

2017

“Anyone Can Change the World”: An Ethnography of Design For Change

Courtney Tee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/honors>

Recommended Citation

Tee, Courtney, "“Anyone Can Change the World”: An Ethnography of Design For Change" (2017). *Honors College*. 15.
<https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/honors/15>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the ACU Student Research, Theses, Projects, and Dissertations at Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ ACU.

“Anyone Can Change the World”: An Ethnography of Design For Change

Courtney Tee

Abilene Christian University Department of Sociology

An Honors College Project Thesis

This project was completed as an undergraduate thesis for the Honors College at Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors Scholar. Research was conducted while in residence at ACU at CitySquare.

Special thanks to my thesis chair, Dr. Jonathan Camp, my thesis committee, Dr. Andrew Huddleston and Dr. Suzie Macaluso, and to the research assistants who helped transcribe and document data: Tessa Cave, Barrett Corey, Julie Johnson, Wesley Robbins, and Amanda Stephens.

Copyright 2017

Courtney Tee

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No portion of this work may be reproduced without written permission of the author.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

This Project Thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee,
has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

HONORS SCHOLAR

Dr. Jason Morris, Dean of the Honors College

Date

Advisory Committee

Dr. Jonathan Camp, Committee Chair

Dr. Suzie Macaluso, Committee Member

Dr. Andrew Huddleston, Committee Member

Dr. Joe Cardot, Department Head

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

ABSTRACT

Design For Change (DFC), an education program that seeks to empower students to work for change in their community, has been suggested as a tool for education reform, but little formal research has been conducted on the program. This study sought to fill this gap by examining the implementation of the DFC in a Dallas elementary school. The year-long study was qualitative in nature and used ethnographic methods to gain a deep understanding of how the curriculum interacted with and influenced students. It was demonstrated that the students in the study flourished with DFC, making effective use of knowledge and skills, showing increased agency in the classroom, and coming to see themselves as valuable contributors to change in their community. These findings were analyzed using the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, and suggest that DFC not only creates change through student's projects, but can be subversive to structures that perpetuate inequality.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

“Anyone Can Change the World”: An Ethnography of Design For Change

In the year 2001 a K-12 education institution called Riverside School opened its doors in Ahmedabad, India. From its inception it was to be a laboratory of sorts, a testing ground on which a new type of education could be developed and refined. The founders of Riverside envisioned a type of schooling that would connect the classroom and the world, that would be civically engaged, that would empower students to draw on their own experience, passion, and talent in order to create a better future.

In its fifteen years of existence, Riverside School has seen tremendous success in their endeavor. Students at the school have become deeply invested in the life and health of their community, developing many projects to affect change in their school and in their city. The success of the school goes beyond their social impact, though, as Riverside students consistently outperform other students in their age group academically. In the words of the school’s founder, Riverside is “(blurring) the boundaries between school and life” in order to deliver a type of education in which students are empowered to “do good *and* do well” (Sethi 2009). Spurred by their success in India, Riverside has developed a curriculum designed to be incorporated into pre-existing education institutions around the world to help other schools connect learning to real world problems and to empower students to work for change in their home communities. They call this curriculum “Design for Change.”

Design for Change (DFC) has spanned the globe, being implemented by teachers and school leaders in over 30 countries (Design for Change, N.d.). DFC first reached Dallas, Texas in 2013 as a proposed supplement to elementary school social studies in Dallas Independent School District. DFC has been carried out in select DISD classrooms

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

every year since then. While Dallas teachers and students have reported positive experiences with DFC and the projects that students have carried out in their community have been impressive, there is no formal research on the process of Design for Change as it is being implemented in Dallas. Design for Change Global, the nonprofit that oversees DFC implementation around the world, has completed survey research that claims DFC leads to learning outcomes like presentation skills, teamwork development, empathy, leadership, compassion, citizenship, community service, and communication, but these data are limited in scope and specificity (Design for Change, N.d.).

Purpose

The goal of this study was to examine the impact DFC had on the students who participated in it. To do so, I followed the journey of one fourth grade classroom at a Dallas ISD elementary school as they participated in seven months of Design for Change. It is important to note that this study was conducted in a public school classroom in under-resourced and under-served South Dallas. The school sits in a neighborhood where gang, drug, and criminal activity is common. All of the students in the study came from low-income households as defined by their eligibility for programs like free and reduced lunch. In short, the DFC classroom I joined was one where the social obstacles were many and the need for community change was pressing. In light of the location of this research, the study necessarily focuses on the outcomes of DFC in the particular context of low-income education, with specific attention paid to the nature of inequality in education and how DFC intersects with this reality.

I analyzed the experience of the students using Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of field, capital, and habitus, theories especially relevant to this study because of

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

the way they depict the dynamics at work in inequality. Bourdieu specifically draws our attention to the ways that external forces like socialization, structural power, and the transfer of knowledge become internalized as interpretive schemas that create or diminish possibility for success. DFC's goal is to help students interact with, affect, and change the structures around them, and Bourdieu's theory helps capture the ways that such a process might be engaged and embodied by students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The work of Bourdieu serves as foundational tool to understand the social forces at play in the problem of education inequality. Here, I offer an overview of his concepts and their application to education and discuss the possibility of social change from a Bourdieusian point of view.

