



The
Best School
Ever

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The Best School Ever

This book tells the story of a project, still in progress begun in Providence, RI during the fall of 2012 by myself and a group of young people interested in thinking about possibilities of schooling. The story includes many smaller stories of students' time spent in school, happy and unhappy, as well as their dreams of what school could be.

They are presented here for teachers, parents, and everyone else to read and to act upon.

A CRISIS in APATHY

"SO HOW DO YOU FEEL WHEN YOU'RE IN CLASS?"

"BORED. DULL. LIKE I'M GONNA DIE OF BOREDNESS."

"WHY DO YOU THINK THEY MAKE IT SO IT'S NOT FUN?"

"CAUSE IT'S SCHOOL."

"WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE PART OF THE DAY AT SCHOOL?"

"AFTER SCHOOL. I CAN GO HOME AND SLEEP."



This is the NORM. Large-scale surveys show that most high school students are bored in class every day and students of color are less engaged than white students, which helps to explain why they are more likely to drop out.

Our public schools are facing a crisis in apathy that worsens racialized inequality.

of 300,000 students across the country who were asked, only about half believe they are an important part of their high school community.

Students are apathetic about school because they are not recognized or understood.

WOULD YOU CARE ABOUT A COMMUNITY THAT TREATS YOU AS IF YOU AREN'T important?

I believe that our schools fail, at least in part, because we fail to try to understand kids. Understanding begins with asking and then listening closely.

This is a listening project, one that asks students, "IF YOU WERE IN CHARGE OF CREATING THE BEST SCHOOL EVER. WHAT WOULD IT BE? DRAW THAT SCHOOL."



PHILOSOPHY

In order for students to feel comfortable sharing their experiences, they need to feel respected, not judged or dismissed because of their age. I demonstrate respect by showing students that I *want* to learn from them.

With ethnographer Wendy Luttrell, I believe that an "attitude of curiosity" can help to build students up who are often marginalized.

WHY DRAWING?

★ Visualizing school utopias is one way students can reflect on what's not working for them in the present ★

"IT IS ON THE DAY THAT WE CONCEIVE OF A DIFFERENT STATE OF AFFAIRS" - a vision of "what should be" - "THAT A NEW LIGHT FALLS ON OUR TROUBLES AND...WE DECIDE THAT THESE ARE UNBEARABLE."

(SARTRE, Maxine Greene)

PHILOSOPHY

This is our social imagination

The arts develop social imagination by asking us to notice our world and create our own visions of what should be.

So, I ask students to draw what should be and then talk about the disparities between what *should be* and what *is*, and *why* these disparities exist - who or *what* is preventing their dream schools from becoming a reality?



Through this critical reflection, the students and I work together to understand their world.

PROBLEMS POSED:

In analyzing students' drawings and words, four broad categories of school critiques emerged: SPATIAL/BODILY PROBLEMS, social/emotional problems, PROBLEMS WITH THE CONTENT AND FORM OF LESSONS, and lack of autonomy.

BODILY & SPATIAL:

Students critiqued both the ways their bodies are regulated in school (lack of room to move around & lack of choice over food) and the space of the school itself.

MOVING AROUND!

Several students equated "FREEDOM" with the ability to move their bodies, which they couldn't do in their "CRAMPED" classrooms. They solved this problem in their ideal school drawings by designing bigger buildings



and giving themselves more opportunities to move around, like dance, gymnastics, and RECESS.

RECESS.



Better Food!

Many students focused on lack of food choice in their real schools and advocated different solutions in their drawings—some healthy and some unhealthy—all giving them greater control.



candy for lunch or snack.

Menu: ribs, Nachos, hot dogs, And everything!



