

“A Clear Path”:

Teaching Police Discourse in Barrio After-School Center

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This study follows Mike, a police officer in training, as he runs a Criminal Justice Club at an after-school center in a working-class Mexican@ neighborhood. Employing James Paul Gee's theories of discourse and identity, the study shows how this club enables the teens to shed the identity of at-risk youths and inhabit the identity of future-cops, a transformation that secures their future within the linked institutions of law enforcement and the public schools. However, because the police and schools help to subordinate community residents, the teens' new identity sets them against their neighbors. The study describes how Mike and his fellow teacher instruct the teens in how to negotiate this irresolvable structural contradiction through double-consciousness. Drawing on interviews and observations, the author presents the perspectives of Mike and the teens he teaches regarding race, empowerment and justice in literacy education.

[I]t started when I met Mr. Mike.¹ He always talked about, “Why do you want to be a cop?” “Because I just want rights,” that’s what I said. I

¹ All names are pseudonyms with most chosen by the participants.

just want rights for everyone, you know? . . . Everyone who does bad, they need to pay for what they do.

—JT, Two Cities Resident

Like any police force, they exist to protect the property of the rich and to keep down the oppressed.

—Elizabeth Martinez, *500 Años del Pueblo Chicano*

This is a study of police discourse as it was taught by Mike and taken up by secondary students attending an after-school center in Orange County, California. Mike—who described himself as Chicano—had started a Criminal Justice Club during his tenure as middle school supervisor at this center. By the time of this study, he had begun his training as a police cadet and was returning to the center in a volunteer capacity to oversee the club, which met weekly. I have named the after-school center Barrio and the town Two Cities to recognize the rift splitting the city into two communities: one working-class, predominantly Mexican@ and the other middle-class, predominantly Caucasian (though also Mexican American).² Mike, who lived and was educated in both, described these places as “two different worlds.”

These worlds come together, though not democratically. Middle-class children who grow up in Orange County quickly learn to rely on Mexican@s to provide the services that support their lifestyle: landscaping, crop harvesting, house painting, home repair, food

2 I follow Octavio Pimentel in using “Mexicano” to emphasize participants’ ties to the country in which they or their parents were born, but amend the term to Mexican@ to foreground women’s presence. “Mexican American” I reserve for third generation U.S. residents. “Chicano” was a term Mike used to convey his liminal identity, saying “We call ourselves Chicanos because we’re not really like the Mexicans over there, but we’re not really American.” I have chosen not to use “Chicano” to describe others in this article, however, both because (as Pimentel notes) working-class Mexicanos infrequently employ the term and because it carries associations with the 1960s Chicano Movement that do not necessarily apply to this center.

service, childcare, and countless others.³ It is this division of labor, in which Mexican@s are relegated to putatively “unskilled” jobs and members of dominant groups are encouraged to pursue mental work, that leads me to understand the young people at Barrio center not as marginalized but as oppressed. As Victor Villanueva puts it, “Talk of margins and borders” allows the American middle class to deny “its dependence on the underclass to maintain its level of comfort” (57). At the same time, the word “oppressed” calls up Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which lays out an education based in *consientizãcao* (the building of critical awareness and consciousness). Such education involves the underclass in developing a written discourse that values “unskilled” work—work that, of course, includes the delicate emotional labor of deference among its many prerequisites. Even more crucially, *consientizãcao* addresses the injustices that debase the standard of living of the working-class, naming those in power and their history of abuses, as well as developing action plans for achieving a true democracy, one in which all members of society have the power to speak to and act upon their collective interests.

This article measures the police discourse Mike taught at Barrio After-School Center against such ambitions. It is anchored in two year’s worth of field observations at Barrio Center, where I served as a volunteer and poetry workshop coordinator and in interviews conducted with several students and staff members, including two formal interviews I undertook with Mike. In what follows, I argue that the police discourse Mike taught is neither a symptom of Mexican@ oppression nor a solution to it but some combination of both, and that the language of police work and the identities it facilitates are sites of productive contradiction. Employing James Paul Gee’s theories of discourse and identity, I demonstrate how Mike’s club enabled the teens to shed the identity of at-risk youths and inhabit the identity of future-cops, a transformation that secured their future within the linked institutions of law enforcement and

3 For a fascinating description of Orange County from the point of view of these service providers, see Frank Cancian’s *Orange County Housecleaners*. For a recent take on the historical development of Angl@-Mexican@ relations see Gustavo Arellano’s provocative *Orange County*, which also addresses the conservative political movements that have lodged the OC in the nation’s consciousness as a bastion of conservatism, despite its shifting demographics and politics.

the public schools. Yet I hesitate to describe this transformation as simply "success" because it occurred in institutions that continue to oppress the youths' working-class Mexican@ community. Indeed, the question of what constitutes success is taken up productively by Octavio Pimentel, who juxtaposes WEA (White European American) and Mexicano standards of success in order to displace the former and value the latter ("Disrupting Discourse"). I argue that Mike reconciled both sets of norms. Because he gave back to this neighborhood as a volunteer, he fulfilled a quality that Pimentel's informants characterized as successful: being "buena gente" (a good person; a contributor to family and community). Simultaneously, Mike sought middle-class status and wealth in a career as a police officer, which seemed to be what he had in mind when he said that education could help teens at the center to "be successful" and seek "something more" than what they could find in their neighborhood.

