall outside this dominant rhetoric, as well as even limiting perspective of students who do succeed. 3) denial of youth to create their

own realities, siphoning and constraining youth into dominant worldviews and suppressing their imaginations.

Through collaboration with GOSA learners, I aimed to create opportunities that encourage students to co-create social and academic realities. This project sought to address the following: 1) Reconsider student practices of agency, in hopes of understanding how content can be made more accessible and authentic to student experience, disrupting traditional understandings of students as passive recipients of education. This aims to empower students marginalized by current process, challenge learners labeled as 'successful' to demonstrate knowledge in more authentic and varied ways, and expand the curricular toolbox of educators. 2) Cultivate learner agency to disturb educational hierarchies that dispossess students, instead embracing students' humanity and capability, encouraging students to become active in shaping their own educational lives.

I first interrogated existing pedagogies at the Guild of St. Agnes. How do students conceive their learning? Are their voices valuable and important to educational practices? How do educators construct lessons? What design processes are utilized for lesson creation? Who benefits the most from these lessons, and who is dispossessed? What barriers exist to receiving student feedback for both students and educators? My research sought to uncover current successes and opportunities for educational growth of GOSA, in order to more holistically understand how action can be co-designed with GOSA actors to empower students in their intellectual, educational, social, and personal understandings.

In this project, I sought to uncover conceptualizations of student choice, agency and ownership within educational systems. This project was theorized as a response to student disengagement and resistance to existing pedagogies at GOSA. Therefore, one learning objective

of this research is to reveal student conceptions of agency both in and beyond their classrooms. Understanding how students perceive their role in structures of schooling can better inform my theoretical groundwork of the problem itself. These ideations inspired one of my primary research questions: How do students negotiate agency in schooling through structural realities and personal ideologies, both at the Guild of St. Agnes (GOSA) and in their classrooms?

Themes about student conceptions of agency that emerge throughout the research phase were deployed to create a Program of Practice (POP) that seeks to stimulate critical consciousness of positionality and outcomes of schooling systems, while also fostering tools for student dialogue, advocacy and the reformation of their educational realities. This phase of the project attempted to answer my other research question: How can we create a program that encourages students to critically examine their positions in school structures and become active advocates in configuring their educational journeys?

Literature Review

Scholarship over the last 20 years has demonstrated the increasing relevance of afterschool programs in the academic and social development of youth across grade levels (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Lester et al., 2020). While recognition of the curricular, social, and personal benefits from afterschool programs grew in the late 90s and early aughts, the number of available programs in the United States (USA) nearly doubled, and currently caters to around 7.7 million children and families in the USA (De Kanter, 2001; CDC, 2024).

As the program presence increased, so did the variety of afterschool programming, highlighted by Zief et al (2006). This study examined the broad spectrum of afterschool offerings that ranged from ‘glorified babysitting’ to ‘intense academic and social enrichment’ (Zeif, 2006). While studying the conditions of variability in after-school programs is a worthwhile endeavor, this research wishes to investigate out-of-school institutions that purport to engage kids in academic and social/emotional learning (SEL) as more than basic safety supervision.

As efforts to create more enriching afterschool programs burgeoned, demands in academia to critically examine the conditions, accessibility, and quality of these programs rose too. These efforts illuminated, in scholarship, the schisms in access and administration of afterschool activities along racial and socioeconomic boundaries, and simultaneously advocated for financial allocation to afterschool programs in marginalized communities (Duncan & Murnane 2016; Pittman, 2017). While access to programming that strives to enrich student lives has long been available to those who can afford it, programs that seek to cater to families obstructed by paywalls are most often funded by private or governmental sources (Pittman, 2017; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). For example, initiatives such as the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning federal grant demonstrate the civic and social legitimacy given to

the term "Out-Of-School Time" (OST) in recent years, codifying the presence of these programs in the eyes of the state (Pittman, 2017; US DOE 2025).

Interestingly, studies on ASP that aim to serve racialized populations largely centralize the impact of this out-of-school time on students' academic lives (Albers et al., 2008; Lowe Vandell et al., 2007; Grolnick et al., 2007). The majority of these articles discuss effects on academic performance through quantitative or qualitative measures, such as test scores, feelings of motivation, and engagement with curricular requirements. OST programs vary widely in offerings from childcare and babysitting to academic support via tutoring or homework help, to deep educational enrichment such as PBL and action projects (Grolnick et al., 2007, Fashola, 2002).

A prominent theme throughout scholarship on OST for marginalized demographics is the tendency to classify social benefits of these programs under two predominant categories: 1. How OST can encourage the cultivation of prosocial behaviors in school interactions with teachers, peers, and self within productivity frameworks, and 2. How OST can function to redirect or discourage 'risk'-prone behaviors, identified as drug use, aggression, or other 'problematic' behaviors (Zief et al., 2006; Lowe Vandell et al., 2007; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). These perspectives, while addressing the influence of OST on social behaviors, prevail throughout articles published on OST before the 2020s. Whether tacitly or not, the conflation of 'positive' social behaviors and contributions to society structures taxonomizes and values student outcomes and behavior only as far as their habits are productive for racial capitalist hegemony (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Anyon, 1980; Robinson, 1983).

More recently, journal sources have reconciled with these absences in older literature, introducing pedagogies of critical literacies, youth participatory action research (YPAR), and

Hip-Hop methodology within the realm of research on OST time for racialized groups (Burke & Greene, 2015; Qiu et al., 2021; Travis et al., 2022). The adoption of a critical lens in these recent articles not only functions as a process of resistance and redefinition of conventional deficiency frameworks, but it also simultaneously exhibits the potency of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). This research hopes to operate in conversation with contemporary academic trajectories, explicating where literature has identified a need in OST "for decentralising authority and fostering equitable leadership between staff and youth", and expounding on the "limited reflection on meaningful and integrated youth participation" within discussions of student agency and voice (D'Souza et al., 2025, p. 9).

This project will expand on literature that discusses student agentic practice, by exploring the development of autonomy and empowerment in students younger than represented in most research. Most literature discussing student agency assumes a YPAR framework, and is typically executed as a program for pre-teens, teens and above. Much of this literature is predicated on dominant cultural assumptions that young children lack, or have yet to develop, agency. This I believe to be untrue, and there is thus an absence of literature that explores agentic capacities of younger learners, beginning at 8 years old, that still possess a profound propensity and desire to assert their agentic worldviews.

Agency is a socioculturally mediated phenomenon, constrained or enabled through structural and lived contexts in the social zeitgeist. While agency itself is moderated through social realities, I believe that the capacity for agentic behavior is innate in people of all ages, and should be explored for even the youngest members of our society.

Theoretical Framework

What is agency?

Agency, often coded as autonomy or motivation, has been thoroughly discussed in social theory. Frameworks such as self-determination theory use the term 'autonomy' to define action bred from a desire "to self-organize experience [...] and to have activity be concordant with one's integrated sense of self" (Deci & Ryan, 231).

The meaning of the term 'agency' itself has been debated across social science disciplines. More traditional definitions of philosophical agency denote, "the manifestation of the capacity to act" (Schlosser, 2019, pg. 1). At its very core, to be an agent or possess agency is defined by the execution of an action. However, individuals live and interact within social contexts, and thus are influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, and structural factors. This is considered in more contemporary critical definitions of agency, such as Ahearn's "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (2001, p. 112). In this ideation too, action lies at the center of agentic theory. To extrapolate this definition into working-use, we must consider what constitutes an action. An action, in my theorizations, is an assertion of meaning-making, that creates a tangible or intangible impact. The impact does not have to be discernable to an observer or the agent themselves to be considered impactful. In other words, while every individual or group has the capability to act agentically, the performance of this agency is shaped and constrained by social factors. Social mediation is relevant in various types of agency, as defined by Bajaj (2018), that are relevant considerations within this project.

Oppositional Resistance

One demonstration of agentic behavior is through Oppositional Resistance, as defined by Giroux (1983). I believe that humans have innate capacity to assert agency, consciously or subconsciously interacting, resisting and redefining these diagnostic, structurally-imposed and imperialist narratives (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Giroux (1983) echoes these perspectives, contending that students are not simply passive recipients of dominant ideologies but are capable of resistance, negotiation, and transformation, even within highly regulated institutional spaces.

Students engage in this resistance in multiple ways. One demonstration of oppositional resistance is an "anti-school culture," coined by Paul Willis in 1977. Willis characterizes this theory as an active refusal of schooling pedagogies. Anti-school culture is created and embodied by individuals who perform their agency through rejection of systemic educational ideologies. Students who perform this agency may tell educators "no!" engage in truancy, or disrupt classroom routines as a resistance to a curriculum that is inauthentic and dismissive of their worldviews. I theorize this process as an undercurrent to many processes at GOSA. Students commonly vocalize their disinterest in curricular programming, defy institutionally imposed expectations, and disengage from interactions with educators. If these students have never been served by educational structures before, why would they believe in compliance now?

Interestingly, while this behavior can be situated in Giroux's theory of resistance—the carving out of individualistic ideals within their social environments—I have also observed the collective nature of GOSA students embodying anti-school culture. While not always, I notice students supporting and validating their peers' defiance of academic and social standards.

Relational Agency

Relational Agency, discussed by Kennelly (2009), contends with intersections of complex social and interactive relationships when negotiating agentic capacities of action. This means the influence of social relationships in mediated action, which can enhance or diminish capacities of agency. In relational agency, social relationships are contexualized within larger socioeconomic and cultural structures, yet are considered as a distinct form of interpersonal agency and action. At GOSA, relational agency is negotiated between staff-students, student-student, and staff-staff in both formal institutional and informal ways.

Coalitional Agency

Coalitional agency is a term utilized in scholarship to underscore the Freirean notion of critical consciousness (discussed more below) (Bajaj, 2018, pg. 12). While inherently relational, coalitional agency is employed to describe actions mediated by conceptions of historical, critical and social interconnectedness between individuals and groups. Coalitional agency is performed when agents see their realities as "bound to one another" (Bajaj, 2018, pg. 13). This recognition informs subsequent action, as capacity to act is extended through collective channels.

