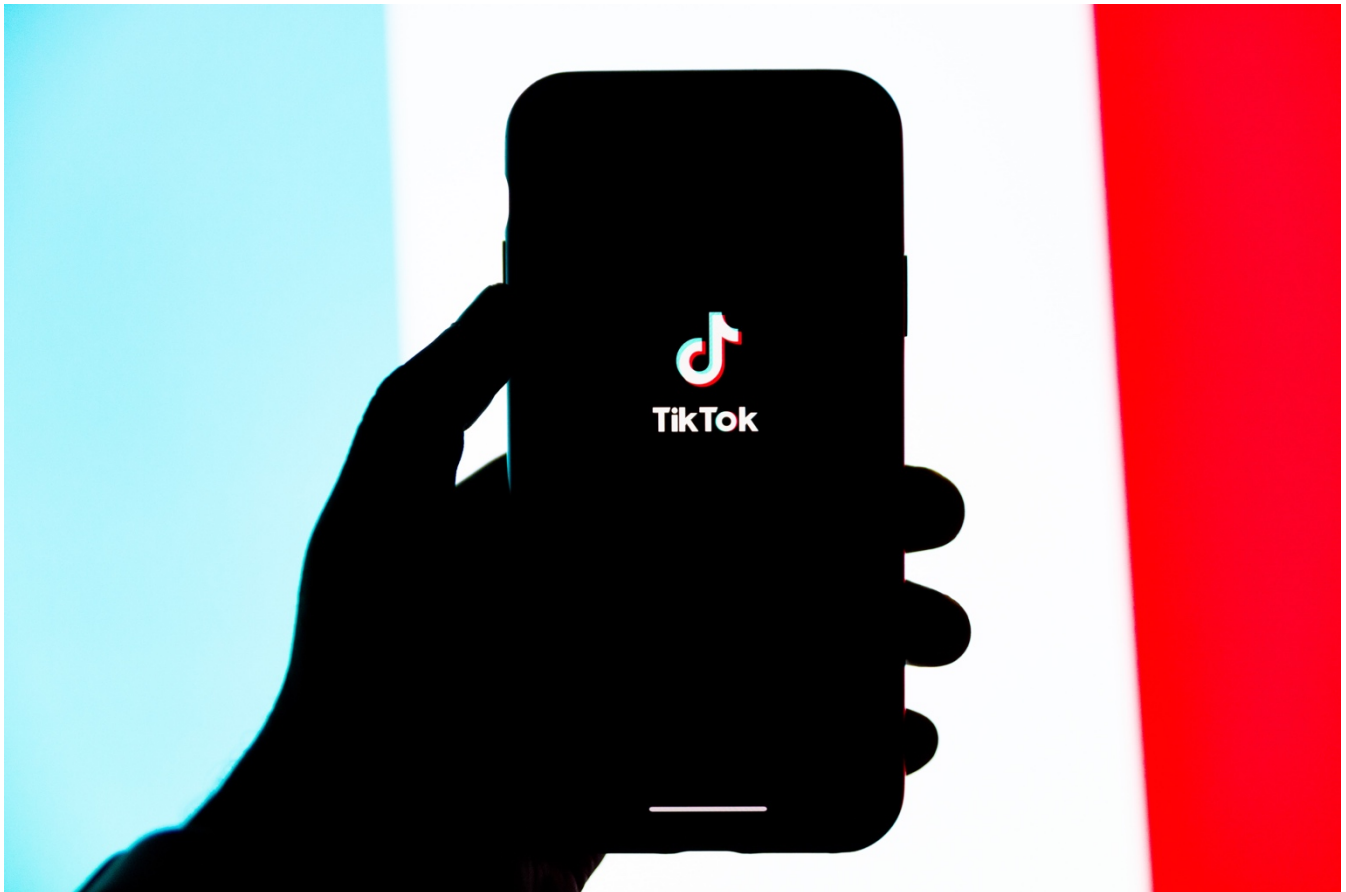# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Reality check: How adolescents use TikTok as a digital backchanneling medium to speak back against institutional discourses of school(ing)

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SOLEN FEYISSA VIA UNSPLASH.COM

I may as well have solemnly sworn I was up to no good when, just over ten years ago, as a high school student, I downloaded a soundbite onto my phone which played a shrill, mosquito-like sound that only young people could hear.

