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Maybe They Are Just Kinesthetic Learners? Student Walkouts and the Purposes of Education

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Students have historically engaged in demonstrations, including walkouts, of schools for causes they are passionate about including the protest of federal immigration policy, teacher quality, civil rights, and most recently school violence. In these instances, students have decided that leaving the school, rather than remaining in it is more likely to bring about the social changes they desire. What does this say about how students value education as it has been presented in the United States? These acts of protest reflect the idea that perhaps students don't see schools, as currently constructed, as part of the solution to societal ills. If that were the case, why would they walk out? This paper will consider local and federal guidance in anticipation of the walkouts which drew more than one million participants following the events at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and the larger question, do schools have a role to play in reducing violence in society?

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy | Discipline | Educational Policy | Student Activism

Schools need discipline in order to operate. Structure is a necessary component of any system of education that is child-friendly and allows opportunities for students to express their political opinions about potentially controversial topics. However, we are haunted by the questions posed by Bowles and Gintis (1976), “Why do schools reward docility, passivity, and obedience? Why do they penalize creativity and spontaneity” (p.42)? It seems paradoxical that schools promote critical thinking, but often times punish its manifestations. Yet, this goes to the heart of the issue of school: the competing aims of education to be a social corrective, as well as to produce labor for the workforce are more often than not diametrically opposed. This contradiction in schooling comes to the forefront when discussing the most drastic action students can take- refusing to participate in the schooling process by walking out.

The American theologian Richard Shaull,(1970) articulated the paradox of education in the introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970):

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the “practice of freedom,” the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (p. 34)

Bowles and Gintis (1976) expand on the idea of a non-neutral education:

The education system is perhaps more than any other contemporary social institution, has become the laboratory in which competing solutions to the problems of personal liberation

and social equality are tested and the arena in which social struggles are fought out (p. 5).

Seemingly, schools should be promoting both personal liberation and social equality, and many educational reformers, from the progressives onward, sought to reform education in a way which provided a level playing field (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Unfortunately, the institution of education in the United States has never been set up in a way that promoted personal liberation and social equality, rather it has primarily served the purpose of preparing students to enter the workforce (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This purpose itself was thought to provide students with equal footing for social advancement through economic advancement.

Education has historically served the purpose of integrating youth into society politically, socially, and economically: “Since its inception in the United States, the public-school system has been seen as a method of disciplining children in the interest of producing a properly subordinate adult population” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 36). Part of integrating youth into society in such a way that makes them subordinate involves disciplining them in such a way that they remain docile. In this sense, the discipline in schools is never complete, rather it is an ongoing process. Foucault (1979) conceived of a docile body as one that “... can be subjected, used, transferred and improved” (p. 136). Schools have many tools at their disposal to create docile bodies including traditional disciplinary methods, such as detentions and suspensions, yet what happens when students choose to ignore these methods and refuse to remain subordinate? While schools have many tools at their disposal to maintain their authority, this is at odds with notions of discipline from Willis (1977) who stated that “the teacher’s authority must therefore be won and maintained on moral not coercive grounds. There must be consent from the taught” (p. 64). While individual teachers may be able to maintain their classroom authority through moral means, including providing students a safe space to creatively express their ideas, schools as institutions maintain authority through coercion rather than morality, hence the student handbook that spells out punishments for misdeeds. If schools were able to maintain authority through moral means, why would they need to threaten students with potential disciplinary actions, including detentions and suspensions, to prevent walkouts? This is precisely what happened across the United States following the tragedy in Parkland, Florida, however this was not the first time in American history where students actively resisted education and walked out over issues they were passionate about. Students who walkout in protest can either be viewed as deviants who do not value learning, or they can be viewed as kinesthetic learners, who demonstrate their knowledge in less traditional ways.

