

# “With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility”

## Privileged Students’ Conceptions of Justice-Oriented Citizenship

Katy Swalwell

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### ABSTRACT

How do students from privileged communities respond to educational efforts encouraging them to become justice-oriented citizens? Observational and interview data collected during a semester-long case study of eleven high school students in a social studies class at an elite private school reveal four markedly different interpretations of their teacher’s call to be justice-oriented citizens. Under Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) conceptions of citizenship as an analytical frame, only one of these interpretations aligns with the tenets of justice-oriented citizenship and the desired outcomes of social justice pedagogy. Given that all eleven students considered themselves to be justice oriented, these findings reveal a disconnect between students’ conceptions of social justice and the principles undergirding a social-justice education. This paper emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of how students make sense of their social responsibilities as privileged people and reveals the deeply embedded nature of hegemonic common sense within privileged individuals and institutions.

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**H**OW WOULD YOU defend your education to critics?” I asked Dallas one afternoon.<sup>1</sup> We were sitting in overstuffed chairs in front of the fireplace in the library of Kent Academy, a private school in one of the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods. Unique among those of its similarly elite peer institutions, the school’s mission emphasizes democratic, progressive education with a special focus on issues of social justice. A junior in high school, Dallas had attended Kent since kindergarten and was, ultimately, a thoughtful proponent of its approach to schooling. After considering the question for a few moments, he told me:

*In the long-term, because we have privilege, we’re going to be able to do things that, you know, kids in other communities might not be able to accomplish. So, educating us about what’s right and what is, like, oppressive and unjust is important because of what we might go onto do. Otherwise, we’re going to be sitting blindly on, like, the upper realms of society. (Personal communication, March 2, 2010)*

In another interview, one of Dallas’s fellow students, Adam, responded to my question by referencing a quote made famous by the comic book superhero Spiderman:

*I think it’s our job as privileged people to understand that with great power comes great responsibility. (Personal communication, March 11, 2010)*

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While the struggles of students and teachers in marginalized communities rightly receive much attention within educational research circles, Dallas's and Adam's responses to my question highlight the need for more consideration to be paid to the children from elite communities who, as adults, are likely to have access to a disproportionate amount of political, social, and economic power.

That they will have this "great power" is unlikely to change in the near future. While there are promising indications of movement toward more equality, in rhetoric and in reality, inequalities of all kinds stubbornly persist in American society (Tilly, 1998) and, moreover, appear to be deepening (Khan, 2011). The existence of students like Dallas and Adam, who are educated in elite institutions, are not anomalies in the United States. Increasing de facto segregation and widening wealth inequality are startlingly harsh realities playing out amid mythic claims of living in a postracial society where anyone can get ahead if they work hard.<sup>2</sup> Though some may defend a system capable of producing such wildly disparate wealth as a meritocracy that rewards "hard work," this kind of gap has been demonstrated to be, at every level, socially corrosive and fundamentally unstable for a democracy (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2009).

In recent years, several researchers have built upon Bourdieu's (1984) work by studying "up" in order to understand how the education of children from privileged groups tends to reproduce and calcify social inequalities (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003; Howard, 2008; Howard & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010; Khan, 2011; Lareau, 2003). What distinguishes this paper from these important contributions to the field, however, is its focus on schooling that is intended to *disrupt* cycles of inequality by educating privileged students to be justice-oriented citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Teachers with this goal hope to interrupt the trajectory of widening wealth inequality and racial segregation by engaging students in social justice pedagogy, a critical analysis of and action within their world.

Following in the footsteps of progressive educators with forceful social critiques and a commitment to democratic interactions (e.g., Counts, 1932; Freire, 1970), supporters of social justice pedagogy work to disrupt rather than reproduce inequalities. They call for content that includes counterhegemonic resources with a focus on understanding forms of oppression, student-centered democratic classrooms with opportunities to connect curriculum to students' lives, and opportunities for collective action around social issues that work toward building a more just society (see Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008; Hackman, 2005; North, 2009). The desired outcomes of this approach are that students will be aware of injustices, feel a sense of agency to address those injustices and, ultimately, choose to act by participating in social movements and organizing around these issues. Empirical and anecdotal evidence about social justice pedagogy paint a picture of students, teachers, and community members engaged in academically rigorous, personally satisfying, and socially transformative education (see Apple & Beane, 2000; Au, Bigelow, & Karp, 2007; Ayers, et al., 1998; Gutstein, 2006; Schultz, 2008).

How do adolescents like Dallas and Adam from elite communities respond to social justice pedagogy? What can their experiences tell us about effective justice-oriented citizenship education for privileged youths? In order to examine these questions, I first outline the framework upon which this kind of education is based, identify its desired outcomes, and highlight examples of how this approach can backfire with privileged youths. I then share findings from a case study in which one teacher at an elite school with a social justice mission was engaging her students. While all students self-identified as justice oriented, they expressed a wide range of ideas about what that meant with varying degrees of alignment to the teacher's intended learning goals. Using Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) framework of citizenship, I trace students' thinking throughout the semester and isolate characteristics of lessons that reinforced or challenged their conceptions of justice-oriented citizenship. This case study highlights the deeply rooted, hegemonic nature of elite common sense and points to strategies for teachers hoping to disrupt the reproduction of privilege with their students.