For Mike, this success had its costs. Taking on the institutional identity of a police officer (e.g. becoming a cop) necessitated a split from friends and family with whom he shared an affinity-identity, and it threatened to do the same for the young people whom he instructed. Mike and his fellow teacher were aware of this and modeled how to think through this contradiction, guiding the young people as they took on vexed positions as officers-in-training in a society divided by language, race, and class.

POETRY VS. POLICING

When I first witnessed Mike leading the Criminal Justice Club at Barrio After-School Center, I was both intrigued and troubled. Mike's club attempted many of the same learning objectives as the poetry club I had run there for two quarters: we would both explicitly familiarize the teenagers with a new discourse, law enforcement and poetics respectively. Furthermore, in drawing attention to how we had been sponsored by universities in developing our expertise, we imagined ourselves as college-going role models for the students we taught. Mike's cadets also did a good bit of reading and writing, and in the course of that work, he modeled habits that also happen to be essential to poetry, such as analysis through close reading.

My poetry workshops drew on knowledge of the public schools that I had gathered during my years as a secondary educator and aimed to orient the students toward success in those schools. Mike, however, taught students how to grapple with the two local institutions he knew best, institutions whose influence on this street was clearer and more immediate than that of the schools: police and gangs. In Mike's club, students learned not rhyming words but words to describe crimes and police procedures. When they analyzed news stories, they didn't look to diction for clues on the writer's tone or examine rhetorical structure to determine the writer's purpose; instead, they scanned the prose for probable suspects, and they identified the legal channels through which further evidence might be obtained.

My apprehension about Mike's work arose in part from community literacy scholarship that draws attention to the structural racism and classism of the U.S. criminal justice system. Much of this scholarship involves prisoners as authors in workshops and other forums involving university students and scholars (see, for instance, *Reflections* 4:1; Rogers; Kerr; Appleman). Less often, publications in public rhetoric address police work explicitly. Linda Flower's well known problem-solving dialogues, for instance, involve Pittsburgh's college students, mostly middle-class and white, writing with younger students of color at the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh. Together, they develop the younger students' critiques of the legal and educational institutions that limit their opportunities, including discriminatory police officers. More of an anomaly is Ben Kuebrich's *I Witness: Perspectives on Policing in the Near Westside*, which includes the voices of police officers in dialogue with local residents on an issue of common concern: a plan to put surveillance cameras in place on a street corner where drugs are bought and sold. Kuebrich anticipates my study in that he interviews a cop from the block, Lori Billy. Ultimately, however, Billy's institutional identity as a police officer trumps the affinities she feels for her Westside neighbors; she is, for instance, impassive when her fellow officers flout the law but indignant when Westside residents do the same.

MIKE'S STORY

Mike offered his students a more ambivalent perspective, one rooted in his onetime identity as an at-risk youth and shaped by his current one as a police officer in training.

Mike grew up on the same street as the Barrio Center but two miles north. Both sections of the city are under the same gang injunction, which in the name of safety abbreviates the rights of residents by making illegal many activities that gangs engage in, such as group assembly. Once when I asked Mike about how his neighborhood compared to the one that housed the center, he said, "It's the same." In the other interview he said that where he grew up was possibly even rougher, with more graffiti and alcohol abuse and a more pervasive gang presence. Mike said that in high school his male cousins had gotten involved in the gang lifestyle, and he too was on his way. He bounced around to four different schools, including the continuation school. He said,

I didn't really have a lot of good role models. Growing up in a neighborhood like this all you see is the older kids hanging out with a bad crowd. So, you didn't really see a lot of going to college. Or anybody really talking to me about college period. So you really didn't have a lot of motivation . . . I flunked out my whole freshman year. I just didn't see the importance of education.

When he was sixteen Mike's father wanted his family to move out of the neighborhood because he saw that Mike was "messing up, getting into fights." His parents, who both work – "My dad's a handyman and my mom cleans houses," he reported – were fortunate enough to have the means to buy a home. I was able to visit that home when Mike invited me to the party his parents threw him when he graduated from the police academy in the spring of 2012. The house is just a mile away from Barrio After-School Center, but I found myself agreeing with Mike's assessment of the two sides of Two Cities as "two different worlds." In an interview, Mike emphasized the peace of his new neighborhood: "I don't hear yelling in the middle of the night. I don't hear fighting. I don't hear the cops at night. I don't hear the music blaring at every hour." Mike was happy that his younger

sister was growing up in this new neighborhood, where she didn't have to face the same challenges he had.

