Transforming the Power of Education for Young Minority Women: Narrations, Metareflection, and Societal Change

Michalis Kontopodis

Abstract This article elaborates on different modes of reflecting and on the significance of these differences for educational and educational-psychological practice. It contrasts exemplary materials from two research projects at schools where students share experiences of social exclusion, poor performance in mainstream educational settings, economic challenges, and family-related problems. These materials stem from my own ethnographic research that took place at an experimental vocational school in Germany in 2004 and 2005, and an a posteriori analysis of a school project that took place at the Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California from 1994 to 1998. Echoing Foucault as well as Vygotsky, the article demonstrates how diaries and narrations by young women written in different educational contexts promoted different forms of communication between teachers and students as well as qualitatively distinct modes of reflection. The analysis advances received scholarship by differentiating between introspection about oneself and reflection on the societal relations within which one is positioned. The focus on marginalized populations strengthens the argument by virtue of addressing challenging cases where this second kind of reflection is even more critical to one’s development. [critical reflection, mediation, experimental school, Foucault, societal change, technologies of the self, Vygotsky, young women]

First Act: Creating Means of Reflection At School

Teacher: I have just been thinking, whether for the end of this independent project we could find some way for them to express themselves about their individual process (of learning/development) in a written form (.2) Honestly, this probably can’t

Author: Mm

T: just happen on its own. […] (so that they) reflect on (.1) this process for themselves a little bit, I think, they might need some questions (.1) as guideline. Well, I mean, not everybody can just start (saying): “This was good, and my problem is always that and so on.” Of course, that would be fantastic, but, I think it this is uh it would be asking too much.

A: Mm

T: (.1) So (.1) once again, a guideline: to look at it once more and […] well, just to shed light on this process.

A: (.1) Mm

T: (.1) And I would like to (.1) do it in writing […] [Translation by author from German]¹

The excerpt above stems from a scheduled discussion that took place for purposes of coordination among the teacher (T), me (A), and another teacher who worked closely with a class of about 20 students for a year at the School for Individual Learning in Practice (pseudonym) in a big German city. We are discussing mediating tools meant to help students perceive the “process” of their individual development during a 15-day-long individual
learning project. This extract reveals that the teacher T would like to ask the students questions to make them reflect on their own development process. He emphasizes the importance of doing this in a written form and refers to it as giving the students a kind of direction.

The practice of reflecting on one’s school performance and development in general by using graphics, narrations, and other mediating tools is part of the everyday life of the School for Individual Learning in Practice (pseudonym). Most of the materials presented in this article come from my yearlong ethnographic field research in this school that I will analytically present in what follows.

For now I would like to return to the extract presented above. The writing to which the teacher refers should provide an overview of various student’s actions and student and teacher interactions that take place during a two-week educational project. Not the teacher but the student would provide this overview; the student is expected to engage and produce it as well as to reflect on him- or herself.

As I demonstrate below, it is necessary to move from Vygotsky—the well-known Soviet psychologist of the early 20th century—to Foucault and back to understand how mediation in this concrete case enables particular processes of reflection and ways of relating to oneself and to others, while at the same time rendering other processes impossible. The mediation that the teacher wants to create enables not only thinking and communication but also implies a particular form of selfhood on which one can reflect. The student is expected to actively engage in the control of him or herself through the process of self-understanding.

**Second Act: Las Meninas by Velázquez**

In the famous opening of his book *The Order of Things*, Foucault analyzes the painting *Las Meninas* by Velázquez. The painting presented the painter himself painting King Philip IV and his wife, Mariana, who were serving as models but are not directly visible in the painting—viewers can only see their reflections in a mirror. In this painting, Velázquez is being watched by Infanta Margarita and a group of maids and other people who have come to observe him as he paints. Foucault claims that what we find in this painting is not a representation of a person resembled but a representation of representation.

> Representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being.  
> [Foucault 2002:17]

According to Foucault, representation offers itself here in its purest form.

In bringing together Foucault and Vygotsky one could argue that a painting such as the Meninas by Velázquez mediates the communication between painter and audience and at
the same time mediates the inner speech of the painter as well as that of the spectator. The painting enables reflection by the viewing subjects about the represented theme or object in several modes (Fichtner 2005). The same can be said for many applications of semiotic tools or means of communication including narratives, films, and artworks.²

Such means are often used in school settings as also indicated in the first act presented above. Scholars using sociocultural and cultural-historical approaches to teaching, learning, and development have thoroughly studied how semiotic tools (such as a narrative or a painting) simultaneously mediate communication between teachers and students, adults and children, and one’s “inner speech” to oneself, as well as shaping thinking and imagination (Dafermos 2002; Daniels et al. 2007; Fichtner 1996; Keiler 2002).

This kind of research is based on Vygotsky’s semiotic approach that conceptualized thinking as mediated by the signs used in one particular historical era and sociocultural setting (Vygotsky 1987, 1997b, 2004). What is unique in this painting by Velázquez is that it does not only enable reflection in general but also enables reflection on the conditions of artistic work: social encompassment and power relations. The painting further enables reflection on the conditions of reflection and on its qualities.

Advancing Vygotsky’s understanding by referring to Foucault one could say that this is a different type of reflection than the introspection about oneself that dominates current psychological and counseling (and school-psychological) practices. Introspecting about oneself can be traced back to Christian confession as analyzed in Foucault’s work about the “techniques” or “technologies of the self” (Foucault et al. 2005; Foucault et al. 1988; cf. Kontopodis and Niewöhner 2010).

