Three Portraits of Resistance: The (Un)making of Canadian Students

Marcia McKenzie

In this article I have outlined several modes of resistance to popular media and dominant cultural narratives suggested in three Canadian educational programs with a focus on social and environmental change. Exploring discourses of awareness, inactive caring, thinking differently, lifestyle activism, impacting the world, and contingent agency, I propose that program characteristics and issues of class may affect students' abilities to (un)make themselves as media consumers and producers—as ethical and political global citizens.

Key words: social justice and education, environmental education, global education, discourse analysis, agency

L'auteure présente plusieurs modes de résistance aux médias populaires et aux discours culturels dominants ressortant de trois programmes scolaires canadiens portant sur les changements sociaux et environnementaux en insistant sur l'évolution de la société et du milieu environnant. Explorant les discours axés sur la conscientisation, la bienveillance passive, la pensée distincte et autonome, l'activisme quant au mode de vie, l'impact sur le monde et l'intervention conditionnelle, l'auteure fait valoir que des caractéristiques des programmes et des questions de classe peuvent avoir une incidence sur l'aptitude des élèves à devenir ou non des consommateurs de médias et des producteurs – en tant que citoyens éthiques et politiques dans le village planétaire.

Mots clés : justice sociale et éducation en matière d'environnement, éducation planétaire, analyse de discours, intervention

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I mean the media, obviously, we bash the hell out of the media, or the heck out of the media, in terms of popular media. (Heidi, Lawson student, 17)

As the student interview excerpt that leads this article hints, the education of Canadian students is a complex mix of instances of contestation and more subtle norming. In a nation built on contradictory discourses of neoliberalism, cultural and ecological loss, postmodern contingency, critical thought, and religious fundamentalisms, many educators seek to engage students in exploring the ways in which we live. Asking how resistance is understood and enacted by students and educators in three Canadian educational programs with a focus on social and environmental change, I explore in this article how program characteristics and issues of class may affect students' abilities to (un)make themselves as media consumers and producers, as ethical and political global citizens.

AN ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE

In both theoretical framing and methodology, I take up a broad conception of discourse derived in large part from the work of French philosopher, Michel Foucault. Instead of connoting language in use, discourse in Foucauldian terms signals an uncertain world composed of shifting matrices of power and knowledge through which we are constituted (Foucault, 1980). Instantiated by means of practices such as language use, traditions of family and culture, and institutions such as school and media, we can understand discourses as having different degrees of authority, with dominant discourses appearing natural or true, denying their own partiality, and supporting and perpetuating existing power relations (Garvey, 1997; Pile & Thrift, 1995).

Accordingly, the aim of discourse analysis is not to uncover an objective reality, but to investigate how we construct objectivity, or sedimented power, through the discursive production of meaning (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Like all research, discourse analysis itself is unable to avoid constituting the world in particular ways. Thus, we can view the analysis of discourse as a political intervention intended to challenge certain discourses, even as it constitutes or reproduces others. As Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) suggest, "treating the delimitation of discourses as an analytical exercise entails understanding discourses as objects that the researcher constructs rather than as objects that exist in a delimited form in reality ready to be identified and mapped" (pp. 143-

144). We can then assess validity, not in terms of truth-telling, but in relation to the role of the research in maintaining or disrupting power relations in society.

THE SUBJECT OF AGENCY

The discourses dominant in a given time and place tend to constitute the subjectivity of the majority of the people much of time, acting both, in Foucauldian terminology, as "technologies of power" initiated and enforced by official authorization and as "technologies of the self," internalized means of self-discipline (Foucault, 2003/1982, p. 146). An example is the pervasive influence of corporate advertising, whose influences are both officially sanctioned and perpetuated through our own desires (Kilbourne, 2000). According to this understanding, "discourses that carry public authority shape identities and regulate bodies, desires, selves, and whole populations" (Seidman, 1994, p. 215). Rejecting the humanist notion of authenticity in the individual, this framing suggests instead that subjectivity is fluid and multi-faceted, with its constitution changing in relationship to the relative power of various discourses over contexts and over time.