The student-led movement following the recent tragedy in Parkland, Florida, follows a long history of American schools being the site of what we will call expressions of liberation, actions taken by students which they believe will better their lives and make them more free individuals. This is particularly evident because youth depend on the adults in their lives to protect them (Mintz, 2004). These expressions of liberation run counter to the orderly, economic oriented mission and daily operation of schooling and as they have in the past, represent the conflicted nature of education in the United States and resistance to being kept docile. In this paper, we will examine how U.S. schools, from World War II to the present moment, have served as sites of struggle and protest, specifically highlighting the youth led national walkouts in 2018 following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Student led walkouts are not a new occurrence in the United States. The 1960s were a time of social strife and upheaval across the United States, as “widely held presuppositions about authority, family, life, gender, race relations, sexuality, and proper behavior were contested” (Mintz, 2004, p. 312). Young people were at the forefront of social change. These young people did

not grow up having gone through the hardships of the Great Depression. By and large, teenagers in the 1960s went through their childhood during a time of economic prosperity and security, especially if they were white (Mintz, 2004). During this time period, dialogue turned to mass action as movements for Civil Rights, women rights, and peace swept the nation. The fabric of American society was changing as new voices became heard and new narratives to what it means to be American and live in a democracy were offered. This dialogue was a disaster for schools, these are the presuppositions which are communicated in both the written and hidden curriculum of the schooling experience. Undoubtedly many were concerned that children were too coddled, and that poor parenting and education were threatening the “progress” being made by society. Fueled by magazine articles that, parents became anxious over their children experimenting with drugs and sex (Mintz, 2004). This moral panic led to over-reactions and policies that criminalized youth, such as zero tolerance, a method to try to eliminate an undesired variable. For example, if a child who smoked marijuana was removed from the school, the thought was that no other student could be influenced by them.

Additionally, during this time period notions of patriotism and democracy were also questioned by young people across the country as they demonstrated en masse simultaneously for Civil Rights, and against the war in Vietnam. This youth rebellion and questioning could not have come at a worse time for the United States government, and in turn schools, because with the Cold War heating up, the Red Scare was in full steam (Mintz, 2004). The concerns of youth rebellion led to fears of the erosion of the nation and social order and to some, undoubtedly became an issue of national security, which led to some false memories of American schools and their role in maintaining discipline and society turned to the schools for answers to a perceived panic and a foundation of social cohesion and conformity.

Though there were countless student walkouts and protests during the Civil Rights movements, it was the events in the Supreme Court case of *Tinker v. Des. Moines* which set the stage for a Supreme Court ruling over the right of student demonstrations during the school day. In 1965, four members of the Tinker family in Des Moines, Iowa wore black armbands to protest the Vietnam War (Mintz, 2004). The principal subsequently suspended those who refused to remove their armbands. The parents of activists Tinker sued the school district alleging their children’s First Amendment rights were being violated by not allowing them to exercise their right to free speech. In their initial pursuit of justice, the parents were unsuccessful as the district court sided with the school. Eventually, the case reached the Supreme Court, which issued a 7-2 ruling in favor of Tinker (*Tinker v. Des Moines Community School District*, 1969). Justice Fortas, writing for the majority, penned the immortal phrase, “...First Amendment rights, applied in light of the special characteristics of the school environment, are available to teachers and students (*Tinker v. Des Moines Community School District*, 1969). It can hardly be argued that neither students nor teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate (*Tinker v. Des Moines Community School District*, 1969). This contradicts the reasons behind the punishments of the students who choose to protest, as they are able to express their right to free speech, as dictated by the ruling. Following Tinker, suspensions and other disciplinary consequences of students for walking out or making other demonstrations can potentially be labeled unconstitutional, as deemed by the U.S. Supreme Court, unless, however, their protest “disrupts the functioning of the school,” (Eidelman & Brennan, 2018, para. 4).

The notion of what constitutes “disrupted functioning of the school” can be looked at from several angles. Undoubtedly, the notion that protests disrupt the school day is accurate. This fact has the potential to upend our entire project argument, however if we question what it means to

disrupt the functioning of the school, is it not already disrupted if students walk through the halls with a palpable the derivative fear, which Bauman (2006) defines as “...a steady frame of mind that is best described as the sentiment of being *susceptible* to dangers that may strike at any time with little or no warning,” (p. 3)? Undoubtedly students, in the aftermath of the Parkland shootings had a hard time concentrating and thinking about formal education, which itself is the purpose of the institution. This paper will attempt to answer the question, what role can schools as presently constructed have in reducing violence in society?

