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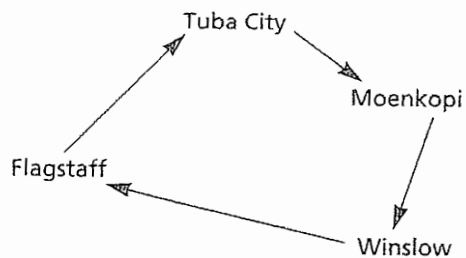
MIKE ROSE,
POSSIBLE LIVES
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Possible Lives

I was riding with Percy and Terry Piestewa through Kerley Valley, following the route Suzy Worker had sketched when she took us, both as outsiders and insiders, shifting point of view, down the main street of Tuba City. Clump clump. Manny Begay had invited me to Tuba City to visit the high school Michelle's students attended and to see the places they had written about. The Tuba Trading Post, the motel where the tourists stay, McDonald's, the police station . . . A correspondence of landscape and language.

Terry turned south, crossing the highway, and drove a mile or two to Moenkopi, the farthest west of the Hopi villages that originate deep in the spare and beautiful center of the reservation. Brick and stone dwellings, a few newer wood constructions, some cars, trucks, a tractor, limited electricity, the hum of generators. We walked to the edge of the mesa. Below, out on the open floor of the valley, were neat rows of cornstalks, the fields Edwin had described in the essay honoring his grandfather.

It was fall, and school was in session. I visited some of the classes of the sort Suzy, Edwin, and the others had taken before coming to the summer program. In Effie Hyden's course in anatomy and physiology, a bespectacled girl in overalls was explaining the procedure for coronary bypass surgery, sketching a shunt into the aorta of a heart she had drawn on the board. In physics-math down the hall, Mani Roi was reviewing the concepts of distance and displacement, drawing, as I had seen Sharon Davis do in Tupelo, a quick schematic of local geography:



Winslow, seventy miles south as the crow flies, was the location of the school's football rival, and that night the Tuba City Warriors were hosting the Winslow Bulldogs. Terry said, Let's go. The stands were about three-quarters full when we arrived. There were families, many greetings, little kids playing in the aisles, old men in cowboy hats, a few Navajo policemen. As we made our way up the stairs, I heard English, Spanish, Navajo, and Hopi, and the dialects and accents Darold, Bertha, and the rest had played with in their sketches of life in Tuba City. The sky was brushed with feathery clouds, the air warm and gentle. First and ten. Ball on the eleven-yard line. The band played "Achy-Breaky Heart" with a deep, rolling beat. People yelled at the Warrior quarterback. Bud Reynolds, the teacher from Kentucky, had talked about the way high school athletics bring a small town together. Next to me, Percy was furiously rattling an old cow bell. The crowd began stamping on the metal bleachers, a wave of noise meant to intimidate and inspire. And off in the distance, atop one of the hills beyond the border of the school, a lone figure sat on a horse, watching the game.

THE EXIT from the Warriors' stadium led back through Tuba City, car light, lights from trucks, streetlights, moonlight over the roads that continued a journey I had begun three-and-a-half years before, trying to fashion a response to the loss of faith in our public schools. I was looking for a language of possibility, an imagery to spark our imagination. It was a wonderful trip, one many could take, full of revealing conversation and the pleasure of the land — Happy Jack Road, Holy Moses Wash — a journey of surprise and resonance.

The search led outward, across landscapes — urban and rural — that were new to me, across the immensity of this country and its remarkable particularity: snow falling on a creek, a pasture, a frame schoolhouse, a block of brick storefronts — its mix of dry goods, melons, language, fish on ice, apples, information, opportunity; billowing smokestacks jutting out of pine; the desert after rainfall; empty mills where rivers cross, thick with pain and goldenrod; a train whistle through the hollows; cornfields symmetrical on a page and in the clear air below.

And, as is the case with so many journeys, this one led inward as well. I had been studying schools for much of my adult life, had been trying to understand how they enhanced the lives of students or diminished them. Most of that work was located in and around the LA Basin. For all its bewildering complication, Los Angeles was familiar territory, home. These trips to Calexico, to Baltimore, to Eastern Kentucky, to a nation within a nation in northern Arizona brought forth new cultural

practices, new languages, new gestures. I was fortunate to have been escorted into so many classrooms, so many homes, to have been guided into the everyday events of the communities I visited, for the invitation eased the unfamiliarity and discomfort that could have been present on all sides. What I experienced was a kind of awe at our variety, yet an intimate regard, a handshake on the corner, a sense of shared humanity. The complex interplay of difference and commonality. What began as a search for a fresh language of educational critique and invention became, as well, a search for what is best in this country — realized infrequently, threatened at every turn — but there to be summoned, possible in the public domain, there to instruct a traveler settling into a seat in the corner of a classroom.

It was, in many ways, an odd time to be on such a journey. The country was in the grip of a nasty reactive politics, a volatile mix of anger and anxiety. And people of all political persuasions were withdrawing from engagement with the public sphere. It was time of economic and moral cocooning. The question for me — framed in terms of public schools, our pre-eminent public institution — was how to generate a hopeful vision in a time of bitterness and lost faith, and, further, how to do that in a way that holds simultaneously to what educational philosopher David Purpel calls "the interlocking and interdependent hinges" of criticism and creativity. How to sharpen awareness of injustice and incompetence, how to maintain the skeptic's acuity, yet nurture the ability to imagine the possible and act from hope.

The journey was odd for me in another way, considering my own teaching history. My work in the classroom has mostly been with people whom our schools, public and private, have failed: working-class and immigrant students, students from nonmainstream linguistic and cultural backgrounds, students of all backgrounds who didn't fit a curriculum or timetable or definition of achievement and were thereby categorized in some way as different or deficient. There are, as we have seen along this journey, long-standing social and cultural reasons for this failure of our schools, tangled, disturbing histories of discrimination, skewed perception, and protection of privilege.

