

Student disengagement as/and unfairness: Re-reading schools through photos

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Abstract

Four diverse English-speaking Montreal public school students who self-identify as being disengaged with their schooling experience constructed photo essays telling the story of their disengagement in school. Analyzed in conjunction with photo-elicitation interviews and fieldnotes, we find that youth are involved in a struggle against systemic unfairness as they enact and embody their own life goals and identities, which are firmly grounded in future visions of well-being, while rooted in educational histories of failure and unfairness. Responding to calls by some engagement researchers for social-ecological frames (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), this article re-theorizes engagement as being less about the individual, and more about the nestedness of the individual and school within an ecology shaped by social unfairness, namely, income inequality.

Keywords: *engagement, disengagement, fairness, unfairness, justice, photo essays, youth development*

Introduction

Student engagement or engagement is a construct in the field of educational research that has received rising prominence in the last 20 years. While researchers typically divide the construct into domains for statistical analysis, the term is also used broadly to refer to the degree to which a student is involved in the process of schooling, for example, involvement in class activity, school attendance, and feelings of belonging. Politicians and pundits gravitate to the construct for its ability to explain everything (Eccles & Wang, 2012), and even educational researchers have been identified as using the term in

its broader sense, pointing to “increasing engagement” as one of the primary goals of educational reforms (Vallée, 2016; Losen, 2015). This paper aims to advanced research against the continued psychologizing of the individual through its implicit suggestion that the problem with schooling is that the student is disengaged (Fine & Cross, 2015). In light of the growing public awareness of vast social inequality, a symptom of a global neoliberal era, in which the school and student are nested, a counter-narrative of youth perspectives of disengagement from school reveals critical analyses of unfairness and injustice. Rather than teasing out the differences between dimensions of engagement, this paper conceptualizes engagement from a bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in the task of addressing the upstream causes of educational inequality. Such a framework is not new; Lawson and Lawson (2013) have called for a more socio-ecological framings of the construct. To this end, this paper presents an exploratory qualitative research study that seeks to understand disengagement from youths’ perspective. It finds that disengagement is related to the fracture between youth struggling to become their future self (e.g., having agency, being employed, owning a home, having a partner and children) and the systematic unfairness that clouds their aspirations. In this sense, disengagement is a sobered response to a blunting of *aspirational capacity* (Appadurai, 2004) . Youth, embedded in a social, cultural, and historical context, are engaged in the co-creation of the meaning of disengagement. With a view of a future self-rendered with work, family, and education, youth struggle through daily instances of unfairness. Dis/engagement is perhaps best understood from perspectives of in/justice or un/fairness applied to each nested level of the human ecology, and this paper aims to retheorize student dis/engagement as a proxy of fairness.

Review of literature

Indicators of educational attainment such as high school graduation and school dropout are strong predictors of future life course health and wealth (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006; 2012; Deaton, 2002; Lantz et al., 1998; Woolf & Braveman, 2011). And dropout is thought to be the final step in a cumulative process of disengagement from school (Rumberger, 2011). While research has historically talked about dropouts, many young people who leave school are more accurately the victims of school pushout (Ruglis, 2009; Tuck, 2013) and other related violations, such as the school-to-prison pipeline. In the act of *framing dropouts* (Fine, 1991), a neoliberal educational environment (Lipman, 2011) makes systematic dispossession (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) an act of individual failure; despite the sectors, systems, institutions and relationships that are crumbling all around. Or in the case of dispossession by

accumulation (Harvey 2005; Fine & Ruglis, 2009), the heavy investment – in testing, hollowed out curriculum, discipline, surveillance, security, behavioral interventions, diagnosis and assessment – in educational practices that presume deficit, damage, inferiority and otherness, that are rooted in raced, classed and gendered histories of inequity. Neoliberal education policy not only affects the quality, access, humanity and opportunities of schooling that are shaped by intersectional social forces and identities of race, class, gender, sex, class, ethnicity, religion, and citizenship; but also the life course as it relates to educational attainment. The *circuits of dispossession* that circulate through schools under national policies of neoliberal education produce inequities in health, criminal justice, social, economic and further educational outcomes (Fine & Ruglis, 2009). Every additional year of schooling sees a commensurate rise in life span and overall health and wealth (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006; 2012; Dow, & Rehkopf, 2010; Ruglis, 2009). Educational attainment and the pathway to health through its facilitation of employment (e.g., Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007) is even more critical as the workforce divides along lines of educational attainment. Acquiring meaningful work and a living wage are, now more than ever, dependent upon one's educational attainment (Goos and Manning, 2007; Autor, Katz, and Kearney, 2008). Neoliberal education policy is there a matter of national well-being.

The move to think of disengagement as related to unfairness becomes central to undoing the neoliberal subject, for it conceptualizes engagement in the domains justice and humanity (Young, 1990; Sen, 2009), thereby moving to understanding dis/engagement in students as something altogether different. Dis/engagement from school is not only in relation to engagement in other sectors of life, but is also about a response towards desire to learning. Here, dis/engagement as un/fairness decouples schools/schooling from education/learning. Dis/engagement as un/fairness is derived from the previous (and forthcoming) work of the first author in theorizing dropout by the same overarching framework. Ruglis (2011) writes on the biopolitics of school dropout as a framework for understanding why/how it is that students might *choose* to leave school, when school is a failure oriented, identity-corroding, health damaging space. Reframing school dropout as an act of resistance for/towards flourishing and learning interrupts the neoliberal project. Framing negative educational outcomes and constructs - school disengagement or school dropout - instead as embodied voices and collectives speaking for/of some place that allows some space of flourishing, desire, respect and dignity (Nussbaum, 2000; Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007; Wolff, 2009) – when that space is not school, a developmental context (Eccles & Roesner, 2011a,b) and identity forming institution (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2010) for youth.

Engagement

Engagement is defined by a diversity of conceptualizations and theoretical frameworks that affect the way engagement is understood and researched (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Traditionally, student engagement has been relegated to what happens in classrooms and the school (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), and has been described as having three dimensions: *affective*, *cognitive*, and *behavioral* (Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004). Engagement is malleable, represents a pathway to learning (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012), and is distinct from student's motivations (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Moving beyond formulaic conceptualizations of engagement has been the priority of recent researchers (e.g., Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Dupéré et al., 2014). In their review of the literature on engagement, Lawson & Lawson (2013) find that too much is lost in the reduction of dis/engagement to strictly linear-causal explanations. Rather, they propose a systems-oriented, social-ecological framework for understanding dis/engagement. Lawson & Lawson (2013) define engagement as “the conceptual glue that connects student agency [and] its ecological influences [to] the organizational structures and cultures of school” (p. 433). The theoretical shift away from a reductionist, elemental (Crick, 2012) approach to engagement can be understood as a recognition that the tendency to scrutinize the individual outside of the ecological system in which they are embedded, is insufficient to understand the significance behind what researchers call engagement. Instead, research on engagement must account for interactions of place, space and time.