Strategic Agency

Strategic agency illustrates deployment of a tactical finesse to engage with social worlds in ways that can privilege or benefit an individual or group. Bajaj describes strategic agency as, "the ability to engage in deep analyses of power relations in order to chart out a path forward in light of constraints" (2018, pg. 14). Utilizing strategic agency mandates an assessment of existing structural conditions. For instance, at GOSA, the negotiation of strategic agentic

capacity may appear as a student currying trust with educators in power, or aligning themselves in proximity to "popular" students, as a method to achieve their desired outcomes.

"Negative" Agency

Finally, "negative" agency, coined by Craig Jeffery (2012), is a term utilized to describe the agentic reorganizations of power to align with hegemonic ideologies. For instance, Willis' Anti-School Culture describes the resistance against repressive and authoritative structures of schooling by youth in an English town. However, this youth movement was also characterized by notions of racial dispossession and an ideal 'masculinity'. Thus, although these youth demonstrated agentic behavior in rejecting prescriptive school constructions, power was reorganized and produced in ways that reinforce hegemony.

While using this term situates this concept in specific realm of intellectual theory, I put the term "negative" in quotes intentionally. As a word, I believe that "negative" insinuates a particular failure of the moral attributes of individual or collective agents. In this project's context, when describing the ways that students in this program reproduced notions of hierarchy, I posit that these reassemblies are also socioculturally mediated. Because students are socialized to perform these conceptualizations of power, the reproduction of these organizations must be analyzed structurally, not merely as a shortcoming of individual agents.

Additionally, it is important to note that these types of agency can coexist, and often converge to animate social realities. As mentioned, coalitional agency is predicated on relational agency, but all relational agency is not necessarily coalitional. Furthermore, strategic agency can include the negotiation of relational agency, oppositional resistance, or "negative" agentic

ideologies. In short, these categories are not discrete taxonomies, but instead are utilized in this project as tools for theorization and analysis.

Bringing it Together: Agency and Freire

For this study, I have chosen to utilize Ahearn's provisional definition of agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" with the addendum of the capacity for self-definition, including autonomous construction of personal and collective realities. Rooted in Freire's ideas of Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Education, this definition draws from Freire's conceptualization of sociocultural realities.

Applying Freire's model of Transformative Education to Ahearn's definition of agency requires an analysis of schooling logics that impact sociocultural realities. In Transformative Education frameworks, agency is achieved first through building critical consciousness. For Freire, the existing conditions of schools as institutions of socialization is a form of sociocultural mediation that constrains the agency of students. Therefore, the construction of a critical consciousness facilitates agentic behavior by shifting sociocultural repertoires towards relational, coalitional, and strategic agencies. In other words, Freire's model of Conscientization (to be discussed later), which includes critical consciousness and engaged action, stimulates agency by attempting to create impact by changing sociocultural mediations of schooling as a naturalized social reality, instead cultivating the capacity for engaged action to realize alternative futures.

Overview: Perceptions of Education

Traditional understandings of the value of schooling systems in the United States are often a variational repackaging of overarching ideals as a set of learning capacities that bestow

on an individual the confidence to self-define, aspire towards their goals, and contribute positively to society. We frequently hear the adage, “Education is the key to success”. But, success in what? And, for whom? John Dewey defines the purpose of education as an ideal: “to give the young the things they need in order to develop in an orderly, sequential way into members of society (1934, pg 1). More recent literature that synthesizes the conditions of programs within the scope of my project, ASP and OST institutions, echoes a similar perspective. D’Souza et al. centralize “positive youth development” as a primary metric for measuring the impact of extracurricular programming (2025). These authors borrow this term from psychosocial disciplines, where it is defined as: “an approach that focuses on cultivating positive, prosocial capacities in youth by utilizing resources within their home and community, aiming to enhance their autonomy, self-direction, and healthy social interactions for a positive societal contribution” (Blasingame, 2016). Evidently, the ubiquity of education being framed as the cultivation of self-direction in service of “positive societal contribution” reveals tacit socialization processes of schooling structures in the social zeitgeist. This process can be pinpointed through a multilayered analysis of educational and sociological theorists.

What are the Conditions Of Schools? – Understanding Hierarchy

Teacher-Student Hierarchy

Fundamentally, Freire’s (1970) Banking Model positions schooling systems as a process of enduring inclucation—teachers are knowledge benefactors, imparting information on passive student recipients, whose responsibilities are to internalize and interpret data through frameworks provided to them. Students are conceived as “blank slates,” conduits of knowledge waiting for their worlds to be animated through gracious and legitimizing education. Freire claims that the

responsibility imposed on students inside school structures is not to harness education as a tool to develop critical ideologies, authentic perspectives, or genuine skills of analysis. Instead, Freire asserts that the goal of educational systems is to produce functioning regurgitators of teacher input, developing to believe and espouse these frameworks themselves. For Freire, it is not so much the content of the curriculum, but rather the process of banking education that positions students as passive recipients thereby reducing their sense of historical agency, and thus their full humanity.

Freire's critique highlights a social disempowerment that is foundational to educational structures of hierarchy. I conceptualize this phenomenon across two magnitudes: curricular and existential.

- First, my understanding of curricular disempowerment refers to the regulation or complete absence of student contributions to curriculum and knowledge production. Students inherit predetermined curriculum that is not adaptive, responsive or relevant to their realities. In this way, schooling structures deprive students of agency in dictating their scholastic endeavors.
- Second, existential disempowerment describes the consistent inculcation of epistemologies and ontologies. Students are presented a single reality, validated through positivist worldviews. Through five paragraph essays that require "evidence", science "experiments" that are actually replications of historic experiments, lectures on historical events, for example, students learn to think, behave and produce knowledge with a deliberate androcentric and imperialist discourse, providing little space to acknowledge differing worldviews (Warren & Roseberry, 2011). Furthermore, this process also teaches students that they do not

> have control over the forces that govern their social reality and therefore they actively avoid embracing their human agency to shape their world and learn to tolerate dehumanization.

Socioeconomic Hierarchy

This is relevant in understanding student agency when considering the lack of opportunity for youth to develop agentic behaviors within schooling systems. While Freire underscores experiences of hierarchy between teacher and students, Anyon's "hidden curriculum" analyzes the manifestations of socioeconomic hierarchy within schools. In Anyon's theorization of the hidden curriculum, she posits that school curriculum varies across socioeconomic disparities, subliminally socializing children to uphold a predetermined role in upholding social reproduction. For example, Anyon's (1980) observation of "Working-Class Schools" revealed a routine characterized by mechanical and rote procedures, whereas "Executive Elite Schools" were intent on establishing precedents that developed students' "analytical intellectual power" (p. 83). While reality is not so neatly categorical, it becomes evident that youth are intentionally instructed in 'ways of doing' that align with prescribed capitalist categories. This is relevant as it further confronts the dispossession of agency and ability for youth self-actualization.

Anyon's hidden curriculum gets at this capital model of schooling structures. For example, this manifests in concrete models of "rewards and sanctions" in school that valorize behavior beneficial within capital job markets, and discourage or punish tendencies outside of this paradigm (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). This mindset pervades educational spaces within and outside of classrooms, and is commonly used to assess learner success. At GOSA, for example,

students are frequently assigned value judgments based on their ability to engage with curriculum and obey guidelines with minimal redirection. Students who demonstrate ease with these pedagogical processes rarely interact with disciplinary or redirectional procedures, reinforcing labels of learner quality and capability.

Hierarchy of Racialization

Additionally, as intersectionality theory dictates, aspects of identity coalesce and overlap, creating matrices of privilege and oppression in social spaces (Crenshaw, 1989). This, therefore, must also be considered when theorizing the outputs of school systems. Intersecting identities experience schooling through unique lenses revolving around their proximity to power. Projects of racialization undergird all institutional, organizational and social practices. Victor Ray (2019) highlights organizational stratification for different racial groups, noting that "racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups" (p. 1). Coupled with his belief that "whiteness is a credential," Ray constructs a theory in which paradigms and productions of whiteness are systematized and instilled within principal procedures and structures of institutions, while simultaneously penalizing, diminishing, and dispossessing ontologies characteristic of racialized groups.

Angela Valenzuela's concept of subtractive schooling explicates this idea. Through her research at Senguín High School in Texas, Valenzuela developed the phrase "subtractive schooling" to refer to distinct practices that replicate the "subtracting" of students' language and culture, and dismiss their conceptualizations of education that differ because of their worldviews (1999, 336). This work corroborates the bifold dichotomy of disempowerment as I identified in Freire's Banking Model. By denying students the ability to embody their cultural perspectives

and prohibiting speaking Spanish, this institution imposes curricular disempowerment of students by suppressing academic participation in linguistically relevant ways, thereby "subtracting" an avenue for their cultivation of meaning and development of social capital. Furthermore, Valenzuela identifies the racializing projects of Sanguín High School that dispossess students of their epistemological foundations. Within her research, understandings of care held by many of the Mexican and Mexican-American youth differ from the institutional inclination to "care *about* students before they are cared *for*" (p. 342). Students, instead, seemed to expect the inverse. This ideological clash becomes evidently political when understood that "teachers and students hold different definitions of caring, and the latter are unable to insert their definition of caring into the schooling process because of their weaker power position" (p. 343). Thus, deficit viewpoint of students 'not caring' or 'being inadequate' pervades discussions of student achievement, both reinforcing oppressive racialized narratives and dispossessing students from expression of their authentic, agentic realities.

How Does This Manifest?

