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Lived-in Room: Classroom Space as Teacher

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Abstract

This paper is a portrait of a public elementary school classroom in light of the relationships, history, and ideas that have formed its physical space. In describing Judy Richard's classroom, the author shows how a creative teacher's commitment to seeing her classroom as a living space inevitably brings her to overstep the narrow limits of the traditional mandates of classroom management. The author presents this portrait as an example of the ideological and creative stance teachers can assume in relation to their classrooms. Addressing challenges that are specific to urban public schools, the author also suggests that public schools must abandon their oversimplified conception of learning spaces and develop support systems that help teachers incorporate the socio-emotional, developmental, and cultural needs of their students into their classroom settings.

Key Words: space, classroom environment, Henri Lefebvre, social production of space, resistance, traditional classroom, portraiture

When a veteran public school teacher transfers or retires, she must pack up her classroom. Some things she has to take or let be discarded; some things she has to leave behind. What remains are the barebones of an educational setting—the institutional patrimony she received on her first day in the classroom, which she now leaves to her successor.

The traditional contents of new classrooms are quite familiar: four walls, two windows, two closets, four dozen chairs and as many individual tables, two whiteboards, a shelf-full of official curricula, a handful of computers, three packs of notebooks and binders, pens and pencils, and thumbtacks for sticking things to the walls. These objects embody a particular vision of education. It is an isolated and austere set-up. What is there is there to serve the academic task, as performed on paper. Other human needs, such as development, beauty, play, privacy, conversation, freedom of movement, and even food and water, do not inherently belong here. What the teacher packs away as she leaves is all evidence and history of her and her students' efforts. But she also takes away all, if any, modifications she managed to make to this initial patrimony. The age-old setting of public education, barely changed for over a century (Scott-Webber, 2004), revives itself.

While some schools have consciously rejected the old rows-and-aisles approach to elementary classrooms and opted for more distributed set-ups involving work-stations

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and gathering areas, such improvements are marginal to the overall experience of schooling. Discussions of changing the classroom space require more a complex definition of *space*—one that takes into account much more than the bare physical bones of the classroom and makes room for a greater set of human experiences. It is in this sense that a close *look* at a single teacher's classroom begins to gain value for a larger audience.

A critical approach to understanding space—one that takes into account the interplay of forces that shape and reshape space—is necessarily a sociological one. In the definition presented by sociologist Henri Lefebvre, space is a social product, a definition that implies a shift in research perspective from physical spaces to the social process of their production (1974/1991). The researcher's role is to elucidate the often contradictory, often political, processes that shape the environment of people's lives (Stanek, 2011). Consider, for example, that within most schools in the United States, English is the only language spoken between teachers and students. No physical barrier, no actual sign decrees the exclusion of other languages, but it is a fact that the school is more or less an English-only *zone*. The mechanisms that shape the school as such a zone, and the ways in which people take part in them, must be part of our study of the school setting. Thus, space comes to represent much more than the limited sense of the word as physical environment.

Within educational research certain studies have already adopted this expanded perspective. Critical historians have shown how the dominant classroom ecology—schedules, hallways, hierarchies, even the very dividing of students into classes—rose out of mechanisms of social control and particularly factory life (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Hutchison, 2004). Foucault (1986) suggests that whether or not the Panopticon prison became the model for disciplinary institutions, it was a school, the "pedagogical machine" of the École Militaire, which may have provided the inspiration for the Panopticon in the first place. Such historical perspectives, combined with a small body of literature that tries to describe the interplay between learning spaces and children's lived experience (for a review, see Chawla, 1992; Ellis, 2004), go a long way in describing the traditional classroom space.[2] However, they do not yet give a sense of what resistance within the uniformity of the traditional classroom entails. How would resistance interact with the space? Lefebvre's paradigm shift demands more than a new set of descriptions. It implies a second essential task for research: helping liberate social space from the hegemonic control of dominant ideologies. But since nothing short of authentic social liberation can achieve that mission completely, the task is often to highlight or create sites of resistance that provide a glimpse of what can be done now and with what is available. Callejo-Pérez, Slater, and Fain (2004) have pointed out a range of literature that study educational practices that blast open the confines of traditional academic space. These efforts include curriculum based on arts integration, experiential approaches to natural environments, and a sense of cultures represented within and around the

[2] These stand in contrast to the bulk of existing literature, which treat space as means of producing educational "outcomes", ranging from behavior control to productivity increase . For an exhaustive though dated list, see (Lackney, 1999).

classroom (as opposed to the hypocrisy of year-end international potlucks, etc., common in most schools). In fact, since the inception of public education, nearly every alternative pedagogic movement has also proposed a counterdesign to the dominant physical layout of schools (Hutchison, 2004). Early Marxism called for *polytechnical* schooling, wherein creative labor would be valued alongside intellectual activity (Small, 2005). The space, then, would blend workshops and classrooms. The Montessori model designs a space that denies teachers a focal position in the room and instead allows for autonomous work and freedom of movement (Lillard, 2005). Waldorf schools keep the traditional classroom model, but demand extremely close attention to aesthetic elements (Uhrmacher, 2004). The literature from Reggio Emilia schools are particularly rich due to the approach's emphasis on community participation and the role of culturally integrated learning spaces (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007; Tarr, 2001).