According to Foucault, the type of metareflection enabled by Velázquez’s painting is indicative of a movement in the margins of Western thought at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th, when “resemblance was about to relinquish its relation with knowledge and disappear in part at least, from the sphere of cognition” (Foucault 2002:19). From this time onward, signs were no longer perceived as resembling the objectively existing truth somewhere “out-there,” but recognized only to account for the truth of the semiotic relations at stake. In this context both the “self” and the “external reality” are no longer seen as such but in relation to an observer as well as in relation to the form and the means of the practice of observing or representing.

It is in this tradition that the concept of “discourse” comes to significance in Foucault’s work. His critical analysis of technologies of the self, power relations, psychological and other discourses, and practices of representation and disciplining takes shape within this semiotic understanding of representation (Foucault 1982; Rose 1990).
Third Act: Talking about Today

Foucault’s work takes on importance when studying Western education today. In most Western developed countries adult life is increasingly organized on the basis of short-term work contracts and reduced social security funds. Producing efficient job seekers and employees has become a primary aim of many educational programs (Rose 1999; see also Urciuoli 2008). It is not going too far to note that students’ development is increasingly conceived in terms of vocational education, professional orientation, and development of self-control, self-responsibility, and job-finding skills. In this context students often engage in guided practices of reflection and introspection about themselves, their past performances, and their future careers. Furthermore, schools are interconnected with the job market as well as with institutions that provide psychological services.

This situation is increasingly problematic for students who share experiences of marginalization. Instead of reflecting on the conditions of reflection as in Velázquez’s painting, such students are often only encouraged to introspect about themselves and personalize broader social problems such as marginalization or increased levels of unemployment. They frequently regard these social issues in terms of their own failures and do not reflect on the process, reasons, and consequences of this personalization of broader problems. They thus tend to seek personalized solutions to those problems by increasing their own efforts to be productive, flexible, and disciplined. They do not critically reflect on and deal with key conflicts in their social situation. They also do not feel empowered to challenge the conditions of their education (Papadopoulos 2005; Rose 1999). This becomes of magnified concern when students sharing experiences of marginality, poor performance in school, economic hardship, and family-related difficulties are subjected to today’s neoliberal educational reforms (Macrine 2009; Papadopoulos 2003).

In the following I will clarify and explain this theoretical and political position and look for radical alternatives to this phenomenon. I will refer to some empirical cases and examples. Drawing mainly on the analysis of written documents produced in two different school contexts, I will deconstruct modern practices of “re-presentation” and suggest a critical understanding of reflection. This article experiments with writing: it unfolds as a theater play. I present eight acts and two interludes. The play is however not written to an end and the next and closing acts remain unknown. The article takes under consideration recent problems and challenges faced by ethnic and class minorities in educational settings in Germany and elsewhere in the developed world (Benites and Fichtner 2007; Kontopodis 2009a; Mørck this issue).

In this context I aim to challenge standard practice at an experimental school in Germany regarding a particular form of narrative reports as a key component of educational advancement. I also offer a comparison with other modes of reflective work developed in a particularly innovative classroom in a public school setting in Long Beach California. I try thus to provide possible answers to the political question of how reflection can be conceptualized and encouraged so that freedom, imagination, and movement are generated at schools.
To accomplish this I contrast narratives of three young women who share problematic educational biographies as well as common characteristics of social marginality, gender-based discrimination, economic hardship, and family related problems as they use narration as a meditating tool in their educational settings. I also examine and contrast the broader contexts of those young women’s narratives. The narratives concern the young women’s present and future situations.

The research materials of the first and second cases stem from longitudinal ethnographic field-work that I conducted in Germany as described below. The third case presented in this article refers to an older broadly known and well-documented school project, which took place in California. Although I did not have the chance to observe this case ethnographically, I found it inspiring in many regards for the analysis of the research data from the German school. The focus of my comparison of these two school activities is on subjects who have been discriminated against or are positioned as peripheral in their settings, an interest shared by Mörck in this dialogue as she explores critical educational and youth research (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Ivinson and Murphy 2007; Mörck this issue; Walkerdine et al. 2001).

I will concentrate only on female students of the investigated schools with a focus on how ethnicity, gender, and social class interrelate (Linstead and Pullen 2006; Walkerdine 1990, 1997). I bring the cases of three young women from the two settings described to a general theoretical argument. Although the problem I would like to study is broad, affecting most students of majority and minority backgrounds, my focus will be on challenging situations. One could say that in these situations marginalization complicates education and that—at least to some extent—critical reflection is even more needed than in more mainstream cases. The narratives of the women on whom this article focuses can be seen as typical, in the sense that they are similar to many other marginalized students’ narratives from my research materials. I argue that these materials are “parts of the whole” reflecting more general trends and phenomena I observed in the field or understand from reviewing case study materials. For this reason they may be used as exemplary in the context of a more general analysis (cf. Vygotsky 1997a). This case study methodology is also followed in the other articles of this dialogue (Kousholt this issue; Mörck this issue).