And yet there were these rooms. Vital, varied, they were providing a powerful education for the children in them, many of whom were members of the very groups defined as inferior in times past and, not infrequently, in our ungenerous present. What I began to see — and it took the accumulation of diverse classrooms to help me see it — was that these classrooms, in addition to whatever else we may understand about them, represented a dynamic, at times compromised and contested, strain in American educational history: a faith in the capacity of a people, a drive toward equality and opportunity, a belief in the inti-

mate link between mass education and a free society. These rooms were embodiments of the democratic ideal. To be sure, this democratic impulse has been undercut and violated virtually since its first articulation. Thomas Jefferson's proposal to the Virginia legislature for three years of free public schooling, for example, excluded the commonwealth's significant number of enslaved Black children. But it has been advanced, realized in daily classroom life by a long history of educators working both within the mainstream and outside it, challenging it through workingmen's organizations, women's groups, Black schools, appropriating the ideal, often against political and economic resistance, to their own emancipatory ends.

The teachers I visited were working within that rich tradition. They provided example after different example of people doing public intellectual work in institutional settings, using the power of the institution to realize democratic goals for the children in their charge, and finessing, negotiating, subverting institutional power when it blocked the realization of those goals. At a time of profound disillusionment with public institutional life, these people were, in their distinct ways, creating the conditions for children to develop lives of possibility.

My hope is that these classrooms will help us imagine — and, in imagining, struggle to achieve — what schools in the public domain, and perhaps a range of public institutions, can be.

Whether or not an institution is democratic is often determined by procedural criteria. Do members have a vote, input into policy, a place at the table? These concerns are important, of course, but considered alone, or primarily, can lead to reductive definitions of democracy, democracy as procedure, as a set of rules. My visits led me to be more interested in the *experience* of democracy, the phenomenology of it. What did it feel like to be in those classrooms in Watts, on the South Side, in the Eastern Coal Field, in Hattiesburg and Missoula, in Calexico and Tucson? If we can situate ourselves within that experience, we may come to understand on many levels, not just the definitional and formal, what schooling for all in a democratic society can be and how we can meaningfully talk about it.

The first thing to say about the rooms I visited is that they created a sense of safety. There was physical safety, which for some children in some environments is a real consideration. But there was also safety from insult and diminishment: "They don't make fun of you if you mess up," said the middle school student in Chicago. And there was safety to take risks, to push beyond what you can comfortably do at present, "coaxing our thinking along," as one of Steve Gilbert's students put it, "bringing out our best interpretive abilities."

Intimately related to safety is respect, a word I heard frequently during my travels. From what I could tell, it meant many things, operated on many levels: fair treatment, decency, an absence of intimidation, and, beyond the realm of individual civility, a respect for the history, the language and culture of the peoples represented in the classroom. Surveying the images of Mexican and Mexican-American history on Carlos Jimenez's walls and bulletin boards, a Chicano student exclaimed, "This room is something *positive*. As you walk around, you say, 'Hey, we're somebody!'" Respect also has an intellectual dimension. As New York principal Louis Delgado put it, "It's not just about being polite — even the curriculum has to convey respect. [It] has to be challenging enough that it's respectful." It is interesting that virtually all of our current discussions of academic standards are framed either in the quasi-technical language of assessment and accountability or as a lament for diminished performance. There could be a whole other discussion of standards in a language of expectation, respect, and democratic theory.

Talking about safety and respect leads to a consideration of authority. Most discussions of authority in the classroom involve either a teacher's "management" style (one common treatment, for example, contrasts an authoritarian with a democratic style) or the degree to which a teacher involves students in making decisions about what will be taught and how the class will be run. While none of the teachers I observed could be categorized as authoritarian, I did see a range of classroom management styles, and while some teachers involved students in determining the rules of classroom conduct and gave them significant responsibility to provide the class its direction, others came with curriculum and codes of conduct fairly well in place.

But two things seemed to hold across classrooms. First, a teacher's authority came from multiple sources — knowledge, care, the construction of safe and respectful space, solidarity with students' background — rather than solely from age or role. Though there were times when our teachers asserted authority in a direct and unilateral way, in general, authority was not expressed or experienced as a blunt exercise of power. As one of Stephanie Terry's first-graders put it, "She doesn't fuss a lot."

The second thing to note was that even in classrooms that were run in a relatively traditional manner, authority was distributed. In various ways, students contributed to the flow of events, shaped the direction of discussion, became authorities on their own experience and on the work they were doing. Think of Stephanie Terry's students reporting on their observations of the tree frog and hermit crab and Michelle Taigue's Navajo and Hopi students explaining slang and dialect on the reservation. There were multiple pathways of authority, multiple op-

portunities for members of the class to assume authority. And since authority and the generation of knowledge are intimately connected — those who can speak affect what is known — there were multiple opportunities to shape the knowledge emerging in the classroom.

These classrooms, then, were places of expectation and responsibility. Teachers took students seriously as intellectual and social beings. Young people had to work hard, think things through, come to terms with each other — and there were times when such effort took a student to his or her limits. "They looked at us in disbelief," said New York principal Haven Henderson, "when we told them they were intellectuals." The teachers we met assumed that a small society of achievement and civic behavior could flourish. "All children," said Evangelina Jones in Calexico, "have minds and souls and have the ability to participate fully in society." It is important to note that such assumptions were realized through a range of supports, guides, and structures: from the way teachers organized curriculum and invited and answered questions, to the means of assistance they and their aides provided (tutoring, conferences, written and oral feedback), to the various ways they encouraged peer support and assistance, to the atmosphere they created in the room — which takes us back to considerations of safety and respect. These classrooms required thought, participation, effort — they were places where you did things — but not without mechanisms to aid involvement and achievement. Such aid to participation should be a defining quality of public institutions in a democracy.

This mix of expectation, responsibility, and assistance established the conditions for students like the young woman in Mark Hall's Graphic Arts Lab in Pasadena to say, "I'm just learning all this. I can't wait to get really proficient at it." Or for the child in Calexico, engaged with an exercise on the telling of time, to implore Elena Castro to "make [the problems] harder." Earlier, I suggested that there could be in our country an alternative discussion of standards, one that involved expectation, respect, and democratic theory. Yvonne Hutchinson, the middle school teacher from Watts, offered one direction such a discussion might take:

Teachers will say either "we can't lower our standards" or "this poor child is reading below grade level, so I'll need a third- or fourth-grade book." But what you need to do is find a way to make that eighth-grade book *accessible*. You have to respect the child . . . We get so busy looking at children in terms of labels that we fail to look for the *potential* — and to demand that kids live up to that potential. Children can tell right off those people who believe in them and those who patronize them. . . . They rise to whatever expectations are set. They rise or fail to rise. And when they rise, they can sometimes rise to great heights.

