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EDUCATIONAL THEORY

RETHINKING SCHOOLS: TRANSFORMATIVE HOPE AND UTOPIAN POSSIBILITY

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Abstract. This article explores the work of *Rethinking Schools* (RS). RS is at one and the same time a grassroots movement of teacher-activists, a quarterly journal, and a publishing house. For almost four decades the movement has sought to enact Freirean-inspired curricular/pedagogical initiatives within US public schooling. What makes the work of RS significant is the way it connects critical pedagogy to specific examples of concrete practice. It thus provides an invaluable corrective to the abstruseness and high levels of theoretical abstraction one finds in critical pedagogy as an academic field. Of particular interest is the explicitly *utopian* dimension to the work of the movement. Underpinning all the curriculum materials, resources, lesson plans, reading lists, and pedagogical strategies is a desire to provide children and young people with an opportunity to flex their utopian imaginations. Drawing on Freirean theory to reflect on the practice of the movement, Webb highlights the ways in which RS finds utopian possibility blooming in that most unpromising of grounds — public schooling. While the context for utopian praxis feels unpropitious to say the least, *Rethinking Schools* offers a corrective to doom-laden assessments of the scope for radical pedagogical initiatives within public schooling, not only in the US but more widely.

Key Words. Rethinking Schools; Paulo Freire; critical pedagogy; utopia; hope

Introduction

Rethinking Schools (RS) is at one and the same time a grassroots movement of teacher-activists, a quarterly journal, and a publishing house. Founded in 1986 by a group of teachers in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, RS started life as a study group reading Henry Giroux's *Theory and Resistance in Education*. After tiring of Giroux's "abstruse prose" and high level of theoretical abstraction, the group decided to put together their own journal aimed at balancing classroom practice with critical educational theory.[1] From the very first home-printed newsletter to the latest quarterly issue (stretching now across 39 volumes), RS has remained an activist publication written by and for teachers, parents, and students — "probably the only education journal in America written and edited by K-12 educators."[2] Speaking of the journal, Michael Apple says,

> If someone were to ask me what publication in education should be consistently read by anyone who wants clear and passionate material on our current policies and practices in

1. David Levine and Wayne Au, "Rethinking Schools: Enacting a Vision of Social Justice within US Education," *Critical Studies in Education* 54, no. 1 (2013): 72–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.738693.

2. Alain Jehlen, "Rethinking Schools: Classroom Educators Publish a Journal Packed with Practical Lesson Plans and Plenty of Attitude," *NEA Today* 22, no. 4 (2004): 36. The movement soon established strong roots in Portland, Oregon, too. Today, the movement attracts support from teachers across the country. The journal, for example, has subscribers in every US state and Canadian province.

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> education and on how to engage in alternatives that are aimed at greater equality and at better curricula, teaching, and evaluation, my answer would undoubtedly be *Rethinking Schools*.[3]

Soon after establishing the journal, some of the founding members joined with community allies to save a local Milwaukee school from demolition. Following a long battle with administrators, approval was eventually given in 1988 to establish a bilingual elementary school, La Escuela Fratney, governed by parents and teachers.[4] With a number of RS editorial team members working in the school, La Escuela Fratney sought to "pioneer multicultural and antiracist classroom practice facilitated by democratic collaboration between parents and school staff" and "became a kind of laboratory for emancipatory teaching that inspired ideas we articulated in the journal."[5]

In 1991, the ideas articulated in the journal found another outlet, as RS branched into book publishing. Starting with *Rethinking Columbus*, a succession of edited collections have followed — *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, *Rethinking Early Childhood Education*, *Rethinking Mathematics*, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, *Teaching a People's History*, *Teaching for Black Lives*, and many more.[6] Reviewers have described these books as inspirational, motivational, uplifting, compelling, and indispensable, providing "a powerful vision of education for social justice" with which "to inspire educators with new insights for centering the development of critical consciousness" and offering "a courageous and a much-needed way to forge forward in this time of perceived dystopia."[7] Consistent with the very ethos of the movement, reviewers note

3. Michael Apple, "Rethinking Education, Rethinking Culture, Rethinking Media," *Education Policy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 341, https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904811417593.

4. Bob Peterson, "La Escuela Fratney: A Journey toward Democracy," *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education*, ed. Michael Apple and James Beane (Heinemann, 2007): 30–61.

5. Levine and Au, "Rethinking Schools," 75.

6. *Rethinking Columbus* has now sold more than 300,000 copies. For a full list of publications, see www.rethinkingschools.org.

7. Anon, "Review of New Teacher Book," *School Library Journal* 51, no. 4 (2005): 79; Antonia Castaneda, "Review of Rethinking Columbus," *The Journal of Negro Education* 61, no. 3 (1992): 443–445, https://doi.org/10.2307/2295264; NG, "Review of Rethinking Globalisation," *New Internationalist* 361 (2003): 31; Amy Darr-Elston, "Review of Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word," *Educational Studies* 46, no. 6 (2010): 611–614, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2010.524137; Inna Abramova, "Review of Rethinking Multicultural Education: Teaching for Racial and Cultural Justice," *Multicultural Perspectives* 14, no. 2 (2012): 112, https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2012.673370; Jody Slavick, "Review of Rethinking Bilingual Education: Welcoming Home Languages in Our Classrooms," *Bilingual Research Journal* 41, no. 1 (2018): 91, https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2018.1425166; and Lobat Asadi, "Review of Rethinking Popular Culture and Media," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 15, no. 4 (2018): 375, https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1453427.

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that the books offer analyses and resources written in a style accessible to the layperson.[8]

As yet, little academic attention has been paid to *Rethinking Schools*. Indeed, not a single journal article has been written by anyone outside the movement itself. I seek to rectify this in the current article. What interests me in particular about RS is the explicit foregrounding of *the utopian* within the more familiar terrain of Freirean pedagogy. Underpinning all the curriculum materials, resources, lesson plans, reading lists, and pedagogical strategies is a desire to provide children and young people with "an opportunity to flex their utopian imaginations."[9] This feels significant for a number of reasons. First, while it is not uncommon to ascribe a utopian function to educational spaces, this is typically applied to schools operating outside the publicly funded education system, whether it be experimental schools such as Summerhill in the UK, the tradition of anarchist free schools, or "alternative" education variously understood.[10] The focus of *Rethinking Schools*, however, is placed firmly on state-maintained public schooling.[11] Second, unlike other literature seeking to uncover pockets of possibility within public schooling, RS draws less on individual (and generally historical) examples, and seeks instead to spread utopian good practice throughout the entire system.[12] Finally, given the more common framing of public schooling as *dys*topian, and recent suggestions that critical education has lost sight of "its normative anticipatory-utopian foundation," this seems like a timely moment to explore a movement of critical educators seeking to provide young people with opportunities to flex their utopian imaginations.[13]

8. Apple, "Rethinking Education"; Kelly Dohei, "Review of Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 14, no. 3 (2017): 333–335, https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2017.1324347; and Deborah Palmer, "Review of Pencils Down: Rethinking High-Stakes Testing and Accountability in Public Schools," *Language Policy* 15, no. 1 (2016): 109–111, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-014-9346-7.

9. Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson, eds., *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years* (Rethinking Schools, 1998), 68.

10. For example, Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Duke University Press, 2014); Judith Suissa, *Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective* (Routledge, 2006); and Peter Kraftl, *Geographies of Alternative Education: Diverse Learning Spaces for Children and Young People* (Policy Press, 2015).

