

Contesting With Feeling: Childhood in and Through Public Education

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Abstract: In public education forums people create and contest implicit theories of learning and society. We study a community education council meeting where participants address mask mandates, selective admissions policies, and school violence. We used critical discourse analysis to trace how speakers mobilized emotional configurations about children to guide emotion participation. To influence councilmembers' votes, speakers contested which children should get to learn, under which conditions, and toward what futures. By invoking ideas such as innocence and rationality, meeting participants engaged the racist underpinnings of U.S. society in calling for individualist or collectivist approaches to learning in schools.

Introduction

Public education forums are key sites where the public engages policy and contributes to decision-making, contesting far more than the children and their learning they are ostensibly there to support. For example, organized groups have contested racist and colonialist national history, self-determination, and bodily autonomy by advocating particular policies at the local school board level. Since discourse in and about public education decision-making offers implicit theories of learning and society (Philip & Sengupta, 2021) that index powered contestations, attuning to collective action in such forums is a necessary part of studying politics and learning (Curnow & Jurow, 2021; The Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). In the New York City (NYC) Community Education Council (CEC) meeting we analyze here, participants articulated visions of the future by sharing multivocal positions for the public record and to shape decision-making. As part of sensemaking, *emotional configurations* are constructed *in* and form learning targets *of* the practices of activism (Vea, 2020). With the potential to garner support through “productive cultivation and unethical manipulation” (p. 340), emotional configurations and *guided emotion participation* are powered practices that shape which (and whose) contributions are taken seriously. Toward this end, we ask: *How do participants in a public education meeting create and mobilize emotional configurations about children and childhood? With what consequences?*

Situating powered practices of public education engagement

We analyze the situated activities of participants in a CEC meeting to highlight how participants contested meanings as part of racialized histories (Curnow, 2022). As Curnow describes, “these ongoing historical processes assign power to people in dominant groups via institutions and practices, enacted by people in daily life” (p. 4). We focus on how participants engaged histories of racialized power relations in the emotional configurations they mobilized and whose arguments were taken up or dismissed. As Vea (2020) describes, *emotional configurations* are “situated and reciprocal interrelationships between feeling, conceptual sense-making, and practice (including linguistic practice) that give emotion social meaning” (p. 315). How emotional configurations are oriented, what racialized and powered meanings such configurations draw from, and what futures they move toward, matter. People learn to participate in valued emotional configurations through *guided emotion participation* where “experienced practitioners engage in a provision of opportunities, along with normative pressure, for others to participate in particular ways of feeling” (p. 332). Deliberately or not, the participants’ calls to action engage racist histories and practices in US public education. We illuminate three interrelated concepts that participants frequently relied upon (childhood, innocence, and whiteness) in relation to whom they have historically served.

First, *childhood* is a contested construction. Racial ideologies guide *which* children are recognized as being innocent, by whom, and in which moments. Such constructions of childhood have consequences for minors and non-minors, such as distributing the negative impacts of carceral systems like increased surveillance and

policing (Meiners, 2016). As Meiners (2016) highlights, however, simply “claiming nonwhite youth as children or juvenile does not allow for critical exploration of the conception of innocence... [nor] unpack the underlying nexus of other associations tied to childhood.” (p. 62). Therefore, attending to who is allowed to be a child and thereby granted innocence, victimhood, and/or safety can illuminate the power relations (re)produced in public education forums. Second, the workings of *innocence* in political appeals show how “morally ennobled victimization has become the necessary precondition for determining which grievances we are willing to acknowledge and authorize” (Wang, 2018, p. 278). Determining who is innocent, victimized, or safe implicates some people as not-victims and, therefore, as deserving of harm. Tracing attributions of innocence, victimhood, and purported deservingness of safety reveals the ideological positions underlying the emotional configurations that participants mobilized in their testimonies, because “the invocation of personal security and safety presses on our affective and emotional registers and can thus be manipulated to justify everything from racial profiling to war,” (p. 282). Finally, innocence has long been connected to *whiteness* in the U.S., and racialization has historically been predicated on determining who is and is not eligible for the privileges and protections of whiteness. Racialization, however, often happens without explicit articulations of race. Bonilla-Silva (2018) illustrates, for example, how “contemporary racial inequality [is explained] as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (p. 2) through abstract liberalism, an ideology that draws on ideas of political and economic liberalism (e.g. equal opportunity and individualism). It allows participants to contest whether public education should serve public or private interests without explicitly mentioning race or racism, enabling the (re)production of racial inequality. Considering which children are entitled to innocence makes visible the histories of power indexed by emotional configurations. Specifically, we attend to how conceptions of childhood are dynamically constructed and contested; how ideas about innocence distribute harm in racist, carceral, capitalist, and neoliberal systems; and how racial ideologies sustain and conceal this distribution of harm.

