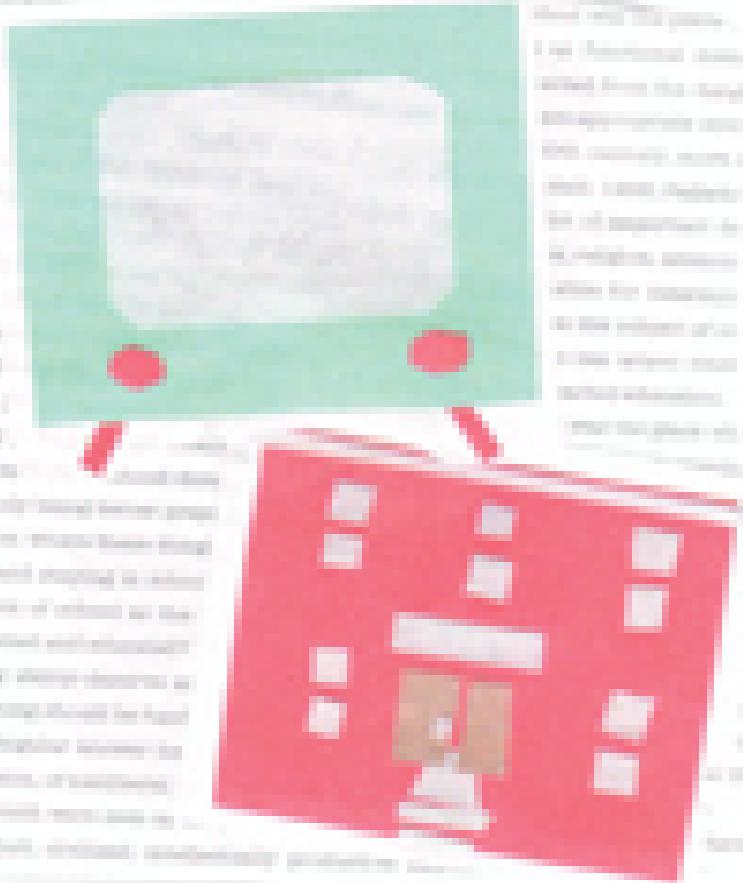


# MEDIA EDUCATION GOES TO SCHOOL

## Young People Make Meaning of Media & Urban Education



Allison Butler

## Introduction

### Media Education Goes to School: Gathering Together the Threads

In July 2008 I received the following text message: “I went to freshmen orientation & loved every second of it. It’s such a solid fit for me, I feel like I totally made the right decision. I’m so excited for fall!” Popcorn<sup>1</sup>, a young man of mixed African heritage sent me this message as he prepared for college and while it is difficult to ascertain emotion from a text message, I felt that this was a genuine expression of positive feelings with an underlying subtext of bravery. For the first time in his life, Popcorn would leave home, depart the protective confines of familiar New York City and intimate friends. For the first time since the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, he would enter classrooms in an unfamiliar environment, would know none of his teachers or his fellow classmates. As a young black man who grew up with great economic difficulty in an urban environment, it is statistically unlikely that Popcorn will succeed in college. If he does, he is statistically likely to succeed in legitimate employment beyond his peers who dropped out of high school or graduated with no plans to attend college (Allen 1996; Eckholm 1996; Steele 1999; Western 2006). On this July weekend, neither Popcorn nor I were thinking about statistics, but rather about the joy he was feeling about his upcoming university adventure.

Popcorn is a member of the first graduating class of Lincoln Square High School (LSSHS), a public school in New York City, part of new school reform and designed, in part, to ensure that students such as Popcorn – known more for his statistical and demographic position than for his bright and complex identity – do not grow invisible within the largest public school system in the nation. A strategy of new school reform is to reach out to young people prior to them becoming lost in the system and provide a rigorous pedagogical environment that works to move them beyond their negative environments and help foster their commitment to school. The current wave of new school reform, jumpstarted in 2002 with Mayor Bloomberg’s takeover of the public school system, dismantled many of the large, failing comprehensive high schools and increased the quantity of small, theme-based non-academically selective schools that drew underprivileged youth from throughout New York City to intimate settings with approximately 100 students per grade and administration-controlled discretionary budget.

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A major tenet of the movement to increase the development of small schools is the inclusion of a specific theme to provide a consistent, continuous thread of organization to students' experience of their education. The opportunity to include a theme alternative to the standard core curriculum opens doors to innovative learning experiences. LSHS's theme is media and it was the initial intent of the school to use analysis and production of the media to foster community awareness and activism.