But it wasn't only the move to a wealthier neighborhood that provoked Mike's change in direction. A teacher at the continuation high school also tapped his potential. "He was like us," Mike said of the man. Whether that meant he was Mexicano or not was not clear, but it was clear that the teacher treated his students like human beings, had respect, and tried to relate to them. It was while taking this teacher's class that Mike found *Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz*, which recounts Ruiz's life as a "gang chola, high school drop-out, disowned daughter, battered wife, welfare mother, student, and policewoman" (publisher's description). The book showed him that law enforcement was a respectable outlet for him to seek the action he otherwise would have found as a gang member. "We're not really that different," he said. "We seek adrenaline, we play with guns, we look for drugs." With his teacher's help, Mike completed his work at the continuation school and returned to graduate from the school where he'd begun as a freshman, determined to become a police officer.

In fulfilling that dream, Mike moved on from the community center where I had found him, joining the police department in a nearby city. But he returned to lead the Criminal Justice Club and to mentor younger students, whom he counseled against forming affiliations with those in this neighborhood who were headed for trouble. On the afternoon of one of our interviews, for instance, Mike noticed young men gathered together in the alley behind the center, drinking. He commented that the students "see the twenty year-olds drinking alcohol . . . the graffiti, the tagging . . . and they want to do that, they want to imitate that." However, he said he guided the teens toward a different path:

I try to tell them. I shared my experience with me being at the lowest of the low: going to continuation high school, being kicked out of regular high school. I told them . . . I know what it feels like to not have that path toward a good education.

When he spoke at the graduation ceremony held for Barrio students, Mike explained that his college ambitions had saved him from life as

a criminal. He recalled, "I try to tell them from my experience that education does benefit you one way or another."

But in fact Mike ended up showing the students that education had benefitted him in a very particular way: it allowed him to become a police officer. And by schooling the teens in the discourse of policing, Mike's Criminal Justice Club naturally sparked the students' desire to adopt the same institutional identity, despite Mike's protests that such was never the goal of the club.

"I GOT THEM THINKING LIKE LITTLE DETECTIVES": BUILDING POLICE IDENTITY IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE WORKSHOPS

Following the earlier work of linguists Krashen and Terell, James Paul Gee posits a difference between learning and acquisition. Gee suggests that discourse communities work not by teaching novices the rules of the discourse explicitly—that would be learning—but by allowing them to work as apprentices under and alongside those already fluent in the discourse in a process of acquisition. Mike's Criminal Justice Club, then, led the teens not just in learning the language of police officers but also in acquiring the discourse of police work. It did so by leading those teens who chose to participate in the club through activities that asked them to read, write, analyze, and act as police officers.

Like Gee, I focus on "discourse" as a kind of master category for the ways of doing, valuing, believing, and speaking required of a given identity ("Literacy"). In what follows I also bring to bear insights from Gee's work on identity, which has turned from discourse as an all-encompassing category to "discourse identity" as one of four kinds of identities: nature identity, institutional identity, discourse identity, and affinity identity ("Identity"). The last three are all relevant to Mike's Criminal Justice Club, for that club was quite effective in getting students to recognize themselves, and be recognized, as a certain "kind of person": future cops. A "kind of person" is Gee's term for identity, what I would call a social role, a "type" that is recognizable by others and which invites them to react accordingly. Roughly speaking, Gee argues that institutional identities are tied

to jobs, discourse identities to language and other signs, and affinity identities to group *practices* (“Identity” 3).

Mike’s criminal justice club was and was not about training young people to accept the institutional identity of the police officer. Institutional identities are defined by the exercise of power, and it’s important to note that at the time of this study, not any of the members of the club, Mike included, was invested with the actual power to act as police officer cops (though Mike would be commissioned as an officer a few months later). Yet it was the existence of this institutional identity—the fact that people in Two Cities acted as police officers with all of the privileges and responsibilities of that job—that lent much of the appeal to the *discourse* identity that Mike led the young people in acquiring: that of future-cops.

Importantly for Gee, identity is both a way of understanding the self and a means of gaining others’ recognition; the latter proved particularly important for these oppressed teens’ identification as future-cops. For instance, one middle-school student had been targeted by an intervention program that brought together teachers, social workers, medical providers, and – crucially – police officers to consult with the families of “truant” students (i.e. those who didn’t find the public schools worth attending). Being identified as a future-cop meant that the school addressed her truancy by encouraging her attendance at Barrio Center; the Barrio supervisor introduced the young woman to an FBI agent who offered to guide her through college applications. Had the young woman’s identity remained the default identity of Mexicanas in her neighborhood, namely “at-risk” (i.e. possibly affiliated with gangs), the school’s course of action may have been more punitive.