Space

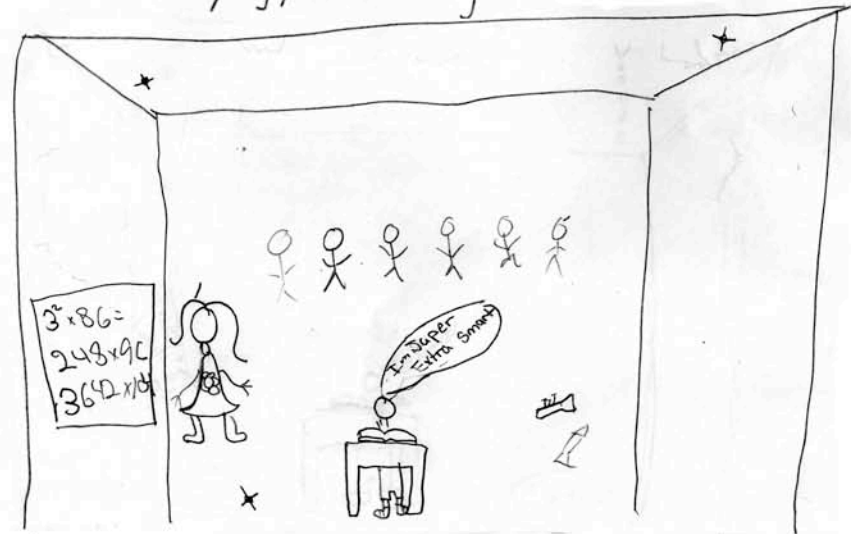
"IT'S AN UGLY, UGLY, UGLY BUILDING.
IT SUCKS. THERE'S NOT A LOT OF LIGHT
AND BRIGHTNESS TO IT... EVERYWHERE
YOU GO IT'S ALL THE SAME, EVERYWHERE.
IT GETS SICKENING." (Maya, Grade 12)



In response to their real schools' monotonous, ugly designs students created dream schools that were more free-flowing and integrated indoors and outdoors.



Sixth grader Christopher was upset that his school was deteriorating to the point of being not only ugly but also dangerous.



His ideal school was fixed up and sparkling clean.
He explained:

"THE PLACE OF LEARNING AFFECTS HOW YOU LEARN."

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL

Students hoped for more responsive teachers and more inclusive school cultures. Their relationships in school were clearly integral to feeling comfortable enough to learn well.

"IF SOMETHING'S GOING ON IN THE HALLWAY, SOMEBODY'S GETTING BULLIED, [TEACHERS] DON'T REALLY PAY ATTENTION TO THAT. THEY DON'T CARE." (Diane, Grade 12)

"DO TEACHERS HELP WHEN YOU'RE FEELING BULLIED?"
"NO. THEY DON'T CARE."



Students wanted their teachers to show that they care by maintaining calm and safety at school, especially when it came to bullying, and by getting to know students well enough to meet them at their level.

- Fair teachers

Nice Teachers



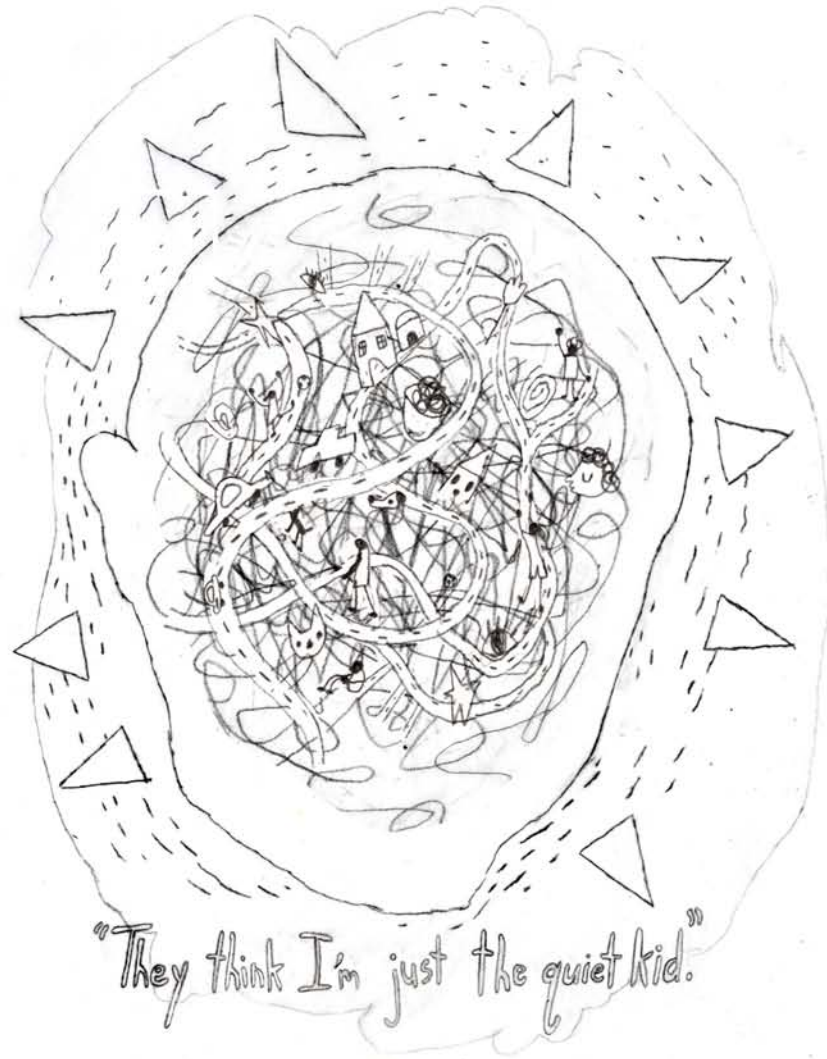
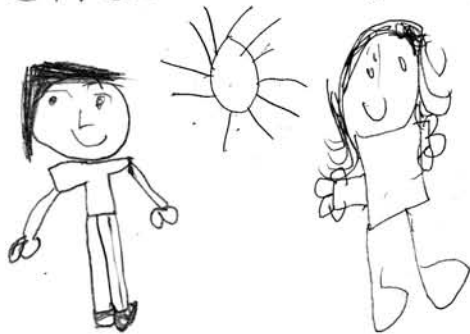
Students felt their peers' fear of difference made it hard to survive in school without conforming. They hoped for more empathy and less judgment, and felt that closer relationships with other students and teachers could help, although they struggled to identify systemic changes school could make to be more inclusive.

