

SUBVERSION IN EDUCATION:

COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND MYTHS

JOHN P. PORTELLI
& ARDAVAN EIZADIRAD
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Abstract

This paper argues that subversion is a necessary tool for survival and opening up of new possibilities in the context of the 21st century where neoliberalism and its extreme market-driven ideologies and institutional practices permeate and impact all social settings public and private. Subversion is defined as subtle mechanism(s) of resisting abusive forms of power that create and/or maintain oppression and harm. At the heart of subversion and engaging in subversive acts is a hope for creation of new possibilities, imaginable and unimaginable, to facilitate attaining social justice and implementing justice-oriented practices that have moral implications. It is within the context of neoliberalism, and its ability to control power relations yet appear undetected, that we argue for a necessity of subversion and subversive acts as a form of resistance, as a tool and a grassroots action-oriented mechanism(s), to challenge abusive and immoral forms of power. The paper argues that subversion is, in many instances, the most moral and integral way to act in the face of abusive and exploitive practices that cause harm to certain social groups through policies that are normalized and perpetuated by social institutions. This paper identifies and critically challenges some common misunderstandings and popular myths about subversion in education.

Keywords: subversion, social justice, resistance, neoliberalism

WHAT IS SUBVERSION?

bell hooks (2000) in *All About Love: New Visions* points out that “[d]efinitions are vital starting points for the imagination. What we cannot imagine cannot come into being. A good definition marks our starting point and lets us know where we want to end up” (p. 14). This paper seeks to articulate and clarify a conception of subversion, and to justify its important and critical role in standing up to neoliberal ideologies and practices in education and beyond as a means of creating a more justice-oriented society. Portelli and Konecny (2013) trace the historical root of the word subversion and state:

While subversion tends to carry negative connotations in everyday discourse, etymologically the word is rooted in the Latin words *sub* (under) and *vertere* (to turn around/over). Since *the word subversion means ‘to turn or change from the bottom or foundation’ [it] is not necessarily vicious*. In other words, subversion means to change from below, to turn around or redirect from underneath, and is not necessarily a negative, aggressive, or vindictive act. It could, alternatively, be that through subversive acts, something harmful or negative is undone. When it comes to relations of social power, oppressive government institutions or policies, or systemic structures that disenfranchise particular groups of people, effective subversion is an undertaking that can have especially positive results. (p. 94)

In this paper, we are expanding on this conceptualization of subversion and making the argument that subversion is a necessary tool for survival and opening up of new possibilities in the context of the 21st century where neoliberalism and its extreme market-driven ideologies and institutional practices and power relations permeate and impact all social settings, public and private, ranging from everyday interactions and decision-making to institutionalized laws, policies, and practices.

Subversion is subtle mechanism(s) of resisting abusive forms of power that create and/or maintain oppression. Subversion is a form of resistance, yet not all acts of resistance are identical to acts of subversion. The objective of subversion is to stand up to injustice and inequitable practices as a means of rupturing the status quo, in the

process preventing and/or reducing harm to self, others, and members of the community, and harnessing hope for change and opening up of new possibilities. At the core of subversion is an understanding that everyday decisions and actions have consequences far beyond the surface level and that they impact others in numerous ways. Brickell (2005) states, “In the everyday settings of our lives, we act against and in concert with others in ways that express support, cooperation, violence, or appropriation. Whether instituted individually or collectively, these actions legitimate, bolster, contest, resist, and/or leave unaltered the power inherent in social structures” (p. 37). However, subversion is different from explicit resistance since it is carried out in a less explicit manner.