Fourth Act: Narrating about Everyday Life at the School for Individual Learning in Practice

On the third day I actually did nothing special. As always, I was there at 9:45. I immediately folded the towels, then I... The first customer came at ten o’clock—he had a dog with him that barked and got on our nerves the whole time. In the meantime I took off the curlers (off the doll head), that I’d put on yesterday: it looked really good. In short, I was proud of myself, the curls looked really great and well done, right to the roots. Mike (pseudonym) said so too!... With the haircut it didn’t work so well, but fortunately a customer came, and Anna (pseudonym) was doing the same for her. I observed attentively from the beginning till the end. And on Wednesday I am going to try this again. [translation by author from German]
The narrator is Samira (pseudonym), a female working-class student of Turkish ethnicity and German nationality. She had not had a successful school career, and this was the reason she was a student of the School for Individual Learning in Practice. In comparison, however, to many other students of the School for Individual Learning in Practice, her school performance at this school had been high for the past year. She was rarely absent and overall “self-responsible” in the way teachers expected a student to be. Like many other female students of the School for Individual Learning in Practice, Samira was doing an internship at a hairdresser’s. During her time at school, in the context of the German-language class she was expected to write daily or weekly reports for her supervising teacher on her activities carried out at the internship. The purpose of this activity, was at the same time practicing in writing in German as well as reflecting about one’s internship and professional interests and orientation.

Samira documents in the above narration, in writing, the tasks in which she was engaged as well as their evaluation by adults working at a hairdresser’s, the place of her “Learning in Practice” project. It is the third day of Samira’s internship; the narration starts at 9:45 A.M., then moves to 10:00 A.M., and so on. Throughout the report, everyday life events are objectified as they are articulated through sentences written in German in the past tense and put in a sequence to produce continuity. A connection to future events is also made: “And on Wednesday, I am going to try this again.” Her narration resembles a confession and aims to objectively represent what happened.

What is disclosed here is that Samira (re-)views what happens “out-there” in the context of a concrete situation. She is sitting at her desk in the classroom (in-here) and under the guidelines of the supervisor teacher translates a multiplicity of events that have taken place during her internship (out-there) into a meaningful whole that is temporally ordered. Information is not just transported but is condensed, generalized, individualized, and modified so as to be used in further settings for different purposes. An important element of this translation from events to written language is the fact that action is individualized and the writing subject is put at the center of the narration. Another important element of the conversion into language is the enacted temporal order that makes what has happened during Samira’s internship meaningful to her and to the teacher who is going to read her report and evaluate her later on.

The enacted temporal order not only considers the past but also considers the future. The events and ongoing actions that have taken place during Samira’s internship are meaningful in regard to a future state that she should achieve, the state of being rational (Wulf 2002), of being adult (Holzkamp 1997), of being a worker or, rather, a job seeker (Rose 1999). Her narrative report is supposed to support her own self-reflection about her past as well as support her in developing an orientation for the future. This is clearly revealed in further research materials about Samira as well as in another report, apologetic in tone, that recounts the failure of another student in her vocational education at a hairdresser’s. This report, entitled “My Last Day at the Hairdresser Salon, . . .” was written by Huriet (pseudonym), another female student of Turkish ethnicity.
I decided not to continue my internship at the hairdresser's [name]. There were very many reasons why I wanted to change my internship: e.g., because it is located too far away—I wanted a site of internship that is close to where I live. (Another reason was that) it was not for me, the hairdresser's simply was not my world. I had the impression that I was like a cleaner. They gave me only cleaning tasks. . . . I am now completing my internship in the cafeteria and it is a lot of fun. I hope that I can also orient myself for my future. [Translation by author from German]

Huriet here narrates an unsuccessful internship at a hairdresser's that she broke off. Given the fact that the internship at a hairdresser's has been unsuccessful, the student informs the supervising teacher about the present situation in a second internship and expresses her concern about her future professional orientation. The student uses informal language (“was not my world,” “a lot of fun”) and tries to apologize to the teacher to whom the report is directed. Reading the report, we cannot know what (has) happened exactly, but only what the student is writing to the teacher. What is hereby forgotten is the richness and probably the ambiguity of the student’s ongoing and dispersed experiences (Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006) that many times—as manifested in my field notes—were related to exclusion, lack of respect, and other negative experiences often complained about by marginalized young subjects (cf. Hansen and Jarvis 2000).

The report answers implicit questions such as: “Where do events and actions lead?” “Is the internship successfully leading to what is predefined as a successful end?” The reports were written in a form resembling a personal diary but are addressed to the teacher to fulfill institutional norms. In this sense the report brought together self-reflection and school discourse (Fairclough 1992), autobiographical memory (Brockmeier 1999), and institutional or organizational memory (Middleton and Edwards 1990). The state of being a worker is here the implied successful future that is at stake and to which the different events, experiences, and actions should lead.

The reports presented above go together with a series of other mediating devices such as files, registers of absences, CVs, and certificates. The enacted temporal order is not only narrative and semiotic but also material; it is materialized in the written report that is saved in the student’s personal file so as to be circulated in various settings and taken into consideration in future activities such as counseling and evaluation (cf. Kontopodis 2007).

The only history enacted in the narratives presented above and in most of the narratives produced and circulated at the School for Individual Learning in Practice is that of “success” or “failure” of concrete individuals. There is no space in such forms for the enactment of collective memories of exclusion, gender-based discrimination, or racial segregation. There is no place for reflection on the societal conditions of life in these narrative reports nor space to reflect on one’s position as constructed by these conditions.
Sixth Act: “I Also Want to Have a Career—A Successful Professional Life . . .”

I: And how do you experience success or why is success important to you?
S: I just don’t want my life to become boring.
I: Mm
S: Well, I don’t know, what am I supposed to say, erm(.) I just don’t want to sit at home and become a housewife, like other Turks, I also want to have a career—a successful professional life, and although hairdresser is not always such a successful occupation, but, if one really manages it then one can become a really good hairdresser, and receive awards or the title of “master,” I don’t know. [Translation by author from German]

Samira and Huriet saw mainly two alternatives regarding their future: either to marry and become housewives, possibly maintaining a low-paid, part-time job or to accomplish professional training as hairdressers or other similar occupations to later be able to work and become financially independent. They were in a way “captured” in this “either–or” discourse but were not able to reflect about its conditions of possibility in a radical–critical way (Fairclough 1992; Freire 1973).

