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Humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities: a dialectic of school pushout

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This article explores youth resistance to urban public high schools that both inadvertently and by design push out students before graduation. The author details how youth experience the institutional production of school non-completion as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities, a dialectic of school pushout. The author describes how some youth position themselves in ways that are dangerous to the institution of schooling, and, at the same time, their own school careers.

Keywords: pushout; youth resistance; humiliating irony; dangerous dignity; dialectic

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Students who have been pressured to leave by factors inside their schools describe their schools as places that no one wants to be. This article contends that New York City youth experience schooling as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities, a dialectic of school pushout. It is an illustration of how federal accountability policies like No Child Left Behind, and state policies that prevent multiple routes to graduation, work in concert to produce school pushout. Though humiliation and dignity may seem to be in contradiction, the boundaries between them in this dialectic are hazy. New York City youth identify a series of ironies in schooling, especially related to assessment, exit exams, and meritocracy, that, due to the personalized nature of school rule enforcement, humiliate students. At the same time, youth position themselves within a particular kind of dignity that is dangerous to the stasis of the classroom and hallway, and also their own school careers. I emphasize that pushed-out youth can reorient themselves to positions of dangerous dignity, seeking self-preservation and self-determination, and claiming educational sovereignty. I designate dangerous dignity as an emergent theory of youth resistance to injustices in their schooling. Yet, there is not a clear-cut story here. I posit that a theory of dangerous dignity can interrupt the teleological inclinations of resistance theories.

Teleological resistance theories are those that prescribe and proscribe the direction of change, from oppression to liberation, for example, or from bewildered to enlightened. Such conceptualizations of resistance rely on developmental or progress-oriented theories of change, the same theories that presume the "improvement" from savage to civilized, wild to domesticated, and unschooled to educated.

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Theories of change that suppose progress are characteristic of Western philosophical frames, are consistent with the world views of settler colonial societies, and have authorized occupations, genocide, and other forms of state violence. Non-teleological resistance theories do not fetishize progress, but understand that change happens in ways that make new, old-but-returned, and previously unseen possibilities available at each juncture (see Deleuze and Guattari [2003] on flows and segmentarities and Tuck [2009a] on indigenous theories of change, including sovereignty, contention, balance, and relationship). Non-teleological theories of resistance are messy, and the endgame of such resistance is unfixed and in formation. This does not mean that resistance does not do anything, or does not work, just that it does not do what we think it does, and does not work in the way we think it works.

My analysis is based on research I conducted with a collective of youth researchers between 2006 and 2008. Several of my youth co-researchers identified as having been pushed out of their New York City public schools, and most had felt unwelcome in their schools at some point. We called our group the Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire (CREDD). Together, we designed and implemented a mixed method participatory action research project on the role of the General Educational Development (GED) credential in New York City public schools, and the use of the GED option by urban youth both as a gateway to higher education and full employment, and as a get-away from inadequate high schools (see also Tuck et al. 2008; Tuck 2009a, in which the process of forming this collective, designing our study, and collecting our data is described in detail). Our study also explored the ways that the GED option was used by students and school personnel as a way to legitimize school pushout. Data reported here are from our one-hour semi-structured individual interviews ($n = 35$) and focus groups (nine focus groups, $n = 95$) with youth GED earners and seekers.

My co-researchers and I have utilized the term pushout throughout our work to describe the experiences of youth who have been pressured to leave school by people or factors inside school, such as disrespectful treatment from teachers and other school personnel, violence among students, arbitrary school rules, and the institutional pressures of high-stakes testing. Study participant Pilar, a youth GED earner in her thirties at the time of her interview, asserted this caveat to our definition of pushout:

> Sometimes we don't make the best choices in life. It's not just school that pushed me out. The structure of my school was chaotic. It was like, *No*. I couldn't get help and I sought help. You just get no support. Yes, ultimately, you are pushed out. If by pushed out you mean pushed out by more than just the school.

As I have indicated, our collective's use of the term pushout describes those components inside schools that detain and derail students' secondary school completion. However, as Pilar argues, outside forces compound students' needs, and in those times of crisis the lack of support afforded by school policies and practices is glaring.