11. This is significant also in terms of their attempt to enact critical pedagogy. One of the most powerful recent depictions of a school enacting critical pedagogy argues that this was only made possible because the school operated outside state-mandated curriculum and auditing structures. See Claudia Cervantes-Soon, *Juárez Girls Rising: Transformative Education in Times of Dystopia* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

12. For example, Michael Fielding and Peter Moss, *Radical Education and the Common School: A Democratic Alternative* (Routledge, 2011); and Encarna Rodriguez, ed., *Pedagogies and Curriculums to (Re)imagine Public Education: Transnational Tales of Hope and Resistance* (Springer, 2015).

13. Quentin Wheeler-Bell, "An Immanent Critique of Critical Pedagogy," *Educational Theory* 69, no. 3 (2019): 277, https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12368. See also Paul Warmington, "Dystopian Social Theory and Education," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 3 (2015): 265–281, https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12112.

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Significant also is the way the work of RS connects critical pedagogy to specific examples of concrete practice. It thus provides a corrective to the theoretical density one often encounters in critical pedagogy as an academic field. As bell hooks notes, theory can all too often serve "to divide, separate, exclude, keep at a distance" in order to reproduce an intellectual class hierarchy.[14] Critical pedagogy sometimes feels like this, and has frequently been criticized for deploying alienating levels of theoretical jargon comprehensible only to the initiated (while offering little in the way of practical classroom advice to the teachers on whom it places such high expectations).[15] This is why a movement like RS is so important. Borrowing words from Paulo Freire, RS provides a necessary reminder to critical theory that "without practice, we lose ourselves in the air."[16] Indeed, a central argument of the article is that the work of RS enlivens critical pedagogy as utopian *practice*. It goes without saying, of course, that theory is not always or necessarily alienating. When understood in Freirean terms as reflection on practice, it becomes a necessary component of praxis, i.e., "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it."[17] Here, the relationship between theory and practice is iterative and dialectical, a "reciprocal process wherein one enables the other."[18] Practice is illuminated and guided by theory just as theory is illuminated and deepened through practice.[19] It is in this dialectical spirit that the article seeks to do two things simultaneously: to draw on theory to reflect on the concrete practice of *Rethinking Schools* at the same time as highlighting how specific examples of practice help illuminate and bring theory to life by giving concrete shape to key concepts.

The work of Freire is used as a constant reference point throughout the article. Although Freire is seldom referred to directly by those involved in RS, he is nonetheless identified as the key inspiration behind their ideas.[20] Drawing on Freire, the concepts I turn to — concepts that help illuminate the work

14. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (Routledge, 1994), 64–65.

15. See, inter alia, Michael Apple, "Rhetoric and Reality in Critical Educational Studies in the United States," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27, no. 5 (2006): 679–687, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036176; Jacob Neumann, "Critical Pedagogy's Problem with Changing Teachers' Dispositions towards Critical Teaching," *Interchange* 44, no. 1–2 (2013): 129–147, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-013-9200-4; J. Martin Rochester, "Critical Demagogues: What Happens When Ideology and Teaching Mix," *Education Next* 3, no. 4 (2013): 1–11; Kevin Williams and Patrick Williams, "The Problematic Character of Critical Pedagogy," *Irish Educational Studies* 35, no. 3 (2016): 307–318; and Tova Yaakoby, "Teachers' Reflections on the Perceptions of Oppression and Liberation in Neo-Marxist Critical Pedagogies," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 45, no. 10 (2013): 992–1004, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2011.00830.x.

16. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the City* (Continuum, 1993), 132.

17. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, 1970), 28.

18. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 61.

19. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 98.

20. The importance of Freire is signaled on the movement's website and on the first page of Wayne Au, Bill Bigelow, and Stan Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (Rethinking Schools, 1994).

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of RS and are at the same time illuminated by it — are powerful/dangerous knowledge, educational archeology, and transformative hope. These concepts I consider central to understanding the utopian dimension to RS; to teasing out the processes and practices of what Freire termed "utopian pedagogy."[21] I hope that reading RS alongside Freire, through the lens of three pivotal concepts, will add a layer of depth and rigor that enables a wider and fuller appreciation of the ambitious work undertaken by the movement. As will become evident during the course of the article, I consider *Rethinking Schools* to offer something of a bulwark against doom-laden assessments of the scope for radical pedagogical initiatives within public schooling, not only in the US but more widely.

Schools as Sites of Resistance and Utopian Praxis

Freire insisted repeatedly that we should avoid both the naive optimism that schools are levers of social transformation and the terrible pessimism that they merely reproduce dominant ideology and social relations.[22] While educational praxis needs to be located within a holistic program for systemic change, forging ties with broader social movements, educational institutions nonetheless operate as sites of resistance and offer "spaces for action."[23] We often need reminding of these things. Against the bleakest readings of contemporary schooling we need to emphasize "the crucial role schools can play in the formation of counterhegemonic social movements."[24] At the same time, we must avoid "romantic idealism" and the overbearing material, emotional and spiritual pressures placed on teachers by the call for them to act as "transformative intellectuals."[25] Teachers implementing critical pedagogy in their classrooms cannot on their own spearhead social transformation. Struggles within schools must articulate with broader struggles

21. A term coined in Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Penguin, 1972), 40.

22. Paulo Freire and Ira Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (Macmillan, 1987), 129–130; Paulo Freire, Migues Escobar, Alfredo L. Fernandez, and Gilberto Guevara-Niebla, *Paulo Freire on Higher Education: A Dialogue at the National University of Mexico* (SUNY Press, 1994), 30; and Freire, *Pedagogy of the City*, 123.

23. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Temple University Press, 1990), 203; and Paulo Freire, *Daring to Dream* (Paradigm, 2007), 67.

24. Michael Apple, "Reframing the Question of Whether Education Can Change Society," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 3 (2015): 314. https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12114. Apple was here reviewing several books offering a bleak assessment of contemporary schooling. These included David Blacker, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame* (Zero Books, 2013); John Marsh, *Class Dismissed: Why We Can't Teach or Learn Our Way Out of Inequality* (Monthly Review Press, 2011); and Mike Cole, *Marxism and Educational Theory* (Routledge, 2008).

25. Juliet Perumal, "Enacting Critical Pedagogy in an Emerging South African Democracy," *Education and Urban Society* 48, no. 8 (2016): 743–766, https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124514541466. A recent example of this romantic call can be found in Peter McLaren, "The Future of Critical Pedagogy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 52, no. 12 (2020): 1243–1248, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2019.1686963.

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and movements if they are to become effective vehicles for social change.[26] Recognizing this, the work of RS starts from two basic premises:

> Teachers can create classrooms that are places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make it reality.[27]

> No classroom is an island. Teachers soon become painfully aware of how factors beyond the classroom limit what they can accomplish with their students … teachers must complement their efforts inside their classrooms with alliances to transform the schools, districts, and communities they work in.[28]

In terms of the utopianism I want to explore in this article, this operates at two levels. The first is prefigurative. The term *prefiguration* refers to "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal."[29] Ruth Kinna describes this as here-and-now utopianism, often summarized as "building the new world in the shell of the old."[30] For those within RS, "Classroom life should, to the greatest extent possible, prefigure the kind of democratic and just society we envision and thus contribute to building that society."[31] Prefiguration alone, however, is inadequate as a strategy. As Freire tells us, the reconstitution of education cannot be imagined outside the reconstitution of ownership and control, production and distribution, culture and "the formation of a new mentality."[32] For this reason, work within classrooms needs to be connected to broader struggles for transformation. This is where "flexing the utopian imagination" becomes important. Guided by "a vision of social justice and equality," and "connecting classroom learning with community movements," RS sees "teaching as political action: we want to equip students to build a truly democratic society."[33]

26. Jessica Gerrard, "Class Analysis and the Emancipatory Potential of Education," *Educational Theory* 63, no. 2 (2013): 185–201, https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12017; and Rebecca Tarlau, "From a Language to a Theory of Resistance: Critical Pedagogy, the Limits of 'Framing,' and Social Change," *Educational Theory* 64, no. 4 (2014): 369–392, https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12067.