Including media studies in secondary school in more than one-off or tangential projects provides space for radical and socially important curricular developments. Generally speaking, it is not until university that American students have the opportunity to begin any formal, critical study of the media, yet they are audience and consumers of media for the majority of their lives. As pecuniary and ideological consumers, young people in underserved environments consume the messages of the media, which, most often, construct them as negative, criminal or otherwise subservient bodies in the larger landscape. An individual like Popcorn—dark skinned, from Harlem, living with a single mother and extended family members—is most easily categorized/labeled as a drug dealer, rap star, athletic hopeful, or some such position that emphasizes the physicality of his body and the labor done to extricate himself from his negative social environment. At age 18, that Popcorn has not decided what he wants to do with his life—but knows he wants to complete college, take as many exciting courses as possible and pursue his art/photography/writing/filmmaking dreams in some capacity—is perfectly ‘normal,’ but does not fit the media or social image of who or what Popcorn is to become.

The inclusion of alternative curricula, such as media studies, in the secondary school system can act as an intervention, bridging the gaps between the messages and stories young people receive as audiences, their critical understanding of the media and the ways in which young people make meaning of their educations as a training ground for their entry into adult society. Media education<sup>2</sup> cannot solve the myriad problems of a struggling urban environment, but implementation of the concepts of media education into secondary schools can provide young people with the skills of critical inquiry and critical analysis and thereby develop multi-dimensional education experiences where young people are interpellated into an active learning environment, including increased awareness about their roles as audiences, scholars and participants in the culture industries. Media education can be a catalyst for change within the urban school system. The inclusion of media

studies in secondary schools can be a radical, innovative break from traditional pedagogy, especially standardized testing, that further subjugates young people in underserved environments. This book locates its foundation within critical media and urban education studies and is opposed to the increased reliance on neoliberal orthodoxies that promote the individual, private enterprise and the free market above the betterment of the community, as a way to explore actual work done to include media education principles in a New York City public school. The *actuality* of media studies inclusion is fraught with struggle and difficulty, which this book will cover in detail.

In the official, public language of the Department of Education, small, theme-based schools read as nearly flawless. In actuality, it is a deeply problematic initiative based largely on political rhetoric that ultimately does not thoroughly serve the needs of underserved youth. While a few select schools may succeed in the face of systemic adversity, most do not. This book looks at one particular school that had the opportunity to include a rigorous media education across its curriculum, but failed at that inclusion. The media theme was diluted at best and served to replicate the students' already negative social and political positions. To explore this, I draw from my two years working at LSHS and, more importantly, from the understanding and meaning making of Popcorn and his peers. I intend this book as a place where media scholars pause, reflect and examine what is learned when media education principles are envisioned for—but not rigorously incorporated into—urban education.

Young people are positioned in a conflicted space in both media and education. They are sophisticated audiences, readers and—in an age of increasing user-generated content—producers and distributors of media, yet are not formally invited to think critically about their media experiences. Furthermore, it is students who experience most directly the changes made in schools, but who are often the least informed or taught about the changes in their education. To work within this space of multiple conflicts, I privilege the stories told by students about how they understand and make meaning of media and media education in a small-school setting.

The primary data in this text are drawn from interviews with students from LSHS who are participants in the project of theme-based education within new school reform. Overall, their stories reveal that the study of the media is not included in their school, they do not possess the tools to either speak critically about the elements that constitute media education or speak authoritatively about the organization and intent of their school as part of

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new school reform. Ideas of activism and radical pedagogy are mobilized in the present as cultural and social moments that fail students and serve to replicate their already disenfranchised positions. Professionally and personally, I am an advocate of media studies inclusion in secondary education. Using the culture industries as a foundation, media education rejects no pedagogical avenue as invalid for inquiry and neither punishes nor celebrates young people's choices but rather works to critically inquire the influences and implications of those choices within a tightly structured ideological and capitalist culture. Media education is neither value free nor politically void of influence and the integration of it into a highly bureaucratic system is grounds for conflict. However, if not cautiously integrated, media education will fail both the school and the students and ultimately work to reinforce oppressive pedagogical aims.

This book explores how media education is uncomfortably enfolded into one start-up school and how adolescent identity development, in connection to school and learning, is revealed through participants' awareness of school reform. Media studies and media education theories are mapped alongside theories on urban school reform, specifically the changes made in the New York City public school system, to examine the diluted success of theme-based education in one specific public school. This book represents a unique contribution to the field of media learning because it originates in the classroom and tackles knowledge and impact of school reform from those most closely involved: the students themselves.

### **Intersecting Frames of Knowledge Production**

#### **Media Education**

Media education asks students to critically analyze and produce media texts as a way to learn about both the broad landscape of the culture industries. Critical media education draws from young people's knowledge of and role as regular audiences and readers of media and without punishing or diminishing their pleasures, works to develop more thicker and greater nuanced awareness and understanding. In the United States, 'media education' means many, often disparate, things. The National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy provided the foundational American definition of a media literate individual as one who "can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media" (Aufderheide 1993, p. 1). The fundamental objective

of media literacy is to foster “critical autonomy in relationships to all media” (p. 1). There is no singular thread of media education development in the United States. Today, most scholars agree on two things: all students deserve some form of media education in their primary and secondary schooling and any media education curriculum should include elements of analysis and production. These agreements manifest in multiple ways and often through disaggregate epistemologies. As we grow into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and digital and new media increase rapidly, especially the popularity of social networking sites and increased user generated content, media education scholars work to expand and refine the definitions and implementation of media education. Increasingly, young people are directed to explore their own production (including original work and alterations of existing work) and distribution of media. This is pointedly discussed in Jenkins (with Puroshotma, Clinton, Wiegel & Robison 2006) white paper on media education, the most recent comprehensive research on American media education. Closer examination of young people’s production and distribution role deserves greater attention within media education.