Tragedy in Parkland

On February 14, 2018, 17 students and faculty were fatally shot at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (Luscombe, Laughland & Yuhas, 2018; Price & McCarthy, 2018). Nikolas Cruz, a 19-year-old former student of the high school, was charged with 34 counts of premeditated murder and attempted murder (Berman, 2018). Before the shooting started, a witness claimed they saw Cruz getting out of an Uber and was “walking purposefully toward the 1200 building,” or otherwise known as the freshman building (Chavez & Almasy, 2018, para. 7; Price & McCarthy, 2018; Segarra, Reilly, Meixler & Calfas, 2018). Not long after Cruz went into the building was a fire alarm pulled, allowing the shooter to open fire on the students who ran towards the exits (Chavez & Almasy, 2018; Price & McCarthy, 2018). A faculty member called a “code red” and the school went into lockdown, so the shooter went into different classrooms, shooting into them (Chavez & Almasy, 2018; Price & McCarthy, 2018). Cruz fled the building with other students once the shooting was over, blending into the crowd (Segarra et al., 2018; Chavez & Almasy, 2018). By the end of the shooting, 12 people were killed inside, two outside, one in the street, and two at the hospital (Price & McCarthy, 2018). Cruz was then arrested after making a purchase in a nearby Walmart and stopping at a nearby McDonald's for a meal (Chavez & Almasy, 2018; Price & McCarthy, 2018; Segarra et al., 2018). After the shooting, many students came forward, claiming that they knew something like this would happen. In the recent past, Broward County police had received at least 18 reports about Nikolas Cruz, claiming that he had committed other acts of violence (Murphy & Perez, 2018; Segarra et al., 2018). By the end of the day, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting was named one of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history. This shooting, however, was different due to the large amount of social involvement from students. After the shooting, students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas immediately began sharing their perspective in the shooting and what actions the U.S. should take following the preceding events (Yee & Blinder, 2018). Immediately following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, students began to discuss walking out of school in protest.

Recent Federal Guidance and Student Walkouts

In March 2008, nearly a full decade before the events at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and the anticipated student walkouts, the United States Department of Education provided guidance for schools on how to handle student walkouts. Schools have historically served as sites of social protest, including mass walkouts, from students protesting government initiatives and social injustices (Mintz, 2004). The Department of Education's guidance is based on the experiences and actions of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) which saw nearly 24,000 diverse students, both immigrant and American citizens across all racial lines, unite to walk out of classes on Friday, March 24, 2006. The walkout was prompted by the federal immigration policy changes

(United States Department of Education, 2008). The walkouts did not end on March 24. They continued for several days the following week, leading to principals and superintendents to use multiple strategies to prevent walkouts including disciplinary actions, lockdowns and busses at rally points to encourage students to return to school (Cavanaugh & Greifner, 2006). Students who walked out of school were clearly in violation of mandatory attendance policies and school administrators stated they were trying to balance student freedom of speech and expression with their right to demonstrate. This student walkout led to the Department of Education to provide six steps for school to implement as a means of preventing walkout while also planning in the event that one does occur. The six steps for schools to consider from the Department of Education (2008) are: Collect intelligence on upcoming events and important issues, begin planning response efforts immediately, initiate prevention-mitigation strategies, bring all relevant and interested parties to the planning table, create an event plan of action that clearly delineates the roles of all parties involved, and disseminate information prior to the event on how to respond.