As demonstrated above, hierarchies in school structures manifest in personal, relational, and structural ways. These hierarchies are predicated on power differentials that schooling structures produce and maintain. I argue that the dispossession of students from their individual and collective capacities to authentically engage, create, and augment their realities creates social conditions of Foucault's "Docile Bodies" (1977). In his theory of Docile Bodies, Foucault traces the physical form as a political entity that is socialized by disciplinary structures. These structures, including schools, routinely coerce and instill socialization processes into the psyche of the individual, essentially rendering the body obedient and useful to the state in facilitating

social reproduction. The Docile Bodies framework is particularly pertinent to this project as it understands the displacement of individuals from internal loci of self-definition. Foucault synthesizes structural socialization not only as the state forcefully inflicting constraints on individuals and groups, but also subtly as the deprivation and displacement from internalized belief in one's own agency and capacity. The Docile Body is dispossessed of itself, disillusioned from structures that materially and ideologically constrain actualization of desired or authentic realities.

These oppressive processes also manifest in the exhibition of coerced acculturation. Drawing again on Ray's third tenet of racialized organizations, "whiteness is a credential" (1999, p. 1), we can see a process of students adopting epistemologies substantiated by hegemonic ways of being. Because whiteness is structurally and institutionally valorized, students may engage in tradeoffs as they learn that to get ahead, they must adopt dominant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 6). While not truly agentic, because it operates as a result of dispossessing power structures, the predominance of white supremacist frameworks coerces certain individuals to assimilate to dominant logics.

To complete my theoretical framework, however, I must complicate the theories of Habitus by Bourdieu and Docile Bodies by Foucault. While students are inculcated by schools to manifest prescribed social realities, I concurrently reject complete structural determinist ideologies that these theories present.

Methods

Methodology

My methodology for this research is aligned with Practitioner Inquiry (PI) as defined by Cochran and Lytle (2009). As an aspiring classroom teacher, this project was an opportunity to critically interrogate my practices as an educator and facilitator of learning for students in the elementary grades.

I chose to utilize a PI lens due to the condition of schooling systems– teachers as responsible for the execution of curriculum and community practices within the confines of larger systems: administrative, district, state and national standards. My goal was and continues to be the cultivation of authentic and agentic spaces for young learners. As an educator, it was important that I developed skills of pedagogical redesign within the systems I am a part of, investigating how to create conditions to honor resistance and agentic practice within the realities of student-teacher dynamics.

To better engage with conditions of agentic practice at GOSA, my project consisted of two phases. Phase 1, a predominantly research phase, was aimed at understanding the realities of GOSA students. Through personal and group interviews, fieldnotes, and student written reflections, I sought to listen and consider student perspectives to directly inform my action and intervention.

Phase 2 was comprised of the intervention itself. Students participated in a 10-week program that created curriculum to reveal, problematize and interrogate existing pedagogies and school structures. Students were asked to become designers of their own realities and envision alternative futures. In this phase, I considered fieldnotes and both written and verbal student reflections to inform the nature of this intervention.

Site Context

The Guild of St. Agnes is a non-profit child-care company that operates programs for youth and families of all ages. Although it is a larger organization, the administration is subdivided into various locations, which are managed by Assistant Directors of Programming. Under each of these management teams, Site Coordinators are responsible for the regulation of daily operations on site. These are the supervisors who control the majority of student discipline and on-site bureaucratic tasks. The Site Coordinators are reported to by Group Leaders for each age group, who generate curriculum and direct classroom management procedures.

Perspectives of agency at the site are a complicated affair. For instance, students often would express to me that they appreciated certain programming, or conversely, were bored and/or disengaged with other activities. However, due to certain factors, such as stringent scheduling blocks and curriculum creation without student input, students are not afforded the bargaining power to change the conditions of their learning. In particular, I have noticed this with the execution of Project-Based Learning (PBL) initiatives. Students are excluded from brainstorming and identifying the project theme, topic, and medium of expression.

Additionally, administrative standards present another complicating factor in understandings of student agency. While students are encouraged to create projects that are of "their choosing" within a particular theme (e.g., poetry about our world), it is not uncommon for GOSA administrators to interfere and change student projects in service of an end goal, typically a 'parent show" or other public presentation. Because students seem to expect staff to modify their project to make it 'better' or more 'presentable', it seems that many of the students have become apathetic or skeptical of their own creations. I often hear "I don't know this" or "Tell me what to write to finish" from student participants.

Positionality

I have been onsite at The Guild of St. Agnes - Quinsigamond Elementary school location since June 2024, when I began collaborating with GOSA as a Hanover Fellow, sponsored by the Worcester Education Collaborative (WEC). WEC is a subsidiary organization of the United Way of Central Massachusetts, which aims to promote educational equity and diversity, equity, and inclusion. The partnership with GOSA and WEC began in 2022, when WEC sent the first Hanover Fellows to participate in a Woo-Labs project with learners at the Guild of St. Agnes. The Woo-Labs program aims to enhance out-of-school learning for all school-age students, providing quality Project-Based Learning initiatives that enable students to investigate topics in a self-driven, authentic manner. Throughout Summer 2024, I collaborated with the Guild of St. Agnes, implementing a music-based Woo-Labs project, in which students explored music theory, concepts, and instruments to create a song that expressed an emotion or shared a particular message. We embarked on two more projects within the 2024-2025 school year, one utilizing arithmetic concepts to design houses, and the other using poetry to process issues in our communities.

Because I was attending full-day GOSA programming throughout my tenure as a Woo-Labs fellow, I was also able to witness and facilitate a variety of other programming for GOSA students. This included assisting with another scholastic portion of the day– Generation Genius science lessons. I've also aided the development and execution of visual arts curriculum, as well as participated in sports and physical education.

I must note that the execution of PBL at GOSA is a complex process. These projects continue to be extremely valuable and nearly universally enjoyed by participants. However,

conditions of PBL at GOSA had complicated implications for conceptions of agency. Firstly, I must mention that GOSA administration harbored genuine dedication to the difficult but critical work of encouraging their students to authentically grapple, engage and reflect on projects throughout PBL sessions. Many of these young learners would organize and exert agency interdependently, selecting project topics within given constraints, iterating through varying methods of engagement, and refining products over extended periods of inquiry.

However, fiscal and organizational barriers at GOSA persisted in limiting productions of knowledge by participants in a myriad of ways. Firstly, PBL funding was initially dependent on consistent funding from the Worcester Education Collaborative (WEC). While generous and flexible, WEC employees would attend each showcase or public presentation, as well as send an evaluative observer on a predetermined date to assess the efficacy of the program. This created social pressure on administration to deliver what they considered high-quality products. Sometimes, these standards came at the expense of student agency, as it was not uncommon for GOSA administrators to interfere and alter student projects in service of an end goal of "presentability." These epistemologies were inadvertently communicated to students, who sometimes became apathetic or skeptical of their own creations, with the expectation that staff would "fix" their projects before showtime. Additionally, these elements enforced a valorization of productivity in curricular and administrative work. It was required for students and staff to be efficient and competent, not always allowing for the admittedly aspirational practices of iteration and sustained grappling with project practices and topics.

I was quickly introduced to these practices when I became a full-time Group Leader for the Older group (students ages 8-12) for four months in Summer 2025. I planned activities,

attended field trips, engaged with students daily, and often was exposed to evaluative and stringent expectations imposed by management.

My positionality within this organization, therefore, is slightly complex. I am certainly an outsider within my social identities. I am a white man who did not grow up in Worcester, which differs from the majority of staff and students. While I have worked as an organizational staff member at GOSA, my transition from Woo-Labs Fellow, described by my former boss as "Fun Uncle" to full-time staff, the same boss claiming that "you have to make students respect you," was a messy transition. Once I began working as a GOSA employee, the carefree, silly demeanor I employed was heavily discouraged. I became trusted by the organization to individually execute programming, supervise kids during various formal and informal scheduling blocks, organize materials, and implement resolution procedures for youth conflicts. However, I was expected to discipline students through formal and informal procedures, and was frequently relied upon to redirect behaviors deemed "problematic." This transition was difficult for me, and I think somewhat unanticipated for students. Thus, I believe that despite my prior relationships with students, my transition disrupted and diminished some of the trust I had built with students, no longer as a reliably safe outlet.

As my program ran, however, my role at GOSA evolved once again. I was no longer a direct employee, responsible for directly implementing disciplinary procedures throughout the day. However, my full-time employment experience allowed me to more directly recognize the duress of staff members to execute responsibilities under highly regulated circumstances. Frankly, as an educator, while I acknowledged the significance of genuinely valuing student voices, there were instances in which my concern of job retention overshadowed my commitment to pedagogical responsiveness. Administration was often present, and it was evident

that management tactics designated as “improper” would jeopardize my position at this organization. I began to realize that my initial presence at GOSA, one so aligned with student interests and critical of program practices, may have disrupted or diminished the real pressures directly impacted employees. It is integral to note that my mention of administration is not accusatory, as bureaucratic complexities also rendered executives responsible to their bosses, donors and other relevant entities at the institution. In practice though, this meant somewhat submitting myself to the “GOSA machine,” in a now inverted trajectory, as I operated through discourse heavily aligned with staff/administrative interests. Thus, I did not always invest in enacting agentic practices as much as I had desired, instead operating within an ambiguous liminality.

Instead of not truly being aligned with any interest, as I returned to the GOSA-Quinsigamond environment, I held a resolve to instead maintain commitment to the population most impacted by the problem, students, while also respecting practices of GOSA staff. Students are experts on their own learning experiences, and my objective became to facilitate reflection by all stakeholders on suppressive paradigms of youth learning and knowing. Through the situation of all participants as learning, evolving beings, I aspired to redefine my positionality at GOSA with a dedication to agentic advocacy and co-creation.

Participants

There is one group of research subjects. This group includes students enrolled in the Guild of St. Agnes (GOSA) after-school program. Students in the Green group (ages 8-10) are included in this group. Their defining characteristics are as follows: 1) They are GOSA students; 2) They are in the Green group, which conducts Woo-Labs and Generation Genius educational

programs. These students are also expected to uphold conventional classroom practices (i.e. request to speak, follow instructions in an orderly manner, engage with programming as designed, etc.). The majority of these students attend the site's host school, Quinsigamond Elementary.

