
Democracy & Education

“If You Cannot Live by Our Rules, If You Cannot Adapt to This Place, I Can Show You the Back Door”

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Abstract

Stitzlein and West (2014) are primarily concerned with how Relay and Match risk failing to prepare their residents to practice democratic education. My aim is to provide a more thorough account of specific practices employed by Match and their no-excuses approach in order to illustrate and support points made by Stitzlein and West. It is my hope that this deeper examination will substantiate the concerns of Stitzlein and West while further problematizing the practices employed by and advocated for throughout Match.

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I'm calling for dialogue. I'm gathering attention for dialogue, which is what you do in a struggle for power.

—Tupac Amaru Shakur, Westside Radio Program

STITZLEIN AND WEST (2014) aimed “to engage in and critique public discussion about the impact of charter ideologies on teacher education and how quality teacher education should be achieved” (p. 2). My aim is to provide a more thorough account of specific practices employed by Match Teacher Residency (Match) and their no-excuses approach in order to illustrate and support points made by Stitzlein and West. It is my hope that this deeper examination will substantiate the concerns of Stitzlein and West while further problematizing the practices employed by and advocated for throughout Match.

It is worth noting that I approach this subject as a former Match Teacher Resident, which gave me access to some course materials as well as limited experience within the program. I

resigned from the program in fall 2013 after controversy surrounding the contract of tutors at Match schools in Boston (Vaznis, 2013). I also found myself unable to reconcile the pursuit of liberatory education with the missions and pedagogy of the program. Before beginning, I want to make explicit my subjectivities as a cisgendered White male with class privilege. Because of these identities

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and the persistent segregation of cities in the United States, I was afforded a public education that sharply contrasts with the one offered to most students swept up into no-excuses schools. These identities and the privileges born of them ground my own subjectivities, which in turn shape my reading of Match.

Stitzlein and West (2014) were primarily concerned with how Relay Graduate School of Education (Relay) and Match risk failing to prepare their residents to practice democratic education. They concluded with a distinction between teacher training and teacher education, a helpful starting point for a deeper examination of Match. In this reading, Match represents a teacher training effort, designed to initiate residents into the world of no-excuses charters. This training differs from teacher education in that the pedagogical endpoints are predetermined and perspectives presented and discussed are strictly limited. The prescriptive methodology of Match, combined with its foundation in no-excuses philosophy, does indeed have grave implications for democratic education.

The Tutor Corps

εὖ γὰρ πρὸς εὖ φανεῖσι προσθήκη πέλοι

May we have good besides the appearance of good!

—Aeschylus, *Agamemmon*

Stitzlein and West (2014) were astute to point out Match and Relay residents' "immersion experiences" as a crucial piece of their teacher training. In the case of Match, this experience can best be understood by examining the broader program structure. All Match residents are concurrently employed as members of the Match Corps, so called because of its previous affiliation with AmeriCorps. According to the website, "the Match Corps and Match Teacher Residency are two tightly connected programs. Monday–Thursday, there is no difference between them" (Match Education, 2012). The residents work as corps members Monday through Thursday at one of the three Match Public Charter Schools in Boston. In these day jobs, they serve as tutors for between four and six tutorial periods and fulfill various other school functions. These functions are diverse and include roles as teaching assistants, administrative assistants, lunch personnel, janitors, coaches, one-on-one aides, and more. The corps members, described as "elite recent college graduates from top universities across the country" (Match Education, 2012), most of whom are not residents, work as minimum-wage employees for one year (Match Education, 2012). Thus, the corps members possess no long-term prospects in their roles and ultimately provide a cheap source of deprofessionalized labor, which takes the place of a more experienced, local, persistent, dedicated, and, thus, expensive workforce. For teacher residents, Fridays and Saturdays are spent in the Match classroom, completing coursework, working as a student teacher, interviewing for jobs, or observing other no-excuses charter schools in Boston.

A resident's Monday-to-Thursday work as a corps member also plays a role in their training as teachers. Even before residents begin their student teaching in the spring, their daily tutorial periods give them opportunities to try out some of the "moves" practiced at Match. With respect to Match, this is the context for

Stitzlein and West's (2014) claim: "[Its graduate students] have the opportunity in such immersion experiences to immediately apply the techniques they have learned" (p. 3). And there are clear advantages to such immersion. I support the assertion that this concurrent work "may potentially better prepare teachers for the difficult realities of teaching in high-needs classrooms by situating their primary learning experiences in these settings from the start, as well as foregrounding the unique needs of children in these communities" (Stitzlein & West, 2014, p. 3). But it would be a mistake to envision this as an experience in exploration and deliberation between diverse pedagogies. It is, in fact, teacher training: a socialization into the no-excuses model.