The students I talked to, from primary-grade children to graduating seniors, each in their own way, had the sense that these classrooms were salutary places, places that felt good to be in, places that honored their best interests. "They really care about you," that student in Mark Hall's lab said of the *Graphic Arts Academy*. "It's like we're a family." Discussing difficult times in making their video, two students recalled Bell High School teacher Larry Stone's encouragement: "Girls, you have to do this . . . It'll work out. I believe in you." Calling Michelle Smith, of the COMETS program in Chicago, a "good teacher," a student explained that "she's teaching us how to do things we couldn't do before." "Math'll take you a long way in life," said an Algebra Project student in Hollandale, Mississippi. There was variation in the way it was experienced and expressed — nurturance, social cohesion, the fostering of competence, a sense of growth, a feeling of opportunity, futurity — but there was among the students I met a common recognition of concern and benefit.

The foregoing characteristics combined to create vital public space. The rooms I visited felt alive. People were learning things, both cognitive and social, and doing things, individually and collectively, making contributions, connecting ideas, generating knowledge. To be sure, not everyone was engaged. And everyone, students and teachers, had bad days. But overall these classrooms were exciting places to be, places of reflection and challenge, of deliberation and expression, of quiet work and public presentation. People were encouraged to be smart. "I wanted to feel the challenge of the tough courses," said Carlos Jimenez's student about electives like Mexican-American history. "I think I came to understand," said Lois Rodgers's student after completing a video project on Camp Sister Spirit, "something about the fear behind prejudice." "[Rick Takagaki's] classes made me realize I needed to go experience things," observed a University High student in Los Angeles. These young people were acting as agents in their own development. And that agency became an essential force in sustaining the classroom. The work they were doing had an effect beyond itself.

In an important post-revolutionary essay on education, the eighteenth-century journalist Samuel Harrison Smith wrote that the free play of intelligence was central to a democracy, and that individual intellectual growth was intimately connected to broad-scale intellectual development, to the "general diffusion of knowledge." To a significant degree, the occasion and energy for intellectual growth in these classrooms came from engagement with others, often over a common problem. Consider Aleta Sullivan's human anatomy and physiology students trying to find a solution to their blood-antigen experiment, or Bette Ford's students, also at Hattiesburg High, struggling to convey to an

audience of children the complex legacy of sharecropping, or Michelle Taigue's students in Tucson trying to render in a videoplay the tension between White, urban education and the social fabric of reservation life.

Smith celebrated "the improvement of the mind and the collision of mind with mind." As a number of contemporary critics of our public schools and of the larger public sphere have noted, what Smith referred to as "the general diffusion of knowledge" has been restricted in our country, and many voices remain silent. If we consider these rooms to be miniature public spheres or preparatory arenas for civic life, then it is essential to note how the formation of intellectually safe and respectful space, the distribution of authority and responsibility, the maintenance of high expectations and the means to attain them — how all this is essential to the development of the intelligence of a people.

THE CLASSROOMS we visited were created spaces. Other public institutions — or other classrooms in other schools — could provide a very different experience. What accounted for those rooms in Los Angeles, Chicago, Wheelwright, Jackson, Polaris, and the balance of our towns and cities? How did they come to be?

One way to answer that question is to recall the conversation with Emily Palacio, the director of curriculum development for the Calexico Unified School District. Talking about the classrooms I was observing at Dool Elementary School, she said, "You have to understand the number of things that had to be put in place so that those teachers you saw could flourish." Schools, classrooms exist in elaborate social-cultural, political, economic contexts. The work of Elena Castro and her talented colleagues at Dool was made possible by federal affirmative action policies that encouraged people like her to enter the teaching force, by the Bilingual Education Act and other federal and state legislation that affected the ways we think about language, culture, and pedagogy, by a shift in the local Calexico demographic and power base. You'd also have to consider the way the foregoing changes affected teacher education; in fact, you'd have to factor in the very existence of the San Diego satellite campus — a source of local teachers, the majority of those I visited. Also of importance is the current district administration, people like Emily Palacio who encourage individual teacher initiative and — no small matter — are skilled in ways to find money to fund good ideas. There is an activist and supportive school board and productive relations between the board and the administration. And there is the Calexico community's belief in the schools, a willingness to support them, fiscally and socially, to trust children to them, to become involved

in them. This is a partial list, but it underscores Emily's point: good schools and classrooms do not exist in a vacuum.

I'll return to this idea later, for I want to consider it from a different perspective: What are the forces beyond the schoolhouse that threaten good work in the classroom? But for now, I'd like to bring my question about the creation of the classrooms we saw in to the level of the teacher, for the teacher has been so much the focus of this journey. As I hope the visits have shown, any meaningful discussion of schooling and school reform must have the instructional encounter at its center. Furthermore, the teacher, as political philosopher Amy Gutmann points out, is positioned dynamically between state and community and, of all those involved with schooling, holds the potential for most immediately "cultivating the capacity for democratic deliberation." What did these teachers know how to do and what assumptions did they share that made their classrooms possible?

The first thing to remember in posing such a question is that there was a great deal of variation in what these teachers did and how they did it. Region, demographics, grade level, subject matter, all these shaped and differentiated good work in eleventh-grade American studies in eastern Kentucky, in math and algebra courses in the Mississippi Delta, in a one-room schoolhouse in western Montana. There were, as well, a range of individual styles and preferences. Elena Castro in Calxico developed an abundant curriculum around learning stations; Stephanie Terry in Baltimore thought learning stations would sabotage her curriculum. Ed Murphy's video-production class at Bell High School was a fairly unstructured affair, organized around student-generated projects; Steve Gilbert's advanced placement English class in Chicago proceeded in close analytic connection to specific literary texts. This variability enlivened the journey. *students depend on teachers*

With this understanding of differences, let me attempt some generalizations, knowing that they are not meant to be tight categories and don't apply equally to everyone.

To begin, the teachers we spent time with were knowledgeable. They knew subject matter or languages or technologies, which they acquired in a variety of ways: from formal schooling to curriculum-development projects to individual practice and study. In most cases, this acquisition of knowledge was ongoing, developing; they were still learning, and their pursuits were a source of excitement and renewal.