In a focus group, Gabriel told us:

> High school is fine for kids who are fine in their lives, but if there is anything hard going on in someone's life, school becomes very difficult. When things are hard in your life and you're not excelling academically, it's easy to be like, "This is stupid, I don't need to be here." And for adults in the school to feel the same way.

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Interview participant Sophia told us, "I had this teacher who always told me 'Quit wasting my time, quit wasting my time.' One day, it came to me: this was a waste of *all* of our time."

In our interviews, in our focus groups, young people again and again taught us the following three things: (1) some schools implicitly teach students they are not cut out for school; (2) students struggle to sustain their schooling in spaces where no one seems to want to be; (3) poor students, students of color, and undocumented students are especially unwelcome in some schools. Miguel told us, "They didn't want *anybody* there. My high school was the *worst*." Hsaio, a GED instructor, told us about the experiences of undocumented youth who ended up at the doors of her GED program:

> Some of the students [when they come to the US] they are turning 19 or 20. Sometimes 18. The schools, they refuse to take them. It's not just one case, it's like 10 different cases every month. They've been deferred. They've been pushed out of school and told go to [a] GED [program]. They don't even provide them a place they could contact. So, sometimes [the schools] use [the immigrant students'] English skills as an excuse. They say go and take the GED because they require less of this language than demanded in a school.

Many youth told us that their schools made them question if they were really cut out for learning, some telling us that they felt pushed out of school as early as the 5th and 7th grades. Benji told us, "I walked [in the building] and I thought, 'No way, not me.' I mean, I knew right away that that place was not for me in the first place." Amaris observed: "I felt like there was no need for me to be there. They already had their minds set up that I was just going to continue doing what I had been doing. They weren't going to waste their time with me." Tyrone, however, insisted:

> It's not that we aren't cut out for school, we don't want to be in school because we don't like it. If they [pushed-out youth] were in a different school, they would stay. If they were in a different environment, they would stay. That's not the case, so they leave.

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The dialectic of school pushout

My goal here is to map school pushout as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities. I call the unintended consequences of school policies and the disrespectful interactions between school personnel and youth humiliating ironies because the ironies do not just serve to exclude youth from schooling, but assault their dignities in the process. Dangerous dignity is the powerful position that youth take up in response to and in anticipation of this ongoing humiliation and hypocrisy.

The choice to employ a frame of dialectics may surprise readers familiar with criticisms of dialectical materialism as teleological; though my use of dialectics is inspired by Greene's (1988) work, dialectics make an unavoidable nod to Marxism. Dialectical logic was the crux of a debate over dogmatism among Marxists: systemized, prescriptive, ordered, complete ideology vs. open, praxis-, knowledge- and creative action-based theories of change. I am satisfied with Lefebvre's (2009) rereading of Hegel, and reading of Marx' reading of Hegel (a reading sometimes appreciated as "more Hegelian than Hegelianism" [Lefebvre 2009]) which

intervenes upon the struggle between dogmatists and anti-dogmatists within Marxism and reclaims the dialectic not as a method of analysis, but as a constructor and animator of the complicated stuff of life (41). Lefebvre reads Hegel's dialectics as an approach to everyday living:

> Not to aim at acquiescing too hastily to ourselves or to the world; not to hide from ourselves the contradictions in the world ... but, on the contrary, to accentuate them, however much we may suffer, because it is fruitful to be torn asunder and because, once the contradictions have become unbearable, the need to transcend them becomes stronger than any resistance on the part of the elements that are passing away. (2009, 35)

Greene's (1988) *The Dialectic of Freedom* describes dialectical relationships as existing between two poles, but with mediation between them – mediation that does not diminish the tension, as the tension will not be resolved or balanced (8). We must "always confront a certain weight in lived situations" (9).

Calling upon dialectics as a way to conceptualize contradictory bothness, I will move through our data to show that the complexities of school push out are more than just a clash of institutional and personal responsibilities. Ironies and hypocrisies that humiliate are more difficult to expose. Dignities that are dangerous exponentially raise the stakes. It is hard to tell where one part of the dialectic ends and the other begins, and impossible to trace to their origins. They simultaneously cause and provoke the other. They are an arms race.

