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Visibly ungoverned: strategies for welcoming diverse forms of knowledge

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Abstract

Access to schools and other institutions built on social progress offers a way to move toward a better future. Working toward this progress, educators at all levels seek out ways to provide access to marginalized groups. In doing so, however, this move opens the knowledges and ways of being of these groups to new forms of governance and control. A tension thus arises of how to welcome different ways of being and knowing as part of an emergent global commons that benefits all of humanity and the planet without submitting these knowledges to new forms of domination.

This background paper outlines a conceptual methodology for local and indigenous knowledges to engage and influence education as a global common good while simultaneously resisting the conforming logics that aim to configure these knowledges into existing frameworks. Notions of incompleteness, refusal, and speculation act as strategies to make space for knowledge in its many forms to act as a common good for humanity and the planet. Building on these strategies, the paper posits that institutions as well as less structured sites may act as mechanisms to generate and exchange knowledge throughout the world.

Introduction

From individual school initiatives to global education goals, the call to include new voices and recognize local and indigenous knowledge opens avenues to challenge educational inequities and remap the fundamental making and doing of school. This understanding moves beyond schools and systems simply including marginalized populations. It instead positions groups as agentive producers and sharers of knowledge. Yet, inclusion, even in an active and disruptive sense, risks perpetuating the very asymmetrical power relations these aims intend to challenge. Pursuing knowledge as shared, fluid, democratic, and plural both refuses notions of knowledge as stable and accessible and makes legible new ways of knowing and being. In doing so, however, this move opens these knowledges to new ways of governing. As visibility and legibility emerge, systems and policymakers begin to formulate logics of treating and controlling newly included populations. A tension thus arises of how to welcome different ways of being and knowing as part of an emergent global commons that benefits all of humanity and the planet without submitting these knowledges to new forms of domination.

This background paper outlines a conceptual methodology to open routes for local and indigenous knowledges to engage and influence education as a global common good while simultaneously resisting the conforming logics that aim to configure these knowledges into existing frameworks. The paper first presents a background on dominant approaches to embracing diverse voices in education work, including culturally affirmative approaches and general inclusion efforts in schools. Listening to and studying with these examples helps generate strategies to pursue what I call “visible ungovernance,” a way of resisting both exclusion or marginalization and the controlling or disciplinary power that comes with inclusion. Specifically, I suggest notions of incompleteness, refusal, and speculation as strategies to make space for knowledge in its many forms to act as a common good for humanity and the planet. Within this each strategy, I use transnational examples of people engaged in collective work to simultaneously share knowledge across time and space and resist its appropriation or submission to hegemonic structures. Building on these strategies, the paper posits that institutions as well as less structured sites may act as mechanisms to generate and exchange knowledge throughout the world.

Governance and Inclusion

Foucault details the emergence of queerness as a political, populational category, suggesting that where queer sexual acts had previous been "a temporary aberration," discursive shifts created conditions where "the homosexual was now a species" (1990: 43). Certainly, Foucault's intention was not to suggest that being queer is a phenomenon emerging from modernity. He instead posits that as queer folks emerged as a legible population in Western societies, this shift simultaneously introduced a range of governing practices for how to understand and treat this category of person. In other words, as "homosexuals" became included in societies (though still facing various forms of oppression), a "machinery of power" (Foucault, 1990: 44) emerged for how to analyze, treat, and even produce individuals within this category. A move away from exclusion carried with it an entire set of strategies to govern this newly produced population.

Sharing much with Foucault, Popkewitz (2009) describes a double gesture of inclusion and simultaneous exclusion. As modern systems produce "reasonable, cosmopolitan" people, something that Popkewitz suggests acts as a foundation of modern pedagogy, the making of bounded, legible populations for inclusion also excludes those who fall outside of this category. Refugees, for instance, become constituted within political categories. From this framing, the label of refugee is used to understand a type of person and include those in this category through prefigured logics. Yet, depending on the time and place, there are many individuals and communities who share experiences and identities yet are excluded from initiatives that aim to include refugees (e.g. Wettergen & Wikström, 2014). Furthermore, there is no singular, unified experience or educational need of a population. There will always be those slipping from, escaping categorization.

