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**Experiencing Imminence:  
The Presence of Hope in a Movement for  
Equitable Schooling**

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Critical scholarship on reform-oriented interventions has emphasized the normalizing, capitalist power of reformist discourses, institutions and technologies. Whereas care is often taken to account for the agency of reform's subaltern targets, scant research has attended to the subjective experiences of implicated reformers. This paper examines the ascent of a movement for small, equitable schools in Oakland, California in order to explore the hopes and aspirations of its most ardent advocates. I begin by contrasting the movement's assertion of its equity-centered strategy with the complex race and class hierarchies that grounded power relations within the movement. The question that emerges from this discontinuity is how reformers come to *experience* the movement as equitable and unequivocally progressive. I find that the gap between reformers' ideals and their material circumstances is bridged by the movement's ample production of hope.

*"Our work is about helping others to see a better future for all young people, and sharing in the responsibility of its realization. It is about creating reliable hope."*

Executive Director of the Gates Foundation's Education Program

*"The state can't solve people's problems. The failure of liberalism was thinking that we could solve people's problems. We can only create the conditions for people to make their lives better, in ways that they didn't think were possible before. That's being in the change business."*

Executive Director of the Center for Educational Equity

*"Hope is the confusion of the desire for a thing with its probability."*

Arthur Schopenhauer

## **Historicizing Hope**

The grand opening of four 'new small schools' was the occasion for a lively press conference. After a series of sanguine speeches from educators, administrators and families involved with the conversion of the hulking Fremont High School, in Oakland, California, a school board member representing the district stepped to the microphone for a more subdued salute. He said he wanted to congratulate everybody on the hard work, but he wanted to remind people that this was not the first or last of school innovations in Oakland. He told the crowd, "What we do is reform after reform." He said he remembered the new schools started under Marcus Foster (Oakland's iconic, first Black superintendent of schools) more than 20 years ago. He remembered how in the 1980s, there was a big focus on career academies, and how Fremont's Media Academy became a national model. He remembered helping Fremont implement reforms known as 'block scheduling' in the 1990s. And now he was working with Fremont on the transition to small schools. As he half-heartedly commended the group on its work, he said he wanted to remind everyone that they were standing on the shoulders of other people's work. He conceded that it was OK to do reform after reform, because these reforms reflect the hopes and aspirations of each generation.

What makes the board member's lack of ebullience conspicuous is its timing. The observation that public schooling in the United States is the site of endless reform waves is hardly unusual. It is a commonplace among teachers, scholars and policy-wonks alike. However, sounding a tone of wistful frustration has a customary time and place. This was a time of deliverance. The "small-schools movement" in Oakland had generated unprecedented support for the cause of "closing the racial achievement gap." It garnered historic levels of capital investment, unanimous legal approval and, most importantly, the active participation and enthusiasm of working-class families of color whose fortunes were to be changed by the reforms. The Fremont press conference came in the midst of what appeared to be a giant leap toward racial equity in the school system. It was a zone of unmistakable optimism at the height of an era of hope.

In this paper, I take a cue from the doubting school board member, and I interrupt reformers amid a moment of faith. I examine the ascent of the small-schools movement in Oakland in order to explore the "hopes and aspirations" of its most ardent advocates. I begin by contrasting the movement's assertion of its "equity-centered" strategy with the complex race and class hierarchies that grounded power relations within the movement. The question that emerges from this discontinuity is how reformers come to *experience* the movement as "equitable" and unequivocally progressive. I find that the gap between reformers' ideals and their material circumstances is bridged by the movement's ample production of hope. Articulations of hope through the life of the movement help make reformers' ideals feel closer to realization than they are. Progress, in other words, is experienced as imminence.<sup>i</sup>

The sense of imminent redress accomplished by the movement is not easily detected in the formal statements reformers made about their goals and probable achievements. The actors

and organizations leading the movement did not claim to be racial justice revolutionaries, nor did they promise to create a new society where race and class conflict would not exist.