This study conceptualizes engagement and disengagement (also referred to as *disaffection*) as separate continua (e.g., Skinner et al., 2008), and one not necessarily the inverse of the other. Dis/engagement are conceived of as related-yet-distinct, co-occurring constructs, and as both a process and an outcome. This is a desirable theorization considering that school non-completion and graduation are recognized as being the result of processes of school disengagement and engagement respectively (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). This paper explores the phenomenon of disengagement through photographs.

Fairness

Fairness is an abstract, fundamental psycho-social construct through which humans interpret the conditions, events, and relationships of their lives (De Vogli, Ferrie,

Chandola, Kivimäki and Marmot, 2007; Prilleltensky, 2012). Of centrality to this conception of fairness is the importance of relational quality among humans, and of humans and their environment. Humans interpret conditions, events and relationships through an embodied perspective that is grounded in the social. Oppression, marginalization, injustice and unfairness are all rooted in difference between social, economic, psychic/symbolic, and material realities. And youth in schools are no different. Unfairness in this context is not separate from other forms of marginalization and intersectionality. Experiences are inextricable from their intersectional standpoints and positionalities of race, class, gender, sex, immigration, dis/ability, housing, and ethnicity.

Conceptualizing dis/engagement as un/fairness instead aims to move towards an anti-neoliberal model of schooling that instead theorizes that such moves in education make any/all students for whom there is an expanding chasm between their desires for education and what neoliberal education serves up, as structural, material, symbolic, and developmental forms of unfairness. Like all disproportionate educational outcomes, students of color, students who grow up in poverty and/or foster care, queer and indigenous students, are all more likely to attend schools where they will experience more unfairness (ranging from high stakes testing to poor school buildings to access to less academic courses) which more often, gets coded as “student disengagement.”

Engagement literature subsumes fairness as a *facilitator* (environmental condition) through its connection to school discipline, curricular and testing policies (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Fairness is implicitly referred to in dimensions of (a) *affective engagement*, where it is spoken of in the context of relationships with teachers and peers, and (b) *behavioral engagement*, in its connection to “disruptive” behavior—which is debatably connected to students’ reactions to unfairness. Fairness is not very often measured on assessments of engagement or disengagement/disaffection, yet it is perhaps one of the most important mediators of dis/engagement because of its highly disruptive impact on well-being (Prilleltensky, 2012). Fairness is addressed in the concept of *critical youth engagement* (Fox, Mediratta, Ruglis, et al. 2010), which conceives a central part of youth engagement to be teaching, learning, researching and organizing for rights and justice, dignity and equity. Research also finds that involvement in social action against injustice, through youth “involvement in organizing was positively associated with sense of agency and youth civic and political engagement. Involvement in organizing significantly predicted school motivation, above and beyond the effects of gender, age, and grades” (Fox, Mediratta, Ruglis, et al, 2010, p. 644 on Mediratta, Shah & McAlister, 2009).

Based on research on fairness, the construct of fairness has a robust relationship with the emotional life of the individual, and almost always, fairness is primarily an expression of some relational self-other condition, or self-environment condition. Fairness has been researched in numerous fields including education (Vieno, Gini, Sanitinello, & Lenzi, 2011) organizational development (De Vogli et al., 2007), public health (Levi & Sidel, 2006), political economy (Sen, 2009), political philosophy (Nussbaum, 2006), and philosophy (e.g., ethics of responsibility, Levinas & Nemo, 1985), but less so in psychology (Prilleltensky, 2012).

What are the mechanisms or pathways by which fairness operates? Prilleltensky (2012) states that fairness is synonymous with *justice*, and refers to the “fair and equitable treatment of other human beings” (p. 9). By this definition fairness is a relational condition between the self-other. This paper employs an explanation of fairness as having elements of (a) recognition of an experience as un/fair, (b) disruptive emotions, or a physiological stress-response, arising at any point either before, during, or after a recognition of unfairness, and (c) most often is embedded in human relationship, with environmental and social conditions that can trigger the onset of the development of the stress response (see Shonkoff, 2010). If fairness entails a stress response, one must acknowledge the embodied nature of fairness. Fairness has been increasingly shown to have biological effects as embodied experiences of perceived unfairness produce short- and long-term negative health effects (De Vogli et al., 2007; Ruglis, 2009). Unfairness in the workplace has been found to lead to coronary heart disease (De Vogli et al., 2007). A study of Italian secondary students demonstrates the correlation between perceptions of unfairness with higher incidents of youth violence (Vieno et al., 2011). Youth who perceive unfairness in their relationships with peers, teachers, administrators, parents, and in nested levels of their ecologies (e.g., dilapidated public schools in close proximity to affluent private schools; political or cultural hostility) may be more likely to experience school disengagement.

Moving outward from the embodied experience of the individual, fairness is also approached from an environmental perspective. From this perspective fairness is related to the distribution of outcomes. Morton Deutsch (2006) says that fairness is synonymous with *social justice* or *distributive justice*. *Social justice*, writes Deutsch (2006), refers to a concern with justice at the level of society, or social environment, as it pertains to the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities, and privileges. Deutsch (2006) suggests that social justice is about distributive justice—or the equitable distribution of resources and outcomes.

Distributive justice is of primary concern to theorists of educational equality. While debate continues about how best to construct the benefits of schooling, there is agreement that schooling as it stands distributes benefits unequally (Meyer, 2014). The fair distribution of outcomes such as the school credential (diploma) is of deep concern (Fine & Ruglis, 2009). Yet the attainment of a high school diploma rests on a number of factors both inside and outside the schoolhouse walls. These multiple, mutually influential, nested contexts (e.g., family, community, workplace, nation) are equally undergirded by neoliberal inequity, or unfairness, and a range of educational practices inside the walls of schools work to impact the distribution of an educational credential.