When it comes to describing the relationship between teachers, ideologies, and the physical set up of classrooms, however, the public school teacher is conspicuously absent from the literature. The most effective descriptions come from alternative and private school movements, where it is possible to describe space in relation to a cohesive educational philosophy because such philosophies to some degree exist. When it comes to public schools, however, the task is more difficult. Which teachers, for example, should we choose, and with which philosophies? In one of the very few studies of classroom space to focus on public school teachers, Owens (2009) shows that in a sample of 21 educators each teacher utilized his or her space differently and somewhat in accordance with his or her pedagogic outlook. However, Owens' study is also a good example of how the use of conventional quantitative and qualitative analysis can leave us with a flat picture of spaces, decision-making processes, and the dialectical relationship between social forces and agents that impact the classroom.

Purpose and Methodology

How can we understand the role of a creative public school teacher—her ideology, her craft, and her personality—in relation to the recycled uniformity of school settings? In what way does the interaction between space and teacher impact each of them? And what impact does this interaction have on the lived experiences of the classroom?

This essay is a portrait of the relationship between one veteran public school teacher, Judy Richards, and her classroom space in the year before her retirement. My choice of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) as a method of description is, of course, deliberate. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis developed portraiture as a practical response to the dilemmas of documentation, interpretation, and intervention, particularly in those situations where themes cannot be seen outside paradoxical (i.e. dialectical) relationships (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). Portraiture encourages an artistic approach. The researcher mines the data for *stories* that emerge and that best represent a complex of themes. Narrating these stories in thick description becomes a way of drawing the reader into the living dynamics of a situation. The author does not "shoot the story through with explanations," to paraphrase Walter Benjamin (2007), but allows the reader to enter the complexity. Nor does the author pretend to stand at an objective distance from the subject and the reader. Rather:

> [The] portraitist hopes to be able to capture the raw hurt and the pleasure of her or his protagonists *and* works to embroider paradoxical themes into the inquiry and narrative . . . [he or she] seeks to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, trusting that the readers will feel identified. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 10)

Throughout that school year, I visited Judy's classroom at least once every working day. Depending on the occasion, I was present as a colleague (I taught next door), an observer, an apprentice, and a friend. I regularly recorded my observations in written or visual form (photographs, drawings, and films). I also conducted three interviews in which Judy and I sat down with the specific purpose of discussing the biography of her classroom space. To triangulate my data, I interviewed two of Judy's colleagues and three of her students. As themes began to emerge from the findings, I examined the data in light of theory and alternative forms of teaching practice. In an iterative process, Judy and I discussed these themes and arrived at more nuanced descriptions of her thinking regarding space.

As I mined the data, I looked for those instances wherein Judy seemed to show or discuss personal initiative in defining her space. How, for example, I asked myself, was her classroom different from the others in the same building or the same district? The second tier of investigation involved identifying and describing the forces that underlie the various aspects of the classroom. To do so, I had to investigate a bevy of factors, including biographical, bureaucratic, and ideological ones. The interaction between these elements, where the data was rich enough, emerged as a theme (e.g. *work, privacy, home culture, pedagogical objects*). My main work has been to investigate and describe the dialectical relationship among the forces that shape these themes. In my writing, therefore, I have not tried to isolate these relationships. As far as possible, I have tried to show how the various elements are in constant interaction. For the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to avoid any illusion of simplicity. Otherwise we could fall into the positivist trap of thinking that what we must take away is a set of "best practices" or recommendations.

I have chosen to present my analysis through vignettes from Judy's classroom and my own interactions with Judy. These *thick descriptions* should provide a text that would allow the reader to perform her own analysis as well. Only in a few places have I intervened to explicate my own understanding. In such an approach, the author must continuously clarify the shape of his lens as observer and interpreter. While this helps reveal bias, it is also a matter of solidarity. I entered Judy's classroom as a learner and later also as a colleague. I could not have learned from the space and gathered my data without some sense of solidarity with at least aspects of Judy's outlook. The role of the author must be evident because this portrait is an act of intervention. The intervention occurs in my attempt to give voice to a space before it is forgotten under the bureaucratic wheel that flattens the microtraditions of individual classrooms. In this writing, at least, the vicious cycle I described in the opening paragraphs suffers a break.

Classroom as Experience: Room 108

I met Judy Richard's room before I met her. It was the spring of 2008, and, having recently finished a masters program, I had set myself the task of observing as many schools and teachers as possible before I risked being a teacher again. The visit to Graham and Parks Elementary School, where Judy taught, came near the end of an itinerary that took in most of the alternative public schools in the Boston area. By then, as soon as I walked through a school entrance I could tell, by the way children did or did not greet me, if visitors were welcome. This was a place that welcomed observation. That morning I met with the principal, talked to teachers, and took part in a sixth grade lesson. During lunch period, I wandered the hallways and looked into the empty classrooms.