Capital, Field, and Habitus

Bourdieu (2007) describes the social world using the concepts of “field,” “habitus,” and “capital.” “Capital” can be simply defined as resources. These resources take varied forms, ranging from physical objects like machinery or money, dispositions that come from culture and upbringing, or institutional factors like academic qualifications. A “field” is a structured social space (Bourdieu 1993). A field has clear boundaries, specific interests, and is governed by rules. Fields impose norms on social actors and legitimize the capital people bring to the social space. The capital a field legitimizes is arbitrary, but this valuing of capital has real consequences for social actors. The absence of useful capital within a field seriously hinders one's ability to interact and advance within that field. Finally, “habitus” can be understood as an individual's perception of the world based on their experience of the world, “dispositions which are

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

impalpably inculcated through a long and slow process of acquisition” (Bourdieu 1991:50). The habitus is experienced in the first person, but it is constructed as an “internalization of externality” (Applerouth and Edles 2012:654) and is continually defined by the social space an individual occupies. Huddleston (2012) describes the relationship between field and habitus, stating that,

For Bourdieu, habitus represented the transfer of the objective rules of the field into the subjective thoughts and actions of the agents. Social fields have unspoken rules and requirements that humans often accept unknowingly. When these ingrained structures influence people's decisions and actions, a taken-for-granted relationship exists that largely determines how they will play the game. (P. 736)

The field or fields a social agent participates in directly influences the habitus, which in turn influences the way an individual sees the world, the way one carries oneself, and the way one interacts with their environment.

While the habitus is largely developed by structural factors like the field, the habitus is not entirely inflexible. Grenfell (2004) describes the habitus as fluid, capable of change over time with a changing environment. Grenfell suggests that the habitus is most flexible in children and becomes more durable with age. A similar position of flexibility in the habitus is held by Fairbanks and Ariail (2006), who argue that, “If, as Bourdieu claimed, habitus is a product of the history of individuals’ engagement in various fields...then the dialectic between habitus and field provides opportunities for agency, creative responses, and transformations of one’s positioning within any given field” (P. 335). As this study examines a process centered around creating change, I too hold that the field and habitus are malleable, able to be transformed by practice.

Bourdieu on Education

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

Bourdieu understood education to be a prime factor in the development of the capital needed to succeed in a given field, something with the power to enrich and empower. However, he also acknowledged that education can work to further legitimize social hierarchies and perpetuate inequality through the unequal transfer of capital (Grenfell 2004). The work of Lareau (2003) found that, unfortunately, education often is party to inequality. Lareau showed that lower class children receive profoundly different capital than their upper-class counterparts. The method of socialization common to the lower classes is “out of synch with the standards of institutions. As a result... (children from low income families) appear to gain an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint in their institutional experience” (Lareau 2003:3). The forms of capital common to the lower-class families are not readily legitimized by society, so the children of these families receive capital that is divergent from the legitimized forms of capital in the field. These children in turn begin to take this fact into their habitus, shaping the way they view their place in the world. This disparity of capital also has profound practical consequences, limiting the ability of the children from low income backgrounds to effectively navigate institutions and gain the sorts of credentials that constitute capital. These children were much less likely to achieve milestones like graduating from high school, enrolling in college, or obtaining a drivers license, which in turn further limited their mobility in the field. When certain people consistently receive lesser forms of capital, are disallowed from advancing in the field, and take on a “natural” belief of personal inferiority or distance from society, Bourdieu (1991) says that symbolic violence has occurred.

Overcoming Symbolic Violence and Inequality

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

It is crucial to return to the notion that the legitimization of capital is arbitrary, defined by power and in service to the status quo. Unfortunately, failure of capital for the under-resourced student within the institution of school often becomes internalized as a natural occurrence, a social fact rather than a social phenomenon, and distance and mistrust is created. What might it take to intervene in such a cycle? For Bourdieu, the only way to bring about change that does not simply replace one power structure with another is to undo the trends of normalization and legitimization by the powerful and to challenge the acceptance of the status quo (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). The individual must come to see their place in the world through a different lens, one that does not accept that inequality is “natural” or that some forms of capital are empirically more useful than others. In other words, those parts of the habitus that are complicit with one’s own domination must be transformed.

To measure the sort of changes it would take to overcome symbolic violence, we must look at a holistic picture of an individual and examine change in that individual over time. Using the ideas of field, capital, and habitus, we can paint a robust picture of the social state of a given individual or group and hypothesize about how outside experiences either create or diminish possibility for success for those individuals. This provides us a broad understanding of not only the impact of a program on students, but also how that program may interact with the broader social situation and constraints faced by that student. This study seeks to capture the overarching story of Design for Change as it was applied in South Dallas with precisely those goals. This study was an exploration rather than an analysis, guided by the research question, “What happens when a student participates in Design For Change?”

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, I chose to use qualitative data collection methods. Because of the lack of previous research on Design for Change, there was a need to conduct an exploratory study to look in depth at the full experience of DFC. This broad approach to the study was chosen in order to avoid imposing expectations on the data and to provide a starting point for future research (Madison 2012).