Characterized in the rational and strategic terms of reformers' planning documents, the movement takes on a pragmatic appearance. However, the modesty of reformers' claims must be paired with the utopian tenor of their desires. Reformers at the center of the movement—a group that includes teachers, principals, parents, NGO professionals, community organizers, foundation officers and school system administrators—imagined the reforms with a passion that insisted on the possibility of a dramatically better world.<sup>ii</sup> In detailing experiences and identities of hope engendered by the movement, I focus on the emotional trajectories and political-economic forces that give material presence to imagined futures.

By investigating the ethics of a pragmatic-utopian social change formation, this paper joins a long tradition of critiquing reform-oriented politics. Critical theories and studies of reform comprise diverse works that are not often brought into common conversation. They have taken on myriad forms, from leftist debates on the virtues of reform vs. revolution (Fanon 1963, Luxemburg 1908) to structural analyses of relations between society's wreckage and its renovation (Gramsci 1971, Polanyi 1944) to more recent analyses of interventionist institutions, NGOs and social movements (e.g., Cooper and Packard 1997, Edelman 2001, Escobar 1995, Fisher 1997, Gregory 1997, Joseph 2002, O'Connor 2001, Wolch 1990). Given its varied guises, current critical scholarship on reform is dangerously dispersed across academic disciplines and divided along geo-political lines. For example, whereas the self-consciously critical *post-development* literature provides cogent interrogation of reform processes unleashed to make the 'third world' in the image of the 'first,' its theoretical work does not often speak to or with analogous literature on interventions against race and class inequality in Europe and the United

States.<sup>iii</sup> While this political-cum-analytic chasm requires serious examination, it falls beyond the purview of the present discussion. My purpose here is to build on the disparate insights and implicitly argue for a ‘reformist politics’ frame.

Two stabilizing features of these critical literatures are of interest to a project on the hegemony of reformist formations. First, research has begun to take as given the programmatic failure of reform projects. For example, Jim Ferguson’s (1994) influential ethnography of an agricultural reform apparatus deployed in Lesotho takes the failure of a livestock management project as an analytic point of departure, and sets out to learn what is being accomplished if not agricultural reform. Second, scholars are characteristically unsurprised by the historical record of “reform after reform.” The endlessness of reform is particularly salient in the worlds of U.S. public education research, where firmly institutionalized relations between schooling and social improvement reach back more than 150 years. Eminent education historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban have suggested that periodic waves of criticism-diagnosis-problem solving are a natural result of value conflicts in a liberal democracy (1996). A far more penetrating theory of continuous reform emerges from Michel Foucault’s (1977) history of the ‘correctional’ vocation of disciplinary societies. Foucault writes: “One should recall that the movement for reforming the prisons . . . is not a recent phenomenon. It does not even seem to have originated in a recognition of failure. Prison ‘reform’ is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its program.” (234). Not only is continuous institutional reform unsurprising, on Foucault’s account, it flows rather automatically from practices aimed at educating souls. It would be hasty to blame the impression of self-reproducing cycles of reform on Foucault’s strategic move to de-center the subject in his historical work. As Foucault intimates, but does not address, “recalling” the connections between waves of reform is a far-

reaching *empirical* problem. To the extent that critical theorists of reform naturalize the failure and paradoxical persistence of interventionist projects, they miss an opportunity to examine how each new era of hope is articulated out of failures of the past. At stake is a rigorous account of the power of reformist movements to arouse and articulate desires for social change.

### **The Ethics of Equity**

In the fall of 2000, there was so much national buzz about changes happening in the Oakland Unified School District that the city could not accept all of the applicants to *Teach for America* who wanted a placement there.<sup>iv</sup> That spring, the district had passed a policy to create new small schools intended to fill the city with “equitable schools of choice.” In addition to the policy, a raise in teacher salaries and an innovative partnership between community organizers and education reform experts put Oakland in the national spotlight. At a press conference announcing the latest donation to Oakland’s effort, the Executive Director of Education for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation offered heartfelt admiration along with a check for \$9.5 million. “Things are going right for Oakland kids. I don’t see this level of community involvement anywhere in the country,” he told the crowd. “We’re gonna keep coming back until every student in Oakland has great life options.”