The teens came to be recognized as future-cops, as that “kind of person” rather than as “at-risk youth,” not least because they could speak the language of criminal justice, because they had begun to master that discourse. So how did Mike acquaint students with the police discourse that made that future-cop discourse identity possible? To begin with, he shared forms used by police officers such as tickets for moving violations and arrest reports for adults and juveniles. The club read news stories about crime and examined a map outlining the

boundaries of the local gang injunction. They wrote journals outside the club that reflected what they learned in it. The students learned about the legal processes through which evidence could be procured and suspects brought to justice. Learning the vocabulary to describe these processes was key; in the club notebook, which Mike shared with me, I found outlined in 30-point font on 8.5x11 paper, terms such as "warrant": "a document issued by a legal or government official authorizing the police or some other body to make an arrest." The most common club activity involved Mike presenting these definitions and asking the students to use them to discuss a local news story about crime. Those crimes varied. I witnessed Mike deliver a lesson about the serial killings of local homeless men, but I also found in the notebook incidents the CJ club had discussed that involved police misconduct, such as the cover-up of evidence by a local police officer. After the club ended, I even witnessed Mike returning to help a student fill out a blood alcohol form that had been assigned in his criminal justice class at school (more on that class shortly).

As rhetoricians, we can understand the police forms—the traffic tickets, arrest reports, and booking approvals that Mike brought in for the students—as specific iterations of the rhetorical genres that enable police discourse and law enforcement action. As such, these police forms elicit in those who fill them out a police subjectivity, an institutional identity that shapes one's discourse and establishes one's affinities. True, as Gee suggests and as Mike's example will show, individuals can work within these institutional identities even as their discourse and affinity identities produce conflicts, but the power of the institutional identity is what makes action within that role possible, and that power requires one to interpret the world in legally legible ways. For a traffic ticket, one must, for example, list the code of the violation and list one's name as an arresting officer. And one must fill out, along with sex, hair, eyes, height, and weight, a suspect's race (on each of the forms Mike brought in as examples the suspect's race was "Hispanic"). The police form offers a viewing of the world in which these categories are salient for marking out and identifying those one interacts with as suspects and criminals.

As Charles Bazerman and others have pointed out, genres are established forms of social action; they are, so to speak, the skeleton

of the body of power. As such, they have their own motives and values, and by writing within them, we place ourselves to some degree subject to those motives. For example, Anis Bawarshi demonstrates how the genre of the literacy narrative assumes as a truism the power of literacy to transform lives, and he suggests that even those students whose life experiences conflict with that conclusion, find their narratives bending toward that resolution (Chapter 4). Similarly, I argue that in the iterative process of using these police forms, students came to adopt the police gaze in filtering the unpredictable flux of life in their community. Specifically, they came to see their neighbors as potential criminals against whom they might bring the police powers they have practiced adopting.

The teens enrolled in criminal justice also began to see themselves as an affinity group, to some extent aligned against their community. A look at the membership chart of the club demonstrates how under Mike's leadership, the participants imagined themselves already as a police unit. There we learn that "Squad 1" met "at 1630 hours" in the back room of the apartment. The two staff members, Mike and Gustavo, are listed as "Chiefs." Three of my poetry students were the "captain," "lieutenant" and "sergeant" respectively. But the artifact that best makes the case, is that Mike wasn't simply asking students to write like police officers but to think like them is the "Code of Ethics." Mike saved two copies of this code in the Criminal Justice binder he handed over to me for my study; each was copied down in the hand of one of his cadets. The students used impeccable spelling, and I quote from their transcriptions at length so as to demonstrate the seriousness with which they were asked to play their roles in this club:

As a Barrio Center Officer, my duty is to serve students. Whatever I see or hear of a confidential nature or that is confided to me in my official capacity will be kept ever secret unless revelation is necessary in the performance of my duty. I will never act officiously or permit personal feelings, prejudices, animosities, or friend ships to influence my decisions. I will constantly strive to achieve these objectives and Ideals & dedicate myself ~~before~~ ~~God~~ to my chosen ~~Profession~~ Role as a Barrio Center Officer. (Strikethroughs in original).

The last strikethrough and replacement shows the slight change needed to adapt police discourse for use at the community center, to render the "institutional identity" of police officers' accessibility to the teens, though of course, the power of that identity would be deferred many years and granted only if the teens qualified for that role, as Mike had, by earning a college degree and remaining separated from any gang associates. In the pledge above, what was for the officers a moneymaking "profession" became a "role" for these teens. If the subjects who took this pledge were required to swear "before God," we would say that the pledge required a commitment of their souls to the police officer's role. As it stood, the pledge merely required that the initiate promise to remake herself, eternally, for the role—pledging to keep information "ever secret," to sever friendships with others in favor of loyalty to the force, even to give up the guidance offered by her feelings and orientations as mere "prejudice." One might say that the genre of the pledge exists to disrupt one's affinity-identity as a member of a community (in which one is lodged by feelings that emerge from and feed affiliations) and to reinitiate one's subjectivity in the police force.