To concentrate on the case of Samira—according to her own reflections on her life she should have made a decision between two choices, either being a housewife or a hairdresser—but nothing beyond this. Samira participates in conflictual practices of different social spaces (family–Turkish community and school; cf. the case analyzed in Kousholt this issue). As she explained to me during the above-presented interview, she saw her emancipation as a Turkish woman in her professional career as a hairdresser. She is somewhat equivocal about this career. However given the way the German system of postsecondary and higher education is organized she did not have any radically better choice. She could choose another similar profession but nothing that would be related to higher technical or university education. If all would go well, on finishing school, she, as all other students of this school, would have a certificate of the lowest level of nonspecialized education and be 18 years old.

Even if Samira would like to devote a few years of her adult life and pursue higher secondary and then university education, this would be legally impossible because her school certificate does not entitle her to do this (see above and N. 5). However one could argue that this “either housewife or hairdresser” dilemma belonged to a dominant discourse of the school that excluded radically different possibilities—for example, those of political activism and radical societal change and transformation.

Interlude I: A Distanced View (Metaperspective)

Referring to the context or the situatedness of these narratives one should say here that about 15 years ago, the teachers of what later became the School for Individual Learning in Practice were politically active in promoting a new learning method and school model for all the students of Germany that entailed broader sociopolitical aspirations. The School for Individual Learning in Practice in Germany, however, after a long bureaucratic process was
turned into an experimental school for students excluded for various reasons from mainstream educational venues. The teachers were confronted with a huge bureaucracy and legal limitations. In the end a school was established that fulfilled the wishes of the municipal educational administration—an option very different than what was initially imagined to be a step in the transformation of German education more generally. This has also been the fate of numerous other progressive or radical local educational initiatives in Germany.

As seen from my perspective, this situation manifests the reluctance of political and educational authorities to allow new learning methods and educational models to be developed and reflects also a broader educational and societal crisis in Germany (Nolan 2001) and the entire developed world, a crisis manifested by increased failure rates, low social mobility, the failed integration of generations of migrant populations and, last but not least, by school shootings (Pourkos 2006).

The question that poses itself here is what could be the alternatives to this situation. Seeking for alternatives, I will consider the following case of another young woman who was expected by her family to become a housewife and by her teachers to enter the job market. The setting for this student is that of the Freedom Writers’ project in Long Beach California, a project that enacted radical visions of future societal change and transformation.

**Seventh Act: Growing up Chicana**

Growing up, I always assumed I would either drop out of school or get pregnant. So when Ms. G. started talking about college, it was like a foreign language to me. Didn’t she realize that girls like me don’t go to college? Except for Ms. G., I don’t know a single female who’s graduated from high school, let alone gone to college. . . . I always thought that the only people who went to college were rich white people. . . . After all, I live in the ghetto and my skin is brown. But Ms. G. kept drilling into my head that it didn’t matter where I came from or the color of my skin. She even gave me a book called *Growing up Chicano* [Growing up Chicana/-o, Lopez 1995] about people who look like me, but made it out of the ghetto. In class today she made us do a speech about our future goals. I guess some of her madness was rubbing off on me because I found myself thinking about becoming a teacher. I began to think that I could teach young girls like me that they too could “be somebody.” [Gruwell 1999:202–204]

Students in both projects presented here, the Freedom Writer’s and the School for Individual Learning in Practice engaged in describing their everyday life in writing—in both cases during the English or German language lesson. Significant differences can however be observed in these practices of writing and reflection as well as in the contents of the students’ narrations.

An anonymous female Freedom Writer of Chicana background wrote the extract presented above. According to her autobiographical account, from the perspective of the dominant society and because of her ethnicity she was expected to either drop out of school or get pregnant (cf. Garcia-Reid 2007). However, instead of accepting this “future” as self-evident,
she views her own potential from a metaperspective considering how this future may be fabricated. As in most diary extracts created at the Woodrow Wilson High School, and in contrast to the daily reports written by the students at the School for Individual Learning in Practice, the anonymous writer does not try to produce an “objective” account about what has happened somewhere “out-there” but instead articulates societal conditions and the potential to transcend them.

The narration here resembles the painting of Velázquez referred to in the introduction. The anonymous writer presents in a poetic way the relations in which her representation is constructed by a mainstream and historically dominant position and views this from a metaperspective. She is not limited to reporting on specific conditions of school performance and professional orientation as in the narratives of Samira and Huriet. She reflects on the conditions of discourse production and representations of herself. It is thus possible to view reality from the standpoint of the new (Fichtner 2005, 2007) and to imagine alternative futures that would not only concern the student’s individual development but also broader societal transformations.

Rather than revealing demoralizing effects of experiences of marginalization that can result in limited expectations, the anonymous Freedom Writer uses her narrative space to critique an oppressive setting and to rewrite her own future including higher education and her goal of helping to “build the human nation”:

> For the first time, I realized that what people say about living in the ghetto and having brown skin doesn’t have to apply to me. So when I got home, I wrote this poem: *They Say, I Say: They say I am brown/I say I am proud/They say I only know how to cook/I say I know how to write a book/So don’t judge me by the way I look/They say I am brown/I say I am proud/They say I’m not the future of this nation/I say/Stop giving me discrimination/Instead/I’m gonna use my education/to help build the human nation*. I can’t wait to read it to the class tomorrow. [Gruwell 1999:202–204 — continued from previous extract]

The question that arises here is that of the specifics of the broader setting of this narrative production.

