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The Spatiality of Schooling: A Quest for Equitable Classrooms and High Expectations for Low-Income Students of Color

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**Authors**

Liou, Daniel D.  
Marsh, Tyson E.J.  
Antrop-Gonzalez, Rene

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Students' views of their chances of school success can greatly influence their motivation to learn (Brophy, 2013). However, the extent to which classroom spaces mediate these perceptions is currently undertheorized in the educational literature, especially in the context of teacher-student relationships. Research has recognized spatiality as physically and socially constructed to mediate human experiences within a given set of institutional norms (Pickles, 1985). Moreover, through unspoken norms, such as the *hidden curriculum* or expectations that might be subtly conveyed to students, spatiality plays a central role in the educational socialization of students (Apple, 2004; McLaren, 2015). Students' capacity to effectively navigate the tacit constructions of knowledge and achievement influences their spatial behaviors (Allen, 1999; Anyon, 1980).

This article draws from the disciplinary traditions of spatiality, educational studies, and the concept of social identity contingency to generate new ways for students to interpret and experience their teachers' expectations for learning. The interplay between the physical and social dynamics of spatiality is of consequence to what is also known as *social identity contingency* (Steele, 2010), which Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, and Crosby (2008) have defined as "possible judgments, stereotypes, opportunities, restrictions, and treatments that are tied to one's social identity in a given setting" (p. 615). These judgments can be externally imposed through stereotypes, and internally negotiated through social interactions to comply with, resist, or transform those rendered judgments (Steele, 2010). Finally, social identity contingency recognizes the power dynamics and institutional processes that foster one's social location within the physical and interpersonal dimensions of spatiality.

In the school context, we operationalize the concept of social identity contingency as the ways in which educators classify students' intellectual promise based on broader social identity categories, and engage in classroom practices that communicate different expectations in both indirect and overt ways. As such, teachers allow their anticipation of student learning to foster a state of interpersonal and environmental effects and relationships. This sequence—what we refer to as teacher *expectancy*—in turn socializes students to perform to the teacher's standards for academic achievement (Gregory & Korth, 2016). For example, if a student is regarded as "unteachable" due to negative stereotypes and deficit thinking, the teacher might lower expectations for that student, which can negatively impact the subsequent treatment and performance of this student (Rist, 1970). Social identity contingencies inform educational spaces, which can be regulated through one's expectations and interactions with other members within the space. Much like the logic of the Thomas theorem (1928), a teacher's assumptions about reality can inform and even define reality. That is, criteria that inform a school's perceptual framework (Title 1 status, high versus low achieving, belief and disbelief about student success, etc.) can dictate acceptable behaviors

for achievement, and result in real consequences for the students (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2016). Hence, the norms, values, and beliefs associated with the hidden curriculum often communicates to students' their perceived potential and opportunities for success as a product of their social identity—reinforcing the social order to deleterious effect (De Lissovoy, 2012).

The researchers sought to understand how the undertheorized issue of how the spatiality of schooling facilitates teacher-student interactions to bring about learning. To this end, our study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers shape the classroom space to engage students in learning?
2. How do low-income students of color define the classroom as a space to facilitate academic identity contingency?
3. How can classroom spaces be transformed to positively support students' expectations for higher forms of learning?

### **How Expectations Regulate the Classroom Space**

Though there is no concrete definition of space, it should not be understood symbolically, especially in educational contexts where learning is situated within teacher-student relationships, and within the physical arrangement of the classroom to meet particular political objectives (McGregor, 2004). Undertaking this work, we contended that social identity contingencies implicate space in such a way that students physically and psychologically engage in a historicized context of learning that has been defined by a political process embedded within a normalized system of beliefs and expectations. As Lefebvre and Enders (1976) observed, "Space has been shaped and molded from its natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideology" (p. 31). To Lefebvre and Enders (1976), space encompasses social meanings that are contextually bounded by both the physicality of the space and the moment in which social identity contingencies influence behaviors and interactions.

A psychological dimension informs concepts of space, as socialization within the classroom shapes the student's sense of belonging and identification with learning. The dimension was conceptualized by Steele (2010), who posited that the concept of social identity contingency is central to our understanding of the environmental factors that shape identity and the use of that identity to interact within the confined rules and expectations for a given social identity contingency. Milner (2010) observed:

Implicit social and academic power structures exist among students in schools. Some of these power structures are conceptualized by adults and

are shared by students. Other power structures are constructed by students themselves. Understanding these power structures and how they operate and are enacted can help educators bridge the space between social facets of the school environment with academic aspects. (p. 114)

Thus, space is both physically and socially constructed by the relationships between race, class, and academic achievement in the classroom. Allen (1999) illuminated these evolving relationships by pointing to spatiality as a major feature of students' racial identities and the formations of student resistance to the persistent power dynamics in the school system. Further, Allen (1999) elaborated upon the ways in which educational opportunities have traditionally been arranged to privilege White students and their ways of knowing. The educational system endorses a structure of domination that normalizes both white superiority and the inferiority of low-income students and students of color. These implicit tendencies therefore perpetuate inequitable expectations along racial lines. It is in this apparatus of domination that students of color begin to learn about their academic identity and distinct membership in the school.