### **Conceptions of Citizenship and Elite Education**

In their influential 2004 examination of 10 civic educational programs in the United States, Westheimer and Kahne (2004b) highlighted how educators' pedagogical choices reveal three very different visions of what kinds of citizens are needed for a healthy democracy. These perspectives include personally responsible citizenship, participatory citizenship, and justice-oriented citizenship. Civic education embracing the perspective of personally responsible citizenship teaches students that citizens with a good moral character demonstrating responsibility, independence, and obedience will solve social problems. Programs promoting participatory citizenship, on the other hand, emphasize students taking an active leadership role within established community structures that serve the "less fortunate" in order to improve society. Educational efforts rooted in justice-oriented citizenship teach students that good citizens question the status quo when it is shown to repeatedly reproduce injustice and actively work to change those established systems through social movements.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004a) asserted that, though there is some overlap among them, these three approaches present "conflicting priorities" (p.243). They critiqued the many civic educational programs rooted in personally responsible or participatory forms of citizenship with the claim that both visions of good citizenship dangerously depoliticize democracy by emphasizing individual, idiosyncratic acts of kindness over social action in the pursuit of justice and encouraging docility over demands for change. Though they acknowledged that both personally responsible and participatory citizens make good community members, they found that attempts to educate students with these ends in mind are not sufficient for a robust democracy. Ultimately, Westheimer and Kahne called for democratic educational programs that manage to emphasize justice-oriented citizenship that is linked to social action (p. 246).

Despite the need for justice-oriented citizens, the small body of research investigating the education of privileged youths most

often finds them being educated with personally responsible citizenship in mind. Rather than encouraging critical reflection or social action, their education emphasizes individual character traits that cast good citizens as those who help to maintain the status quo. Privileged students are concertedly cultivated (Lareau, 2003) to excel in the individually competitive marketplace of white-collar knowledge jobs, to feel at ease (Khan, 2011) in any situation, to be color blind (Howard, 2008; Khan, 2011) regarding race and ethnicity, and to see hierarchies as natural and meritocratic (Howard & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010; Khan, 2011). For social justice pedagogues, this kind of uncritical schooling runs the risk of creating “misled, miseducated citizens when it comes to sociopolitical and sociohistorical realities” (Gorski, 2006, p.165–166) who are self-interested, unquestioning of current structural inequities, and committed to a weak democracy defined by consumer notions of choice.

Though rarely explicitly framed in terms of citizenship education, social justice pedagogy’s goals to cultivate students’ critical awareness, empowered agency, and social action align best with Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004b) framework of justice-oriented citizenship. Good citizens are not those who blindly acquiesce to the status quo or who address only the symptoms of inequality through volunteerism but are those who critically analyze socioeconomic and political structures, emphasize the root causes of problems within these systems, and develop collective strategies that directly challenge injustice.<sup>3</sup> Rather than committing individual random acts of kindness or being involved in leadership roles divorced from root causes of social problems, privileged students educated in social justice pedagogy mobilize their privilege on behalf of and act in alliance with marginalized people.

When teachers attempt to challenge conventional forms of pedagogy for privileged students by engaging them in social justice pedagogy, however, there is some evidence that their efforts backfire by inadvertently promoting personally responsible or participatory conceptions of citizenship. First, when exposed to information about issues of injustice, for example, or encouraged to unpack their privilege (e.g., McIntosh, 1990), students may capitalize on their understanding as a way to increase their marketability rather than engage in more meaningful, critical self-reflection (Goodman, 2000a; Leonardo, 2009). Students may integrate their new knowledge about diversity as a way to write a much stronger college essay or leverage required community service hours with the those deemed less fortunate in order to pad a résumé—likely not the use of newly acquired critical literacy that teachers hope for.

Second, rather than feel empowered to take action against injustice, privileged students exposed to social justice pedagogy may feel confused and angry or immobilized by guilt (Curry-Stevens, 2007; Denis-McKay, 2007; Rodriguez, 2000; Rothenberg, 2002; Seider, 2008). Even if privileged students choose to commit themselves to justice-oriented citizenship, peers and families may express concern and encourage a resistant response (Goodman, 2000b). Initially supportive students may thus revert back to their original blindness as the fear generated by examining themselves and the risk of damaging relationships with their social networks

appear too great (Heinze, 2008). Retreating into personally responsible and participatory forms of citizenship may seem safer than adopting a justice-oriented point of view.

In terms of taking action, the final desired outcome of social justice pedagogy, privileged people are politically unreliable as evidence of them becoming change agents is “unclear, undocumented, and unrealistic” (Hernandez-Sheets, 2000, p. 19). They may change their hearts and minds but refuse to act on these changes either individually or collectively (Curry-Stevens, 2007; Goodman, 2000b). For those students who do choose to act, it tends to be within an ethos of charity or service-learning that frequently descends into a platitudinous helperism (Hernandez-Sheets, 2000) framing marginalized peoples as victims. Certainly, privileged people are valuable members of social movements if only because they have powerful forms of capital to mobilize (Curry-Stevens, 2007; Goodman, 2000b). As Kent student Adam said, they have both great power and great responsibility. Ideally, however, their role is that of an ally with oppressed peoples rather than a patronizing or colonizing savior swooping in to aid the Other (Edwards, 2006; Kivel, 2002).