There are 28 total students in the Green group. Typical daily attendance ranges from 22-26 students. Students are primarily people of color (POC), and the majority of students come from Spanish and Portuguese speaking households. Additionally, staff and management are also primarily POC, though it is notable that upper-executive management are majority non-Hispanic white individuals.

There is also a small subsection of students who will be pulled for individual interviews. This opportunity was available to all students in the Green group, pending the return of a signed assent and consent form. There were 6 interviews conducted.

Data Collection

Over Summer 2025, data were collected on student participants through 3 months of initial fieldnotes and practitioner reflections. These initial field notes were collected throughout eight-hour work days in June, July and August of 2025. Once my program began, observational notes were collected throughout a 3 hour time block. This included fieldnotes on group reflections, noticings during activities, and personal reflective portions.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted throughout the program duration. These interviews were between 10-15 minutes, and were designed to investigate how students conceived of their agency, also coded as "choice" or "freedom" in epistemologies and

pedagogies at GOSA. Interviews that have recording consent were recorded, otherwise I took written notes.

Data Analysis

Data was interpreted and analyzed through a discourse analytic lens. As I collected data, I coded information with appropriate emphasis on relevant terms. These include: voice, listen/listened to, care, want to, agency, active, decide, etc. These are certain words that I have associated with feelings of empowerment and agentic behavior at GOSA.

As research unfolded, additional highly-relevant terms were identified as follows: get to, let, and being good/bad. Other discourse-specific indicators were identified throughout data analysis and interpretation.

One objective of my data collection is to reveal student conceptions of agency both in and beyond their classrooms. Participants utilizing terms such as “I get to…”, or “I am allowed to…” when discussing being heard or having their voice valued indicates an embedded disempowerment of students as they operated through traditional banking models. Students who may appeal to educators or exhibit deference to educator rhetoric might also have theorizations that coincide with banking model logics. Moreover, changework theorized as “being good” or “waiting for my reward” also demonstrate student passivity, such that beneficial change is conceived as a product of compliance within existing systems.

In contrast, discourse that highlights opposition or pushback to restrictive frameworks may indicate learner belief in the capacity of learner resistance. Terms such as, “doing what I want” from students or phrases related to degrees of school “understanding me” reveal a

conscious or subconscious grappling with banking models. Behavioral discourse that emulates phenomena similar to Kohl's (1991) "I won't learn from you" also fits within this paradigm.

These interviews proved extremely valuable in uncovering student perceptions of choice and agency in concrete, legible ways. Because of my long history at GOSA, I was able to ask students about specific moments, projects or activities they participated in throughout their time present in the program. I had also witnessed the tenure of many educators throughout my 18 months of GOSA experience, and utilized this knowledge to inquire about particular classroom procedures, relationships, or curricular tactics that felt relevant to students.

After completion of the program, anomalies I've retroactively identified as indicators of agentic practice include certain shifts in verbal discourse, "I get to do___" → "I will do ____", "Can I sit with my friends for PBL?" → "I'd work better if I sit with my friends for PBL". Furthermore, decreased expression of student resistance "I hate this" and more prominent utilizations of curricular reformation practices, such as "I'd rather do this other activity instead" can also be indicative of heightened perceptions of student capacity for agency and change.

The interview phase of my project (dubbed Phase 1) attempted to surface student conceptualizations and assertions of agency at GOSA. I conducted interviews with 6 students, inquiring into their feelings of ownership and authenticity both at GOSA and in their classrooms. Throughout this initial period, I attended after-school program days to spend time with students, gather fieldnotes, and reintegrate with the culture and routine at GOSA.

Beyond this, student advocacy for pedagogical authenticity can appear through active engagement with construction or modification of pedagogical models such as, "I'm want to show my work through drawing instead," "In the gym, we should play all together, not be separated into groups," and "We made roles for our school design. I am the lesson planner, [redacted] is the interior designer, and [redacted] is in charge of breaking up the day with fun things" (2026). In

this way, discourse can reveal discernable evolutions, reflections and perceptions of student agency in practice.

Findings

History With GOSA

I began work at GOSA within this PBL paradigm as a Hanover Fellow in 2024, in which my primary responsibility was collaboratively planning and executing PBL projects. Through these initial experiences, I observed the Guild meaningfully invest and support the facilitation of four PBL projects. I grew an admiration for Guild staff and administrators for their commitment to constructing programs that featured enduring practices of inquiry, captivating modes of engagement, profound opportunities for critique and reflection, and cumulative final showcases and celebrations. These all informed Phase 1 of my exploration: How do students conceptualize agency, and how does it manifest at GOSA? We then began our Phase 2 intervention: How can we co-create robust conditions for transformative agency?

Throughout these phases, I began to codify a broad-stroke typology for different enactions of agency as they happened at GOSA. In existing GOSA pedagogies, I primarily saw processes of oppositional resistance, which were often met with offerings of curricular choice from staff.

Oppositional Resistance at GOSA

Throughout my time at GOSA, students have often been comfortable expressing their feelings about particular curriculum or programming. I have frequently heard students say “I do not like this activity”, or “I don’t care about this” (Fieldnotes, 08/2025). During a PBL project session in our Poetry Slam unit in August 2025, one student was predicting our scheduled activity. She shared, “whatever we do, it’s not gonna be fun cause it’s like writing” (Fieldnotes, 01/2026). On the same day, another student declared, “I hate this project, because poetry is

boring" (Fieldnotes, 01/2026). Students expressed disinterest in a variety of creative ways, asserting agentic capacity through diversion, distraction, or rejection.

Responding With Curricular Choice

When asked about alternatives, students were often ready to share their preferences in programming. Student Patricia expressed, "Well, we should go to the gym, because we can play games there instead" (08/2025). A week later, another student mentioned that he wished there were more opportunities to make beaded bracelets during the station block, "I don't know what to do, I want to make one bracelet to give to my sister and one to give to my mom" (Fieldnotes, 09/2025). Unsurprisingly, these instances substantiate the notion that kids are autonomous entities with opinions and desires.

Interestingly, students at GOSA exemplify a palpable ease in expressing their curricular perspectives. As a student named Luna described, "At school, I would not tell my teacher what to do, because I am not in charge, and maybe she would yell [...] but here, there are teachers who will try to listen" (2026). Although GOSA, in many ways, functions similarly to classrooms, a distinction of this program is the GOSA staff's pedagogical commitment to "student voice and choice" in the classroom. From the upper-administrations involved support of PBL, to student-facing employees implementation of autonomous station-based activities, discourse at GOSA forefronts practices that create space open enough for students to express their opinions on programming.

When presented with the opportunity to select program content, students were prepared to voice their preferred methods of engagement. The majority of kids were ready and enthusiastic about selecting games, activities or methods of participation. As an employee of GOSA, I would routinely ask students remaining towards the end of the day to identify an

activity they would like to engage with for the rest of the day. The size and composition of this group of students varied daily, yet nearly always became ecstatic when presented with this choice. If any day became hectic, or unanticipated challenges arose that hindered our ability to do choice-time stations, kids would communicate their frustration on behalf of themselves and the collective. “I know Jariel really wanted to design his own video-game characters with markers”, one student shared.

Many learners could also easily articulate topics they wished were incorporated into curriculum. Student Tatum shared in his interview, “I want us to do more robotics, cause I really liked programming, and also building things with legos or other materials” (02/2026). GOSA emphasis of PBL’s “voice and choice,” coupled with the relative informality of an afterschool program in contrast to a standard-bound classroom allowed for a strong culture around student input and choice.

When Curricular Choice Is Not Enough

Although the zeitgeist at GOSA has established student ability to vocalize desires or feedback regarding curriculum, the option to dictate academic content at GOSA was often not enough for students. Instead, many students exhibited epistemological opposition through demonstrations of worldviews that challenge existing GOSA paradigms. One instance of this was young learners exhibited intricate theorizations of their senses-of-self in relation to structures of schooling. For example, during a discussion of current rules in school, student Fabian divulged, “I wish the rules were different, I want to beat someone up” (Fieldnotes 03/2026). Startled, one of the staff members inquired further. The student continued, “there’s this kid who was bullying my brother, and that’s not okay with me.” Family, for him, was priority.

"It's most important," he concluded. For this student, cultural and social models of family superseded the socialization processes present in academia. In dominant social frameworks, physical violence, even as retaliation, is heavily penalized. However, this learner's firm sense of cultural identity supplanted internalization logics of schooling systems, that seek to acculturate students to perform hegemonic ideologies.

Even as young as kindergarten, youth at GOSA display prioritization of relational practice that overrides the individualism espoused through schooling practices. When passing siblings, cousins or family members in the hallway, students often would step out of their line to receive a hug, high five, or a few words of affection. These students would often receive frustrated redirection from staff, who are responsible for upholding institutional rules that strive for neat organization, order and efficiency. Students would sometimes be subject to rehearsing expected behavior in line, being instructed to keep quiet and remain in their assigned spots. Like the student above, these kindergarteners continued to demonstrate a strong relational sensibility, even despite social scripts enforced within classrooms and the potential consequences for deviance.

Within these examples of modification, reformation and resistance, youth illustrated a friction of worldviews, as articulated by Valenzuela in *Subtractive Schooling* (1999). These students possess cultural frameworks that conflict with narratives disseminated by hegemonic systems, and are structurally punished for these values. However, learners exhibited a Giroux-esque resistance, underscoring the capacity for agentic negotiation and transformation, even amidst confining power structures (1983).