The door to Room 108 was as wide open as it could be, considering how architectural inspiration had placed it in a corner to contend for space with a wall and two closets. One of the signs on the door (most of them in Haitian Creole) declared this to be the 4th grade classroom of Judith Richards. My first clear memory is of sounds. From a corner I could not see (there were many such corners), I could hear the gurgle of water. It was May, and from the open window a breeze filled the classroom and shook a few strips of paper that, somehow, floated in mid air. I heard a very faint splash and looked and saw a densely vegetated aquarium in a far corner, one in a series of many glass tanks that held living creatures. They were far from view, but I could guess (and, out of a sentimental attachment to Basho[3], hoped) that the splash was the sound of a frog jumping in water.

I tried to see the room as a whole. What appeared here at first sight was a place with no discernible beginning or end, with no head or back, and with no singular tradition apparent in its design. Still, like a well-run historical town, it displayed its own unique order. Its pathways did not force the various structures in the room out of the way to achieve symmetry or angularity, but instead wrapped in between and around the objects to provide a network of clear connections. It was not a large room (32 by 32 feet, more or less), but one could imagine many children spreading out and working individually or in groups.

There was little uniformity in the furniture. A variety of tables were positioned around the room, child-sized chairs or benches surrounding each one. Some tables were clearly handmade out of wood, but the chairs were the standard-issue plastic and metal model I had seen in the other classrooms. A rather large, rectangular rug designated what I took to be a gathering space. Around the rug sat bookcases, a couch, comfortable armchairs, footstools, and a tower. At least I thought this last item to be a tower. It was a large (5 by 5 feet at the base), sturdy wooden structure, reaching to the ceiling, with an upper loft that could easily seat two or three children.

The surfaces were brimming: the shelves with well-used books, games and tools; the walls and cabinets with children's work; the counters with plants, some older than the students. Tall branches arched out of heavy pots and reached over the seats and tables.

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[3] Matsuo Basho's best-known Haiku:

The ancient pond;
A frog jumps in –
The sound of the water

This multitude of objects was matched by the variety of cultures represented: mathematical games from Africa, Mayan statues, East-European fabrics, and small looms from the five continents. Some pamphlets were in Haitian Creole. One of the two ready-made posters in the room showed images of Black mathematicians. The other celebrated Muslim contributions to mathematics.

In my curiosity, I had broken decorum and stepped into the classroom. From this new vantage, I noticed to my right a sink surrounded by a nearly complete kitchen set. On the wall behind the sink, cups hung under delicate porcelain tags that bore the names of some 25 students. One of these students, a little boy, brushed past me into the room. He walked up to a worn-out, wooden cubby-case set against the tower, and from a niche took out a notebook. He climbed on a chair to look into one of the fish tanks, watched it intently, and jotted down a few lines of notes, pressing the pen (the first time I ever saw an elementary student use a pen in the classroom) firmly into the paper.

I stopped him as he was leaving, "Can you tell me where Ms. Richards is now?"

In the cafeteria Judy was standing, like a small flag, amid a throng of seated children. We shook hands, and I introduced myself as a teacher. I remember being struck by how callused and strong her very small hand was. Her white hair was cut short near the head, and this highlighted the eyes that considered me from behind gold-rimmed glasses. She looked at me, at least 30 years her junior, with both the attention one assigns to a colleague and the unspoken assessment I have come to expect from teachers who view education as a conviction and for whom there are no neutral pedagogies. Where does he stand, the look asks.

I told her I admired her classroom.

"It's one way of doing it," she smiled.

This unsettled me a little. I did not want her to think I was paying her an empty compliment. It seemed to me that what I had mostly read about in education had sprung to life in her classroom, but I could not describe its significance or understand its origins. I tried, with poor results, to explain this feeling to her, stringing together names of progressive educators in no particular order: Deborah Meier, Rudolf Steiner, Eleanor Duckworth, and Maria Montessori. I was also intimidated. Teachers who view their profession as an art can feel persecuted by a figure like Judy, in the same manner that a singularly talented painter can feel threatening to a young artist. Master craftsmen inspire the suspicion that perhaps what they do is ultimately a matter of copious, unique talent—talent that cannot be learned.[4]

This first conversation, fortunately, went on long enough for me to feel more comfortable. Judy was about to take her class to the park, and she offered that I accompany them on their walk. Her manner made it very clear that she was as interested in hearing about my background as she was willing to share her experience.

That next school year, and directly as a result of that conversation, I began teaching in the room across the hall from Judy's. Throughout that year of teaching, Judy acted as my mentor and as my main source of support and inspiration. In my spare time I

[4] On the prevalence and peril of the "born not made" beliefs regarding good educators, particularly among teachers, see Scott & Dinham (2008).

observed her classroom, explored its secrets, used its inexhaustible resources, and enjoyed the rich atmosphere of its many relationships. I also took time to document my observations of the space through notes, pictures, and interviews. The room was, for the duration of that year, my favorite room in the city. As I write about it, however, Room 108 no longer exists. Judy retired from public education in 2010. Many of her materials were packed up and moved to her basement, and the rest were discarded to make room for new, standard issue sets. The arriving teacher must make of the four walls of the classroom what she can.