Media literacy education occupies contested space in American pedagogy. Although the United States exports a great deal of electronic media across the globe, it does not make formal space to educate its own populace (Tyner 1998). Indeed, a major reason why other countries, with less indigenous media, educates its youth is precisely *because of* the massive American influx of media (Buckingham 2003). The major tenets of media education in the United States, traced more thoroughly in Chapter One, alternate between protecting young people from the dangers of the media and celebrating their use and manipulation of the media. Within this spectrum, media education works “to develop students’ literacy and critical thinking skills so they will become lifelong autonomous learners” (Goodman 2003, p. 48). Media education makes students into more formally informed media producers which bolsters “the ‘passive’ knowledge that is developed through critical analysis” with the “‘active’ knowledge that derives from production” (Buckingham, Grahame & Sefton-Green 1995, p. 12). The literature of media education is well-organized and neatly presented; its intentions and suggestions are clear and easy to understand. However, the reality is much less organized: My goal is to look at media education in the reality of the school day and all its messy, unclear parameters.

## **Cultural Studies and Critical Pedagogy**

A fusion of cultural studies and critical pedagogy, with their shared inquiry into the everyday experiences of subjugated bodies and respect for multiple understandings of texts and possible fields of study, inform the organization of this text. Postwar Britain witnessed the fusion of youth and media cultures, forming a scaffold for cultural studies. The media, according to Hall and Whannell (1965) “provide youth with the information and ideas about the society into which they are maturing” (p. 20). Early cultural studies scholars did not see the media as imparting their will on youth cultures, but rather inquired into *how* young people choose *what* media and what they *do with* their media of choice. Rather than resigning themselves to the belief that young people engage ‘too much’ with electronic media—a quantity and quality of time that is never unequivocally defined—cultural studies scholars instead explore young people’s choices and the pleasure they garner from their choices (Buckingham 1993a). Cultural studies examines identity development and social awareness within cultures deeply and regularly influenced by, and influent upon, the media industries. Foundational work in cultural studies that examined youth cultures focused on how young people self-identified and grew into their identities within the broad, intersecting social, political and media cultures in which they lived (Corrigan & Frith 1976; Hall & Jefferson 1976; McRobbie 1976; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1977). Young people actively participate in their own project of identity development, and do so as part of the larger environment in which they live and grow. Therefore, cultural studies focused on young people’s process of ‘becoming,’ seeing it as a continuously developing, multidimensional project. Hall (1996) argues that identities are not “‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (p. 4). Selves cultivate within the project of identity development, which is a political endeavor that shifts with changes in environment, technology, education, and many other social categories.

A particular concern within this project is the intersection of ethnicity, gender and social class as sensitive bits of identity development, especially when situated within the experience of school, which young people are told is the way to improve their social and cultural capital, yet is often the place where they are regularly reminded of what they lack. Much research on young people of color defines them as deficient, not meeting the qualities of

privilege associated with white, middle class status and media representations reinforce this belief (Leistyna 1999; Lipsitz 1998). Urban youth of color negotiate both their own identity and intellectual development concurrent with the knowledge that they are subjugated by the larger society that externally labels them as deficient based on their skin color or geographic location. Urban youth of color are compared against an unachievable middle class white standard. The cultural norms of urban families, in contrast to, and punished by, the middle class white standard, include single-parent households, extended family relations, early entry into the labor force, non-dominant literacy expertise and less time in lower quality schools. Young people growing up in this environment who contend with these conflicting messages must learn to negotiate an identity path not supported by the larger, dominant society.

A major institution of dominant society within which young people regularly engage is school. The institution of school divides youth of privilege from underprivileged youth early in age and perpetuates those divisions throughout the tenure of schooling. Critical pedagogy works to make explicit those boundaries and to explore alternate ways to construct education. Critical pedagogy works to undo adherence to a traditional, test-based pedagogy that favors students whose social and cultural capital readies them for a test-taking environment. The foundational voice of critical pedagogy, Freire (1970/2000) argues the oppressed are divided bodies, discouraged to work for their freedom, or with each other in community and encouraged to accept their oppression, which, over generations, settle into an uncomfortable, but expected and accepted status quo. In large part, the oppressors and oppressed internalize expected behaviors, therefore, as Freire writes, “as long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically ‘accept’ their exploitation” (p. 64). Individual oppressors might not be aware of their role in the process of dismantling the self-authority of the oppressed, reducing them to things, labels and stereotypes. Freire warns, “the oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. In order to regain their humanity they must cease to be things and fight as men and women” (p. 68). The system of oppression needs to be undone in order to enable individuals to make change; critical pedagogues work within the educational environment to foster such change.