27. Bill Bigelow, Brenda Harvey, Stan Karp, and Larry Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Volume 2* (Rethinking Schools, 2001), 2.

28. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 161.

29. Carl Boggs, "Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control," *Radical America* 11, no. 6 (1977): 100, https://libcom.org/library/marxism-prefigurative-communism-problem-workers-control-carl-boggs.

30. Ruth Kinna, "Utopianism and Prefiguration," in *Political Uses of Utopia*, ed. S. D. Chrostowska and James Ingram (Columbia University Press, 2016), 198–215. The phrase "building a new world in the shell of the old" was inscribed within the constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World (https:archive.iww.org) and is now a common shorthand definition of prefiguration.

31. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 4–5.

32. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy in Process* (Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1978), 20.

33. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 162; Eric Gutstein and Bob Peterson, eds., *Rethinking Mathematics* (Rethinking Schools, 2013), 25; and Bigelow and Peterson, *Rethinking*

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Utopia can be defined in many ways.[34] In previous writings I have argued for an understanding of utopia as both a mode of immanent praxis and a collectively elaborated guiding vision, each feeding off and reinforcing the other in an iterative pedagogical process.[35] This fits with Ruth Levitas' notion of utopia as method, as the imaginary reconstitution of society.[36] It also fits with the work of RS, which combines the immanent praxis of prefigurative utopianism with the broader goal of developing, collaboratively with students, a vision of how we could live, a vision which then feeds back into classroom practice at the same time as it seeks to guide social transformation. This is an ambitious project, of course, and may raise concerns about the pressures and expectations placed on teachers. Rather than "transformative intellectuals," however, "rethinking our classrooms requires teachers to be activists."[37] The burgeoning literature on scholar-activism, in contrast to the romantic idealism attached to the idea of transformative intellectuals, draws attention to the dangers and constraints faced by educators striving to work within, against, and beyond their institutions.[38]

Those associated with RS are acutely aware of the systemic (ideological, social, political, material, curricular, pedagogical) constraints facing anyone seeking to enact radical/democratic education. It would be churlish to deny that such constraints are becoming increasingly tight. While RS activists may strive to introduce modes of restorative and transformative assessment into their schools, they also face the realities of monthly report cards and standardized testing. While they may seek to create space for student-led problem-posing education, they also have to work within the constraints of fifty-minute classes, six-week units, and crammed timetables. While they may aim to engage students in an anti-racist curriculum that is simultaneously critical and hopeful, they still have to teach standard English and the Common Core within environments often resembling carceral fortresses. While they may wish to inspire social transformation, they do so in a context in which the goal of education has been positioned successfully as little more than human capital formation. And while equity and social justice may be their

Columbus, 21. See also David Levine, Robert Lowe, Robert Peterson, Rita Tenorio, eds., *Rethinking Schools: An Agenda for Change* (The New Press, 1995), 53–55.

34. See the discussions in, for example, Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Allen Lane, 1990) and Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

35. Darren Webb, "Educational Archaeology and the Practice of Utopian Pedagogy," *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2017): 551–566. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2017.1291534; Darren Webb, "The Domestication of Utopia and the Climate Crisis," *Mediazioni*, no. 27 (2020): 6–16; and Darren Webb, "Education," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Utopian and Dystopian Literatures*, ed. Fatima Vieira, Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, and Peter Marks (Palgrave, 2022), 605–616.

36. Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method* (Palgrave, 2013).

37. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 203.

38. A good survey of the literature is offered by Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly, *Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism* (Manchester University Press, 2021). Wayne Au, one of the key figures within RS, identifies explicitly as a "scholar activist." Wayne Au, *A Marxist Education* (Haymarket Books, 2018), 151, 201, 204.

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ultimate aim, the education system they operate within serves more starkly than ever to reproduce and entrench social divisions and inequalities.

The social totality, however, is neither static nor closed. Freire reminds us that reality is a process wrought with tensions, contradictions and conflicts.[39] Cracks and gaps in the operation of power create openings for dialogue and here he urges us to work within the cracks, "occupy the spaces and fill them up."[40] This resonates with the notion of interstitial strategy advocated by E.O. Wright and the Real Utopias Project.[41] An interstitial strategy involves the deliberate development or expansion of interstitial activities (processes operating within the spaces or cracks of some dominant social system) with the overall aim of transforming the social system as a whole.[42] For both Freire and RS, however, an interstitial strategy on its own is insufficient. Tactically, one may work within the system to fill spaces and develop interstitial practices but strategically one must work with wider movements across all social fields.[43] Education is just one "moment or process or practice" in the broader struggle involving social and political organization, mobilization, programs, and parties.[44] How is such work envisioned and enacted by RS? In particular, and my main focus in this article, how does the twin operation of utopia — i.e., utopia as prefigurative practice and utopia as the emergence of a collectively elaborated guiding vision — play out on the ground? In what follows, I turn to three concepts that I consider pivotal to understanding the movement's utopian engagement: (1) powerful/dangerous knowledge, (2) educational archeology, and (3) transformative hope.

Powerful and Dangerous Knowledge

The concept of powerful knowledge is associated with the work of Leesa Wheelahan, Michael Young, and Johan Muller.[45] They advocate a curriculum founded on rigorous, subject-centered, theoretical knowledge because only this "powerful"

39. Paulo Freire, "A Few Notions about the Word 'Conscientization'," *Schooling and Capitalism*, ed. Roger Dale, Geoff Esland, and Madeleine Macdonald (Routledge, 1976), 225.

40. Freire, Escobar, Fernandez, and Guevara-Niebla, *Paulo Freire on Higher Education*, 53; and Freire and Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 36–37.

41. The Real Utopias project, led by Erik Olin Wright, stretched over twenty years and six edited volumes, each exploring real utopias in action across various social fields. Wright's own reflections on the project can be found in E. O. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Verso, 2010). A good critique is offered by Dylan Riley, "Real Utopia or Abstract Empiricism," *New Left Review* 121 (2020): 99–107, https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii121/articles/dylan-riley-real-utopia-or-abstract-empiricism.

42. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 322–324.