In real life, Mike had, to some extent, given up his role as a community member when he took a similar pledge and joined the police department. "Some family members have stopped talking to me just for the simple fact that I'm a police officer," Mike said. "You lose people along the way." So Mike explained his estrangement from his cousins, who live in his old neighborhood and continue to associate with gang members. Of course, the teens who took this pledge did so merely in their imaginations, and clearly it didn't carry the same consequences for them. Nonetheless, as an initiation rite into the club, this pledge clearly, demonstrates how police "discourse" asked not merely that students add police language to their existing vocabulary but that they imagine how they might remake themselves by voicing this vocabulary and thereby realign themselves with respect to their friends at Barrio Center and others in Two Cities. For, as Gee reminds us, "Discourses are not just ways of talking, but ways of talking, acting, thinking, valuing" (*"Literacy"* 530).

Mike was direct about the way that the Criminal Justice Club taught the teens to think like police officers, to develop what writing

administrators today are calling the “habits of mind,” but for the police profession. Mike described this process as follows:

We try to take a law enforcement approach to it. And we actually try to solve [the case]. We would actually make a little board. What kind of evidence should we be looking for? What should we do next? If there’s an outstanding suspect we’ll say, “Who do you think the suspect is? Why do you think he did it?”

In the other interview, he elaborated:

We would post up different terms. I remember using the term of the week . . . something to do with law enforcement . . . like, “parole” and then I would have one of the students kind of explain to the group what it was. We had a little crime blog going. We’d talk about different crimes that would happen in the area. . . . There’s a lot of different things that the kids would see in the news. And I can remember them just coming up to me, [saying] “Can we talk about this this week, can we talk about that?” I’d kind of help them out understanding the process, what happens now. We’ve got to look for this guy. [I’d say,] “Hey what evidence do you guys think they’d use?” And then they’re like, “Well I would use this or I would use that.” So it got them thinking kind of like little detectives . . . [W]e would write down evidence that was found at the scene. And how they’re going to look for [the suspect.] And we would guesstimate when that person would be arrested. One was the homeless guy that was killing people. There was [also] a Hollywood beheadings one that they were trying to guesstimate.

Clearly, Mike’s Criminal Justice Club taught critical thinking skills that many literacy educators would value, all in the real-world contexts that our research suggests makes those skills “stick.” He developed students’ vocabulary. He urged students to use the media to take notice of current events and to suggest topics of conversation, thereby making the club speak to the events that shaped their world and to their own interests. By getting them to understand how the information from those stories would be processed, given police procedures, he gave them a schema with which to read. This meant

considering what tools law enforcement might use to get permission to collect evidence (warrant; affidavit) and to make a case for the criminal's degree of culpability (*mens rea*). Thus, the students were not just passively reading but reading for a purpose, interacting with the text not just to comprehend but also to analyze. This analysis required them to "close read," to sort the news stories for specific details relevant to a given schema. Finally, based on their understanding of those details and the total picture they form, Mike asked the students to make well-supported predictions.

The teens also engaged in the *practices* of police work that for Gee establish the last identity category: affinity-identity. (Gee argues that this category is increasingly relevant in a postmodern society in which institutions and discourses and the identities they enable, are ever more in flux.) It's true that Mike did not take this action-oriented approach as consistently, perhaps because it is difficult to enact the actual practices of police membership without first obtaining the institutional identity of the police officer. That is, one can't act like a cop until one has been commissioned as a cop. Nonetheless, it appeared that the teens came not just to talk like police officers but to *feel* themselves to belong to that group (hence "*affinity*"), not least because they engaged in a few of the practices of police: handing out tickets and applying handcuffs. One afternoon, for instance, Mike and the teens filled out the moving violations together, a process local cops call "ripping bluesies" due to the color of the form and practiced handing them out to drivers in the center's back lot, including Mike's sister. On another occasion, Mike brought in his police gear and showed it to the dozen students and staffers who were gathered in the center's front room. Mike talked about what he was going through at the police academy: the push-ups, the tests, the drills, the hazing that was meant to weed out cadets. The center's coordinator, Ms. Evans, asked most of the questions that elicited this information but students engaged too. Katie, a 7th grade student, tried on Mike's duty belt, and after Mike was done talking, he showed her how to use the dummy can of pepper spray on the duty belt, and she used it to mock-spray another young man in the face. These actions helped secure Katie's affinity for Mike and her inclination toward police work, an affiliation that would bear fruit when she later led the club in Mike's absence.