Study Design

The entirety of the study was conducted in the home classroom of the students, a familiar, naturalistic setting. A naturalistic setting is a key part of ethnographic research, providing an environment for study that is as untouched by the researcher as possible and ensuring that the subject of study is observed within a setting normal to them (Given 2008). I collected data in multiple forms, via field notes, the collection of student artifacts, and student interviews. In order to collect the field notes, I attended the weekly hour-long meeting of Design for Change in the selected classroom and took notes while observing and participating in the class. Special attention was paid in the field notes to dialogue between students and teacher, student-to-student interaction, and the classroom environment. These notes were made more complete after each class ended. Some documents related to Design for Change like creative writing assignments, project rough drafts, and pictures of the classroom were collected as artifacts. I also conducted exit interviews with seven students in the class. The questions asked in the interview were intended to better capture the journey of the individual student and provide insight into their personal feelings and experiences. The students to be interviewed were selected via convenience sampling based on return of the proper informed consent to be interviewed.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

These data were then transcribed into NVivo qualitative analysis software and analyzed using an inductive coding scheme in order to avoid imposing expected outcomes on the data, instead allowing themes to arise from the data. The analysis was audited by an outside adviser after coding was complete to check for validity of coding.

This project was conducted with the approval of the ACU IRB and the Dallas ISD IRB. Each student and the parent or guardian of that student signed an informed consent form for participation in observation and interview research. Each consent form was made available in English and Spanish.

Participants

The participants of this study were the students of Ms. Raeburn's fourth-grade classroom from an elementary school in the Dallas Independent School District. These student participated in Design for Change for one hour each week. The DFC curriculum itself was delivered by outside volunteer teachers who had trained with DFC. The volunteer teachers I worked alongside also came from Abilene Christian University, providing the connection that allowed me access to the classroom on such a long-term basis. While I was not listed as a DFC teacher, the students tended to treat me as one, asking me questions and seeking my input on class activities. Ms. Raeburn served as an assistant to the volunteer teachers during the DFC time, encouraging students to participate and intervening in any behavior issues. The class was made up of 18 total students, 16 of whom were African American and 2 of whom where Hispanic. No other ethnicities are represented in this study. All students in the study received free and reduced lunch, a benefit available to families who make no more than roughly twice the

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

poverty line income threshold. This sample is representative of the surrounding community demographics both in terms of race and income.

School Setting

The school Ms. Raeburn's students attend is located in South Dallas. On the income map provided by city-data.com (2015), the school sits on a boundary between two measured sectors. On one side of the school, the median annual household income is \$19,474 and the percentage of residents below the poverty line is 36.7%. On the other side, the median annual household income is \$13,750 and the percentage of residents below the poverty line is 51.7%. The neighborhood is almost entirely African American and Hispanic. These statistics are reflective of a finding in a recent Pew study, which showed that Dallas is among the most racially and economically segregated cities in the nation (Hyun and Kent 2015).

Researcher Roles

When conducting a qualitative study, it is important to acknowledge and account for the influence of the researcher collecting the data (Given 2008). To lend validity to this sort of research, the investigator must take every measure possible to reduce their effect on the setting they are studying. I attempted to reduce my own impact on the results by carrying out the research in a naturalistic setting, collecting a variety of types of data, and seeking outside audit. However, I acknowledge that I myself served as the research instrument, and that the subjects of my research were students who became very dear to me over time. The ethnographic researcher, however, must affirm these emotional ties and unpack them as a part of the data, examining them rather than ignoring them (Given 2008). Therefore, I admit my positive bias toward the students from my

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

prolonged social contact with them, but I was careful to ground my conclusions in a thorough analysis of both my own assumptions and the data.

RESULTS

After the data was collected and analyzed, three key themes concerning the experience of the students who participated in DFC emerged. First, the students were able to express their perceptions of themselves and their community readily, revealing their “lifeworld” in the reflective space DFC created. Second, students took on the idea that “Anyone can change the world,” a slogan that became an anthem, a motivator, and a continual goal for the class. Finally, the students began to take charge of their DFC experience, showing self-direction, regulation, and command over skills and materials. I discuss each of these themes and the main ideas that make them up in turn.

Theme 1: The “Lifeworld” of a Design for Change Student

Design for Change begins with what is called the “feel” stage of the curriculum. The “feel” stage is exploratory and free form, encouraging students to explore their perceptions of themselves, the neighborhood, and the world through a variety of mediums. The central tool that the DFC teachers in Ms. Raeburn’s class used in this stage was a loosely structured poem, prompting students to reflect on the world as they experienced it and about themselves. These poems were built upon throughout the “feel” stage, made more robustly descriptive and specific over time. The students were enthusiastic about sharing their impression of their surroundings and themselves and did so in robust and creative ways. For example, Shona shared this poem with the class:

I am talented and gifted

I wonder what the world has brought to me

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

I hear birds singing

I want what is best for me

I am talented and gifted

I pretend to dance on a stage with my family watching me

I feel an ocean breeze

I touch the softest ocean wave

I worry that I will never see my cousin again

I cry because my family will drift apart

I am talented and gifted

I understand that I'm not always going to be right

I say that DFC is brilliant

I dream that I could change the world

I try to believe in myself

I hope to make the world a better place

I am talented and gifted

Poems like Shona's were collected and analyzed alongside other early observation based data, out of which arose two key themes. First, in their expressions of the world around them, the students articulated a keen awareness of the world as a difficult, at times cruel place where suffering is nearly constant reality. Second, in their reflections on themselves, the students expressed a hopeful, child-like outlook, even in the face of the aforementioned awareness of suffering.