The first step recommended by the US Department of Education (2008) is for schools to “collect intelligence on upcoming events and important issues” (p. 2). The Department of Education lauds the efforts of the Los Angeles Unified School District who begin surveilling student communication on digital platforms from the beginning of the year, even before a threat to student well-being or the operation of the school is identified (United States Department of Education, 2008). While the monitored are public, unless students restrict accepts, to it is problematic that this surveillance is not only practiced but encouraged to discipline them from the outset of the year. If surveilling could ever be seen righteously, it would surely involve schools identifying issues that are important to students and confronting them within the halls of the school. We do not stipulate that schools should never employ a tactic for maintaining the orderly function of the school, however it seems insidious for it to be used from the first day of the school year before there is a threat observed in the school or communicated to a staff member. The use of digital technology to surveil students for the purpose of gathering intelligence of potential acts is a clear example of the militarization of student discipline, right down to the use of the word intelligence in the heading.

Between December 2007 and June 2009, the United States experienced the Great Recession, which was the largest economic downturn since the Great Depression. During this time Americans experienced increased rates of unemployment, homelessness and hunger (Kellenberg & Von Wachter, 2017). In 2008, at the onset of the Great Recession, 19%, or nearly one in five of children in the United States lived in poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009). Yet during this time of economic strife, the federal government thought that it would be appropriate to use food to dissuade students from participating in walkout demonstrations (United States Department of Education, 2008). This is troubling given that during the Great Recession, with child poverty elevated, there were many children who went without meals. Using food as a method social control to prevent expression is a slap in the face. Step four of the Department of Education’s (2008) guidance recommends schools to “initiate prevention-mitigation strategies” (p. 2). These mitigation strategies include developing educational components around issues of concern as well as giving students alternative forums for political activities. Curiously, despite knowing gathering intelligence on student issues of concerns, it is not until now that there is a recommendation of engaging students in issues that are important to them (United States Department of Education, 2008). Perhaps if these prevention-mitigation strategies were done sooner, the students would see no need for a walkout because they would see their schools as places where societal issues could be explored, as well as have solutions offered. Students would be provided more meaningful activities (which we will discuss later) to make their voices heard. One of the most odious lines from the

recommendation involved the use of food: “For example, one school official recommends creating an enticing lunch menu option for the day of the walkout or scheduling an important school event-like the announcement of prom candidates,” (United States Department of Education, 2008, p. 3). This is precisely why Mintz (2004) argued passionately in his engaging work *Huck’s Raft* that the United States has an enduring national myth of being a child friendly society.

State Guidance in Anticipation of Wide-Spread Walkouts

The federal government was not alone in attempting to prevent student walkouts, particularly those initiated in the wake of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas murders. In anticipation of walkouts spreading nationally after the events in Parkland, many states provided guidance specific guidance to school districts about how to handle the unfolding events. On March 2, 2018, Dr. Christina Kishimoto (2018), the superintendent of schools for the state of Hawai’i offered the following in a letter to parents and guardians:

What we hope to gain from these experiences are student voices that help to shape how we can better design schools with safety in mind. I encourage you to speak to your child about their thoughts on this nationwide movement and if they choose to participate in a walkout activity. Our goal in responding to walkout plans and other forms of peaceful assembly is to support student and staff safety and keep the focus on teaching and learning, (para. 6)

Kishimoto’s directive reflects a lack of understanding of the central concerns and aspirations of the students who were planning to walkout. In her directive, there is no mention about long term sustained efforts by schools to confront the issues students are so passionate about that they would risk punishment to demonstrate against.

California State Superintendent Tom Torlakson, who served as the chief executive officer of a state which is no stranger to student walkouts issued a similar letter on March 2, 2018. In his letter he expressed concern over student safety, as well as a validation of their concerns with a hope that students learn more about, “government, civic participation, and how to engage in civil, respectful dialogue about critical and often emotional issues” (Torlakson, 2018, para. 9). While Torlakson seemed to be genuinely interested about student concerns and their need to express themselves, he could not resist bringing the concern back to economics:

A walkout is unlikely to lead to a loss of funding based on average daily attendance (ADA) unless a student misses the entire day. Any loss of funds related to the walkout would not be recoverable through the emergency ADA (J13-A) approval process. (Torlakson, 2018, para. 7)

This concern over student and attendance and funding reinforces the concern that school disciplinary practices are often tied to funding. While the concern over funding is notable given the reality of education funding in the United States, Torlakson’s response also failed to outline any type of commitment on the school’s part to address the issues the students are passionate about over the long term including school safety and stricter access to guns.