In this paper, *neoliberal* refers to the ideology and economic practice that an unfettered free market is best able to provide for the needs of the populace, and by extension, where markets do not currently exist, there shall new markets be created (Harvey, 2005). As a result of this move, it renders individual lives and bodies as meaningful so long as they serve economic production, which then becomes the primary purpose of all institutions and neighborhoods and communities play out the front lines. Neoliberalism is a particular form of capitalism that rebukes government involvement in markets, save for the protection of private property and corporate rights, and which reifies and reproduces class, racial, ethnic and gendered injustice. Eschewing cooperation in favor of competition, neoliberal policies regard public education as a new market for expansion in the form of private schooling, and the private management of public schooling, for example, charter schooling. Under threat of private takeover, public schools respond to the pressures of neoliberalism by reducing curricula to the testable, reconfiguring themselves in response to competition, and conforming to a neoliberal, social efficiency (Labaree, 2005) purpose of education in which schools exist to produce laborers in state economies bent towards global competition.

Neoliberalism is both context and praxis, operating in pathways that ultimately affect students. Quality of curriculum, teachers, testing, buildings, discipline, policies and practices all influence a student's self-perception, and engagement. Schools are identity forming institutions (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2010), and the experiences students have within them function as a context for adolescent development (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Understanding the engagement/fairness // disengagement/unfairness dialectic is novel for rethinking how neoliberal education policies function as biopower (Ruglis, 2011; Ruglis, forthcoming). Research linking engagement to fairness is essential for disrupting the brutalizing force of neoliberalism on the body: and for its ability to mutate injustice/unfairness into an individual psychological

construct of engagement. Engagement as fairness is also central for understanding how accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004, 2005; Fine & Ruglis, 2009) and privatizing projects of public education create unfair experiences, conditions and outcomes even in the face of money. Distinguishing capital from fairness as a locked dyad is also important for valuing the relational aspects of fairness and schooling. This is of utmost historical importance as public schooling is under threat of privatization in many countries, by those working hard to create a new market within public education (Au & Lubienski, 2016; Fabricant & Fine, 2013; Harvey, 2005).

Methodology

Research questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the processes of school disengagement. The primary research question sought to identify the aspects of disengagement that youth participants describe as being most salient to their educational trajectories. Secondly, this study was concerned with the events, conditions, and processes related to school engagement.

Study participants

From April 2012 to April 2013 the second author conducted a university REB (IRB)-approved exploratory qualitative research study in Montreal, Quebec for his Master's thesis, under the supervision and collaboration of the first author.

Four gender and racially/ethnic diverse youth participants (n=4) ages 14-16 were recruited through community organizations. Based on qualitative standards of research, four participants is enough to provide rigorous and valid data (Luttrell, 2010). All participants were born in Quebec, and are Anglophones. Two participants are 14-year old females: Clara and Taylor. Clara is a white Canadian, and Taylor is a black Caribbean-Canadian. Malcolm and Taylor (pseudonyms) are 2nd generation immigrants of adult immigrants from Jamaica and the US. All names are aliases chosen by participants themselves. The two male participants are Malcolm and Kyle. Both males are 16 years of age. Malcolm self-identifies as being a Canadian African-American whose mother is Haitian and his father is Jamaican. Kyle is a white Canadian. Participants shared many qualities that situated them within Anglophone lower-income families for part, if not all, of their lives. All participants attend English-speaking public schools in Montréal and

self-report as struggling with the French language, one of their most difficult and disliked school subjects. Importantly, while all students identified as “disengaged” they were also all currently enrolled in school during the study.

Recruitment. All study participants were recruited through Anglophone-serving community organizations in Montréal, Quebec. Participants responded to a recruitment poster asking if they (a) identified with being “disengaged from their schooling experience,” and (b) were interested in telling the story of their disengagement in a “creative way.” Parents were provided information via youth through a detailed consent/assent form and copy of recruitment poster. Informed consent/assent forms signed by the parent or guardian was required at the start of a participant screening interview. Kyle’s guardian father was present at our first meeting and asked questions about the study. The authors reviewed field notes from screening interviews to theoretically sample youth who could explain why they identified as “disengaged.” Youth were given compensation options: (1) \$5 CAD for every 1-2 hour visit (ten meetings would be required in total, for a maximum per participant compensation of \$50), or (2) a digital camera valued at \$80 CAD if photography was the chosen medium for narrative construction, as opposed to songwriting, storybook, or acting). Refreshments were served at every meeting.

Youth described the story of their disengagement with their schooling experience over a period of five months and spanning six different qualitative methods: (1) semi-structured interview, (2) photo essay (Harper, 1987; Pink, 2007; Rose, 2011) (3) photo-elicitation interview (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Harper, 2002), (4) a mapping method (Haney, Russell, and Bebell, 2004; Wheelock, Bebell, and Haney, 2000), (5) Artist’s Statement (Ruglis, 2009), and (6) focus group. For the purposes of this paper, only three of six qualitative methods are reported: photo essay, photo-elicitation interviews, and Artists’ Statements; in addition to analysis of fieldnotes.

Data collection methods

Photo Essays. Participants unanimously chose photography as their visual narrative medium. A limitation of this study must be identified: participants may have chosen photo-essays as a result of the relatively lower cash compensation, \$50 (the limit of the latter being dictated by a lack of research funds). On the other hand, it was abundantly apparent to the second author that youth were excited to engage in photography, as indicated by their joy at discovering the high quality of the cameras, and their satisfaction

during photo-selection meetings. Photo-essays are collections of photographs that “can work at the boundaries of knowledge by allowing the author to circumvent more traditional modes of investigation and representation” (Coles, 2014, p. 7). Photo-essays tell a different story than single photographs, and their narrative potential has been underplayed (Coles, 2014). Harper (2002) writes that ‘photo essays’ allow participants to integrate “several elements of analytical thinking, images, and reflection” (p. 17).

Participants were given digital cameras valued at approximately \$80 CAD as part of the study. The two male participants attended a four-hour photography workshop covering basic camera skills such as using the camera, photo composition, and principles of light/dark, distance, and point of view. The two female participants were also invited, but did not attend. The session was co-conducted by the second author and a professional photographer working in the Montreal area. Participants not attending the session were given an abbreviated lesson covering the same workshop material at a later date. Snacks and beverages were always served.

Youth participants were prompted to “take photographs showing aspects of either their school disengagement or engagement.” A pamphlet detailing this prompt and other important aspects such as protecting anonymity, securing photo release waivers for people in photographs, and avoiding photographs of recognizable school features/landmarks to ensure the confidentiality of the schools they attended were given to and discussed with the youth.