These regulatory processes can involve teachers' expectations of students based on personal judgments (belief, stereotype, and bias) and objective measures (test scores and grades) to influence student achievement (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2016). These expectations embed themselves in pedagogical practice (Becker, 1952) and communication styles in the classroom (Woolfolk & Brooks, 1983), and might even be influenced by students' previous grades and behavior record, earlier encounters with the student's older siblings or those who act remarkably similar, other teachers' accounts of interactions with the student, initial impressions of the student and family members, and teachers' attitudes toward people who look, speak, and dress differently (Rist, 1970).

Research has indicated that, historically, students of color—regardless of social and economic status—have faced problems related to low academic expectations by teachers (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004). Unlike teachers who hold their students to low academic expectations, those teachers who hold high expectations for all students demonstrate what we refer to as spaces of positive expectations, where teachers draw upon the students' knowledge base for learning and enable them to become academically successful (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005). As opposed to an ideologically oppressive epistemology, all students deserve a student-centered pedagogy informed by positive academic expectations and culturally competent teachers who attend to the feelings and needs concerning societal inequities, and play an instrumental role in creating a classroom space that promotes success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We utilized conceptual frameworks that include whiteness studies, identity theory, and Freirian theory to help us understand the ideological and psychological underpinnings of classroom spaces, teacher expectations of students, and students' academic identity. As discussed, the ideological dimension of the classroom often manifests in teachers' beliefs and attitudes about students. Because psychological factors shape classrooms as spaces for learning, student self-concept and identification are enmeshed in the physical dimension. Abundant research that has indicated the high valuation of whiteness in the school context (Allen, 1999) also suggests an inverse devaluing of low-income and the detrimental outcomes relating to who is entitled to more resources, who gets tested under the accountability system, and whose epistemology should be central to intellectual legitimacy and acceptance under the pretense of meritocracy (Harris, 1992; Leonardo, 2002).

The dynamics within the classroom space contribute to the complex process whereby a student negotiates and defines his or her academic identity and future aspirations. To understand how students experience racial identity contingency in the classroom, we drew upon Lowe's (1999) analytic framework of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity to grasp how external and internal identifications influence teacher academic expectations of students. Clearly, identity is not static, and individual associations with other various norms in different contexts can be fluid (Omi & Winant, 2004). Applying this concept to the definitions of one's institutional membership and academic identity, Howard (2003) observed that "identity is constructed internally and reconstructed externally in various social and cultural settings, and can vary from one context to the next" (p. 6). Academic identity, then, is a historicized, ongoing process of conquest, resistance, negotiation, and affirmation from one social identity contingency to the next. Freire's (1970) concept of *limit situations* posits that these socially constructed spaces are not neutral, but rather are bounded geographically, physically, and politically.

Extrapolating from Freire (1970), these spaces become extensions and sites of ideological meaning—for our purposes, structures that limit pedagogical possibilities (Spring, 2013). Our observations were informed by the test-based accountability system designed to serve the advancement of the neoliberal state, not to remove the shackles of race, class, and gender hegemony. When students negotiate their academic identity contingencies, educational spaces are contested, as those who begin to question the inequitable distributions of educational opportunity come to seek empowerment and liberation. As Freire (1970) observed, "In order for the oppressed to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world in which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation in which they can transform" (p. 49). In this

study, we aimed to illuminate students' perceptions of their realities, and highlight the constraints and contradictions embedded in a contested space waiting to be transformed.

## **Methods**

### **Context**

Our study took place in a racially and linguistically diverse city in California, referred to here as West Coast City, where race and class segregation was occurring to a lesser degree than in many large metropolitan centers. Indeed, a walk down a major thoroughfare in West Coast City could have given the impression that it is well-integrated, though the presence of a major research university brought in workers for local businesses that served its largely privileged college student population as well staff and faculty (restaurants, retail shops, etc.) from surrounding working class communities of color.