loyal rules
no swearing
no Bunking
no fighting
no bullying
no Drama

Comfort
Respect
Safe
Tolerance
Open

Listener

LISTENER



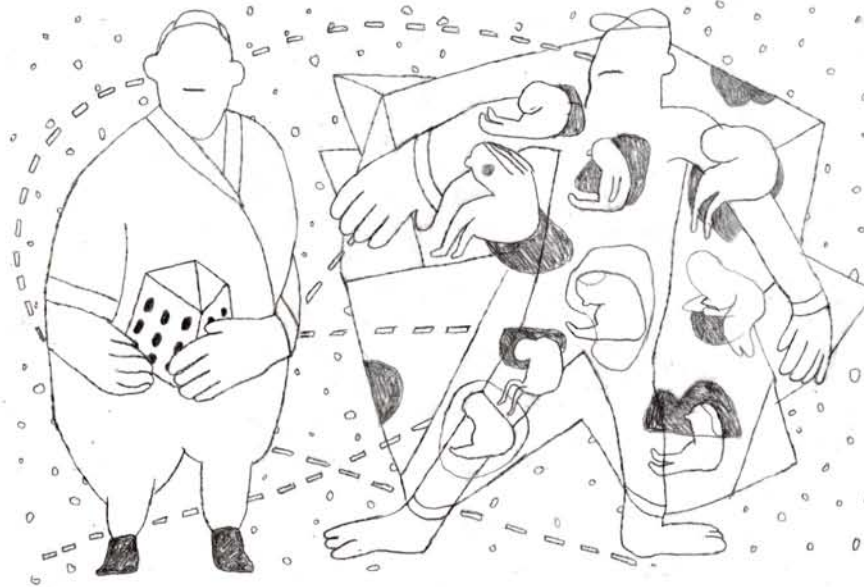
- Empathetic students

FORM & CONTENT

"INSTEAD OF JUST MEETING A GOAL AND BEING LIKE, 'I GOT AN A, BUT I DIDN'T LEARN ANYTHING,' IT'S LIKE, 'I MET THIS GOAL, NOW HOW CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS THING I'M INTERESTED IN?'"

(Erin, Grade 12)

Students linked motivation with content that is relevant to their interests, and with learning through hands-on experience rather than lectures. For older students, content was relevant if it related to their goals for the future, which were directly tied to their passions.



Most of the older students I interviewed attend a progressive, project-based high school where content is perceived to be relevant, and hands-on learning happens in local internships.



1990 will smith
b.g.g.ie tufac, b.g.l, Flave flm
fresh price era, Burgerdom,ld,
big, pun, gansta baby records.



"I LEARN BETTER HANDS-ON ANYWAY, ACADEMIC STUFF JUST DOESN'T WORK. SO THIS ENVIRONMENT'S PERFECT, CAUSE PRETTY MUCH EVERYTHING I DO HAS TO DO WITH WHAT I WANT TO DO." (Katie, Grade 12)

PLAY.

Some students connected play with learning academic content; MOST communicated a need for *more play*.