No Excuses

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

—Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*

Each spring Match places 100% of its remaining residents as teachers. According to the Match contract, the attrition rates before placement were 33% for Cohort III (2010–2011) and 36% for Cohort IV (2011–2012) (personal communication, 2013). Contractually, residents agree to teach in a high-poverty school for two years, but Match "suggests a No Excuses type" (personal communication, 2013). In fact, the program explicitly aims to mold its residents to this pedagogical style: As the contract says, residents sign on because "*you want us to mold you into a jaw-droppingly good No Excuses first year teacher*" (personal communication, 2013). The training is explicitly in this no-excuses style and even represents one of the cited contractual reasons to "healthy exit," or withdraw, from the program: "You want to teach, but don't want to teach in a No Excuses style, and therefore our program isn't right for you" (personal communication, 2013). The contract itself strongly supports Stitzlein and West's (2014) distinction of the program as a teacher training effort. Match is not trying merely to educate and license future teachers but rather to train a specific type of teacher: the no-excuses teacher. But what is a no-excuses teacher? What does teaching in a no-excuses style entail? An exploration of these questions illuminates Match's philosophy of education. The answers work to strongly buttress Stitzlein and West's concerns surrounding the capacity of residents to educate their future students for democracy.

No excuses is short for the concept of "holding all students, of all races and income levels, to high standards and expectations—and then making sure that all children succeed" (Carter, 2000, p. 3). By invoking this consistent success, the no-excuses approach positions itself on "seemingly unassailable on moral grounds" (Lack, 2009, p. 143). However, an examination of what proponents mean by *high standards* deeply problematizes this approach to education.

The no-excuses approach often translates the common language of high expectations to highly militaristic codes of discipline that "sweat the small stuff" (Match Education, personal communication, 2013). Lack (2009) recounted that what he

observed at Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools “looked more like a military school than anything that remotely resembled a progressive pedagogical approach to teaching and learning” (p. 128). A civil rights complaint has recently been filed in New Orleans against several no-excuses schools for their disciplinary practices. While detailing suspension rates that are nearly seven times the state average, the complaint specifically cites no-excuses practices: “Zero tolerance policies like the ‘no excuses’ model employed by Collegiate Academies do not target violent or majorly disruptive behaviors but more often than not push students out of school for very minor infractions” (Calhoun, Lellelid, & Quigley, 2014m, p. 4). The complaint went on to allege that “these schools feature a culture of hyper-discipline that is punitive and demeaning to students” (Calhoun et al., 2014, p. 4).

In my own experience working at Match Middle School, where many residents are “immersed,” I observed and enforced many of the same practices noted in the New Orleans complaint. At Match, the network of rules constructs a system that prizes silence and rigorously controls students’ bodies. During hallway transitions, students were to walk in total silence in a clockwise “traffic pattern” of taped lines on the floor. Students who did not “meet these expectations” were given demerits, detentions, and if they were persistently disobedient, their “hallway privileges” could be “revoked” (Hwang, personal communication, 2013). Inside the classroom, if a student needed to blow her nose, she would perform a silent hand signal (raising one hand while covering her nose with the other) and wait for a teacher or teaching assistant to bring a tissue. During a three-hour practice standardized test (purchased from the Achievement Network), I was instructed to give demerits to sixth-grade students to discourage them from using the bathroom or getting water. While each individual expectation is somewhat problematic, the real detriment lies in the combined effect of such policies. The New Orleans civil rights complaint best captures this: “in combination and backed up with suspensions and threats of suspensions, they create an oppressive atmosphere which advances almost military-like uniformity and can turn the school atmosphere into one which prizes strict authoritarian discipline at the expense of learning” (Calhoun et al., 2014, p. 5). Teacher residents, through immersion in no-excuses schools and classrooms, practice and normalize this type of discipline.

But who is this style of education appropriate for? No-excuses pedagogy is overwhelmingly prescribed for and practiced on poor students of color. This is intimately tied to the very purpose of many institutions identifying as no-excuses. These schools fundamentally aim to close the achievement gap, which describes consistent discrepancies in standardized test scores between White students and students of color, between rich students and poor students (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). The approach of no-excuses schools and other charters, as Stitzlein and West (2014) noted, is to be “focused on measurable achievement results” (p. 6), that is to say, “improvement on [standardized] achievement tests” (p. 4). However, standardized tests are engaged noncritically as neutral, accurate, and legitimate measures of student achievement (Au 2009 thoroughly problematized this notion). Instead of critically situating or challenging testing regimes, which would be an excuse,

advocates of no-excuses prescribe a “culture of achievement” for these underperforming groups (Carter, 2000, p. 2). These students apparently arrive at school deficient in this culture, and so they must be introduced to it and “literally trained” (Match Education, personal communication, 2013). This ultimately shifts the responsibility for differential results from historically racist systems onto the individuals sifted and oppressed by these systems. This perspective constructs a view of students and their communities as deficient but able to be trained by the school and, thus, improved.