Working Along Students: Designing our POP

As I grappled with existing terms of student engagement at GOSA, I crafted a general draft of our upcoming program of practice (POP). This POP was designed as a response to much of the classroom-esque restrictive pedagogy I've noticed while employed at GOSA, and tension of student engagement with these paradigms. Through the curation of my theoretical framework, I began to theorize that a significant portion of complete rejection of programming by students was due to the 'existential' disempowerment I described above. While students did have some choice in curricular content, they were often not afforded the capacity for participating with the program with more existentially, culturally and epistemologically relevant ways. This left many learners fatigued, disinterested, or resistive to program practices. Some students completely disengaged, while others subscribed to rhetoric similar to Willis's "Anti-School Culture." Rather than completing work, these students would disparage GOSA, withhold participation in activities, or deny materials presented by staff. This knowledge, paired with student perspectives I gathered through informal conversations and official interviews, I came to realize that students are rarely provided a framework of discourse for critiquing, reflecting and resisting dominant educational norms. Therefore, the goal of this project evolved into facilitating the development of critical consciousness in students, so that learners will feel more equipped to reflect on their positionality within schooling structures, consider alternative possibilities, and advocate for their own authentic futures.

The POP sought to emphasize the development of critical consciousness through Freire's model of Conscientization. This framework purports that the capacity for changework and advocacy requires an understanding and reflection on existing social structures, as well as the development of tools to participate in engaged action. In short, Conscientization is characterized

by two distinct elements of conciousness *and* action. Conscientization was a fitting framework for this project because in traditional schooling settings, including GOSA, the intended productions of these systems are naturalized, and students are not taught frameworks to understand schooling structures as constructed to produce specific outcomes. Therefore, guiding students in the development of critical consciousness was the first step. The action piece of Conscientization was additionally relevant because consciousness is not enough. Action, to advocate for the reformation of existing conditions, is an integral step in designing authentic futures. Because many students at GOSA engaged in resistive practices of disengagement, I felt it was important to promote and co-develop social scripts and skills for students to confront and modify their realities.

Furthermore, earlier iterations of this project theorized "action" as a creation of procedural change at GOSA to incorporate more student feedback. While this intervention might have been effective at modifying existing conditions at GOSA for these students to include more opportunities for agency, this intervention would have been site-specific, and reliant on structural power of an educator. In other words, GOSA would likely have implemented a mechanism primarily because it is heralded by an authority figure. If students had produced an intervention independently, I envision that youth would be met with disregard. Furthermore, while transforming structural conditions at GOSA I wanted to construct knowledge with students that encouraged a student-centered discourse applicable both to within and outside the program, stimulating reconsideration not only of GOSA circumstances, but also conceptions of youth disempowerment at large.

Thus, I developed two sections of the POP: first, we examined extant practices of education, including our own positionalities, problematizing hegemonic paradigms that fabricate

hierarchies of capability and validity. In this phase, students explored “fairness” and power in education, exploring the role of school in determining life circumstances through access, or “who gets to succeed?” and “How does power play out in classrooms?” We also examined procedural elements of school, interrogating the role of rules, regulations and restrictive paradigms. This portion of the program attempted to encourage learners to understand their positionality as students situated within larger critical realist frameworks.

I believed it was paramount to construct the project to uphold my core values of student agency. Because students are the experts of their realities, my role was to facilitate the exploration of conceptual frameworks that operate beyond conventional schooling paradigms. Through this, students were able to identify relevant and meaningful ontologies assembling authentic conceptualizations of how to resist and redesign.

In the second section of the POP, we utilized our learnings of power and criticality to visualize alternative futures. We began with the *what*, “What do we want our schooling to look like?” Learners designed ideal classroom spaces with the knowledge they constructed from prior sections of the POP. For this portion, participants were encouraged to identify elements of other spaces in their lives that created feelings of authenticity and translate them to a classroom context. From there, we needed to explore the *how*, “How can we bring these elements from our ideal spaces into reality?” For this portion, we explored legacies of student activism, rehearsed discourse, collaborative creation, and the navigation of disagreement and tension.

Overall, the critical question that informed the POP became: How can we push discourse at GOSA to extend beyond curricular choice, instead grappling with ideas of critical and epistemological agency.

Our POP: Striving Towards Agency

As a practitioner, catalyzing interest in confronting deeply embedded social norms was, understandably, complex. Students were accustomed to routines at GOSA that they have practiced for months to years. Therefore, disruption must be a careful, responsive and incremental process. Several commonalities emerged during the initial stages of this project that represented larger themes of student reaction to our activities. For instance, oppositional resistance, relational and coalitional agency, as well as strategic and 'negative' agency, manifested in complicated ways.

Persisting Paradigms: Dominant Pedagogies in Our POP

Despite familiarity with decisions on what activities to do, or topics to learn about, students confronted with a fundamental agency surrounding pedagogical practices, structures and tools of engagement at GOSA were initially reticent to communicate their perspectives as dominant epistemologies continued to persist in mental and physical models of education.

This can be illustrated by student Hilda, during an interview in February 2026. After mentioning that her teacher could be mean, I asked Hilda if she would change the way her teacher interacted with her class. She shared, "I would feel bad because she worked really hard for the lesson. I am just gonna ruin it" (Hilda, 02/2026). Hilda's deference to her teacher's standards indicated an embedded devaluation of her preferred practices. Her preferences were framed as less important, less relevant, and disruptive. Instead, it is Hilda's job to conform to the expectations of her teacher, a sentiment that aligns with larger theorizations of student passivity.

Moreover, existing frameworks for student choice at GOSA operate through a student-feedback framework, a key distinction from 'existential' practices of learner agency. At

GOSA, choice is structured into the curriculum. Students can determine activities or sometimes choose certain topics of inquiry. This type of choice coincides with my theory of "curricular choice" in that students are allowed by teachers to select programming or content within specific parameters. I use the word "allow" intentionally. Students provide active feedback and contribute input only so far as defined on staff terms. For example, station activities are a common tool of instruction at GOSA. In these activities, students are able to circulate among several staff-determined activities, choosing which station to participate in and for how long. As mentioned above, learners can sometimes decide on content within the stations. But if a group of friends is deemed distracted or interacts with an activity in a manner unanticipated by educators, they are swiftly separated and instructed to remain focused (2025). Staff is quick to remind students to remain silent in line, stay in assigned seats, and respect their unyielding authority without rationale. Therefore, while students are provided the curricular choice of dictating facets of the curriculum, they are concurrently still largely disseminated a tacit ontological framework and way of knowing. In this paradigm, individualism prevails over social interaction, predictability trumps experimentation, and conformity supersedes expression.

Student Ideologies

Understanding student ideologies and conceptions of their role in schooling systems is a complex but critical endeavor. Students approach theorization from diverse tools and theories of practice, and perform in social spaces in uniquely individualized channels. However, major themes of student understanding emerged through interview data and fieldnotes observations, highlighting the intersections of individual perspective and various cultural models that interact with dominant social rhetoric in complicated ways.

Furthermore, narratives of hierarchical education models pervade atmosphere and the mindset of students, whether due to genuine belief or repeated exposure. As shared by Alex in his interview, “About the staff here, I’m not like the boss of them, but I’ll listen to them, but they don’t have to listen to me [...] say, if I wanted the basketball, I'll just say, please [...] I just don't want to be bossy and stuff” (Alex Interview 3, 02/2026). He went on to discuss his favorite subject, science, and divulged that it's rare for him to engage with topics he’s interested in. He mentioned, “But in second grade, I *get to* make slime” (Alex Interview 3, 02/2026). Here, Alex both explicitly and subliminally communicates his perspective on schooling structures. In his model, educators possess an ultimate authority to impose social, epistemological, and curricular standards. Alex framing his endeavors as behaviors he “getting to” perform reveals his understanding of schooling as imposed upon him. This resonates with Freire’s banking model, as schooling systems acculturate students into mental models of recipience and disempowerment.

Alex also articulated rhetoric that indicated conceptions of youth ineptitude. When sharing his excitement about a video-recorded science experiment shown to him by his sister, I asked if he would like to do a similar experiment himself. He noted, “That would be cool too, man. But by myself, I don't think so [...] I'm scared to do it, because I don't want to get myself burned. [...] I'm scared of using it. You gotta be careful. Um, with stuff like that because, yeah, fire is dangerous, right?” (Alex Interview 3, 02/2026). He then emphasized that if he were in middle school, he would be more willing to undertake the experiment. Alex’s lack of confidence in his ability to perform this experiment, as well as the conversational appeal to me, an adult, can be interpreted as an internalization of prevalent banking model rhetoric. This can also be situated within Foucault’s idea of Docile Bodies. In the Docile Bodies framework, a body becomes dispossesed of its own agency as internalized logics of hegemony catalyze self-regulation and

disbelief. Alex's expression of self-doubt, particularly as correlated with his age, illustrates this internalized self-monitorization and recognition when specific practices conflict with dominant social narratives, manifesting through his lack of belief in his own capabilities.

Furthermore, during a group activity, learners highlighted changes they would like to implement in their classroom and GOSA routines. I also asked them to identify avenues and tactics to achieve their reformations. Eight students underscored "being good" as their primary strategy for enacting change (Fieldnotes, 3/2026). When questioned about this process, most of them shared that if they followed instructions, rules, and expectations enforced by their teachers, their alteration would eventually come to fruition. This instance is indicative of widespread paradigms at GOSA: students are capable and inventive, yet often are deprived of the social scripts and models to engage in agentic determination.

This coincides with the internal disempowerment as articulated by Foucault's Docile Bodies. Although students question norms at GOSA, they conceptualized change through subscribing to existing structures. There are two interesting emergences from these student contributions. Firstly, the idea of "being good" is a conflation of morality and obedience, where goodness is defined as docility and adherence to institutional norms. Secondly, as noted in Alex's interview and the anecdote above, it seems that many students perceive school as happening *to* them. Students "get to" engage in desirable activities only so far as they are "good." In other words, if they follow procedural regulations, the opportunity for authenticity and autonomy be granted to them by authoritative bodies.

Blind Faith: "Because I Said So."

Pervading notions of youth disempowerment at GOSA can partially be attributed to hierarchical pedagogies that staff are encouraged to embody when interacting with students.