The possibility of agency within this constituted subjectivity remains a controversial area of scholarship. In contrast to traditional understandings of agency as the capacity for choice and self-determination, those working with discursive epistemologies propose various limited possibilities for reflexivity and resistance to processes of discursive constitution. Foucault himself is considered to have insufficiently elaborated on the question of agency, although seeming to move in his later work to a position of greater support for its possibility (Butler, 1997b; McNay, 1999). For example, in the *History of Sexuality: Volume I*, Foucault (1981) writes:

> We must conceive of discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable…. Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (p. 101)

Judith Butler is among those who have sought to take up where Foucault left off, working to theorize subjectivity and the workings of agency in more detail. Butler (1993) suggests that the source of agency is within the hegemonic force of social conventions, such as heterosexual normativity, which create "abjects." The resulting discursive slippage is a means of resistance, challenging the norms by indicating how constitution is social and hegemonic, rather than natural (Applebaum, 2004). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler (1997b) outlines the conditions of agency:

> Power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject's "own" acting. As a subject of power (where "of" connotes both "belonging to" and "wielding"), the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; it eclipses power with power … the subject emerges both as the effect of a prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radical conditioned form of agency. (pp. 14 -15)

However, some scholars feel that Butler's elaboration remains inadequate. Although it explains how change occurs through subjects, it does not explicate how change occurs because of subjects, resulting in an ambiguity reminiscent of that in Foucault's work (Applebaum, 2004; Mills, 2000).

Lovell (2003) posits that what is required is the recognition of agency as an ensemble performance, with transformative political agency existing in the interstices of interaction between contingent and constituted subjects. Taking up Butler's (1997a) example of the pivotal day in the U.S. civil rights movement when Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus, Lovell suggests it is necessary to look at the cumulative effect of the multiple other resistances that created the conditions for her refusal (not the first by her or others) to become an important "act of resistance." The effect of these multiple resistances, including social and political circumstances, point to the possibility that change results from the interaction of multiple discourses, whether at the individual or societal level. Indeed, other scholars have suggested that a high level of interdiscursivity is associated with social change, while a low level signals the reproduction of the established order (Jørgensen &

Phillips, 2002). Similarly, subjectivity can be viewed as more than a sum total of positions in discourse (Walkerdine, 1989), with the opportunity for agency occurring within and amongst discourses, as they bump up against one another – as one discourse enables critiques of others.

This understanding supports the possibility that subjects do not simply reflect the practices through which they are constituted, but that there is always a possible tension between the discourses available and, as a result, the subject's interpretation and use of them (Søndergaard, 2002). Rather than being free from discursive constitution, we may work within that constitution, using alternative discourses to "resist, subvert, and change the discourses themselves" (Davies, 2000, p. 67). In this view, agency can be understood as the ongoing process of (un)making ourselves through explorations of our positioning within discourse. Encumbered by constituting discourse, and not at all transparent or outside of power matrices (Applebaum, 2004), this alternate notion of reflexivity becomes a potential tool as educators work to engage students in their own (un)making.

THREE PORTRAITS OF RESISTANCE

In the following sections I revisit these perspectives on the possibilities of agency and resistance through the data generously provided by students and educators from three Canadian programs that have a focus on social and ecological issues. Ranging from a grade-12 global education class in a public school in a rural working class community of 5,000, to a grade-8 to 10 Montessori mini school within an urban public school, to a non-profit, two-year International Baccalaureate school in a remote residential setting, these programs particularly vary in terms of dominant social class and depth of focus on social and ecological issues.

Although media education is not the sole focus of any of the programs, it is a central part of everyday practice at each site, with activities including discussions and workshops on bias in media coverage, local and global issues, body image and eating disorders connected with the popular media, advertising and consumerism, critiques of current trends perpetuated through the media, as well as frequent Internet-based research projects. Teachers include media education in each of the programs as one aspect of broader curricula

aimed at social and ecological activism.

To suggest how resistance to popular media, and mainstream society more generally, is understood and enacted differently by students in the three programs, I have organized my analysis of discourse into "portraits" of the three schools. This form of representation differs from the methodology of "portraiture" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983), which sets out to essentialize by "raising the mirror" and hoping to capture the research subject "with accuracy and discipline" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 2). Instead, this analysis of discourse is performative (MacLure, 2003). It represents the data in one particular way through the gathering of discourses in salient portraits of resistance of the three programs, seeking not to truth-tell, but instead to question dominant discourses as they affect students' abilities to (un)make themselves as media consumers and producers, and as socio-ecological activists.