These problematizations reveal a complex entanglement between governance and access. In the following sections, I sketch a range of theories and approaches to inclusion in education. Given the conceptual focus of this paper, I do not engage specific issues of knowledge production and access (e.g. school dropout) but rather explore common themes, ones which further illuminate this tension between legibility and control. In the broadest possible terms, inclusion in formal education operates along a messy continuum of institutional, liberal multicultural, and decolonial approaches. These approaches are by no means siloed or comprehensive but represent dominant ways of welcoming different forms of knowing and being. It is also worth noting that this approach largely assumes various actors pursue inclusion as a way of building a more equal future, something that leaves aside the nuance and theories of action of different inclusion mechanisms. Seeing struggles and issues of implementation of each of these approaches as beyond the scope of this background paper, I offer abstract outlines that frame and contrast strategies for visible ungovernance. I do not take up, for instance, directly assimilationist approaches (e.g. the American Indian boarding schools in the U.S.) that aimed more at cultural erasure than anything rooted in equality.

Institutional Inclusion

In a most recognizable and broadly implemented form, inclusion finds centralized actors, from multilateral agencies to specific school districts, interrogating gaps in a system and creating policies and strategies to address these gaps. This approach emerges from and dominantly espouses a Western form of modernist development. The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) act as a clear example, where the fundamental aim seeks to create universal access to schools as a key to building a better future. To pursue inclusion in this way, actors must use populational reasoning to figure out which groups have been excluded and how to successfully welcome them into (or back to) the fold of schooling. Populations may be broad. To achieve the 2nd MDG, for instance, there is a need for a gender-sensitive curriculum in schools that addresses girls as a specific category of

student in need of better access (Aikman et al., 2005). Populational reasoning may also focus more specifically on subcategories such as the cultural identities of girls within a specific locality. The point here is that vast resources and practices coalesce with a central focus on identifying populations and figuring out ways to provide them with access to schools.

In this framework, access closely relates to notions of educational quality or outcomes. These twin tenets of institutional inclusion—access and outcomes—rest on a commonsense understanding that widening the path and welcoming new groups in schools is the manner in which positive futures are built. Knowledge production and governance dominantly remain in the hands of institutional structures. Access to (and success within) schools as central sites of knowledge production and dissemination here becomes synonymous with building a better, more equitable future, one that is stable and singular. At the same time, I do not want to assume that institutional actors necessarily frame populations as passively receiving knowledge. Approaches to and understandings of knowledge production vary widely. Yet, the emphasis in institutional inclusion is dominantly placed on figuring out what populations do not have access to places of education and creating ways of understanding and treating them to provide access.

Multicultural Inclusion

Where institutional approaches place school as a core site for access and knowledge production, a more localized approach to inclusion centers identities. A loose collection of practices shows that while people may have physical access to schools, their knowledge and ways of being may still be marginalized. Moll et al. (1992) suggest that students' cultural backgrounds can act as "funds of knowledge" in classrooms. That is, students' diverse cultural backgrounds (Moll et al. focus on immigrant families in the U.S.), from language to family values, directly contribute to the generation of curriculum. In turn, this curriculum helps build a more inclusive environment for all students. Multicultural inclusion is rooted in constructing a future in which all students' identities help build a better future. This approach directly responds to deficit mindsets so often used in schooling, seeing experiences and identities as useful in constructing knowledge and shaping the way students engage schools.

Certain forms of multicultural inclusion do challenge who and what counts in the work of education. At the same time, even when using asset-based thinking, this approach still falls into the sticky trap of visible governance. In bringing knowledges into the school space, multicultural inclusion directly opens them up to the larger controlling forces that make up schools and school curriculum. The form of schooling may be altered, but the aims and logics of schooling remain largely intact. Critiquing a liberal, multicultural framework, Abu El-Haj (2015) desrbies that when schools operate with this understanding, they use cultural identities to reinforce a seemingly universal, global understanding of the good, one that casts out dissent and complex understandings of race, nationality, and power relations (see also Banks, 2009 for a discussion of these issues in contexts across the globe). In other words, while multiculturalism carries the potential to challenge deficit and exclusionary framings, it is also constructed on an assumption that access to and tinkering with existing structures better serves local and indigenous knowledge than challenging broader structures. With these structures intact, newly included knowledges become subject to various forms of codification and legitimation (e.g. testing).

