
The Physics of Power: Stories of Panopticism at Two Levels of the School System

Noah R. Jefferson
University of Minnesota Twin Cities

Margaret Smith-Peterson
University of Minnesota Twin Cities

Introduction

One of the more famous concepts from Michel Foucault's (1995) seminal book, *Discipline and Punish*, is the Panopticon. By elaborating on Jeremy Bentham's 18th-century architectural design for a new prison, Foucault (1995) worked to show the many ways in which the perpetual surveillance of the Panopticon is articulated throughout modern society in order to produce "a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). In this paper, we work with the concept of panopticism to explore our lived experiences at both the classroom and district levels. In particular, we consider the ways in which panopticism functions through "hierarchical networks" (Foucault, 1995, p. 220) of students, teachers, principals, and district officials.

After a brief literature review, Noah works to relate panopticism to specific behavior management practices at his school which normalize docile bodies. In the subsequent section, Margaret relates hierarchical networks and panopticism to surveillance at the district level. In addition to engaging Foucault's theory of panopticism, both sections leverage Simone Browne's (2015) concept of *racializing surveillance* to engage a more racially conscious analysis of surveillance in school systems. Browne's work allows us to highlight possibilities for resisting surveillance through specific

examples drawn from our narratives. An overarching goal of this paper is to illustrate how hierarchical networks of surveillance are produced and sustained across the various levels of educational systems, as well as to explore the ways in which panopticism functions to control and manage bodies.

Power, Panopticism, and Schooling: A Brief Literature Review

Foucault's work has been taken up widely in the field of education. With brevity in mind, we begin with a brief discussion of Foucault's conception of power and its role in producing subjectivities. We then provide a snapshot of the various ways scholars have used the idea of panopticism in classrooms and at the school system level.

Power

As a historian, Foucault (1995) was interested in the advent of industrial and post-industrial expressions of power after centuries of monarchical rule. He drew much of his theorizing around power from the historical moment in which sovereign power transitioned to a different form: disciplinary power. Under monarchical rule, sovereign power took the form of spectacular public displays of punishment that aimed to "to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign" (Foucault, 1995, p. 49). Disciplinary power, on the other hand, was more subtle, distributed, and continuous; it proliferated through institutions (e.g., prisons, hospitals, schools, the military) that provided the means and mechanisms to discipline society through the regulation of individuals, which was achieved through surveillance and the encouraged internalization of norms. While Foucault presented the evolution of disciplinary power as a departure from sovereign power, Browne (2015) reminds us that for Black people both of these forms of power continued to work together: "when that body is black, the grip [on the body] hardly loosened during slavery and continued post-Emancipation with, for example, the mob violence of lynching and other acts of racial terrorism" (p. 38).

To Foucault (1980, 1990, 1995), our contemporary experience of power is as a force that permeates all situations, all people, all classes and castes. Rather than something that is held by individuals, power circulates as it is produced by and through relationships, and its effects become internalized: "power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). Thus, individuals both produce

subjectivities and are produced by the omnipresence of power (Foucault, 1972). The production of identities, convictions, ideologies, knowledges, and self (i.e., subjectivities) are recursively and perpetually in relationship with power.

In this paper, we have worked to operationalize this conception of power as we reflect on our lived experiences as educators within different levels of educational systems. In particular, we emphasize *power relations* (Foucault, 1972), a concept that stresses the intersubjective nature of power. Foucault (1990) claimed that “power comes from everywhere” (p. 93) because human interactions form a network of relations that represent the essential sites of power production. This is a particularly important concept for analysis of and reflection on educational practice, as our encounters with students, parents, teachers, and administrators all represent power relations. Our analyses of panopticism (Foucault, 1995) at different levels of educational systems help us to think more critically about the role of surveillance in shaping these power relations and maintaining racist oppression.

Panopticism at the Classroom Level

Scholarship on the Panopticon in schools has often focused on the practices teachers use to surveil students. Some scholars have focused on traditional forms of classroom surveillance. Gallagher (2010), for example, documented teachers in a Scottish primary school watching and listening to students to ensure orderliness and quiet, and Simmons (2010) discussed school architecture and the arrangement of classroom furniture to facilitate the supervision of student behavior. Others have highlighted the increasing influence of new technologies, including CCTV cameras (Hope, 2013) and the use of student databases (Selwyn, 2011). Through interviews with staff at primary and secondary schools in England, Selwyn (2011) documented how teachers monitored and controlled students’ internet activity. The intent of this surveillance and control was to prevent bullying and ensure engagement with “‘high quality’ content” (p. 481), but it also had the effect of ingraining in students a sense that they were always being watched, leading them to monitor their own behavior. While these scholars have warned of digital technologies expanding the scope of school surveillance, they have also emphasized that school surveillance is not new; these technologies tend to reinforce, rather than change, already existing practices and power relations (Hope, 2013; Selwyn, 2011; Simmons, 2010).