But, of course, good teachers not only know things, but are also adept at conveying what they know, presenting it, clarifying it, sparking interest in it, using it to generate thought and action. Part of the pleasure of this journey for me was being guided through books I hadn't read before, working, with a fresh take, calculations I had long since forgotten, con-

sidering a historical or current event in an unexpected context. Teaching, then, involves additional knowledge and skill, applied knowledge, craft, what educational psychologist Lee Shulman calls "the wisdom of practice." Some of this knowledge is fairly specific to subject matter: familiarity with the materials of one's field, a ready stock of illustrations and analogies, a grasp of the ways particular concepts and operations are typically misunderstood and a repertoire of responses to facilitate understanding. And some aspects of pedagogical craft are more general: from structuring and pacing a lesson to conducting a discussion and responding to questions. One of the many reductive debates within educational circles sets those who define and study teaching primarily in terms of process and technique against those who insist on the centrality of subject matter knowledge. Good teaching is a dynamic of both knowledge and technique. John Dewey, so often misunderstood on issues like this, is instructive here. "The more the educator knows of music," he writes, using one area of study as an example, "the more he can perceive the possibilities of the inchoate musical impulses of a child . . . [T]he various studies represent working resources, available capital . . . [yet] the teacher should be occupied not with subject matter in itself but in its interaction with the pupils' present needs and capacities."

As one teaches, one's knowledge plays out in social space, and this is one of the things that makes teaching such a complex activity. As studies of teacher cognition have shown, and as we saw in the classrooms we visited, teaching well means knowing one's students well and being able to read them quickly and, in turn, making decisions to slow down or speed up, to stay with a point or return to it later, to underscore certain connections, to use or forgo a particular illustration. This decision-making operates as much by feel as by reason: it involves hunch, intuition, a best, quick guess.

There is another dimension to the ability to make judgments about instruction. The teachers we observed operate with a knowledge of individual student's lives, of local history and economy, and of social-cultural traditions and practices. They gain this knowledge in any number of ways: living in the communities in which they work; getting involved in local institutions and projects; drawing on personal and cultural histories that resemble the histories of the children they teach; educating themselves about the communities and cultures of the students before them; connecting with parents and involving parents in schooling; seeing students as resources and learning from them.

This is a difficult and delicate issue. We often in America, and teachers are no exception, judge people harshly by their origins ("trailer trash," I overheard in one lunchroom; "scummy parents," in another),

or, less maliciously, we pity or patronize or pigeonhole them. (Recall here Yvonne Hutchinson's litany: "slow," "poor," "impoverished," "deprived," "oppressed.") And because our social history is so confused and blighted, we easily slip into stereotype when we consider ethnicity or race or gender. Educational literature has been complicit here, offering thumbnail sketches of populations as a guide to instruction. Recall, for example, Michelle Taigue's complaint about characterizing Native American children as having difficulty with writing "because they come from an oral culture." Yet look at the way the teachers we met used knowledge from beyond the classroom to enhance their ability to counsel and to teach. I suspect that if we were to study that knowledge, we would find it structured in ways that work against reductive perception. For one thing, it is acquired from multiple sources. It is, from all I could tell, rich knowledge, grounded in particular people's lives, balancing strengths and liabilities, reflecting variability within groups. I think it contributed to the ability of many of these teachers both to understand, at times celebrate, where their students came from and to envision for them other domains of actions and influence — to, as a friend of mine put it, help them develop both roots and wings.

As one spends more time in a classroom, one's subject matter knowledge is influenced by, even transformed by these human connections. I think here of feminist educator and ethicist Nel Noddings's call to consider subject matter in terms of what she calls an *ethic of care*. "Our guiding principles for teaching arithmetic, or any other subject, are derived from our primary concern for the persons whom we teach." This way of talking about teaching and learning, observes Noddings, this "language of relation" has "almost disappeared from formal educational discourse." Yet many of the teachers we came to know spoke about what they taught in ways that intersected cognition and relation, subject matter and students' lives. Here's Sharon Davis, the physics teacher from Tupelo, reflecting on her curriculum. "One reason physics is so scary is that students have not been shown that a significant part of physics involves taking a different perspective on the everyday flow of events around them. For example, could they come to think about the bending of the elbow to eat as a response to electrical impulses from the brain? If kids look at life from one perspective only, then much of life will remain baffling. They will be limited in how they function, in what they can do." There's an interest here in the formation of experience, a connection in Sharon's mind between physics, perception, and human growth.

A teacher must use these various kinds of knowledge — knowledge of subject matter, of practice, of one's students, of relation — within the institutional confines of mass education. The teachers I visited had,

over time, developed ways to act with some effectiveness within these constraints — though not without times of confusion and defeat — and they had determined ways of organizing their classrooms that enabled them to honor their beliefs about teaching and learning. We saw a good deal of variation here; there is no one best way: lecture-discussion, Socratic dialogue, laboratory demonstration, learning centers, small-group collaborative learning, a kind of artisans' workshop where students pursue independent projects. Not infrequently, these approaches existed in combination in the same classroom. In a number of cases, the current organization evolved. Teachers experimented with ways to create a common space where meaningful work could be done. This quality of reflective experimentation, of trying new things, of tinkering and adjusting, sometimes with uneven results, sometimes failing, was part of the history of many of the classrooms in *Possible Lives*.

The ability of many of these teachers to work effectively within their schools and districts was strengthened by the way they pulled others into their professional lives. You won't find this discussed very much in teacher-education literature, and, I must admit, it was so obvious that it took me a while to appreciate its full significance. Now I find myself talking about it to new teachers all the time. With the autonomy of the classroom comes the potential for isolation and loneliness — something many beginning teachers feel acutely. Evangelina Jones in Calexico, recalling her own first difficult year, said simply, "If you don't get support, you die a little every day." This isolation, for beginning and continuing teachers alike, is complicated and mystified by what Deborah Britzman, who studies the socialization of teachers, identifies as common myths about teaching: that the effective teacher is a rugged individualist, the source and center of authority and control; that the teacher is expert; and that the teacher is self-made, is a "natural" — "pedagogy becomes a product of one's personality." "These myths," Britzman observes, "valorize the individual and make inconsequential the institutional constraints which frame the teacher's work." The situation is further complicated for women (who make up 80 percent of the elementary and about half of the secondary teaching force) by the play of cultural expectations — shaped in the mid-nineteenth century, but in some ways still with us — about the way women should act in the classroom: good-girl forbearance, silent sacrifice, submission to institutional regulation.