**Eighth Act: “What’s the Holocaust?”**

Nobody could foresee what would happen in Gruwell’s class when a few months into the school year, one of her students passed a note depicting an African American classmate with extremely large lips. The teacher Gruwell got hold of the paper and became furious, telling her students the thick-lipped cartoon was like the propaganda the Nazis used during the Holocaust. A student then asked her, “What’s the Holocaust?” In that instant, a radically innovative educational practice began that is very difficult to adequately present in a few lines. As Gruwell recalls, “I immediately decided to throw out my meticulously planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum” (Gruwell 1999:3).
Gruwell took the students to see *Schindler’s List*, a U.S. film drama from 1993 directed by Steven Spielberg (1993) and based on the historical novel *Schindler’s Ark* by Thomas Keneally (1982). The film is about Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who saved the lives of more than a thousand Polish Jewish refugees during the Holocaust by employing them in his factories. Gruwell also invited elderly survivors of the Holocaust as guest speakers to her class. She then had the students read books written by and about other young people in times of war, such as Anna Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* (Frank 1995; cf. Lee 2006), Zlata Filipović and Christina Pribichevich-Zorić’s *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo* (1994), and Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (2006).

Like Anne Frank, Zlata, when she was only 11 years old spent her days cooped up in a room (of an apartment), often never seeing daylight and lived through constant bombings—not to mention severe food and water shortages. “My students saw that these other kids, living in real wars, had picked up pens, chronicled their pain, and made their story immortal,” Gruwell comments (Anonymous 2002). Later on, at her initiative, students began to write diaries about their everyday lives, following the examples of these other young people. I never observed such close work on history and literature in the School for Individual Learning in Practice.

**Interlude II: A Distanced View (Metaperspective)**

The Freedom Writer’s project emerged in a situation of institutional deficits and educational inadequacies as well as broader societal problems in Long Beach, California (cf. Houck et al. 2004) during a time of interracial and interethnic conflict there (Davis 1990, 1998; see also Appendix). The development of this project as a whole as well as of the relations between the students and the teachers was unpredictable.

One could say that the development of the Freedom Writers was unpredictable as well as “dramatic” in the sense of Vygotsky. Inspired by theater, Vygotsky introduced this term in psychology to conceptualize both individual and societal development as the dynamic and affectively intensive process of collision of different tendencies (e.g., of old and new meanings, of contradictory motives or values) that causes changes at the same time on psychological and social levels that cannot be predicted at the beginning of this process (Vygotsky 1971, 1999, 2005, cf. Magiolino 2010; Veresov 1999).

Following Stephenson and Papadopoulos, we could define what happened in the Freedom Writer’s project as “outside politics”—“contingent, unpredictable, and unintentional.” This perspective deals

with unrealized trajectories, possibilities which do not yet exist (not even in the symbolic, nor the imagination), potentials which may never manifest [themselves]. [Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006:205].
Also a significant difference from the School for Individual Learning in Practice and of particular importance for the Freedom Writer's diaries, such as the one presented above, was that each student's diary was anonymous. It was not addressed toward a teacher who embodied institutional control but toward potential readers (the other students and the teacher) who might have shared similar experiences or faced similar problems. A box at the back of the classroom where students could anonymously place their diaries was an important material-semiotic ordering that added a new element to the history of diaries as meditational tools (Roth 2007, cf. Kontopodis and Newnham this issue).5

The process supported students not only in expressing themselves but also in moving beyond their identities and understanding how their everyday experiences were similar to those of students from different racial groups or from different social strata. Individuals or groups of youths were not conceived only in terms of their ethnic identity but also in terms of shared experiences of social exclusion, economic and family-related problems, ages, and low-educational levels. It was thus revealed that a series of everyday problems were not private, but public and related to citizenship.

Students realized that these latter shared societal experiences were what made them vulnerable more than any particular ethnic identity. The two contrasted school projects not only reveal different practices but also different communities of practice (see Mørck this issue). A series of associated activities of the Freedom Writers, such as circulating and reading books, watching films, or looking at pieces of art were further practices that supported this kind of social reflectivity and solidarity (cf. van Oers 2007).

Writing an anonymous diary was a kind of emancipatory memory work that regarded individual experience(s) from a collective perspective and opened space to speak about power relations (cf. Haug 1987, 1992; Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006). Students here were not seen from the point of view of their past leading linearly to the future, but the opposite: they perceived themselves from a future point of view as witnesses of the racial–ethnic war around them as well as of a series of other forms of repression.

One could say here that witnessing took place from an imagined or virtual future point of view (Kontopodis 2009b). Doing this, the students did not reflect about their performance or their individual development and professional orientation in the closed way the students of the School for Individual Learning in Practice did, but they were given open space to reflect about their relations to the other students and, broadly speaking, about the history of these relations (cf. Roth et al. 2004).

The holocaust, the history of racism and the resistance to it were enacted anew as seen in relation to those concrete students' presents and futures. Individual history and future development, on the one hand, and societal history and future societal development, on the other hand, merged into each other and lead to radically new realities. The relation between one's past and one's future was radically redefined: not as individual development but as the
societal development of new relations among different subjectivities (Daniels 2001; Lave and Wenger 1991).