According to participants and observers, what made Oakland’s small-schools movement different from other efforts to battle the effects of factory-style schooling in large, urban districts was its relentless commitment to principles of equity. The policy, for example, called for new organizational designs that would produce personalized, rigorous and safe learning environments. While the schools would be open to all students, the policy’s vocation was to improve education for the Black and Latino working class students who typically had the lowest



test scores and fewest college prospects in the district. The policy's details—from admissions guidelines to academic standards—made plain that these changes were not meant to enhance the choices available to the wealthy families living in the Oakland hills. In terms that no one had to spell out, the policy spoke to the needs of “flatlands” families whose children attended “overcrowded and underperforming” schools. Its stated purpose was “to close the achievement gap for under-served students.”

However, the commitment to equity was more often identified with the genesis and leadership of the reforms. For one thing, the origins of the movement in grassroots organizing and parents' demand for better schools was seen as a critical reversal of the more typical “top-down” imposition of reforms. From the perspective of the community-based organization, Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) which represented parents in the “Small Schools Partnership,” the movement was a victory not only for students but also for their parents. In the words of the organization's co-chair, “Through OCO we have made absolute systemic changes. We have been able to do things that other cities haven't been able to do because we brought everyone to the table, especially parents and community. And making the school district and the city listen to our concerns and start to work for us, which is what they're supposed to do.” OCO not only organized the watershed public action in which more than 2000 supporters won policy commitments from public officials. They also did the listening legwork, through thousands of face-to-face meetings with teachers and parents, which allowed them to confidently say of the small schools agenda, “This is what the community wants.”

The ‘educational expertise’ piece of The Partnership, represented by The Center for Educational Equity (CEE), was also considered essential to overcoming the inequities and errors of past reform movements.<sup>v</sup> CEE was the local affiliate of a national, university-affiliated school

reform network that had for decades championed small schools organized around intellectual mastery. CEE's access to 25 years' worth of reform wisdom assured Oakland's advocates that local changes would be guided by "what the research says." Flatlands residents had seen too many reform waves come and go to have patience for experimental solutions to the problems that plagued their neighborhood schools. The educators and consultants on CEE's staff were seen as "the brains" behind the movement. They could advise the district and community organizers on the complex array of technical issues involved in creating new schools, from the most effective organizational structures to the best pedagogical practices to on-going professional development for teachers. The Partnership, as it was dubbed, therefore signaled the reformers' ideal leadership model for making progressive and sustainable changes: CEE brought concrete, proven models to the community's demand for better schools.

For CEE, "challenging historical patterns of inequity" was the *raison d'être* of school reform. It wasn't enough to promote academic excellence. The goal of equitable schooling—"to ensure that all students can reach high standards and that no student is poorly served due to her/his race, gender, home language, or economic status"—had to define both the means and ends of reform. To train teachers, they developed programs such as "Inquiry for Equity" and "Leading for Equity, Achievement and Democracy." Multiracial collectives were thought to be a strategic necessity in equity-centered reform. In the words of one CEE document, "We believe the best way to leverage the resources we need is to harness the latent talent, resources and energy that exists in our communities but that cannot be accessed because of distrust, cynicism and past failure. Our work together stands as proof that we can establish partnerships and alliances across the fractures of race, class, experience and culture that divide us." The diversity of CEE's staff and the community's multicultural vanguard were widely recognized as

indications that common cause was supplanting a history of cronyist politics. The ultimate goal of equity-centered reform was expressed, in the words of one funding proposal, as “changed lives – lives transformed through the intentional creation of multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial communities where freedom and justice are practiced in pursuit of learning.” Reformers committed themselves to that goal through daily practices such as ensuring that subaltern parents and people of color had directive and vocal roles in daily meetings and long-term projects.