Youth participants met four times over two months with the second author, and at each meeting they selected their ten favorite photographs since the last meeting. A fifth and final meeting was the setting for a selection of the final ten photographs that best represented their school dis/engagement: these photographs were given captions by participants in a process called ‘photo feedback’ (Sampson-Cordle, 2001) where “photographers analyze their photographs with written comments, what might be called photo-self-elicitation” (Harper, 2002, p. 17). No prompting was given to ensure an equal amount of photographs be selected for disengagement or engagement. Malcolm had a majority of photos that depicted engagement, the rest, disengagement. One participant, Clara, did not complete the entire cycle of meetings, only meeting once to deliver her photographs; neither did she sit for a photo-elicitation interview. While this does raise an issue with regards to validity of findings in a comparative sense with other groups of photographs, her photographs have been included in the analysis for their rich description of her school disengagement.

Photo-elicitation interviews. According to Harper (2002) photo-elicitation is “based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (p. 13) with the difference being between the difference in the ways of response between symbolic representations of text or image. The final ten photographs selected for the photo essay were used as prompts in a photo-elicitation interview (Harper, 2002) with the photographer. Participants were asked to talk about how each particular photograph depicted an aspect of their school dis/engagement.

Artist’s Statements. An Artist’s Statement is a direct written communication from the artist to the spectator that accompanies a piece or collection of art. Typically, artist’s statements set the tone for spectators by describing the impetus behind the work and notes about process. Participants’ favorite four photographs were displayed in a photo reception at a youth drop-in center in a major Anglophone neighborhood and left on display for a month following. Participants names were replaced with aliases. The reception was open only to participants and family members to protect the anonymity of participants. Later, photos were open to public viewing for a period of one month, after which time the participants were allowed to keep the framed photographs as additional compensation. An Artist’s Statement accompanied the photographs (except for Clara, whose photos were chosen by the researcher, and put on display without a statement) that was transcribed by the second author while the youth participants dictated: no grammatical advice was given, speech was typed verbatim. Youth had the opportunity to read and conduct edits of statements. The purpose of the Artist’s Statement was described to participants as being the message from the photographer written to the audience to set the tone for the photographs by explaining the artist’s intended meaning for the viewer.

Methods of data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the second author on the freeware sound-engineering program Audacity, and processed using Microsoft Word. Both authors conducted analysis of photographs in conjunction with photo-elicitation interview data and Artist’s Statements. These methodologies were combined because each of the latter two methods grew out of and elaborated upon youths’ photographs. The presence of photo-elicitation interviews and artist’s statements in the analysis increases the reliability of the results drawn from photographs. A grounded theory approach and constant comparative method (e.g., line-by-line coding, focused coding; Charmaz, 2014) was

performed on both photograph and interview data. In conjunction, a content analysis of photographs was performed. Codes were constructed using gerunds, rather than topics or themes, in order to facilitate the development of a theory of school disengagement. Qualitative research software (Max QDA) was used to code transcripts.

Results

All analysis is framed within Eccles & Roeser’s (2011) developmental context of schooling. Eccles & Roeser (2011) adapt Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory of human development (1977, 1979) to schools, to examine the educational factors influencing development of youth in/through schools at multiple levels (e.g. micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronological levels). Table 1 below summarizes findings across all methods. Themes may best be understood in a class-based analysis, as no participants were from privileged backgrounds; and all findings are situated in a larger structural context and political economy of Quebec, in which English is an official minority language and where there exists both French and English school boards, and the politics of who can attend which are deeply tethered to provincial policy.

Table 1. Primary Findings, All Methods

Method	Primary Findings
Maps	<p>Disengagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) social (e.g. bullying) and academic aspects of disengagement begin in elementary school, (2) experiences of disengagement accumulate over time and influence your future educational and life options. (3) are exacerbated by the high school transition, (4) the rising academic difficulty with each increasing grade – especially in high school, (including increased/more difficult homework assignments) (5) experiencing failure (failing marks, failing classes, grade retention). (6) implied unfairness (being unprepared by elementary school, not protected from bullies, bodies controlled by institution, “annoying” teachers who sometimes ignore students) <p>Engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) experiencing academic success (2) having fun and enjoying school (being emotionally balanced, having respectful, kind, supportive teachers) (3) having time outside school to themselves (no homework)

<p>Photos, Photo-elicitation interviews, Artist’s Statements</p>	<p>Disengagement</p> <p>(1) struggling to become or have movement (autonomy)</p> <p>(2) experiencing failure (grade retention, class, classwork; fearing future well-being)</p> <p>(3) involvement in illicit behaviors (i.e., graffiti, smoking marijuana; immersed in drug culture at home and with peers)</p> <p>(4) enduring an anemic educational experience (standardized learning: learning from text- and workbooks).</p> <p>(5) experiencing unfairness (from teachers, grading policies, institutional)</p> <p>Engagement</p> <p>(1) Having a goal (future autonomy: career, “success,” partner/family, single-family home (not apartment); passing; mastery)</p> <p>(2) Having fun and enjoying life</p> <p>(3) Mastery takes time</p>
<p>Interviews and focus group</p>	<p>Disengagement Defined:</p> <p>(1) is a process that increases slowly over time</p> <p>(2) involves disliking something to the point of giving up (manufactured apathy)</p> <p>(3) is emotionally disturbing (or numbing) by nature of (a) school itself, (b) attacks to self-worth and/or (c) social exclusion</p> <p>(4) involves a deficit of interest/motivation (a construct theorized as involving both emotional and cognitive elements).</p> <p>Disengagement</p> <p>(1) Is a cumulative process occurring over time (being underprepared by elementary school, being bullied, rising academic difficulty (longer class, more homework), school transition is shocking, experiencing failure/fearing future well-being, experiencing failure.</p> <p>(2) is influenced by teachers, administrators, and school policy (unfairness, poor teachers, Principals, and Vice Principals)</p> <p>(3) is influenced by High school environment (reduced school support compared to elementary, farther from home, unwelcoming/threatening/prison-like environment)</p> <p>(4) is influenced by an anemic curriculum (classwork is boring, repetitive, and meaningless)</p> <p>(5) is correlated with individual characteristics (absenteesism, drug/alcohol use, staying up late, “losing focus,” peer group membership and dynamics)</p>

<p>Engagement defined:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(1) engagement is a process and event that,(2) occurs in a meaningful and supportive educational environment in which individuals,(3) effortfully take part until the end of the task, and is(4) also contingent upon one’s ability to manage social tensions which may arise. (Sometimes means ignoring one’s peers to get help; having friends and fitting in; participating.) <p>Engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(1) Having a goal, being focused. (graduation, employment, families, homes, etc.)(2) Enjoying school (activities in class and school wide, certain subjects like Art and History)(3) Learning from good teachers.(4) Incorporating the arts (music, visual art, dance)(5) Experiencing academic achievement(6) Having autonomy(7) Enjoying life [outside of school](8) (Kyle) being freed from homework(9) (Clara) improving with grade retention
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Disengagement: Common themes

Three common themes were emergent from analysis of photo essays of youths’ disengagement with schooling: (1) struggling to become, or have movement, (2) experiencing failure (primarily grade retention, failing classes and assignments), and (3) enduring an anemic educational experience (standardized learning: learning from text- and workbooks).