Some scholars have attended to the tools used to surveil teachers, such as digital management technologies (Selwyn, 2011) and the mandated use of scripted curricula (Bushnell, 2003). Bushnell (2003), for example, interviewed teachers about the impacts of

curriculum standards and “‘teacher-proof’ materials” (p. 260), which they felt devalued their expertise and limited their authority, autonomy, and creativity. These tools make it easier for school administrators and parents to keep a watchful eye on teachers, who face consequences for going off script, straying too far from a standard (which must be posted on the board at all times [Bushnell, 2003]), or failing to update student data in electronic systems (Selwyn, 2011). Just as was the case for students, the result of this surveillance is self-monitoring and a degree of docility (Bushnell, 2003; Hope, 2013; Selwyn, 2011). Contrary to the panoptic model, however, these authors highlighted opportunities for resistance, such as counter-surveillance (Hope, 2013), avoiding a teacher’s gaze (Gallagher, 2010), or teacher union organizing (Bushnell, 2003).

Panopticism at the School System Level

Literature that engages Foucault’s (1995) conception of the Panopticon at the school system level has addressed a variety of contexts. For example, Deever (1991) investigated the ways in which panoptic power was used to maintain segregation across a legally mandated reintegration school district. Systems-level power relations were embedded in and articulated throughout a hierarchical network to maintain segregation: parents in an all-white PTA functioned as panoptic agents by releasing memos to the school district community claiming that their observations of Black teachers and Black students represented threats to white teachers and white students, and the school board instituted a policy of ability grouping to maximize the panoptic power network and the maintenance of segregation.

Other scholars have explored the Panopticon within the context of state and national policies, such as standardized testing and teacher evaluation (Bushnell, 2003; Gilliom, 2010; Goldstein, 2010). For example, Bushnell (2003) analyzed qualitative data from New York City elementary school teachers and argued that teacher evaluations function as panoptic surveillance delimiting the professionalism and agency of teachers. Bushnell also explored the ways in which the external measurement of a school’s efficacy through high stakes testing gives systems-level authorities the panoptic mechanism to take control of schools and classrooms within their jurisdiction. Scholars have also addressed the ways in which special education laws and policies place school systems under constant surveillance (Angus & Winslade, 2015; Morgan, 2005). For example, Angus and Winslade (2015) have stated that, “in special education, someone is always monitoring someone else” (p. 1). The hierarchical network of surveillance within special education is particularly extreme: it extends from “the federal government level and runs all the way down to the special education staff”

(Angus & Winslade, 2015, p. 1). At every level of the system, the Panopticon functions to ensure correct implementation of special education and required reporting; sanctions in the form of withheld funding are used to produce docility.

While these studies represent only a small sampling of the literature addressing panopticism at the systems level of public education, they illustrate the utility of applying this Foucauldian framework to power relations within and across school systems. We shed light on the connections between the many levels of the school system by reflecting on our experiences within “the panoptic machine” (Foucault, 1995, p. 217). Though there is some disagreement about whether schools truly fit the panoptic prototype (Gallagher, 2010; Hope, 2013; Simmons, 2010), our purpose here is not to demonstrate an exact correspondence between schools and Bentham’s ideal prison. Rather, we use the Panopticon as a model, not because it perfectly describes our experiences, but because using Foucault’s work as a “point of departure” (Gallagher, 2010, p. 262) helps us to examine the surveillance practices that we participated in and to reflect on the ways those practices shaped power relations and produced subjects, regardless of our intentions.

Docile Students, Docile Teacher: Surveillance in a School Setting

Surveillance, in the words of Michel Foucault (1995), is “at the heart of the practice of teaching” (p. 176). My (Noah’s) goal in this section is to think through my experiences of surveillance during my five years as a high school teacher, first using *Discipline and Punish* and then Simone Browne’s (2015) *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* as models. Foucault’s work helps me to see the effects of school surveillance and to critically reflect on the tension between authority and autonomy that all teachers face. Browne’s work forces me to consider whether my surveillance practices reproduced racial dominance, and it helps me to see in a new light my students’ acts of resistance to the subjection that surveillance engenders.