Given this complex social-cultural backdrop, it is telling how many of the teachers I visited developed formal or informal social arrangements that enriched their teaching, gained them emotional and intellectual support, and shored up their ability to temper or challenge the constraints of their position. A significant number of them team-taught

or established other kinds of collaborative relationships. Some were engaged with school reform, within their school — as were the three COMETS teachers on Chicago's South Side — or at the district, regional, or state level, like several of the teachers from Mississippi. Some fulfilled personal and professional needs through study and advocacy groups — I think here of Stephanie Terry and her colleagues who worked in and studied urban schools — or through less organized arrangements, like the lunch-time gatherings of the Calexico teachers in Elena Castro's classroom. A fair number were involved in their local unions and, in some cases, became advocates for teachers in larger national and state arenas. And some teachers developed networks with parents and others in the community that provided knowledge, resources, and support.

These relationships and professional networks reinforced, at times revitalized, a belief held in some way by all the teachers I met: a belief in the value of their work, even as they voiced with clarity its limits and contradictions. "Women down here don't have the top positions," said Lois Rodgers of Hattiesburg High School, "so we've learned to be strong in what we do have." Teaching provided for them a sphere of influence, a source of identity and meaning. Reflecting on his career of twenty-six years, Chicago's Steve Gilbert said that "if at the end of my life, there are five hundred people who see the world differently because of the work I've done, well, I would be very happy about that." It was this sense of value that guided and sustained these teachers in their classroom work and that, in many ways, accounted for their persistence, the long hours, the extra push. There were times of doubt and ambiguity, of deep frustration, and, in several cases, of burn-out. And there were pedagogical dark nights of the soul: I picture Stephanie Terry in Baltimore struggling with the decision of whether or not to refer a child to special education or Bud Reynolds in Wheelwright confronting the possibility of his own failure. But their relationships and commitments and the children themselves pulled them back, rekindling their belief that they could, again to quote Lois Rodgers, "make a difference in the lives of kids."

At heart, the teachers in *Possible Lives* were able to affirm in a deep and comprehensive way the capability of the students in their classrooms. Thus the high expectations they held for what their students could accomplish. As with other characteristics we've considered, there was considerable variation in the origins and architecture of this affirmation: It emerged from and was shaped by one's family or church or from the early experience of being valued and affirmed by a teacher; from the experience of race or class or gender or sexual orientation; from spiritual sources or an intellectual populism. It came from love or anger,

from a sense of injustice or a sense of abundance and hope. In any one teacher's history there was usually a complex intersection of such sources. But what was common was a belief in the worth and potential of the children, all the children, who came under their charge.

Such affirmation of intellectual and civic potential, particularly within populations that have been historically devalued in our society, gives to these teachers' work a dimension of advocacy, a moral and political purpose. "~~Teaching children to read is, after all, an egalitarian business,~~" writes Michael Walzer in *Spheres of Justice*. "Like the democratic theorist," he continues, the reading teacher "assumes that all her students have an interest and are able to learn." We tend to forget what a radical idea this is in the history of Western political thought — this belief that *all* members of the state have an intellectual and civic contribution to make, have the potential for full participation in society. The shame of our schools is that, over time, we have denied such merit to so many. "I do think it is revolutionary," said New York principal Mary Stevens, "to get kids to believe they are worthy . . . to understand themselves as learning, growing beings." Given the populations with whom many of our teachers choose to work, the enactment of egalitarian beliefs in their classrooms becomes a vehicle for social change, a realization of the democratic ideal in real time.

III WE HAVE CONSIDERED the classrooms in *Possible Lives* as democratic spaces, tried to get a sense of the experience of being in them, and detailed what it was that teachers did to help create them. I would now like to consider what it is that threatens them. What did we encounter along the journey that menaces achievement, that limits the development of broad-scale intellectual and civic excellence? This question takes us to the heart of school reform, though offers a somewhat different way to think and talk about it.

The majority of national-level reports and addresses on reform over the past decade and a half have tended to represent school failure — which is usually characterized as being of crisis proportions — in one of two ways. The first asserts that there has been a significant decline in standards, as determined by national and cross-national test scores, and that the remedy lies in more rigorous curriculum and instruction, higher and more precisely articulated standards and goals, and more testing. The cause of this decline, if I accurately read the rhetoric of the discussion, is essentially a failure of will — students don't work hard enough, teachers don't demand enough, parents aren't involved enough — and we will be able to gauge a stiffening of will through a rise in scores on standardized tests. The second cause of school failure is

found in the way schools are organized and governed. The solution lies in a restructuring of school management and decision-making processes, bringing more responsibility for the way a school is run closer to the school site itself. There is a belief at work here, understandable in a technological-managerial society, that a change in institutional structure — rather than, say, a rethinking of state and national funding priorities or a re-evaluation of basic assumptions about teaching and learning — will necessarily lead to fundamental changes in behavior and, thus, in educational outcomes.

Each of these calls to reform could lead to public discussions of some merit. One discussion, for example, would call attention to the significant numbers of children — often poor, immigrant, or minority — who routinely face unchallenging, demeaning curricula, curricula that, as Bob Moses of the Algebra Project would argue, locks them out of fuller intellectual and sociopolitical involvement in civic and institutional life. And, as those New York principals made clear, the way most urban schools are organized and situated within their district bureaucracies stifles inventive and comprehensive work with young people. These issues came to the fore at many points in the trip across country.

Yet the national discussion of the problems in our schools, as ever-present and sweeping as it is, seems, much of the time, to be incomplete, narrow, somehow lacking: failure of will, declining standards, bureaucracy. Perhaps its limitations are to be found in the crisis rhetoric itself, a rhetoric that levels nuance and variation, and leads readily to a stark and simplified model of cause and effect — with overtones of a fall from pre-crisis grace and the promise of a post-reform redemption. And perhaps the difficulty lies in the measures of achievement and the models of effectiveness that are at the center of many reform proposals: standardized tests, reductive comparison designs that ignore social and cultural variables, ways of analyzing institutions that focus on function and structure. Whatever the case, the solutions offered in our reform literature seem one-dimensional, at times utopian (“By the year 2000, all children will be ready to learn,” reads the first of our National Education Goals), and the analysis of problems in the schools seems thin and acontextual and, well, bloodless. As Calexico’s Emily Palacio explained near the beginning of this journey, schools and classrooms, teachers and students, exist in a complex axis of history, politics, economics, and culture. While some of what ails our schools surely does lie in curriculum and school structure, there is much more to our failure to teach our children well.