For example, CREDD co-researcher Jovanne spoke in a formal interview about an incident with a teacher in which she refused to remove her head scarf. Jovanne identified this "altercation" as an exemplary moment of feeling unwelcome in school. "My hair was not done that day and he tried to make me take my scarf off. I refused. So he went out of his way to get me suspended for telling him that if he had a bad hair day he'd want to wear a scarf too."

Unsure if the no scarves policy was school-wide or particular to this teacher's classroom, Jovanne nevertheless experienced this rule as directly aimed at embarrassing her. Her teacher's institutional power wore personal and punitive gloves; Jovanne's somewhat innocuous reasons for wearing her head scarf (a bad hair day) rapidly became politicized, a line drawn in the sand that was too easily crossed by each of them. Jovanne and her teacher's personal and institutional responsibilities were tangled, knotted, and oppositional. Each oppositional tug on the knot made the tangles tighter and less likely to come undone without scissors, further entrenching both of them in increasingly extreme options. Her teacher exercised the seemingly extreme option of getting Jovanne suspended, while Jovanne soon exercised the seemingly extreme option of exiting school completely.

By examining the extreme options to push and be pushed as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities, we can begin to understand Jovanne's and many other pushed out youths' exits from schooling as not at all extreme, but rather as acts of self-preservation, political critique, and defiance, even as repatriation.

Humiliating ironies

Youth in our study described to us the ways in which they were acutely aware of the ironies of schooling – often gaps between expressed aims and values of the

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school, and the realities of schooling encounters – and this awareness, compounded by their widely held connections between success in schooling and intelligence and worthiness, made each ongoing irony more and more humiliating. Unresolved ironies of schooling stab at students' experiences of themselves as intelligent enough or worthy enough to do well in school. These experiences accumulate into complete and pervasive, highly personalized feelings of being unwelcome. We asked interview participant Arimme, "Was there a specific time that you felt unwelcome?" She told us:

> It was so many times. It is hard to just pinpoint one of them. Most of the times what I would do is just get a pass to the bathroom and leave. The first exit I see, I'm out the door. They don't want me to be here. Here I am and you're acting like I'm invisible, and you're only paying attention to certain individuals in the class. Well, I'm going to get out of here, I'm getting the hell out of here. I'm not going to waste my time.

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The feeling of unwelcoming in schools has been described to us by our participants as imprecise yet omnipresent. Youth describe it as all-encompassing but, as in Arimme's words above, hard to pinpoint. *Un*welcome, *un*wanted, *in*hospitable – youth in our study experienced schooling in ways that were largely marked by what was missing – yet these words barely hint at the aggression that youth reported. These are not mere inadvertent slights, but what amounts to systematic unwelcoming and contempt, way-paved by acute inflexibility and indifference.

The interpersonal nature of these ironies heats them, causing a chemical reaction that turns ironies into an even more poignant offense: hypocrisy. One frequently cited hypocrisy concerned what our participants observed as teachers' reluctance to educate all students. Miguel told us, "When I asked for help, they sucked their teeth. That's their job. Even if you are to ask a bunch of times, that's their job."

Almost half of our interview participants indicated that they believed that some school personnel were "only there to get paid." Every single one of the participants that made this assessment was careful to emphasize that this attitude was not held by all, but only some school personnel. However, the impact of these sentiments was invasive, serving to undermine compelling reasons for students to continue to attend school. The hypocrisy of being required to attend (and punished for not attending) a school day when school personnel also do not seem to want to be there insulted youth and made their attempts toward school completion seem futile.

Another hypocrisy identified by our youth participants was the persistent narrative of meritocracy, despite the obvious falseness of this narrative. Almost all of our participants expressed frustration in the largely unspoken, grotesquely imbalanced playing field between well-funded and underfunded schools. In one focus group, Sandra passionately explained, "It's not fair that poor students go to poor schools."

In an interview, Wilson told us, "If you know the deck is stacked against you a lot of times you just stop playing the game." Several youth in our interviews described this stacked deck by citing funding per student in wealthy school districts such as nearby Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester counties, compared to funding per student in New York City. Youth observed the absurdity of the prospect of schooling as the great equalizer in such unequal circumstances. Youth participants in one focus group called this the "Anybody can get into Harvard denial," and cited it as one of the persistent roots of school pushout.