Indeed, judging by Katie's example, Mike was successful in encouraging the students to take on leadership roles, his stated goal for the club. Mike noted that toward the end of his time there at the center, the teens would run the club themselves. This allowed them to meet frequently, not just when the site principal was able to relieve Mike of his supervision responsibilities for the other teens at the center. After Mike departed, Ms. Evans urged Katie, who had been a sergeant in the Criminal Justice Club, to lead the first meeting in Mike's absence. "Don't you think if Mike came back he'd want you to keep going?" she asked. Katie agreed. That day, she led a discussion of the case of Trayvon Martin, the young Black man shot and killed by self-appointed neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman. As I watched Katie prepare for that club meeting, it was clear that Mike's lessons had made an impression. She first looked up the case on one of the computers at the center, using the victim's name in a Google search and finding an article on the Fox News website, which she proceeded to read to me, surprised that I had not been familiar with the case. Katie then successfully used the criminal justice textbook Mike had left behind as a reference, finding key terms in the glossary and presenting them to the other adults who had run the sessions with Mike. We'll remember that Mike believed that the Criminal Justice Club taught leadership; even if one grants that the leadership Katie showed in picking out the news topic and leading students through it wasn't a *result* of the CJ club—Katie had shown herself to be a self-starter in poetry club as well—it's certainly true that the club built the confidence in police discourse that was necessary for Katie to feel comfortable *exercising* those skills.

Mike's club seemed to have a similar effect on many young people at the center, but as I have mentioned, it also created a more direct effect that Mike had not foreseen but in retrospect seemed inevitable: the teens wanted to become cops. I had designed my interview questions to find out about the students' home and school literacies, the literacy activities they did at the center, and those they utilized in neighborhood activities like trips to the market. I also asked them about college role models. What I had not expected was that over and over again, I would find them discussing law enforcement. Indeed, perhaps what's most notable about the police discourse offered in Mike's workshops, is its power to shape students' identities: when I last spoke with them, several of the teenagers attending the center

not only had ambitions to enter law enforcement but were already taking steps to complete the formal education necessary to achieve that goal.

Once I began asking around at the center about why so many students shared these ambitions, I found that Mike wasn't alone in orienting students toward a career in law enforcement. While some students were inspired by extended family members who worked in the criminal justice system—one had an uncle who was a parole officer, for instance—others were influenced by their formal schooling. Criminal Justice, it turns out, was now a class offered at both high schools attended by the community center students. One graduating senior at the center had chosen to commute to a local community college five miles away rather than go to the school that was closer because she had been inspired by a criminal justice class at her school taught by a former police officer.

RACE AND POLICING: IDENTITIES IN CONFLICT

Perhaps none of the teens was more touched by Mike's work at the center than JT, whose words opened this article. Hers was a prime example of how literacy practices about police work played a part in students' emerging discourse and affinity identities as police officers (although JT sometimes said she'd rather be an FBI agent). The following excerpt from our interview together shows how she retained some of the vocabulary of law enforcement as part of that identity, months after Mike's departure:

JT: I learned a lot. I learned a lot of new words. Yeah. Grand theft auto, I thought it was a game, but it means like stealing cars. I think we learned about assault. Degree. Oh yeah that you need a, a, what's it called? An affidavit, an affidavit, and then you need a... I'm think it's, I'm just going to say permission.

Author (A): Oh, a warrant.

JT: Yeah a warrant. That's the word.

A: Why did that stick in your head?

JT: That's something I want to do.

A: You want to go in people's houses?

JT: I just want to be the one who finds the clues.

Mike inspired JT to see law enforcement as a career where her nascent social vision could be fulfilled. JT had said in one poem she wrote for my workshops "I dream one day racism will stop," and from her interview comments, both those presented above and those that began this article, it's clear that JT was doing the mental labor of a police officer—looking for clues—in order to help rectify the injustices she saw in her neighborhood, though it remained unclear whether she conceived of these rights and violations in personal or ethnic terms. In explaining what she meant when she argued that people ought to have rights, for example, she said, "I just don't like seeing people have to pass through bad stuff that people do to them, but they are just too scared to get them in jail."

However, as I indicated by including the Elizabeth Martinez quote alongside JT's comment on rights, the role of the police in administering justice can be complicated by race and class. Thus, I close the description of the club's impact by noting what it taught the students about the role that race plays in counting Two Cities residents as criminals or victims. I have noted that for Mike, adopting the institutional identity of the police officer required him to give up remnants of his prior affinity-identity as a gang associate; in this section, I demonstrate how Mike's gang affiliated identity overlapped with his identity as a Mexicano and how the police identity he took on required him to give up those affinity identities. The students too, I suggest, were asked to imagine themselves doing the same.