In keeping with this orientation, both data collection and analysis were flexible and did not have systematicity or comprehensiveness as goals. In total, 38 students participated in the study (63% of whom were female), as well as 5 teachers (60% of whom were female). Data were collected mainly through a mix of individual (24) and focus group (4) semi-structured interviews of one to two hours in length. These were undertaken with current students and teachers, and in the case of one focus group, with program graduates. Additional data were included through photographs, questionnaire responses (6), and school documents provided by program teachers. I collected all of the data during the spring of 2003, with a total of two weeks spent at each site. The data were subsequently analyzed through processes of transcription, (re)reading, identification of discourses for discussion, and the creation of various representations which brought together the data in various ways (i.e., see also McKenzie, 2004). I worry that the representation by portrait offered here is unfair in that it washes out the complexity that exists within each of the sites; however, my hope is that in exchange it usefully draws attention to differences among forms of resistance, and their possible roles in the (un)making of Canadian students more generally.

Awareness and Inactive Caring: Hillview

Central to the dominant mode of resistance suggested in the talk of students in the Hillview Secondary School[1] Global Education course is the perception that their education is, and should be, unbiased -- a view that continues to be commonly held and promoted within Canadian secondary schools (Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Lousley, 1999). This discourse of neutrality is evident in the comments of Angela:

> I learned a lot about the problems dealing with sweatshops and about cloning, not only with people but with food. And possible solutions for these problems…. In this class you get the truth and solid facts about what is going on. Not like the one-sided media. (Angela, Hillview student, 18)

An understanding of education as neutral seems to be symptomatic of a broader reliance on a discourse of objective knowing, which makes awareness possible and appears to correspond with a lack of challenging critique of dominant societal discourses. Resistance in the Global Education course tends to involve having one's "eyes opened," and learning about "what's going on" in the world, as the following remark epitomizes:

> I've just learned that there are issues and problems that people don't focus on… the States, for example, have so much money… and they would never look at other countries and, and give up pennies for their health care and people are dying and people are getting sick and they've got, we've got medicines in Canada and in the States that, cure some of those diseases and stuff that they have in other countries, but there's no, there's no way of connection…. I've just learned so much about, countries that can help, but don't, and just because they're blind—they don't take the time to, to figure out what's going on. (Kelsey, Hillview student, 16)

In "teaching students about the world in which they live" (Global Education Course Outline), the course highlights issues that are explored as largely external to the students, and proposes solutions that tend to draw on dominant ethno and anthrocentric discourses, such as Western intervention in "less developed" countries, globalized economic development, and environmental management (Bowers, 1997; Gough,

1999).

Ironically, students repeatedly contrast the assumed educational neutrality with an understanding of the popular media as strongly biased, as exemplified in Angela's comments that, "In this class you get the truth and solid facts about what is going on. Not like the one-sided media." Another student explains,

> We've learned that the news is kind of biased and whatever country you're watching in you're going to hear that government's side more than what's actually going on. And I think that's kind of neat, that we found that out. Because you watch the news here and we hear some parts of the war on Iraq, right?, from our news channels. And then you watch American news – it's totally different and I just noticed that. Before I thought it was two different things that happened (laughs), and now, it's like the same thing, they just flip it. (Corrine, Hillview student ,19)

> I think for the rest of my life now, I'll be wondering what's going on, looking on the Internet and watching CNN more so that I know what's going on. (Corrine, Hillview student, 19)

Students seem to take up this "media is biased" stance as part of learning "what's going on" in the world, although there is little suggestion that students understand why or how they might undertake a more in-depth deconstruction of media. Indeed, students seem to continue to use mainstream media uncritically as their main source of knowledge about the world. This absence of critique was also evident more generally, suggesting low interdiscursivity and minimal reflexivity and agency on the part of students.

> Your friends are the people you hang out with the most, well, other than your family, so they influence the way that you feel about things. I mean, like, everybody is their own person, but, if you don't agree with your friends then, I don't know, it causes a lot of conflict. (Corrine, Hillview student, 19)

In addition to discourses around knowing, discourses of subjectivity also appear to be central to students' understandings and enactments of resistance. Adhering to dominant humanist conceptions of the subject, students in the Hillview Global Education course appear to generally understand themselves as somewhat influenced by family and friends, but as primarily

autonomous and stable. Holding themselves responsible for their (lack of) achievement and agency, the students in this course emphasize their desire to live "a steady life." This position is strongly articulated in the following conversation with Doug:

Researcher: So, do you think that your experience in the class will, in the long run, affect the way you'll live your life?
Doug: Uh, affect it in a good way I would say, maybe help it out and, I would know more about what's going on globally because of it, I guess? Things like that. And being on the field trip too, I'm not too sure, the homeless – that was a good experience, that helped me.
Researcher: How did it help you?
Doug: I don't know, I'm just, never really liked the city very much and going there and seeing how all those people live and stuff like that is just, like, it's an eye opener, for sure.
Researcher: What does it make you think – did it make you like the city more or less or?
Doug: It makes you think of how they got there, and if you want to end up like that, right? Imagining yourself being in that same situation.
Researcher: It gets you more motivated or?
Doug: Yeah…
Researcher: What things do you think will affect who you are ten years from now?
Doug: What will affect me? Probably I will regret my grades in school. I should try better, but I just don't right now. That's one thing I should be doing. If I wanted to get a better job down the road. And, I don't know. That's probably the most important one.
Researcher: And do you have any specific dreams or goal for the future?
Doug: Uh, I'd like to be a personal trainer, but that's just a lot of school work and I'm not very good with school, so – but, just live a steady life and have a family.
Researcher: Do you have plans for next year?
Doug: Uh, I'm just going to get a job and then, after I work here for a bit I want to go the oil rigs. Go to the oil rigs for a couple of years. (Doug, Hillview student, 17)

Like many of his classmates, Doug's plans for his future appear inhibited by a sense of lack of agency as he worries about where he might end up and considers his goals for the future. In contrast to the discourse of individual power that is so prevalent at the other two sites, the

discourses available to the Hillview students are no doubt bound by their class-specific material realities and life experiences (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Tied to their understanding of social and ecological problems as requiring objective awareness of events happening elsewhere, as well as to perspectives of themselves as autonomous, stable, and lacking agency, students in the Global Education class commonly articulated a second component of their resistance, which I have called "inactive caring." Several students indicated that they have "grown to care" for others "less fortunate" through the class, and a few talk of wanting to find careers that enable them to help others. However, the caring expressed in students' comments typically does not carry with it a sense of being able to make any substantial change in the world, as suggested in the following remark made by Doug:

> Researcher: What do you think [Ms. Scott is] wanting to teach you in the Global Ed class, particularly around social issues or environmental issues? *Doug:* Uh, how the world is and how it runs and problems around the world and things you can do, that you can do personally, obviously you can't change it, but to help it. Things like that. (Doug, Hillview student, 17)

Another student, Kelsey, articulated a similar notion of caring that is restricted in its ability to effect change. In discussing the possibilities of taking action, she commented that the experience of raising money for an orphanage in Asia was educative in that "it seems like it would be difficult to help them, but actually it's not." However, Kelsey retreated to a position where she wanted "not to make the world a better place," but just make "a little bit of a difference or at least put, like, a smile on someone's face that wasn't smiling beforehand." This modest understanding of her potential effect on the world, or resistance to it, is reiterated elsewhere when she stated,

> We had that, what's that group, "Check Your Head." They came in and they were talking about, um, like, sweatshops and stuff… Like, I know, most of the clothes I'm wearing have been made in sweatshops, but I really don't know where else to buy them from. That makes you feel kinda like there's nothing you can do, like, even when you feel bad about it, it's just like, well, I got to get clothes from somewhere. (Shelley, Hillview student, 16)

"I know I'm not going to be able to help [people] dramatically." Through the combined discourses of awareness and inactive caring, Hillview students articulate a limiting portrait of resistance: one that remains strongly influenced by mainstream cultural narratives and suggests some of the difficulties that can be involved in engaging students in deeper levels of reflexivity and activism.

A Way of Thinking and Lifestyle Activism: Kirkwood

Students in the Kirkwood Montessori program commonly took up a discourse of educational neutrality, as did students in the Hillview Global Education course. For example, when asked whether the Montessori teachers promoted certain perspectives on the world, one student commented:

> My viewpoints of what's cool and what's not in grade school was directly from the media, I guess you could say. I think, *now,* I've just changed, I've realized what's cool and what's not. Montessori helped a lot. Like kind of learning about child labour and that kind of stuff, questioning the companies and that kind of thing. (Daniel, Kirkwood student, 16)

Um, not so much perspectives of, though I guess, in some ways, but, they, they just sort of promote the world. And they don't really say any negative points or positive points. They just explain how the world is and they explain how countries are, and they don't say whether that's good or that's bad, 'cause that's something that we have to learn ourselves. (Lara, Kirkwood student, 14)

Unlike at Hillview, however, comments such as those made by three program graduates suggest a tension between statements of educational neutrality and acknowledgement of experiences of norming within the Montessori program.

Researcher: You said it strengthened your strength, being in the Montessori program?

Steve: Well, it strengthened my strength, but only the values I had already. It's not like I developed bad values and then had to change them. I just had, like, sort of, well I already had them, but then because of this I knew they were the right ones.