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The Saundra Graham and Rosa Parks Alternative Public School was founded in 1981, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Its founders intended to create, in a working-class neighborhood, a school that valued one-to-one instruction, paced learning, and parent involvement in decision-making and teaching. The original Upton Street location was in the heart of the immigrant neighborhood of the city. A large portion of the students were children of Haitian immigrants, and the school, until Massachusetts voters outlawed bilingual education, hosted a strong Haitian Immersion program.

Judy began studying Creole soon after she joined the school faculty in 1984 (she is yet to become proficient). She formed a close partnership with a teacher from the Immersion program, and the two classes were effectively united for many subjects, activities, and lessons. By the time I arrived at the scene, Haitian students comprised a smaller part of the student body. Haitian language and culture, however, still infused the activities in the classroom.

"A'go," Judy would speak at the end of each day.

"A'me," the students would respond, indicating they were listening.

"It's time for Ujima. Do we all know our roles?"

Simple signs around the classroom described the significance of these words, but the students already knew their routines and responsibilities. Each began in some way caring for the classroom space. Plants were watered, tables were cleared, and the floor was swept.

The home feeling was carefully cultivated through the objects. Couches, rocking chairs, cleaning supplies, a carpet, even a sleep mattress, all gave the impression of a living space. "Home culture," Judy says, "means that the walls do not shut out the lives of students, but invite them in." She goes on to explain:

> Everyone can see some aspect of their own home reflected in the classroom. If many of the words we used were in Creole, if the class motto was in Creole, if we had Haitian paintings and portraits around the room, if we defined many of our values according to Haitian cultural values, it's because a majority of our students used to come from Haitian homes. It's also because the culture was de-emphasized in many other facets of the outside world.

Her rhetoric on multicultural education is not neutral.[5] Each phrase can quickly turn into an indictment: "Culture can't be an add-on on top of the dominant, white, American attitudes. The same way that multicultural education is not a weeklong curriculum unit and a potluck dinner. It needs to be woven into the very fabric of the place."

I asked Judy why she had kept the Haitian influence strong, even though at this point the majority of her students came from white families. She described the situation in frank detail:

> The population of the school began to change when district politics forced the school to move to a middle-class neighborhood. Basically, the new neighborhood needed a school, and Graham and Parks was chosen—maybe because it was successful and progressive. Some of us teachers fought to keep us where we were, but the other side had political clout . . . [The confrontation] was not pleasant . . . I moved all my things to this new classroom, and my students moved with me. It's only in the last three or four years that our demographics have changed. So the role of Haitian culture in the classroom has changed, too. It has remained as a sign of respect for the Haitian influence on this city . . . and on this classroom. There is plenty of white culture everywhere else my students will look. Here at least they have a reminder that their lives are built by many people, from . . . many cultures.

At the same time, all students were allowed and encouraged to live their identities. Avi, a fifth-grader and a graduate of Room 108, was born in Israel. He told me the year after he left Judy's class,

> Every morning I would come in and see the numbers one to ten [written on the board] in all these different languages. Then I'd read the Hebrew numbers out for everyone, and they would repeat them to learn from me. It was also OK to read Hebrew books if I wanted to, and the other kids would ask me to tell them about the stories. Now I only get to read Hebrew when I'm not in school.

If Avi no longer read Hebrew at school, it was not because his new teacher forbade him, but because she simply did not invite him to do so. The invitation in Judy's class was explicit. She invited parents to visit as they pleased, asked them to speak, and bought books in students' native languages. But there was also an implicit invitation coded in the classroom's unambiguous attention to culture. In the corners and cabinets dedicated to math artifacts, you could find student-made Japanese abaci and Chinese tangram tiles (Judy used the latter to teach fractions). There were boards for wari, mancala, kay and wosle—games with roots in the African continent and Haiti, whose histories Judy was quick to point out for children. There were also cardboard versions of Napier's bones, a set of instruments invented in Scotland in the 16th century to simplify multiplication. Judy's library, in fact, was not organized by reading level, which she never found to be

[5] See Judy Richard's published essay "Classroom tapestry: A practitioner's perspective on multicultural education," (1993).

"either meaningful or challenging to learners." Some books were organized by subject and others by the places they portrayed.

I would like to point out two of the themes that emerge from the above description. First, Judy's decisions regarding classroom space were at every turn influenced by her students and her surroundings, as well as the (top-down) decision-making processes of the district. But just as her choice to open her space to the influence of students matters, her choice to resist the overriding influence of the district, including the district's overt attempt at changing the demography and purpose of the school matters too. In proclaiming her classroom a multilingual zone, she was resisting the district's political influence. At the same time, we should not forget that the rather open climate and progressive tradition of Graham and Parks were also important. Judy had twice been let go as a teacher, due to her pedagogical and resistant stance, before she arrived at Graham and Parks and could flourish. The flourishing, however, was again limited by the larger context. At Graham and Parks, as in all schools designed according to the traditional model, the space belonging to students is severely delineated. Save for breaks, students are confined to the four walls of the classroom, and hallways are not places for interaction but for quick transition from one room to the other. In her first year in the building, Judy tried to gain for her students the right to at least have open and regular access to the neighboring yard, which was easily accessible through a classroom window, but regulations had eventually triumphed against her. All her efforts on designing an environment for the students, therefore, took place within the classroom.