Social justice pedagogy interpreted this way obscures underlying causes of injustice, reifies privileged norms, and reproduces a sense of Us and Them (Butin, 2007; Choules, 2007; Seider, 2008) that is ultimately incompatible with justice-oriented citizenship. Social justice educators in communities of privilege thus face a difficult challenge as they struggle against norms of personally responsible competitive individualism rooted within a larger sociopolitical context in which citizens are framed as consumer-clients and participatory strategizing entrepreneurs who are more concerned about personal achievement than collective sustainability (Apple, 2006; Goodman, 2000b). Is it inevitable that efforts to orient privileged students toward justice will backfire or are there examples of student learning that aligns with social justice pedagogy’s goals of greater awareness, agency, and action?

## Data Collection

With an understanding of the potential pitfalls of social justice pedagogy in relation to different conceptions of citizenship, I now turn to a brief overview of my data collection methods for a case study that provides a more detailed and nuanced account of how students at one elite high school responded to the call to become justice-oriented citizens.<sup>4</sup> My instrumental case study was bound by the time and space of a daily, semester-long social studies course taught by a self-described social justice teacher working with privileged youths.<sup>5</sup> Because such teachers are anything but the norm, I used personal and professional networks to locate Liz Johnson, a high school social studies teacher at Kent Academy.

Nestled in the gentrified heart of a large urban center on the edge of one of the city’s most beautiful parks, Kent Academy boasts a long tradition of academic excellence with many famous and financially successful alumni. What distinguishes it from other similarly expensive<sup>6</sup> independent schools sending students off to prestigious postsecondary institutions is its mission, which emphasizes democracy, multiculturalism, and social justice. It is a living mission I heard called upon often: during fiery debates in the

student body's school meetings, with teachers planning curriculum, and among students comparing themselves favorably to their privileged peers at other schools. At every level, the K–12 school is organized around democratic social justice education, most noticeably with regards to its influential student government and its innovative community action program that, in the students' junior year, links teacher-sponsored student activist groups with the humanities curriculum.<sup>7</sup>

As one of the designers of this program and a cosponsor of student government, Liz Johnson is, as one student told me, “the embodiment of Kent” (personal communication, March, 2, 2010). In her 10 years at the school, Johnson has crafted a philosophy of teaching intended to “disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed” (personal communication, March 10, 2010). As I searched for teachers to participate in the study, a variety of sources named her as an exceptional, experienced teacher with a tremendous local and national reputation in social-justice social studies education. Before extending an invitation to participate in the study, I met with Liz and examined her syllabi to confirm our mutual understanding of *social justice pedagogy*. After expressing a desire to work together and obtaining site permission from the school, she and I decided which classes I should observe based primarily on logistics of my observational schedule.

Her modern American history course was a required class for juniors and had the reputation of being a challenging yet rewarding experience. In it, she asked students to interpret a series of primary and secondary sources from a diverse range of perspectives through a critical analytical lens, facilitated a variety of classroom discussions, demanded sophisticated articulation of their ideas in writing and speech, organized each unit around provocative questions addressing historical and contemporary controversies, and created assignments linking history with students' social action groups. This curriculum and her teaching methods explicitly and consistently addressed issues of racism and classism in American history with several examples of how these phenomena related to students' lived experiences. Within the first week of the semester, I recruited students from both sections of the course through a brief presentation of my research questions. All

eleven students who wanted to participate were included in the study (See Table 1).

Though I spent time getting to know the school, community, and participants outside of class, the vast majority of data collection occurred during school hours throughout the semester. I observed classes daily, accompanied students on field trips, collected documents like course readings and homework, and conducted multiple interviews with Liz and her students throughout the semester. I transcribed and coded by hand my field notes and interviews, using a grounded theory approach attending to emergent themes. I also coded the data with an eye to social justice pedagogy's desired outcomes of awareness, agency, and action and looked specifically for any references to citizenship, justice, or privilege. Throughout the study, I shared those and other emergent categories with the participating teachers and critical colleagues for comments and clarification. After the initial coding and feedback, I returned to the data to engage in second and third rounds of coding moments during class or specific assignments that had been identified by participants as “critical incidents.” Throughout the data collection, I invited Liz and the students to give feedback on all emergent analyses.<sup>8</sup>

## Findings

How did students in Liz's classroom respond to her teaching? What conceptions of citizenship made most sense to them? And what does this mean for social justice pedagogy with privileged kids? Notably, not one of the students rejected the idea of being a justice-oriented citizen. Even the students who identified themselves as staunchly conservative advocated for an education that drew their attention to issues of injustice and provided opportunities to get involved in social action at the school and community levels.<sup>9</sup> Both inside and outside of class, students proclaimed to value social justice and saw themselves as committed to making the world a better place; all readily identified themselves as justice-oriented citizens.

Their ideas, expressed within class discussions, interviews, and written work, however, indicated a range of beliefs regarding what it means to be justice oriented that ultimately seem better aligned

**Table 1.** Participating Students' Biographical Information

<i>Student</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Economic Status</i>	<i>Years at the School</i>	<i>Political Affiliation</i>
Adam	White	Upper Class	12	Independent/ Liberal
Anna	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Cora	White	Upper Class	4	Liberal
Dallas	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Dylan	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Elliott	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Jane	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Jennifer	White	Middle Class	4	Conservative
Max	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Melanie	Asian American	Working Class	4	Liberal
Rachel	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided

with Westheimer and Kahne's (2004b) conceptions of personally responsible and participatory citizenship in ways that undermine the aims of a social justice pedagogy. Howard (2008) called these interpretations "ideological operations and frames" that

*are replete with markers that guide their taken-for-granted interpretations and understandings of their place in the world, their relationships with others, and who they are. Their cognitive maps point to some of their knowledge, values, dispositions, and beliefs that insulate and regenerate their identity. Their understandings and interpretations of self and Others reveal a privileged identity that they both inherit and re-create. . . . Through this coordination and relationship, their identity is not a given, but an activity, a performance, a form of mediated action. (p. 214)*

Students' "cognitive maps" in relation to their awareness of social justice issues, sense of agency, and social actions can be organized into the following four categories of performative identities: the Meritocrat, the Benevolent Benefactor, the Resigned, and the Activist Ally. After I describe each frame with related student quotes, I offer a diagram onto which I mapped individual students to examine what influenced their interpretations of what it means to be a justice-oriented citizen.