Such critiques are not intended to discard the possibilities of using international agencies or multicultural education to create more equitable conditions. Yet, these approaches include along normative lines that, once more, submit those being included to control and governance that ultimately reinscribes them on the margins. They strive toward a stable and centrally defined future.

“Unstandardized” Inclusion

A third approach to inclusion takes a more radical form, directly pursuing decolonial aims. This position specifically acknowledges the dangers of inclusion and legibility. Kovach cites “the risks of bringing cultural knowledges into Western research spaces” (2009: 12). As Western actors come to see indigenous knowledges as legible and legitime, Kovach suggests that researchers, educators, and institutions reshape and adapt knowledge to fit within larger structures. Smith (2012) similarly shows knowledge production from this vantage point as essentially commodifying other forms of knowledge. Responding to the globalization of knowledge, Smith asserts that “Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of 'civilized' knowledge” (2012: 64). Furthermore, this view presents knowledge as universal and democratic. Thus, even as forms of knowledge outside this construct come to “count,” they become subsumed into a seemingly universal understanding of knowledge that reaffirms other ways of knowing on the margins.

Disrupting this notion of universality, local and indigenous groups show governance and knowledge production as something localized and contingent. Within education, these knowledge forms’ inclusion in Western structures stands against the standardized form of education increasingly prevalent across the globe (see, for example, Sahlberg, 2011). A strain of work within the broader anti-colonial project is neither strictly aimed at autonomous work nor Western models for expanding access to universalized knowledge. Despite the risks that Kovach and others present, this approach to inclusion does not abandon or wholly forsake the role of access to institutions in shaping educational futures. Instead, the position shifts toward listening to and opening space for efforts already taking place. Furthermore, it is not the making of a responsive curriculum within a stable broader structure. It is rather a kind of autonomy with, often fundamentally challenging existing structures. These approaches suggest paths toward increased access and simultaneously directly resist codes of power. They stand against the linear, causal development seen particularly in institutional approaches. In this work, unstandardized approaches strive to construct a future that is possible for non-hierarchical knowledge production and borderless sharing.

The notion of visible ungovernance draws on each of these approaches, but specifically builds on decolonial ideas. Though some of this work specifically references the role of institutions, much of it emphasizes local practices or challenges to forms of governance. Visible ungovernance expands these theories to provoke a methodology for grappling with the facts and possibilities of global governance without giving up the force of the decolonial project. This suggestion is not to romanticize local and indigenous practices. Decolonial approaches establish forms of governance and deal with their own issues of access and knowledge production. As seen in the following sections, autonomous groups such as the Zapatistas have established clear rules such as prohibiting the consumption of alcohol. Facets of the movement also wrestle with issues of gender (what some call the revolution within the revolution, Capelli, 2018). Yet, rulemaking and issues are emergent and function within communities rather than the external imposition of governing. The point here is that visible ungovernance offers a different approach to listening with already-present decolonial work.

Strategies of Ungovernance

Engaging various approaches to inclusion, strategies of ungovernance build a possible repertoire for simultaneous legibility and resistance. The strategies presented here offer literature and examples to reveal visible ungovernance in action. These strategies are not, however, some kind of methodological guide,

something I believe would impose specific forms of governance rather than engage possibilities for thinking and acting. These strategies offer different considerations of working toward educational futures. Strategies of ungovernance also offer a way of considering educational futures as open spaces for productive risk and indeterminacy. If policy and governance aim to capture and codify knowledge in order to build a future based on established endpoints, these strategies invite potentiality and the unknown. That does not mean that they are devoid of politics and positions, but rather shift away from the outcome-orientation of many policies. As seen in the examples I offer below, strategies carry distinct political aims, but do not prefigure any kind of educational future.