Critical pedagogy works diligently to undo bodies and release minds from the tangle of things. Inspired largely by Freire (1970/2000) and intersecting avenues of cultural studies and critical theory, critical pedagogy

works to complicate the educational terrain as a site for social change. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2007) write that critical pedagogy is an approach to education “rooted in the experiences of marginalized peoples; that is centered in a critique of structural, economic and racial oppression; that is focused on dialogue instead of a one-way transmission of knowledge; and that is structured to empower individuals and collectives as agents of social change” (p. 183). In his exploration of the ritual culture of schooling, McLaren (1999) discusses culture as informed and organized by “rituals and ritual systems” which are imprinted in schools; school culture is “informed by class-specific, ideological and structural determinant of the wider society” (p. 5). Critical pedagogy exposes and works with the inequalities within schools, schooling, the students within and critiques the deficient educations received by poor urban students of color.

Critical pedagogy itself runs the risk of becoming formulaic, of resting too securely on the divisions it made explicit. Kincheloe (2007) writes the debate between “a democratic, inclusive, socially sensitive objective concerned with multiple sources of knowledge and socioeconomic mobility for diverse students from marginalized backgrounds” and the “standardized, exclusive, socially regulatory agenda that serves the interest of the dominant power and those students most closely aligned with the social and cultural markers associated with such power” must serve as a caution against complacency (p. 12). Both too easy and too tempting is continued pointing at the same problems rather than working through them or working to see emergent problems. To advance critical pedagogy beyond rehashing a debate is to point to the latest site for oppression, the adherence to neoliberal philosophies that create a greater gulf between the points of debate.

## **Neoliberalism**

An ideology commonly understood among the larger American population is the belief in freedom. Freedom is generally understood to be a good thing, especially if its opposite is understood to be captivity. No American would willingly agree to captivity and modern-day post-industrial power structures do not explicitly, willfully engage in practices of captivity. Yet, rarely is ‘freedom’ clearly defined and when it is, the actuality and pervasiveness of ideological ‘captivity’ becomes that much clearer. Freedom is the strongest illusion of neoliberalism, paving the way to a seamless consent to hegemony.

Within neoliberalism, freedom is a specific thing, the pointed possession of increasingly fewer economic barons. Klein's (2007) detailed exploration of 'disaster capitalism,' what she defines as "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities," serves 'freedom' in its new context (p. 6). Freedom is understood to be for and in the service of a particular slice of the population. More layers need to be undone in order to see both the definition of freedom and a clear distinction from its antonym, captivity. Disaster capitalism serves the interests of neoliberalism, encouraging those in positions of power to maintain their power through increased subjugation of the oppressed.

In the age of neoliberalism, freedom is the purview of private enterprise, connected to the free market and values the role of the individual. David Harvey's (2005) in-depth dissection of neoliberalism discusses the incomplete, uneven spread of 'freedom.' He writes, "the assumptions that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking, and it has long dominated the US stance towards the rest of the world" (p. 7). Essentially an economic position that values free market enterprise, the deregulation of institutions and the dismantling of social services, neoliberalism serves the economic elites, reflecting the "interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital" (Harvey p. 7). Neoliberalism sparks a physically subtle, but ideologically strong, captivity, one that publicly embraces average individuals while privately destroying the structural foundations and social services on which they rely. Harvey writes that neoliberalism "makes it all too clear why those of wealth and power so avidly support certain conceptions of rights and freedoms while seeking to persuade us of their universality and goodness" (p. 38). The support by those in wealth and power is clear because a small capitalist class have unadulterated power in institutions necessary for the maintenance and well-being of industrialized and post-industrialized society. Freedom, therefore, is marked by an increase in capital and control by the few, and captivity can be understood as an invisible bind felt by an increasing number of people who are bifurcated from each other in the absence of community and their own decrease in capital and control.

What Harvey (2005) and Klein (2007) do not explicitly discuss in their dissection of neoliberalism is the impact on youth cultures or education. Grossberg (2001) writes about "trends and practices" that hurt young people,

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such as cuts in social services, decreased federal dollars for education, increased fears of failures of education, increased belief that incarceration of youth is a proper course of action and decreased respect for the civil liberties of young people, all directly related to the spread of neoliberalism (p. 117). Because these cuts focus specifically on young people, they are forced into compliance by their absence of control or contribution. Neoliberalism treats all bodies as docile, demur to the control of the economic power barons, and therefore chips away at active, productive ideas of citizenship. Grossberg (2001) argues the actions of neoliberalism speak and act the language of hatred of, and discontent toward, youth in its devaluation of labor, community, education and absence of social support for youth development.