Research methods

NYC schools are divided into 32 community-based districts, each with an elected CEC that shares decision-making with the Department of Education (DOE). Since 2020, CEC meetings have been held virtually, recorded, and posted for public record. We analyzed a recording of a 2022 CEC meeting from one of NYC’s largest and most socioeconomically diverse districts. This 5+ hour meeting included public speaker sessions where the public signed up to speak for two minutes each and sessions where councilmembers discussed and voted on resolutions: a non-binding resolution on making facemasks optional (masking was mandatory in schools at the time); a student-proposed school name change; sibling and borough priority for school admissions; and academic screening for school admissions. Many participants also spoke about a middle school which had recently been the subject of high-profile news stories about instances of violence. We take this meeting as a case of participants in public education forums mobilizing emotional configurations toward contested futures. We analyzed turns of talk to “identif[y] the ways that social actors express—through their language and material activity—the relations between feeling, sense making, and practice” (Vea, 2020, p. 238) in relation to powered histories. We began with five speaker turns that elicited strong emotional responses from the research team; for example, one turn began with a measured and calm tone and shifted to something one researcher described as leaving her heart pounding. Noticing asymmetries in how these turns framed issues led us to select additional sets of turns that spoke to the same “issue” within the meeting to highlight implied symmetries in their framing while illuminating the actual asymmetries of consequences (Philip et al., 2018). Informed by critical discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005), which attends to how language constructs power, dominance, and control, we engaged in cycles of group viewing sessions, individual analysis and memo-writing about specific turns and about connections and contrasts across turns, and group discussion of hotspots and themes. In total, we closely analyzed 14 turns from parents, council members, and other community members. In what follows, we use pseudonyms for all speakers and schools.

Findings

Meeting participants mobilized emotional configurations about children that engaged powered relations in education in four ways. First, participants constructed *safety as a condition for children’s learning*, using fear and a desire to protect children from fear to persuade the council. Some participants focused on children’s safety from physical violence, while others emphasized safety from emotional discomfort. Safety is treated as an important condition for learning and yet mobilized to argue for practices that erode public safety, particularly for children and communities of color. This reproduces long standing associations between “public safety” and white safety, and it reinforces neoliberal notions of responsibility in civic institutions such as schools. Second, some participants *imagined troubling futures for imaginary children* if their preferred policies were not enacted. Three speakers described how hypothetical children would suffer from eliminating academic screening, from failing to implement carceral policies, or from making facemasks optional. Although these speakers worked towards different ends,

each of them (and others) engaged in rhetorics of care that promote whiteness to guide emotion participation. Third, participants recruited unspecified “data” to lend *an air of rationality* to false equivalences and righteous arguments. The participants guided emotion participation by implying parity between the consequences of illness and consequences of preventing illness, and by appealing to “data” to argue that, for children, the latter were more dangerous than the former. Finally, participants contested who falls within the *dynamic bounds of childhood*, and therefore innocence, as a precondition to granting victims time, attention, and policies in their favor. Next, we elaborate on a constellation of turns in which speakers did the latter while engaging schooling practices with racist histories and consequences, forming competing conditions for learning.

Contesting (the significance of) who counts as a child

Mobilizing protection for white childhood

Isabella, who had recently participated in a news segment about violence at M.S. 100, positioned herself and her spouse, Esteban, as parents of an innocent child victim of violence. She mobilized fear by framing M.S. 100 as especially violent and “not normal,” dynamically bounding the protections of childhood. In describing their son’s experiences, Isabella omitted his actions, portraying him as a passive recipient of unprovoked violence. She reported they transferred schools to protect him from peers who “have stolen [his] innocence with all the words he’s learned at that school, in the playground, in the bathrooms, in the hallways, in the stairways.” She animated this “profane” language with a racialized shift in voice as she named a Snapchat group called “yo we on drugs.” Isabella positioned these students as like-adults who “weigh the same as [she does],” and their actions as threatening “safety issues.” By contrast, she indexed her son’s adult-like actions (e.g. traveling to school alone) as examples of “independence.” The pair shared their histories of migration to NYC from Bolivia and Spain, claiming that their “multicultural” background along with “liv[ing] in Hell’s Kitchen” made them “not racist” and thus accusations “taking out the race card” were unwarranted, ultimately positioning themselves as victims. “We’re taxpayers here...” she says; “If the DOE is not going to defend our children... and you’re not going to keep a safe environment, and you’re not going to put NYPD [Police] in there... then allow the money to follow the kids...” Isabella appealed to *their* innocence from racist practices while making a racialized appeal to white victimhood for their son. She spoke of “defend[ing] the children,” but the context of her argument and demands for increased policing and voucher systems (which are known to harm communities of color, especially Black communities) makes clear that this does not mean all M.S. 100 students. Those whom she constructed as violent are not offered the defense that childhood offers some children—overwhelmingly those racialized as white. Through appealing to relational feelings bolstered by institutional practices of whiteness and white victimhood, Isabella and Esteban sought to guide participants’ emotional participation in their favor.