The night I came across this really quite annoying sound on the internet, my younger self immediately pounced on its possibilities. It happens that, as we age, our ability to hear high-pitched frequencies wanes through a process called presbycusis, a phenomenon observable in people as young as 18. Perhaps predictably, I took my phone to school the next day and played the soundbite on repeat in the middle of English class. A certain juvenile hilariousness ensued as my peers all winced in unison and looked about for the source of the sound while my teacher, deaf to its whine, attempted to figure out what had so rudely commandeered our attention.

I remember being captivated by this encounter. I played it once, maybe twice more throughout the day, quickly realizing how disruptive it was. But the notion that I had access to a secret frequency that our teachers were unable to access left an impression on me. It was a hidden channel, a form of covert telepathy. My imagination teemed with possibilities, and yet my younger self could have never predicted the rise of social media platforms such as TikTok, which grant today's young people the ability to create and circulate content on creative wavelengths that truly do transmit beyond the purview of most adults.

TikTok

For readers unfamiliar with the details, TikTok is a short-form video-making platform for iPhone and iOS where users create and share lip-sync, comedy, and talent videos. The app's website states that its "mission is to capture and present the world's creativity, knowledge, and moments that matter in everyday life" in such a way that "empowers everyone to be a creator directly from their smartphones" (https://www.tiktok.com). Within the past two years TikTok has become a global phenomenon, having been downloaded over two billion times (Carmen, 2020), with young people, overwhelmingly, its primary users. Launched by its parent company ByteDance in 2017, TikTok merged with the video-making app musical.ly later that year with the intention of capitalizing on their young userbase in the United States. The union proved a success, as TikTok went on to become the most downloaded app in the world in 2018. A feat it went on to repeat in 2019. The app then become embroiled in a series of international disputes in the latter half of 2020: most notably the South Korean-led pranking of the distribution of tickets for a Trump rally and the US-led charges that China may be using the platform as a means of overseas surveillance. That the app remains a subject of controversy remains clear.

The app itself immerses users with a seductive, casino-like design. When the app is opened, full-screen videos start playing immediately whether or not the user has any followers or has even created an account. The phone's clock disappears, transparent touch-controls are confined tidily to the margins, and a simple swipe of the finger dismisses one

video for the next instantaneously. All is meticulously calibrated to ensure minimal distractions from the vibrant, unending stream of content available. As a result, the intention of a brief check-in all too easily lapses into a half-hour or more.

And yet for all its addictive properties, it cannot be denied that TikTok is still very much a wild west—both in the sense that it is loosely regulated and manifestly White (although video-makers use a lot of Black-produced music in their TikToks). Rampant stereotyping, often of a sexual or racialized nature, goes woefully unchecked. Copyright infringement, concerns over privacy and sexual predatorship, and reports of cyberbullying and racist abuse are disturbingly common. What is more, sharing one's voice on TikTok and other participatory mediascapes is also highly contingent on technological access and one's dexterity with dominant online discursive practices. And yet in spite of this, and perhaps most critically, TikTok's aggressive AI algorithms (i.e. users who enjoyed this content also enjoyed…) often shape users' feeds into digital walled gardens that effectively sequester perspectives and harden existing biases under the guise of plurality. This constellation of issues has yet to be addressed adequately—that is, in sustained, systematic, and proactive ways—and we (digital citizens, policymakers, administrators, teachers, and parents alike) can all do better.

As much as the user-generated content on TikTok reifies its fair share of problematic discourses, I have also found myself occasionally taken aback by the clever and subversive content its young users create, content which is then circulated, remixed, and taken up in various, unexpected ways. For certain, the skill with which previously published, often niche material becomes subject to multimodal recontextualization, juxtaposition, and commentary is impressive, especially given the enormous size of the TikTok community and the ever-shifting terrain of popular culture its users draw upon.