Second, while Judy's pedagogic philosophy influenced her classroom design, the design in turn influenced her pedagogy. Because the cultural artifacts were there, she had to spend time retelling their histories. Because Haitian culture was represented, she had to continue to define her classroom values and practices in relation to Haiti, even if it meant redefining that relationship in order to justify its continued presence. A significant dilemma underlies this situation. On the one hand, Judy's old setting was no longer culturally "relevant" to her new students; on the other hand, the classroom had become a cultural entity of its own, standing on its own historical foundations, embodying other important relationships. One can argue that Judy should have redesigned her classroom as it moved to a new community. Of course, she *was* always in the process of redesigning the space, but to tear down the old classroom culture that took nearly two decades to construct and build a new one is a managerial fantasy. It has nothing to do with the efforts and attachments that have gone into the space. My point here is not to try and solve such dilemmas. It is enough to point out that any discussion of classroom design is also a discussion of the expanse of the teacher's energies and experiences.

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Where do well-equipped classrooms, like Judy's, come from? Ellen Kim, a young teacher who first came to the class for a simple visit, ended up spending the bulk of her year as a masters student at Harvard in Room 108. She told me:

> You feel in here the way a surgeon might feel in a damn good operation room—but I don't know if there are any operation rooms that actually respect their patients. I feel like a researcher in a very nice lab or a priest in a beautiful church.

> The difference is that people with those professions aren't expected to set up their own work environments from scratch. That's exactly what's expected of teachers.

That expectation goes hand in hand with debilitating limitations on budget and paid time for setting up one's classroom (Hutchison, 2004). "Don't spend a lot of time decorating your room," read one sympathetic guide I was handed by a colleague when I began teaching. "You will have many other important things to do to get ready for the beginning of school. A few bare bulletin boards won't bother anybody" (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2003).

Almost every time I picked up an interesting object in Judy's room, she would recount its provenance. "Claudia Zaslavski[6] gave me this one," she would say, handing me an African counting instrument, or, "Here is the book where I found that idea." The habit underlined her awareness of the difficulty of arriving at an adequate physical environment. She shared:

> Teachers can't do it alone. You can't expect a first-year teacher to walk into the classroom with all these materials, or even ideas . . . The school, luckily, gave me a small budget that year-by-year helped bring in new things into the classroom. We usually have only one set of each thing—the students must learn to share. Where we didn't have the budget, we used simple things to build what we wanted and that taught the kids resourcefulness.

In regard to time to set up the classroom, there were no resources, other than the presence of janitors on campus who would help Judy carry things in and out of her classroom during summer. She would show up three weeks early each year, unpaid, to prepare. If classrooms like Room 108 are rare, budgeting has something very real to do with it.

There is yet another institutional barrier between teachers and the type of classroom Judy had set up over the years. Almost every object I have named so far can be seen as tangential or even distant to the task of "learning" if we take textbooks and exam preparation materials as core. In other words, if an educational ideology sees on-task behavior and academic performance as the end goals of schooling, it will of course provide nothing beyond what is necessary for performing academic tasks. Most classroom design advice for teachers are published in books on classroom management. Of these, many (or the majority that I have read) suggest that any object that is not directly part of "academic learning" can be a distraction, and teachers should think twice before including it in their classrooms (Cummings, 2000; Evertson et al., 2003; Malm, 1992; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003).

But the artifacts in Room 108 were not merely decorations. Students constantly retrieved, used, referenced, studied, and puzzled over them. Even outside the teaching hours, early in the morning for example, students and recent class alumni (though it was not customary at the school for alumni to return to their old classes) would welcome

[6] Claudia Zaslavski (1917–2006), ethnomathematician. Before her passing, she bequeathed her personal library to Judy.

themselves into the room, pick out a toy, book, or instrument from a shelf, and put it to use. Every book or game had a meaning to Judy. Each served a purpose, and each was capable of engaging students with an aspect of the larger world.

When I talked to Judy about the texts that had impacted her thinking about space, she quoted John Dewey to me: "We never educate directly, but indirectly through the environment" (Dewey, 1916). By the time I encountered the room, she never used textbooks for her teaching. Her curriculums had been coded into the artifacts. Her role was no longer to lecture. It was to know what questions each object embodied and how best to keep the students engaged in the materials. Math lessons, for example, were embodied in hand-made games, puzzle-books, historical measuring instruments, cloth patterns, and so on. In other words, as she invested intellectually, financially, and emotionally in the design and choice of her artifacts, her pedagogy could move toward a hands-off approach.

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There were six workstations in the room. Six tables, each different from the others, seated four or five students on plastic chairs or softly cushioned benches. The workstations were the meeting places for the various teams. Different arrangements of teams gathered during the social studies periods, the science sessions, or the literacy blocks. A sign on the wall described the four main duties within each group: scribe, reporter, includer (whose job was to assure the participation of all members), and material-provider. Every week the tasks rotated.