Many staff members utilize authoritative repertoires to establish the nature of their connection to students. Within this paradigm, educators are the central holders of conceptions of behavior deemed acceptable and unacceptable, and frequently employ corrective or punitive procedures to maintain social order. Students are consistently reminded to adhere to specific guidelines, often vocally reinforcing regulations through chastising or reprimanding students when they deviate from expected practice. If a student challenges the logics espoused by these educators, it is not uncommon for "Because I said so" to be a sufficient response (Fieldnotes, 08/2025). In this way, students are expected to abide by regulations enforced by educators solely due to staff's formal position of power.

These methods of classroom management function similarly to conventional Banking Model frameworks, in which the hierarchical positionality of educators requires them to enforce specific social worldviews and practices. The maintenance of this paradigm also requires constant monitoring and supervision, by teachers and students themselves, to retain control of classroom behaviors. For instance, GOSA administration mandates staff to always have every student within their fields of vision. This practice is required by law, yet it is also promoted by GOSA as an opportunity to surveil and redirect deviant behavior. Trust and friendliness are celebrated traits for staff at GOSA. Ultimately, educators were expected to make students "respect them" rather unequivocally, emphasizing power differentials that undergird staff-student exchanges at this program. These practices of power exertion were framed as preparatory opportunities for students to practice "success in school." This emphasizes the apparent socialization process of Banking Model frameworks. To a degree, these corrective procedures do assist students. At GOSA, penalties for misbehavior are supposedly more "informal" than official school "write-ups," and students experience consistent redirection to function more

effectively within existing classroom paradigms and reproduce dominant epistemological thought—learnings that can produce better pedagogical synchronicity with extant school practices.

These instances make evident how commonly schooling discourse expects students to immediately abide by anyone nominally designed as a figure of authority, irrespective of learner perspective and input. These relationships are upheld through material and ideological power granted to educators that is not extended to students. Within this Docile Body framework, students are presumed to emulate a "Blind Faith" towards their educators, dispossessed of material agency through expectations of passive participation in program activities. Not only are students deprived of material engagement, but also are taught to tacitly internalize self disempowerment. Through close monitoring, students learn that their behavior is not trusted or valued, and is instead subject to surveillance and correction. This encapsulates self-disempowerment frameworks of Foucault's Docile Bodies, that individuals within a system are regulated externally, while being trained to self-regulate and monitor their own participation in structures. These relationships additionally echo later organizations of power that students will be expected to exist within, such as boss-employee or even stratification across quantities of social capital, effectively denying students the opportunity to formulate and rehearse relational practices and general worldviews that may differ from constrictive norms.

Oppositional Resistance in The POP

While initial conceptions of my intervention involved a biphasic POP that first sought to stimulate critical consciousness in learners and then utilize this knowledge to redesign alternative futures, a number of students performed oppositional resistance to ideas of the POP itself. For

instance, certain learners resisted by withholding participation in POP activities, particularly through indifference. By demonstrating to their peers and me that they did not care about our activities, students were able to communicate a lack of connection with material or a subtle assertion of agentic rejection.

Naturally, challenging conventional schooling models requires the cultivation of reciprocal trust between all participants. While I resolved to model trust to students and their contributions, that does not necessarily indicate that this faith is returned. For students engaging with an outsider, trust is careful and deliberate. In one of our first POP activities, I asked participants to locate places of authenticity, safety and comfort, urging them to engage in whatever method felt most authentic. When work was being collected, I looked through the stack of papers and noticed a pink sticky note. One anonymous learner had shared, “Nowhere, I don’t need one. And I don’t like this idea” with a scrawled thumbs down emoticon (Fieldnotes 01/2026). This activity was early in the program, and many students had not yet codified an arrangement of the power dynamic I was embodying in this new role. Thus, this student may have felt this information too vulnerable, withholding their answer as an act of defiance to the abruptness of this activity. By selectively disclosing information, perhaps due to discomfort or an absence of trust, this student articulated their own participation and narratives of engagement.

Not only does the construction of an effective discourse community necessitate the building of trust, but also continuous and intentional investigation of pedagogical practice, as revealed by multiple exchanges I had with students. For instance, on one day in mid-February, when we were about halfway through our POP, I was sitting with students at snack time, conversing informally.

A student across the table waved for my attention, “What are we doing today for our POP?” she asked.

I replied, “we’re gonna continue some stuff from last week, talking about spaces here that feel most comfortable-”

She interjected, “Well, whatever it is, I don’t really care because it might be writing, and I don’t like writing”

“Okay, is there some other way you’d rather continue your work?”

She thought for a moment, “Yeah, I’m not sure, I don’t know” (Fieldnotes, 02/2026).

Through her vocalized disregard, this student triggered a serious reconsideration of my pedagogical practices. I scribbled in my journal, “I have been relying too much on literary engagement” (Fieldnotes 02/2026). This communicated pushback accentuated shortcomings of my program tactics, and the nuanced ways I failed to foster agency in students’ ability to define their own engagement. This highlights a larger friction revealed through this research: the dominating ubiquity of Banking Models feel so innate not only to students, but also to *me*, that deconstruction of these frameworks must be intentionally evaluated, crafted and upheld.

Relational Agency: Changing Goals to Trust

While my early theorizations of the POP sought to stimulate deep critical consciousness and encourage active change, the students and I soon realized a crucial initial step: We must establish a more authentic trust, between students-students and students-myself. The work of challenging structurally rooted ideologies is often uncomfortable and unfamiliar. To push ourselves into territory of engaging with novel paradigms, students had to trust each other to receive sincerity, and I needed to cultivate faith from students that I would not respond to them

with conventional authoritative rhetoric. For example, as an outsider authority figure claiming to situate myself as a learner along with students, many participants actively sought to solidify a power dynamic within our connection. By testing my pedagogical boundaries, these students attempted to construct mental frameworks of discourse and interaction. Because I positioned myself differently than conventional Banking Model educators, students had to understand how to interact with me as a facilitator.

For example, in an early POP activity, students had access to art materials as a tool of engagement to critically explore rhetoric of existing school legacies. A young student, who only recently matriculated from a younger group at GOSA, looked me in the eyes and declared, “I am not gonna do this, I’m just gonna draw girls” (Fieldnotes, 01/2026). I was taken aback, but I recognized this as an effort to assess and negotiate power dynamics. I replied, “Okay, I can’t make you do something,” and began walking to another table. “I’m just gonna draw girls…,” she repeated. I responded again, keeping my tone indifferent. I wanted students to participate in the activity, but worried that enforcing strict rules or parameters would only make the program feel like an extension of school. To me, this moment was a diagnostic evaluation by the student. Could she test me? Would I assert logics of hierarchical banking model authority? In this scenario, I did not. Three sessions later, this student was insistent on being her group’s recorder and presenter, roles that she had not volunteered for prior. Towards the end of the program, after discovering that I am an aspiring teacher, this student claimed I would be good in her class, and provided me some advice for my professional future. For this young learner, the possibility of openness from an educator signaled an alternative relationship model. As described in Freire’s banking model, students in classrooms are rarely regarded as autonomous, rich individuals, often subject to immediate processes of control and regulation. This exchange between this student and

I exemplified a disruption of the inherent distrust of students in existing paradigms. I theorized that I needed to trust her, and encourage her to engage agentically with material, and she chose to become more actively involved.

Coalitional Agency: Building on New Ground

As the POP unfolded, I dedicated more intentional efforts to building trust and honoring true agentic practice. Students began to exhibit faith in my pedagogical practices, as allowing student-driven discourse to flourish stimulated a coalitional agency of students and their peers. Students grew more comfortable designing, critiquing, and debating each other. This discourse centered on student epistemological engagement was lived through a coalitional agentic model: through collaborative iterations, students demonstrated active intellectual and social engagement, reconceptualizing knowledge as an iterative, autonomous creation that is inextricably linked to each others' ideations.

For instance, during a program discussion regarding rules and procedures of schooling structures in the later half of the program, I shared one of my school memories in which I was expected to follow a rule I did not understand. A student named Daniela began to respond. "Rules in school are about control, I follow the rules I want to" (03/2026). One of her peers looked skeptical. He rebutted, "But what if there's a fire? If rules didn't exist we wouldn't know what to do." Daniela thought for a moment, and replied "Some rules are important, but some are just dumb." As the conversation unfolded, we began to create a list– rules that felt logical versus illogical. Through this discourse, participants highlighted that rules can be fair for some individuals and unfair to others. In this scenario, Daniela and her peer navigated diverging conceptualizations of schooling structures. Daniela recognized that hierarchical educational

systems oppose her worldview, and confine her agentic capacity. Conversely, her peer conceived constructions for their ability to provide order. Both learners demonstrated deep engagement with theory of systems, acknowledging productions of systems through their impact on lives. Daniela vocalized her rejection of systems as an individual, critiquing the influence of restrictive social codes on formation of realities within the self, whereas her peer observed systems through collectivity– schooling constructions through their impact on relationships and social organizations. Both students compiled a list of rules for their ideal classrooms, and showcased each to the whole group, requesting their peers to vote on each preferred rule. Here, Daniela and her partner embodied a unique coalitional model of agency. By defining their curricular content of interest, as well as assuming leadership in dictating pedagogical practices, these learners utilized their developed critical awareness to assume agency and implement an action centered in student authenticity- a participatory design process for them and their peers. Furthermore, these learners interactive production of knowledge between *each other* signified a coalitional agency in their discourse context.

With time, the Green Group students developed a unique discourse community. It was common for students to cycle through leadership roles, individuals being responsible for the management of certain activities or program days. For instance, on the penultimate week, students were asked to engage with various scenarios of learning and choice-making. After examining each situation, student Lara stood in front of the group, announcing “let’s do this where we move around the tables so we can look at everyone’s.” The group murmured. Another student began to speak, “what if we did this as a debate, raise your hand if you want to do that.” The class obliged. After counting the votes, the group had decided on a debate. After grouping the scenarios into two categories, an educator suggested the students move to opposite corners of

the room to indicate their opinions. Majority agreed. Two at a time, students would walk to the center of the circle, creating a fishbowl-style pedagogical practice, debating, conversing and critiquing perspectives of their opponents (Fieldnotes, 03/2026).