Despite this dynamism, in the eyes of many educators, TikTok is seen as a distraction at best and a bad influence at worst. Arguing against a blanketed disavowal, Moore (2011) argues that, "The issue with criticizing the objects of students' tastes, and by association often criticizing students' navigation through their unique media worlds, is the assumption that the negotiation of teacher/student authority applies to what is fundamentally a process of personal and social discovery" (p. 225). For the time being, at least, TikTok has entered into popular culture, and popular culture is quite clearly capable of shaping people's everyday beliefs and perceptions (Sellnow, 2018). At the same time, to complicate the situation further, it is important to keep in mind that "Youth culture needs to be tapped not co-opted" (Alvermann, 2012, p. 225), and that, when it comes to online mass media, "It is adolescents who curate, reinforce, and contribute most to these digital spaces and teachers may need to capitulate to the idea that they do not necessarily have the responsibility to teach them about their own worlds" (Fassbender, 2017, p. 266). While Vygotsky (1980) held that the largest impact on student learning comes from societal influences, students' cultures, and their peer groups, it has become increasingly difficult for educators to responsibly (much less authentically) tap into

these potentials when an ever-increasing amount of young people's social interaction takes place online.

As a former English teacher and current literacy scholar, I wonder, in both personal and professional ways, how educators might reckon, variously, with the problems, popularity, and power of youth-dominated mediascapes such as TikTok. I certainly do not claim to know how to reconcile the often-competing observations spelled out here, but I do believe the tensions they typify are well worth educators' open-minded attention. I also believe that it is our responsibility as educators to be at least peripherally aware of what the young people in our classrooms are producing and consuming in their out-of-school lives.

This brings me to the focus of this article, which centers on how TikTok's adolescent users "speak back" to the discourses of school(ing). In considering this question, I refrain from offering ready-made solutions for educators or condoning the particular viewpoints expressed by any video or online trend. My aim is simply to offer up my observations of TikTok as a means to call attention to the ways school(ing), as a largescale, democratic project and socially constructed phenomenon, is being shaped *by* young people, *for* young people on a digital platform that backchannels a largely resistant attitude toward the institutional framing of school(ing) upheld by many adult educators today. I do so through a discussion of four viral, school-related trends that have proliferated on TikTok over the past two years. My hope is that educators might engage these moments of rupture and feelings of dissonance in considerate ways that do not combat or cheapen the experiences of the young people in classrooms but instead open up opportunities for understanding and dialogue.

Framing

For millions of students, TikTok operates as a kind of social backchannel. The term *backchanneling* has shifted from its linguistic roots in recent years to accommodate the advent of technological tools like texting and social media. Today, at least in scholarship, backchanneling is most often used to describe conversations that take place digitally during meetings, presentations, and classroom lectures (Seglem & Haling, 2018). My framing of backchanneling here, however, is more ubiquitous, referring, instead, to furtively-threaded lines of communication that make their way across spatiotemporal boundaries in a variety of contexts that scale cohesively from the intimate to the cultural. Online message boards, Reddit threads, YouTube channels, blogs, and memes all fall comfortably within my use of the term, so long as they operate as a channel of countervailing solidarity for a particular userbase.

My conception of backchanneling suggests that participatory mediascapes like TikTok may have considerably under-recognized effects in shaping the broader discourses of school(ing), particularly in the US. In describing the "discourses of school(ing)", I do not intend to evoke notions of dialogic exchange or even Gee's (2015) socially mediated "ways of being" within particular cultural groups. Instead, I use discourse in the post-structural sense to mean "a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs" (Scott, 1988, p. 35) which "systematically form the objects about which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). In this way, "Discourse can never be just linguistic since it organizes a way of thinking into a way of acting in the world" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 485). To put this concept to work, we can trace how the formation and function of school(ing) in the United States has been discursively constructed over the last century by drawing direct links from the assembly-line exploits of Fordism to our current era of neoliberalism, implicated in the heightened emphasis on standardization and efforts to commodify learning in privatized settings (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

I do not, however, take discourses to be totalizing in effect. Drawing on Butler's understandings of contingency (2013) and in particular the practice of "subversive repetition" (1990), wherein what is perceived to be given is routinely disrupted, I am instead suggesting an interpretation of discourse that is, at once, inescapable and ultimately malleable. Subjects in this case both reproduce and contest the various ways of being available to them in a state of ongoing, constitutive becoming. Here there are no stable meanings. Everything must always be questioned, attended to, and accounted for.