In our interviews, Mike described how the neighborhood's gang injunction meant that teenagers in this half of Two Cities were "harassed." "[T]here's a lot of stipulations that teenagers have to go through" with police, he said. "[T]hey get talked to a lot more by law enforcement than other kids in other areas." Growing up, Mike had been stopped because of the way he was dressed and the people he

associated with. “I don’t want to say racial profiling, but that’s the only thing I can really call it here,” Mike said. When I asked him if such treatment still occurred, his answer was, “sadly, yes.” Recently he had been pulled over “a couple of times,” detained, he thought, because he was “a Hispanic, no hair, bald, in a tinted window car.” Intriguingly, in what Du Bois would describe as double consciousness, Mike now could sympathize with the police perspective on his own shaved head and style: “[W]ith my training now I understand it could be a little shady. I understand it both ways.”

Fortunately, the Criminal Justice Club offered a chance for the students to hear from Mike and another staff member, Carlos, about this issue of racial profiling. By explicitly discussing the role that race plays in police work, they allowed the teens the opportunity to also see things “both ways.” For the teens, this meant that even if they did decide to follow Mike’s lead in getting college degrees and becoming police officers, they would see that work as more than just the technical expertise of “finding clues” or as uncomplicated labor on behalf of justice and rights. For by considering how their race might affect the way that police dealt with them, they would also begin to recognize how race impinged on justice and have the chance to consider appropriate action plans to negotiate that fact. Here was Freire’s *consientização*.

Carlos, a senior staff member who works at the regional level, is a forty-something father of two with a gentle, steady demeanor. On this particular day of the Criminal Justice Club, Mike began a discussion regarding the gang injunction, which Carlos helped to lead. I must admit that my expectation was that as an older man and an administrator, Carlos would justify the police perspective. Perhaps I had grown used to his conservative haircut and business dress and profiled him myself. However, it turned out that he too had been detained by police as a youth, and this experience had tempered his support for the wider police powers possible with the gang injunction.

To begin the meeting, JT read an article on a recent arrest of a gang member; the article included a map of a gang injunction that covers the neighborhood in which the teens live. The students held onto the map and identified a few places on it. Mike explained what a “civil

injunction” was, and at the request of another student, presented definitions of a few of the words from the previous lessons: “warrant,” “affidavit.” Mike explained how the requirements for these could change under a gang injunction. Carlos then asked the teens what they thought of the information that Mike was giving. One or two of them said that they thought the injunction was necessary to keep everyone safe.

Carlos then testified about a time twenty years before when he had been pulled over by the police. “I was in a car with three guys with shaved heads,” he said. “Two of the guys in the car, they had just come back from the army. And the third guy, his head was shaved because he was in football.” None of them had been affiliated in any way with gangs, so Carlos believed that race had played a role in their being stopped. He asked the students to consider this event in weighing whether the civil injunction would affect them positively or negatively and whether or not it was just. Responding to Carlos’s comments, Mike said that while most police officers were fair, some would do what Carlos had described.

I did not ask the students or Mike directly about this event in my interviews, so it is difficult to say where the students came down on the issue of the civil injunction or indeed what their perspective was on racial profiling, a practice that obviously conflicts with the ideals of police justice that JT voiced. What was evident was that Carlos’s presence at the meeting enabled the students to hear from an adult who could testify to police-citizen interaction from the perspective of someone who understood that race had played a role in his being detained and questioned. Carlos’s personal presence and words had an impact that text alone would not have had on the students. By articulating himself as a racialized subject in the community space of the after-school center, Carlos helped to create a shared Latinidad between himself as a Mexican American and his Mexican@ students. Carlos and Mike both sharing similar stories about being targeted, suggests that such spaces do necessary work for students growing up in a society in which race continues to matter a great deal in their chances for avoiding incarceration and pursuing a successful future in civil society.

CONCLUSION

Under Mike's tutelage, criminal justice discourse became, if not emancipatory, then at least critical. The lesson described above shows Mike and Carlos beginning to teach the teens how to live through double-consciousness as Mexican@ police officers—that is, as members of an oppressed ethnic group who would achieve "success" in a career that required them to renounce former ties. JT and other youths at the center came to identify themselves as members of a law enforcement body that sought impartial justice—citizen rights—even as they developed a language to name how that institution viewed them and other young people in the community as worthy of suspicion and in need of discipline.

I saw how Mike, in this difficult position, accomplished what Lisa Delpit holds as a goal for educators who would school the marginalized in a dominant discourse: "wrest[ing] from it a place for the glorification of their students and their forebears" (553). Delpit quotes Bill Trent in pointing to teachers who successfully promoted their minority students' acquisition of dominant discourses. Trent says of those teachers, "They held visions of us that we could not imagine for ourselves. And they held those visions even when they themselves were denied entry into the larger white world" (549). Here at the community center, Mike *had* achieved entry in the larger world of the police force, and there is no doubt that his vision that these students could do the same, influenced the futures they saw for themselves. His success supports Delpit's point that teachers' lofty goals, when coupled with their support of students' skill building, can be a sustaining force for non-dominant students. Even as he shared with me how he had to leave behind those from his prior life who refused to abide by the ways of doing, speaking, and believing required of police officers, Mike showed by his very example and by his use of the local dialect that he could lead a "successful," middle-class career in the mainstream (White) workforce without forfeiting his ties to this Mexican@ community.