Many of the youth participants in our study theorized the role of testing and their former schools' over-reliance on testing as influential in their pushout experiences. They framed the problem of testing in two ways. The first had to do with the pressure to pass the New York Regents exit exams[1] and the fallout when students do not pass the exams. For example, many youth reported that teachers, guidance counselors, deans, and other administrators explicitly told them, "You're not going to pass this test, why bother [taking it again/staying in school]?" The second way youth framed the problem of testing dealt with the ways in which testing has narrowed and over-determined curricula. These two elements work in combination with the steep consequences and merit-based rewards of testing for schools, creating a perfect storm-like climate for school pushout (see also Rebell and Wolff 2008).

A final humiliating irony has to do with youths' awareness of the number of their classmates exiting school before graduation while at the same time being squeezed into over-crowded classrooms. In a focus group, Jessica posed the phenomenon in this way: "I know it wasn't all honors kids dropping out, so why do they got no one in their classes and I got everyone in mine [*sic*]?" There are several betrayals at work here. First, youth see mass numbers of students exiting their schools, and their schools continue as if nothing has occurred, as if those students had merely fallen through the cracks. Then, the courses in which they are supposed to get the help they need to move through their schooling are over-crowded and chaotic. Finally, though those who do not complete school are in the numeric majority of New York City youth, young people who have this experience are left feeling isolated, and like they are the aberrant ones.

These betrayals are compounded by students' troubled negotiations of schooling as a fraying life-line. Public funding for basic human and civic needs is being repealed at every turn in a young person's life (Anyon 2005). Though we know that resources are unevenly distributed, and that much improvement is needed, school is the only place that some students will be able to get a healthful meal, see a counselor or nurse, be tested for a range of cognitive, learning, and physiological disabilities or impairments, have access to books, computers and the Internet, and be free from the expectation to earn money. For fewer students, school will be the place where they learn English, get needed sexual health information and safe sex devices, and receive relevant career training and guidance.

Dangerous dignity

The other side of the dialectic, dangerous dignity, is derived from Six Nations scholar Alfred's (2005) assertion of Indigenous dignity as part of a returning to *wasase*, or the warrior's way. "The way to defeat the colonial state," Alfred writes, "is to struggle in creative contention to delegitimize it and to weaken belief and commitment in the colonizers' minds, not by confronting the state on its own terms and playing to its strength, violence" (see also Tuck 2009a, 228). Alfred cites Gandhi's satyagraha, or truth force, movement as a "challenge to both colonialism and traditionalism" (269) that inspires his call for *regeneration*. "Regeneration means we will reference ourselves differently, both from the ways we did traditionally and under colonial dominion" (Alfred 2005, 34).

Dangerous dignity is a stance of informed defiance. Wise come-uppitance. It is in response to and anticipation of humiliating ironies such as those I have already described. Dignity, for the purposes of this analysis, can be understood as a sense of

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justice and injustice that is felt in or on the body. Within a stance of dangerous dignity, danger is extended both to the person and to institutions and larger society (as well as tribes and communities). There are personal, professional, economic, safety, and health risks for the person with dangerous dignity. At the same time, when one stands in her own dangerous dignity it is risky to institutions and societies because hypocrisy, corruption, exploitation, and greed are exposed. As a strategy of decolonization, it is part of a "process of discovering the truth in a world created out of lies" (Alfred 2005, 280). In Asia's words, it is being able to see and articulate to her school that, "You're basically giving me no chance when you're giving me a chance."

Dangerous dignity encompasses strategies employed by youth to re-vision who they are because of and in spite of their schooling. Youth most frequently talked about this in terms of "doing what I had to do," but they also talked about their school leaving as taking care of themselves, as finally doing the right thing for themselves, and in some cases, as saving their own lives. In our interview with Amaris, a young woman pushed out in tenth grade, she put it this way: "I think high school makes you who you are, basically."

"Can you say more about how it made you who you are?"

"Yeah. It opens you up to new things and stuff. It's a learning experience."

"Regardless [of] if you feel unwanted? You think it makes you stronger in that sense?"