Given all that seemed to be at stake, people in the movement labored with incredible intensity. The nonprofit professionals notoriously worked 70- and 80-hour weeks to “coach” emergent “design teams.” They drew few boundaries around their time and worked at a frenetic pace in order to accomplish all that was expected of them. Parents and teachers donated innumerable, unwaged hours to the cause, squeezing meetings in before and after work, in hallways and on weekends, often sacrificing family responsibilities. Reformers did not pace themselves for a marathon. They were in a constant state of sprint. That urgency made good sense to CEE’s executive director as he explained to me, “We have reached a point where I can look ahead and I can actually see the actual set of events . . . it’s a 3-5 year window where this district is gonna tip. This is gonna tip.” Such statements were far more than rhetorical tools of encouragement. The director’s bright face and energetic delivery conveyed an affective intensity and deep muscular attachment.

Before equity could be measured in terms of student test scores, then, “community leadership” was the main sign of a principled break from the past. The on-going participation of flatlands parents in creating the schools was said to be critical in securing the effectiveness and the righteousness of the reforms. It was understood that flatlands parents wanted what middle-

class parents had always enjoyed: choices among high quality schools. In order for the new schools to be responsive to the needs and values of the community—and not only to the visions of teachers and administrators—community members would have to stay close to the school design process. Beyond getting designs right, many reformers envisioned the transformation of the entire district in terms of a fundamentally new relationship between public schools and their communities. One parent observed, “OCO has empowered parents by keeping them central to the organizing process for small schools. They understand that parents need to be involved with each other and at our children’s schools just as much as our children need us to be.” Parent participation on the new school design teams was seen as a particularly significant interruption of the status quo. “What is different about this movement,” said one leader, with emphatic respect, “is that people demanded not only to have better schools, but to sit at the table and design those schools. The care and ownership that people brought to the table was key to the shift from reproductive patterns to transformative ones.”

The story of the movement’s grassroots origin was perhaps the most consistent and public narrative of what the small-schools movement was all about. It introduced the text of the policy and other official documents. It was recounted at the start of important meetings. It was used to orient newcomers and observers of the movement. Those in the know trace the roots to a group of Latina mothers who met at a church on Saturdays to discuss the problems in their children’s school. They gradually began to see the need for less crowded schools. OCO heard concerns voiced across the flatland neighborhoods of the city and began organizing. They sent a delegation of parents and elected officials to visit exemplary schools in Harlem, New York. Parents and community groups kept meeting and dreaming and lobbying officials. Officials

were convinced, asked CEE to draft a policy, and the school board unanimously passed it. The story establishes the reform movement's 'bottom-up' trajectory. It renders marginalized parents as the empowered force behind citywide changes. It portrays white power-holders heeding their demands.

But there are other stories to tell about the origins of the movement. At least since the mid-1990s, CEE had been developing plans for a small-schools project in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 1997, they won a foundation grant to develop a network of schools that could serve as examples to a broad audience of educators and reformers. They were deeply tied to the Harlem schools that were said to have inspired Oakland's movement. By the time OCO had fomented Oakland parents' concerns into an audible rumble, CEE was, in fact, already doing the work of 'the small-schools movement.' It was simply cast at a national rather than local scale. Though they strained to portray themselves as "supporters" of community leaders, CEE was arguably the protagonist of the movement.

They quickly became the center of gravity for the design and opening of new schools. As fiscal agent of the Gates donation and architect of the policy, the nongovernmental organization built the confidence of potential supporters and exercised conceptual authority over the reform process. To be sure, OCO and organized parents were a critical factor in the movement's ascent, its national splash and its success in effecting changes to schooling in the district. What's not at all evident is that they were "the driver" behind the reforms, as it was often said, nor that the movement's genesis redressed their status as vulnerable subjects of racial and economic domination.