43. Freire, Escobar, Fernandez, and Guevara-Niebla, *Paulo Freire on Higher Education*, 170–178.

44. Freire and Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 34, 134.

45. Leesa Wheelahan, "How Competency-based Training Locks the Working Class Out of Powerful Knowledge," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 28, no. 5 (2007): 637–651, https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690701505540; Michael Young and Johan Muller, "On the Powers of Powerful Knowledge," *Review of Education* 1, no. 3 (2013): 229–250, https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3017; and Johan Muller, "Powerful Knowledge, Disciplinary Knowledge, Curriculum Knowledge: Educational Knowledge in

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knowledge enables students to develop a critical understanding of the world. They present a *radical* case for such a curriculum, they argue, because a focus on lived experience, cross-cutting themes, and "relevance" locks working-class and other marginalized students out of the knowledge they need to play an active role in democratic society. It may seem counter-intuitive to take this concept as a springboard here because, on face value at least, it sits at odds with the kind of Freirean pedagogy practiced by RS. While the overall aims are similar (to empower marginalized students), the relationship between experience, curriculum, and knowledge are understood very differently. For Michael Young, "Students do not come to school to learn what they already know … No one would imagine that the creation of new knowledge could begin with experience or everyday life."[46] For Freire, on the other hand, "I insist that lived experience be used as a point of departure" so that the activist-scholar-educator can teach people "to know better what they already know."[47]

Those associated with *Rethinking Schools* acknowledge the importance of a "powerful," subject-rich, "academically rigorous" curriculum. The need for such is identified as one of the key principles of a social justice classroom.[48] However, while "powerful" knowledge may enable students to take their place and maneuver in the world that exists, "*dangerous* knowledge" is needed if they are to change it.[49] This requires that subject-centered disciplinary knowledge be supplemented with, and taught through, a curriculum "rooted in children's needs and experiences."[50] Young might wonder how anything new could emerge from this. For Freirean educators, however, lived experience is used as *a point of departure* "so as to transcend it."[51] As Freire says in *Pedagogy of Hope*,

Question," *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education* 32, no. 1 (2023): 20–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/10382046.2022.2058349.

46. Michael Young, "The Future of Education in a Knowledge Society: The Radical Case for a Subject-Based Curriculum," *Journal of the Pacific Circle Consortium for Education* 22, no. 1 (2010): 25, 29, https://lefthistoryteaching.wordpress.com/2016/03/24/the-radical-case-for-a-knowledge-rich-curriculum/

47. Freire, *Pedagogy of the City*, 110; and Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 157, 226.

48. Linda Christensen, Stan Karp, Bob Peterson, and Moé Yonamine, *The New Teacher Book: Finding Purpose, Balance and Hope During Your First Years in the Classroom*, 3rd ed. (Rethinking Schools, 2019), 84; Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 4–5; and Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 4.

49. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 117; Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 145; Levine, Lowe, Peterson, Tenorio, eds., *Rethinking Schools*, 49–51, 139–144; Gutstein and Peterson, eds., *Rethinking Mathematics*, xi-xiii; Au, *A Marxist Education*, 135–158; Linda Christensen, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* (Rethinking Schools, 2017), 102, 237; and Linda Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice* (Rethinking Schools, 2009), 15, 163.

50. Christensen, Karp, Peterson, and Yonamine, *The New Teacher Book*, 82; and Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 2.

51. Freire, *Pedagogy of the City*, 110.

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> Starting out with the educands' knowledge does not mean circling around this knowledge ad infinitum. *Starting out* means setting off down the road, getting going, shifting from one point to another, not *sticking*, or *staying*. … *Starting* with "the knowledge of experience had" in order to get beyond it.[52]

Linda Christensen (a central figure within RS and author of several of the movement's books) talks of the importance of "finding the heartbeat of a class."[53] This means teachers getting to know the local school community and the issues animating it. It also means that "our students' stories about their lives provide the bedrock that my curriculum rests on."[54] Students are encouraged "to view school not as the imposition of an alien agenda, but as an organized means to articulate their own."[55] This does not mean fetishizing student experience, however. It means providing an organized setting for its *critical* articulation, with all of the questioning and unpacking this entails.[56] Schools become "both a mirror and a window," positively reflecting students' lived experiences, but also in and through the critical interrogation of these experiences, providing a window onto wider social structures and other ways of thinking and being.[57]

The privileging of formal knowledge as the locus of "power" is also problematized. Carolyn Lesjak challenges the priority given to "thinking and knowing" over "experience and feeling" in much radical thought. She argues for holding each in dialectical unity to ground a project focused less on "knowing what we see" and more on "seeing what we know."[58] In order to see better, clearer, and deeper what we know, Robert Hattam argues that "critical pedagogies for our times have to work on the terrain of affect," interrupting contemporary common sense through sensational, relational and embodied pedagogies.[59] The work of *Rethinking Schools* can be conceptualized in these terms, exploring ways of seeing what we know, holding together individual experience and totalizing structure in order to see (clearer, in more organized form) what we already know (inchoately, confusedly). Reading the word (in its concrete localization) to read the world, to see the determinate social relations hiding behind visceral lived experiences, to see the structural, symbolic, and material violence, and to see also the cracks and fissures that open out into possibility and agency.

52. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (Continuum, 1994), 68.

53. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 52.

54. Christensen, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, 32.

55. Levine, Lowe, Peterson, Tenorio, eds., *Rethinking Schools*, 55.

56. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 26; Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 7; Christensen, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, 8.

57. Levine, Lowe, Peterson, Tenorio, eds., *Rethinking Schools*, 124.

58. Carolyn Lesjak, "Reading Dialectically," *Criticism* 55, no. 2 (2013): 252, https://ufmrg.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/reading_dialectically.pdf.

59. Robert Hattam, "Untimely Meditations for Critical Pedagogy," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 48, no. 1 (2020): 89, https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2019.1669138

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This all begins with *narrative writing*, with students writing about the realities of their lives. Christensen says, "My curriculum uses students' lives as critical texts we mine for stories," and this "tells students that they matter, that the pain and the joy in their lives can be part of the curriculum."[60] It takes courage for students to share their stories but *the read-around-circle* provides everyone with the opportunity to be heard, to learn about each other's worlds, as well as reflect on their own. Through collective storytelling, a community starts to take shape and the experiences shared become a "collective text," the reading of which is the cornerstone for constructing dangerous knowledge.[61] Fred Jameson argues that it is in the intersections of difference and multiplicities that one encounters the dissonance, violence, gaps, and aporias through which change and politics become possible.[62] This is evident when Christensen says, "Students have written about rape, sexual abuse, divorce, drug and alcohol abuse. And through their sharing, they make openings for each other. Sometimes a small break. A crack. A passage from one world to the other."[63] The metaphor of the crack is a powerful one. Domination is always partial and "leaky."[64] Cracks can appear in the structural and ideological edifice of neoliberal capitalism, in hegemonic common sense, in one's routine acceptance of the way things are. It is in these cracks that glimpses of human fullness can be found.[65] From this perspective, teaching becomes a process of "finding the gaps" and "examining the cracks" in order to create openings that can operate as "spaces of possibility" and sites of utopian becoming.[66] In the work of RS, curriculum and pedagogy

> should tap into who people are and build on their knowledge, culture, language, and experiences — but never stop there. Although an education focused on liberation can start from the realities of the young people in front of us, it should always go beyond.[67]

Tapping into who people are. This becomes possible once the cracks appear. Curriculum and pedagogy act as mechanisms for *excavating* the cracks, for unearthing latent hopes and desires, catching fleeting glimpses of human fullness, cultivating a new structure of feeling opening out onto transformative hope and utopian possibility. Central to this archeological process of excavation — and mediating between everyday experience and radical hope — is dialogue. As

60. Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, 1; and Christensen, *Reading, Writing and Rising Up*, 6.

61. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 144.

62. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (Verso, 2009), 537–543.

63. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 55.

64. Henry Giroux, *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture's War on Children* (Palgrave, 2000), 144.

65. J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

66. Paul Sutton, "A Paradoxical Academic Identity: Fate, Utopia and Critical Hope," *Teaching in Higher Education* 20, no. 1 (2015): 45; Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 27; and Sara Amsler, *The Education of Radical Democracy* (Routledge, 2015), 48.