Success within no-excuses schools is further individualized by the pervasive rhetoric of choice. At schools based around this no-excuses framework, high standards can often lead to students being pushed out for not meeting behavioral expectations. This is a component of the common accusation that charters are creaming the crop to raise their test scores. But Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) confronted this accusation head-on, quoting a cofounder of North Star, a network of charters: “This school is all about choice. . . . See that back door? See any locks on it? Is this a prison? Am I forcing you to be here? . . . If you cannot live by our rules, if you cannot adapt to this place, I can show you the back door.” According to proponents of no excuses, many students who do not succeed in these environments choose not to meet expectations. It is not the no-excuses school or expectations that fail but the students themselves.

No-excuses schools all share highly rigorous expectations for student discipline, while actively promoting and fetishizing standardized testing as a neutral, objective measure. Their fundamental assumptions about student and community cultures are misguided at best and at worst hopelessly mired in a racist, classist, deficit view. Through the discourse of “choice,” these schools are extremely effective at individualizing opportunity and rendering invisible collective struggles necessary to alter unjust structures. These are the types of schools for which Match explicitly aims to prepare its residents.

A Scientific Management

I know I've learned how to manage a classroom, but I'm not sure I can actually teach children

—A Match Teacher Resident, 2014

Stitzlein and West (2014) voiced concern about the pedagogies employed by Relay and Match and how well the program prepares teachers to educate for democracy. Specifically, they worried that “neither Relay nor Match describes the role of democracy in K–12 schools or in teacher preparation, and neither offers coursework in areas typical of teacher education programs . . . potentially jeopardizing the development of these important skills within their graduates and within the students those graduates will eventually teach” (p. 8). Match represents a threat to democratic education not just by omission but by the very pedagogies they employ and actively train their residents in.

Repetition is one of the keys to the training of residents. Match shares the terminology of Lemov’s *Teach Like a Champion* (2010), cited by Stitzlein and West (2014) and mirrors its prescribed methodology to instruct its residents. A perfect illustration of

repetition is the move referred to by Lemov (2010) as At-Bats: “Only repetition will inscribe and refine the skill such that it can be reliably applied under any circumstances, including those when one’s mind is on higher things. Great lessons end with kids getting at-bat after at-bat after at-bat” (Lemov, personal communication, 2013). At-Bats isn’t just a technique residents are taught to use in their classrooms. It is a practice heavily employed in the training of the residents themselves. At-Bats is given to residents during Group of Six, which is a common practice during instructional times when residents mimic classroom situations with a group of other residents, led by a mentor teacher, referred to as a coach. This is such a core instructional strategy employed by Match that it is even written into the contract residents sign each fall: Match promises “to provide candidates with the time, teaching ‘at-bats,’ and coaching necessary to meet program requirements and become unusually successful first-year teachers” (personal communication, 2013).

Stitzlein and West (2014) expressed concern that this repetitive style devoid of explicit theoretical grounding will prevent teachers from being able to think effectively on their feet and react to novel situations. The best potential response by Match is found in the materials for the course MTR112: Classroom Management. The claim is that by using this method, “you are literally training your students to respond automatically to different situations, because your expectations and follow-through are the same, every single time” (personal communication, 2013). This argument is grounded in a more automated, operational view of the teacher literally training their students. Through this automation, data-driven test-prep repetitions supplant a basis in developmental psychology or educational theory looking toward students’ development as individuals or citizens. After all, the issue in the view of no-excuses advocates is not creating democratic citizens but closing the achievement gap. The move is a shift from a qualitative goal to a quantitative one and renders philosophy and developmental psychology largely superfluous to the teacher’s prescribed task: raising test scores. In a version of *Teach Like a Champion* specifically rewritten for Boston charter schools and used in training all Match Corps members, Lemov (2013) wrote that the “master-teacher [will] use what the data tells him works best.” The students are not seen as developing citizens but are rather objectified, analyzed, and manipulated as data points. Stitzlein and West (2014) worried that Match risks its “graduates’ ability to understand and work to fulfill the democratic purposes.” However, it seems less of a risk and more like an inevitability. There is no mention of democratic preparation or citizenship in Match course materials or instruction; a concern for democracy is effectively outside the purview of the program.