> Montessori can manipulate [students'] minds, and make them become Montessori. (Lena, Kirkwood student, 17)

Researcher: Which ones?
Steve: Not steal, not buy Nike, not whatever.
Daniel: The ten commandments.
Lena: Yeah. I don't know if it's strengths, as much as morals. It's not really what to do, as much as what not to do. (Kirkwood students: Lena, 17; Daniel, 16; Steve, 16)

Students' comments suggest that although the values of the Montessori program were considered "right," and therefore perhaps could still be thought of as "neutral," in some cases students experienced them as constitutive, or as a form of norming.

Researcher: How do you think the values that are sort of taught here in the Montessori program – do you think they correspond or conflict with values that are taught by society in general?
Lara: They're quite the same actually, cause I know that Canadian society, they're uh, "We don't want to be part of war," and environmental concerns – little hippie tree hugger country right? (laughs) So that's what Montessori is too. (Lara, Kirkwood student, 14)

Although maintaining that the Montessori program did not "bump up against" mainstream Canadian values "at all," Ms. Pryde suggested how the Montessori program sought to enable students to resist the power of the media and related mainstream values:

It's no surprise that their life is pop culture and when they put in a CD, when they turn on the TV, when they go see a movie, when they pick up a magazine, they are being targeted as a marketing group. And they are being sold a consumer lifestyle. So, that's totally juxtapositioned to what we're asking them to think about. And it's everywhere, it's pervasive. So, we're really swimming upriver with the kind of power that that has on them. (Ms. Pryde, Kirkwood teacher)

This view of students as socio-culturally constituted to some degree, and of media and society as constitutive, contributes to the existence of a discourse of critique in the Montessori program, although a number of discourses such as assumptions of objectivity and educational neutrality seem to generally be beyond the realm of this critique.

The taking up of the combined discourses of socio-cultural constitution and critique appear to translate into students at Kirkwood

talking less about awareness of social and ecological issues, and more about a different way of thinking about the world, including in terms of their interactions with media. The Montessori students describe this way of thinking as being quite pervasive and as affecting their actions, including their interactions with peers and family. Lena, a graduate of the Montessori program, self-describes how she took on an anti perspective during her time in the program, which has now shifted back towards a middle ground which is less extreme, but still a different way of understanding the world than the one she started with.

> [They teach you] freedom of speech, to question authority (laughs), not to challenge it but to question it. Yeah, don't sit back and be spoon fed, you know. (Jenny, Kirkwood student, 16)

> Even the little butterfly flapping its wings, I guess, could influence me in some way. (Lara, Kirkwood student, 14)

Sometime in grade 10, um, it all kind of just, snapped into place. Then I thought I saw a bunch of conspiracies and things, which was I guess the extreme (laughs)… but um, it's kind of like an awakening. It's neat. And then you just get to react to everything differently. Um, I guess it comes about with more knowledge probably, or maybe a deeper kind of knowledge, more critical. (Lena, Kirkwood student, 17)

Another Montessori student, Kim, also talked about developing a different "way of thinking."

It just kind of accumulates. Like, from [other students], like, they're kind of the vegetarian spokespeople for Montessori (laughs)… And then we have Off Ramp, which is promoting clean and safe transportation. And we have Evergreen promoting a green school and a green environment. And we just have all these groups, and they just kind of, mesh together, and together it's kind of like a super being, you know, kind of a super global issues/knowledge thing (laughs), and I just think that, everybody's hearing about this, you know, every day at class meeting or whatever, things are brought up. (Kim, Kirkwood student, 15)

Although assuming an underlying discourse of neutrality, the way of thinking described by Kim and Lena seems to go beyond awareness to a deeper, more reflexive kind of knowing, one that causes them to pit certain discourses against each other, challenging their own constitution

through media and society more generally, and contributing to their socio-ecological activism. Connecting to this portrait of resistance is a discourse of agency as "individual power," a sense of "freedom" not uncommon in more privileged classes (Dillabough, 2004), which is prevalent in the Montessori program and quite distinct from the modest aspirations and lack of agency suggested in the talk of the Global Education students at Hillview. Contained in this discourse is the notion that students can achieve what they "set their sights on" if they only work hard enough. What Kirkwood students judged as worthy of striving for commonly seems to match dominant North American discourses around academic success, social status, and economic achievement. The coupling of individual power with these other unexamined discourses around achievement can be heard in the comments of Kirkwood students, such as those of Kim:

Researcher: How would you describe your values? What things are important to you?
Kim: Most things that are important to me, grades are important to me… but, uh, I'm striving for success in life basically – overall goal. Obviously. Um, and I think grades are a big way of getting there. Grades are getting me up to where I need to be to get into programs for university, for, I want to go to a program in Europe, a boarding school for grade 11 and 12 to earn a baccalaureate… what university or college I attend or law school… I have big goals, but – it lets me strive higher. (Kim, Kirkwood student, 15)

Although indicating a strong sense of agency, Kim also suggests that the "way of thinking" in the Montessori program extends limited critique to many of dominant cultural narratives, in some cases restricting reflexivity and resistance to particular domains.