67. Gutstein and Peterson, eds., *Rethinking Mathematics*, xii

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Hideyuki Ichikawa rightly notes, it is through dialogue that learners are able "to articulate their excavated demands" and speak with "a hope for transformation."[68] The following two sections seek to unpack this, focusing first on the dialogic process of educational archeology before turning to how educators can nurture transformative hope.

Educational Archeology

Educational archeology is a process variously described as excavating, mining, uncovering, revealing, unearthing, tapping — hidden, submerged, repressed, suppressed, buried, subjugated, untapped — desires, longings, memories, histories, knowledge, dreams, possibilities. In a classic statement of this kind, Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren talk of the need "to tap the hidden utopian desire" found in students' experiences; to "uncover the submerged longings" inherent within social and cultural practices; to engage in "the task of excavating historical consciousness and 'repressed' knowledge"; and to commit to the project of "redirecting the paths of human desire."[69] The dangers associated with notions of "unveiling," "revealing," and "making visible what is hidden" have rightly been highlighted. As both Gert Biesta and Sarah Galloway note, the logic of demystification (i.e., revealing to those being emancipated the real conditions of their existence) creates a dependency between emancipators and emancipated, for whom emancipation is something done to them from outside.[70] In the work of RS, however, one finds concrete instantiations of dialogic pedagogy working to dissolve the teacher-student relationship as the process of educational archeology becomes a joint process of knowledge creation.

For Freire, "dialogue is the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study."[71] The aim is "to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge" with, crucially, "educands' concrete localization" forming "the point of departure for the knowledge *they* create of the world."[72] The teacher/educator selects an object of study, but the process of study itself is a joint act of knowledge production. In and through dialogue, we "exchange our ways of thinking with each

68. Hideyuki Ichikawa, "A Theory of Hope in Critical Pedagogy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 4 (2022): 391, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1840973

69. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, "Radical Pedagogy as Cultural Politics: Beyond the Discourse of Critique and Anti-utopianism," in *Theory/Pedagogy/Politics*, ed. D. Morton and M. Zavarzadeh (University of Illinois Press, 1991), 174–180.

70. Gert Biesta, "Don't Be Fooled by Ignorant Schoolmasters: On the Role of the Teacher in Emancipatory Education," *Policy Futures in Education* 15, no. 1 (2017): 52–73, https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316681202; and Sarah Galloway, "Reconsidering Emancipatory Education: Staging a Conversation between Paulo Freire and Jacques Rancière," *Educational Theory* 62, no. 2 (2012): 163–184, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2012.00441.x.

71. Freire and Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 100.

72. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 30; and Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 72.

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other and look together for better ways of approaching the decodification of an object."[73] The teacher-student relationship becomes a relationship of co-subjects mediated through learning resources. The process is certainly an archeological one — Freire repeatedly uses terms such as "unveiling," "revealing," and "unmasking"[74] — but it is also "a pedagogy that asks students to assume their own direction" such that the role of the educator becomes one of "directing self-direction."[75]

As for the utopian dimension, Freire makes this explicit. The dialogic process of collaborative knowledge production is also a utopian process of denunciation-annunciation, "a dialogic praxis in which the teachers and learners together, in the act of analysing a dehumanising reality, denounce it while announcing its transformation in the name of the liberation of man."[76] For Freire, "humanistic education is a utopian project of the dominated and oppressed" in which "only the oppressed, as the social class that has been forbidden to speak, can become the utopians, the prophets and the messengers of hope."[77] In this, "the duty of the educator is to search out appropriate paths for the learner to travel," directing, not the learners themselves, but the process of learning through the selection of the object of study to be decodified.[78] What emerges through the dialogic praxis of decodification and denunciation is what Freire termed a "draft project," the inchoate annunciation of collectively elaborated yearnings and desires for a new way of being.[79] The role of the educator here becomes one of translator, interpreting the dreams and aspirations of learners, and helping give them a deeper cognitive foundation and sharper, more precise shape.[80]

In his earlier works, Freire might have used the term *conciêntização* to describe this dialogic process of decodification and denunciation-annunciation. *Conciêntização* designates "an active, dialogical educational program" directed toward the "awakening" of critical consciousness.[81] This in turn requires the "overcoming" of semi-intransitive and naive transitive states of consciousness,

73. Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo, *Literacies: Reading the Word and the World* (Bergin and Garvey, 1987), 96.

74. See, for example, Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education* (Bergin and Garvey, 1985), 157, 169, 172; Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 31; Freire and Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 36, 38, 134, 168; and Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 19, 22–23.

75. Freire and Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 85.

76. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 40.

77. Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 113, 127.

78. Freire, *Pedagogy in Process*, 10; and Freire and Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 46.

79. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 71–72.

80. Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 111–112.

81. Paulo Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1976), 19.

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characterized respectively by fatalism, passivity, a belief that things are as they are because of the operation of "magical" forces such as fate, luck, or divine power (semi-intransitive), and over-simplified, uncritical, one-dimensional understandings of the world that fail to grasp the interconnectedness of the social totality and in which "magical" explanations persist still (naive transitive).[82] *Conciêntização*, as the process through which critical consciousness is attained (i.e., a deep, contextual, historical, dynamic, holistic, active understanding of the world that recognizes the collective powers of human agency) is, for Freire, "always a utopian enterprise" and "is brought about not through an intellectual effort alone, but through praxis — through the authentic union of action and reflection."[83] The dialogic process of decodification is crucial here in creating critical distance between the mundane practices of everyday life and the new awareness emerging through reflection, in creating a space through which a new subjectivity can begin to articulate itself. As Abdul Janmohamed notes, through the collaborative process of decodification, learners "in effect become archeologists of the site of their own social formation; their new subject positions begin to cathect around the project of excavating and reading their own social and physical bodies."[84]

How does all this play out in the work of RS? Consistent with striving to "make openings for each other," cracks through which one can "tap into who people are," curriculum and pedagogy are conceived as archeological tools. Thus, the key to building community through liberatory pedagogy is "helping students *excavate* and reflect on their personal experiences" while also *tapping* other people's pain and other people's hope.[85] This enables learners to *dig through* childhood recollections, to *surface* memories of pain, joy, anguish, and transformation, to use these as a platform for *unearthing* and *tapping into* buried, repressed, and silenced stories, voices, memories and histories — and through the collective critical interrogation of all that has been uncovered — to flex their utopian

82. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 75; Freire, *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, 17–19; and Ira Shor, *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 126–127.

83. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 77–78. It is important to note that the categories of semi-intransitive and naive transitive consciousness were developed by Freire in the very specific context of Brazil in the 1960s, and were never intended to be taken as universally applicable stages of consciousness through which people supposedly pass. It is better, perhaps, to consider elements of "magical," "naive," and "critical consciousness" as coexisting in varied and fluid forms and of *conciêntização* as a continuous ongoing process. See Peter Roberts, "Rethinking Conscientization," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 30, no. 2 (1996): 179–196. It was precisely because the concept and process had become widely misunderstood that Freire abandoned the word *conciêntização* in 1987. He later tells us, "I never abandoned the comprehension of the process which I had called conscientization, but I gave up the word." See Freire, Escobar, Fernandez, and Guevara-Niebla, *Paulo Freire on Higher Education*, 46.

84. Abdul Janmohamed, "Some Implications of Paulo Freire's Border Pedagogy," in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (Routledge, 1994), 248.

85. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 55, 111.

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imaginations and open up a transformative sense of possibility.[86] This is achieved through dialogue understood, not reductively or mechanically as a method, but rather dynamically as a relation constructed and enacted through various strategies of decodification. These include:

- *Neighborhood mapping*: A strategy for uncovering and unveiling material conditions of existence and for developing a language through which lived experiences can be named. For example, using math to excavate local data on racial profiling, the distribution of public services and liquor stores, mortgage lending, neighborhood displacement, the geography of school funding and investment, wage distribution, political representation, life expectancy, and so on. Learners engage with various mathematical concepts and techniques as they dig beneath and decipher data relating to their own communities, thus gaining a fuller understanding of the circumstances that surround them.[87]
- *Textbook detectives*: A strategy for nurturing critical literacy, working with, against and beyond standardized curriculum resources. Textbooks from major publishers are used as a mechanism for uncovering bias, distortion, stereotyping, silences, gaps, and aporias. With the Christopher Columbus story, for example, a whole series of questions are posed to the standard curriculum literature: what is omitted, what motives are given to Columbus, who does the book root for, how is this done, what pictures do the illustrations paint, why do the books tell the story as they do, who in contemporary society benefits from this?[88] This is a process of decodification through which learners dig, uncover, and unearth whose stories are told and whose stories are silenced.[89]
- *Dialogue journal*: A strategy for "talking back" to texts and materials while making links to lived experiences. Students make notes on one side of their journal and write questions, reflections, and provocations on the other side. For example, keeping a dialogue journal as classic fairy tales

86. Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, and Wayne Au, eds., *Teaching for Black Lives* (Rethinking Schools, 2018), 163–170; Annika Butler-Wall, Kim Cosier, Rachel Harper, Jeff Sapp, Jody Sokolower, and Melissa Bollow Tempel, eds., *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality* (Rethinking Schools, 2016), 34–35; Christensen, *Reading, Writing and Rising Up*, 32–33, 169, 182–184; and Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, 4, 11, 108.

87. See, for example, Gutstein and Peterson, eds., *Rethinking Mathematics*, 175–180; Watson, Hagopian, and Au, eds., *Teaching for Black Lives*, 198–203; Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 94–95; and Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 84–90.

88. Bigelow and Peterson, *Rethinking Columbus*, 47–55; and Levine, Lowe, Peterson, Tenorio, eds., *Rethinking Schools*, 61–68.

89. For other examples, see Watson, Hagopian, and Au, eds., *Teaching for Black Lives*, 88–95, 132–136, 140–149, 150–159; and Butler-Wall, Cosier, Harper, Sapp, Sokolower, and Tempel, eds., *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality*, 63–71.

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are read alongside Ariel Dorfman's *The Empire's Old Clothes* reveals to learners the hidden curriculum at play in children's literature, and the ways in which dreams and desires, including their own, are constructed and manipulated.[90] Alternatively, keeping a dialogue journal in a science class while reading media reports about lead poisoning in Chicago, Illinois, and Flint, Michigan, helps students realize how chemistry is important to their own lives at the same time as raising awareness of the environmental devastation being wrought by corporate greed.[91]

• *Interior monologues and persona poems*: A strategy for tapping into other people's hopes and fears, dreams, and pain. Learners are invited to "try on" the persona of people in widely different social circumstances, writing an interior monologue or a poem seeking to imagine the thoughts of a character in, say, the history or literature curriculum. Learners share their writings in a circle, listening, feeling, and attempting a momentary entrance into another person's life. This encourages empathy as learners use their imaginations to humanize events, situations, and experiences. Storytelling through the eyes of others also helps cast light on history, not as destiny, but as contingent on choices made and actions taken at key junctures.[92] This helps frame a sense among students of "the future as unwritten, a field of possibilities, the outcome dependent, in part, on their actions."[93]

• *Role play*: A popular strategy for uncovering subjugated histories and memories, for revealing what is hidden, missing, and absent in textbooks and standardized resources, and for recovering stories not told — stories of terror, loneliness, abuse, exploitation, and oppression, but also of struggle and resistance.[94] In one role play, for example, learners are asked to take on the role of groups not invited to the constitutional convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1787 (including indentured servants, enslaved African Americans, free African Americans, women, and native Americans) in order to problematize the celebratory ways in which the constitution is presented in textbooks and to uncover the subjugated histories and voices of those excluded.[95]

90. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 8–13.

91. Watson, Hagopian, and Au, eds., *Teaching for Black Lives*, 219–227.

92. Bigelow and Peterson, *Rethinking Columbus*, 120.

93. Christensen, *Reading, Writing and Rising Up*, 211.

94. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 114–115.

95. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 63–69. For other good examples, see Watson, Hagopian, and Au, eds., *Teaching for Black Lives*, 99–107, 122–131; Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, 170–179; Bigelow and Peterson, *Rethinking Columbus*, 87–93; and Butler-Wall, Cosier, Harper, Sapp, Sokolower, and Tempel, eds., *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality*, 185–191.

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In the work of RS, then, one encounters the dialectical interplay of a curriculum grounded in learners' lives and a "curriculum of empathy," which puts them inside the lives of others.[96] Pedagogical strategies such as narrative writing and the read-around-circle place learners' lives at the center of the collective text of the classroom. Having located the heartbeat of the class, the educator then selects an object of study, the joint and collective decodification of which facilitates the excavation of hidden, submerged, silenced, and suppressed voices, and the tapping into of subjugated memories, desires, fears, and hopes. A pedagogical feedback loop then brings these unearthed voices, memories, and desires to bear on learners' readings of their own lives and experiences, expanding the "social imagination," constructing a more profound sense of the collective "we," and enabling learners to begin the process of articulating their own inchoate longings, yearnings, fears, hopes, and desires.[97]

This process is neither easy nor frictionless. Creating the conditions for the dialogic co-production of (dangerous) knowledge requires a lot of time, effort, and negotiation. In order for classrooms to become spaces of hope, through which utopian glimpses can be gained of the kind of society we could live in, classrooms themselves must become prefigurative microcosms of this new way of being and living. A dialogic relation means that learners must help co-determine the aims, content, and methods of the educational program, being remade as students-teachers working with the teacher-student.[98] The "democratic classroom" requires learners themselves having a meaningful say in how classrooms are organized.[99] In allowing students to lead classes, take responsibility, pose questions, and steer discussion, the teacher learns how to pose different questions and pose questions differently, shifting the parameters of the teacher-student relationship.[100] This does not amount to licentiousness, however.[101] What Freire referred to as "living the tension between freedom and authority," of directing the process of self-direction, requires a constant iterative process of negotiation and re-negotiation between teacher and learners.[102]

One key role for the teacher is mediating the effects of educational archeology, which can be unsettling, disturbing, and upsetting, provoking conflict,

96. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 53.

97. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 110. Jodi Dean might refer to this process as the reconstitution of individuals as a desiring, collective "we" through the naming of a lack. Jodi Dean, "Communist Desire," *The Idea of Communism 2*, ed. Slavoj Zizek (Verso, 2013).

98. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30; *Pedagogy in Process*, 106; and Au, *A Marxist Education*, 165.

99. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 163–165.

100. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 101.

101. Freire, *Pedagogy of the City*, 39.

102. Paulo Freire, *Letters to Christina* (Routledge, 1996), 149; and Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 34.