West Coast High School, a large, comprehensive high school in West Coast City, was engaged in efforts to bridge the racial opportunity gap. It was the only high school in the city and, historically, low-income and students of color had shown disproportionate rates of "D" or "F" grades on their report cards compared to their White peers at the school. These disparities in academic achievement were reflected in the high dropout rate, and the proportion of students of color suspended and expelled from school. Through partnerships with university researchers, the school recognized the profound disparities in educational opportunities available to students along racial lines.

To confront these issues, West Coast High School implemented small-school reform to increase personalized instruction and harness equity through higher expectations. These efforts were especially appealing to parents of color, who had historically viewed the school as an entrenched racialized context in which White students were perceived as superior to their students of color. The small-school initiative separated West Coast High School into multiple, smaller thematic academies, each with a different focus, allowing students and families to choose which of the autonomous academies best met their needs. Examining small schools as contingencies of equity with the possibility to transform learning for low-income students of color, we view the small school as a space of possibility. Because of the small school reform, West Coast High School was selected for this particular study for the purpose of understanding relationships between space and teacher expectancy practices. Specifically, we wanted students who had historically been marginalized in academic contexts to elucidate how they identified with the space in relation to their present and future probability of academic success.

## **Data Collection**

Findings for this study are informed by a larger ethnographic study that focused on teachers' academic expectations for students of color (Yin, 2009). At Ponderosa Academy, one of the small-school divisions of West Coast High School, 222 students were attending at the time of this study. Of this total, 56% was African American, 19% was Latina/o, 14% was White, 9% was mixed race, and 2% was Asian. Of the 12 teachers, two were teachers of color. The larger study took place over one year and involved multiple sources of data, including weekly observations of English, history, math, and science classrooms, semi-structured interviews with 36 11th- and 12th-graders and 12 teachers, a collection of school and community artifacts, and memo writing. We selected 11th- and 12th-graders from the small learning community due to the length of their experiences in this particular school setting, and the data selected for the study at hand is a subsample of the larger study guided by the same research questions.

With the classroom as the unit of analysis, the multiple case studies design started with a purposive sample procedure to recruit participants. Students' level of participation included one-on-one interviews, classroom observations, informal interviews, and one focus group for the purpose member checking. Interview questions included the following: What are your expectations for yourself socially, academically, and career-wise? What steps are you taking to meet those goals for yourself? What are your family members' expectations for your academic achievement? What do teachers do to support you to reach your goals? What do these practices look like in your classrooms? Do you feel your goals are attainable as a result of being in this classroom? The intent of these interview questions was to understand how classroom spaces facilitated teacher-student expectations in learning contingencies that contribute to student learning.

Ponderosa Academy utilized a looping system wherein students in each grade level had the same set of teachers for all four years of their high school career. The looping system benefitted this study by allowing us to shadow students in the same set of classrooms for an entire academic year. We accounted for students' internal diversity by having even numbers of participants represented across race, class, gender, and achievement levels. All student participants qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and came from families in which the parents did not attend college. We interviewed teachers as a secondary source to confirm our observations of their practices and to enhance our understanding of events that had taken place in the classroom. For one year, the first author also shadowed students four to five times a week to their core content classrooms, at 45 minutes per class, and collected ethnographic data about their experiences in these classrooms.

## **Data Analysis**

Through inductive data analysis procedures (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), themes and patterns emerged as we analyzed their experiences with teachers in the classrooms. Emergent themes included (a) the spatiality of the classroom and material arrangement of learning opportunities, (b) timing and responsiveness of instruction within the material arrangement of learning, (c) teacher and student perceptions of each other in the classroom context, and (d) the spatial behaviors of teachers and students as manifestations of the expectations they had of each other. These themes were repeated in our interviews and observations. Following up on the identified themes, we probed students in the interview process about their needs and how they identified and experienced their learning contingency within the space of the classroom. Themes were further developed and supported as a result of students' willingness to share the kinds of relationships and teaching strategies that would help them to cultivate their self-concept for the present and future. We then connected these themes to the analytic frameworks to examine the extent to which both teacher expectations were operative within the spatiality of the classroom and were communicated to foster students' academic identities, and how students' and teachers' spatial behaviors were informed by—and a response to—classroom dynamics associated with one's social identity contingency.

In our analysis, we were particularly attuned to instances that helped us theorize the potential adaptive strategies that would nurture and cultivate students' spatial behaviors. The process of theorizing included critical reflections between the authors about our classroom observations and interviews with students and teachers. These critical reflections led us to reach a greater understanding about students' self-concept and subsequent interactions with the classroom space. These layered processes of triangulation were conducted through member checking conducted at the conclusion of the study with each participant by the first author. This process of verifying information included a small focus group in which 12 self-selected students collectively helped to confirm and analyze the data to establish trustworthiness and to confirm our findings. The overall process allowed us to connect the findings to the research questions.