Under the guise of neoliberalism and its excessive market-driven ideologies and practices, human needs and collective needs of communities are inferiorized, and suffering is accepted for profit. Yet, the hurtful and destructive nature of these dominant market-driven ideologies and practices are swept under the rug and instead presented through the mantle of “efficiency,” “effectiveness,” and “accountability.” As a prime example, standardized tests are used as a main tool to promote accountability within schools at various levels. Yet as Alfie Kohn (2000) points out,

As excitement about learning pulls in one direction, covering the material that will be on the test pulls in the other. Thoughtful discussions about current events are especially likely to be discarded because what’s in today’s paper won’t be on the exam. Furthermore, it is far more difficult for teachers to attend to children’s social and moral development—holding class meeting, building a sense of community, allowing time for creative play, developing conflict-resolution skills, and so on—when the only thing that matters is scores on tests, that, of course, measure none of these. (p. 30)

Through a neoliberal lens, responsibility is often exclusively judged through an individualistic perspective emphasizing a person’s decisions and choices made irrespective of examining the exploitative practices and inequitable institutional practices and policies that create the social conditions that present limited choice(s) to individuals.

Racialized and inferiorized members of society and communities get blamed for their living conditions while the oppressor—“the European/capitalist/military/Christian/patriarchal/white/ heterosexual/ male” (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 8)—reaps the benefits of profits at the expense of causing oppression and suffering to other social groups. Therefore, we take the stance throughout the paper that neoliberal values, beliefs, and qualities are unethical and immoral in nature as they prioritize profit over human needs. Kohn (2000) argues in relation to the effectiveness of standardized tests,

When someone emphasizes the importance of “higher expectations” for minority children, it is vital that we reply, “Higher expectations to do what? Bubble in more ovals correctly on tests or pursue engaging projects that promote sophisticated thinking?” The movement driven by “tougher standards,” “accountability,” and similar slogans actually lowers meaningful expectations insofar as it relies on standardized testing as the primary measure of achievement. The more that poor children fill in worksheets on command (in an effort to raise their test scores), the further they fall behind affluent kids who are more likely to get lessons that help them understand ideas. (p. 38)

Under neoliberalism, education as a field is embedded with intentional inequities driven by market ideologies which lead to the reproduction of the status quo benefiting the affluent at the expense of exclusion and oppression of others—the socioeconomically marginalized members of society (Apple, 1978; Dei, 2000; McNeil, 2000). As Kohn (2000) puts it, the focus of many current policies is on “standards of outcome rather than standards of opportunity” (p. 39). When institutions face criticism about their inequitable practices, they resort to emphasizing individualism, which translates into glorifying one success story with the theme of “if you work hard enough you can overcome anything.” Yet, for every working class and minoritized/ racialized student who is saved by an education initiative which invests in individuals, such as scholarship creation, there are hundreds if not thousands of others who become victims of the vicious cycle of inequality of opportunity (Kohn, 2000; Masood, 2008; Sharma, 2009). We never get to hear “unsuccessful” stories, as

they are silenced and forgotten. Institutional dysfunction is largely responsible for the perpetuation of living conditions permeated with inequality of opportunity that creates a socio-stratified and hierarchical society (Apple, 1978; Grosfoguel, 2011; Mosley, 2000). As Garrison (2009) points out, “Closing gaps in intellectual performance—that is, in equalizing outcomes—will not solve the problem of what are now unsustainable social inequalities because these social inequalities do not have their origin in intellectual difference” (p. 105).

As a response to institutional inequitable practices, which dehumanize certain social groups for profit while simultaneously perpetuating inequality, we call for subversion as a form of subtle resistance that can stand up to injustice and abusive power and create new possibilities.

THE MORAL NEED FOR SUBVERSION

As Jaramillo and Carreon (2014) point out, “our struggle is multipronged, and it necessitates conceptual, philosophical, and epistemological shifts to our understanding of the social” (p. 408). As an extension of this point, we also need a *moral* shift in our “understanding of the social,” one that centers power as the main lens through which we judge our (inter)actions and their impact on ourselves, our communities, and others locally and internationally. From a Freireian perspective that we adhere to, the political and moral domains are intrinsically related. In other words, issues of power are always involved in making moral decisions. From a Freireian perspective, anything that causes “the degradation of human beings,” including any ideology or political relations that “humiliate” and “deny our humanity” (Freire, 1998, p. 27), is morally unacceptable.