A second narrative that exalted the agency of an empowered community recounts the citywide action OCO organized to press for a small-schools policy. Participants tell it as a David

vs. Goliath story, recalling how Mayor Jerry Brown, Senior State Senator Don Perata, Superintendent George Musgrove and members of the City Council, School Board and teachers' union each said yes, one-by-one, to all of the parents' demands. What's peculiar about the interpretation of 'victory' that surrounds this story is the timeline of events. Eight months *prior* to the emblematic meeting, district leaders had already asked CEE to draft a policy and they had hired a Director of Small Schools. The teachers union had formally signed on as movement collaborators. A Mayor's Commission formally endorsed the concept. Education's power brokers, in other words, walked into the meeting already convinced. Nevertheless, this story and other glorifications of democratic initiative were regularly invoked as evidence of a dramatic reordering of power relations. Just what did this event and its recollection accomplish, if not pressuring politicians to change their ways? Suffice it to say, for now, that there is a disjuncture between the stories the movement tells about its commitment to equity and the rather more ambiguous principles grounding its political practices.

The idea of the small-schools reforms as a 'community-led' movement is best viewed as a prominent reification in Oakland's emergent progressive imaginary. The only real leverage that OCO and their constituents had over the *direction* of the movement was their ability to make a public stink. In light of widespread enthusiasm about the small-schools agenda, parents and officials were far more united than divided, and protest was hardly necessary. As such, though the words 'community leadership' were everywhere, there was a divergence between the ideal of empowerment and the material need for subaltern participation. Once the movement had passed from a moment of demand to implementing the policy, it was unclear that there was much for parents and organizers to do but follow.

Much less ambiguous, however, was the general marginalization of parents in the budding school design process. As reformers' work turned toward the nitty-gritty of hammering out instructional programs and staffing patterns, teachers took center stage. Parents were less often seen and heard at meetings. Some teams of teachers never succeeded in enlisting parent participants. On other teams, tensions between parents and teachers festered around the exclusive, technical language of the call for proposals.<sup>vi</sup> Given the racial profiles of the two groups, this entailed a marked whitening of the movement's front line of action. In light of the association between parents' central role in creating the new schools and the urgent goal of interrupting patterns of inequity and "reproduction," the new reality might have brought the movement to a halt.

Participants did find the pattern disquieting. Some designers of the process confessed they hadn't yet figured out how to bridge parents' and teachers' points of view. Others lamented the speed of things. Some parents were furious, and others simply felt unqualified to contribute. It's puzzling that this turn of events did not prompt OCO to take parents to the streets. In the face of such a crushing reversal of ideals, why did the discourse of community leadership persist and not become a symbol of hypocrisy or failed dreams? And what accounts for the demure tenor of the response? The sense of *concern* that followed a boldfaced resurgence of top-down decision-making hardly compares with the passion that underscored reformers' assertions about building a new culture, "where freedom and justice are practiced in pursuit of learning."

What's more, from the start, "the community" was itself racially divided in its relations to the small-schools reforms, giving lie to the promise of dispossessed families uniting to solve common problems. Initially, participation was concentrated among mothers of elementary school children in Oakland's Latino neighborhoods. Their children generally attended the most

egregiously crowded schools in the district. Although the policy gave priority for admissions equally to children from “overcrowded” and “low-performing” schools, the first five schools to open were all located in the Fruitvale—the geographical metonym of Oakland’s Latino population. “That’s where the energy is,” one reform leader told me. The movement quickly developed a reputation as “a Latino thing,” and it proved difficult, at first, to engage large numbers of Black parents. It didn’t help matters that smallness was being imposed on two large high schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods of East Oakland. Given the contrast between voluntary and coerced participation, and its racial contours, it should have been impossible to posit the unified and ideologically homogenous social people that personified the movement’s “romance of community.”<sup>vii</sup> However, parents and professionals alike invoked the *universal* good the reforms would bring. As one brochure phrased it, equitable schools would create conditions where “every school, every teacher and every student will realize their unique gifts, interests and talents.”