### **Positionality**

Engaging in qualitative research requires speaking to the positionality of the researchers for the purpose of providing context and insight into the way we approached this study. All authors identify as scholars of color, and each had attended high schools in California, Washington, and Florida, respectively. Our work was informed by our experiences with differential expectations in the classroom, as well as our commitment to improve the context of schooling and educational opportunities for low-income students of color. Our research was positioned with this particular stance.



## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Shaping the Classroom Space to Engage Students in Learning**

Together, all three authors relayed and discussed data concurrently in relation to the identified research questions. In the end, we chose two classrooms that best described the variance in teachers' expectations for learning. As a part of the equity reform, Ponderosa Academy decided to raise expectations of all classrooms and eliminate the use of advanced placement (AP) classes that had historically separated students by race and presumed ability. Efforts to raise expectations included the 11th-grade science class, taught by an incoming teacher, Dr. Witt, who held a doctorate in chemistry. Ponderosa Academy was excited about hiring Dr. Witt and viewed her as highly qualified to contribute to the college-going culture the school was working to create. The classroom space was structured like a lab, with nine bulky lab stations each shared by two to four students. Dr. Witt did not have a seating chart, but the groups that sat together stayed consistent throughout the semester. One prominent and repeated theme was how learning opportunities were structured and timed in relation to the classroom space.

On one particular day, the class started 20 minutes after the bell. Students were out of their seats, hanging out near the door or outside, shouting down the hallway to greet their friends. Dr. Witt did little to intervene and start the class. She quietly wrote the day's assignment on the blackboard as the students slowly found their seats. Finally, the door was shut. However, the noise level did not diminish. Several students shouted, "Be quiet! God!" as Dr. Witt stood quietly in front of the classroom waiting for students to turn their attention to her. After a long pause, Dr. Witt said, "Here is your activity for today," pointing to the blackboard behind her as she passed out a worksheet for students to complete. In soft tones, Dr. Witt gave instructions on the assignment, while several students raised their hands and shouted out questions about the assignment and the previous night's homework. Dr. Witt was able to address a few questions but missed several others, as it was difficult for anyone to discern those questions from side conversations. Our observation data showed there were no clear expectations about where students should be once the bell rang. Moreover, the noise level, the use of instructional time, and the physical arrangement of the classroom did not provide an appropriate environment for students to focus on learning.

Dr. Witt did not address the noise level, offering only a blank stare at the students, hoping that they would start to pay attention. Finally, Veronica, an 11th-grade Latina student, pleaded to her classmates "Be quiet, be quiet." Several other students chimed in, including African American student Jerrod, who attempted

several questions about the assignment. The teacher chose not to pay attention to him, largely because she thought Jerrod was part of the problem, what students referred to as “chaos.” On multiple occasions, Jerrod would raise his hand to speak up, but Dr. Witt would proceed to write him a referral for in-school suspension.

Instead of addressing his questions, Dr. Witt asked Jerrod to be quiet in an effort to establish order so that students could get to the assignment written on the board. Feeling disrespected and misunderstood, Jerrod slowly retreated to his phone to check email and text message his friends. Jerrod declined to be interviewed for the study, but over the semester we observed his increased frustration in the chemistry class through the amount of time he made eye contact with the first author to express his disbelief with the classroom dynamic, and by redirecting his attention to his cell phone whenever he was ignored or misunderstood by the teacher. In effect, we observed a student who came to class prepared and expected to learn, but was not provided the appropriate support and environment to fulfill that expectation. As time was running out, some students decided to copy off each other while Dr. Witt went over the first few questions on the worksheet, telling her students that they could take the rest home to complete as homework. As soon as students heard about their homework, they packed their bags with 15 minutes still left on the clock. When asked about her academic expectations for her students, Dr. Witt said, “I don’t have any.” Linking these sentiments to our observations made clear that Dr. Witt’s lack of expectations for her students dictated her sense of agency and responsiveness. As Ms. Megan, one of the only Latina teachers at the school, succinctly stated:

Some teachers start to make excuses and more excuses about why students can’t give us what they’re being asked for. Not all, but people start to say, “have you thought about maybe they don’t have an alarm clock?” as a justification on why students can be excused for being late to school. They use excuses like “they don’t have this and they don’t have that,” or their parents didn’t go to college.