#### THE MERITOCRAT

Within this first frame, students' awareness of injustice was idiosyncratic: It exists in other parts of the world and happens "over there" to "them." For example, when asked to identify an injustice he knew about, Elliott had trouble thinking of one. "Like, um, Darfur? I don't really know much about it" (personal communication, March 10, 2010). To Meritocrats, any wrongdoing in the world is distant, disconnected to their lives, and can be explained primarily as bad, powerful people acting unethically or as oppressed people making poor decisions.

The task of privileged people in such a world is to keep up the good work they have done, which has manifested in their social position, and to accrue knowledge about social injustice as a means of becoming more competitive in a globalizing society. Rachel said:

*I think learning about injustice can only help because we can reference it and sound really cool for saying it, if people recognize it. Otherwise we can help educate people on the things we learned about that maybe they didn't have the opportunity to learn. Or we just know it, and that's great for us. Either way, there's no downside to knowledge. (Personal communication, June 1, 2010)*

If privileged people choose to participate in what they deem to be "deserving" philanthropic causes, they should take pains to maximize the effectiveness of their investment; being "wasteful" with one's privilege is impractical and unethical. Jennifer offered:

*I mean, I know there are brilliant minds out there, and if they just utilized, like, the small things that they were given, I feel like they could make something out of that. Instead of just throwing money at people, we should find ways to, like, start up their motivation. (Personal*

*communication, April 23, 2010)*

Though students identified their thinking as a conception of justice-oriented citizenship, this schema fits best with Westheimer and Kahne's (2004b) personally responsible citizen. The individual is primary in this mode of thinking; it is important to be a "good" person who is honest, follows rules, and tries not to depend upon others. The status quo is unproblematic and offers opportunities for those who work hard to rise up through the ranks. According to the Meritocrat, the world will be a more socially just place if and when people take responsibility for their problems and take advantage of the opportunities provided to them.

Students who articulated this schema frequently referenced Andrew Carnegie, the steel baron who espoused a philosophy of philanthropy that came to be known as the Gospel of Wealth. He believed wealth inequality to be beneficial to society, as the consolidation of resources at the top effectively trickles down and improves everyone's lives. Meritocrats believe that this works best when the privileged use their power "responsibly" by investing in institutions like libraries and concert halls that provide opportunities for motivated individuals to improve their position in life. Meritocrats thus do not consider themselves to be selfish people; instead, they see themselves as making the world a better place by their individual achievements and feel they should be commended as pragmatists who understand how to most effectively use scarce resources to advance social justice.

#### THE RESIGNED

Students operating within this schema demonstrated a highly sophisticated awareness of the systematic nature of oppression; it is primarily because of this depth and breadth of understanding that they seemed to become overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of social injustice. They believe that progressive social change at a fundamental level is unrealistic, however much people may wish it to be otherwise. Efforts to become involved in social movements will have such small effects that it is better to direct energy toward living as consciously as possible by attending to one's own consumer purchases, hobbies, and personal interactions.

The most consistent and eloquent articulator of this conception of justice-oriented citizenship was Dallas:

*Really, my only feeling of power is in opting out. And because I have certain privileges that other people don't have, or certain connections, I feel as though my ability to opt out is greater. . . . I see myself as someone who's just detaching because there's nothing that can be done, and you know that apathy is inexcusable, and it doesn't do anything to change the circumstance, but I don't think that it's apathetic in the sense that, like, I can only cast one vote. If I can make my entire life count in every way as a vote, then it's not apathetic and it's not selfish and it's not trying to cast off all the problems. It's being as responsible as I can. I hear the urgency, but I don't feel like it's my duty to redeem the rest of society. It's like I can only be responsible for myself (Personal communication, April 1, 2010).*

Dallas did not consider himself callous or selfish, though he recognized that others may interpret his position this way. In fact, he often took pains to express great compassion for those who are caught in the quagmire of oppression. He did not blame those people for their position and recognized the ways in which institutions systematically constrain them at every turn. Ultimately, he recognized an inability to shed his privilege or use it in any way that would have a lasting positive effect. The best he could do was unplug and reject as much of mainstream society as he could by living on its margins. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Resigned students most frequently referenced Henry David Thoreau, whose philosophy represents a middle way between a repressive modern culture and a more liberatory natural state. Though Dallas worried about the selfishness within such a withdrawal from society, he believed it to be the most pragmatic approach to addressing social problems.

Because it is unlikely that any civic educational programs would be explicitly devoted to cultivating a conception of citizenship in which the good citizen opts out, it is unsurprising that Westheimer and Kahne (2004b) do not include attention to such ideas in their framework. Ignoring that such conceptions of citizenship emerge within civic-educational efforts, however, hides those students who may develop a deep understanding of social issues but fail to feel empowered to participate in social movements. Their opting for a kind of inaction should be interpreted as a highly conscious and thoughtful decision that is, in some ways, a form of action in and of itself.