Neoliberalism washes over the nation in the form of decreased social services and increased interests in private enterprise; caught in the space where increase meets decrease resides public schooling. Private enterprise, in the guise of increased monies spent on testing and surveillance, meets public enterprise, whose legend involves teaching all young people under the belief that education is the most surefire route out of poverty and toward a better, more fulfilling active citizenship. Giroux (2008) argues neoliberalism has unabashedly changed the face and intent of public schools, turning them into prison-like environments that contain and train children as regimented members of an increasingly militaristic society. He writes, “schools were once viewed as democratic public spheres that would teach students how to resist the militarization of democratic life … now they serve as recruiting stations for students” (p. 44). Poor students in urban schools are ‘recruited’ into a regimented life through a regular reminder that they are less worthy than their more economically privileged peers. Neoliberalism operates most powerfully in its invisibility (Giroux 2008; Klein 2007). The task for those opposed to the influx of neoliberalism is to make it visible.

### **Knowledge Production Made Tangible**

#### **Understanding the Environment: Lincoln Square High School**

The New York City Public School system has over 1500 schools serving just over 1 million young people (New York City Department of Education, *About us*). New York City is the largest public school system in the United States, serving a diverse collection of young people, the majority of whom are of African and Latino heritage, from lower working class and impover-

ished economic backgrounds. Despite the lofty rhetoric of radical pedagogy, the structures of the school system carry more weight than individual schools. LSHS is part of new school reform which includes a collection of newly formed, small schools designed to reach out to underprivileged youth and whose curricula is focused around a primary theme. The goal of small, theme-based high schools is to ensure that no student is forgotten or allowed to be invisible and that all students will have a competitive chance at their college and career of choice. The overarching theme of small, theme-based education is to encourage students to work their way out of their socially and economically negative circumstances through education.

This rhetoric, however, does not translate to the reality of these schools, or to LSHS in particular. The demographic makeup, geographic environment of the school, and the actual space in which the school is housed, are constant reminders that, despite changes in language and organization, LSHS students are primed to replicate, not break out of, social and political inequalities. The majority of LSHS students are African- or Latino-American; there are a small number of white and Asian-American students. Many are from immigrant families and are the primary English speakers in their families. Many students will be the first to graduate high school and the first to contemplate, let alone attend, college. The majority of LSHS students live at or below the poverty line and the school is eligible for Title 1 funding, which entitles students to free or reduced lunches and free breakfasts. Most students travel from the South Bronx, Washington Heights, Harlem or Inwood to the Midtown school. Many live in public housing projects and a small, but significant, number have been in and out of the shelter, foster care and Child Services systems. A significant number of students enter the 9<sup>th</sup> grade at Level 1, meaning they are functionally illiterate, operating below grade level.

With a population just under 400 students, LSHS exceeds national standards in negative areas of public health and well being. Currently, one in 100 American men, primarily African-American and Latino, are in prison (Liptak 2008; Western 2006). In the 2007-2008 school year, at least six male students were permanently or temporarily discharged from school while they were imprisoned. Three young men faced significant sentences for armed robbery and weapons possession. For the first time since 1991, teen pregnancy is on the rise (Altman 2008; Harris 2007). During the 2007-2008 school year, five girls were pregnant or gave birth and several more girls were suspected of handling unwanted or unplanned pregnancies on their own, without school help. The New York City Department of Education ex-

pects a 90% daily school attendance rate (New York City Department of Education, *Empowerment Schools*). In the 2007-2008 school year, LSHS had abysmally low attendance, with an average of 74%; in unofficial estimates, 30% of students come to school late. Official attendance is only taken one time a day, so students who show up late are marked present, irrespective of arrival time and there are no accurate estimates on lateness.

LSHS is located in a geographic area typical of New York City: as extreme wealth moves in, it pushes the extremely poor further to the edges. The school is located in a literal and figurative intersection between art, commerce and urban blight. It is settled uncomfortably between Lincoln Center, a series of housing projects, the West Side Highway and Columbus Circle. Students traveling by subway, bus or on foot jostle for space with wealthy Upper West Side residents, gourmet markets and boutique shops, and with performers, laborers and students of Julliard, the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic, and the New York City Ballet. Given the amount of development on the West Side, they also regularly dodge construction laborers erecting high-rise apartments buildings. Because of the construction and a slight valley in the road, even on the sunniest days, the school building rests in permanent shadow.

LSHS is one of seven schools housed in a concrete building. Many schools, but not LSHS, have uniforms that range from color requirements to specific school-monogrammed shirts. In a building with seven schools, a uniform develops school unity as much as it serves to separate and categorize students from different schools. The building used to house one large school but because of a variety of problems, it was shut down and phased out year by year while small schools were phased in each new school year. The building is a severe concrete and glass square, partially surrounded by an equally unforgiving outdoor plaza. Part of the plaza is enclosed by a wire mesh fence; the front of the plaza that skirts the main entrance has a series of once brightly painted, box-like structures that serve as makeshift seats and tables. Four floors are above street level and there are two levels of basement classrooms. Each of the seven schools occupies a floor or series of hallways in the building. The students in each school are not allowed in any other school's space, though roughly 3000 students enter and exit through the same doors at staggered start and end times to the school day and all students share the cafeteria, gym and auditorium spaces. All students must enter through scanning, where their bags are examined through X-rays, they must remove belts and any metal objects, their bodies are randomly scanned and their belong-

ings may be searched. Per New York City rules, no students are allowed to bring in any electronic devices, including cell phones and iPods.