(1) Struggling to become or have movement

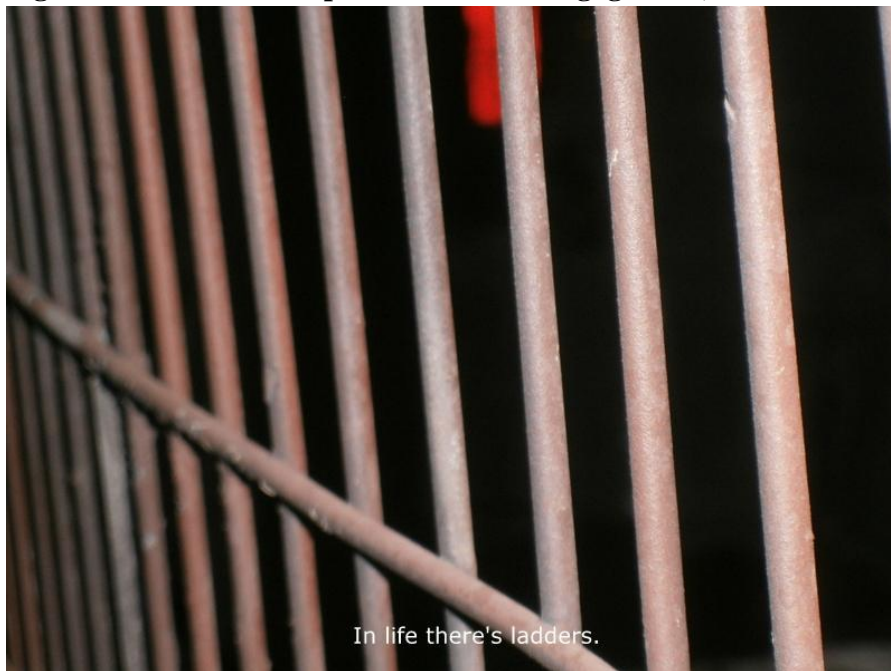
The most recurrent theme was coded as *struggling to become or have movement*. A content analysis identified the presence of ladders in the photographs of three out of four participants. Ladders are present in photographs that have to do with “life,” “options,” and “struggles.” For example, in a photograph of a metal grill with vertical bars, Malcolm states “In life, there’s ladders” (See Figure 1). In photo-elicitation interview (PEI) data, he declares that this photo is representative of how

... in life there's always some step you have to take but sometimes you always can't take that step cause you're incapable of doing that on your own. So it gets very difficult. So sometimes you just want to sit down and do nothing.

(Malcolm, PEI data)

Based on our data, ladders are symbolic of *becoming*. One's situation on a ladder implies that one is climbing to reach a destination—to be where they are not; the struggle requires great effort. Ladders also imply that one is not yet at one's destination. If the ladder is suggestive that youth are not where they desire to be, then the rest of their photographs tend to confirm that they are impeded in diverse ways from reaching this goal (e.g., Clara, Taylor), and question their ability to reach their destination (e.g., Kyle, Malcolm) based on intersecting inequities. In his Artist's Statement, Kyle opens with "Sometimes in school I'm lost a lot, so most of the pictures are of places that you wouldn't know where you are." Another ladder appears in Kyle's deliberately blurred photo of the side of a building with a ladder against it has the caption "Without an option in life things are blurry." Being lost is another way of describing a state of becoming (as unfinished business) and having movement (going to where you are not yet). Feelings of disengagement as stagnation are central to theorizing unfairness as a component of disengagement, for students read their education as (a) what is missing (unfair) from their schools to allow them to feel belonging, and (b) learning that leads to their ability to achieve their goals.

Figure 1. Photo of an aspect of school disengagement, Malcolm



(2) Experiencing failure

The second most recurrent theme revolved around youths' failure experiences. Youths' insecurities around their ability to succeed in school are developed by their histories of educational failure, and this is a central finding: that failure is linked to accumulated experiences of unfairness. Having the ability to deflect failure and achieve success is a recurring motif. Malcolm's photo (Figure 1) has everything to do with success at school; and yet his school fails to protect students against the accumulation of failure experiences. In his Artist's Statement, Malcolm states that he took the photos because "school is difficult" and generates "frustration." Again, school disengagement is articulated as being related to lost autonomy in life, or the "psychological need to behave according to one's interests and values" (Turner, Christensen, Kackar-Cam, Trucano and Fulmer, 2014, p. 1200). "Options" are understood in Kyle's context as being closely connected to employability: his Artist's Statement sutures school outcomes with homelessness and employment; his photographs are peppered with references to homelessness, "work," "success," and graduation. Disengagement, which is often an outcome of repeat experiences of school failure, bears the threat of failure in the future. Failure-as-violence-against-self-worth pervades depictions of school disengagement (Figures 2, 3, &4).

(3) Enduring an anemic educational experience

The third most recurrent theme spoke to the quality of youths' educational experience. Struggling to stay engaged despite being presented with an anemic educational experience is a primary finding of this study. Clara's workbooks and textbooks (Figure 2) are representative of the public school experience of all participants in this study. Clara raises the point that to increase student engagement, schools should employ not only more opportunities for students to choose their courses, but to include those activities such as graffiti in their arts curriculum. In making this point, Clara indirectly points to a fundamental mechanism of youth participants' school disengagement that we have coded: *enduring an anemic educational experience*. Youth participants voiced a desire for more dynamic schoolwork, echoing developmental mismatch between institution and secondary students (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Throughout photo-elicitation interviews, participants describe engaging school activities such as project-based assignments, field trips, and as involving the arts (photography, music, visual arts, and dance). For example, Kyle describes how his marks rise as projects gain prominence in the History teacher's pedagogy,

- Daniel “eight out of twenty” [referring to a photo of a marked assignment]
- Kyle Yeah this is in history I think because I never understood history cause I don’t really like History class. But I’m sort of starting to like it cause we’re doing activities and stuff in class. So I’m starting to get like 18 out of 20 on projects and stuff. Which is better.
- Daniel What kind of activities?
I don’t know like playing little games while like, which help us to learn History. Um ...