The sense of agency, and yet often limited focus of resistance, evident in the Montessori "way of thinking" goes hand in hand with the discourse of "lifestyle activism" commonly taken up by students in the program. This approach to "making a difference" is highlighted in the following discussion with three Montessori graduates:

Researcher: What do you think the teachers involved in the Montessori program are wanting to teach you during your time here, particularly in relation to social and environmental issues?

Tess: You can make a difference!
Camille: Yeah (laughs). That is the number one lesson they say – like, every little thing counts.
Alix: Be informed. To know what's going on.
Camille: And, involve others. Outreach. To your friends, kids. Anything to get out there and get stuff spread, kind of thing…
Researcher: So, do you believe your experience in the Montessori program will affect your life in the long term?
All three: Totally. Yep.
Researcher: Why?
Tess: Take shorter showers. The way you eat… Recycling. Just little things. Little things you do that affect the global environment.
Camille: And getting involved. Just, like, even when I'm in grade eleven, and out of the Montessori program, I still want to get involved in workshops and things like that. (Kirkwood students: Alix, 15; Camille, 16; Tess, 15)

> I saw this kid wearing Nike and I said, "Do you know they use sweatshop labour," and he said, "Yeah." So then I asked him, "I'm just wondering why you wear it." (Tess, Kirkwood student, 16)

As these students explained, the dominant discourse of activism in the Montessori program seems to be one of valuing the many "little things" that can be done to "affect the global environment," including staying informed despite media biases, making conscious lifestyle choices, and spreading the word to those around you. However, for some this discourse of lifestyle activism is taken up within an otherwise "mainstream" life of consumerism and achievement. Kate, for example, suggested that "when I go to buy my house now, I'll probably buy with a low flow toilet," and "When I have money to make the decisions on my eating habits … I can buy organic and shade grown and that kind of thing … I'll make those decisions to, um, eat to save the planet."

The restricted focus of the critique for some students at Kirkwood seems in part to be a result of particular dominant narratives, such as educational neutrality, individual power, and economic achievement, remaining unquestioned, and may also be a function of the reluctance of the Montessori program teachers to contribute to their students feeling "downtrodden" by focusing on more systemic and challenging forms of activism. As one of the Montessori teachers explains,

I've gotten the sense that they're almost like dogs with their tails between their

legs, that there's so much crap and there's so much, you know, because they feel responsible and they want to act responsibly, but there's so much to do, and there's so many choices and decisions for them to make, and "Gee, I just want to be a kid." They're kids. So they kind of have to balance that with themselves, what can they do, what can't they do, what do they enjoy, what could they change a bit, without feeling downtrodden over it. (Ms. Pryde, Kirkwood teacher)

Despite limitations, empowered by a view of socio-cultural constitution and critique, as well as a strong class-based sense of agency, this mode of resistance suggests considerable interdiscursivity and reflexivity, and results in a strong emphasis on lifestyle activism.

Impacting the World and Contingent Agency: Lawson

> *Knowers and Sources of Knowledge*
> How is knowledge gained? What are the sources? To what extent might these vary according to age, education or cultural background? What role does personal experience play in the formation of knowledge claims? To what extent does personal or ideological bias influence our knowledge claims? Does knowledge come from inside or outside? Do we construct reality or do we recognize it? Is knowledge even a 'thing' that resides somewhere?
> - From "Theory of Knowledge" course website

Both consciously and unconsciously, through its curriculum and particular environment, Lawson College introduced many of its students to alternative conceptions of knowledge and identity as contingent, thus establishing an important aspect of dominant forms of resistance within the program. Unlike at Hillview and Kirkwood, students at Lawson tend to view knowledge as generally subjective, rather than objective; and understand cultural norms, media, and even their education as biased and potentially alterable, dependent on underlying values and beliefs. This discourse of contingent knowing is included as an important part of the curriculum through the first year course, "Theory of Knowledge." One student explains:

That's what TOK [Theory of Knowledge] teaches us to do: think critically about information, and see which one's more likely to be true. It is biased, of course, but all information is biased, but still; the only information that is not biased is

say, "I weight 65 kilos," or "I'm 17 years old," that's a neutral statement. But as soon as you're getting involved in international politics and points of view, things become really subjective. And the theoretical job of TOK is that, you inform yourself and decide which one you support, and act based on the information. (David, Portugal,[2] Lawson student, 17)

As suggested by David, this approach to knowing includes a strong element of critique.