LHS occupies one basement level in the building; there is no natural light and the cement walls have a vertical wale, reminiscent of prison bars. The basement often leaks or floods, there are mice, and because of its location under and next to the building's ventilation system, one classroom may be insufferably hot while the one next door might be frigid. To combat the prison-like environment, classrooms are painted bright colors, however, with the neon lighting and lack of natural sunlight, these rooms appear more garish than welcoming. No student has anything positive to say about the physical surroundings.

At LHS, in theory, study of the media is employed in specific media courses and across the school's curriculum. In actuality, this is not the case. For two years, I worked to develop the media education curriculum in both specific media classes and across the core courses. I am confident that, due to forces largely beyond my control, I failed wholeheartedly at this effort in part because the standards of success were inflexible and did not embrace alternative or critical pedagogies. I entered LHS with the naïve belief that I could develop the media education curriculum despite systematic restraints. This book and its organization grew out of inspiration from that failure.

Media education could not be thoroughly integrated at LHS for internal reasons, including a top-down, disjointed, disorganized management with high teacher turnover as well as systemic reasons, including an absence of teacher training in media education that left teachers—and ultimately students—unprepared. There was never a clear trajectory of media classes at LHS. In its first four years, there was a smattering of disorganized, piece-meal classes under a 'media' umbrella, which will be discussed in Chapter Four. Many of the classes did not last for an entire school year due to multiple teacher turnover within the school year. The individuals hired to teach these classes were not licensed teachers, but rather professionals and artists in their fields. In part because there is no licensure in media education, hiring professionals in the field initially appears like an innovative idea, a way to connect schools with communities. However, the media professionals lacked pedagogical training and the school system lacked formal space for legitimate hiring of non-licensed classroom based individuals. What resulted was little consistency within 'media' courses, no formal development of the curricula and no scaffolding of knowledge. The inconsistent inclusion of media studies at LHS dually mirrors the inconsistency in the students' lives and

their inability to clearly articulate the qualities behind what are promoted as the unique aspects of the project of new school reform.

The core subject teachers had no formal media education training and if they included media studies into their courses, it was predicated on their own colloquial knowledge or creative thinking. Teachers were also not trained in how to expand their subjects to enfold the theme, so even teachers interested in expanding their curricula often did so in a disjointed manner. This is no fault of theirs: there is no formal professional development within the Department of Education on theme integration and there is no formal, streamlined media education training. Indeed, what I learned when I first began organizing the threads of this research was that a major gap in the students' experience was their teachers' lack of media knowledge. Chapter Seven discusses this gap further and suggests ways to remedy it in future research.

Media education integration could also not succeed for systemic reasons beyond the walls of LSHS. Mayoral control of the school system and subsequent new school reform happened quickly without corresponding attention paid to the enacted changes, leaving schools unprepared to follow through with the attention to detail needed to make actual changes successful. Control of the school system by a mayor with a corporate business background means that changes occur through the lens of neoliberalism. New school reform occurs within a neoliberal ethos and small, theme-based schools with alternative pedagogy uncomfortably intersect with increased pressure of high-stakes standardized testing and regimented school environments. Despite attempts at radical change in the school system, conservative values still take precedence, which translates to continued systematic failure of economically underserved and socially disenfranchised youth. In a neoliberal political environment that defends itself on personal choice rather than community responsibility, small, theme-based schools are destined to fail. Given the rigid strictures of the public school system and the pressures marked by an increasingly competitive local, national and global marketplace, the intellectual desires of students are often neglected in favor of testing, statistics and citywide performance numbers. If a school must adhere to the broad expectations of city and state standards, a theme that does not "fit" the standards cannot be fully integrated.

Despite the changes made to the New York City public school system that rhetorically made more room for alternative curricula, the actual unfolding of new school reform revealed schools not so different from their pre-reform iteration. Admittedly, schools grew smaller and teaching staffs grew

larger, but there is no causal evidence that smaller schools and smaller classes are automatically better. In times of economic, social and political upheaval, schools and school systems cling to traditional tropes of success, such as standardized test scores. Standardized test scores, however, reveal little about the daily reality of particular schools and generally reveal a school's ability to train students how to takes tests, rather than what they have learned as students. The bulk of this book focuses on how young people make sense of their own school and how that may speak to understandings of the system of schooling and how it impacts struggling urban youth.