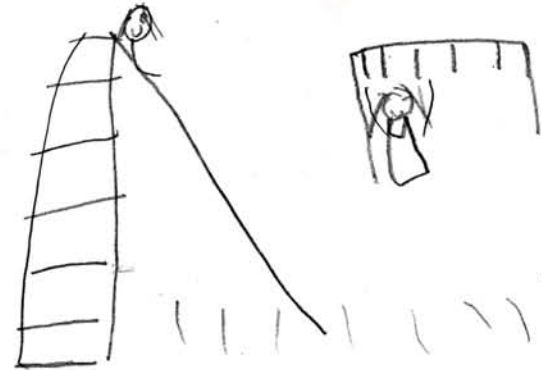
"WHY DON'T YOU FEEL FREE?"
"BECAUSE I DON'T GET TO PLAY."



FUN HOMEWORK

the school should be fun so the kids can be motivated about being educated.

SO MUCH FUN!!!!

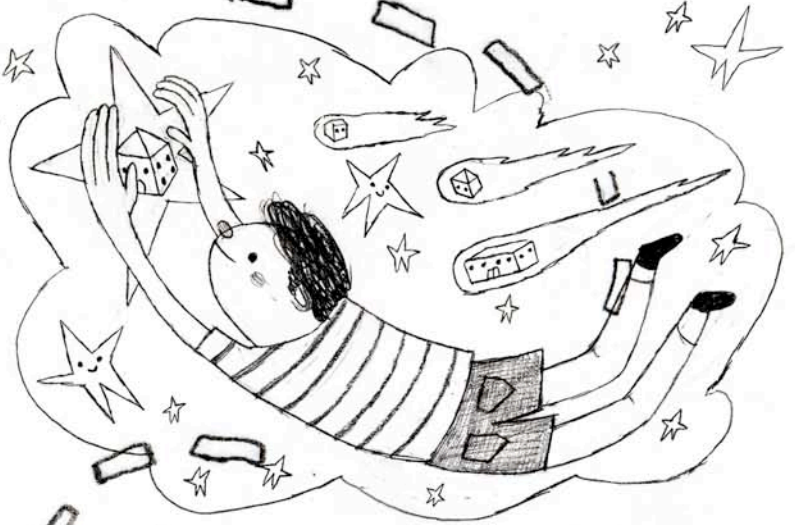
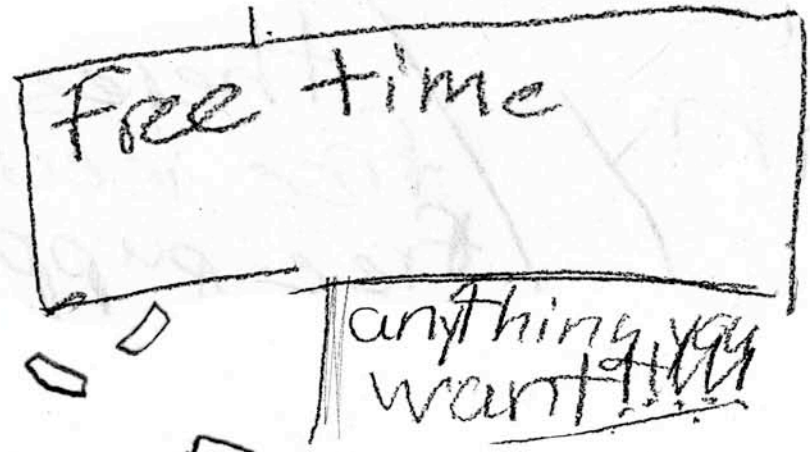


"PLAYING ALL DAY LONG." (Judith, kindergarten)

AUTONOMY

Rigid standardization of both curriculum and teaching style were seen as problems that prevent students from exercising autonomy and having their individual needs met. Students wanted more autonomy mainly in choosing what they get to learn about.

This relates to students' need for relevant learning: high school senior Liam said that students are able to find their passions in school when school puts "the power into your own hands."



Lack of autonomy was equated with lack of respect for youth.

"THEY TOLD ME I SHOULD WAIT TILL AFTER I'M 18 TO MAKE MY LIFE. BUT I'M STILL A HUMAN BEING... IT'S NOT LIKE YOU BECOME A PERSON THE DAY YOU TURN 18." (Maya, Grade 12)

Rigid standards also fail to respect that students are individuals who all learn differently. Several students said that conformity is necessary for success.

Maya suggested in response a more flexible path to graduation and varied teaching styles that would appeal to different kinds of learners.



A fourth grader named Jaychelle added Kid teachers to her ideal school.

She explained: "THE TEACHERS ARE THE STUDENTS AND THE STUDENTS ARE THE TEACHERS."

She liked the idea that students would have more power, saying students "like it better because you get to be the boss of the teachers."