Life in schools and classrooms is vulnerable to the disruptions in the communities around them: unemployment, crime, substance abuse, violence, sudden wrenching shifts in demographics — all of which, them-

selves, are causally linked to broader social and economic transformations. You could measure the decline of King Coal in eastern Kentucky by the buckle in the stairs at Wheelwright High School, by the angle of the lockers torn from the wall. You could chart Janeane Vigliotti’s course across campus at Monterey Park High School, seeking to diffuse tensions between Latino and Asian students, you could chart that course and the lines of force affecting it throughout the LA Basin and beyond, to Mexico, El Salvador, and the Pacific Rim. Any comprehensive program of reform would have to view school problems in these larger contexts. There is a popular conservative line of thought that plays down the effect of such environmental variables on behavior and achievement, that argues that the reason for violence and failure is a collapse of values. To be sure, there are moral and ethical dimensions to the problems in our schools — we saw that along the way — and the classrooms we visited encouraged ethical behavior and moral reflection. But to deny the complex ways a disrupted or devastated material reality diminishes hope, engenders rage, and shrivels our sense of who we are — and the relation of all that to behavior and achievement — seems naïve, sociologically and morally.

There is a significant moral dimension to school failure, but it is not much discussed in the reform literature. It involves the political history of towns and cities, the decisions, deals, and enactment into policy of prejudice and privilege that have had direct and long-standing effect on school funding, equity, and autonomy. When that *Chicago Tribune* editor observed that “it took an extraordinary combination of greed, racism, political cowardice, and public apathy” to bring the Chicago schools to their current state, he could have been describing any number of other districts in our country. I think the thing that most struck me as I read the histories of the troubled districts in this journey was how far back their current problems extended. We saw, in Chicago, a legacy of corruption and disregard that began in the mid-nineteenth century with the building of the first schoolhouse and the selling of the first school lands. The immensely complicated political and economic situation in New York City was duly noted by a journalist in 1903: “[The city] has the most difficult educational problem in the country.” Schools in Mississippi are still recovering financially from apartheid and from a systematic underfunding of public education that began in the post-Reconstruction state house. Public schools are, in many ways, powerful cultural institutions, and we tend to focus on that power both in our criticism of their failings and in our expression of hope for what they might achieve for our children and what social ills they might correct. But it is important to keep in mind that in terms of the sheer blunt power of political and economic interests and the way that power plays

out in city, state, and national life, schools are relatively weak institutions, compromised and undercut continually in our history. The students in Bonnie Tarta's U.S. history class in Chicago had a sense of this; thus one of them recommended "amend[ing] the Constitution to assure education for everyone." She was calling for some mechanism to guarantee not just the right but the practice of equitable universal schooling.

Life in the classroom is vulnerable not only to political and economic forces, but also to the inhumane and anti-egalitarian beliefs and biases in the culture at large. Schools are open systems, permeable institutions: beliefs about race and gender, about class and language, about intelligence, ability, and achievement emerge in the classroom; the appeals of commercial culture, the imagery of power and glamor play across the school yard.

Some of the teachers we visited developed ways to subject these beliefs and practices to scrutiny. Rick Takagaki, the economics teacher in West Los Angeles, role-played his students into discussions of economy and social structure. Lois Rodgers set the stage at Hattiesburg High for reflection on sexism and homophobia. A number of those New York principals were constructing curricula that would lead to the study of race and class. Shelley Neilsen and her colleagues in Co-Teach created the conditions for Missoula preschoolers to have a different experience of ability.

But once the lesson is over, once the alternative social arrangements disperse at the end of the hour, children move back into a world that is less generous to contemplation and growth. When those Monterey Park students leave the stage of *Womanspeak*, exhale the last powerful breaths of Susan B. Anthony and Emma Goldman, they must make their way across the complex social landscape of old-country gender expectations, commodified sexuality, a job structure that is still unfair to women. To be sure, these young women learn from *Womanspeak*, are emboldened by the dialogue — they are not without agency and imagination — but the limits they will encounter because of their gender can compromise what their education yields and what they envision for themselves. I think here of Sharon Davis, the physics teacher from Tupelo. In spite of her hard work and achievement in high school, she still observed a social structure around her that reflected back no images of women in science, and she began to doubt her ability to become a physician. The possible life she created for herself in the classroom seemed less and less likely as she surveyed the streets and offices of her small Mississippi town.

And the schools themselves can diminish hope and ability. As Sharon Davis pursued her studies in college, she encountered a sex-typed division of intellectual labor that intensified her doubts about

being a doctor. "I was encouraged to go into the med-tech program, not medical school . . . Girls were encouraged to become nurses, but not doctors; teachers, but not professors." Michelle Taigue, telling her Yaqui creation stories in school, was thought to be in need of remediation. Elena Castro went to school at a time — and this was not so long ago — when the use of Spanish was forbidden, and as a result, she was judged to be either intransigent or inept. The public school, that institution Horace Mann thought would be the "great equalizer" of American society, has in many ways compromised the democratic ideal. Bias and ignorance have been institutionalized in curriculum and instruction, counseling and assessment, in the thousands of small interactions between teachers and students in the school day.

It is instructive to keep in mind, however, that in some cases these violations did not evolve entirely from bigotry. The prohibition of Spanish, for example, while surely reflecting racist attitudes, was constructed, as well, from prevailing notions about assimilation and the process of forming national identity. The model of assimilation at work was sociologically and historically flawed — a careful reading of the immigrant experience reveals that people, even so-called model assimilationists, create complex mechanisms for maintaining and integrating old-country culture while coming to terms with the new — but at the time the linguistic prohibition seemed to some practitioners to be educationally sound. There is an important cautionary tale here. Many educational practices that we recognize in hindsight to be at best misguided were justified by prevailing belief and theory — were, in some cases, even seen as the forward-looking thing to do. To be sure, some of the awful things done to students in our classrooms, though shaped by broader social forces, must be understood as individual acts of cruelty. What is more disturbing is the way damage is done through standard wisdom, sanctioned practice.