Ms. Megan attributed her colleagues’ low expectations to their broad assumptions about students, which they used to justify their classroom practices. Due to negative stereotypes, Dr. Witt’s classroom had become a space in which student learning was devalued—an appraisal that disempowered students’ engagement in learning. In contrast, Dr. Witt’s expectations for her own children were vastly different. When the first author visited her home for the semi-structured interview, Dr. Witt was actively searching for a high-scoring elementary school for her children to attend, and had neatly arranged her living room with material resources that made it conducive to learning. When asked about her aspirations for her children, Dr. Witt explained that she had high expectations, and wanted

them to do well in school—a stark contrast to her approach to her students and the classroom space.

Fortunately for students at Ponderosa Academy, not all classroom spaces and teachers conveyed the low expectations held by Dr. Witt. According to Ponderosa Academy’s coordinator, Ms. Jackson, “We teach our students to advocate for themselves, and our teachers are constantly role modeling that for them.” While this was not the case with Dr. Witt, Ms. Benson, a veteran English teacher, created a space for high expectations in her classroom and, in the process, served as an adept advocate for students. As a White ally to students of color, Ms. Benson was aware of how institutional barriers operated within the educational spaces of Ponderosa Academy and served to limit the educational opportunities of her students. Despite these barriers, she worked with her students from freshman year to both recognize and overcome these barriers in maintaining high expectations and fostering college-going aspirations.

Observing Ms. Benson’s 12th-grade English class, we were able to gain a more in-depth understanding of the extent to which she worked to push students to envision themselves in college classrooms. At the onset of the academic year, Ms. Benson registered a student application account with the statewide university system to provide her students with the information they would need to complete their college applications. Using the guidelines for college admissions, she structured her course and timed her lesson plans around the application process. For her first assignment, students were charged with setting goals for themselves upon graduating high school. For the remainder of the first quarter, which coincided with the statewide university system’s admissions timeline, Ms. Benson centered her class writing and reading comprehension assignments on the personal statement required for college admission. In this process, students were able to peer-edit and mentor one another in the writing process while developing their critical writing skills.

In addition, Ms. Benson invited Ponderosa Academy’s new college counselor, an African American woman and former college admissions officer, to provide information on the application process. The college counselor’s presentation made evident that she did not expect students would be eligible to gain admission to some of the more prestigious state universities. She decided to provide students with information on admissions to second- and third-tier colleges throughout the state:

All of you will still get a great education by going to a California State University and the community colleges because their faculty members are mostly graduates of the University of California system. So in essence, you’re still receiving an education that is the equivalent of going to a UC school.

Maintaining high expectations while establishing that her classroom would be a space in which institutional barriers and deficit perspectives would not place limitations on her students, Ms. Benson immediately interjected, “Many of our students are interested in applying to the UC campuses. Could you go into detail about how students can pursue these opportunities?” Reflecting the sentiments of Ms. Jackson, Ponderosa Academy’s coordinator, Ms. Benson remained an advocate for her students while modeling to them how they might advocate for themselves.

As discussed by Steele (2010), social identity contingencies are circumstances that individuals must deal with as a result of their social identity, and their ability to navigate these circumstances determines whether they are able to get what they want and need. But Dr. Witt’s lack of academic expectations for students clearly showed that she did not view the classroom, or Ponderosa Academy’s reform initiatives, as a space of possibilities for powerful teaching and learning to occur. Instead, her classroom activities were limited to worksheets, and her students were given far too much time to complete them, eventually slowing their academic progress in comparison to White students at the school. Not having expectations for her students, Dr. Witt conveyed a very destructive message to students about their potential as high achievers. Even though teaching science and teaching English require different strategies to challenge normative curriculum (Kumashiro, 2015), teacher-student identity contingencies in the sciences and the humanities should be based on caring relationships and explicit, mutually demanding expectations for learning. Students can easily recognize that they are not being cared for. Dr. Witt’s students were at risk of internalizing her message as their identities became contingent upon her lack of expectations, which in many ways was informed by the larger system and structure of schooling and society (Steele, 1997). Since these low expectancy practices took place in the context of equity-oriented reform aiming to close the racial opportunity gap, Dr. Witt’s approach to her classroom negatively influenced her students’ learning environment, which further devalued their classroom space to reinforce white supremacy in the larger school context (Allen, 1999; Harris, 1992; Leonardo, 2002).

While the discourse of educational reform purports to improve educational opportunities for all students, Lefebvre and Enders (1976) held that space is not neutral, but in fact possesses historical, political, and ideological elements. It is crucial that educators possess an awareness of—and take action against—the structural and institutional barriers that inform student identities and self-expectations, and to understand how they are operationalized in everyday classroom spaces and practices, despite the best intentions of institutional leaders and actors. In the case of Ponderosa Academy, Ms. Benson embodied this

awareness and action as she designed her classroom as a place in which deficit perspectives of students of color could be named and challenged, advocating for and working with students to counter punitive and externally imposed social identity contingencies by setting high expectations for them.