**The Next Act?**

As seen from the perspective of Vygotsky, human subjectivity and societal relations are not given; they can be endlessly transformed in dramatic and unpredictable ways. The same is true when referring to human history as a whole (Vygotsky 1987, 1999, 2002; cf. Kontopodis and Newnham this issue; Stetsenko 2008). It is exactly the metareflective human subjectivity outlined above that always already views itself from a relational meta-perspective thus continuously opening ways for new and further individual–societal developments.

In this sense one could suggest that Vygosky and Foucault echo each other and that both these approaches can be combined in creating critical and innovative educational-psycho-logical interventions—the next acts to the “drama” introduced with this article. The differentiation between distinct modes of reflection as presented above implies the Foucauldian way of thinking about subjectivity and power from his early works such as the *Order of Things* cited above (2002) to his later works on the technologies of the self (Foucault et al. 1988) and aesthetics of existence (Foucault et al. 2005; cf. Huijer 1999). I believe that this thinking is compatible with and advances Vygotskian theory. At the same time the Vygotskian perspective helps translate the Foucauldian philosophy into educational-psychological interventions.

Similarly to Foucault, Vygotsky was interested in Marxism and dialectics but was also much influenced by the philosophy of Spinoza as well as of Nietzsche and the political theory of Trotsky (Keiler 2002; Veresov 1999; Vygotsky 1994). As a citizen and an academic he was opposed to any form of power and aimed to establish education based on the principles of freedom and imagination (cf. Vygotsky 1999, 2002, 2004). Vygotsky (1971, 1999) studied the psychology of art and considered art as the forefront of societal change.

Vygotsky participated actively in educational politics after the Soviet revolution and tried to develop a radically novel psychological approach (cf. Vygotsky 1997a). His books however were prohibited under the Stalinist regime exactly because of the above-mentioned influences (Keiler 2002). Vygotsky was not just, however, interested in psychology and education but participated intensively in discussions taking place during his lifetime about art, cinema, and representation. These discussions followed a similar thread to the above-presented analysis on Velázquez by Foucault. Many of Vygotsky’s works were perceived at large as at counter purposes to modernity and opposed both to Stalinism and to capitalism (cf. Stetsenko 2008; Vygotskaja and Lifanova 2000).

As noted in the introduction, according to Vygotsky, thinking is possible only through mediation and thus the psychological cannot be contemplated and examined in separation from
the social and the tools used for expression and communication (Vygotsky 1987, 1997b; cf. Daniels 2006; Kontopodis and Newnham this issue; Papadopoulos 2005; Stetsenko 2009; Stetsenko and Arievitch 2004). Vygotsky did not, however, develop a theory of representation and different types of reflection as outlined above.

One could argue that in the Freedom Writer’s project diaries, books, and works of art mediated the communication between various students who were confronted with similar problems and at the same time mediated the inner speech and reflection of those students to themselves. Frequently, however, mediation in Western school settings in the context of reflection tasks, consultation, and evaluation practices, through discourses, school files, reports, and teachers’ memos functions so that the self is the main focus of reflection (Foucault et al. 1988).

This was the case in the School for Individual Learning in Practice. In this way, everyday life is objectified and “either–or” dilemmas such as that of Samira analyzed above are constructed. Students and teachers accept the given or current societal situation as the only possibility—and that in turn shapes their further motives, decisions, and actions. Students witness this future, regard it as “their” own and move toward it while reflecting on their past to evaluate and improve their achievements (Rose 1999).

By contrast, at the moment when the individual self is no longer the focus of attention but the societal relations in which the self is situated are considered, a metareflection is possible. This in turn changes radically the way one relates to oneself and to others. The Freedom Writers’ project can be seen as a small example of how this happens and the same could be said for some other projects such as the practice research presented by Morck in this dialogue or for educational projects that emerge in the context of broader sociopolitical movements (Kontopodis 2009c, 2010).

Taking under consideration the various materials from the School for Individual Learning in Practice as well as the materials from the Freedom Writer’s project, it is important to differentiate between two modes of reflection: (1) introspection about oneself, that is, about one’s school or job-related performance, and (2) reflection as witnessing, that is, reflection about the societal relations within which one is positioned. This second kind of reflection—what can be called “meta-reflection” as reminiscent of Foucault’s (2002) analysis of the painting Las Meninas by Velázquez—is directly linked with the transformation of the societal relations within which one is positioned because it implies a critical enacting of history and of the future that is collaborative, affective, and unpredictable (cf. Freire 1972, 1973).

Even if the above-presented material is brief and has only an exemplary function, I pointed thus to directions focusing on the role of alternative modes of reflection in educational praxis that should be subjects of future research and practice. A focus on educational and broader societal outcomes associated with these reflective possibilities would also be in the best interest of minority subjects such as the young female participants in urban educational projects to whom this study referred.
Appendix: (Back-) Stage and Materials

The School for Individual Learning in Practice (pseudonym) is an experimental school that combines social work, teaching in the classroom, and vocational education. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork during the school year 2004–05 at this school and those experiences are the basis for the following analysis. As a school psychology trainee and a doctoral candidate, I participated in the everyday life of this school for one full school year, typically engaged in participant-observation in classrooms for five days per week during the whole school day as well as participating in official and informal teachers’ meetings that took place outside the school day timetable.

The school, based in one of Germany’s largest cities, served students who had hitherto been unsuccessful in their school careers and had failed more than once to be promoted to the next grade. The school curriculum valued reflection or reflectivity in combination with a practical orientation: students were supposed to have various vocational experiences in “real-life” contexts to find for themselves where their interests lay so that they would be empowered to make serious decisions about their future.