What did end up being worthy of critique, however, was the social structure in which Mike's lessons were delivered, a structure that paradoxically offered consistent police surveillance of Barrio Center attendees but inconsistent educational support for students who

would pursue career ambitions outside of law enforcement. This is a system that confines students to a set of possible institutional identities more narrowly circumscribed than those offered to their white, mainstream peers in other neighborhoods of Two Cities; it is a system that links Barrio center and the local public schools in providing oppressed students a vocational education in the language of police work, both through language that makes possible the discourse identity of a police officer and through activities that provoke the young people at Barrio feel they are adopting that identity as a result of their own affinities.

I hope that the frame of discourse has allowed readers to better understand what was at stake as Mike taught the teens literacy. Whereas “teach” and “literacy” might lead us to imagine Mike imparting discrete reading and writing skills through lecturing or exercises, I more often found him encouraging the students to speak, read, and write in the service of translating themselves into the role of police officer. That activity was always inflected by their mutual positioning in the larger socioeconomic realities of the community, specifically law enforcement’s demands for law-abiding citizens. “Discourse” helps to keep those relationships in view, and to understand literate practices at the center as one means through which students constituted their social identities, identities that were shaped in the center but that were understood to translate to social and economic spaces beyond it. For the Criminal Justice Club, literate skill was not, as it was for my poetry workshops, the central educational objective. Yet in some ways that makes the criminal justice activities more compelling, for they foreground the embeddedness of literacy in social practices. They thus reveal, more directly than the discourses in language arts classrooms—which often cover their ideologies under the fig leaf of “skills”—how literacy is always already tied up in social life, in discourse. In shedding light on how the teens at this center were taught to speak, think, and feel as racially conscious police officers rather than potential gang members, I hope to provoke readers’ reflection on how vocational literacies come to be sponsored and for those of us who teach at universities, how we might encounter the off-campus students with whom we work as already embedded in such discourses.

But the question remains: what are the costs and benefits of such discourses as they already exist at such sites?

On the positive side, we should not ignore community educators like Mike, who donate time to the education of children in stressed neighborhoods, to guiding them, in the terms Mike chose for the graduation speech he delivered that spring, from a "blurry path" to a "clear picture" of their life and to pursuing their dreams for "something more" than the limited job opportunities available to them in their immediate neighborhood.

However, I continue to be suspicious of the police discourse Mike teaches the teens there, inasmuch as police work urges these students to see their neighbors as potential criminals and to accept laws that support a society in which they have limited access to other professional paths. Once again, in this suspicion, I take heed of Freire, who is careful to distinguish between technical education, or education as adaptation to an inequitable neoliberal order, and education as *consientização* (the building of critical awareness and consciousness), which requires that a subject come to awareness of the historical forces to which she has been subjected, envision an ethical response to those forces, and act upon that vision (112). In a more democratic society, these young people would not be consigned to a subordinate position—or even a police career path—and made to feel responsible for their fate. They would instead participate in an education that valued the identities of their neighbors, even those dressed in gang styles and prepared them just as much as it did their counterparts on the other side of Two Cities to be lawyers, doctors, business leaders, engineers, and the like. It is unfortunate that where Mike saw himself as a college-going role model who urged his students to strive for something more, they saw his job as the only available one and judged that striving for something more, could only mean striving to join the police force. To the extent that Elizabeth Martinez is right and that police protect private property, however unjustly it is acquired, police work is not just a career that offers a way out of oppression but a return to the neighborhood in the role of the oppressor. Mike's experiences with racial profiling suggest ways in which he continues to find such a critique valid.

Yet a full look at the criminal justice club reveals that he and Carlos discussed the issue of racial profiling and civil rights with the students. The club thus spoke to this issue with a pragmatic political perspective that the center's students were likely to find persuasive as they sought to realize their goals within society as it exists, rather than how we might imagine it to be. Villanueva writes that the word revolution "conjures up frightening pictures: not acts of criticism, but acts of violence, undertaken when there is nothing left to lose." But for the students he discusses as well as for the Barrio students, "there are things left to lose here. There might still be pie" (61); that is, though the system is canted against students of color, it will yet reward some of them, enough of them to make faith in that system something more than bald self-delusion. True, Freire enjoins us as language instructors to pay attention to oppression, to consider "the word" as a tool for both "denouncing the present and announcing the future" (Shor 187). Yet in less prophetic moments, young people must also find ways to speak to the discourses that govern their lifeworlds and to speak within them; as I learned in the two years in which I was an intermittent guest at the center, police work is one of the most evidently powerful of these.

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