### **Understanding the Methods: Qualitative Data Gathering**

The inspiration for this book grew from my two years at LSHS. I felt consistently and continuously hobbled by the system and despite my academic training in media education, felt at a loss when trying to integrate media education curricula. However, my feelings of frustration paled in comparison to the frustration and ultimate apathy experienced by many students. On too many occasions to count, I watched students resign themselves to the bureaucracy of the system and heard them say, with defeat, "Oh, you know how it is at *this* school." Yes, I did, but not from the perspective they lived through. They had learned to anticipate and accept their school would let them down. I could certainly see and often empathized with their frustration, but I did not know *how* or *what* they knew about their school and the larger institution of school. Ultimately, at the end of the day, end of the school year and the end of my tenure at LSHS, I was able to return to the safety of the academy and my relatively privileged existence. For the most part, I live a life where I am rarely insurmountably subjugated and where I am often given the opportunity and space to respond to my critics. While there were days that I felt like a victim of the system within the walls of LSHS, with perspective, I very much was not. The young people within the school and especially those who participated in this research articulated their thoughts, understandings and meaning making on media, media education and their experiences with education. Though their answers were often unsophisticated, misguided and absent critical autonomy, they were articulate, clear and revealed their frustrations and anxieties. For the most part, however, they sourced their frustrations and anxieties to themselves rather than to the system or any authoritative space. How do young people do this? Because I argue that new school reform manifests as rhetoric rather than action, I look closely at those

words used to describe young people and explore how young people understand and make meaning from this language.

To better understand what young people knew about the media and media education within their school and how it fit into the larger puzzle of new school reform, I engaged in semi-formal interviews to illuminate the students' understanding of the media and their experiences with media education and engaged in participant-observation of the development of the school to contextualize the participants' words. As a researcher/scholar within the school, I was able to explore the students' lives from a multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary perspective, which Chapter Three discusses in detail. Qualitative research does not claim to answer questions about how schools are the way they are or why public education has taken the paths it has taken. What these data do is paint a picture of how certain students feel and make meaning of their educations, particularly their experiences with alternative curricula in new school reform and how this experience may prepare them for the future, at a moment in time.

### **Layout of the Book**

In order to best understand how these threads have come together, I look at them inside the LSHS classroom and trace from this space and where they might travel beyond the school's walls. Chapters One and Two frame the media education trajectory within United States' secondary schools and map out particular moments in the history of urban schooling, specifically the monumental changes in the New York City public school system. How has media education been conceptualized as part of the education system? Why is media education not in more schools across the country? There are multiple ways to approach the study of the media and Chapter One focuses on key definitions of media education and attempts to include media education into secondary schools in the United States. Special attention is paid to the different epistemological approaches to the study of young people and media in the United States.

There is a vast literature on the history of American schools and I do not profess the audacity to trace the history of American urban education in one chapter; instead, I look at key moments in time that illuminate how a school like LSHS came into being, beginning with hobbling of the urban school model by the success of the post-WWII suburban school; the 1968-1969 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes that restructured New York City public

schools; and Mayor Bloomberg's 2002 takeover of the school system that re-centralized the system and made space for new school reform in its current incarnation. Along the way, key snags in urban education are explored as intimately connected to neoliberal orthodoxies that pervade the school system and the young people educated within its walls.

To apply the literature to the real lives of students who live beyond the pages of a book, Chapter Three discusses in detail the methodological approach taken in this study. Because I worked in the school for two years, I was offered a unique view of the development of the school, including all those bits of life that have little if anything to do with pedagogy. I was also familiar with the majority of my participants prior to conducting formal research with them and argue that it was precisely because of our familiarity that they trusted me with their stories. What are the ethical and methodological implications of familiarity with participants? Had I been an 'outsider' entering the field, I would not have been afforded such an intimate glimpse into their lives.

A premise of qualitative methodology, particularly data gathered from interviews and in a quasi-ethnographic style, is that data deserves to speak for itself. The job of the scholar is to provide space to illuminate salient details. Therefore, the bulk of this text is made up of the stories told by the participants about their experiences in school. Much research has been done on the treatment of youth of color living in disadvantaged environments. I believe, however, that it is important to continue telling these stories, especially as the social and political climate continues to change in ways that further subjugate these young people. How do individuals, negatively labeled by the larger society as somehow degenerate, understand themselves?

Irrespective of the attraction of a theme, New York City Schools still must adhere to larger city, state and national standards that measure school and student success. This limits the time and intensity that can be devoted to the theme, especially a theme that moves beyond the traditional core course curriculum. Chapter Four discusses how, if at all, the study of the media is integrated into LSHS. While 'the media' are an intimate and regular part of most Americans' everyday lives, rarely is formal space made for the study of the media in a secondary school environment. Yet, the intention was to weave media education thoroughly throughout the school. Chapter Four shares the media studies course trajectory in the first four years of LSHS and shares the participants words how they understood the inclusion of media in their school.