Before tracing these strategies, I offer several brief caveats. First, many communities are already engaged in collectivist work that resists a global governance framework built on access to institutions. The strategies discussed below listen to and learn from these efforts, but specifically focus on the ways that those engaged in resistance speak back to problems of legibility. Additionally, these strategies are deeply partial. In this section, I lay out three strategies among a network of diverse ways to engage educational futures within a global commons. Along with partiality, these strategies may be considered as fluid and becoming. Rather than fixed policies to implement, they are offered as ever-evolving plans to build a different kind of future. Finally, though these strategies favor decolonial work, they also draw on multicultural approaches and even aspects of institutional inclusion.

Refusal

As a new form of global governance spread in the 1980s, education and the future became entwined with entrepreneurial individuals using hard work to improve their lives. Within this structure, education moved further toward the commodification of knowledge and the preparing of students to participate in a global “knowledge economy” (Allen & Hollingworth, 2013). This neoliberal model has, in the last decades, increasingly dictated participation in a global commons as free choice within markets. Under this framework, as soon as access is granted in the form of choice, everyone is seen as free and equal. In fact, programs in this framework actually “tend to erase any acknowledgement of the very inequality that brought them into being” (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013: 934). Here, racialized and classed exclusions of local and indigenous ways of knowing are masked as simple choices dictated in a free global market. Overall, neoliberalism can often be seen as a big, global machine marching toward a seemingly universal endpoint. The only options are to participate or be excluded.

Yet, at the start of the year in 1994, the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico pushed back. In doing so, they offered a vision of education and future building that could “constitute a challenge to the homogenization and centralization” of both Mexican national education policy and the broader neoliberal project (Baronnet, 2008: 113). Using horizontal self-organizing and an education model rooted in indigenous identity, they turned a long struggle with the Mexican government into a specific practice. Speaking back to NAFTA, the Mexican government, and many others’ implementation of a neoliberal order, the Zapatistas refused.

The conditions undergirding this refusal extend far beyond a single act of defiance against a government. Zapatismo did not emerge overnight, but came about through a long, shared struggle. Refusal in this sense relies on shared community values and collective work. Refusal is a strategy built on autonomy, the right to self-determination. It comes about as an act against unbearable controls, responding to these governing systems with a clear “I would prefer not to.” At the same time, it is far from a strategy of consensus or homogeneity. For the Zapatistas, refusal allows for rejection of government funding and teachers and a diverse construction of a diverse dissensus of something else.

Refusal is also a productive strategy. The schools created within Zapatismo look to an "other education." Other education makes an educational model centering community culture, language, and history (Bertely-Busquets, 2016). For Zapatistas, it was a refusal to join a system that opposes them (or includes them along the lines of conformity) in favor of building one of their own. Once education has been constructed along these lines, refusal also shifts the position of educational engagement. As a way of shared care and protection, communities can either hold knowledge locally or open it to sharing and movement. Decisions regarding such knowledge emerge locally and collectively, always operating on the community's own terms. In many ways, there is an orientation here to the past, with education acting as a way to reconcile the past wrongs of exclusion and colonialism. Refusal also carries a clear futures perspective. There is a refusal to be included in the inequitable conditions of schooling and a refusal to participate in the destruction of land. In doing so, this "other education" favors curriculums of environmentalism and a radical form of cultural education.

The strategy of refusal is not about communities creating alternative but universalizable models. The Zapatista refusal speaks and acts for collective groups in Chiapas, Mexico rather than as part of a diverse, global whole. At the same time, their refusal places an "emphasis on a 'no' with global resonance" (Holloway, as cited in Schlembach, 2015, p. 989). They have refused while simultaneously announcing their visibility; both sharing and guarding their "other education." This kind of refusal welcomes others to organize along the same path in building a new world, a different kind of future. The Zapatista phrase "to walk while asking" (*caminar preguntando*) is an invitation, not to be included on an ever-widening path, but to learn with in building a better future.