The Parkland Student Walkouts

The main student concern was that of gun control, including the current ease of access of guns, and hoped to lobby lawmakers into passing stricter gun control measures to prevent future incidents

similar to Parkland (Yee & Blinder, 2018). This idea spread across the country and students from other schools planned one day, March 14, 2018, where they would walk out from their classrooms to protest school shootings and current gun laws (Valys, Geggis & Chokey, 2018; Yee & Blinder, 2018). The Marjory Stoneman Douglas student-led walkout began at 10 am and was supposed to last 17 minutes, though many students were out longer because they felt that 17 was not enough (Yee & Blinder, 2018). The Marjory Stoneman Douglas walkouts blossomed across the country and led to the creation of “March for our Lives,” a demonstration held in Washington, DC with other, smaller marches throughout various cities in the country (Yee & Blinder, 2018). One of primary faces of the movement is Emma Gonzalez. Gonzalez, a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas during the events of February 14 became known for a speech given at a gun control rally in Florida, where she criticized the National Rifle Association (NRA), and those who support and are supported by the NRA (CNN, 2018).

However, it was the opening of Gonzalez’s speech, reported by CNN, which provided the strongest critique of the role of education in moments of social change:

The students at this school have been having debates on guns for what feels like our entire lives. AP Gov [Advanced Placement Government class] had about three debates this year. Some discussions on the subject even occurred during the shooting while students were hiding in the closets. The people involved right now, those who were there, those posting, those tweeting, those doing interviews and talking to people, are being listened to for what feels like the very first time on this topic that has come up over 1,000 times in the past four years alone (CNN Editors, 2018, para. 5).

Undoubtedly, the issue of gun control and safety had been on the minds of students for years at Marjory Stoneman Douglas and across the nation, as has been a common debate and discussion topic in social studies classes across the nation. Perhaps it was the lack of listening to students which led to what came next. Yet there is still room to question: Who did Gonzalez think was not listening to the students? Teachers? Administrators? Parents? The government? The students who chose to walk out felt that their safety was not a priority for politicians and other policy makers and chose to act because they believed that when it came to their safety, schools were not meeting their needs and policies regarding access to guns. Naturally, the walkouts did not receive all positive feedback. However, they did receive many willing participants. On Wednesday, March 14, the first day of organized student walkouts following the tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, nearly one million students across the United States walked out of school with the intent of drawing attention to the issue of gun access in the United States and create legislation that would make them feel safer (Yee & Blinder, 2018).

Discipline, the Workplace and Critical Pedagogy

Historically, the primary purpose of education in the United States has been to prepare labor for the workforce (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Discipline in educational institutions, as it also is in the workplace, is about maintaining the image, prestige, and functionality of the institution of the school (Willis, 1977). This necessitates keeping students docile in the classroom as preparation for the workplace. In order to meet the needs of employers, students are prepared at school to follow directions without resistance. Employers certainly have no interest in employees who protest while on the job, or in such an instance that it brings negative publicity to a company, as has been the experience of the NFL and Colin Kaepernick, whose protests during the national anthem received

national attention and sparked debate and action over police actions in the United States (Babb, 2017). If the primary function of schools continues to be that of preparing workers, then there is little reason to hope for a change that provides an education in which students are heard and their actions to improve society are a part of the curriculum and are not punished.

The link between education and the capitalist system contributes to the inability of schools to meaningfully contribute to social change: “As long as one does not question the structure of the economy itself, the current structure of schools seems eminently rational,” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 9). Yet, what would happen if this assumption were to be challenged? The idea that schools can always serve the purpose of preparing students for the labor force is misguided considering the rise of automation and artificial intelligence. Craig Barrett, then CEO of Intel, offered the following omen: “We could thrive as a company going forward without ever hiring another American” (Hira, 2009, p. 53). If companies can be profitable without ever hiring another American worker, then what is, or should be the new primary purpose of education? One option is for education to be a mechanism for social change, instead of social reproduction.