The teams were divided according to a complex set of criteria, best understood by Judy herself. Based on Judy's explanations and my own observations, I know that ability level was not a factor and that the primary objective was a certain sense of balance among the participants. This balance was not one of opposites canceling each other. I would call the effect almost homeopathic. Similar tendencies would meet and alleviate their overt expression, so that, for example, the domineering personalities would feel the need to relate to one another without domination, or a team of fire-crackers would have to calm one another enough for work to take place.[7]

During the social studies hour, groups gathered based on common interest. The process began with a series of communal meetings that took place on the rug. Students sat on the floor, on chairs, on a couch, leaning against bookshelves, and in every other place where they could make eye contact with Judy and be seen by the majority of their classmates. Judy's place was on a chair similar to the one her students were using. She had no workstation of her own in the common gathering area. In the beginning of each semester, Judy would introduce a civilization to the students.[8] The introduction had three parts. Initially, she would try to place the civilization in time and space. This in itself turned into an act of subversion. If the state standards mandated that she teach (for the nth

[7] Waldorf education employs a similar idea for deciding which children should sit next to each other. See Steiner, 1967, p. 19; Steiner, 1988, p. 177.

[8] At Graham and Parks the teacher stays with the same set of students for two grades so that in two years, Judy's students would have studied four civilizations deeply.

time) the tired Thanksgiving story of "Indians and Pilgrims," Judy introduced a local Native American tribe, such as the Abenaki or the Wampanoag. She read Abenaki stories, showed artworks and photographs made by (and sometimes about) members of the Abenaki, and handed around tools and toys specific to the tribe. She and the children studied and discussed these together.

The second step, Judy explained to me, was inspired by Paulo Freire's definition of culture as the collection of all activities performed by a people (Freire, 1982). The students came up with a list of all cultural aspects of the Abenaki life that interested them, such as stories, toys, clothing, cuisine, sculpture, architecture, and any other aspect that occurred to them. Each student then would apply to work on the topic that called to her most strongly, and Judy would form five or more groups based on these written applications. The last part of the introduction lesson was a gentle reminder:

> Remember that as we learn about the Abenaki, we are really learning from the Abenaki. We are not going to pretend to be Abenaki, the same way that we did not pretend to be Mayans. We will be 'respectful outside learners' . . .

For months following this introduction, if you visited the room during the social studies hour (and it seemed that there were always visitors in the classroom), you would see in the workstations groups of students in the process of researching and performing an aspect of Abenaki culture. The space resembled a miniature village. A group would be bent over small handlooms, recreating patterns they had discovered in books and articles. Another group would read and write intricate stories. The group working on cuisine would spend weeks finding, modifying, and rewriting recipes that they would then, with the help of an adult, prepare for their classmates. The rug, bordered on two sides by workstations, functioned as the library, with Judy's books on the particular civilization gathered on a designated shelf.

Classrooms in Graham and Parks enjoy more shelves than the average classroom. But Judy had added more open shelves in at least five new places in order to house student work. As the process of research and creation progressed, the half-finished works or the prototype models stood on designated shelves or counters, serving both as decoration and as reminders of the continuing project at hand. In her seminal study of the concept of work in schools, Jean Anyon demonstrated that a school's understanding of what constitutes work corresponds to the social class of the students (Anyon, 1980). In working class schools, for example, "work is following the steps of a procedure," (p. 73); while in the schools catering to the "affluent professional" class, "work is creative activity carried out independently" (p. 79). Judy's conception of work is obviously closer to the latter case. It is not surprising that you are more likely to find classrooms that at least superficially resemble Judy's in affluent schools rather than working class ones. The space (work-stations, etc.) support a particular vision of work. In Judy's case we can also see a clear deviation from Anyon's characterization of affluent settings: Work in Judy's room was creative activity carried out collaboratively as an object of communal pride. The space folded around this ideological understanding.

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Let's be clear that the "work" that took place in Room 108 was not an end in itself. If viewed outside its economic constraints as divided labor, that is, if seen as a human activity, work entails a much larger set of relationships.

The semester the kids were focusing on the Mayan culture, I found Mathew, a serious, phlegmatic boy, working week after week by himself in a corner of the rug. He would sprawl his awkwardly growing body on the floor and read slowly and carefully through a voluminous, academic-looking book. Mathew had originally chosen to work with the storytelling team, but something about the group or the topic had failed to interest him. He tried another group, but that did not pique his interest either. Finally Judy asked him if there was another aspect of the Mayan culture that he was curious about. "I want to know more about Mayan science," he replied. In her husband's collection, Judy found a book on the topic. By the end of the unit, Mathew had taught himself Mayan numerals and aspects of Mayan geometry. During the end-of-the-unit public exhibition, when the groups presented their artwork and findings to adult and student visitors, Mathew sat by himself at a table, his back to a giant poster of Mayan numbers. A series of worksheets were neatly stacked by his side. He patiently taught Mayan numerals to all interested visitors. Afterwards, this is how Mathew described the experience to me: "What I really liked was being by myself on the rug. If I wanted to talk to the others, there was always someone. But if I didn't feel like it, it was like I could just hide next to the bookshelf and read."