Incompleteness

Just as refusal acts to guard and share knowledge in sometimes partial forms, incompleteness opens pathways to learn with and respect that which is already present without imposing new governing logics or subsuming it in broader structures. Incompleteness is a perspective, a reflective standpoint as educators and policymakers consider and respond to students' complex educational lives. Hoping to better include students, countless strategies see school as one component of educational life. While many of these strategies consider something like home life as a way to inform schooling and act as a supplement for inclusion, incompleteness recognizes school as one place of knowledge production. But that is not the complete picture. A complete picture is neither possible nor desirable. Home life is also a central site of education. And so is learning with friends. And figuring out skills at a job. And sharing ideas while messing around online. And educators and policymakers may welcome these knowledge forms and recognize their understanding as incomplete. "And…and…and" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 25).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer the rhizome as a way of mapping that which is ever-becoming, never-complete. "The rhizome," they describe, "connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states" (1987: 21). Embracing a kind of incompleteness, rhizomes have no center. They are not compiled into some kind of whole. Totality is impossible. Rhizomes reveal a multiplicity, one that is always incomplete, never reducible, with parts emerging and breaking off, visible and obscured depending on who, where, and when. Again, school and home and the subway and… a welcomed horizontal network with no privileged place for "legitimate" knowledge or "real" education.

In my own ethnographic work with transnational youth (Corson, 2020), even in a school built on culturally and linguistically affirmative values, outside-of-school knowledge conformed to school. Life trajectories and access to participating in the world were constructed around schooling success. Yet, youth who were not viewed as succeeding in the school routinely engaged in productive educational practices in their everyday lives. Though

conditions had not been made equal, they were already equal. They were not waiting around for access. Their knowledge and cultural practices made possible different connections and appreciations of learning. For instance, two participants in the project were identified as "at-risk" and with "limited proficiency" in English. Yet, throughout our time together, these participants broke out in frequent bilingual freestyle raps. They routinely practiced translanguaging that was not legible as an educational practice in school, and they did not want it to fit into the school day. They did not want the entirety of their educational lives to be written into schools (or the research project). This refusal solidified access to the knowledge in school as partial, something incomplete and intentionally obscured. Seeing school as one part of something always partial offered a way of showing how their knowledge and ways of being were valuable but not something to tame and conform to schools, even if those schools are built on culturally additive values.

Incompleteness also adds an element of connectivity among networks. It is not only that educational practices of individuals and groups connect across different localities, but also that the "and…and…and…" of incompleteness opens connections among different kinds of educational projects in building open educations that can be shared and learned from, but never completed and categorized. Working toward this reflective standpoint, educational projects are not isolated or scaled toward global reform models. They function as open possibilities, linked together in a complex, entangled networks like a map, "open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification…reworked by an individual, group, or social formation" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 2).

Incompleteness reveals the ever-extending possibility of education in the present, but it also sprawls outward into unknown and unknowable futures. Beyond successful outcomes in schooling, recognizing incompleteness suggests that those striving for educational futures do not yet know what connections will emerge, what becoming possibilities will occur as the result of education in its many forms and many places. This notion does not aim to denigrate schools or abandon policy and planning to build a different kind of future. Rather, it shifts and opens the where and who of making such plans. That is, planning emerges from "a common experiment launched from any kitchen, any back porch, any basement, any hall, any park bench, any improvised party, every night." It becomes a "ceaseless experiment with the futurial presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible" (Harney & Moten, 2013: 74-75). The future is here constantly in the making by a multiplicity of actors who are themselves multiplicities.

Speculation

Pulsing through contemplations of futures is a question of what kinds of worlds education can help construct. One model shows the previously mentioned establishment of goals and measuring development as progress is made toward those goals. But from refusal, with incompleteness, a different kind of thinking moves toward something else. Speculation uses imagining and conjuring of futures not built on linear development but on wild possibility. It opens the dreams and visions of possibility for groups that have had goals and futures defined for them. The work of speculation is shared, a collective project of thinking toward the very edge of thought, imagining the possibility of what seems to be beyond the possible.