How does the study of the media fit into the larger frame of new school reform? Chapter Five discusses the value of small, theme-based schools and how the participants understand theme-based education. For those students who experience small, theme based schools, how do they understand these schools? Schools have long been a way to measure the nation's success: if schools and students are doing well, it follows then that the nation must be doing well. I also explore how the young people understand the labels 'underserved' and 'inner city' that are applied to them. Young people know negative labels are applied to them and when their schools replicate these labels, they are provided with few options to break out of their negative circumstances. In subtle and explicit ways, they learn they are less important and less valuable to society than their socially and politically advantaged peers. The subjugation students experience outside of school is replicated, not eradicated, inside the walls of their school. For the most part, the participants do not see themselves as underserved, inner city bodies and are not able to critically define these terms. Lastly, this chapter explores how the participants critique their school, specifically the interpersonal relations formed with faculty and administration and their overwhelming frustration with the surveillance and 'safety' mechanisms employed in their school building.

Both 'adolescence' and 'schools' are not separate from the environments in which they are found and are not immune to media representations. Chapter Six explores how the participants make meaning of adolescence and education from both the media's representations of these social categories as well as their own experiences as adolescents attending an urban school. In a school that is supposed to teach media education, the participants further reveal the absence of critical media knowledge in their acceptance or rejection of media messages about school, urban environments and teenagers. This chapter also shares the reflections of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade participants, the first graduates, on the breadth of their experiences with new school reform.

LHS fails at media education integration. As Chapter Four shows, the integration of the media was piecemeal at best and with little cohesion or scaffolding of skills. This need not be the case. Despite the seemingly insurmountable barriers facing schools, teachers and students, media studies can be implemented in schools. Chapter Seven explores what needs to be done in order to integrate media education into school and revisits understandings of critical media literacy and multiliteracies to frame both short-term shifts in the current classroom incarnation as well as creates a foundation for neces-

sary radical paradigm shifts in urban education. This chapter is not meant as a panacea, but rather as a space to begin to imagine real change and its possibilities as envisioned through alternative pedagogy.

This introduction and the majority of this text paint a grim picture. We are living in globally grim times and, when examining the broad landscape, it is difficult to make the argument that reorganizing the urban school system is an acute need. The temptation to brush aside the struggles of a school year, even a school day, to examine broad-scale global concerns is one that is resisted in this text. I believe the face of global struggle represents an opportune moment to study the urban school system. Productive change occurs when we are fully aware of the environment in which we are working. Therefore, Chapter Eight exits Lincoln Square High School to examine how the school fits into its larger community as a way to mark avenues for change. This book is not intended to solve the problems of the American urban public school system, but rather to make the portrait of the current environment explicitly clear so that a foundation for change can be made.

### **Why this Book Matters**

First and foremost this book matters because the urban youth who attend school today enter the workforce or academy woefully under-prepared. We are not living in a time where the under-prepared have the luxury of being fixed later and neoliberalism is making the strictures of entry to labor and university that much more restricted. Young people who are not provided the invisible social cues that bolster success, those who do not inherit any degree of influential social or cultural capital, are primed for and will replicate failure.

Alternative curricula, such as media education, invite students to enter into potentially unfamiliar topics and material with a degree of expertise. In part because young people are versed in a variety of media and possess a great deal of colloquial expertise on their media of choice, they can speak about the media with a great deal of authority. This authority can be both transformative and translated across the curricula and provide a foundation for transparent learning. Providing students with a place to exercise their authority—where they may know more than their teacher—teaches lessons about responsibility and power. Media education does not belong ‘only’ in media literacy and production courses; a powerful media education curriculum weaves its way through the entire curricula. The media are not discrete

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pieces, mutually exclusive from other aspects of our life, therefore education of them should be inclusive and across the core curriculum.

Students may be experts in the media, but they are not pedagogical experts. The job of the teacher is to provide a proper foundation and execution of material. However, there is no space in American teacher education for media education licensure. This needs to change. This book illustrates what happens when an innovative idea is enacted without proper foundation. No teacher at LSHS was trained in media education or knew the basic fundamentals of integrating media studies into their course plans. There are materials available for teachers, however, if it is not deemed important to make time and space for these materials, they will gather dust and do no one—teacher or student—any good.

The integration of media studies across the curriculum demands radical change in the seats occupied by the students, in the front of the classroom, in the principal’s office and in the offices of those who determine the development and deign what is important in the curriculum presented to those students in their seats. This book works to introduce the current environment, to articulate places where specific change is needed and to develop the beginning of a conversation on change.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> All institutional, proper names and some identifying information have been changed in order to protect participants' confidentiality. Youth participants chose their own cover names.

<sup>2</sup> In Great Britain, where the formal study of the media has a lineage clearer than in the United States, the preferred terminology is 'media education.' In the United States, the preferred terminology has been 'media literacy,' but there is no singular definition of what is meant by either 'media' or 'literacy,' nor clarity of where, how or to what extent this term should be learned. Through the exploration of the literature, I defer to the authors' terminology, however I prefer the more inclusive and active 'media education' and use that term when discussing my own work.