Relatedly, Döveling, Harju, and Sommer (2018) illustrate the online/offline entanglement between micro, meso, and macro memorial cultures (such as terrorist attacks and celebrity deaths) in order to describe how new media technologies such as TikTok influence and infiltrate social practices and cultural life via *digital affect cultures*— that is, "relational, contextual, globally emergent spaces in the digital environment where affective flows construct atmospheres of emotional and cultural belonging by way of emotional resonance and alignment" (p. 1). These digital affect cultures inevitably influence, reinforce, and produce sentiments that shape teachers' and students' lived behaviors in both the digital and physical worlds. Content on TikTok writhes and morphs to the tune of these affective flows. Whether hopping on a viral trend, riffing on a meme, celebrating the end of the school year, or referencing blockbuster films, TikTok users remain keenly up to date in creating "culture-specific communities of affective practice" (p. 1). These affective intensities resonate across spatiotemporal boundaries to produce meaning and change. What "happens" online, in other words, immanently alters the course of lived reality. It is therefore imperative that educational theorists and practitioners reckon more thoroughly with participatory mediascapes such TikTok so as to better understand and account for the ways educational discourses are being shaped by those whom we often least assume: the students themselves.

Viral Trends

The four trends in the discussions that follow have each gone viral on TikTok at some point over last year and a half. I have chosen to focus in on these four trends to

demonstrate how users' engagement with the platform enters into sociocultural, political, and economic dialogue that is both relevant to school(ing) communities and the larger discourse(s) surrounding education in the US. Given the now-mainstreamed culture of neoliberalism in US schools (tending to dwell primarily on test scores and positive PR), I consider how TikTok might represent a compelling, if complicated, counter-narrative—that is, as a vibrant community of loose, constellating affiliations that could very well signal a future for responsive engagement with networked technologies in the context of 21st century schooling.

Acronyms

One of the most popular school-related trends to have proliferated on TikTok is the creation of acronyms intended to (re)inscribe meanings of commonly used educational words. "School," for instance, is frequently alleged on TikTok to stand for Six Cruel Hours Of Our Lives, a perhaps unsurprising indictment for those acquainted with traditional depictions of school(ing) in mass media (Trier, 2006). Similarly, "Homework" is said to stand for Half Of My Energy Wasted On Random Knowledge, a loaded characterization fundamentally averse to educators' goals to make the content they teach meaningful for their students. And finally, contrary to former American democratic presidential nominee Andrew Yang's suggestion that "math" be taken to mean Make America Think Harder, the average TikTok user has observed time and again that "math" stands for Mental Abuse To Humans.

Potential impressions of melodrama aside, these associations do not come from a vacuum. Something about the educative project we are a part of has created conditions where massive amounts of young people actively produce and relate to such sentiments. Perhaps, when we recall what it was like to be adolescents ourselves, these feelings may even sound familiar. Beyond providing us with insights—or perhaps reminders—into how school(ing) is experienced and perceived by young people, such instances also afford us opportunities to look anew at how and why we teach the ways that we do. If students, at the end of the year, have learned to dislike the subject we teach more than when they came to us, then we have done them an unequivocal disservice. There of course are no simple solutions or easy targets to point fingers at. What is plain, however, is that we still have work to do, especially when it comes to empathizing with our students and inspiring them in intrinsic ways.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that language and ideas often have slippery relations. We need look no further than the host of hotbed words (facts, socialism, etc.) which are actively being contested on sociopolitical levels that scale cohesively from policy on down to the personal. While youth's discursive grumblings on TikTok might seem inconsequential by comparison, the formulation and spreading of these resistive acronyms are prime examples of youth participating in ongoing constructions of meaning. Whether in Webster or Urban Dictionary, words must be attended to. As youth readily engage in reading and writing their words/worlds (Freire & Macedo, 2005), educators who choose to sit idly or dismissively by miss out on opportunities to participate with them in the attempt to render a more fulfilling, less cynical tomorrow.

#callingteachersbytherefirstname [sic] 825.6k views

#callingteachersbytherefirstname [sic] is another viral trend in which students go about school calling teachers by their first names in order to film their reactions. A typical video consists of a mashup of a half-dozen or more short clips that cut off as soon as the teacher's face registers the tiny, unexpected breach in decorum. Teachers' reactions vary from irate to dumbfounded to pleasantly surprised, while we, the viewers, serve as witnesses to this break in a teacher's self-composure.

The trend, while only a gest, to be sure, nevertheless prods gently against age-old power dynamics that exist between students and their instructors. On the surface, the humor derives from its disruption of the seriousness and formality of the school setting. But between the lines is also the soft, subversive thrill of seeing the resident hierarchy flattened, in only for a moment. Under this polite guise, a hardened signifier of deference and respect is playfully cast aside. Suddenly an address to a superior becomes the nonchalant hailing of an equal.