These themes will be discussed in turn to help us understand the intricacies of the experience that students brought to DFC. Throughout, I will refer to the students'

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

“lifeworld” as a way to denote the totality of experience these expressions give insight into. The term “lifeworld” is drawn from the work of Husserl (1970) and refers to an individual’s social, cultural, and personal experiences that, taken collectively, make up the foundation for meaning and belief formation.

“The world is a hard place.” Ms. Nicole stood at the front of the room, every eye in the class studying her closely in silent contemplation. She had asked the class to guess about what her life was like based on what little they knew about her so far. It was an exercise intended to demonstrate to students the importance of acknowledging the depth of experience each person carries, a depth we cannot understand from appearance alone. Students spoke up with guesses about Ms. Nicole, benignly generalizing perceptions of what the life of a white female might be like. Then, the small voice of Destini joined in, “You had a fun childhood because you are from far away, and far away is more fun than right here.”

In that moment, Destini revealed what would become a consistent theme of the lifeworld of the students. The students demonstrated an intimate understanding of the presence of suffering in the world, both in general and specific terms. They could cite issues of pain and loss in their lives and in the lives of friends, as well as reflect broadly on ideas like death and sadness. One of the first exercises the class did in the “feel” stage was to write individual poems about their experience of the world. It is important to note that these poems preceded any collaboration among the class about shared experiences, and as such they represent individual, preexisting notions about the world. The following are lines from these poems that reflect broad themes of the student’s outlook on the world.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

I worry about homeles [sic] people

I understand that people have to die

I worry about sadness

I say that some people are bad

I cry because my family will drift apart

I worry about people who matter to me

I understand that people have to die

I cry at funerals [sic]

I worry about danger

Beyond these general expressions, students more specifically described their neighborhood as a place where suffering was especially concentrated. The students expressed more exact understanding of the types of problems in their immediate community, specifically naming issues in their poems such as the following:

I see a lot of bad things like drug dealing, fighting, and trash

I see branches that are falling in the street

I see houses that need work that look like they could fall down

I don't like that people rob fight and shoot

I see roads that need to be fixed and cars that need to be fixed

I see people having wrecks

I see a lot of homeless people

I don't feel good about this neighborhood

DFC intentionally asked for and created space for these somber expressions with the intention of helping students capture what about their neighborhood and community

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

was not right. After writing the poems, students shared them with one another and began to notice the concerns for the world and the neighborhood they had in common. This exercise was eventually built upon later in the DFC process when students were asked to begin to imagine solutions to these common concerns.

Childlike outlook. The second theme in the lifeworld of the students is best captured by my interview with Cameron. He told me he wanted to be a lawyer when he grew up and that as a lawyer, he planned to stop gun violence. When asked why he would be able to stop gun violence as a lawyer, he replied matter-of-factly, “I would be able to get the president’s phone number and try to call him and tell him about it, that happens in South Dallas.”

Cameron, like all of his classmates, possessed what some would call a naive outlook in the face of the previously discussed awareness of suffering. This naive approach to the problems of the world is of value to DFC though, since such hopeful imagination about what is possible was needed to later design solutions to the difficult problems the students had identified. For this reason, DFC encouraged hopeful, even wild or fanciful imaginings, and the students readily invented and shared.

The audaciously hopeful outlook of the students was several fold. First, the students overwhelmingly described themselves in positive terms. When asked to come up with two words to capture themselves as a part of their poem, students always chose positive traits:

I am bright and talented

I am a hard working person and a helpful person

I am special and funny

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

I am unique and creative

One only needs a bit of practical experience with young people or adults to know that this sort of idealized self-esteem deflates over time. The students' belief in their own positive attributes served as a foundation to their lifeworld, defining how they saw themselves in relation to the outside world.

The students also expressed a belief in goals and ideas that others would consider unreachable or impossible. They wanted to be doctors, lawyers, super heroes, or famous athletes when they grew up, and they pushed the limits of the possible with their imaginative tendencies. Especially telling lines from their poetry include the following:

I feel like ponies can talk

I understand animals

I see an imaginary friend [sic]

I see monsters in my closet

I touch the center [sic] of the earth

Students expressed hope and imagination in spades in the early stages of DFC, which starkly juxtaposed with the much darker images they painted about their surroundings. These two themes, “the world is a hard place” and “childlike outlook” should be taken together, though, as they eventually began to weave together as the class moved from the “feel” stage and into “imagine.” The “imagine” stage of Design for Change required students to draw critically on the hard parts of their lifeworld, confronting the most pressing issues head on. Then, they were asked to imagine solutions to these problems. In order to do so, they drew on their “childlike outlook,” presenting solutions that were deeply creative in nature. This was especially evident when the class

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

began to work on developing possible solutions to the problem they chose to do their main project over, the problem of kidnapping. The class shouted out ideas to stop the rampant kidnapping in the community while Mr. Thomas wrote on the whiteboard:

“Let’s put signs on the tree that say ‘please stop kidnapping!’”