The bounds of this purview are established by a radically positivist approach to education, a revival of Taylorist scientific management popularized at the turn of the 20th century. The no-excuses analysis frequently and consciously borrows economic terms for its capitalistic, banking model of education. Match begins its “Introduction to Our Key Beliefs” document with “econ majors will love this” before going on to flesh out three formulas, which “simplify the process by which teachers get students to

learn” (personal communication, 2012). Simply, strong classroom management is needed to keep students on their designated, quantified learning goals and to fully utilize the “classroom’s most precious commodity—time” (Lemov, personal communication, 2013). Like a factory manager, the no-excuses teacher tells himself or herself, “My job is to increase student learning in the most efficient way possible” (Lahann, personal communication, 2013). After all, “their time is always zero sum” (Lahann, personal communication, 2013). Coupled with a deficit framework constructed around students, this is an extremely effective means of limiting inquiry-based learning. Residents are taught to reflect, “Will that give [students] deeper learning, and if so, is it worth the opportunity cost of learning and practicing new skills?” (Lahann, personal communication, 2013). After all, when teachers utilize inquiry-based pedagogies, students “have little hope of” solving a given problem “in an effective and efficient way” (Lemov, personal communication, 2013).

The commoditization of time lends itself to a pedagogy that is explicitly and unapologetically teacher centered. From the coursebook for MTR114: Instructional Methods I, residents are informed, “We identify our theory of teaching and learning as being teacher-centered” (Lahann, personal communication, 2013). Noting this is important because the focus speaks to the conception of a teacher’s power within a classroom, a concept that is passed on to Match residents. Match rejects Foucault’s (1980) conception of power as a network where all participate and prefers a more possessive, zero-sum understanding of power. Match makes it clear that within the classroom this power should be possessed by the teacher alone:

The difference between us and the student-centered folks is that we think that the questions of what should be learned, and how, are so incredibly complicated that they need the strategic mind of an adult to organize the learning experiences for kids. (Lahann, personal communication, 2013)

The teacher rigorously dictates all learning: “The teacher needs to know exactly what will be learned, for each kid, before each lesson” (Lahann, personal communication, 2013). Match instructional material puts this in no uncertain terms. The internal relations of power in the classroom are explicitly laid out, and student learning is dependent upon maintaining this relation:

That is, you have to orchestrate everything that happens in your classroom because it is the only way to ensure that students do the right thing for themselves and for the class, which they will not automatically do if left to their own devices. (personal communication, 2013)

The goal is a “culture of compliance” where “[students] are crisp and orderly; students do as they’re asked without ever seeming to think about it” (Lemov, personal communication, 2013). In sharp contrast, critical theorist Freire (1970) urged that as part of a transformative education, we must overcome the contradiction inherent in the traditional student-teacher power dynamic.

But instead of addressing this contradiction, Match demands practices that further mystify and fetishize teacher authority. The goal is not to overcome or even to recognize the contradiction but rather to render it invisible: “Yet the culture of compliance is both positive and—most importantly—invisible” (Lemov, personal communication, 2013).

Match employs the language of economics to explicitly advocate for automated teaching practices in a system where students are constructed as helpless and wholly dependent on the teacher to manage their learning. These teacher-centered classrooms with a prevalent “culture of compliance” (Lemov, personal communication, 2013) have grave implications for educating for democracy.

A Proselytizing Project

But to substitute monologue, slogans, and communiqués for dialogue is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with instruments of domestication.

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Finally, not only does Match’s curricular material fail to “describe the role of democracy in K–12 schools” (Stitzlein & West, 2014, p. 8) but its design also relegates the possibility for such discussion outside the Match classroom; the resident’s ability to push for the inclusion of conflicting materials or pedagogies or even discuss them is severely limited. On the first page of the Match contract, a clause reads: “We use our limited time to practice (until mastery) specific ‘teaching moves,’ rather than engage in lengthy discussions about alternative approaches. We are very open to such discussions, but we’ll ask you to table that either until after training sessions are over, or during the regular week when you have a free period” (personal communication, 2013). This can only substantiate Stitzlein and West’s (2014) concern that such a pedagogical approach to teacher education potentially jeopardizes “the development of these important skills within their graduates and within the students those graduates will teach” (p. 8). The pedagogy is a foregone conclusion: Dialogue around issues of curriculum and pedagogy are explicitly given no place in a Match classroom.

This narrowness of approach and scope means that “new teachers become socialized into a narrow technician perspective, focused on measurable achievement results without the ability or desire to critique this focus, thereby jeopardizing their professional voice, their ability to flexibly adapt practice in light of theory, and the privileging of the common good” (Stitzlein & West, 2014, p. 6). Match’s foundation resides in a radically positivist conception of

teaching that confines the horizon of possibility within a classroom. Such pedagogy does nothing to challenge or alter existing power relations but instead replicates, strengthens, and renders such relations invisible. The implications for democratic citizenship, much less liberatory education, within this model are grave.

While authoritarian practices may have a place in the maintenance of short-term order, they do little to cultivate justice, equity, or opportunity. As educators and citizens, we must critically examine the place and legitimacy of such teacher training programs that “seem to indoctrinate participants into set practices geared toward preselected benchmarks that define success” (Stitzlein and West, 2014, p. 8). We must begin again the process of waging effective resistance against this latest iteration of Taylorist scientific management. The system of public schools in the United States and the futures of our students depend on it.

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