Taylor describes the lack of music programming at her alternative school, a step down from the school from which she was pushed out:

- Daniel Do you get to do any stuff around music in your schooling?
- Taylor No, at [former school’s name] I used to. I used to do the class but at [alternative school] there’s none.
- Daniel Hmm that must be pretty hard.
- Taylor Yeah.
- Daniel You love music and yet the place where you spend a lot of your time doesn’t even ...
- Taylor They have no music program.
- Daniel Hmm that must be hard.
- Taylor It sucks.

Summary

Youth clearly articulate a desire for a richer, more robust educational experience; moreover, Kyle’s testimony suggests that his academic performance rises in the presence of such an experience. In other methodologies (semi-structured interviews, focus groups) anemic educational experiences (those most often cited in descriptions of school disengagement) are: stencils (worksheets), learning from textbooks, irrelevant textbooks and novels (e.g., *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) and filling out pages of workbooks (which usually accompany textbooks). Malcolm laments the schoolwork he encounters daily; he would even prefer direct instruction over workbooks. Eccles and Roeser (2011) note that academic work in secondary settings resist change over time to reflect “the increasing cognitive sophistication, diverse life experiences, and identity-linked motivational needs of children and adolescents” (p. 583). As a result, boredom is at its highest when

performing repetitive, low-level, and unimaginative tasks such as these (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Disengagement: Individual findings

Having established aspects of disengagement found among at least two or more youth participants, we turn now to a few notable aspects that pertain to single participants. Youth described relationships, institutions, school policies and neighborhoods that were best characterized as fundamentally unfair.

Fairness

Fairness is a construct that is synonymous with *justice*, and refers to the “fair and equitable treatment of other human beings” (Prilleltensky, 2012, p. 9). This definition of fairness is fundamentally relational in nature. This section will discuss how unfairness in relationships with teachers, the community, and in less direct relationships are prominent in narratives of disengagement. Fairness is how people fundamentally experience the world and has been increasingly shown to have biological effects as embodied experiences of perceived unfairness produce short- and long-term negative health effects (De Vogli et al., 2007; Ruglis, 2009). Findings reveal examples of unfairness particular to the *academic work*, the most proximal nested level of a student’s school ecology, all the way through to more distal ecological levels including relationships with teachers, the school environment, the community in which it is embedded.

Fairness: Kyle. Kyle is acutely aware of the cost of school non-completion. In his photo-elicitation interview, he describes schooling two or more times as a long and difficult journey ending in employability: he does this by speaking about both employment and unemployment. Kyle’s photo captions, in quotes, followed by a description of the photograph in parentheses, provide evidence for this claim:

“Without work you’d be stuck in the middle of nowhere in a broken-down car.”

(A rotting truck in the middle of the forest)

“If you pass school you can get all the shoes you want.”

(Shoes hanging from a telephone line)

“If you don’t do your work, that’s what you end up like.”

(Homeless man sitting on an indoor bench in winter)

Kyle associates academic work, and by extension school completion, in a do-or-die manner with employment and personal agency at one pole and homelessness/unemployability at the opposite. Figure 3 captures the precariousness of life by showing a bitterly cold Montréal winter scene of a homeless man sitting hunched over on a bench in the foyer of a metro/subway station. “If you don’t do your work, that’s what you end up like,” reads the caption. By “work” Kyle is referring to his academic work, as he does in his Artist’s Statement, but more importantly, the high-stakes of such work and its place in Kyle’s understanding and enactment of his future. Supporting this interpretation is another photo—this time depicting an aspect of engagement—with a caption saying that the reward of “passing [assignments, classes, the academic grade itself]” is monetary gain. Only then will one be able to buy “all the shoes [one] want[s].”

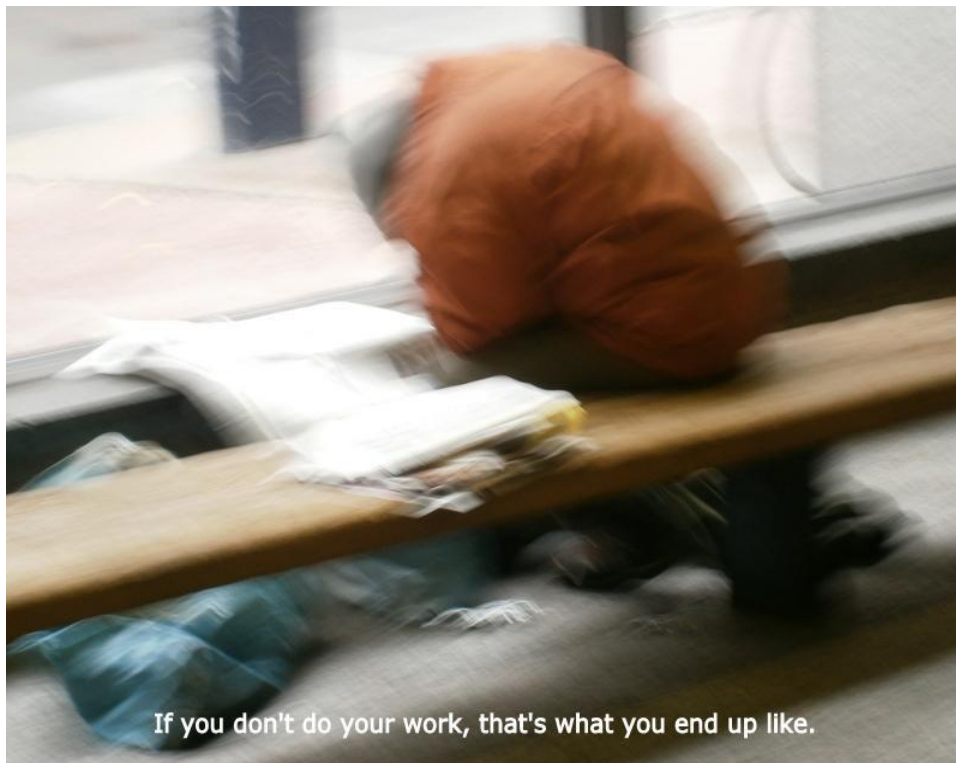
Kyle’s project of future well-being lives and dies with his ability to achieve passing grades in his academic work. For Kyle, without grades there is limited jobs and restricted life outcomes ahead for him. And experiences in schools that lead to failing marks, such as a lack of dynamic pedagogies, the burden of too much homework and its encroachment on private life, the academic work being “really hard,” “losing focus” and “getting lost a lot,” and the challenges of the transition from elementary school are the cornerstones of educational unfairness as disengagement.