I believe that these goals of autonomy and individualization are part of students' larger need to be recognized as fully human, appreciated for their distinctiveness and capable of acting for themselves.

AND SO,

What message do we send students when we force them to spend their days confined in schools that look like prisons, or schools that are falling apart? When we feed them bad food? When we don't keep them safe and we treat their differences as problems? When we don't allow them to pursue their interests, denying them access to personally meaningful learning experiences, be these ship building, astronomy, or outdoor play?

We send students the message that, as far as school is concerned, they don't MATTER very much. They disengage from school, becoming too jaded to see any possibilities.

AND YET,

Despite these serious problems, the students I talked to still had enough hope for our schools to envision something better.

Some, recognizing the obstacles standing in their way,

PUSHED BACK.

"MY PARENTS WOULDN'T GO FOR ANY OF THIS... YOU'RE NOT LEARNING WHAT YOU NEED TO LEARN, YOU'RE JUST PLAYING AROUND ALL DAY."

"WHAT WOULD YOU SAY BACK?"

"I'D SAY 'SCREW YOU. THAT'S NOT WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO ME."

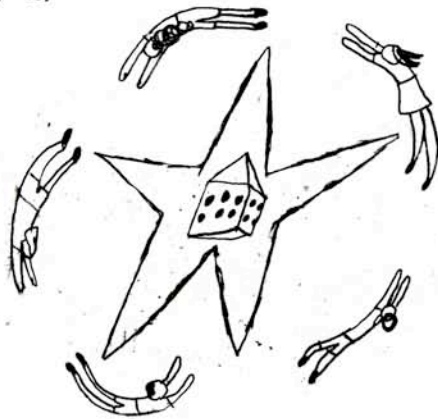
"YEAH COLLEGE IS IMPORTANT, BUT YOU ARE YOU... YOU CAN DO ANYTHING... YOU JUST GOTTA FIND A WAY TO DO IT."

(Katie, Grade 12)

Drawing on the hopeful potential for change that all of the students' school utopias embody, senior Maya said that in order for change to occur, "EVERYBODY HAS TO BE WORKING TOGETHER." Collaborative action between adults and students- "THAT'S REALLY WHEN IT WORKS. AND STUDENTS ARE NOT ONLY PART OF THAT, WE'RE THE BIGGEST PART OF THAT. WE SHOULD HAVE A voice."

NEXT STEPS

It's time for us to invite students to participate in our conversation about schooling. NYC high school students' *STUDENT VOICE RUBRIC* demands meaningful student representation in such areas as school governance, school culture, discipline, and teacher professional development. Schools can use real measures such as this rubric to ensure that students are asked what school could be doing better and then listened to.



Teachers can also use the arts to reflect with their students about teachers' and students' ideal schools. In order to create both greater understanding between students and teachers and solidarity in working to transform the *STATUS QUO*.



If we don't ask students what needs to change in their educations, many, most even, will certainly survive the school system, and thrive.

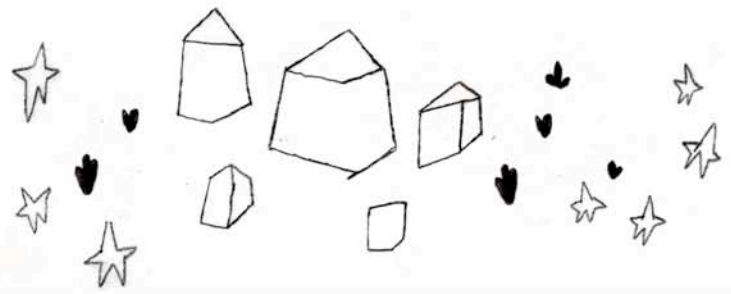
There are plenty of schools in America whose students are not apathetic—they are given the chance to learn in meaningful ways each day. Yet the painful truth is that these students come largely from privileged families—they set foot in kindergarten miles ahead of children reared in conditions of poverty, hunger, and stress.

So while it is wrong and undemocratic to deny any students the right to represent their educational needs those who suffer most from oppressive, unresponsive school policies are those who already have the least.

Involving poor students of color in changing the course of their educations is thus a matter of social justice.

I have learned that if we are willing to ask, and listen, we will find that many of these students' social imaginations are still intact; many are still alive to the possibilities of a brighter future for our schools. But in order for that imagination to stay alive we must allow students to exercise it.

We must ask students to imagine, listen to what they have to say, and act.



Many thanks to Emmy Bright for her care and attention throughout this project, and to all the students, teachers, and community members who lent time, ideas, and support. I couldn't wish for better collaborators, and this book is for you.



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