Mathew's need for solitude bears some discussion in regard to classroom settings. In education we often limit our understanding of psychological development within the discussion of developing abilities: what the child can do, or learn, or perform at a particular point in his life. The much more significant (and difficult) discussion, however, is that of developing *needs*. One aspect of development, the sense and need for solitude and privacy (which is accepted as a right and a skill when it comes to adults), has almost nothing to do with the child's abilities, and yet it has particular significance for his eventual development. In her monumental review of children's place attachment, Chawla (1992) discusses that such places "form an internal center of stability and calm [that can be] invoked in times of stress and isolation" and as places for practicing independence. Similarly, in Berg's (2003) research with 9- and 11-year-olds, children explained that "their own places" help them feel better when they are sad or angry.

Mathew's desire to hide is not a way of escaping work or group activity. It is not rare to find kids of his age seeking hideaways in order to brood, play alone, or read in silence (Koepke, 1989). Most classroom set-ups, however, eradicate all such spaces. According to traditional classroom design, from the vantage point of the standing teacher every corner of the classroom should be visible. Such design finds justification in terms of the need for behavior management. Just when children most need it, classrooms deny them any sense of privacy and deprive them of the chance to feel and deepen an autonomous self.

There were corners in Judy's classroom where children could go about their work and feel unobserved. One of these spaces was partly shielded from view by the futon couch and the enormous math supply closet. A workstation was placed in that space, and to approach it, one had to make the effort to circumvent one of these two obstacles.

Another spot was the one I described in Mathew's story: Though open on two sides, his corner of the rug afforded a small sense of privacy. Judy's own desk, in fact, was only observable from the vantage point of the class entrance. She could keep an eye on the traffic entering and leaving the classroom, but during the times she was busy behind her desk, she was not in a position to survey the students (an intern, a parent or a part-time aid was often present, but the force of the main teacher's gaze is qualitatively different). If she felt the class needed her presence, Judy would work from one of the workstations.

The most striking private spaces in the room were within or beyond the wooden tower. The Loft, as the students referred to it, stood on a corner of the rug, not quite in the center of the room. It rose 8 feet high on its sturdy base of 5-by-5 feet. Made of strong sheets of brown plywood, it was, among some other pieces of furniture, Judy's own handiwork. The space from which the structure took its name could be reached by climbing four feet and entering through a large window that faced the communal area of the rug. Inside were a mattress, a small pillow, some books, and writing and drawing supplies. Every student was assigned a particular day in the Loft—two students per day. From this slightly enviable height, students would participate in the day's communal gatherings. The space was also perfect for reading hours.

Need, however, trumped other considerations when it came to using the space. If someone needed to use the Loft because he or she felt sick or tired or homesick, then he or she took the space with rarely ever an argument from the child who was assigned the Loft for that day. Throughout my year in Room 108, I only saw three instances of a child using the Loft to sleep. Twice it was given to a boy who had arrived at school emotionally and physically bruised by an argument at home. The third time Avi, who was feeling particularly sleep-deprived, had taken the space. When I asked Jainaba, the girl who had given her turn to Avi, what she thought of the situation, she shrugged: "Fair is everybody getting what they need." In an interview, Judy smiled as I told her about Jainaba's comment. "That was written on a sign inside the Loft space, you know." The rules, in turn, had been generated during a beginning of the year discussion with students.

There was no shortage of smaller private spaces. Individuals owned cubbies, where they stored their math and literacy work and shelf-spaces that held the products of group projects. There were also science and social studies cubbies. The folders Judy provided even came with meaningful divisions. The mathematics folder, for example, featured sections such as "problem solving," "spatial reasoning," "Aha moments," "number sense," and "automaticity." All these she arranged in the three weeks prior to the start of the school year.

The last, and strangest, of these private spaces was also within the tower. It was a room underneath the loft space, only high enough for a child to enter. Inside, it was mostly dark, because only two very small windows afforded a view of the outside. The Lower Loft, as it was called, had a small door that required a table to be moved before one could open and enter it. I never saw a child use this space. I do remember, however, hearing from Judy that the space had been used extensively in previous years by one or two students who had experienced a significant loss at home. One student, after losing her father, also used the couch as a regular refuge during the months she spent recovering from the trauma.

Death, too, had a place of its own. All teachers who see education, as Dewey suggested, "not as preparation for life, but as life itself" are aware of the prominent place death takes up in children's thinking, not just in its experienced form, when someone they know passes away, but as a concept having to do with their own futures (Corr et al., 1992; Reisler, 1977). I will give one example of the manner in which the room held a place for children's contemplation of loss and mortality.

Next to a window hung a giant kite made of bamboo and translucent paper. Light shone through the many colors of the kite as through a stained-glass window. The kite was an eight-sided polygon, made by Judy and the students in the tradition of those flown on the Day of the Dead in Sumpango, Guatemala, to carry messages to the departed. The children's messages to those they had lost (parents, grandparents, pets, and friends) were written on ornate paper, mounted on cardboard, and hung with colorful yarn from the kite like a silent wind chime. When Judy's husband passed away during one of her last years of teaching, she hung a message of her own to the kite.