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arguments, and tears.[103] This is nothing to be shied away from. The unearthing of silenced voices, subjugated histories, and suppressed desires inevitably generates feelings of discomfort, disbelief, frustration, and anger. These surface in classroom interactions such that regular meetings are required to discuss conflicts through the lens of race, class, gender, sexuality, fairness, and justice.[104] The work of RS serves to normalize taboo subjects (e.g., racism, sexism, transphobia, imperialism, exploitation, oppression) and the tensions and conflicts emerging from their discussion are viewed as part and parcel of a process of healing.[105] As Christensen notes,

> Classroom community isn't always synonymous with warmth and harmony … Politeness is often a veneer mistaken for understanding, when in reality it masks uncomfortable territory, the unspeakable pit we turn from because we know the anger and pain that dwell there … real community is forged out of struggle. Students won't always agree on issues; the arguments, tears, laughter, joy, and anger are the crucible from which a real community starts … discord — when paired with a social justice curriculum — can give birth to community.[106]

According to Rebecca Tarlau, critical pedagogy has developed three key criteria for assessing if, when, and how liberating educational processes are taking place: (1) a dialogic *form* that sees teacher and learners interrogating an object of study together in order to co-produce new knowledge, (2) a curriculum *content* that takes the knowledge and experiences of learners as the starting point, and (3) an animating aim and *purpose* "to connect marginalized groups and students to an alternative hegemonic project."[107] In the following section, I seek to outline how the process of educational archeology (which encompasses criteria 1 and 2) is built upon in order to connect students to a transformative utopian project (criterion 3).

Transformative Hope

Hope looms large in the work of RS. There is an explicit mission to transform classrooms into "places of hope" and to work collectively on developing "a curriculum of hope."[108] References to nurturing, inspiring, and providing sources of hope abound. All of which is unsurprising, perhaps. "Hope" has become an imperative within educational policy discourse such that to be a student without it (or to be a teacher, a school, or a district who is not committed to instilling it) is interpreted as something like moral failure.[109] Those working within RS, however,

103. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 76–80.

104. Ibid., 166.

105. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 138.

106. Christensen, *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, 5.

107. Tarlau, "From a Language to a Theory of Resistance," 385.

108. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 4; and Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 41.

109. Darren Webb, "Education and the Construction of Hope," in *Theories of Hope: Exploring Alternative Affective Dimensions of Human Experience*, ed. Rochelle Green (Lexington, 2019), 131–154.

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possess a nuanced understanding of hope that largely evades policy makers and school administrators. For "hope" is neither a singular undifferentiated experience, nor an unmitigated good. It is a socially mediated human capacity experienced with varying affective-cognitive-behavioral dimensions. Different individuals and social classes, at different historical junctures, embedded in different social relations, enjoying different opportunities and facing different constraints, will experience hope in different ways.[110] What I argue here is that the work of RS seeks to overcome the ways in which schooling operates to privatize young people's hopes, and strives to build on the critical hope of students so that this critical hope becomes transformative.

Within contemporary public schools, the proper objective of hope (that towards which young people should be striving) is increasingly framed in terms of good grades, a good college, a good job. As David Levine notes, "Schooling is thus reduced to a privatized journey toward personal prosperity and prestige."[111] Against this privatized mode of hoping — in which "to hope" is to possess an individual goal and the self-perception that one can produce and navigate plausible routes to its attainment[112] — RS seeks to nurture hope in its transformative mode. The characteristics of transformative hope were captured well by Freire when he declared,

> One of the most important tasks of critical educational practice is to make possible the conditions in which the learners, in their interaction with one another and with their teachers, engage in the experience of assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias.[113]

Taking as its objective a positively annunciated utopian goal, transformative hope comprises a consciousness that human beings are self-organizing and self-determining historical agents and a confident belief in the transformative power of collective action. Confronted with a world of poverty, suffering, and degradation, what hope demands is instrumental, goal-directed social praxis. Animated by "utopian hope" as "engagement full of risk," "the people assume the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and recreating the world."[114]

110. Darren Webb, "Modes of Hoping," *History of the Human Sciences* 20, no. 3 (2007): 65–83, https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695107079335; and Darren Webb, "Pedagogies of Hope," *Studies in the Philosophy of Education* 32, no. 4 (2013): 397–414, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-012-9336-1.

111. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 129.

112. This is the definition of "hope" offered by the late Rick Snyder, often referred to as positive psychology's hope guru. This understanding has proved influential, as the ideas of positive psychology have seeped into public schooling. A whole series of measures and interventions have sought to increase levels of "hope" (as measured by a short individual differences questionnaire) among school and college students. See C. R. Snyder, ed., *Handbook of Hope: Theory, Measures, and Applications* (Academic Press, 2000); and C. R. Snyder, Diane McDermott, William Cook, and Michael A. Rapoff, *Hope for the Journey: Helping Children Through Good Times and Bad* (Westview, 1997).

113. Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, 45.

114. Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 41, 72.

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How does one nurture transformative hope within K–12 public schooling? Freire tells us that a "draft project" or "pre-project" emerges in and through the process of denunciation, which is then "concretized" as a viable annunciatory project through praxis.[115] This is instructive for understanding how RS approaches the task of inspiring and cultivating hope. The process of educational archeology that "cracks open students' lives" can unleash pain and rage as the various pedagogical strategies tap into sources of injustice and validate students' experiences.[116] This brings with it, of course, the danger of foregrounding hopelessness, a danger taken seriously across all of RS's publications.[117] But educational archeology also unearths, uncovers, and brings to the surface buried desires, subjugated dreams, and suppressed visions, all of which can serve to evoke and "nourish our hopes."[118] Indeed, "Uncovering submerged desires is crucial for grounding hope in the possibility of social transformation."[119] Individual and collective acts of resistance, struggle, defiance, strength, and hard-won victories are thus selected as objects of study for textbook detecting, dialogue journals, interior monologues, persona poems, and role plays. Just as importantly, students are encouraged to excavate and mine their own lives in order to locate moments of joy, beauty, defiance, solidarity, and change, thus linking their own desires and sense of agency to the history of wider struggles.[120]

What emerges from this is the "pre-project" referred to by Freire. Phrased differently, educational archeology grounds a *critical* hope. Critical hope is underpinned by a feeling of lack, by the sense that something's missing, born in the darkness of the lived moment as a *No!* to the current world of oppression and degradation. Hope in this mode is experienced as restless, passionate indignation, and is directed toward the negation of the conditions giving rise to profound injustices (i.e., the negation of the negation).[121] The process of educational archeology unleashes the passionate indignation characteristic of critical hope while also bringing to the surface a series of previously suppressed desires and dreams that highlight both present lack and the possibility of another world. What educational archeology does not do, however, is give clear shape to this other world, which remains somewhat vague, fragmented, and inchoate. For Freire, then, it is only through praxis that this pre-project becomes concretized as a viable annunciatory project.

115. Ibid., 71–72.

116. Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, 33, 108.

117. See, for example, Watson, Hagopian, and Au, eds., *Teaching for Black Lives*, 51–57; Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 98; and Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 96–99.

118. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 118.