"Yeah. It's an emotional journey. If it doesn't kill you it's just going to make you stronger. Or at least that's what I thought before I realized it was actually going to kill me."

Youth made observations in line with Kathleen Nolan's work on the confluence of policing and schooling, and Jessica Ruglis' work on the health consequences of school non-completion *and* the health consequences of *staying in* school: for these youth, schools were the sites and sources of unsafe interactions with police and school security agents, and declining physical and mental health (see Nolan [2011] and Ruglis [2011]).

In the following passages I'll share pushed out youths' views on their own acts of self-preservation, self-determination, and educational sovereignty. The orientation of this discussion comes from indigenous and decolonizing frameworks; this means that I am signaling indigenous conceptions of the interdependence between the individual and the collective. Thus, concepts of self are at the supra-individual level, a sense of self that is bigger than the body, and in relationship to one's community, history, ancestors, and land (Deloria 1988).

Self preservation

There were as many contexts of self-preservation as young people who participated in our interviews and focus groups, including bullying, gang violence, homophobia and hate-based violence, misogyny, racism, physical health, mental health, family health, foster care, pregnancy, substance abuse, abuse at home or from a boyfriend or girlfriend, and in several cases, parenting younger siblings. Several youth in our interviews described scenarios in which their safety was at risk, and school personnel could not protect them. "I had a problem with a guy," Veronique told us. "He had pushed me and I went to go see the principal and they said, 'I don't think you're welcome here.'" At James' school, each new school day brought a sense of

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impending violence, and before he permanently exited school, the potential violence escalated: "I saved my own life [by getting away from that school.]"

In James' case, the self-preservation was immediate; for other youth, the need for self preservation is more cumulative. Many more of the youth participants in our study took positions of dangerous dignity not because of threats to their physical safety, but to stand up for themselves in the face of misrecognition and disrespect. Lionel told us that year after year of gross inequity of resources in schools was unbearable:

> It's almost like a chain that everyone is stuck in. Like, poverty is something that you are born into, you die into it, and then your kids are born into it and they die into it. Because there's no escaping it unless you're lucky.

Youths' jettisoning from schools can be read as a critique of school and societal inequity, and schooling's promise to afford the American Dream (see also Fine 1991). Jameak talked to us about the importance of having educational opportunities. We asked him, "Do you think that opportunity is offered to everybody?"

"Yeah," he told us, "Everybody has a chance to make it in life."

"Do you think everybody has an equal chance?" we asked.

"No," he said, "Not even close."

Self determination

When Tyrone tells his pushout story, he often begins by telling listeners that he was not supposed to go to the school that ultimately pushed him out. "I know I was in that school because there was a typo on my junior high transcript saying I [would] go to automotive. But I wanted to go to some other high school. It was a typo."

For Tyrone it was a literal clerical error that evidenced the inanity of the decision making around his schooling. For others, the pointlessness of school showed up in other ways. Jacqui told us, "I got more out of School House Rock[2] than I got out of school."

"I was in high school for three years and the only thing I got out of high school was foreshadowing," Jovanne declared. "Yep, that's about it. In your real life, when am I going to be in a work place and they say, 'Hey, Jovanne, do you know what foreshadowing is?' I don't think ever will happen." Youth who see their schooling experiences as putting up with a lot while gaining very little exit schools as acts of self-determination. Rather than tolerating bureaucratic slights and irrelevant curricula, youth exercise self determination as an extension of their dangerous dignity.

Pilar talked with CREDD researcher Bacha about the power of her own self determination in exiting school and earning a GED:

> And I made it. I passed it. That was very great ... [I was proud that] I can achieve something, I could actually complete something. Kind of like a "Fuck you. I can do this."

Educational sovereignty

Another way of thinking about dangerous dignity, self-preservation, and self-determination, is in terms of educational sovereignty. At bare bones, indigenous sover-

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eignty is a struggle against empire; it is the fight for who we will become, and who we have been. Lyons (2000, 449) writes:

> Sovereignty is the guiding story in our pursuit of self-determination, the general strategy by which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization: our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self respect. For indigenous people everywhere, sovereignty is an ideal principle, the beacon by which we seek the paths to agency and power and community renewal. Attacks on sovereignty are attacks on what it enables us to pursue; the pursuit of sovereignty is an attempt to revive not our past, but our possibilities.