“Put cameras on every house and if anyone gets kidnapped we can take the tape to the police.”

“We should paint a mural that says ‘We are watching.’ It would make things prettier too.”

“Just stop letting kids walk alone!”

“We can spy on people and hide places we think the kidnappers are.”

“Start a neighborhood watch.”

“In suspicious places we can see if people were hanging out in a building and it looked strange.”

“Do a skit in auditorium to present what we have learned to the whole school!”

The diversity of ideas and the at times comical lack of feasibility of some of the suggestions is an important point of convergence between the two themes in the lifeworld of the students, the difficult reality they experienced every day and the imaginative, hopeful outlook that is so universal of young people. While they certainly understood what was bad, they did not approach the world with a sense of total despair. On the contrary, they showed a vivid and hopeful imagination for what might be possible. They drew on personal or near personal experience with kidnapping in the neighborhood alongside their natural creativity in order to construct innovative solutions to a pressing problem.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

Theme 2: “Anyone Can Change the World”

As the Design for Change process moved from “feel” to “imagine,” curriculum began to focus on preparing students to develop solutions to the problems they had identified in their reflections on the world around them. As the students shared their reflections, they compiled the concerns they had in common into a list of problems they might solve. From this list, the class decided that they would like to work to design a solution to the problem of kidnapping. The DFC teachers facilitated this move from reflection to action first and foremost by communicating to students that their experiences of the neighborhood and the problems in it was valuable. The teachers also stressed that their young age would not limit what they could achieve and pointed to the creativity and passion the students had expressed as a crucial tool in the process of designing change. But what was the impact of such lessons on the students? The effect of DFC’s emphasis on legitimizing the preexisting knowledge and abilities of the students as useful to creating change can best be captured by a phrase Ms. Raeburn’s class coined, “Anyone can change the world.”

The phrase first came up when Javion called me over towards the end of class during one of the first weeks of school, “Miss, I made a theme song for our class!” He began a pencil-and-fist instrumentation on his desk and, after a few measures, sang,

“DFC,

Anyone can change the world,

Everybody loves

DFC”

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

He taught the class the rap over the next few days and before long, everyone could sing it together. The class eventually asked to recite it every day at the end of DFC, an anthem of their own. They also wanted a name to mark themselves. Shona suggested “Fourth Grade World Changers” and it more or less stuck, coming up occasionally when students were asked by outsiders about DFC.

“Anyone can change the world” served as a marker in name and song of what the class considered their fundamental ideals, namely the belief that their experience of the world could be leveraged in effective ways to bring change. Over time, “Anyone can change the world” became a statement full of complex meaning for the students who spoke it. There are three notable sub themes that make up the motto “Anyone can change the world.” First, the students believed that even kids can change the world, second, they saw the task of changing the world as a source of motivation, and third, they projected the idea of changing the world forward as a future way of life.

Changing the world as “just a kid.” Students placed special emphasis on the “anyone” aspect of the motto. They would often remind me that anyone, even kids like them, can change the world. This came up during my conversation with Maleah:

Researcher: What do you mean by “anyone can change the world?”

Maleah: Well... Me as a... For instance, me being a kid, people might say that I can't change the world because I'm too young, or I can't do this. But if you really just put your heart and all your effort into it, you, you don't know what can happen.

The idea of “being a kid” came up in several interviews, and when it did I would follow up with a question asking them to reflect on the fact that often, adults don't believe that

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

the world can change. It was a one sided question, limiting them to only exploring the potential negative effects of adulthood, but even so their responses serve as an interesting way to examine what might disallow someone from this “Anyone can change the world” mindset. I followed up on Meleah’s previous comment:

Researcher: Sometimes adults and people in general, but adults especially, think that they can’t change the world. They think that maybe there’s no hope for the world. Why do you think that is?

Maleah: Because maybe they think it’s nothing they can do about it, because, they just, they, it’s nothing they can do about it, because they don’t have a lot of power, or they don’t have any people that can back, well, any big people or stars that can back them up. But no, even if they did, it doesn’t matter how much power you have, it just matters what you’re tryna do.

The answer Maleah gives to my question shows that students had come to realize that what is needed to be a world changer is not what people typically assume, power and prestige and connections. A world changer, in the eyes of the students, is someone with audacious belief and big ideas, traits they had already shown they possessed. It is much easier to believe that “anyone” includes you when you know you already have what it takes to change the world. The emphasis that anyone, regardless of place or age, can change the world, was an important reflection of the ways that DFC legitimized the knowledge and traits that had been identified in the “feel” stage.

Changing the world as motivation. The phrase, “Anyone can change the world” was used as a motivator, both by teachers and students. It was the central goal of the DFC experience, the mission around which all else revolved. Once, when asked what the goal

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

of the class's project was, Javion misunderstood the specificity of the inquiry and replied, "To change the world, of course." To Javion and to the rest of the class, changing the world was the ultimate task at hand.