The most basic component of classroom surveillance is, of course, a teacher watching over their students. In both pre-service training and in-service professional development, mentors taught me to arrange the classroom furniture strategically, and to always position my body so that I could see every student at once. Though the classroom “architecture,” as it were, did not strictly follow Bentham’s panoptic model (Foucault, 1995), I did arrange tables in a roughly semicircular formation whenever possible, with all students facing me at the front of the room. There may not have been walls separating students, but my position made it possible to notice and stifle any attempts at communication between students in order to ensure that

there was “no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time” (Foucault, 1995, p. 201). Of course, I did expect my students to collaborate at times; group work and partner discussions were frequent occurrences in my classroom. But I put strict limits on when, how, and sometimes with whom, students should collaborate. At certain moments during a class period, talking to a classmate could incur punishment. At other moments, *not* talking to a classmate, or talking to the *wrong* classmate, or talking too loudly or about the wrong thing, could incur punishment. Far from a disorganized mass, this was an intentional “composing [of] forces in order to obtain an efficient machine” (Foucault, 1995, p. 164).

The possibility of punishment was the mechanism that produced docility in my classroom. As Foucault (1995) stated, “at the heart of all disciplinary systems functions a small penal mechanism” (p. 177). I had a wide array of punishments at my disposal, ranging from the relatively minor—verbal reprimand, deduction of “Scholarship” points, lowering a student’s “Engagement” grade for the day—to the more serious, including phone calls home, referrals for detention, or sending students out of class. While the more serious penalties were reserved for infractions of school rules, the minor penalties aimed to correct “the slightest departures from correct behaviour” (Foucault, 1995, p. 178). In other words, I punished students not only for what they did, but also for what they *didn’t* do. Any student who did not conform to my expectations of what hard work looked like was liable to be punished. These small penalties were not exercises of sovereign power meant to send a message about my authority; rather, they were disciplinary efforts to get my students to internalize norms of “good student” behavior.

The techniques of surveillance that I used included not only observation, but also documenting student behavior and productivity. I carried a clipboard with me at all times while teaching, and used it to record who was on time and who was late, who appeared to be working hard or not, who took too long to get back to their seat after a transition, and any number of other behaviors that I deemed worthy of an increase or decrease in “Scholarship” points. This was, essentially, a perpetual examination, which situated students “in a network of writing ... a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (Foucault, 1995, p. 189). This documentation was not discreet; I wanted students to see me, to know they were being watched, recorded, and rewarded or punished. I wanted them to believe that nothing escaped my gaze so that they would eventually come to surveil themselves. Describing Bentham’s Panopticon, Foucault (1995) stated that “he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself” (p. 202). In

other words, if my students believed I might be watching and recording their actions at all times, they would regulate their own behavior without me needing to intervene. This system of records captured not only students' behavior but also the products of their work. Even if I could not watch students, as when they did their homework at home, I could enforce the proper completion of assignments by giving grades, which could act as either punishment or reward.

Foucault helps me think through the effects of this surveillance. The Panopticon, Foucault (1995) wrote,

has a role of amplification; although it arranges power, although it is intended to make it more economic and more effective, it does so not for power itself ... its aim is to strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply. (pp. 207–208)

My intent in embracing these tactics of surveillance was not to increase my own authority or to produce my students as certain types of subjects; my intent was to provide my students with a better education. Regardless of my intent, however, the result was indeed a power relation that encouraged docility and placed limits on acceptable ways of being for my students. While my surveillance practices undoubtedly created structure that facilitated learning (Yang, 2009), they also shaped students according to normalizing discourses of appropriate behavior (Hope, 2013). This is a tension inherent in the practice of teaching: we must set reasonable boundaries for students, but also hope to encourage autonomy. Foucault's thinking on surveillance and power does not resolve this tension, but rather forces me to reconsider my teaching practices, including those aimed at democratizing the classroom. When I encouraged or allowed academically-strong students to help their peers, for example, was I really "empowering" students like I hoped to? Or was I simply creating "hierarchical networks" (Foucault, 1995, p. 220), increasing the number of watching eyes in the classroom, and making power more distributed and subtle in order to achieve greater docility? When students did as I wished even when I was not watching, was that true freedom? Or was it the effect of the "automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1995, p. 201) and the deep internalization of normalizing discourses?