### **The Presence of an Improbable Future**

What’s especially striking in the overall discontinuity between the progressive identity of the movement and its ethical practices is a temporal slip. Instead of treating equitable schooling as a set of aspirations that might guide a protracted struggle, reformers talked and behaved as if inequity’s end were imminent. For example, rather than seeing parent organizing for new schools as an uneven, uncertain, temporary process filled with moments of both encouragement and disappointment, participants regarded it as an actual “shift from reproductive patterns to transformative ones.” Likewise, the bottom-up practices that distinguished the movement from prior reforms, such as ensuring that Black and Latino participants had visible and audible roles in



important meetings, were not understood to be expressions of the desire for a reversal of racist power relations. They were taken to be indicators of a reversal in-the-making. Reformers rallied, wept, cheered and labored as if they could “see the actual events” that would turn Oakland into a city where poor and rich parents alike choose among great schools. Despite the fractious and unequal involvement of residents and racial groups, “an organized community” was not regarded as a task to accomplish, rather as a *fait accompli*. The tremendous flurry of activity was accorded a clear interpretation: progress was here and now. All of this confidence, it’s worth repeating, flourished in advance of the opening of new schools, long before new measures of ‘the achievement gap’ could even be taken.

Their optimism, in other words, entailed a collapsing of the future they wished for with the present they were creating. Where did this sense of imminent “freedom and justice” come from? How were the partial and contradictory fruits of reformers’ labor misrecognized as compelling evidence of a righteous path? To the extent that there were planned changes taking place throughout the district, the results were rather modest. Groups of Black, Latino and working class parents were attending school-related meetings in larger numbers than usual. An influx of philanthropic capital temporarily paid for surplus meeting time—though it did nothing to boost the dismal budget of the school system. Newly designed schools rerouted funding streams and allowed teachers and students to know each other better. As we have seen, myriad unplanned changes violated cherished principles of racial equity and empowerment. How were such transgressions ignored? The experience of daily frustration and falling short didn’t have to be well-articulated to have weighed heavily on reformers’ big hearts. There was evidence of inequity (however re-configured) bearing down on their dreams of an educational utopia. And yet there were few signs of doubt. No scent of despair. There was vigorous, zealous attachment

to the plausibility of their plans and to the probability of realizing their ideals. How did the imagined trajectory from the achievement gap to equitable schooling hold together? What was the glue for this utopian-pragmatic zone of social change? How did images of a more equal future carry so much weight in the present?

It was the temporal and spatial *presence* of hope that gave material heft to the ideals of racial equity. Whereas racial equity still lay precariously in a state of ‘possible future,’ hope was something you could practically bump into. It materialized across wide swaths of the city in the willingness of subaltern parents to elicit and believe the promises of highly-perched decision-makers whom experience had taught them to distrust. It circulated in the festive air of the annual small-schools conference and it erupted through rousing speeches about “a new civil rights movement.” It burst through the applause of world-weary adults at the mention of a poor child’s professional aspirations. Hope was both the sustenance and out-put of laboring school-designers who gave voice and body to their dreams in church basements, NGO offices and school cafeterias. The Gates Foundation’s optimistic multi-millions boosted collective self-esteem, and eased the pain of an economic recession.<sup>viii</sup> When Oakland voters overwhelmingly approved a \$350 million bond to build and improve schools, this time-and-place of hope seemed firmly installed. One has only to think of a stock market rally to imagine the synergistic effect of these affective, financial and semantic investments on the sense of imminent transformation in the city.

Needless to say, such durable intensity and excitement did not arise automatically from the tracks the movement was laying. Contrary to reformers’ accounts of excitement in and about Oakland, it was not enough to create a new and better strategy for closing the racial achievement gap. The movement had to become what Antonio Gramsci (1971) called “a modern prince.” It had to create a “concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and

organize its collective will” (126). The movement’s ascent and its prospects for hegemony lay not in the institutional power of The Partnership nor strictly in the rhetoric of its equity narratives. It had to bring the fantasy of racial equity to life. The two movement visionaries quoted at the start of this paper were keenly aware that arousing and articulating desires for change were integral to their work. “Being in the change business” entailed “creating reliable hope.”