These students, playfully knocking against the discursive protocols we have built for them, may be said to be questioning any number of things. What constitutes respect, for instance? Why do adults care so much about maintaining certain distinctions? Where are the lines that should and should not be crossed? Does taboo come in shades of grey? Or: perhaps deep down they are just seeking glimpses of who their teachers really are underneath that professional exterior of theirs. Are we willing to show it to them?

#publicschoolcheck 9.5m views

#publicschoolcheck is one of TikTok's most viral trends. To participate, students compile a series of clips that represent what they perceive to be the most shoddy, rundown, or pedestrian qualities of their school. Common subject matter for these montages includes "out of order" signs on bathroom stalls, STD prevention flyers, graffiti, close ups of school lunches, and shaky panoramas of cafeterias, hallways, and school grounds. As a rule, the intro to the song "Stoner" by Young Thug plays over the video.

On the surface, these students do not seem to be drawing a deliberate critical eye to the material conditions of their schools; it appears, rather, that they are simply having fun by cataloguing their experience to playfully commiserative ends. And yet these attempts to identify representations of "ordinary" (if largely suburban) public school environments nevertheless wind up providing an

intriguing commentary on the spaces in which we ask our young people to learn. Such a stance falls into even greater relief when held up against the countering #privateschoolcheck, where private-school students show off lines of sports cars in the student parking lot, in-school Starbucks, pristine sporting venues, and lavish, TV-lined cafeterias. Such contrasting portrayals demonstrate that students are in fact keenly aware of the ways in which adults do or do not value (at least monetarily) the dignity of physical environments in which learning is expected to take place.

#belldoesntdismissyou 1.9m views ("The bell doesn't dismiss you. I do.")

This last trend likely requires the least amount of introduction. The bell rings, students all stand to leave, and the teacher shouts, "The bell doesn't dismiss you. I do." On TikTok, this immanently-recognizable moment is characterized as a routine power trip. Content creators ask, "then what is the bell for?" or claim that teachers have no power in this case because they are "required by law" to let students leave when the bell rings. Other users illicit humor by juxtaposing their reenactments with dramatic showdown music from popular entertainment sources such as *Dragon Ball Z* or *Avengers*. In this way, a challenge is set up: *it's all of us versus you*. From the auspices of TikTok, what might have remained a minor frustration in the lives of young people transforms into a broad-based nexus of contention, a rallying point no longer experienced in isolation. The everyday is made epic.

While an element of humor of course underscores many, if not most, of these depictions, it is interesting to consider why such a statement—"The bell doesn't dismiss you. I do."—garners so much attention in the first place. It is, after all, a moment of tension, where power hangs in the balance, when a teacher's "time is up" and students feel it is their prerogative to flock to the halls and joke with friends, listen to music, or kiss their significant others.

While the routines and teaching style of a given educator is (and should be!) their own, it is nevertheless important for teachers to be mindful of how their statements are being perceived and, in this case, taken up. There may be a time and a place for such hardline demonstrations of authority, but if we are indeed unwittingly circulating tired clichés, then we must consider checking ourselves in an attempt to resist doing so, in order that we might seem less like automatons and more like the authentic human beings our students need us to be.

Finally, I want to make clear that "The bell doesn't dismiss you. I do" is far from the first flashpoint phrase adolescent students have been in league against. Years ago now, a high school student of mine wrote a poem called "Mitochondria are the powerhouse of the cell". In the poem, the title phrase was repeated robotically at the end of each stanza. The student and I had a candid relationship and often spoke together after class. It was here that he told me the phrase was based on a popular meme that most students knew all too well, although he suspected most teachers did not. Indeed, online, the phrase "mitochondria are the powerhouse of the cell" is mocked as an example of the impractical information taught in schools, the irrelevant "third things" (Gambell & Sumara, 1996) students are expected to hardwire into their brains for test day. While there may be advantages to insisting our students learn particular facts, educators should, at the same time, attempt to avoid abetting obtuse caricature-building in whatever ways possible.