In this scenario, students began to define the terms of their own educational realities, identifying pedagogical and epistemological practices that felt authentic to them. Interestingly, this was one of the first activities in which most students seemed to place less emphasis on validity as dictated by educators, instead interacting with each other to analyze and contend with their collective knowledge production. Educators functioned as facilitators, suggesting when expertise was relevant.

In short, although moving towards pedagogies of true agentic practice is a profound, prolonged process of reformation and reconstruction, students beginning to trust their collaborators and generate solutions amongst themselves signifies a resistance to commonly held theories of youth disempowerment and ineptitude. Furthermore, the discourse community developed among the Green Group participants exhibits the uncapped capacity for student capability. Through trial and contention, these learners manufactured a community of practice led by them, effectively rejecting banking models, even in the smallest ways, and instead redefining these learners beliefs in their own agency for determining their authentic realities.

Strategic and "Negative" Agencies: Complications and Complexities

Strategic Agency

I must note that these conceptualizations of agentic practice are not discrete classifications, as figured worlds at GOSA continue to operate in complex ways. In particular, intricate negotiations of strategic agency surfaced as students demonstrated profound

understanding of sociocultural realities. This demonstrated the endless complexity of social worlds, moving beyond simplified models of agentic development, in which critical consciousness and agentic capacity are developed linearly. Instead, many learners navigated figured worlds at GOSA through distinct performances to claim power and create meaning.

Primarily, through shared culture or charismatic dispositions, a select group of students constructed trust, asserting strategic agency with particular educators, that allowed them to maneuver and challenge educational paradigms.

Notably, students who exhibited an ascribed charisma, or were considered funny by GOSA staff were often given more freedom in autonomous practices of curricular engagement. For example, during a program activity in February 2026, students were participating in independent work to advance their PBL animation projects. Social and power dynamics were being navigated similarly to standard GOSA routine: Youth who began to socialize or perform behaviors deemed distracting were swiftly redirected and reminded to remain on task. One student, called Ana, who was amicable, likeable and popular amongst peers and staff, had moved to a neighboring table to talk to her friend. A staff member intervened: “Ana, you have to sit down.”

She looked up, and began in a saccharine voice, “But I don’t knowwww thiis.” As she responded, she elongated each syllable, almost as if she was a whining sibling.

“Ana…,” the staff cautioned again, smiling slightly. She whirled around to face me.

“¿Qué lo que Martín?” This was the customary greeting when Ana saw me. “Can I move my seat?” She grinned.

“I’m not in charge of this activity,” I responded, “To keep things consistent, I’ll ask your Group Leader.”

Without hesitation, the Green Group Leader two tables away contributed, “No, I don’t think they can handle it. When they’re are allowed to move about the area, they get too crazy.” Disappointed, yet acknowledging the authority of her teacher, Ana resumed position in her assigned seat.

Minutes later, I noticed a group of students congregated at one table, talking. Ana was among them. Returning to the table to remind them of their expectations, I realized they were in discussion with a different staff member, the Assistant Group Leader, laughing and chatting about something tangential. “Why does Ana get to move her seat but no one else?” I immediately questioned to myself (Fieldnotes, 02/2026). After this lesson, I articulated my question to this employee. In response, she emphasized that she knew Ana will still get her work done.

In my post-program reflection, I pondered why Ana received the privilege of movement freedom. Recognizing I should have inquired further with the Assistant Group Leader, I began to reflect on the rapport of trust between Ana and this staff member that seemed to have been developed. Was it because of an intentional demonstration on Ana’s behalf, resisting hierarchical models through asserting her ability to complete work on her own terms? It was clear that this respect was unique to her, as other students who resisted were still met with punishment. Was she afforded this opportunity because she was charismatic? I certainly thought that her affability played a role. But I believe it could have been more than that. As a student, Ana chose to operate with a distinct repertoire of practice. She frequently switched between English and Spanish, often articulated her opinions to the whole class, and highly valued groupwork with her friends. While not entirely comprehensive, Ana’s tools of engagement align more closely with Caring Relations and Linguistic models articulated in Valenzuela’s *Subtractive Schooling*, complicating

the idea of "whiteness as a credential" in racialized organizations as defined by Ray (2019). Embodying ways-of-knowing centered in whiteness certainly benefitted students at GOSA regardless of their racial identity by reducing cultural friction with institutional practices of penalization. However, a subsection of students at GOSA embodied these similar paradigms, and were often given more autonomy in modifying program circumstances. This may be attributed to the sociocultural understanding of worldviews by the majority POC Latine staff.

This familiarity in epistemological conceptualization between staff and particular students generated circumstances of micro-resistance, in which traditional hierarchical schooling logics were subverted by certain students as they developed trust and relationality with educators through cultural commonalities. I began to code anomalies such as this with the label "Grounded Faith," to represent an alternative student-educator relationship model that seemed to function from a deeper place of connection, through shared understanding of worldviews and positionality. While these were powerful instantiations of relational changework, this freedom was much less present in students who either chose not to participate in specific practices legible to the majority POC Latine staff, or whose existing cultural models of engagement differed from this standard. Thus, I began to wonder how to create opportunity for Grounded Faith and relational practice for students whose cultural constructions may not be recognized and responded to at GOSA.

"Negative" Agency: Reorganizing Power

In other ways, students continued to reconstruct social hierarchies and stratification amongst themselves, reorganizing power between their peers during the POP to echo conventional hegemonic paradigms. These organizations of power were familiar and

comfortable, and thus learners actively negotiated their positionalities in relation to each other. This phenomenon harkens back to Jeffery's (2019) idea of 'negative' agency, in which individuals deepen dominant structures of power through reproduction.

Power Through Dominant Pedagogies

Learners who interacted with programming through knowledge-production legible to academia often became the pseudo- "governing bodies" of their group's discourse. It was common for some students to assume "leadership" roles in their partnerships and collaborative work (2025). Student labels of "good" or "bad" endure at GOSA, and are often arranged according to student tendency to engage with material in ways aligned with logics of hegemony. While never explicitly stated, stratified treatment of students through differentiated instruction makes labels quietly evident. Within this framework, students labeled as "good' develop a more sturdy confidence in their abilities, and thus more frequently assume leadership positions in cooperative endeavors. Students who participate in methods outside of pedagogical hegemony are sometimes dispossessed of belief in their own abilities, tending towards roles of deference. In this way, because certain paradigms became validated and others discarded, the ideals of dominant structures are reflected through learner behavior.

Power Through Socioeconomic Status

Students are also acutely cognizant of economic disparities across the classroom. For instance, young learners frequently utilize "poor" as a pejorative in conflict or comment on their peers' physical presentation (Fieldnotes 08/2025). Notably, class differences also impacted students' organization of social capital during the POP. During the activity where we explored

our places of comfort and authenticity at the Guild, a student called Nana pleaded with me to share a comfortable location she had identified that was outside GOSA. Standing up in front of the whole group, Nana proudly shared the size of her "large bed" and listed her roster of the electronic devices in her bedroom, citing that as her primary source of comfort.

"If you get it, you get it" she concluded (Fieldnotes, 01/2026). Suddenly, the atmosphere shifted. Later in the lesson, students were asked to brainstorm key elements of these spaces that they believe contribute to feelings of authenticity. While discussions at the beginning of the lesson tended towards emotional elements of authentic spaces, such as "people who listen to you", the conversation was now rife with talk of possessions.

"Well playing Roblox on my Playstation 5 makes me feel comfortable," another student shared. Each student seemed almost to interpret the POP program as an opportunity to broadcast their bountiful material ownership.

Although a departure from Anyon's Hidden Curriculum, it quickly became evident that logics that valorize capital and economic status are thoroughly imbued to students as a dominant and desirable social position. Each young person was distinctly attuned to the organization of economic power, and understood that presenting higher on this economic "ladder" would garner more capital. In this way, students were constrained by their own perceptions, as pressures to appear within specific economic narratives limited agentic contributions.

Power Through Social Performance

Social performance, through demonstrations of calculated indifference, endeavors to garner social capital, and personal acquiescence to maintain social harmony, is endemic to any

circumstance where interpersonal engagement occurs. At GOSA, these social roles operate as an extension of personal agency, where social capital was organized and manipulated within groups to create varying outcomes. When describing their efforts on a recent PBL claymation project, two students shared that one of their group members dominated their discussion, evaluating each participant's contributions and pursuing concepts only that captured his individual interest (2026). I asked them why they think he tends to undermine their involvement. One of these students commented that their group member is older than them, and maybe stressed about satisfactorily completing the work within time constraints. Here, existing conceptualizations of goal-oriented collaboration become visible, as their relationship was framed through transactional exchanges for achieving a polished product. These students were assigned groups for executing a claymation production, and thus they seemed to understand their relationship in ways that prioritized productivity. "I don't even want to do anything anymore, he's just gonna ignore me," these participants shared (Fieldnotes, 02/2026). Evidently, not only did structural and productivity frameworks limit student capacity for agentic engagement, but these pressures unearthed social hierarchies of age and personality that limit learner ability for participation on individual terms.

Conclusion

Summary

This project was designed to more deeply understand attitudes and practices regarding student agency at GOSA. Through interviews, fieldnotes, and a 10-week program facilitation, my students and I explored existing and alternative practices and conceptions of agency for a population that is assumed to be too young to develop it. As we collaborated on understanding and reconsidering our social realities, what first emerged was a fundamental distinction between curricular choice and epistemological agency. Students can be offered the opportunity to select options for program content, but this does not necessarily translate to students having agency in designing pedagogical processes that would be more meaningful or authentic to them. As we investigated these deeper conceptions of epistemological agency, processes of coalitional, and strategic agencies became evident. Conducting interviews and facilitating program blocks simultaneously not only allowed learners to reflect on existing conditions of classroom spaces, but also enabled reflexive exploration of our program's epistemologies and goals. Across the winter months, students identified spaces that felt meaningful and authentic to them, began to examine their positionality within schooling structures, and practiced tools of redesign and advocacy to carry into other spaces in their lives. Relational agency with a foundation of trust developed as the primary goal of our POP. As our relationships of trust deepened, students began to develop a unique student-centric discourse that was substantiated on coalitional agency that valued peers as cocreators of knowledge. Through this process, forms of "negative" agency surfaced, as students reorganized power even amongst themselves, often to reflect larger systemic hierarchies, which revealed rich opportunities for future inquiry and research.