There is an interesting interplay suggested in the talk of students and teachers at Lawson between discourses of critique and subjective knowing, and a discourse of educational bias. Students generally understand their education as promoting particular perspectives, such as a discourse of media scepticism, which are often quite different from those at home. Yet most students seem to accept and take up the values being advanced by the College, including the emphasis on critique. David explains,

Even though they try to be as neutral as possible, there is always bias. Which means they can't produce unbiased statements, and of course there are biases here at Lawson, and they kind of want us to, force us to, think that way … Even if you think critically there are certain biases that the College introduces to you. For example, the word around campus is that, "Don't trust CNN, don't trust a word of what they say." Even if what they're saying is true, I think that a Lawson student will assume that it is false. (David, Portugal, Lawson student, 17)

A teacher describes this process of taking up of the biases of the College in the following way:

> I viewed life differently when I first came here. You know, I might have been a bit more racist. But being here has changed me a lot… it opens up a whole load of questions about yourself and about people in general, why we're here, and it's just opened up a whole new world. (Adam, England, Lawson student, 18)

This experience of living together in a small global community is something that affects not just what you think, in terms of attitude and background knowledge, but affects who you are, affects the screens through which you see all the world, and we're speaking of knowledge …. I think the screens that were developed, the eyes through which you look, are, that they more or less look through - I don't think students look at the world through the eyes after

they've left Lawson. (Lawson teacher)

As in these examples, the learning students experience at Lawson College is often described as dramatically changing their understanding of the world, or in the words of a Kirkwood student, their "way of thinking."

Related to discourses around knowing, are those to do with subjectivity, including the unexamined discourse of individual power. In keeping with the privileged backgrounds and experiences of many of the students at both Lawson and Kirkwood, this discourse is strongly promoted at the College. Violeta articulately outlines this discourse of "I am an individual and I am different and I can do anything."

> I think Lawson is within a western model for sure. And I think we westernize students to some extent. (Lawson teacher)

Reseacher: "Whatever you set your sights on," where did you learn that?
Violeta: It's just that the daily experience of seeing the way you people behave towards each other, the way things function and all the things, it's, it's just how it became engraved in myself …. At home we still have, kind of all believe some form of mythic, some kind of the communistic way of thinking …. there is still this sort of set mould for everything there. Well here it's very much individualistic and the tolerance is valued. "I am an individual and I am different and I can do anything." (Violeta, Bulgaria, Lawson student, 17)

As part of their assumed stance of agency as individual power, as well as through understanding the world as a contingent and shifting object of critique, students at Lawson commonly articulated and enacted a resistance writ large, through their desire and efforts to "impact the world." For example, Emilia described the impact her experiences at the College have had on her way of living.

> You have to, to, to *climb the ladder of power* in order to make some big decisions that will impact, that will have a big impact on the world. (David, Portugal, 17)

Lawson has inspired my soul, my spirit, my life, in the way that now I have so many goals, like physical goals but also internal goals, like, as I was saying before, like, converting the educational system in Nicaragua. I don't know, the

way you see people, the way you talk to people, but also, the way you live. (Emilia, Nicaragua, Lawson student, 17)

Although certainly not the case for all, a number of students work between a "lifestyle activism" approach to socio-ecological change similar to that at Kirkwood and a more outwardly activist stance for effecting change. Heidi described her own struggle with how to "help the most."

Researcher: I just have one more question — do you have specific dreams or goals for the future?
Heidi: I thought I did, when I first came here, in terms of wanting to be head of Oxfam or something like that, but, and then as I've come here I've been like, I'm between the lines of just taking care of myself and my immediate area, like you know, having a nice farm and an orphanage of some sort, like very small. I'm torn between that and running Nike so that I can make it so there aren't sweatshops. You know, it's kind of one extreme or the other – how to help the most? And is helping the most important, or do you want quality, quantity. Ahhh!! So I'm torn between that. That will just sort of, time will tell. (Heidi, Canada, Lawson student, 17)

Although the strong discourse of impacting the world promises much action, it is the less expected discourse of "contingent agency" which is perhaps more exciting in its possibilities for a deeper reflexivity and more selective resistance to normative discourses of media, society, and education itself.