We got a sense of some troubling traditional practices as we watched the teachers on this journey push against the status quo and listened to their reasoning. A number of the children in the COMETS program in Chicago were significantly limited in their knowledge of academic subjects, but rather than relying on standard approaches to remediation, their teachers tried creating for them a rich, multidisciplinary curriculum. "Even a kid who can't use a ruler," Michelle Smith observed, "can do some mathematical things." Joanne Wynn, the special education teacher at Hattiesburg High, knew that though her student La Fonda had a great deal of trouble speaking, she could move beyond low-level vocational training and, with technological assistance, use language in sophisticated ways: "The night time is like a hunter's home./You can see it black body./And you can see it million eyes."

For some time it has been accepted practice to respond to children who are having trouble with school tasks — or who, based on some assessment, are predicted to have trouble — by providing assistance through a curriculum that isolates for mastery disparate elements of discrete skills, that relies on drill and memory, that lowers expectations so as not to discourage, that limits the scope of assignments, that narrows rather than expands the focus of study. A lot of people in and outside school view these practices as sensible and humane. They mark traditional method in remedial and compensatory reading, writing, and math instruction, in English-as-a-second-language instruction and in some bilingual education programs, in special education, and in many of the courses students encounter in nonacademic tracks in high school. There has been educational theory to support such practices, instruction in teacher-education programs and commercially produced materials to promulgate them, legally mandated accountability measures to enforce a number of them, and in some cases professional and parental organizations developed around them. Such practices, and the theories driving them, shape the way we think and what we see. I remember a group of teachers from a neighboring district visiting Elena Castro's bilingual third-grade classroom in Calexico. Walking amid the dazzling student work, squeezing by kids clustered around a table, one turned to her colleague and whispered, "This is too much stimulation. Our students couldn't handle it." A number of the classrooms we visited developed in resistance to such beliefs.

In the beginning of the chapter on Los Angeles, I said that I've come to believe that a defining characteristic of good teaching is a tendency to push on the existing order of things. This is not simply rebelliousness; the teachers we visited are institutional beings. Rather, it's an ability to live one's working life with what philosopher Maxine Greene calls a "consciousness of possibility," an ability to imagine a better state of things, to, in Greene's language, "possibilize." Consider: Stephanie Terry asked herself why her inner-city Baltimore kids shouldn't be doing the kind of work she saw in elite schools. Carlos Jimenez wrote a history of Mexican Americans in order to teach what hadn't been taught before. Bud Reynolds envisioned students in economically devastated Wheelwright connected through electronic mail to young people across the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Bob Moses thought of the teaching of algebra in terms of the civil rights movement. Andy Bayliss stood in his classroom before school began in Polaris, Montana, and imagined how the space would change if he replaced those old desks with tables and chairs. The teachers in the Graphic Arts Academy in Pasadena decided to blur the boundaries that keep "academic" and "vocational" study separate, that split hand from brain. Michelle Taigue resisted the mes-

sage of failure in the literature on Indian education and formulated a curriculum that invited achievement. Shelley Neilsen tried to see through the categories of disability to "what the kids can do." The New York principals were creating schools where a range of children could study and work together, schools without rigid curricular tracks and disciplinary borders. You can read their interviews as a series of meditations on ability, achievement, and the social order.

There has developed over the last thirty years a critical literature, written both by educators and outside observers, that investigates the ways school has enacted bias and fostered inequality. Some of my own work falls within this tradition. These studies have helped us focus on the kinds of limiting beliefs and practices I have been discussing and have encouraged change in the way we teach and counsel children. The theoretical framework of some of the studies, however, or the generalizations that have been drawn from them, suggest a one-dimensional relationship between educational institutions and the social order, lead to a vision of schools as being, in some necessary and unitary way, the reproductive mechanisms of an unjust society. This perspective misses the history of work for social change in and around the classroom, the effects of so many to create democratic public space, the kind of teaching that is possible today, that waits to be done.

Many representations of school in our reform literature — and, for that fact, in the various forums of our culture wars — are static ideological abstractions. And teachers are either the focus of blame or, despite all the current talk about "teacher empowerment," are impotent shadow figures. We lack adequately complex models of schools as institutions in which both limiting and liberating forces contend. We rarely hear discussion, for example, of the ways bad ideas get converted into standard practices and the complex process by which teachers grow uncomfortable with them and begin to change them. To weigh common practice in the balance of your own beliefs and experience, your knowledge, your sense of the possible, is a dynamic and powerful act. It is also discomfiting, often unpleasant — for you're straining in the web of the accepted. It can produce doubt, uncertainty, and, chances are, will result in blunders, even failure as you try new things. This mix of agency and unease is rarely addressed in teacher education and is not part of our usual definitions and measures of good teaching, yet it is central to the realization of more humane institutional space.

Most discussions of change in schools revolve around major reform efforts or, on a different plane, around community action, legislation, or the courts. We saw the effects of such change especially as we traveled through Chicago, New York, Kentucky, and Mississippi. But perhaps because we tend to imagine social change in terms of major shifts and

transformations, and perhaps because we are so cynical about our public institutions, we play down or miss entirely the significance of the everyday acts of courage and insight, the little breakthroughs, the mundane reimagining of the possible. These are the particular human moments of institutional self-criticism and renewal. John Dewey suggested that "mind" is a verb; "[d]emocracy knows no final closure," notes social theorist Peter McLaren. How does the mind reflect back on itself and its attendant social structures in ways that foster democracy in the ongoing flow of classroom life?

IV IN *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, an analysis of the last hundred years of school reform in America, historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban note a common pattern in our nation's reform efforts: they come "from the top down or the outside in." That is, they are commonly conceived and advanced by people at a far remove from the place where any reform effort is targeted, where it would finally have its effect: the classroom, the immediate lives of teachers and students. This distance cannot help but influence the way problems are framed and the kinds of solutions that are formulated. The vantage point from which you consider schools — your location physically and experientially — will affect what you see and what you can imagine.

Many of the proposals to reform our schools — their modes of inquiry, their language, their recommendations — emanate from the office of the legislative analyst, from the corporate or foundation or university president's conference room, from policy panels and roundtables. Though some of these reformers solicit the views of administrators, teachers, and others close to the school, their analytic process tends to work at a high level of generality, with data on demographics, the economy, test scores, and the like; their focus tends to be on systems, structures, and broad social trends. This macro-level perspective is an important one. It places education in large social and economic contexts and encourages us to think of our schools in systemic ways. It is, to use examples of our time, legitimate to discuss the relation between education and the economy, work and school. Government and business concern about the preparation of the work force is not, of necessity, crass or malevolent, and the hope for a better material life for one's children has throughout this century driven participation in our nation's public educational experiment. And state and national goals, frameworks, and standards can play a role in improving the quality of schooling — though, as we saw when we got close to classrooms, they can have contradictory effects. Bud Reynolds and Delores Woody in Kentucky were emboldened by their state's reform guidelines; the

teachers we visited in Mississippi felt constrained and undercut by the performance goals in the Mississippi Education Reform Act.