#### THE BENEVOLENT BENEFACTOR

In the Benevolent Benefactor mode of thinking, awareness of injustice primarily consists of local events in other places. For instance, when asked to identify examples of injustice, students referenced the numbers of homeless people in the city and the high rate of incarcerated men of color. Rather than recognizing any systemic dysfunctionality of the status quo, however, they framed injustice as a tragic misfortune in the lottery of life. “When you’re a person of privilege, it’s luck of the draw—you were born into this situation; some people just didn’t have that luck when they were born,” said Anna (personal communication, May 28, 2010). Importantly, the lifestyles of privileged people are not connected to these hardships; rather, they represent a haven or escape for those who suffer and often serve as a model toward which those with less should strive.

Benevolent Benefactors tend to distinguish between two kinds of privileged people within this schema: those who take their privilege for granted and those who are grateful for it. A “good” person within this frame represents the latter and is manifested as someone who appreciates privilege and engages in charitable acts toward others. Jane advised:

*You can at least be grateful for what you have. Like you’re not entitled to it because other people have it a lot worse. And it just, like gives you the opportunity to try to change something when you can because you know that things should be changed. (Personal communication, April 14, 2010)*

The “bad” privileged people are positioned as materialistic, self-involved, and frivolous. In this schema, these “bad” privileged peers are often vilified for their overtly hostile actions that prevent other people from getting ahead.

In keeping with Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004b) conception of participatory citizenship, Benevolent Benefactors consider regular volunteerism and community service keys to improving society. These organizing efforts focus on the symptoms rather than the root causes of social problems and locate the problem-solving knowledge within “educated” elite circles. Whereas Carnegie was a role model for the Meritocrats, several of the Benefactor students mentioned Oprah Winfrey as a shining example of a justice-oriented privileged citizen who has done much with the privilege she is lucky enough to have. And though they often express some guilt associated with this good fortune, Benevolent Benefactors are fundamentally optimistic that their individual kindness toward others can and will make a difference in those people’s lives and improve the world.

#### THE ACTIVIST ALLY

The last interpretation of justice-oriented citizenship, the Activist Ally mode of thinking, shares with the Resigned a sophisticated awareness of the complexities of injustice, without the accompanying sense of cynicism or malaise. In addition, it shares a sense of empowered agency with the Benevolent Benefactor, though with very different ends and means in mind. Because Activist Allies have made a connection between the oppression of marginalized groups and their own humanization, eradicating injustice is not just about helping Others but also about improving their own lives. Their privilege, in continual social construction by the complex interaction between structural forces and individual acts, is thus seen as a set of resources to be mobilized in concert with the oppressed for the purposes of mutual transformation and societal improvement.

Cora was an outspoken advocate for this approach to justice-oriented citizenship and talked at length about the importance of critical self-reflection and deep involvement:

*I think if you have someone powerful who’s trying to affect change, then there’s always that sense of, like, who am I to stand up for like the less fortunate when I’m not one of them? Like, do they want me standing up for them? Am I being an ally or have I just inserted myself?*

Dylan, a student who expressed more Activist Ally views toward the end of the semester, told me:

*I don’t like saying “give back” because then it’s, like, too linear and one-sided, but I think that if you just, like, “give back” to something you’re not involved in at all, like giving back to the community without being back in the community, then I think that you just—you waste the opportunity to know people. And I really like knowing people and talking to people and being around people.*

What this mode of thinking represents is a movement toward a “critical consciousness,” which Freire (1973) described as people’s capacity to engage in a “legitimately democratic mentality” (p. 20).<sup>10</sup> It is rooted in praxis, an iterative relationship between thinking and doing that loops knowledge and understanding with action. This cognitive map is best suited to Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004b) justice-oriented citizenship given its emphasis on root causes of problems rather than symptoms, its attention to the different ways in which all people (the privileged citizen included) are dehumanized by injustice, and the citizens’ focus on committing to issues rather than simply helping individuals.

### Mapping Students’ Thinking

While students’ responses were not static, they were consistent enough to be mapped. By counting the number of times that students expressed a particular viewpoint in relation to their conceptions of justice-oriented citizenship throughout the semester, I was able to position them on the quadrant of a diagram that corresponds with their general interpretations of justice-oriented citizenship (see Figure 1).<sup>11</sup>

What is immediately noticeable is the diversity of viewpoints among the students, though clearly the most common schema was the Benevolent Benefactor. When viewed in tandem with a table recording biographical information of the students, other important dimensions of this data emerge (see Table 2).<sup>12</sup> First, students’ cognitive maps seem related to their “privileged” status in terms of race and class. The only two students to consistently express an Activist Ally conception of justice-oriented citizenship that aligned with their teacher’s social justice pedagogic goals were Melanie and Cora; neither girl identified as part of the upper class, and one was the only participating student of color. In other words, the less

someone identified as “privileged,” the more likely that person was to express justice-oriented conceptions of citizenship aligned with social justice pedagogy.<sup>13</sup>

Second, students’ thinking appears to be connected to the length of time they had been members of the Kent Academy community. None of the students who had been educated at the school since kindergarten fell fully into the Activist Ally category, the schema most aligned with the teacher’s goals for social justice pedagogy and Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004b) understanding of justice-oriented citizenship. In fact, the three students who had spent the least amount of time at the school represented diametrically opposed positions: Cora and Melanie as Activist Allies and Jennifer as a Meritocrat. The students who had spent their entire academic lives at the school primarily expressed Benevolent Benefactor thinking. One important exception was Dallas, who was the most consistent in his views that represent the Resigned perspective. While he remained grateful for his education, he also wondered if he had been too sheltered within a “social justice bubble” that he felt could position him as a member of a “chosen people” to right the wrongs of the world (personal communication, June 1, 2010). This felt less like a call to arms to him and more like an overwhelming burden that led to his feelings of resigned detachment.