Educational sovereignty is the political right of all people. It involves being recognized as having a wealth of experiences and ancestors, a richness of interests and talents, a limitless number of paths a life might take, and those around you will confer the respect on you to choose and make each step on the path. Educational sovereignty means that all people are extended the right to complex personhood (Gordon 1997; Tuck 2009b), the right to be complicated, even contradictory. Educational sovereignty means that all people are seen as holding an abundance of desires, for now and for their futures.

Lyons writes about the need to understand "the twin pillars of sovereignty: the power to self-govern and the affirmation of peoplehood" (2000, 456). This is what makes sovereignty distinct from autonomy – sovereignty is realized by a people, not one person. In this way, educational sovereignty does not get reduced to youth merely being free to fail, but instead, youth, in relationship to their communities, map a dynamic trajectory of learning to, in CREDD researcher Sarah's words, "grow up to be myself."

Sarah writes:

> At the same time [that I am working as a researcher with CREDD] I am trying to figure out my own ways of doing things in my life. I'm asking myself: What happens to people when they are forced to adapt to pre-made structures and conventions and expectations? Can someone become who he or she really is through this path? Are the structures of school and work scaffolding for our dreams or cages to contain us? Does that depend on your position in society? What if I can't grow up to be myself within these preexisting structures? What would it take to make my own? How can I build something strong and flexible enough to support and accommodate my needs?

Sarah's questions are questions that are central to educational sovereignty.

Educational sovereignty is predicated on intergenerational relationships. As many lessons as we learned about the policies and practices inside schools that push youth out, my co-researchers and I also learned about the power of relationships. In similar fashion to the gravitational pull on objects in orbit, one strong relationship with a teacher, guidance counselor, elder, or other adult can help keep youth experiencing the dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignity from being torn apart. Moving to another science metaphor, these relationships can interrupt the chemical reaction that heats up within this dialectic, cooling down the stakes so that youth make decisions from places of dignity, not humiliation.

Our interview participant Sophia put it this way, "If things were better I probably would have finished. I know it's people around you that make things worse. If you want to do it you're going to do it. Some people can make it a little easier."

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Certainly, crowded classrooms and coverage-mandated curricula make it difficult to nurture relationships; in part this is why out-of-school spaces are so important, but I have never been so convinced of anything except this: against the odds, in the inhumane spaces, in the bleakest moments, relationships matter.

Yet, relationships that cultivate dangerous dignity are important in ways that we cannot anticipate. This is to say that relationships that nurture dangerous dignity won't necessarily result in graduation – these relationships do not work in the ways we think they will. This will be unsatisfactory for some, who think that the endgame is increasing completion within the current school system. Informed by the perspectives of pushed-out youth, the endgame must change to include a recalibration of the purposes and meaning of schooling. Supporting youth in making decisions from positions of dangerous dignity may mean giving up the project for greater inclusion in a substandard school system for the more complex, more painstaking project of constructing schooling that is compelling, relevant, inspiring, and worth it.

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Notes

1. A state policy change phased out one of two routes to graduation: the local diploma, which did not require students to pass an exit exam. Now, in New York State, the only route to graduation is by passing five Regents exams, in addition to meeting other criteria. At the time of this writing, the policy is under discussion again, and one option on the table is to reduce the number of required Regents exams to three, eliminating exams in Social Studies. The phasing out of the local diploma has affected the use of the GED option and the use of another route to school completion, the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) "diploma," which is a certificate of completion that does not on its own yield access to higher education.
2. A series of animated educational music videos that aired on Saturday morning cartoons.

Notes on contributor

Eve Tuck is an assistant professor of Educational Foundations at the State University of New York at New Paltz. She has conducted participatory action research with urban youth on the lived value of the GED, school pushout, mayoral control, and neoliberal education policies. With K. Wayne Yang, she is the co-editor of a special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* titled "Youth resistance revisited: New theories of youth negotiations of educational injustices" (Vol. 24, No. 5, October 2011). A fuller discussion of the research featured in this article can be found in *Urban Youth and School Pushout: Gateways, Get-aways, and the GED* (2012, Routledge).

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