Anyone who has spent time around high schoolers knows that students have long accused teachers and school administrators of not listening to them. Freire (1970) discusses this when he said: “Education is suffering from narration sickness. The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static compartmentalized and predictable... his task is to ‘fill’ the students with the content of his narration- contents which are detached from reality...” (p.71). Even if schools were to continue to advocate a system of instruction and assessment based on memorization, how is a student to focus on memorizing the facts of United States history, or algebra equations when they are worried about their safety? In this sense Gonzalez’s claim is not new, however its continual echo should give educators pause. Those teachers who are most skilled at aiding student memorization of content are often those who are most feted: “Educational systems increasingly reward the most machine-like teachers those who focus fully on achieving the highest test scores and the most efficient use of instructional time toward that end,” (Kline & Knight-Abowitz, 2013, p. 156). There is no tangible reward for being the most thoughtful teacher, or the teacher who is the most committed to helping students transform society. In this instance, that reward is the occasional Facebook message or random thank you on graduation night. Kline and Knight-Abowitz (2013) argue that teachers are rewarded based on tangible student performance, so if the pursuit of justice itself is fluid at best, how could teachers ever be rewarded for such an endeavor? This would require a fundamental shift in not only the aims of education, but also the ways in which teachers and students are assessed. One way to see the students who participated in walkouts is as deviants, another is to see them as kinesthetic learners.

Paulo Freire offers insight into the ways in which teachers can engage in the type of work that the students at Parkland and across the country who participated in walkouts are interested in. One way to accomplish this goal is through what Freire (1970) deemed, “problem-posing education” (p. 79). In problem-posing education, Freire argues (1970) that “the role of the problem-posing educator is to create; together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the doxa is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the logos” (p. 81). If education is to have any role in bringing about social change, especially related to violence, it is going to have to start with analysis of social issues and transformative action and the active participation of students in the instructional process. Freire discussed education’s ability to be liberatory, yet he is not naive to those who doubt this possibility: “Some will regard my position vis-a-vis the problem of human liberation as purely idealistic, or may even consider discussion of ontological vocation, love, dialogue, hope, humility, and sympathy as so much reactionary ‘blah’

(Freire, 1970, p. 37). The “blah” aroused in many when discussing education’s liberatory potential yields systems of education in which students reject schooling and demonstrate their knowledge in other ways.

Conclusion

The words of Freire as true today as they did when they were written. The narrative students are presented is that working hard in school will lead to gainful employment and a more stable future. This practice is falling on the deaf ears of students who realize, perhaps more than those in educational administration, that no one is going to have a stable future if they are victims of violence. If schools were doing a sufficient job of providing student efficacy and teaching in a way that students found beneficial to their lives in the here and now, why would they walk out? Students walked out following the events of Parkland because they did not feel that schools, and the adults in their lives were doing enough to protect them. Instead of using digital technology to surveil students and gather intelligence about potential walkouts and prepare discipline, perhaps a more moral justification would have been to use that information to simply plan curricular activities that engaged students in topics that were meaningful for them.

Schooling, if it is to have any role in transforming society in a way that makes it less violent, will need to fundamentally change its primary purpose and answer legitimate questions about its purposes as a social institution. This shift would need to begin with confronting the reality that schools actively worked to shut down protests that were designed to create a less violent society. Critical pedagogy offers some insight into the ways in which schools can incorporate high interest issues, such as gun violence into the curriculum in ways which lead to social change, however this shift is dependent on many variables including individual teachers, administrators, and curriculum developers. These types of questions will require educators and scholars to continue to provide the critique necessary to further this important goal. In the meantime, perhaps the next time a student chooses to walkout, they should simply inform the administration that they are a kinesthetic learner.

Author Notes

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