Last, these frames appear to run parallel with students’ political beliefs. Those students who expressed conservative political beliefs gravitated towards the Meritocrat frame, those students who felt unsure about their political affiliations expressed a Benevolent Benefactor frame, those who identified as independents showed affinity for Resigned thinking, and those with strong liberal views articulated an Activist Ally frame.

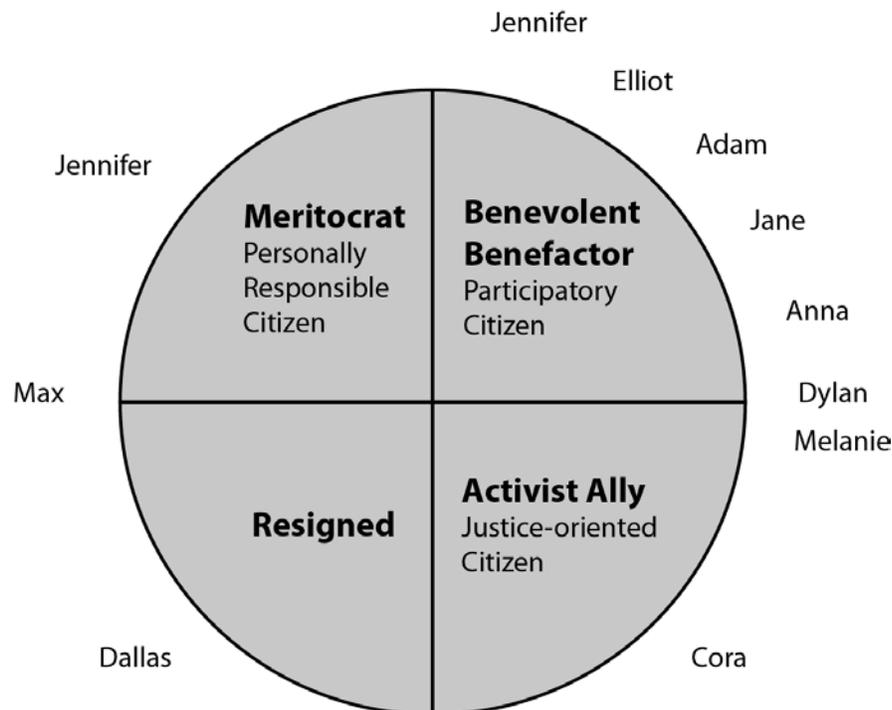


Figure 1. Privileged Students’ Interpretations of Justice-Oriented Citizenship

**Table 2.** Participating Students' Interpretive Frames and Biographical Data.

<i>Student</i>	<i>Interpretive Frame</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Economic Status</i>	<i>Years at the School</i>	<i>Political Affiliation</i>
Adam	Benevolent Benefactor	White	Upper Class	12	Independent/ Liberal
Anna	Benevolent Benefactor	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Cora	Activist Ally	White	Upper Class	4	Liberal
Dallas	Resigned	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Dylan	Benevolent Benefactor/ Activist Ally	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Elliott	Benevolent Benefactor	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Jane	Benevolent Benefactor	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Jennifer	Meritocrat	White	Middle Class	4	Conservative
Max	Resigned/Meritocrat	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided
Melanie	Benevolent Benefactor/ Activist Ally	Asian American	Working Class	4	Liberal
Rachel	Meritocrat/Benevolent Benefactor	White	Upper Class	12	Undecided

## Discussion

Understanding privileged students' varying conceptions of justice-oriented citizenship raises several critical points about social justice pedagogy in relation to these youths. Most strikingly, it reveals how the teacher's (and the school's) expressed desire for students to commit to justice-oriented citizenship was, in general, only superficially achieved. The instruction did not simply backfire, however; students' responses were much more complex than the current literature suggests. Importantly, all students claimed to be justice oriented, whether they articulated Meritocrat, Benevolent Benefactor, Resigned, or Activist Ally points of view. They did not, however, seem to recognize these views as incompatible with the demands of justice. In other words, students did not outright resist this kind of pedagogy, as predicted; rather, it seems that they mapped what they were learning about social justice onto a deeply embedded logic of privilege that naturalizes hierarchies and disembody injustices from individual and structural reinstatements of supremacy. Even in a classroom nested within a school explicitly organized around democratic and social justice principles, these students' limited interpretations of justice-oriented citizenship demonstrate how difficult it is to challenge deeply held worldviews produced, supported, and made invisible by the systems that privilege them.

Take, for instance, how compelling Andrew Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth" was for students who held him up as a great example of justice-oriented citizenship. Even Cora, the most ardent Activist Ally, found his ideas sensible and seductive. His philosophy outlining the desirability of inequality and the responsibilities of wealthy people to support institutions that offer opportunities for the most motivated of the underclass, however, is in direct opposition to most theories of justice. Students seemed to miss this disconnect, however, and used his justification of disparity to focus on the actions they ought to take as privileged people rather than to critically reflect on how the

fundamental injustices of racial and class hierarchies themselves ought to be changed.