This framing of speculation may move in many directions, but it certainly wades through decolonial theories. Responding to a modernist project that creates a rigid, centrally defined idea of the future, Escobar (2008) suggests the possibility of thinking about knowledges and a world "otherwise." Knowing and being here become an "inquiry in the very borders of systems of thought and reaches towards the possibility of non-eurocentric modes of thinking" (2008: 180). The otherwise, conjured through speculation, is a multiple future-in-the-making rooted in alterity. Unlike the binary future that either succeeds or fails (we either achieve universal education or not), speculation creates a lateral shift to alterity. Such alterity uses dreams, wanderings, aspirations, visions,

and builds on past and present actions of groups who are multiple and refuse as they speculate about possible futures.

Hartman takes up one kind of speculation to speak back to the violence that “defines the horizon” of the lives of Black girls and women in cities in the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century (2019: 29). Pushing at this horizon, she imagines the “many lives” of subjects she encounters in the archives to articulate “another kind of existence, a runaway image that conveys the riot inside” (2019: 30). Hartman’s acts of fabulation enact a thinking about futures rooted in alterity and collective self-determination.

The entrypoint here is one where sociologists, reformers, and social workers aim to include, but so often find that “with no social considerations to constrain” Black girls and women became “ungovernable” (2019: 235). Inclusion, once more, exists along disciplinary and governing lines. Hartman does not stop at this point of critique. From archival encounters with these “riotous Black girls” and “troublesome women,” she speculates, fabulates new configurations of possible living, ones that not only reimagine the past but speak to possibilities for a different kind of future. Informed by archival tracings, her work tells imaginative stories of possible artful lives lived beyond governance. Even as discipline describes how these subjects appear in history, Hartman suggests that “desire and the want of something better decide the contours of the telling” (Hartman, 2018: 470). Speculation is thus part of future-making where people say they are here, they exist, and they live otherwise.

Speculation is not only the imagining of a possible otherwise but the speaking and thinking of a different kind of future, one that alters discourse and makes possible the decolonial future of another world. Hartman specifically uses those on the margins of the archives, but there is something pedagogical in her method: to learn from these examples and enact speculation in everyday life. For those refusing governance and those tasked with governing, the work of speculation can be an educational practice of imagining and enacting a future otherwise.

Conclusion

These strategies reflect something hopeful and aspirational, but do not aim to idealize lived realities that have been marked on the margins and subject to certain forms of governance. They also do not discard or suggest abolishing the work of access to a broader system. Instead, they act as approaches that critically engage this broader work along the lines of the “and…and…and…” As a further caution, these strategies are not guarantees or specific procedures to respond to educating for the future through populational thinking and governance. They are possible standpoints and actions, conjurings of alternatives, and collective acts in-process.

Given these many cautions, there is a question of what these strategies offer and how they may be used. The examples from alternative educational models, everyday practices of transnational youth, or imagined lives of Black women offer lessons, are not ones to be replicated or applied as universal strategies but educative examples to inspire, guide, and reflect. They create new possibilities away from the trap of visibility. They reveal a future of unqualified participation in a global commons where anyone, without condition, can participate in making a different kind of world.

Educational institutions throughout the world can play a role in constructing a different kind of educational future, one rooted in the kind of work already striving to build other worlds. Scott (2005) suggests that strategies of improvement or development emerging from modernist systems often fail to implement the progress they aim to enact. The issue, he posits, is that they only see problems through the tunnel vision of their own lens.

Strategies for ungovernance offer potential ways that institutions and institutional actors can see beyond that tunnel vision. Perhaps part of this narrow vision comes about because fields of education and development have constructed issues of access and governance upside down. Rather than identifying the individuals and groups who have been left out of the larger structure, what if the driving force became to construct educational futures around the very idea of ungovernance? In doing so, a project of striving toward different futures aims not to welcome in those on the margins but listen to or awaken the unruliness and wild potential of anyone and everyone.

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