Subversion is subtle, and it involves goal-oriented actions emerging from the need to survive and prevent harm to self and others. Subversive acts blossom from intuition into the needs of the individual and the collective community rather than from excessive fixations with the economy. Subversion navigates within and through spatial power relations, often hierarchical in nature, and seeks to find new ways that power can be dispersed and enacted in everyday situations with the aim of decreasing dehumanizing power relations. Dispersal of

power may give voice to those who are often silenced, marginalized, and exploited systematically by structural inequalities that constantly and invariably prioritize profit over human needs. Emphasizing that subversive acts potentially initiate macro-level changes, Brickell (2005) states, “New opportunities opened up by subversion do provide inspiration for resistance, struggle, and changes to the ways power is done in everyday life; micro-level change may filter upwards in a set of capillary movements” (p. 38).

Jaramillo and Carreon (2014) point out that “neoliberal capitalism patterns the way we think, communicate, and relate to one another and our environment” (p. 394). Neoliberal subjectivity connects destiny to individual decision-making. Dominant discourse and its metanarratives promote stereotypical ideologies that attempt to freeze identities in time and space. For example, the poor are judged as responsible for their living conditions because they are lazy and prefer being on social assistance programs rather than finding a job and working hard. Neoliberalism simplifies complex social issues and places blame on individuals while masking and silencing discussion about exploitative social practices of institutions driven by market ideologies. As a result, poverty is not examined as a systemic issue directly and indirectly linked to inequitable access to resources and opportunities such as lack of meaningful employment with benefits. With poor wages, opportunities for upward social mobility remain unlikely, and the cycle of poverty continues to perpetuate itself through systematic and structural barriers created for racialized bodies by institutional policies and practices (Block & Galabuzi, 2011). For example, many immigrants are well-educated and have educational degrees from their country of origin, but upon arrival to Canada their educational degree and work experiences are not recognized or are undervalued by Canadian organizations, making it challenging for immigrants to access opportunities beyond minimum wage employment (Block & Galabuzi, 2011, p. 4). National figures for Canada show that in the year 2000, immigrant men earned 63.1 cents for every dollar earned by a native-born Canadian with the same educational level (Boudreau et al., 2009, p. 91). This is a reflection of how racialized bodies are

exploited for labor to the benefit of a white, settler Canadian society and its institutions.

Subversion is a form of resistance to abusive forms of power, yet not all forms of resistance are subversion. Subversion occurs underground through subtle actions without explicitly naming its intentions within the public sphere. In this manner, subversion differs from other forms of resistance. In the context of dealing with abusive forms of power, detected acts of subversion may lead to harsh consequences and in extreme cases possibly death. Therefore, in standing up to injustice, subversion is in many instances the most morally acceptable way to the oppressed to resist market-driven ideologies of neoliberalism in the face of abusive and exploitative practices.

In the remaining sections of this paper we identify and critically challenge certain misunderstandings and popular myths about subversion in education. Subversion is discussed in depth with various examples in order to develop an argument against the view that subversion is a deceitful form of resistance and concomitantly provide an argument towards subversion as a useful, productive tool for standing up to injustice with the potentiality for opening up of new possibilities.

MYTH #1: SUBVERSION IS ALWAYS DECEITFUL AND MANIPULATIVE.

Whether or not an action is deceitful and manipulative will depend on the vantage point through which the act is interpreted and the power relations involved within the context of the situation. For example, is lying always a deceitful act? When is it acceptable to lie? As Turiel (2003) points out, in World War II “people frequently had to decide whether to engage in deception in order to save people from concentration camps” (p. 125). Hence, sometimes it is more moral to lie as a means of preventing further harm than to be complicit. Similarly, we are arguing that in the context of our current neoliberal times, subversion is part of the mundane, daily action(s) which can act as means of preventing harm to those who are exploited and oppressed for the vested interests of the elite and the affluent.