This logic of privilege is not only deeply embedded within individual students' minds but within the school itself as a paradoxical institution that prides itself on both its social justice mission and its elite status. Consider how students who had attended the school since kindergarten and who had been successful by all conventional measures were preparing to graduate with the belief that they were entering the world as justice-oriented future leaders. The fact that none of them consistently articulated Activist Ally thinking or noticed how their theories of justice conflicted with the aims of social justice pedagogy raises questions about how far the school is willing to go to ensure that students are not simply adopting a discourse of social justice in lieu of engaging in more rigorous, serious, and difficult critical reflection and action. In terms of race, it is the difference between what Leonardo (2004) called learning about White privilege rather than learning about White supremacy. While committing to the former is perhaps a step in the right direction and unusual for similarly elite institutions, it does little to challenge systems of domination and may, in fact, reconstitute them.

Through interactions with Liz Johnson and other staff, it is clear that members of the school community are aware of and struggle with this tension between social justice pedagogy and elite education.<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt that this is difficult work that demands constant critical self-reflection and discomfort. At the very least, there are small steps that can be taken to better align the school's practices with the its purported mission. For example, given that the "least privileged" of Liz's students articulated a vision of justice-oriented citizenship that was much more aligned with the goals of social justice pedagogy than her peers, it would be wise for the school to invest more resources in diversifying its student body to include more of these students. At the classroom level, when students engage with materials like Andrew Carnegie's

“Gospel of Wealth” that explicitly address the nature of privilege, such activities must be structured in ways that reveal their ideological incompatibility with justice-oriented citizenship rather than simply presented as alternative points of view. Several of the activities Liz facilitated with the students did, in fact, attempt this and showed promise by eliciting more Activist Ally responses as the semester unfolded, particularly among students like Dylan and Anna, whose views placed them on the Benevolent Benefactor–Activist Ally line. What these assignments had in common was that they all asked students to deeply listen to experiences of people from diverse backgrounds and explicitly connect these truths both to the students’ lives and to the unjust systems of oppression.

This is not to say that social justice teachers like Liz ought to indoctrinate students into adopting the same set of beliefs or expect the exact same responses to material like Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth.” Not only is this unethical from an educational standpoint but it is in opposition to fundamental principles of a democracy that values a multiplicity of perspectives. The fact that students’ political affiliations mapped so neatly onto their conceptions of citizenship highlights the need for teachers to make space for the respectful exchange of a range of ideas. What is non-negotiable, however, is that social justice teachers expect students be able to articulate theories of justice and oppression, to accurately distinguish among various philosophies, and to identify their own beliefs in relation to these different perspectives after engaging in critical self-reflection.

That students will come to different conclusions is not a bad thing; the rich ideological and philosophical diversity shown to exist in even a very homogenous community like Kent’s demonstrates a diversity of opinions about justice, citizenship, and privilege that exists in our society writ large. This is an asset worth documenting and using as a resource upon which quality social justice, democratic, civic education curricula can and should build. Though the Activist Ally frame aligns most closely with the desired outcomes of social justice pedagogy, each of the schemas offers important insights about the struggles and tensions within social justice work and represents a range of legitimate internal logics. Social justice educators would be wise to explicitly engage students in discussions about these different strategies while simultaneously engaging them in a critique of the logic of privilege.

Though it may be easy to dismiss the Meritocratic mindset as selfish or the Benevolent Benefactors as naïve or the Resigned as apathetic, it is crucial to note that students thinking within these frames certainly do not see themselves that way; they care about the world and believe the best way to advance justice is by maximizing their monetary donations, engaging in charitable acts, or living the most conscientious life they can. While one cannot ignore the important and complicated role that such philanthropic or individual acts play in social movements today, educators must be willing to confront (with each other and with their students) the ways in which such beliefs mask oppressive forms. For instance, the Meritocrat’s and the Benevolent Benefactor’s awareness of injustice is limited to abstract knowledge and a deficit view of the Other rather than any sort of deeper understanding. In terms of agency, these frames focus

solely on “bad” individuals rather than acknowledging structural forces at work or implicating their own actions. In addition, the Meritocrat, Benevolent Benefactor, and Resigned all dismiss collective action (and particularly youth action) as unnecessary or impractical. Under the guise of social justice, these schemas thus lead to the framing of problems and solutions that are more likely to reproduce inequality than to interrupt it.

For a proponent of social justice pedagogy intent upon facilitating the development of justice-oriented privileged citizens with a deep understanding of systemic injustices, a sense of agency that is empowered and critically self-reflective, and the ability to mobilize their resources in order to act in concert with others, the Activist Ally is clearly the most desirable schema. Of course, even the best teachers and students struggle to embrace an Activist Ally conception of citizenship in all situations. Given the complexities and challenges for people privileged by oppression when they engage in social justice work, it is likely that even dedicated allies will find themselves operating within other frames and failing to disrupt the reproduction of hierarchies. This schema is simply the most aligned with the desired outcomes of social justice pedagogy and, as such, is an important guiding idea around which curriculum can be designed and assessed.