Kyle’s photographs of academic work are laced with unfairness connected to his academic work. His photographs are made more crucial under the weight of his own vision of himself in the future in a state of well-being, with its location straddling both present and future (Stetsenko, 2015). This notion of “self” eschews the cognitive self-processes (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-regulation) of educational psychology for a richer, more robust notion grounded in various pedagogical progressive accounts that are grounded in a notion of *bildung* (Friesen, 2014). More traditional notions of the self are ontologically grounded in the political-historical rise of behaviorism (Friesen, 2014; Labaree, 2005). Alternatively, drawing from the Hegelian philosophy of *bildung*, of which John Dewey was highly influenced, allows for a much more robust definition of the self. While notoriously difficult to define, the notion of *bildung* provides for a deeper, more complex notion of the self as related to emancipation “edification, formation, and growth,” (Friesen, 2014, p. 100) but also a cultivation of the inner life, and the development of one’s unique potential within a social context. For Kyle, this means an active creation of a self with temporal continuity. Well-being for Kyle begins with graduation and then employment, a living wage, and meaningful, life-giving pursuits; however, these events and conditions are representative of a particular notion of himself as developing his full potential, and being emancipated from a deep fear of

poverty, which we define as more than simply economic inertia, but agentive as well. Other discourses have captured this notion such as freedom, autonomy, and agency, and dialectics such as oppressor/oppressed, self/other, and more.

Kyle articulates many threats to his identity that can be interpreted through a lens of fairness. The first unfairness is being subjected to the possibility of failure, a hurtful and threatening experience Kyle knows well. One photo shows a grade he received in History: “8/20 [possible marks]” is written in red pen. The failing grade, written severely in red pen, is interpreted as symbolic of the ideological violence of current systems of academic assessment and accountability (compared to the project based assessments he refers to earlier). But understanding the full meaning of Kyle’s unfair subjection to experiences of failure requires noticing Kyle’s description of his goals —what he is *struggling to become*—which involves school completion, and employability.

Figure 2. Photograph of school disengagement, Kyle.



Fairness: Clara. Unfairness at the hands of teachers and administrators looms large in Clara’s photographs of disengagement. While Clara became unreachable midway through the research, her first round of photographs are painstakingly composed and powerfully communicative of the social dimension of unfairness. Clara took part in the

semi-structured interview and the first cycle of the photo-essay component, but became unreachable shortly thereafter. Prior to her withdrawal from the study, in a phone conversation Clara said that her mother, sister, and herself had recently been evicted from their apartment. Clara's photos further illuminate fairness as a relational construct, which substantiates not only the quality and character of environments within each level of ecological models of human development, but also the interactions between nested levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In Figure 4 Clara points to the unfairness of (a) a pass/fail paradigm, and (b) harsh treatment from teachers. In angry red pen Clara writes in the voice of a teacher "give up! Yours truly, [sic] -teacher" next to a grade of "F-" (Figure 4)—the minus (-) simply adding insult to injury. The troubled relationship between Clara and some of her teachers and administrators is a theme that emerges in her interview data, which was not included in this article (Vallée & Ruglis, under review). There is research in various fields reaffirming the primacy of the student-teacher relationship and its rootedness in emotion (e.g., Britzman, 2016; Skinner et al, 2008). Deborah Britzman (2016), writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, suggests that the project of teaching and learning depends upon the "fragilities of a social bond" (p. 6), highlighting the critical importance of the relationship, and emotional life between the student and teacher.

Other photographs elaborate further the deep woundedness of unfair treatment from teachers. Clara's photographs bear text like "f*ck it," or "I gave up [because] you told me my best work was a waste of time ... [I'm] done" (Figure 5). Clara seems to be saying that one important aspect of disengagement is withdrawal or giving up. But giving up seems to be preceded by the school giving up on her. If we frame Clara's withdrawal from the legal requirement of teachers to operate *in absentia parentis*, or even from Britzman's (2016) psychoanalytic perspective, the teacher's behavior is ideologically violent. The violence of unfairness has had its effect, and significantly, within one of the more proximal, and critical (Bronfenbrenner, 1978) ecological levels of schooling—the levels of academic work, and the teacher and classroom (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Figure 3. Photograph depicting an aspect of school disengagement, Clara.

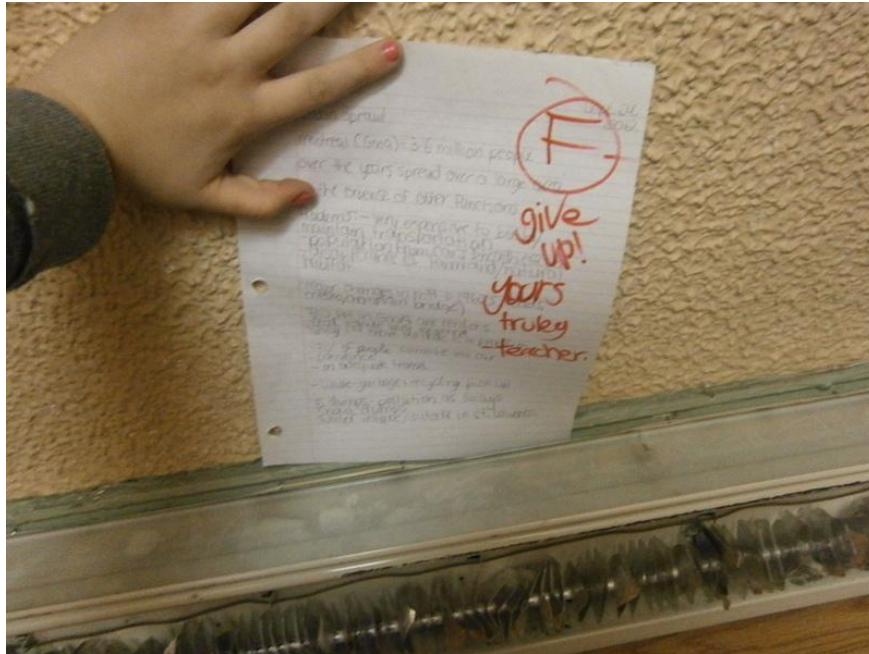


Figure 4: Photograph depicting an aspect of school disengagement, Clara.



Fairness: Taylor. With Taylor the focus of this section, the analysis moves to the outermost ecological level of the school context: community, state, and nation (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Taylor’s data serves to demonstrate the presence of systemic, institutionalized unfairness.

Taylor photographs her dilapidated, vandalized, and prison-like school deep in a remote corner of Montréal Island, far from her home (Figure 6). In her Artist’s Statement she describes the environment as unsafe and boring, covered in rocks and glass, and the water from the fountain “nasty ... like you’re going to die from it” (Photo-elicitation interview, Taylor).