In another telling instance, two students began to bicker over sharing scissors. Ms. Nicole went over to them and knelt down on the floor, on eye level between the fighting parties. She asked them if they could change the world so long as they were busy fighting with one another. They cast their eyes to the floor and told her "No." With that, Ms. Nicole left them and they began to work quietly next to each other again. The goal of changing the world became so important to the students that it came to be used to motivate and justify behavior, or in some cases, behavior changes.

Changing the world as a way of life. Finally, "anyone can change the world" is understood by the students as a continual process, a way of life rather than a one time project. When asked if there were any other problems in the community they would like to solve, students would rattle off long lists and sometimes even include a proposal for how they might solve a given issue. Some students would even bring up other problems they wanted to fix unprompted, like Maleah did in our interview.

Maleah: Well, and... At home, I like to write down a list of things that's not right in our community like littering and shootings and bullying and all that stuff.

....

Researcher: Tell me a little more about that list that you keep at home...

Maleah: Well, I keep that list because I'm like... I would like to introduce them to my classmates or to people that have done the project with me so that once we have one thing off we can work on the other thing. Or once we have, a problem,

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

or more off, we can just keep goin' until... Well, I wouldn't say the perfect community, but till we have a community that's safe but not so bad.

Researcher: Yeah, very good. When did you start keeping this list?

Maleah: Started (pauses to think)... When y'all first came.

Researcher: So was it something that you learned from DFC that made you start keeping this list?

Maleah: Yes.

Researcher: What did you learn from DFC that made you start?

Maleah: That, I learned that anyone can change the world, no matter how old, how young, or who you are, you can change the world.

Maleah's statements show that DFC's central learning outcome, anyone can change the world, led students to not only believe in their capacity for change while in DFC but to begin to have an imagination for the ways that they might do even more. The ideas and experiences coming from DFC seemed, to the students, to extend beyond a one-time project and into a lifestyle, a future of creating change.

Theme 3: "Kids, Take Charge"

The third and final theme arising from Ms. Raeburn's DFC class reflects the ways that students began to take command of their DFC experience as they put their knowledge and skills to use under the guiding ideal that "Anyone can change the world." These practical manifestoes of the experience of DFC included three sub themes, the students transition from followers to leaders of the DFC classroom, the students beginning to take ownership through independent initiative, and the students working together as a team as they managed and created.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

The students of Ms. Raeburn's class decided to address the problem of kidnapping in their community by providing education to their school-mates about the issue. The class petitioned their principal for permission to hold an "Anti-Kidnapping Rally" and, with very little help from their teachers, developed a full program complete with several skits about stranger danger, statistics on kidnapping in Dallas, an original rap on the topic, and a dance choreographed by the students. On the day of the Anti-Kidnapping Rally, the entire school took a one hour break from class to file into the auditorium. Aside from the principal of the school welcoming the students, the event was entirely run by Ms. Raeburn's fourth graders. The class waited backstage with Mr. Thomas and Ms. Nicole, checking the call charts they had made on construction paper to see when their act was supposed to go on. Ms. Nicole and Mr. Thomas served as cheerleaders that day, helping calm some occasional stage fright and high fiving the students who came off the stage. They did not, however, run the show. That was the domain of the students alone. It is of profound importance that this was the case, both to the students of Ms. Raeburn's class and to every student in the audience who saw a full length informative production put on by their peers. It was tangible proof that "it's really true that anyone can change the world," the culmination of a process that, all along, was preparing the "fourth grade world changers" to take charge and lead the way in bringing change.

From follower to leader. The move towards student empowerment and independence can be seen throughout the DFC process. As the class moved from imaginative rendering of possible solutions to the actual process of preparing their Anti-Kidnapping Rally, the classroom took on an electric buzz of activity and intentionality.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

My research process was relegated to observation, as the students were simply too busy to be bothered by questioning and too deeply engaged in their work to think to call me over and show off as they once had. Ms. Nicole and Mr. Thomas had a similar experience. Once project work began, they became a resource for technical questions that would come up and little else. The rest of the time, they quietly supervised or helped wherever they might be requested. As Mr. Thomas put it to me, “We aren’t in charge anymore, they are leading us now.”

Owning the experience. The best way to describe this change in the students and the classroom dynamic is through comparison. When DFC first arrived, the students tended to ask for permission and guidance even on tasks that were intentionally unguided. When they were first asked to draw a picture describing themselves, Mr. Thomas and Ms. Nicole scurried around the room to respond to the raised hands of students asking “Is it okay if I draw this?” “Can I write this here?” One of the intentions of the design of the DFC curriculum is to foster independence and minimize structured requirements, but at first the students clearly deferred to their expectations about the rule-following requirements of school. As time wore on in DFC, leaning on teachers for support became less and less common. The DFC teachers were careful to affirm the independence and ability of the students, and the students began to respond to these expectations. This move towards independent initiative was expressed physically as well. Students began to more readily take physical control of their space, getting the materials they needed instead of waiting for a teacher to bring them, moving desks around to create a better work area for whatever aspect of the project they were working on that day.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

Teamwork. Teamwork was an important element to the independent leadership and self regulation of the class. When there was unguided class time, they would almost always break into groups. Within those groups, one student would lead focused debate about a decision at hand, like what kind of skit to include in the rally. Without teacher intervention, they would vote on ideas and ask opinions of dissenters. When a decision was reached, the leader would assign duties to each member of the team, making sure that everyone's gifts were made use of to their fullest. They also took initiative with each other. Once, Melodie asked two boys to sit further apart from one another because they were joking around and distracting one another. They nodded and deferred to her suggestion and work carried on.