As loss was not forgotten, the foundations of life were not neglected either. Many of Judy's older alumni remember the food they ate in the classroom. At Graham and Parks, all classrooms have a sink and a small counter. In Judy's room, there was a proper kitchen, with pots, pans, a refrigerator, an electric oven, a sandwich maker, and cabinets full of supplies and utensils. Food was serious business. Judy, parents, interns, and guests cooked and prepared food, at least partly, inside the classroom. Cooking happened as students went on with the day's business. Some children helped. Everybody ate.

Every now and then, Judy, whose husband was from the West Indies, brought in the ingredients for a West Indian stew. The pot would simmer on the electric stove from morning to noon, the scent of spice and garden vegetables filling the room and the hallways. Parents often offered to cook meals from their culture, and as they prepared the meal, they would talk to the kids who were helping them about the significance of the dish and its ingredients.

Some Notes In Place of Conclusions

Before I began working with Judy, I had taught in a traditional elementary school classroom. The room was small, bare on the floor and bare on the walls. Children sat on individual chairs behind individual desks, all facing the blackboard. The best I could do was ask my kids to move their "stations" (each chair was welded to its desk) and try to make a semi-circle. There was no way of sitting next to one another: The desk-chairs were made so that the student could only get out of them from a single side. Putting two desks side-by-side meant that one student would be trapped in his station.

The math supply closet consisted of a shelf full of textbooks, some markers, protractors, and small rulers. The curriculum unit that the school had purchased for thousands of dollars came with just one box of supplies, mostly playing cards. If I thought of using a piece of yarn in a lesson about angles, then I had to make sure to buy and bring a ball of yarn with me. Soon I found myself spending my Saturdays scavenging yard sales, hoping something (something cheap, mercifully) would inspire an idea. Some of this material poverty can be attributed to monetary problems of which there are plenty in public education. The real glitch was that I had to smuggle the supplies into my classroom, because the principal disliked clutter and discouraged deviations from the

assigned curriculum. Since there were no real shelves or cabinets to speak of, I had to store my supplies in boxes that the students would decorate with drawings. Those boxes nearly cost me my job on my first evaluation. Not only did I carry my own unexamined assumptions regarding classroom space, I had to actively resist being strong-armed into creating a space that I resented.

Judy's start was harder than mine. Her first teaching placement was at the Gibson School in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Jonathan Kozol had just written *Death at an Early Age*, an indictment of the practiced racism in the Boston Public School System, following his own time as a teacher at the Gibson School. When I asked Judy about that classroom, she could not recall much other than the students. She only remembered that,

> The benches and tables were bolted to the ground, as was anything that could possibly be moved. There were no supplies and scarcely enough textbooks. And the textbooks we had were ten years old and torn up beyond use. There was no question of kids moving around the classroom. If the principal saw that, she would either pull the kid right out of your class and thrash him or threaten you with your job. I was better off locking the door if I wanted to do anything creative with the kids.

Minus the threat of physical punishment, these are still the conditions under which many teachers begin their careers. Even at Graham and Parks, where the school as a whole was supportive of Judy's pedagogy, superintendents, inspectors, and even principals chastised her for the set up of her room, the signs in Creole, or the plants and animals. Only in her last year did she have a positive visit from the district office. The new superintendent walked in, paused for a full minute, studied the room, and said: "This is wonderful. It's just like being outside."

Any story of progress within public schools is also a story of resistance. But sometimes the required resistance occurs at a higher bureaucratic level than the classroom and that gives teachers the breathing room to work from a calmer space. Such support can even help educators think of, literally, ground-breaking ideas regarding educational spaces. Such was the case when open classrooms, spaces in which teachers were not separated from each other by walls, appeared as short-lived public experiments in the United States, in the1970's (Hutchison, 2004). But if I were to return to the classroom as a teacher, in this second decade of the 21st century when the trend in school reform is one of increasing control and closing of open spaces, I can think of more modest privileges. It would help, for example, if the teacher before me had a supply budget, and that she would be given time to sit with me and describe what she was leaving behind. A small budget of my own would also be a good start. Then I would have Judy's example to think about. It would be one way to do it.

To an individual teacher, a classroom like Judy's, or a portrait of it, can serve as an *example* of the *range* of considerations, energies, and skills that go into building a learning environment. What it cannot serve as is a blueprint: You cannot emulate something that owes its shape and value to an individual's active engagement with a particular setting. As soon as it's copied, it loses its value. At the administrative level, a description of Judy's classroom can serve as a call to engage teachers in a dialogue regarding space. Such a dialogue, however, requires certain supports and structures in

order to be meaningful. We can deduce some of these from Judy's example: an independent budget for materials, a larger space that can lend itself to manipulation, access to carpentry or building materials, and the existence of the basic amenities such as a simple kitchen. But let's not delude ourselves, in nearly all public schools, the teacher is working within a system that is inherently authoritarian and limiting. Bar the presence of a sense of insurgency in the teacher, Judy's example and this essay have no larger implications.

By the same token, I can suggest a theoretical implication for this essay. A critical study of educational spaces cannot remain at the level of describing systems of control and socialization. It must also include the efforts of individuals within such systems to push against the boundaries. As soon as a teacher betrays the traditional authority invested in her, the space begins to change. She and her students gain a small level of agency. It will be worth knowing where and how such agency fails or flourishes.

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