Discussion

Of course TikTok will not be around forever. Many, including Casey Newton of *The Verge* (2019), are already predicting its demise. Alternatively, as with Facebook, its user demographic could shift if more and more adult users begin to migrate to the platform. There will no doubt, however, be other apps, other means of transmission, which young people take up. Traditionally, whether it was a clubhouse, a favorite performance venue, or a friend's basement, unsupervised spaces have provided important enclaves for young people to experiment with their identities and their relationship to the world around them. Since young people's lives have begun transitioning into digital spaces, however, there has been an ever-retreating ragged edge where young people gather to create and communicate with each other online. This expressive frontier has taken many forms over the years—Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Yik Yak, Vine, Snapchat, TikTok, to name a few—and yet the expressive energy of young people inevitably finds new outlets to flourish when one platform or another comes under threat from the co-opting forces of adultism. A few such platforms, such as Reddit and YouTube, have managed to stick around, diversifying themselves into large enough platforms that various communities, young and old, willingly or not, wind up compartmentalized into wholly-contained online ecosystems—a separate but related issue that is beyond the scope of this article to address, one which is nevertheless responsible, in part, for the proliferation of "fake news" and the reinforcement of political tribalism.

There may also be a need to expand classical definitions of activism in order to better account for the complexity of civic participation within 21st century participatory mediascapes. Setting oneself ablaze, standing in front of tanks, marching with picket signs, or placing flowers in the barrel of a soldier's rifle come to mind as emblematic images of activism. But perhaps, as Butler (2010) writes, "the "act" in its singularity and heroism is overrated… [as it] loses sight of the iterable process in which a critical investigation is needed" (p. 184). Certainly the everyday courage of minoritized and non-conforming young people who risk their wellbeing to speak and be seen on social media are not to be taken lightly. Nor are students who upload mobile footage of their school security officers using violent force against their peers. These are forms of activism, too. But even on a less immediate note, one also cannot overlook the popularity of crowd-sourced GoFundMe pages, patron-supported YouTube channels, and online Reddit threads (where

creators connect directly with fans), which, in many ways, typify a collective desire among younger generations to bypass intermediaries or bureaucracies in whatever ways they can. One might certainly include here, as well, the "more playful style of activism…emerging through [the] appropriative and transformative dimension of participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2016, p. 2), such as those proliferating on TikTok, which are not about making a stand so much as finding countless, invisible allies with which to secretly resist.

Indeed, all of these examples demonstrate that youth "are often political insofar as they aim to influence or change existing power relations" (Brough & Shresthova, 2012). It is these small everyday revolutions, which become habits and trends, that Shukaitis (2009) describes as "movement[s] through and of the entire social field [that] are nearly impossible to describe without imposing closure on them as open and constantly fluctuating processes" (p. 16). These interstitial movements, in many ways, escape signification. And it may well be the fact that they are difficult to pin down that leads to their eventual widespread affirmation, familiarity, and adoption.

As an educator myself, I am well aware and have written about (Wright, 2020) the ways in which hardline schooling environments that are beholden to test scores and good PR are often run in such a way that is restrictive to and, in many cases, outright adverse toward pedagogical explorations of the very same networked technologies that continue to shape the world we know in profound and momentous ways. As such, I want to suggest that deciding with finger-in-ear certainty to foreclose even the possibility of proactive institutional engagement with these technologies too often leaves today's youth fending for themselves in the digital environments that most affect them. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic especially, platforms such as TikTok are leaned on heavily as stand-ins for the sort of loose, affiliated interactions described here. In a time of social distancing, backchanneling, in effect, has become much easier, and new trends are already starting to emerge. To be clear, I do not believe that schools should take over or even necessarily monitor the TikTok feeds of their students; rather, I am suggesting that all of us—teachers, researchers, and administrators alike—might more empathetically tune into the subjective frequencies of young people's experiences in schools (at least, as best we can), so that we might better understand and account for the ways in which we, ourselves, might be perpetuating students' clear frustration and discontent with the ways school(ing) environments function in their lives.

Curiously, whether a wholesome step forward or another instance of existing power structures subsuming and thereby sterilizing whatever radical energies speak up against it, afterschool TikTok clubs (where teachers and students collaborate to create school-appropriate content) started to crop up across the US before the pandemic struck (Lorenz, 2019). Plenty of catchy dances and pep rally prep, to be sure, but also, perhaps, an opportunity to enter into dialogue with students about issues of online representation, the unpredictable power of virality, and the ways in which

we all might think and do otherwise—whether together or apart, in the open or in secret.

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