In sum, the students who participated in Design for Change were given the opportunity to express their lifeworld and then, to act on the things they felt were not right about their world. They were motivated by the idea that "Anyone can change the world" and acted on this idea with creative energy, designing unique solutions. Throughout the process, the students began to take charge, demonstrating leadership and self-regulation.

DISCUSSION

To examine the implications of the journey of the students of Ms. Raeburn's class, I analyzed the themes present in the data through the theoretical perspective of Bourdieu. I found that the students were able to make use of capital that is not often legitimized in institutions like school. Students also developed a new outlook on their place in the world and their power to create change, indicating a shift in the habitus. Overall, the experience of DFC served as a sort of reversal of the norms and assumptions

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

that lead to symbolic violence, instead equipping students to subvert the expected and develop an outlook of personal empowerment and hope.

The Habitus Before DFC

The first major theme in the results of this study, the “lifeworld” of a DFC student, is indicative of the foundational ideas of the DFC experience. DFC created a safe space where, when prompted, students felt that they were able to share about their perceptions of the world and themselves. This most basic achievement is of profound foundational importance, anchoring the entire process. These reflections of the students about themselves and the world can be understood as a window into their *habitus*, the concept Bourdieu uses to describe the lens through which an individual interprets their social surroundings. As discussed in the results, one of the major elements of the worldview of these students was their intimate awareness of the presence of the poverty, depravity, and crime surrounding them. In their discussion of their immediate environment, their school and their neighborhood, the students often spoke as if such issues were routine and permanent, something to be accepted as a part of life. The students’ *habitus* has been shaped to fit their reality, and their perception of their world as a place where suffering is commonplace helped them make sense of their surroundings on a day to day basis. This is not to say that these students lived in constant despair or did not see the positive elements of their lifeworld. As we see in their “childlike outlook,” students approached the world with hopeful audacity and boundless imagination. This too played a key role in their *habitus*, lending them an optimistic outlook on the future, belief in the possibility of a different, better way forward.

Capital in DFC

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

Institutions like school rarely take into consideration these defining markers of a student's worldview. Knowing about problems in the community or having a gift for imaginative insight are both potentially useful types of capital, but they go unused in most school settings. Bourdieu points out that one's position in the social world is largely determined by the capital one has access to and how useful that capital is within a given social field. The capital of lower class children (like intimate knowledge of the problems in a community and imagination for what might be done to solve them) is often not seen as useful by the institutions that define our social world (like school), and this lack of recognition of capital lends to the reproduction of class based inequality over time.

DFC deviates from the norms of the field by legitimizing the capital arising from the lifeworld of the students. The students were asked to make use of preexisting knowledge and skills in their project work, drawing on their knowledge of the neighborhood to identify problems and their audacious creativity to imagine solutions. This served to legitimize the capital the students already possessed rather than ignore it, a crucial difference between DFC and traditional education models. Students were then able to apply this neighborhood knowledge and creative capacity in a physical project and experienced success at this task, further proving the usefulness of this sort of capital.

"Anyone Can Change the World" and the Habitus

By legitimizing the pre-existing knowledge and dispositions of the students as useful to bringing positive change, DFC opened the students to a new possibility, the idea that any of them already had the power work to make a difference. This idea was communicated to Ms. Raeburn's class by the DFC teachers and was eventually was taken up by the students as the motto "Anyone can change the world." The development of this

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

motto indicates that the students had internalized the message and mindset of DFC, coming to see their own experiences and abilities as useful and of value in the world.

Along with this new mindset and motto came important changes in language and behavior. These changes show that the saying had become more than an anthem.

“Anyone can change the world” had become a new element in the habitus of the students, a new lens through which to interpret their place in the world.

Students demonstrated this change in outlook through their emphasis on the fact that “anyone,” even kids, can change the world, showing that they had come to see their place in the world as one of potential affect. The students were also motivated by the idea of working towards changing the world and were inspired by the possibility of change not only in the short term, but as a way of life, something they could build on for years to come. This active, long term approach to the work shows that much more than superficial understanding had been achieved. Rather, students were beginning to interpret both their present and future actions and their potential to be an active participant in the world through the lens of the possibility DFC conferred.

Acting Like a World Changer

The effects of the legitimization of their lifeworld and the shift in habitus that came with the motto “Anyone can change the world” manifest practically in the ways the students began to take charge of their DFC experience. Students developed confidence and self-regulation in the classroom and led the way on every major section of the Anti-Kidnapping Rally they held. It is important to note that these sorts of outcomes were never explicitly taught in the DFC curriculum. Rather, it seems that these outcomes reflect the effects DFC. When considered through the lens of Bourdieu, it seems natural

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

that an increase in confidence and agency would follow legitimization of capital and a shift in habitus towards hope for change. The students who participated in DFC had come to see their location and their age not as detriments to this process, but as resources to be leveraged for good. They thought of themselves as world changers, able to act in powerful ways. These ideas naturally lend to confidence, leadership, and hard work towards a common goal.