A proliferation of activities followed the passage of the policy and extended the reach of the movement’s expectant mood. There were public meetings about the nascent school design process and about access to Gates funds. Newly formed design teams popped up all over the city and met regularly to devise their proposals. Sundry meetings to enroll new funders, functionaries and researchers became places where the history of the movement was told, and where parents and teachers gave “testimonials” about their dismal experiences in the school system. CEE’s increasing visibility as the leading organizational Partner lent an ‘NGO’ identity to the unfolding reform process. The disassociation dissipated reforms seemed to lift the weight of the district’s bureaucratic baggage.

The emotional shape of parent-demand rituals was a prominent element of the movement’s burgeoning identity of hope. In planning for public actions, parents and organizers often used a call-and-response style of engagement to cultivate and sequence feelings of despair, outrage, anger, intimidation and empowerment. Such rehearsals prepared parents for the more amplified emotional experience of public actions. For example, at the public action discussed earlier, in which public officials performed accession, parent anger was made figurative within a cathartic trajectory under conditions of immediate gratification. Parents offered up their pain, politicians pledged their support, and the memorable evening, often described as euphoric,

peaked when Mayor Jerry Brown led the crowd in chanting the revolutionary slogan, “*Sí, se puede.*” Not only could parents experience the relief of being heard, through such bonding ceremonies, but officials could take comfort in feeling they were doing the right thing.

If the emotional texture of demanding dotted daily participation with a sense of short-term triumph, a variety of dreaming practices gave immediacy to long-range desires. For instance, brochures, websites and other public communications filled the movement’s environs with images of happy and cared-for people of color, including a plethora of smiling and studying Black children. Reformers also habitually used the present tense to narrate desires as if they had already been realized. The syntax of the so-called ‘vision statement,’ for example, allowed one design team to utter, “Mandela [High School] is a rigorous, academic environment where students become articulate, skilled, active, caring, critical thinkers,” before the doors to the school had opened. In time, built landscapes were inflected with desires brimming in the names of new schools, such as “ASCEND Elementary,” “Urban Promise Academy,” and “Youth Empowerment School (YES).” As reformers represented their dreams, a semiotics of racial equity was sutured to the present.

The temporal twist engendered by sustained dreaming sessions was more visceral. When possible, such sessions were held in the form of a retreat. The Mandela design team, for example, spent two days brainstorming ideas for a biliteracy certification program in the school they would open the following fall. Though everyone involved lived in town, they paid to spend the night at a university faculty club. The organizer told me that the group really wanted, “the feeling of being away.” For nearly 12 hours, the team occupied a single, generic meeting room, and filled the walls with chart-paper listing their program ideas. The optimum space of dreaming was an ‘out of place’ space.

Conjuring the content of an ideal school was, for its part, an experience of being ‘out of time.’ In a simple sense, retreating from one’s hectic daily life made such meetings places where time stopped. More profoundly, the act of creating a new school—the essential instrument of social production—was something of a sacred experience. Anything was possible inside the space-time of dreaming. Mandela’s teachers, for example, were not burdened with the task of undoing the unequal status of languages in an anti-immigrant society, a key source of their motivation. In the heat of dreaming up ways for students to love learning languages—“Yeah, and we can do trips to Louisiana where French has a whole different meaning”—they were permitted to simply assert their own, ahistorical values, and thereby transcend the inequitable world. Starting a new school felt like cleaning the slate of history and beginning anew. The realities of design were always quick to discipline the content of dreams. But dreaming left an emotional memory. By letting their imaginations loose in such sessions, participants could at once release the tension of living in inequality and renew their faith that equity was possible.

The shifting location of small-schools meetings brought into relief a geography of hope that revealed the contours of the movement’s persuasiveness. As we have already seen, the sites of heaviest investment in the process—investments of time, labor and faith—were the neighborhoods closest to the heart of the Latino-identified Fruitvale section of Oakland. According to the district office now in charge of “incubating” new schools, when the policy was first being implemented, “we intentionally opened schools only where organizing was occurring in order to grow and maintain a level of energy needed to initiate new reforms.”