### **Classroom as a Space to Facilitate Future Aspirations**

Challenging the disparate power relationships between teachers and students, Freire (1970) directly critiqued the notion that “the teacher thinks, and the students are thought about” as a central component of the “banking” concept of education (p. 73). In line with his critique, and in reflecting on the classroom spaces at Ponderosa Academy, we found it critical to engage students in dialogue to more adequately understand how they internalized the explicit and implicit messages conveyed to them within such spaces. Jerrod, an African American student in the 12th grade, expressed his observations:

All the classes I’m doing poorly in are classes that [the teacher] don’t come to me to check on how I’m doing in class . . . If a teacher does not care about me as a person, then it’s like, you don’t care and I don’t care.

Here, Jarrod echoes Freire’s (1970) sentiment that students must be engaged—simply thinking about them is not enough. Further, what teachers fail to say and do has implications for how students internalize the psychological and physical classroom space. For Jerrod, by failing to check on him and ask him how he was doing, teachers sent him the message that they did not care, to which he responded by not caring himself.

Regardless of their intentions, teachers who fail to create psychological and physical classroom spaces where students are cared for can have detrimental outcomes. Such results were apparent in the comments made by Veronica, an 11th-grade Latina student enrolled in Dr. Witt’s chemistry course. At the beginning of the school year, Veronica was introduced to us by the teaching staff as a high-performing student. As the year pressed on, however, her grades declined in chemistry. When asked why her grades had declined in that particular class, Veronica attributed her poor performance to Dr. Witt’s classroom space:

I don’t think Dr. Witt has any expectations for us. She didn’t really know us and didn’t care, honestly...That’s why I’ve fell behind in Chemistry now, because she didn’t have control over the class and didn’t have strong set rules.

Given Veronica’s sentiments, it is troubling to think that, although Dr. Witt did not verbalize her lack of expectations to students, they still discerned them based on

how they experienced her classroom space. For Veronica, Dr. Witt failed to construct a classroom space that was conducive to learning. Given that the combination of teacher caring and high expectations has been found to foster academic resiliency among students (Benard, 2004), the glaring absence of both manifested a negative social identity contingency between the teacher and students like Veronica.

Observing this failure, Veronica felt that a supportive learning space should have structure. From Veronica's perspective—and despite her academic success in other areas—Dr. Witt's classroom was not a space of academic optimism in which she could realize her future academic goals and aspirations. Although Dr. Witt did not explicitly articulate her lack of expectations, they seemed very likely to be rooted in deficit perspectives she held regarding low-income students of color—even high-performing students like Veronica. It is therefore critical to consider the potentially lasting impact that Dr. Witt's classroom could have on these students' psychological and physical sense of belonging in academic spaces, given the social identity contingencies they might have to repeatedly navigate. This finding contributes to the literature on teacher expectations beyond the physical environment of stereotype threat and the interpersonal dynamics of expectancy practices. Interactions between psychological and physical notions of space reveal new ways that students encounter and respond to their teachers' expectations for learning.

Fortunately, not all classroom spaces represent yet another obstacle students must navigate to realize their future aspirations. Revisiting and discussing Ms. Benson's classroom space with students made demonstrated that students deeply valued her high expectations and advocacy. When asked about the college tours to which Ms. Benson had taken her 12th-grade English students, Melissa, a 12th-grade African American student, expressed that Ms. Benson “showed us the college experience, the actual steps you need [in order to get there].” In many respects, Ms. Benson's classroom represented a space of possibility where students could work toward their future academic aspirations. Our data suggests this space of possibility was not limited to the classroom. When we asked Ms. Benson, “How were you able to create an orderly learning environment with these students when other teachers struggled to do the same?”, she illuminated,

In addition to making connections with these students, I am also in constant contact with their parents. I have a Facebook account where I befriended all of their parents, so I have a direct line of communication with students' family whenever someone's homework is missing, or did not show up in class.

By using Facebook as a tool to connect educational spaces between the classroom and students' home, Ms. Benson was able to expand on the idea of space, while

creating congruency between the expectations of the parents and her classroom. In sharp contrast to Dr. Witt's classroom, Ms. Benson's classroom was a space in which students were expected to have aspirations beyond their high school experience, an expectancy internalized by Melissa:

Ms. Benson wants us to make sure that we know everything so by the time we get to college it will all be very helpful to us. The criticism we received on our writing is very helpful because now we can take it and go to college and do what she told us to do—the right way.