Figure 5: Photo of an aspect of school disengagement, Taylor.



Taylor must travel 45 minutes by public transit to attend her alternative school. Of note is that her own neighborhood has at least three private schools within walking distance, but due to the prohibitive cost of tuition, and the “snobs” that attend: private school is not an option. Despite this, the school she most wants to leave her alternative school for is both private and close to home. The private school has “cooler field trips ... to Paris” (Interview). Like earlier data, this finds evidence for schoolwork that has a rich

curriculum involving extracurricular experiences as related to dis/engagement; moreover, the simultaneous longing-for and loathing-of the equal opportunities afforded in private school strikes a complex chord of unfairness along lines of school type. Another photo describes how motorists drive at reckless speeds on the street her school is on. Motorists ignore speed warnings writ large on the asphalt. “Having an unsafe and boring environment is not going to make us want to do anything but leave” writes Taylor (Artist’s Statement). This community influence stands in stark contrast to the motorist culture of a prestigious private school in her neighborhood. Automobile speed is enforced with speed bumps and crossing guards, speaking to the value the community places on both the elite school, the children who attend, and the privileged families they hail from. This comparative analysis of social conditions primes messages about one’s worth, and the costs of knowing you deserve better and living with deprivation of dignity (Sullivan, 2007) are disengagement from school, and for 2 of 4 participants in the study to participation in other street, youth and sub-cultures that are often in conflict with the law (i.e. graffiti, marijuana use). As of August 2015, we learned that Kyle has managed to graduate—a “total miracle”—according to his guardian mother (email communication), but no longer stays with them.

Summary

Youths’ photos and interview data are rippled with educational unfairness, which participants describe as grounded in social inequality. Social inequality manifests itself over school type, resources, populations, school staff, school culture, and neighborhood effects. This small sample of city English-speaking public school youth describe disengagement in such a way as to make unfairness the most salient lens for education stakeholders to critique schooling. Indeed there appears to be a growing amount of educational research addressing schooling from exactly such a position (Au & Lubienski, 2016; Meyer, 2014; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009). Research in this field is imperative when considered from youth perspectives. Visual and textual data communicates a number of negative affective states such as distress, anger, withdrawal, and resentment. Social conflicts in the form of betrayal and neglect are demonstrated at multiple ecological levels beginning with the academic work itself (workbooks rather than projects, trips abroad), strained relationships with teachers, and the social neglect of bare-bones public alternative schooling.

Engagement: Briefly

While much of the focus of this paper is on disengagement, salient aspects of engagement are worth noting here. Kyle, Malcolm, and Taylor had photographs that were coded as “having a goal” (career, “success,” passing, mastery). Whereas disengagement squared upon aspects of struggle, failure, tangents, and anemic educational experiences, photographs of engagement depicted participants’ understanding of the purpose of education, as well as those hopes and dreams that schooling would enable. Like disengagement, engagement is grounded in participants’ projects of self. Music and the arts figure heavily across participants as relating to engagement in school, especially for Taylor. Engagement occurred in the presence of the arts. Engagement also centered on the central, and historic, role of education for class mobility or class labor preparation. Male participants defined schoolwork and graduation as primarily for employment and preparation for “responsibilities of having a family” which describes a photograph for a single-family home he took, a desired life goal for Malcolm who states “Well education gets you far. So it gets you a good job. And it gets you a good salary and you buy yourself a nice house. That’s basically it.” However, across all photographs, employment is intertwined with the trappings of class mobility, an important facet of a good education that these youth are being denied, and for participants who come from homes and grow up in the balance of economic survival. Malcolm and Kyle articulated the need for school to achieve the “good life”: shoes, single-family homes, and solid professions. In this way, engagement in school is about wanting to change current larger experiences of social unfairness.

Discussion

Analysis of dis/engagement moves beyond the traditionally individualized, normative notion of engagement as lying primarily within the individual student. Such a formulization of engagement seems to us to follow in the long and harmful tradition of the psychologizing and pathologizing of the individual for “abnormal,” “maladjusted,” or non-normative characteristics and behaviors (Fine and Cross, 2013; Gallagher, 2010). If we are to move beyond a normative notion of engagement such that a normal state would be for all students to be engaged, engagement will need to be reframed. The work of reframing disengagement as a social-ecological phenomenon is important for research and practice. If we begin to eschew an isolating, student-centered notion of dis/engagement in favor of more dialectical theorizations of engagement, then it appears the discussion need shift away from the individual upstream to macrosocial influences

that ground individual opportunity and choice. Of primary concern is the undeniable rise of income and other forms of social inequality, for its root in shaping unfairness.

Kirsten Meyer (2014) notes that while variation exists in the philosophy of educational justice, perspectives overlap in their criticism of “a lack of equality in the education system” (Meyer, 2014, p. 3). Both authors’ own research and personal experience working in private and public schools in Canada supports this research finding of educational inequality, which is shaped by language, class, and race/ethnicity—all of which are nested in neoliberal praxis of changing public institutions. Findings of this study can contribute to the engagement literature as a call for expansion of broader social-ecological factor of inequality in (and out of) schools as related to school dis/engagement. Youth epistemologies of educational inequity can be understood as related to identity, moral and social development. At root, then, are the ways in which education injustice is experienced by students as unfairness. This is theoretically and methodologically important for the relationship of unfairness to health outcomes (DeVogli et al., 2007).

Conclusion

Youth are developmentally in an active process of becoming, of developing a project of the self by transforming their embodied realities according to a vision of their future well-being (Stetsenko, 2015) which they do in the developmental context of schools. For the four participants of this small study, findings show they do not become disengaged from school alone. Rather, multiple factors, proximal and distal, impact their dis/engagement to school, and these factors fall along dimensions of fairness/justice over time and in multiple places and spaces of development.

Unfairness as a developmental context of inequitable education, and especially for students for whom there is a doubling of unfairness in school and in life, is likely to have an impact on health and development in multiple ways—not least of which are through which disengagement (unfairness) predicts lower educational outcomes, thereby influencing lifecourse outcomes in housing, health, employment, criminal justice and a host of other social maladies. Neither should disengagement’s influence on identity be ignored, particularly at a critical developmental time. Neoliberal education corrodes what is necessary for schools to achieve fairness. Disengagement retheorized as accumulated unfairness is bidirectional. Educational disengagement derives from experiences of

unfairness in schools, which are inextricable from larger political and economic neoliberal forces.

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