As was discussed in the literature review, Bourdieu stresses the importance of challenging the structures that determine the rules of the field or the usefulness of capital in fighting back against symbolic violence. While it cannot be said that the students of Ms. Raeburn's class could articulate something like the arbitrary nature of the rules of a field, they had experienced a process in which they defied these rules, confronting an issue that many well-resourced adults find too daunting. They had come to understand the value of their unique forms of capital and knew that their work defied expectations. Most importantly of all, the student who participated in Design for Change displayed a shift in language and behavior concerning their place in the world, coming to see themselves as agents of change in the face of a world that told them they were "just kids." Design for Change, therefore, can be understood as *experientially* (rather than theoretically) subversive to the forces that maintain the status quo, bring about symbolic violence, and perpetuate inequality.

CONCLUSION

DFC serves as a micro world for the students who participate in it, a place where they are able to make use of the capital that their background has conferred to them. They are empowered within this world, coming to see themselves as world changers. Their

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

projects are small and likely have only minimal impact on massive social problems like kidnapping, but the real power of DFC lies in the students taking hold of their own ability to work for a better way forward and casting a vision for how they may do so for the rest of their lives. DFC is not, however, the whole world, and as such it is impossible to say how the experience of DFC will affect these students in the long run. In reality, most of the institutions of our social world do not legitimize the capital that DFC does, do not provide a framework for interpreting the world in terms of hope for change. Can we possibly anticipate that the lessons of empowerment and change delivered over eight months will overcome an entire world to the contrary? Bourdieu would likely say “Probably not,” but I believe that when it comes to improving education and outcomes for under-served students in our society, we should take the risk of optimism when possible. We must at least be cautiously hopeful that DFC will remain in the minds of the students of Ms. Raeburn’s class as a possible world, one they could in fact create. We must hope that they have seen an alternate way of thinking about themselves and the world around them, and that they will be able to draw on this perspective even in the face of oppressive structures. We must hope for the resilience of the lessons of DFC.

It may not be true, though. The students I came to so adore in my eight months with them are not yet ten. Their fight to a better future will be long and trying. The odds of the sociologist are not in their favor. Furthermore, this is but one snapshot of DFC, a small sample that simply cannot capture the impact of the program in any sort of broad manner. Much more work would need to be done to understand the long-term impact of DFC or to understand its application to larger groups of students. Still, this work is not futile. We must tell these stories, stories of hope out of despair, so that we who are

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

privileged enough to read long academic papers may put pen to paper and hands to work to create more such stories. We must join with educators and policy makers and neighbors to build schools where all children can thrive. We must take what we know and join that long, storied, relentless march towards justice.

Most of all, we must teach others and teach ourselves the anthem of the fourth grader world changers— “It really is true that anyone can change the world.”

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

References

- Appelrouth, Scott, and Laura D. Edles. 2012. *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory: Text and Readings*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles, CA: Pine Forge.
- Bourdieu, P. 2007. "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 83-95 in *Sociology of Education: A Critical Reader*, edited by A. Sadnovik. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Translated by G. Raymond and M. Adamson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- City-Data.com. 2015. "Dallas, TX Income Map, Earnings Map, and Wages Data." Retrieved January 3, 2017 (www.city-data.com/income/income-Dallad-Texas.html)
- Design for Change. N.d. "DFC Research." Retrieved August 22, 2016 (<http://www.dfeworld.com/research.html>)
- Emirbayer, Mustafa, and Victoria Johnson. (2008). "Bourdieu and Organizational Analysis." *Theory and Society* 37(1):1-44.
- Fairbanks, Colleen M., and Mary Ariail. (2006). "The Role of Social and Cultural Resources in Literacy and Schooling: Three Contrasting Cases." *Research in the Teaching of English* 40(3):310–354.
- Given, L. M. 2008. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Grenfell, M. 2004. *Pierre Bourdieu, Agent Provocateur*. London, England: Continuum.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DESIGN FOR CHANGE

Huddleston, A. 2012. Understanding Responses to High School Exit Exams in Literacy:

A Bourdieusian Analysis of Poetic Transcriptions. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 23(51):734-744.

Husserl, E. 1970. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology:*

An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Huynh, Timmy, and Lauren Kent. 2015. "In Greater Dallas Area, Segregation by Income

and Race." *Pew Research Center*, June 29. Retrieved Jan 10, 2017

(<https://pewrsr.ch/1QZQdae>).

Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley,

CA: University of California Press.

Madison, D. Soyini. 2012. *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance*.

Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Sethi, Kiran. 2009. "Kiran Sethi: Kids, Take Charge." TED Talks website. Retrieved

September 15, 2016

([https://www.ted.com/talks/kiran bir sethi teaches kids to take charge](https://www.ted.com/talks/kiran_bir_sethi_teaches_kids_to_take_charge)).