In addition to providing students interested in pursuing a higher education with access to critical information, Ms. Benson's classroom became a space for students to develop skills that would serve them beyond high school. In addition to the development of academic skills, Melissa also pointed to the significance of Ms. Benson's connections with her parents and intimate knowledge of her home dynamics as a factor for her learning. This has allowed Melissa to connect learning to her immediate context, so the skills she learned have greater purpose beyond high school.

While one may argue that the “overemphasis” on the college-going process for low-income students is a neoliberal one, because it requires these students' adherence to rules and/or procedures based on White, middle class ways of knowing the world, we assert that steering low-income students away from college is a racist one, especially when this thought stems from individuals who themselves possess and benefit from college degrees they have earned. Furthermore, to strictly associate educational spaces with neoliberalism can also be misguided, given the importance of education in communities of color for liberatory purposes, and among people around the world outside of Europe and the United States. Ms. Benson has it in her mind at least, that students such as Melissa can go to college, should they choose to do so.

What would have happened if Dr. Witt had taken the time to get to know Veronica and Jerrod? Would the identity contingency created in the science classroom look different for Dr. Witt, her students, and observers like us? Despite extensive research and practice demonstrating the potential for creating such spaces for marginalized student populations, their voices, experiences, and perspectives remain absent. As a result, the historical and ideological forces of educational inequity persist within educational spaces, contributing to limiting situations in which low-income students of color continue to find their very identities at odds with the deficit-oriented practices of those charged with the task of educating them (Freire, 1970; Vass, 2014).

These obstructive situations have been well documented and challenged through research on the school-to-prison pipeline, the militarization of schooling,

and systemic violence through disparate discipline and punishment policies that ultimately shape the options of students of color, as well as their voices and self-concept (Saltman & Gabbard, 2010). Centering the voices and realities of low-income students of color can provide insight into how teachers like Ms. Benson can work to transform physical and psychological classroom spaces into places where students can develop their academic identities toward the goal of realizing their future aspirations.

### **Reshaping Classroom Spaces to Influence Positive Academic Identity**

Freire (1970) described limit situations as contingencies we cannot avoid or escape; but instead of accepting the situation as a fixed reality, educators should make changes from within. Placing Freire's (1970) conceptualization of limit situations within the context of the politically and ideologically informed classroom spaces that made up Ponderosa Academy, our data demonstrate that some teachers and students were capable of working from within the limited situation to affirm their own belief and practices of high expectations for learning. For example, Ellen, a 12th-grade African American student, said, "My parents have really high expectations with me . . . My parents expected me to do my best. They think I can get A's and B's." In addition to directly contradicting the sentiments of Dr. Witt, Ellen's comment highlighted that some students were able to turn to other adults who truly believed in their chances of success. However, the limits of the chemistry class also put Ellen in the difficult position of explaining her grades to her parents. In this sense, teachers like Dr. Witt ran the risk of producing limit situations that weren't previously there, particularly when low-income students of color are held to high expectations by their families and communities. Viet, a 12th-grade Asian American student, articulated his frustrations:

It's hard—it's hard to change people's minds when they think they already know you . . . You start to excuse certain behavior[s] for yourself because it's like . . . They already think I don't turn in my homework so why start now?

When teachers hold low expectations for low-income students of color based on deficit perspectives, they are imposing punitive social identity contingencies on them while simultaneously failing to contest the very real structural and systemic limit situations already working against them. In failing to contest these structures, Freire (1970) argued:

Men's [and women's] responses in the form of historical action . . . can be neither authentically nor critically fulfilled. In this situation, men [and



women] are unable to transcend the limit situations to discover that beyond these situations—and in contradiction to them—lies an *untested feasibility*. (p. 92)

At Ponderosa Academy, these untested feasibilities had significant implications for students like Viet. According to Viet, several classroom spaces at Ponderosa Academy operated in this way. He explained:

Teachers often like to help those who are already doing well in school, and not even notice that people like me do exist in their classroom . . . I have goals in life too and I only wished my teachers can see that.

As Viet's sentiments suggest, failure to overcome limit situations can leave academic aspirations untested feasibilities. However, there were also teachers like Ms. Benson, whose practice of high expectations in her classroom repositioned students' learning and pathways to college. Countering limit situations, Freire (1970) reiterated the method of problem-posing education, furthering his argument for a dialogic education for the purpose of critical consciousness and emancipation. Freire (1970) contended, "This view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically" with students (p. 118). In moving forward with this project, we believe that a critical consciousness of space is central in education. As discussed throughout this study, space, and how it is ideologically, physically, and psychologically constructed, have critical implications for low-income students of color. Spatiality of schooling shapes their identity and can inform the social identity contingencies they must navigate in pursuit of their academic aspirations and endeavors.