Subversion for survival and a more just society involves learning to navigate public and private spaces, recognizing that although all individuals and social groups have a voice, not all voices are heard equally within the web of power relations that control the public sphere and its institutions. Subversion arises from an intuition and a moral call, an inside voice or sense of consciousness, to pay attention to the needs of the self and others, to stand up to injustice and inequity with the goal of challenging abusive forms of power and their control over marginalized and oppressed lives. As Weiner (2014) points out, “even those who are angry about oppression don’t often want to do what needs to be done to create equity if that means they will potentially lose their privileges of race, class, sex, and/or gender” (p. 18). Yet, some people will take risk(s) to engage in subversive acts to help others and to promote equity and justice, even if it means risking their own privileged positionality.

One’s locality in time and space is significant in terms of the extent of how one can engage in subversive acts. This is not to say that some people cannot subvert, but rather the extent to which one can participate in subversive acts will differ depending on one’s identity and social status within the communities and the society in which one lives. Neoliberalism and its market-driven ideologies and practices utilize a culture of fear to silence those who oppose the status quo. As a prime example, Preston and Aslett (2014) point out that “the academy has become a welcome partner in a cost saving, standardized and entrepreneurial approach to education and includes a devaluing of educational programmes that run counter to profit-driven rationality” (p. 403). These “profit-driven” interests are promoted and protected through various control mechanisms including the “increased use of contractual faculty who may become depoliticized for reasons of job security” (p. 504). Similar to the reward and punishment model that reinforces certain behaviors and practices throughout elementary and secondary school, universities have conformed to neoliberal ideologies where “scholarship that supports the values of capital is rewarded, while that which is committed to the pursuit of social justice risks being marginalized” (p. 505). By associating neutrality with job security, neoliberalism pressures faculty members to conform to the

status quo and be complicit in the face of unjust university practices instead of critiquing or challenging morally unacceptable policies and practices. Since the hierarchical nature of power relations has direct implications on faculty members and their means of survival, such as their contractual employment that is subject to renewal at the start of each term, it becomes an effective control mechanism that, through fear tactics, a neoliberal agenda is perpetuated, contributing to the marketization of education and its practices.

Subversion is at times manipulative and strategic, but morally so in order to stand up for justice and equity and to commit the least amount of harm. The necessity for subversion stems from living within an interlocking oppressive system that (re)produces various hierarchies of privilege—racial, sexual, educational, and political—which have a direct and indirect impact towards (in)access to opportunities and resources for upward social mobility. As it relates to education, for example, we cannot discuss the achievement gap without considering inequality of access to opportunities. How can we expect children who attend school hungry and have to work part-time or full-time to support their families economically to obtain similar achievement levels on standardized tests as students who are well fed and have continuous access to tutoring and social support systems? Educational problems are an extension of the exploitative power relations that control other public institutions of society. Power is at work in every interaction in our daily lives. A collective rage towards injustice and inequity allows subversion to become a form of resistance as a means to survive and create alternative possibilities. An example of subversion at the post-secondary level would be a professor who does not mention all their experiences or research areas on their resume, as some topics might be considered controversial when applying for research funding. In this case, omission is a subversive act that takes into account neoliberal values; by rejecting values that promote inequality and profits over justice, the subversive act is moral.

Taylor (1993) emphasizes that “education should not be imposed, but arise from people’s wants” (p. 70). With reference to the foundational work of Postman and Weingartner (1969) entitled *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Taylor argues that “if one learns