Soon after the beginning of the school year my research project was approved by the school director and local educational authorities. After this approval, the students who wanted to participate in my research signed an informed consent also approved by the school director. All students were older than 16 years and according to German law no parental consent or approval by a university committee for ethics was necessary.

My friendly and trusting relationship with the students allowed me access to all documents they produced. Teachers also trusted me because I had already finished studies of psychology on a Masters level and had a good understanding of the practical problems of the students’ and teachers’ everyday lives at school. The fact that teachers soon regarded me as a colleague, in addition to my respect for confidentiality (such as anonymizing or pseudonymizing the students’ names), enabled me to access most school documents.

The students of this school typically were of immigrant backgrounds or they were German students from problematic home environments affected by alcoholism or unemployment. The process of student selection resulted in approximately the same number of male and female students, and a balance of students of German and foreign (mainly Turkish) ethnicity. Most families were from lower socioeconomic layers as recorded in the school’s own statistics. In most cases, the students were about 18 years old but continued to pursue a school education ending with a certificate that would normally be obtained by students who are 15 years old.
The students of non-German ethnicity were mostly second-generation immigrants. They spoke and wrote German with imperfect grammar, a practice shared with many of the German students as well. The communication of students of non-German ethnicity took place in Turkish or in other minority languages when they were in ethnically homogeneous groups of students inside the school. At the time of the research project I also spoke German with imperfect grammar (my first language is Greek) and this was on of the reasons I was not perceived as a teacher by the students but as a person positioned between the teachers and the students.

My research materials from the School for Individual Learning in Practice involved 17 hours of audiorecorded and transcribed proceedings from teachers’ organizational meetings that took place every week; 21 audiorecorded and transcribed semistructured, open-ended interviews with students; ethnographic research material consisting of video recordings of class activities; and field notes. The analysis of the field notes, interviews, and video recordings as well as of the circulation and use of written documents at the School for Individual Learning in Practice is inspired by ethnographic approaches and by studies in science and technology (Emerson et al. 2003; Jessor et al. 1996; Latour 2005a). My methodology assimilated critical ethnography, that is,

the reflective process of choosing between conceptual alternatives and making value-laden judgements of meaning and method to challenge research, policy and other forms of human activity. [Thomas 1993:147; cf. Levinson et al. 1996]

I also used a variety of methods to document semiotic and material agency, emphasizing the connections between the human actors and nonhuman meditational devices and the interdependencies of semiotic and material aspects of agency (Latour 1987, 2005b). A particular focus of this ethnographic observation was the movement of students, teachers, and school documents among different places such as the classroom, the administrative office, the teachers’ office, and sites of internships. Another aspect on which I regularly focused was the use of technological equipment (mainly PCs but also phones, mobile phones) and the use of electronic and hard cover files. In particular settings, I documented the use of other artifacts such as drawings, films, drinks, clothes. I also documented the circulation and use of many genres of written language employed at school (e.g., learning materials, apprenticeship reports) and I collected photocopied versions.

The second educational practice I focus on here emerged in one class of the Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, from 1994 till 1998. The main teacher involved in this practice was Erin Gruwell (English-language teacher). Under her guidance, students began reading and writing anonymous diaries in the classroom about their everyday lives. This practice introduced issues for classroom discussion on a number of social problems such as racial segregation, attention to appearance and discrimination, domestic violence, misogyny, dyslexia and attention deficit disorder, homosexuality, loss of friends and family members in shootings. The materials that refer to the Freedom Writers project come from books the teacher Erin Gruwell published about this project (Gruwell 1999,
2007a, 2007b) as well as from an a posteriori examination of a series of other sources such as web pages and reports by other people.7

The students who participated in the Woodrow Wilson High School like the students of the School for Individual Learning in Practice, to whom I referred above, came together in their late teens from different ethnic backgrounds and shared experiences of social exclusion, minimal economic and unappreciated cultural resources, family-related problems, and low educational levels, including low performance in English written and spoken language. They were not directly selected for this particular class or school. The distribution of students was diverse ethnically and racially and most students had low school performance previously. Only a few students were however white. Many of the students of each school had engaged in violent activities, although the students of the School for Individual Learning in Practice had not been confronted with the tragedies of shootings and killings faced by the students of the Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach.

In their everyday lives most of the students in both cases faced problems related to minimal economic resources, homelessness, high consumption of alcohol and drugs, unexpected pregnancy, racism, and sexual discrimination. Violence seemed to be the main problem for the students in Long Beach. The primary common problem among the students in the German school was their career of school failure that prevented them from engaging with educational and job-related activities of high profile in the future.

These students did not only lack of funds and opportunities as might have also been the case in the United States but also because of legal regulations in Germany they did not have any possibility for upward social mobility at all. The German system is based on distinct categories of public schools that facilitate tracking of and categorization of pupils from the time students are age 12 or 13—in some cases even earlier. This system of separate school leads to different categories of workers and job seekers beyond the educational years (Radtke 2007).8

Although the problems these students faced in their everyday lives might have differed in details, I believe that all of them could potentially see themselves as “marginal” or “peripheral subjects” from a meta–point of view that brings quite different people together as analyzed below. Stephenson and Papadopoulos introduce the term “sociability in the making” to emphasize the processual way in which collectivities emerge when people share experiences of exclusion that might be unique but can at the same time be seen as similar to the experience of the others (Foucault et al. 2005; Stephenson and Papadopoulos 2006).