Students Rastha and Emilia suggest a sense of contingent agency that works in the spaces of their constituted selves.

I'm from a very large family… I'm the youngest of them, and there was a lot of pressure on me from other members of my family. And I needed to sort of focus on, "Okay, what do I take from it, and what do I push away from?" And coming away provided a space for me to sort of reflect on what I want. (Rastha, Maldives, Lawson student, 18)
My experience has made me the way I am. Because you go to so many different experiences and so many different things through the span of your life, and then the way that you react to those, to those experience is the way you are making your own personality, and I would say that's the way. Of course, what informs them? My parents, my culture, my religion, and everything, so, yeah. (Emilia,

Nicaragua, Lawson student, 17)

Both Rastha and Emilia took up a discourse of socio-cultural constitution in talking about how their previous experiences have exerted pressure on them/made them the way they are. The possibility of agency within this state of constitution is suggested in their comments that their reactions/reflections were "the way you are making your own personality." Rastha in particular articulated agency as occurring through a process of asking, "Okay, what do I take … and what do I push away from." Agency is suggested to be the working with/against ways of viewing the world (discourses) that have been introduced through various influences. This is an understanding of agency as contingent on previous constitution, but as allowing some degree of resistance to be exerted.

In taking up a discourse of contingent agency, a number of students suggested that at times their sense of agency was overwhelmed by forces of constitution, with students worrying about losing the ways of thinking they have gained at school once they return home. Violeta expressed her concern:

Researcher: Do you believe this experience has affected the way you will live your life?
Violeta: I hope so … It's because again it's true that this is very, very much in a way idealistic, um, but as long as … I've incorporated these ideas in myself I try for them and like fight for them but it depends very much on the environment where I go. Because, for example, if I go home, if I am still able to do these things, it will be much harder. And I hope, I dearly hope, that I don't give up with the first failure, because I know if I go home I will have lots of failures with incorporating these ideas but I will try at least. That's maybe, that's what matters, no? (Violeta, Bulgaria, Lawson student, 17)

In realizing the challenges of resisting particular discourses, the students at Lawson indicate a tentative agency that works through a high level of intercultural interdiscursivity to provoke reflexivity and possibilities for working at difficult changes.

EDUCATING FOR AGENCY

Notwithstanding the many conversations left out and the selectivity of the discourses I have chosen to represent here, these three portraits – or perhaps more accurately, caricatures – are intended to provoke inquiry into the ways in which students and teachers may understand and enact different modes of resistance in accordance with those discourses that constitute their subjectivities and schooling. The three programs are evidently very different in their scope, and in the age groups and populations they serve; but all share a commitment to encouraging socio-ecological activism through media education and other means, and are a result of the hard work of dedicated and resourceful teachers. This research seeks to learn from and contribute to the efforts of these teachers, and not to consider them responsible for more or less promising modes of resistance that should rather be understood as stemming from broader social and cultural narratives and conditions (Van Galen, 2004).

With a discursive framing, resistance can no longer be understood as replacing wrong with right, but instead must be complicated as something that is never outside of discourse and never proffering a once-and-for-all solution (Lather, 1991). In these sites, the ways resistance is understood and enacted suggest strong connections to dominant program discourses (e.g., educational neutrality, constitution, critique), dominant societal discourses (e.g., objective knowledge, economic achievement), including discourses more or less available to students with different levels of class privilege based on the sedimentation of early discursive practices and experiences (e.g., critique, individual power). The intriguing "contingent agency" articulated by students at Lawson College suggests a reflexive response to the interdiscursivity manifest in the shifting between cultural narratives, which is no doubt encouraged by an understanding of knowledge as subjective as introduced through the International Baccalaureate curriculum.

According to a discursive frame, this state of possible resistance entails engaging in an examination or an (un)making of one's own discursive constitution, as well as that of one's education, and surrounding media and culture(s), with the possibility of working within that constitution to effect desirable change. Although the desires that

drive that change may always rest within discourse, resistance can be viewed as a more thorough, and always unfinished, probing of their ethical and political implications (Boler, 1999). Understanding agency as a matter of positioning within discourse perhaps offers otherwise unavailable opportunities for resistance and change, for (un)making oneself in relation to the dominant discourses of media and society more general, and ultimately, for more reflexive and systemic socio-ecological activism.

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NOTES

[1] All places and names of participants have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

[2] The student's country of origin provides important context for their comments. Lawson is a non-profit school with a culturally diverse, predominantly middle-class student body of 200 from around the world.

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