how to ask questions, one has learnt how to learn, and this is very crucial for survival” (p. 71). We extend this argument by adding that it is just as important to know when to publicly ask the *right* kind of questions and when to subvert as a means of standing up to abusive forms of power. Neoliberalism promotes neutrality and depoliticization of learning environments and institutional settings (hooks, 2003; Sharma, 2009). Many scholars have argued that neutrality and depoliticization of learning in the face of injustice without taking actions against it is immoral (Apple 2004; Dei, 2000; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2004; hooks, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Razack, 2002). It is critical to question who benefits from promotion of neutrality. It is very common for those who support the status quo to contend that unless one is neutral, one would be political. The problem with this position is that it is self-contradictory: Promoting so-called neutrality is itself a political stance for the status quo. In other words, promoting neutrality in the neoliberal context amounts to actually taking a stance that reproduces injustice and perpetuates dehumanizing practices that are immoral. Weiner (2014) argues, “In a world where economic and cultural power are distributed differentially, to demand standards of outcome while ignoring standards of opportunity is to stack the deck of opportunity against those who possess limited and limiting power” (p. 55). Therefore, critical to understanding the effect of subversion is the awareness that neutrality is a stance that often benefits the oppressor by perpetuating hierarchical power relations that lead to inequality of outcomes and access to opportunities.

Subversion calls for an exploration of multiple approaches, to listen to multiple voices and explore social issues from multiple vantage points rather than through an exclusively economical perspective and a neutral stance. By participating in subversive acts in the face of abusive forms of power that cause harm and privilege certain groups at the expense of marginalization and oppression of specific social groups, one is standing up for justice and equity rather than for the economic benefit of the few. Subversion as a form of subtle, calculated risk-taking is a means of working towards changing outcomes and opening up of new possibilities for systemic change. Subversion becomes a means of taking advantage of “cracks” in

the system, penetrating the loopholes within the hegemonic power relations that work collectively to create and maintain the status quo. Whereas the status quo works towards protecting certain affluent and elite interests which are deemed to be “neutral,” subversion works to give a voice to the needs and rights of those who are continuously being systematically marginalized, dispossessed, and oppressed.

Subversion embraces an ethic of love and interconnectedness that goes beyond monetary values. bell hooks (2000) states, “the inability to connect with others carries with it an inability to assume responsibility for causing pain” (p. 39). A subversive stance requires seeing others beyond the stereotypical and superficial roles constructed by neoliberal ideologies of the subject associated with deficit theories of blame (Portelli & Sharma, 2014). Conforming to neoliberal ideologies and practices without questioning their exclusive market-driven motives and the harm inflicted on others through inequitable institutional practices risks people perpetuating oppression and causing suffering without knowing it.

MYTH #2: SUBVERSION IS MONOLITHIC AND ALWAYS NEGATIVE/BAD.

Under the hegemonic neoliberal discourse, subversion is essentialized in a particular way associated with risk, deceitfulness, and negative outcomes. Yet, from the vantage points of those who are subverting for moral reasons associated with causing the least amount of harm, acts of subversion are a means to reduce tension and have a peace of mind by aligning one’s actions morally with one’s values and beliefs. The goal and intent of subversion is to prevent and/or reduce harm to self and others. Accepting that we live in a world where hierarchical power relations make it very unlikely to eradicate and extinguish oppression completely in its many forms, subversion navigates the harm spectrum. Whereas within neoliberal discourse prevention of harm is assumed to be achieved by not taking any risk(s), we argue that engaging in subtle actions and calculated risk-taking as a means to stand up to abusive forms of power holds the potential for the blossoming of new possibilities that cause less harm.

In order to evaluate subversive acts, one cannot exclusively look at the action in isolation from the context of the hierarchical power relations eminent in the situation. It is critical to connect subversive acts to the processes involved, their objectives, and the projected goal-oriented outcomes. In many cases, the goal is to prevent harm and oppression in one form or another. Whereas within neoliberalism decisions are based exclusively on economical and market-driven factors, which value profit and efficiency associated with complete avoidance of risk, subversion seeks to take into consideration histories of individuals and the needs of communities as a means to formulate priorities and promote calculated risk-taking in the name of social justice. Rather than dehumanizing individuals and specific social groups for the sake of profit through an attitude that emphasizes conformity or perishing, subversion allows for exploration of multiple perspectives, sharing of power through collective roles and shared responsibilities, dialogical listening, reciprocity, and a sense of interconnectedness.