My students were not the only ones being surveilled at school. Above me in the hierarchical pyramid was my principal, who might drop in at any time for an observation, usually once a week and without warning. "Disciplinary power," according to Foucault (1995), "constantly supervises the very individuals who are entrusted with the task of supervising" (p. 177). My principal also periodically checked my electronic

gradebook and kept other records of student performance in order to have "data" for our weekly check-ins and my twice-annual evaluation. The result of this surveillance was, of course, a degree of docility in me, and greater adherence to the practices that produced docility in my students. Even when I wanted to loosen the reins of surveillance in my classroom by, for example, allowing a student to wear a sweatshirt on a cold day or use the bathroom without a pass, I knew that I could be reprimanded for such behavior. When students objected to these restrictions, I could pass the buck to the principal by simply claiming that I had to follow school rules. The principal could pass it on to the Head of School, who could pass it to anonymous state lawmakers if necessary. "Although it is true that its pyramidal organization gives it a 'head', it is the apparatus as a whole that produces 'power' and distributes individuals in this permanent and continuous field" (p. 177). This institutional arrangement of "supervisors, perpetually supervised" (p. 177) almost guarantees that the hierarchical network of power relations will remain in place regardless of who fills the various positions. For Foucault (1995), the Panopticon is "a machinery that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference. Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power" (p. 202).

This does not mean that individuals in the pyramid have no agency to resist subjection and to wield power differently. Nor does it mean that those individuals' identities are irrelevant, as *Discipline and Punish* might have readers think. While the Panopticon "helps explain how disciplinary power operates ... it does not help us understand the disparate experiences within disciplinary power structures" (Simmons, 2010, p. 67). It cannot be ignored that I am a white man who taught in classrooms composed almost entirely of Black students. In some ways, then, my surveillance practices reified racial boundaries and reproduced dominance, enacting what Simone Browne (2015) has deemed "racializing surveillance" (p. 16). Browne's work reminds me that there are other historical and theoretical models beyond the Panopticon for thinking about surveillance, which bring my attention to the ever-present significance of race and anti-Blackness.

In particular, Browne (2015) suggested that rather than the Panopticon, we might look to "the archive of slavery" (p. 8) in order to consider the historical roots of contemporary surveillance practices. She argued that slavery had operated through both the "excessive means and force" (p. 35) characteristic of sovereign power and the "regulation of the subject" (p. 37) associated with disciplinary power. Citing a set of "rules for overseers recorded in the mid-nineteenth century by Charles William Tait for the governing of enslaved laborers on *Sylvania*, his 6,000-acre plantation in Columbus, Texas," Browne (2015) stated that "Tait's directives on

the managerial control of slaves demonstrate how disciplinary power operated by way of set rules, instructions, routines, inspection, hierarchical observation, the timetable, and the examination” (p. 51). Tait also insisted that enslaved people not be allowed to leave the plantation without a written pass. In addition to thinking with the Panopticon, I could situate the surveillance techniques I used—such as observation, perpetual examination, and bathroom passes—in the legacy of slavery. My aim here is not to draw a direct comparison between the institutions of slavery and schooling, but rather to highlight similar mechanisms of surveillance and to consider their effects. This is, of course, uncomfortable to think about. At the same time, it is important for me to question, did my classroom management practices reproduce historical practices of racial domination, possibly reinforcing racist stereotypes, norms, and boundaries? Though this was never my intent, looking back I can see that these may have been effects of the surveillance in my classroom.

This rethinking through the archive of slavery also reframes the way I think about resistance. Foucault (1995) in many ways overemphasized the totalizing nature of the Panopticon. Though he argued that “disciplinary power ... leaves no zone of shade” (Foucault, 1995, p. 177), my students certainly found ways to go unseen. They knew when my back was turned and which hallway nooks were relatively hidden. They knew what to wear to conceal a headphone or an untucked shirt. Browne (2015) has called these forms of resistance *dark sousveillance*: “tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom” (p. 21). Her formulation helps me see that when my students evaded or “talked back” (hooks, 1989) to surveillance practices, they were producing themselves as subjects and challenging racial norms. Although the ideal Panopticon “never intervenes, [and] it is exercised spontaneously and without noise” (Foucault, 1995, p. 206), I had to intervene frequently in my classroom, and I often failed to change students’ behavior. “The very failure of panopticism to produce docile subjects” (Browne, 2015, p. 40) illustrates the reality of constant resistance. Students demanded to be themselves in spite of the surveillance practices aimed at making them docile.