Refusing innocence

Naomi, the M.S. 100 PTA co-president, spoke before Isabella in the meeting but responded indirectly to Isabella’s participation in a recent public news story and took a distinct approach, refusing innocence. As co-president, Naomi saw participating in educational decision-making as a practice that encompasses “the good, the bad, the beautiful, and it’s hard,” in contrast to Isabella’s participation only in this particular situation. Her position as a woman of color is relevant, too, in her efforts to name and shift racist practices. Naomi drew on the more full set of activities and debates within educational decision-making and activism to claim that the actions of those who painted M.S. 100 as especially violent and unsafe “reek[ed] of fear and racism.” In contrast to guiding emotional participation toward reproducing racist stratifying practices, Naomi declared that “children make mistakes,” framing the claimed incidents of violence as within an expected realm of mistakes that schools are meant to support a community in working through. From the position that the school is a “true microcosm of New York City” that “represent[s] every child in [this] district” and all “640 students at M.S. 100,” she was proud of students, parents, teachers, and the principal “doing the hard work, the equitable work, the fair work, the work that everyone in [this] district and New York City asked [them] to do.” She invited participants to “please lean in and ask us how you can help us doing this work.” By positioning members of the community as doing their jobs to support each other, Naomi offered an emotional configuration that moves away from litigating innocence, deservingness, or victimhood to instead consider what the school community might need. Attending to how Isabella’s, Naomi’s, and others appeals were taken seriously, or not, makes apparent which emotional configurations were valued. For example, later in the meeting Naomi responded to a councilmember who referenced her prior turn, contrasting his claims of racism in calling for screening policies with her not having her “truth [in naming racism] honored.”

Who is a victim? (Il)legibility of (mother’s) suffering

The enforcement of two-minute turns was inconsistent. Many speakers, including Isabella, spoke for over two minutes, which became contentious. Mia presented a poem about how students’ suffering due to the intertwined

pandemics of COVID and structural racism should be met with compassion, not merit-based screening. After two minutes, Council President David Rumford repeatedly interjected to end Mia's turn. Councilmember Carmen Ramirez pointed out that "we let someone go over two minutes [previously]," and Councilmember Brooke Donegan countered that "that was the mother of a victim." She differentiated between Isabella, whose racialized constructions of innocence were heard as coming from "a mother of a victim," and Mia, whose speaking about structural racism (and about her child with long COVID) was not granted similar status. Councilmember Ramirez pushed back that Mia "is also suffering," but the council did not recognize her plea. Contemporary discourse on mothers of/as victims allows white mothers to parlay their grief into advocacy; Black mothers, however, face the burden of humanizing their children and litigating their innocence (Carew, 2018). So whose children are victims? Which mothers get to move others with their stories, and in what ways? How does this work in relation to children subject to peer-imposed violence, whose 'innocence' has been stolen and who are victims, while children subject to institutional violence are not? Our analysis shows how relying on appeals to innocence and victimhood to guide emotion participation continues enduring racist relations.

Discussion

Throughout the meeting, participants invoked powered relations in configuring and guiding emotion. Speakers contested which children should get to learn and under which conditions to influence votes and differentially allocate particular futures. Participants' invocations of ideas like innocence and rationality engaged the racist underpinnings of US society while calling for individualist or collectivist approaches to learning. Furthermore, by inconsistently wielding the two-minute turn limits, councilmembers legitimized particular claims about who was seen as victims, innocent, deserving of safety, and whose suffering mattered, and thus, who was not: or, which relationships between feeling, meaning and practice the council valued. Feeling is a powerful part of making appeals. As Vea (2020) cautions, given "the dual capacity of bodies both 'to affect' and 'to be affected,' guided emotion participation entails a form of participation that is not under fully autonomous control" (p. 340). Authoritarian groups increasingly use public education forums to advocate for racist practices, often through rhetorics of protecting children's innocence (e.g., the weaponized white motherhood of Moms for Liberty). Attending to which children are and are not included in constructions of childhood within public education forums illustrates how emotional configurations (re)produce powered relations. Participating in collective action *against* oppressive forces within public education forums, then, might require cultivating different sorts of emotional configurations than those that rely on the terms of childhood, innocence, and whiteness. What might we learn, for example, from Naomi's expansive construction of community or Councilmember Ramirez's explicit naming of suffering, and how might we mobilize emotional configurations toward different ends?

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