When neutrality prevails, state-sanctioned authority and its market-driven agenda speak for the needs of all members of society. Within such a model, the voices of the elite and affluent dominate and become the monolithic voice that dictates macro-level policies, laws, and practices that perpetuate oppression. Although certain practices are implemented under the guise of being beneficial for all members of society, such as the “tough on crime approach” to prevent and reduce crime rates in communities, when one begins to critically analyze the impact of such policies on specific social groups, it becomes evident that “tough on crime” serves a unique agenda where it translates into “tough on crime” committed by racialized and minoritized bodies. This is supported by the overrepresentation of racialized and minoritized members who are incarcerated. Mass incarceration of racialized and minoritized individuals leads to profit for private enterprises controlled by the affluent and the wealthy (Dei, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2011; Mohanram, 1999; Razack, 2002).

MYTH #3: SUBVERSION IS EXHAUSTING AND NOT WORTH THE HEADACHES; IT CONSUMES TOO MUCH EFFORT.

Anytime one decides to challenge the status quo, there are risks involved. Some of the best critical thinkers and icons have had their ideas and actions shut down by “experts” of their times. If they had listened and given up at the time, their inventions and/or ideas would not have blossomed. Hence, courage and hope are required when thinking outside of the socioculturally constructed “norm” and “common sense.” One has to accept that success does not occur overnight. As well, subverting the system will not occur instantly. Belief in one’s moral actions is necessary if one is to engage in subversive acts for a socially just cause. In many instances, progress in the history of humankind required sacrifices from those who had the courage to stand up to the status quo and its dominant ideologies supported by state-sanctioned authority. Therefore, risk-taking and harm are inseparable. There are many instances where taking risks was morally acceptable and appropriate because through such risks a more just society was created. Civil Rights Movement activists and the Black Panthers were visionaries, as they were able to envision a more justice-oriented future implemented with their risk-taking tactics through solidarity and mobilization, even at a time when the status quo was not prepared to hear those ideas and make them into reality (Mosley, 2000).

What “feels right”—an intuition and moral responsibility to engage with risks for a justice-oriented cause—is at the core of giving an individual the courage to engage in subversive acts in the face of hierarchical power relations that put pressure on individuals to conform or risk vulnerability. Subversive efforts need to be gauged in relation to the greater cause of the actions and their potential for creating a ripple effect of positive change. Doing what is right will always take greater effort than doing what is easy. Doing nothing by being complicit will take no effort but will often lead to greater harm. We have to reflexively examine our own values as individuals, social groups, members of social institutions, and citizens of a society and decide what is worth standing up for. Even though Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X became prominent leaders of the Civil

Rights Movement, there were many unheard-of heroes who led the *underground* movement to educate others about human rights and what it takes to create a more justice-oriented society.

Berrey (2009) interviewed kids of parents who lived under the racially segregated Jim Crow laws in the Southern United States wanting to understand “how did black children encounter a Jim Crow world?” (p. 66). Three themes emerged from the interviews that explained how parents and members of the extended family taught children how to survive within the public sphere by engaging in subversive acts which included instructing children about racial rules for protection, teaching children to perform and not to accept their expected inferior Jim Crow role, and providing an alternative meaning of blackness rooted in racial pride and struggle (p. 76). As Berrey (2009) states, “as children learned to play-act around whites, they developed a sense of right and wrong derived not from Jim Crow culture, but from sources within their own communities” (p. 79). Hence, as demonstrated through “play-acting,” subversion serves as creating two simultaneous systems—one as performative for the system in relation to survival and hope and the other as countering the harm caused by the inequitable system.

MYTH #4: SUBVERSION IS COUNTERPRODUCTIVE AND RISKY.