119. Watson, Hagopian, and Au, eds., *Teaching for Black Lives*, 196.

120. Bigelow and Peterson, *Rethinking Columbus*, 115–122.

121. See Webb, "Modes of Hoping"; and Webb, "Pedagogies of Hope."

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I mentioned earlier that the prefigurative classroom acts as a site of immanent praxis. "Democratic" or "social justice" classrooms operate as spaces through which transformed social relations are enacted — safe spaces that allow for honest and open expression, egalitarian spaces characterized by relations of respect, dignity, care, trust, reciprocity, and collaborative decision-making. They are thus spaces that both enable the elaboration of a draft pre-project and partly constitute its concretization. The work of RS takes the project of utopian annunciation one step further, however. True, the co-production of new knowledge through dialogic strategies of decodification is in and of itself "a transformative act" through which students "see that history is not inevitable, that there are spaces where it can bend, change, become more just."[122] Nonetheless, "students need to act on their new knowledge" and "take that possibility for transformation out of the classroom and into the world."[123] This is the activist dimension of the social justice classroom, concerned with "empowering students to take risks which will help promote social justice" and linking struggles within schools to broader struggles throughout society.[124]

Transformative hope as a confident belief in the power of collective action becomes real in its enactment. Students and teachers together become dreamers of possible utopias when they act concretely to realize them. Social action is thus central to RS' conception of curriculum and pedagogy. To provide one brief example here, an interdisciplinary school-to-work program in Milwaukee took as a topic the concept of density, exploring its complexity and relevance across different situations. The object of study stimulated a group of high school students to research the density of toxic sites in the county, leading to the discovery of an oozing site of toxic oil contamination. With the support of teachers, students began taking videos of toxic sites, collecting soil samples, giving presentations to parents, entering into discussions with the oil company responsible for the contamination, and giving interviews to the local press. As a consequence of the students' actions, the oil company was forced to pay penalties for violating hazardous waste laws, and the students themselves worked with environmental movements and agencies to monitor the cleanup process.[125] In addition to learning a great deal about science, math, geography, and civics, another important thing learned from this process was that collective action can effect real change. While only a small step, what the experience also did was help sharpen the students' and teachers' social imagination, giving just a little more concrete shape, in and through praxis, to the collective project of annunciation.

Linking the work done in classrooms to broader movements of social struggle is a crucial component of the curriculum and pedagogy of RS. The need to

122. Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, 5–6.

123. Ibid., 8.

124. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 165; and Levine and Au, "Rethinking Schools," 78.

125. Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 144–147.

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move beyond the classroom, to make alliances, to forge connections, to become involved in and help enact a politics of transformation, is emphasized time and again.[126] "Visionary" and "activist" are two of the key dimensions of social justice teaching-learning.[127] The prefigurative classroom and the pedagogical strategies of decodification described earlier "provide students with moments of hope, with glimpse of the kind of society we could live in."[128] They also link students with legacies of resistance and defiance and forge a solidarity with contemporary struggles. Through involvement with movements such as Black Lives Matter, with climate justice activists, with queer groups, with union organizing, with the struggles of indigenous peoples, the pre-project emerging through classroom practice slowly becomes concretized, the inchoate contours of new ways of living and being — first glimpsed through the surfacing of repressed and subjugated dreams and desires — take clearer shape, and the critical hope born of a *No!* to systems and processes of degradation becomes a transformative hope directed toward the imaginative and material reconstitution of society. Thus, the ultimate aim of RS is to nurture a transformative mode of hoping that enables us collectively to "exercise our radical imaginations, and work together to build the world we need."[129]

Conclusion

In a volume titled *Dystopia and Education*, a succession of writers trace what they see as the dystopian aspects of schooling in the Anglophone world: constricted curricula, mechanized learning, standardized high-stakes assessments, Orwellian systems of surveillance and discipline, a pressurized and censorious culture of audit, performance management and institutionalized bullying, the dehumanization of educational interactions, and the stunting of children's potential for human flourishing, all operating within environments that often resemble crumbling prisons.[130] One of the contributors concludes that "the beauty of possibility has been taken from school."[131] In the work of RS, one finds a concerted effort being made by a movement of K–12 teachers to hold on to that beauty of possibility. It is refreshing indeed to encounter myriad "resources of hope" in a social sphere more

126. Bigelow and Peterson, *Rethinking Columbus*, 142–159; Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 162–183; Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, and Miller, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 2*, 115–154; Levine, Lowe, Peterson, Tenorio, eds., *Rethinking Schools*, 191–234; Butler-Wall, Cosier, Harper, Sapp, Sokolower, and Tempel, eds., *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality*, 301–366; and Watson, Hagopian, and Au, eds., *Teaching for Black Lives*, 16–81.

127. Christensen, Karp, Peterson, and Yonamine, *The New Teacher Book*, 82–84; and Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 4–5.

128. Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, 62.

129. Butler-Wall, Cosier, Harper, Sapp, Sokolower, and Tempel, eds., *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality*, 34.

130. Jessica Heybach and Eric Sheffield, eds., *Dystopia and Education* (Information Age Publishing, 2013).

131. Kerry Freedman, "An Aesthetic of Horror in Education," in *Dystopia and Education*, ed. Jessica Heybach and Eric Sheffield (Information Age Publishing, 2013), 10.

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typically characterized by a sense of Sisyphean futility. The resources themselves, and the emphasis placed on classroom practice, provide a corrective to much of the theoretically labored and sterile work undertaken in the field of critical pedagogy. Welcome too is the humility and reflexive self-awareness permeating the pages of the movement's publications as the teachers/writers admit to things that could have been done better or otherwise.

My focus here has been to draw on Freirean theory in order to offer some reflections on the practice of the movement. Conceptualizing classroom activities as pedagogical strategies of decodification, and framing these in terms of the dialogic process of educational archeology, the co-production of dangerous knowledge, and the nurturing of transformative hope, helps illuminate the ways in which the movement finds utopian possibility blooming in that most unpromising of grounds — public schooling. At the same time, the concrete practices of RS help illuminate and give shape to elements of Freirean theory that can often feel opaque. Our understanding of dialogue, decodification, directing self-direction, a curriculum grounded in the lived experiences of learners, radical hope, utopian pedagogy, (and more), are all enriched by an engagement with how they operate on the ground in RS. More than this, in fact, the work of RS gives life, vitality, vibrancy, and clarity to theory in ways that render it accessible. In contrast to the abstract, jargonistic, impenetrable theory that bell hooks warns against — theory as "a kind of narcissistic, self-indulgent practice" — theory is deepened and given meaning through RS's critical interventions in the world.[132]

My particular interest in this article has concerned the foregrounding of the utopian within the work of RS. Utopia is conceived by movement activists as *both* immanent prefigurative practice within the institution of the school *and* a vision of a reconstituted social totality, a vision that becomes concretized through praxis as students engage with social movements beyond the classroom and give clearer shape to the inchoate utopian dreams, desires, and yearnings that emerge through the process of educational archeology. This is a bottom-up collective process of utopia-building that is rooted in concrete, practical classroom activities. As is emphasized time and again by movement actors, the work of RS is "both visionary and practical."[133] To suggest that the present juncture feels unpropitious for such a utopian endeavor may seem like an understatement. However, as Freire says, "social transformation is made by lots of small and great and big and humble tasks," and classroom practice is one of them.[134] As for the limits of transformative tactics and strategy, these can be discovered only by testing them. In the work of *Rethinking Schools*, one finds a sustained attempt being made to discover the untested feasibility lying beyond the limit situations we currently face — a matrix of systems, structures, and forces that certainly constrain and

132. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 64, 69–70.

133. Au, Bigelow, and Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, 4.

134. Freire and Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 46.

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fetter transformative action, but should not be regarded as an impenetrable wall marking the end of all possibilities.[135]

135. See Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 71–75.

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