Reflecting on my experiences, I wish I had done more to resist some of my school’s more severe disciplinary practices. While my ability to do so was limited by my position within the hierarchical network, and I did sometimes let infractions slide when I knew I could avoid censure from my principal, I could have taken on more risk to allow the production of more freedom and autonomy for my students. Though I spoke out against these practices on occasion, I could have collectively organized with teachers and students to change them (Bushnell, 2003). My purpose here is not

to denounce all of these practices categorically, nor is it to suggest that teachers embrace a permissive discipline-free environment, what Yang (2009) has called “the liberal classroom” (p. 55). Foucault’s work does not call on us to judge disciplinary power as good or bad, but rather to think about its effects (Simmons, 2010). Observing my students as they worked and assessing their progress certainly helped them learn, and my principal’s observations and feedback made me a better teacher. At the same time, it is important that I understand how these practices created power relations that produced docile bodies and reproduced white supremacy.

Panopticism and the Central Office

In this section, I (Margaret) continue the discussion of how panopticism functions through a hierarchical network by considering its effects at the district level. I use my reflections as a teacher and district administrator to consider the many ways in which I was enmeshed in a network of power relations functioning through panopticism, which Foucault (1995) characterizes as “a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it” (p. 201). That is, a panoptic machine functions throughout a hierarchized network of individuals who themselves perform surveillance and serve as conduits for power and control. Furthermore, because of historic racial segregation across large, urban school districts, the operations of central offices seem to sometimes function as forms of racializing surveillance (Browne, 2015). Browne (2015), who revised Foucault’s conception of the Panopticon, defined racializing surveillance as “enactments of surveillance [that] reify boundaries along racial lines, thereby reifying race” (p. 16). Central offices may leverage a range of disciplinary projects to enhance racializing surveillance with the outcome of maintaining segregation.

Many of the operations of the panoptic machine I describe in this section were spurred by the accountability agenda in public education. Accountability reforms including the No Child Left Behind Act and later, the Every Student Succeeds Act, emphasize high stakes evaluations of students, teachers, administrators, schools, and school systems. This focus on accountability has become heavily emphasized across the country, and schools with poor test scores are the particular targets of the panoptic machine. In large, segregated, urban school districts, such schools often serve low income students of color and are sometimes referred to as “turnaround schools” (e.g., schools in the lowest third regionally in terms of standardized test performance; see Huberman et al., 2011), a euphemism I use in this section. The accountability structures and practices to which turnaround schools are subjected

become implicated in the panoptic machine as forms of racializing surveillance.

As educators in large urban school districts, my colleagues and I were members of a sprawling network of power relations. Personally, and this is likely true for at least some of my former colleagues, I did not perceive the ways in which I functioned as a conduit for a larger political agenda that was ultimately driven by whiteness, a point I develop throughout this section. In what follows, I extrapolate on the ways in which district offices function as racializing, panoptic machines by paralleling Noah's discussion of the mechanisms of surveillance at the classroom level. I describe the roles of architecture, hierarchized networks, and discipline as instruments for the panoptic machine at the school system level and consider ways in which inequities are perpetuated by such practices and features of panopticism.

Architecture

Central offices of large, urban school districts first and foremost function as Panopticons through their carefully selected physical locations, which are sometimes positioned in or near racially segregated, economically depressed areas. In one district, the architecture of the central office building was strikingly different from that of the surrounding buildings, many of which were prewar, red brick and concrete structures containing small, local businesses. The central office was a large, corporate structure, much taller than the surrounding buildings and completely encased in glass windows. Its location put the central office in close proximity to the city's most "at-risk" schools: those that tended to perform at the lowest levels on state tests, had the highest annual teacher turnover, and served a majority of so-called "racially isolated" students (Office for Civil Rights, 2020). Many large, urban school districts, such as New York City Public Schools and Boston Public Schools have maintained central offices with similar proximal locations to predominantly Black and Brown neighborhoods in high poverty areas of their districts. From a panoptic perspective, what advantage might this particular kind of location serve for the central office?

Foucault (1995) traced the roots of panopticism to the historical theatre of a 17th-century plague in an unnamed European town. Rituals of exclusion and various other disciplinary mechanisms emerged out of a need for total control through containment. A surveillance system that required permanent registration, which was communicated up and down a hierarchy of officials, ensured the complete control of bodies throughout the town to prevent the spread of disease. In this way, Foucault defined the first function of panopticism through the "discipline-blockade, the enclosed institution, established on the edges of society"

(p. 209). When large, urban school districts choose to locate their central offices in or very near to predominantly Black and Brown, low-income neighborhoods, Foucault's conception of the discipline-blockade serves as a useful analytic device. The locality of the central office not only provides increased surveillance of the school staff, children, and families, but ensures a form of quarantine by creating an enclosed system. Although the conscious intentions of leaders who choose these locations may be to provide increased support to such schools, bureaucratic accountability practices exercise the panoptic effect and may enhance racializing surveillance.