Engaging in subversive acts will always involve a certain amount of risk ranging from perceived risk to real risk of harm. This will reflect the status of the individual and their role within the hierarchical power relations that permeate everyday situations and institutions. Being complicit by remaining silent or pretending to be neutral in the face of injustice will in many cases create further harm by perpetuating oppressive and exploitive practices. Although at times, silence itself, as with the example mentioned earlier of a professor who omits certain research areas when applying for research funding, can function as a form of subversion. The presence of risk itself is not counterproductive, as it presents an opportunity for growth and change depending on how the risk is handled. Hooks (2003) emphasizes that “working with white students on unlearning racism, one of the principles we strive to embody is the value of risk, honoring the fact

that we may learn and grow in circumstances where we do not feel safe, that the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict” (p. 64).

We acknowledge that a certain level of calculated risk-taking is involved in engaging in subversive actions as a means of standing up to injustice. Yet risk is involved in many everyday situations and actions we participate in on a daily basis, including driving a car, crossing the street, playing sports, and, indeed, life itself. The notion of risk, as in the above mentioned everyday circumstances, does not prevent the person from participating in those activities, as the benefits and outcomes outweigh the calculated risks. Similarly, engaging in subversive acts requires an analysis of the risks involved relative to the benefits, outcomes, and consequences that can arise from engaging in such risks.

The reason why subversion is subtle and derives from a grassroots level rather than a top-down hierarchical approach is directly linked to risks and consequences. Within a hegemonic market-driven neoliberal culture, individuals and social groups who critique the status quo are often silenced and potentially face repercussions. Repercussions can range from getting fired or jailed, to, in some cases, being killed. Yet, engaging in morally subversive acts is productive because it holds the potential for harnessing hope, disrupting injustices, and eliminating harm. Yes, there are risks involved, but this should not deter us from being an agent of social change.

Engaging in subversive acts can occur in many formats and in multiple settings. Whereas in certain settings subversion involves challenging formal practices, in many cases subversion attempts to reinvent formal practices. For example, with regard to standardized testing and assessment within schools, a shift in assessment techniques or altering them implicitly without explicitly challenging them in the public sphere, such as teaching to the test in order for students to do well on high-stakes standardized tests, is an act of subversion. Subversion can also involve informal practices guided and dictated by the needs of the situation at hand, including what is considered to be immoral within formal or informal structures and/or practices. Moreover, as part of the process, it attempts to allow multiple voices

to be heard. In many cases, subversion works in subtle manners complementary with informal practices to reinvent formal practices in ways that promote justice and equity. This translates into working within an interdisciplinary, holistic conceptual framework that brings to light counterhegemonic and decolonizing narratives and subaltern knowledges and perspectives. But we cannot simply stop and celebrate for having given a voice; we need to explore ways we can use our voices in solidarity and in collaboration with allies, rather than through competition, in accomplishing collective objectives and shared justice-oriented outcomes that bring about systemic social change from a grassroots level. As Bourdieu (1999) states, “rupture in fact demands a conversion of one’s gaze. . . . And this cannot be done without a genuine conversion, a metanoia, a mental revolution, a transformation of one’s whole vision of the social world” (p. 251). From our human predicament and lived experiences, this “mental revolution” is constantly ongoing, and we all have a role to play in our various capacities to continue resisting the inequities of the system on a daily basis explicitly and subversively.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have clarified the concept of subversion and identified and responded to four major misinterpretations of subversion. Clarifying the meaning of subversion and responding to myths about subversion have helped us to argue for the appropriateness of subversion on moral grounds. Building on a Freireian understanding of the intrinsic relation between political and moral realms, we argue that subversion is a necessary tool for survival, harnessing hope, and opening up of new possibilities in the context of the 21st century where neoliberalism and its market-driven ideologies and institutional practices and power relations permeate and impact all social settings, public and private, ranging from everyday interactions and decision-making to institutionalized laws, policies, and practices. Subversion is defined as subtle mechanism(s) of resisting abusive forms of power that create and/or maintain oppression. It is within the context of neoliberalism, and its ability to control hierarchical power relations by normalizing itself and appearing to be inevitable, that we argue for the moral appropriateness of subversion and subversive acts