And that seeming contradiction is a case in point.

If we situate ourselves in classrooms like those on this journey, find a seat and settle in, what might happen to the way we hear current debates and proposals about education, to the way we understand the issues and talk about schools? What kinds of questions would we ask, what kind of discussion might we desire? My hope is that we would begin to feel uncomfortable with, limited by, the rhetoric of decline and despair that characterizes so much of our public talk about the schools. What also might happen is that we would see current remedies in a different, or at least more nuanced way. We might ask ourselves how a particular proposal would advance or constrain the work we saw in a classroom that had special meaning for us, that caught us up in its intelligence and decency. Would that proposal create or restrict the conditions for other such classrooms to flourish? We might well continue to raise questions about school-work relationships or about standards, achievement, and accountability, but such questions would come from a broader network of experience, imagery, observation, and expression. What we imagine for our public schools would itself change.

Our talk about schools would include concerns about emotional as well as physical safety. It would consider the matter of respect — and we desperately need a national conversation about the ways, intellectual as well as social, by which respect for young people is conveyed. This talk would be rich with imagery, from all sorts of classrooms, in a range of communities, reflecting a wide sweep of histories, cultural practices, languages and dialects, classrooms vibrant with achievement and thoughtfulness, play and hard work, characterized by what developmental psychologist Eleanor Duckworth nicely calls the having of wonderful ideas.

This revitalized talk would build from and contribute to an expansive definition of intelligence — one befitting an egalitarian society — that resists single measures and the segmentation of hand and brain. We would consider, too, the way achievement includes deliberation, risk, unease, and the creative possibilities of failure. Our discussion would intersect themes too often split in debates about school but that blend continually in the kinds of classrooms we visited: authority, expectation, care, well-being, cognition, futurity, love. ("Is it still possible," New York principal Sylvia Rabiner asks, "to talk about love?") We might consider the connection between authority — who speaks and how — and the construction of knowledge. The way care enhances what you see and what you think is possible. The relation between care and standards, how expectation is not just a measure of achievement

but an invitation to achieve. The way love and intelligence together create civic space and a sense of the future.

There would be talk of principles, of decency and right and wrong, of commitment and connection. The classrooms we visited promoted the conditions for young people to act as moral beings and to engage in ethical deliberation. "We don't want to just educate technocrats," said Michael Johnson of New York's Science Skills Center. "We want people who have morals, who can say, 'No, you can't do that to people.'" Moral discourse has currently been appropriated by conservative writers and by the religious right and is either a lament for lost values or a call for sectarian belief. There is another moral discourse — powerful at times in our past but faint now — that needs to ring out across the Republic, a language that celebrates human worth and decries all that diminishes it.

Our fresh public talk would also include frank and angry appraisal of the way social and economic forces undercut our schools, continually threaten the kinds of classrooms represented in these pages. Such talk would, I hope, help us sharpen our critique of public education. Rather than sweeping condemnation, we would aim specific fury at damaging legislation and policy, at particular cases of corruption and ineptitude, at those who compromise safety, respect, and the potential of all young people to have wonderful ideas.

"The child of three who discovers what can be done with blocks," writes John Dewey, "or of six who finds out what he can make by putting five cents and five cents together, is really a discoverer, even though everybody else in the world knows it." "The experience of learning is itself democratic," says Michael Walzer, "bringing its own rewards of mutuality and camaraderie as well as of individual achievement." To imagine a vibrant democratic state, you must have a deep belief in the majesty of common intelligence, in its distribution through the population, and in the resultant ability of the population to become participatory civic beings. For all their contradictory fears and biases, our early advocates of public education — from Thomas Jefferson to Horace Mann — held that faith. It is striking, then, to behold the image of our young people that emerges in public discussion about the schools. Their ignorance is calibrated and broadcasted; they drift across charts, inarticulate. They are a threat to the present and future of the nation.

It is as if we have projected onto the next generation all the deficits of our own economic and political imagination. To be sure, there are things they don't know, can't do well, and, historically, our schools have failed many among them. But when we construct our nation's intellectual merit and our sense of the future from broad and aggregated test scores, we reduce teaching and learning to a few coordinates of

achievement. Such measures are not adequate to define our collective intelligence or the meaning and purpose of our schools. Septima Clark, a teacher for most of her life, encouraged us to "think of the lives that can be developed into Americans who will redeem the soul of America." A short list of test scores cannot spark such thought. The rhetoric of decline that appropriates these measures limits our imagination as well. It is a strange kind of critical language, presents itself as tough-minded, clear-headed, but is, in fact, weary, cynical, dismissive of so many kinds of achievement. It flattens perception, functions more as a bludgeon than an analytical tool.

Our national discussion of public schools is terribly thin of the specific moments of intellectual and social achievement that engender faith in democracy. We miss in our public talk the power of the block placed upon the block, of the sum of the coins. We miss the moments of possibility that distinguish the classrooms of this book, that emerge daily as we move back out into the schools, finding them in a middle school in Wapato, Washington, its community disrupted by poverty and violence, a school in which counselors, teachers, and students are working to create a safe space — "We're a work in progress," says the principal — where Yakima, Mexican, Asian, and Anglo students can learn and live together. Finding possibility after hours in the library of a high school in Lincoln, Nebraska, where a group of students have been reading the educational reform literature, trying to use it to heal their school's curricular and social divides. Sitting with teachers in Providence, Rhode Island, who are writing about their work as a way to influence school reform: "How do we make positive change sustainable?" asks one. "How do we create a rigorous curriculum that does not lose people?" asks another. "I want to both celebrate and investigate my school," says a third.

When a local public school is lost to incompetence, indifference, or despair, it should be an occasion for mourning, for it is a loss of a particular site of possibility. When public education itself is threatened, as it seems to be threatened now — by cynicism and retreat, by the cold rapture of the market, by thin measure and the loss of civic imagination — when this happens, we need to assemble what the classroom can teach us, articulate what we come to know, speak it loudly, hold it fast to the heart.