Locating public meetings in new places was one way to grow the level of energy. The annual conference was particularly effective in stimulating and corralling excitement in less forthcoming locales. Of particular concern to movement leaders was the ossifying Latino

identity that bristled against old Black/Latino antagonisms. Hosting the conference in the western and eastern areas of the city gave Black neighborhoods a chance to see themselves as central constituents of the movement. Uneven identification with the movement did not, of course, follow neatly along neighborhood boundaries. It was stronger among Mexican-Americans, whose power in local government had steadily increased, than among more vulnerable Central Americans. It was far easier to secure among younger teachers than among veterans. Citizens of the large high schools—especially those forced to convert to small schools—were the hardest hearts to win. Enthusiasm for the reforms took hold in pockets, pitting the willing against those who opposed the breakup. These patterns point to the conditions that were best suited for the production of hope. It flowed easily among those who had least experience with local disappointment and most sense of security and openness about the possibilities before them.

## **Conclusion**

In effect, the copious presence of hope counterbalanced and displaced signs of failure and futility lurking in the movement. My project here has been to illustrate the texture and shape of this hopeful presence. In the context of daily life, hope was empowering and relieving. At the scale of the city, it operated as an ethical identity that sparked great productivity and tied Oakland's future to multiculturalist norms. Whereas the movement's political-economic power could only produce modest, institutional changes, demanding and dreaming enabled it to keep the promise of utopian change alive. It was the experience of imminence—the palpable nearness and realness of reformers' ideals—that made the improbable future of racial equity plausible. The progressive contour of the movement's hopeful identity was its dynamics of reliability. If

parents demanded, officials would listen. When participants opened themselves up to dreaming, the Partners came through with grants to turn dreams into designs.

Oakland's intense desire for change—provoked, in the first instance, by the injustice of racialized schooling—could have been mobilized in other directions. Indeed, radical activists contending for the progressive mantle pushed for less hopeful social change identities, such as boycotting mandated curricula and organizing against youth incarceration. Reformers won widespread identification and investment largely because they made each other believe their dreams were about to come true. Honing in on this sense of imminence is key to exposing how utopian desires are appropriated for mundane ends. Given the durability of race and class hierarchies in public schooling (and other battlefields of progress), it is imperative to interrogate the ethical implications of mobilizing hope under conditions of utopian-pragmatism. Rather than defend the importance of hopefulness against fears of political paralysis, critical research ought to ask what forms of hope have come to dominate—in particular times and places—progressive identities and experiences of social change.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This inquiry into the experience of imminent, utopian transformation among education reformers in Oakland, California is part of a larger ethnographic project on the ethics of political optimism. This paper draws on 24 months of field research carried out between July 2000 and June 2004.

<sup>1</sup> I define the category ‘reformer,’ here, in terms of particular political sensibilities. Although Oakland reformers occupied distinct institutional and social positions, they were united by the intensity of their belief in the promise of small, equitable schools.

<sup>1</sup> Given its relative cohesion, the critical literature on ‘development’ is fairly easy to track. See Hart (2001) for a helpful introduction.

<sup>1</sup> Teach for America is an organization that places recent college graduates in understaffed urban and rural schools. It is the emblem of young, middle class idealists who go into teaching not because it’s a good job, but because they “want to make a difference.”

<sup>1</sup> At their request, I have used a pseudonym to refer to this organization.

<sup>1</sup> Conflict between parents and teachers in the small-schools movement is extensively explored in a dissertation by Dryness (2004).

<sup>1</sup> Miranda Joseph’s (2002) book *Against the Romance of Community* provides an insightful critique of community formations by arguing for their complementary relations with capitalism.

<sup>1</sup> Between 2000 and 2004, the foundation donated more than \$35 million to the district and to CEE.







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