Charged with the task of preparing the next generation of educators committed to social justice and public intellectualism—all within a high-stakes reform environment where teachers are vilified by the right and valorized by the left—it is not uncommon to see deficit perspectives being projected onto the communities and families of low-income students of color as a means of explaining away disparate educational opportunities and outcomes. While those on the right may attribute disparities in achievement to a lack of educational values within these communities, those on the left often frame the argument within a paternal discourse of guilt that offers little along the lines of actualizing meaningful change. This binary perspective urgently needs deeper understanding and sustained action against the limit situations of low expectations, and punitive and externally imposed social identity contingencies that are placed on low-income students of color in educational spaces. Only through dialogue with students can we come to name and challenge these limit situations.

Through this process, we maintain the importance of contesting the anti-dialogical public pedagogies of low expectations within educational spaces that working-class students of color encounter far too often. In acknowledging and contesting the negative ideological, physical, and psychological aspects of educational spaces, and by reinforcing high expectations and engaging in dialogue with low-income students of color, the classroom can become a place of possibility. In the words of Barry, a 12th-grade African American student in Ms. Benson's class:

Now [after experiencing some success in the classroom] I'm looking at things from a broader view. I'm not looking to dodge [school] so I can do something else. I'm looking at it to get it done in order to do something better.

Clearly, classroom spaces like Ms. Benson's are not only places where students want to be physically present, but also places where students can envision "something better" and are consistent with what their families and communities expect them to be.

### **Conclusion**

We conclude this paper with questions and areas of practice for educators that can best be used to address these students' needs and concerns. With the tenacious emphasis on testing and school accountability, it is increasingly important that educators—who themselves are coming under increased scrutiny—direct their fear and frustrations into self-reflexivity while remaining mindful of what is at stake. Creating counter-spaces at the universities' teacher training and leadership preparation programs is a viable strategy for engaging educators to develop the beliefs and skillsets to enact high expectations for students. We also learned that change can be enacted in local K–12 schools through teacher and youth participatory action research projects (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013; Cammarota, 2014; Stovall, 2014), followed by professional learning communities to support teachers to critically examine their own—as well as each other's—expectation practices in the classroom. Finally, we believe that professional development and consistently mentoring teachers to realign their expectations of students with social justice goals can potentially reposition them to see spatiality beyond its "natural" state. Our nation must critically examine the ideologies associated with society's assumptions and predictions of the intellectual capacities of low-income students of color. Teachers must go through a personal transformation in their attitudes toward race, social class, and difference, and draw upon students' resiliency and intellectual curiosities to redefine the spatiality of schooling as a contingency of belief, possibility, and

innovation. Central to the processes outlined above, is the importance of acknowledging the way in which teachers, leaders, and teacher educators impose dominant cultural norms, values, and beliefs on students through the construct and veil of meritocracy. In order for educators to more clearly understand how deeply their worldview is informed by their own identities, they must learn to critically analyze the extent to which dominant cultural norms, values, and beliefs are embedded in the meritocratic discourses, structures, and spaces that they work in. As such, the findings of this study emphasize a continued need for educator preparation materials that examine unequal relations of power resulting from social constructs around race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and religion independently, and as they intersect with one another.

Public education and compulsory schooling have been contested since their inception—a situation that is not likely to change. As private and corporate interests continue to inform educational policy and practice from the top down, it has never been more important to listen, first and foremost, to the voices of those in the school context, who remain excluded from the policy discussions, and educational opportunities, yet demonstrate resiliency and remain confident that education is a place of possibilities for them. While research focusing on the resiliency of students of color has gained prominence in the literature (Masten, 2013; Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013; Yosso, 2005), a critical analysis of spatiality that is conducive to promoting their academic resistance, resilience, and success could prove valuable in forwarding this scholarship.

As school leaders, teachers, and teacher educators, we must continue to place authentic relationship building at the center of our intellectual labor. Our data suggest that authentic relationship building means knowing our students, their families, and our collective communities. As a nation, we must deeply contemplate the degree to which we are willing to incite positive change through activism in the communities in which we live. Our findings further suggest that students have an epistemological understanding of the space they occupy as members of a school community. Their resilience is a testament to how they engage in the struggle to redefine that space by calling attention to the inequity they experience in the classroom. Our findings suggest that we need to continue to pursue studies concerning the ideological and material dimensions of educational spatiality that facilitate teacher-student expectations for learning. The ideological construction of space for academic achievement, then, must be an effort that takes account of all members within it, and an environment that all students can identify with and believe in.

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