## Conclusion

Though the literature cautions that engaging students in social justice education may be counterproductive and engender student resistance, the findings described here point to a more complex set of responses that illustrate students grappling in markedly different ways with what it means to be a justice-oriented citizen. For teachers committed to social justice pedagogy, understanding students’ ideas about privilege and justice can help to identify moments when their lessons are being taken up in superficial or unintended ways, particularly with regard to students whose thinking and actions may initially seem to align with justice-oriented goals. Ultimately, the cognitive schemas identified in this paper serve as a useful reflective tool for privileged students and their teachers to explicitly think about the very different conceptions of what it means to be a justice-oriented privileged person and to more effectively advocate for citizens who will understand the systemic nature of injustice, acknowledge their complicity in these systems, feel a sense of empowered agency to make a change, and mobilize their resources as a way to act in concert with others to further justice.

Much more research is needed to understand the possibilities and challenges of this work with these students. For instance, what other attempts within schools or extracurricular programs are being made to educate privileged youths to orient themselves toward justice? How do dimensions of privilege beyond race and class (gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) influence students’ understanding of their social obligations in relation to justice? And, importantly, what are the long-term effects of this pedagogy on these students?

As Kent Academy student Adam stated in the quote that opened this paper, he and his peers have great power as privileged people and thus shoulder great responsibility. While his conception

of justice-oriented citizenship shows that he was willing and able to think about what this responsibility entails in relation to justice, it also demonstrates the limited way in which he thought about that power itself. A strong democratic civic education rooted in social justice pedagogy that resists reproducing the very inequalities it purports to disrupt must not only attend to students' great responsibility but to the unjust nature of the great power they inherit, embody, and enact. In an increasingly self-segregated society with a widening gap between the rich and poor, this is difficult, but incredibly important, work.

## Notes

1. For biographical data of participating students, see Table 1. All names of people and places in this paper are pseudonyms.

2. A recent Economic Policy Institute report noted that the top 5% of households currently control 63.5% of the nation's wealth (Allegretto, 2011). Intertwined in these economic statistics are, of course, issues of racial inequality. Black families, for example, earn a median income that is 58% of Whites' (Isaacs, 2007) and are much less likely to experience economic mobility (Sharkey, 2009). Mobility has actually decreased for *all* racial/ethnic groups as the correlation between productivity and income has unhinged for the working class (Allegretto, 2011; Sawhill & Morton, 2007).

3. I use the word *citizens* with caution here as there are many youths in schools who are undocumented and do not have citizen status. In this paper, the term *citizenship* is to be interpreted loosely as the status of a community member who has a stake in what problems get defined and how those problems are resolved.

4. A case study is a process of inquiry in which a unit of lived activity whose complexity and particularity can only be understood in context is described, interpreted, or evaluated (Gerring, 2007; Gillham, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). The goal is not statistical but analytical generalization that helps to expand theories (Yin, 2003).

5. Though privilege takes many forms and the navigation of it is a complicated process through which complex identities are socially constructed, this case is part of a larger study that drew upon the experiences of students in schools within "privileged" suburban and elite urban communities that have a majority of White middle- and upper-income families. The paper focuses on this particular case because it is the most extreme example of privileged students (the most affluent and the most homogeneously White) within a school most explicitly committed to social justice and democratic education.

6. Tuition is approximately \$25,000 a year.

7. At the beginning of junior year, students choose a teacher-sponsored action group with which they would like to participate (e.g., LGBTQ issues, ethnic discrimination, housing and drug policies). Throughout the year, weekly sessions with their groups provide time for students and teachers to collect data, meet with activists and those affected by the issues, and participate in social action with a focus on passing legislation related to their topic. In their humanities classes, the curriculum is directly tied to these experiences. When they read *The Scarlet Letter* in their

literature class, for example, students write analyses of the book through the lens of their social-action issue. The most recent addition to these cross-curricular assignments introduced students to the work of Studs Terkel as a scaffold for their own oral-history interviews with local social-justice activists.

8. While such member checks are certainly an important part of any qualitative study, it proved difficult to find regular time to meaningfully process together the volume of conclusions. I continue to stay in touch with many of the participants, however, and send them drafts of papers such as these for continued communication.

9. This is not to say that these students were never frustrated in class. Rather, it is to point out that they were happy to attend the school and appreciated the course even when it seemed they disagreed with the majority of their peers and their teachers about many political issues.

10. Freire (1973) described *critical consciousness* in contrast with three other states: a semi-intransitive state in which people "submerged in the historical process" struggle to comprehend problems beyond their daily lives, a naïve transitivity that results in an oversimplification of problems and an emotional style that rejects thorough investigations, and a transitive state that emphasizes dialogue over polemics and a refusal to transfer responsibility. These stages may lead to a fanaticized rather than a critical consciousness in which people respond to problems irrationally and succumb to "massification." Critical consciousness thus can only grow out of a dialogic, critical educational effort "based on favorable historical conditions" (p. 20).

11. The closer a student's name is to the center of a quadrant, the more consistently he expressed that frame's point of view. The closer the student's name is to the dividing line between two quadrants, the more she expressed a mixed point of view between those two frames.

12. The names in the table are listed in the order they appear from left to right around the circular diagram in Figure 1.

13. It is important to note that, though Cora and Melanie admitted to differences that separated them from their peers in terms of race (in Melanie's case) and class (in Melanie's as well as Cora's case), both girls identified as privileged because of their education at Kent and the opportunities it would afford.

14. Many of these teachers could also be identified as "privileged" in multiple ways. Liz identified as a White upper-middle-class woman who had grown up in the suburbs of the city.

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