In the article presented above, I employed exemplary parts of these research materials with particular emphasis on students’ narrative reports. I did not aim, however, to compare the different educational practices, in the context of which these narratives emerged. I believe that both educational practices have been developed in unique ways in particular local contexts so that it would be impossible to compare them on the grounds of common principles, values, and methodologies. Very different people with different motives were involved in each educational practice, making it impossible to “copy” either the one or the other
practice and transmit it to the other context. I tried, however, to refer to the practice followed at the Woodrow Wilson High School to reflect on the fabrication of development at the School for Individual Learning in Practice from a “meta-perspective” (cf. Fichtner 2007).

**Notes**

**Acknowledgments.** I would like to thank Anna Stetsenko as well as Maria Cecilia Camargo Magalhaes, Fernanda Liberali, Márcia Ap. Amador Mascia, Claudia Davis and Wanda Maria Junqueira de Aguiar for our inspiring discussions on Vygotsky and mediation during my guest scholarship at the City University of New York in 2009 and at Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brazil in 2010. Special thanks is owed to the *Ethos* editor, Janet Dixon Keller, who helped me significantly and with great patience to address my thoughts and arguments to the U.S. and international *Ethos* readership. I feel also very grateful to the anonymous reviewers and Line Lerche Morck for their feedback, as well as to Mariane Hedegaard, organizer of the Cultural-Historical Approaches to Children’s Development and Childhood Section of the International Society for Cultural and Historical Research in the context of which this article and special section emerged.

1. “(.2)” indicates pause of 2 seconds.

2. See, for example, the famous work on cinema by Deleuze 1987.

3. Other daily and weekly reports written by her, final reports, field notes, and video recordings from two visits to the Hairdresser’s during her internship as well as CVs and application letters.

4. The name “Freedom Writers” is a metaphor, connecting the students participating in this project in the Woodrow Wilson School to the “Freedom Riders” of the 1960s who fought against segregation during the Civil Rights Movement also in California (cf. Arsenault 2006).

5. Diaries were written anonymously and, although the writers remained anonymous, the teacher collected them out of a black box and students took turns reading aloud each other’s entries as well as editing them. “I constantly used their stories to teach [English],” teacher Gruwell says. “We read aloud, edited aloud. I could take something from a journal and compare it to a story by T. C. Boyle or Amy Tan or Gary Soto. We could look at the work side by side, juxtaposing themes or comparing literary techniques. It’s an authentic way to teach” (Anonymous 2002).


7. The Freedom Writers project soon became very popular and even lead to a commercial film production with Hilary Swank by Richard LaGravenese (2006). However the Freedom Writers’ approach, as it was presented in the film, has been criticized because it reproduces a romantic understanding of the teacher as a hero who should sacrifice her or his personal life to overcome broader social and educational deficits that state institutions are responsible for (Chhuon and Carranza 2008). The book, however, may be perceived as a richer source of information if not analyzed from a hero-centered perspective but in combination with other sources—which I try in the following segments of text.

8. Until recently in Germany, all children attended elementary school until grade 4, 5, 6, or 7, depending on each federal state’s local regulations. After that they could take one of three school paths (*Hauptschule, Realschule, Gymnasium*) based on their school performance at the elementary level. It is exactly this separation that could be seen as segregation. Often students who were sent to *Hauptschule* had similar ethnic and class backgrounds and these students had no possibility inside the German system to pursue higher technical or university education later on. *Hauptschul*- and Realschul-graduates begin a cooperative program (work and school) or attend various Fachoberschulen, gymnasium students continue attending the gymnasium for 2 or 3 years, whereupon they receive their Abitur-level degree
enabling them to apply at university or college. Recently this system underwent reform in some of the German federal states and it is not yet clear if the system will radically change to the better or if the same structures will be maintained under new names and labels. A different type of school for example is the comprehensive school (Gesamtschule [grades 5–9 or 10]) in which the traditional school paths exist integrated or cooperatively. Students of comprehensive schools can achieve their Hauptschul-graduation in grade 9 or 10, their Realschul-graduation or the permission to attend a gymnasium in grade 10 and mobility is allowed between the different paths.

References Cited

Anonymous

Arsenault, Raymond

Benites, Maria, and Bernd Fichtner

Brockmeier, Jens

Chhuon, Vichet, and Francisco Carranza

Dafermos, Manolis

Daniels, Harry

Daniels, Harry, Michael Cole, and James V. Wertsch eds.

Davis, Mike

Deleuze, Gilles

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw

Fairclough, Norman

Fichtner, Bernd

Filipović, Zlata, and Christina Pribichevich-Zorić

Foucault, Michel
Foucault, Michel, Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana

Foucault, Michel, Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton

Frank, Anne

Freire, Paulo

Garcia-Reid, Pauline

Gruwell, Erin

Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson

Hansen, David, and Patricia Jarvis

Haug, Frigga

Holzkamp, Klaus

Houck, Jean Wilson, C. Kathleen Cohn, and A. Carl Cohn

Huijer, Marli

Ivinson, Gabrielle, and Patricia Murphy

Jessor, Richard, Anne Colby, and Richard Shweder eds.

Keiler, Peter

Kenelly, Thomas

Kontopodis, Michalis

Kontopodis, Michalis, ed.

Stetsenko, Anna

Stetsenko, Anna, and Igor Arievitch

Thomas, Jim

Urciuoli, Bonnie

van Oers, B.

Veresov, Nikolai

Vygodskaja, Gita, and Tamara Lifanova

Vygotsky, Lev Semënović

Walkerdine, Valerie

Walkerdine, Valerie, Helen Lucey, and June Melody

Wiesel, Elie

Wulf, Christoph