Collective Analysis

Understanding Existing GOSA Paradigms

Major themes of dispossession versus empowerment, both materially and ideologically, choice versus agency as it manifested through relationships of power, and relational practice became increasingly apparent throughout the duration of the program.

Students expressed diverse conceptualizations of schooling and agency, some demonstrating a dispossession of the self– situated within Foucault's Docile Bodies theory, that disempowers students materially and of the ideological agentic self. All students asserted inherent agency, though some functioned through paradigms more palpably at odds with existing schooling logics that valorize proximity to white, non-queer, middle-class, androcentric logics of hegemony.

Overall, GOSA differs from school Banking Model rhetoric in its conceptualization of student choice, often prioritizing the ability for students to select amongst predetermined options, allowing for heightened student involvement in certain decision-making processes. However, GOSA does emulate many facets of schooling logic, expecting students to follow strictly-enforced social codes, and engage with content in anticipated, prescribed ways. Students in both traditional school and at GOSA are highly surveilled, taught narratives of disempowerment and passivity, and subject to enforcement of order and control to produce specific outcomes. Students even become enforcers of this themselves, monitoring each other for deviation from institutionally and structurally established social norms. Because the majority students were initially hesitant to engage in discourse of critical analysis, frequently described schooling as happening "to" them, and enforced and stratified social power amongst themselves,

ideas emerged that socialization processes of hierarchy endure at GOSA along certain theories of Docile Bodies and Banking Model values of dispossession.

However, cultural circumstances at GOSA also allowed for specific cultural paradigms to flourish- students who engaged in traditionally Latine models of Bilingualism and Caring Relations as defined by Valenzuela (1999), were able to establish reciprocal relationships of trust with educators through cultural understanding. This model informed POP creation, as we thought about how we can extend these Caring Relations and relational agency to students who operate within diverse paradigms of practice.

GOSA is a complex space, characterized by unique figured worlds and nexuses of resistance, agentic behavior, empowerment and dispossession. Therefore, there is no bottom line of agency. Instead, we must revel in the intricacies of the metaphorical branches of thought and practice relating to student agency. A dialectic perspective must be employed to consider both that schooling structures continue to manipulate and stratify conditions across powered boundaries, *and* students continue to exert agency to rearrange and confront the outcomes of current realities.

POP Takeaways

Although the ubiquity and strength of existing logics at GOSA strip learners of the opportunity to meaningfully engage with social scripts of more profound, epistemological existential agency, students through participation in the program and their own contentions, continued to organize, manipulate and subvert power amidst oppressive systems. The POP attempted to surface these assertions of agentic power. In short, students were challenged in this program to take processes of resistance and disillusionment and utilize their capacities for

reformative advocacy to define the terms of their learning conditions. As a practitioner, I was challenged to cultivate a community of learners that *wanted* to engage in the critique and redesign of their educational futures.

Throughout the facilitation of the POP, major motifs that became relevant were repertoires of belief in student capacity, and the development of discourse as a reformative practice. Firstly, as an educator, it was integral for me to enforce a trust in student contributions and engagement. Not only did I have to assume an asset-based mental framework, but I needed to communicate to students a foundation of faith in their capabilities. This commitment could not be an empty promise. It requires repeated and constant iteration, as I attempted to dismantle an inherently assumed Banking Model authority. I also had to contend with the incremental nature of this process. Allowing students to engage through their own paradigms sometimes meant sacrificing my conceptualizations of productivity and focused work. I instead came to realize that struggles to reorganize power in this alternative paradigm was a worthwhile undertaking to truly germinate the conditions of agentic engagement.

Secondly, the development of a bespoke discourse between students was one of the most powerful emergences from this POP. While the outcomes of our redesign activities generated meaningful ideations, the development of a unique student discourse community itself was a powerful dialogue that allowed students to negotiate and conceptualize their individual and collective participation. As the program progressed, many students gradually divorced themselves of rhetoric that situates learning only as it is validated by educators, instead arranging discussion and power amongst themselves, taking ownership of their educational realities. I realized that as a learning community, we needed to establish an agentic discourse *first*, as a foundation to further discuss an idealized education.

Theoretical Implications

Much of the dispossession of students' from agentic practices is documented through theories such as Freire's Banking Model, Foucault's Docile Bodies, and Giroux's conceptions of agency. The impact of increased student choice, peer-led education, and authenticity is also frequently discussed in PBL and Youth Participatory Action (YPAR) frameworks, which was reflected within the execution of this project.

In the educational canon, there is less scholarship on the implications of aspirational calls for "increasing student choice" for programming and curriculum. Thus, I assert that there is often a conflation of choice, such as "this or that", in comparison to epistemological agency that aims to create empowering and authentic educational experiences. Within legacies of discourse analysis, in particular, there is opportunity to explore the meaning and ramifications of using words such as "choice" as interchangeable with "agency" in practice.

Additionally, what is also less discussed is the impact of narratives prescribed by schooling systems as they impact the ways that students organize and realize power amongst themselves. Social, economic and physical capital all manifest in collaborative spaces where students are given autonomy. As students cultivated collective discourse practices and engaged across their diverse repertoires of engagement, stratification continued to manifest across social, economic and racialized boundaries. This influenced paradigms of relational agency and begs the question of a surreptitious, yet pervasive relational power that is exercised between peers on the supposed equal formal institutional "level." That is, the category of "student" cannot be conceptualized as a monolithic unit, both in theorizations of dispossession and models of empowerment. Instead, students actively naturalized hegemonic models, striving to assert power

and agentic practice amongst themselves by stratifying themselves and peers across social hierarchies.

To truly nurture authentic student discourse communities, theory must not only consider the ways that dominant frameworks impact relationships between student-teacher, student-self, but also consider the ways that students reproduce this power within dialogic interactions of student-collective, interrogating how power can manifest in discourse practices and communities.

Practical Implications

After this experience in exploring agency in young learners, I must acknowledge the endless nuance that must be considered in efforts to empower self-definitive capacities in students. Because agency is conceived differently across students, if a practitioner is to truly highlight student definition, it is crucial to construct opportunities to forefront all narratives and conceptualizations of positionality within social structures.

Additionally, a major implication of this program, that was initially unanticipated, was the effort dedicated to distancing discourse at GOSA from the validation of knowledge production solely as it is legible to educators. The nurturing and rehearsal of skills that allowed students to engage with *each other* when grappling with complex material, shifting discourse away from teacher-delivered validation, evolved to be a significant practice of formal and informal programming.

In reflecting on divergences of OST from traditional classroom learning, I also find it relevant to highlight the importance of spaces of learning for youth that operate with more elasticity than rigid schooling instruction. Although GOSA operates, in many ways, with similar

logics as traditional schooling, the relative flexibility of content and pedagogical practices, as well as the departure from conventional productivity/success metric measurements, and distance from punitive measures of schooling were critical in executing this project. This underscores a potential for transformative and empowering learning to occur when students are able to engage and critically explore in a looser environment.

As an aspiring student-facing practitioner, the knowledge I built, notably understandings of relational agency, the power of a mutual trust, and synergy of student-student discourse are powerful takeaways for my teaching career. I hope to approach my students with the knowledge that they have immense capacity for sociocultural analysis, navigation and reformation. Moreover, this project reaffirmed the need for sustained practitioner reflection while situating students as constructing unique and individual meaning. Throughout this process, enriching reflections from students and myself allowed me to grow change practices to better suit our goals.

Limitations

On a related note, future iterations of research with similar goals can incorporate these notions of meta-interpersonality, that is, why and how do peers interact in the ways they do? And, more profoundly, can we rewrite these scripts to strive for different outcomes?

While opportunities for expansion of this program are countless, an extended exploration of student agency at GOSA would more prominently centralize conceptions and practices of educators. As student-facing employees, such as teachers, counselors, or mentors, practitioners hold their own understandings of agency in relation to structural norms of practice, which are relevant in shaping student perception. How does the diverse body of educators curate

authenticity for themselves and their students? Additionally, how do educators contend with standards expected of them, whether from the state, institution, or social contract when conceptualizing and implementing programming and expectations of their students?

Lastly, a valuable iteration of this project would also include opportunity for further rehearsal of agentic practice through the incorporation of a learner-driven action project. This could include an action project not dissimilar from praxis, in which participants theorize a problem in their communities, conceptualize interventions, enact change, reflecting on their action and strengthening agentic skills of practice. Extending beyond the theoretical and execution on the micro, this would allow youth to more concretely participate in true agentic advocacy, including dealing with complexities, as well as seeing tangible outcomes of their endeavors.

Significance

This praxis project sought to uncover conditions at GOSA that produced observable student apathy, disinterest and passivity. Though the conditions and implications of this research are unique to GOSA, this project is situated within larger discussions of schooling practices that do not promote their idealistic values of "education as a key to self-determination and success", but rather facilitate the reproduction of existing social conditions that are stratified across hierarchies of power and dispossession. While popular aphorisms such as "the purpose of a system is what it does" (POSIWID) acknowledge the objective of social systems to recreate societal hierarchies, this project sought to examine the practices within schooling systems that socialize students to fulfill specific social roles assigned by hegemonic, oppressive paradigms that dispossess students of self-determination and creation of authentic realities.

As an exploration of resistance, this project attempted to problematize existing pedagogies of educational spaces, exploring how learners perceive their participation in structures to design tactics of resistance and recreation. Through critical examination coupled with engaged practice, youth were able to create their own template of advocacy, to effectively be powerful, reformational, and authentic agents of change in our world.

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