as a form of resistance and as a tool and a grassroots action-oriented mechanism to challenge dehumanizing forms of power that create and maintain oppression for the vested interests of the elite, wealthy, and affluent. Notwithstanding the common misgivings about subversion, subversion is indeed a useful, productive tool for standing up to injustice, inequity, and abusive forms of power, having the potentiality for opening up of new possibilities and reducing harm to the oppressed and systematically marginalized social groups in society. To conclude our moral justification of subversion, we echo Giroux (2004), who states, “Hope [and we would add subversion] is more than a politics, it is also a pedagogical and performative practice that provides the foundation for enabling human beings to learn about their potential as moral and civic agents” (p. 63).

REFERENCES

- Apple, M. (1978). Ideology, reproduction, and educational reform. *Comparative Education Review*, 22(3), 367-387.
- Apple, M. W. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Berrey, S. (2009). Resistance begins at home: The black family and lessons in survival and subversion in Jim Crow Mississippi. *Black Women, Gender, and Families*, 3(1), 65-90.
- Block, S., & Galabuzi, G. (2011). *Canada's colour coded labour market: The gap for racialized workers*. Wellesley Institute and Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved from http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wpcontent/uploads/2011/03/Colour_Coded_Labour_MarketFINAL.pdf
- Boudreau, J., Keil, R., & Young, D. (2009). *Changing Toronto: Governing urban neoliberalism*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1999). *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brickell, C. (2005). Masculinities, performativity, and subversion: A sociological reappraisal. *Men and Masculinities*, 8(1), 24-43.
- Dei, G. (2000). *Towards an anti-racism discursive framework*. In G. Dei & A. Calliste (Eds.), *Power, knowledge, and anti-racism education: A critical reader*. Toronto, Canada: Fernwood Publishing.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Garrison, M. (2009). *A measure of failure: The political origins of standardized testing*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Giroux, H. (2004). When hope is subversive. *Tikkun*, 19(6), 62-64.

- Grosfoguel, R. (2011). Decolonizing post-colonial studies and paradigms of political-economy: Transmodernity, decolonial thinking, and global coloniality. *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(1), 1-37.
- hooks, b. (2000). *All about love: New visions*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jaramillo, N., & Carreon, M. (2014). Pedagogies of resistance and solidarity: Towards revolutionary and decolonial praxis. *Interface*, 6(1), 392-411.
- Kohn, A. (2000). *The case against standardized testing: Raising scores, ruining the schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers for African-American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Masood, O. (2008). *At Risk: The racialized student marked for educational failure* (Doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada).
- McNeil, L. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mohanram, R. (1999). *Black body: Women, colonialism, and space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mosley, W. (2000). *Workin' on the chain gang: Shaking off the dead hand of history*. Toronto, Canada: Random House of Canada Limited.
- Portelli, J. P., & Konecny, C. (2013). Neoliberalism, subversion, and democracy in education. *Encounters*, 14, 87-97.
- Portelli, J. P., & Sharma, M. (2014). Uprooting and settling in: The invisible strength of deficit thinking. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 8(1), 251-267.
- Postman, N. & Weingartner, C. (1969). *Teaching as a subversive activity*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing.

Preston, S., & Aslett, J. (2014). Resisting neoliberalism from within the academy: Subversion through an activist pedagogy. *Social Work Education, 33*(4), 502-518.

Razack, S. (2002). *Gendered racial violence and spatialized justice: The murder of Pamela*

George. In S. Razack (Ed.), *Race, space and the law: Unmapping a White settler society*. Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines.

Sharma, M. (2009). *Inner city students: Stamped, labeled and shipped out! Deficit thinking and democracy in an age of neoliberalism*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Taylor, J. (1993). Education can never be neutral: Teaching for subversion. *Nurse Education Today, 13*, 69-72.

Turiel, E. (2003). Resistance and subversion in everyday life. *Journal of Moral Education, 32*(2), 115-130.

Weiner, E. (2014). *Deschooling the imagination: Critical thought as social practice*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.