The advantages to district authorities of locating the central office in close proximity to an enclosed system include the ability to deploy a continuous stream of central office staff (i.e., hierarchized officials) throughout the enclosed system with ease and efficiency; the ability to produce enhanced documentation of schools and students to further investigate and sometimes establish their status as low performers; and the ability to use fidelity mandates around curriculum implementation to justify enhanced surveillance and disciplining. I address each of these points in the following sections.

Hierarchized Officials

Based on my reflections at work in and under central offices, the panoptic mechanism of surveilling and disciplining the most racially segregated portions of districts is often supported through a network of hierarchized officials. This process begins with the formation of a team and the appointment of its leader, whom I shall call the Lead Administrator of Turnaround Schools (LATS). District officials sometimes use "satellite" models of management that hierarchize positions within such teams: the LATS appoints "turnaround officials" to surround and support their goals in the areas of math, literacy, and "social-emotional" learning. Other non-specific officials serve as instructional coaches. This team, granted unique documentation and surveilling authorities, spend time conducting student and teacher observations, reviewing assessment data, and engaging "feedback meetings" with teachers, principals and other school staff.

The LATS is tasked with decisions regarding whether or not principals may keep their positions (lest they be transferred elsewhere) based on observations and reports of school quality drawn from tests scores, administrator observations, teacher observations, behavior incident reports, and other forms of data. The Superintendent of Schools decides whether or not the LATS may keep their job, based on the extent to which the schools themselves "turned around" their state test scores. The members of the school board may decide whether or not the Superintendent may keep their job

based on the extent to which the district managed to close its racial “achievement gap.” And ultimately, the school board members are observed by the general, local constituency whenever their terms are up for reelection. Thus, every member of the hierarchized system is subjected to constant evaluation, “axial visibility,” increasing each individual’s “anxious awareness of being observed” (Foucault, 1995, pp. 200, 202).

Discipline and Segregation

These hierarchized officials perform a wide range of disciplinary projects. For example, as districts undergo implementations of various mandated curricula, hierarchized officials may strive to ensure teacher and principal compliance with the scope, sequence, and script of curricula. While more affluent, non-turnaround schools might be allowed to deviate from scripts and lesson sequences, schools in low-income communities that are predominantly attended by students of color are often expected to follow the products page-by-page and to the letter. In the same way that Noah used his clipboard to conduct a perpetual examination at the classroom level, hierarchized officials observe, document, and report on schools’ “fidelity of implementation” across the most segregated portions of districts. Coaching is used to urge teacher compliance, while school administrators sometimes take variously rigid stands on fidelity of implementation, such that the term “fidelity” becomes a loathsome word to many teachers. This disciplinary project involves a perpetual examination in which, at some schools, teachers are expected to be synchronized in their fidelity of implementation and unannounced inspections could confirm whether they are teaching the correct page number as the rest of the related classrooms.

Hierarchized officials may also produce the effect of maintaining various forms of segregation across large school districts through their panoptic, disciplinary activities. According to Foucault (1995), discipline functions to assure “the ordering of human multiplicities” (p. 218). He underscored the evolution of disciplinary projects as attempts to fix “floating population[s]” and to arrest or regulate movement (Foucault, 1995, p. 218). Therefore, the hierarchical network of central office employees, whose job it is to improve the quality of schools, perform disciplinary projects that maintain the segregating functionality of the discipline-blockade by arresting movement. In segregated areas, teachers, school administrators, and children could be worked on for the sake of improvement. The racializing surveillance and attempts to correct problematic, undisciplined performances in the areas of behavior and academics justifies the “quarantined city”: implicitly, the suggestion could be that until these individuals are “repaired” and brought

into order, they may not be allowed to integrate across the city.

In my experience, the racializing panoptic machine is often driven by overt and covert fears in the white community that poor people of color from segregated portions of districts may be allowed to enter the whiter and wealthier schools. The disciplinary projects of central offices further this mission by characterizing segregated schools as failing and thus requiring continuous surveillance. The maintenance of control, exclusion, and containment of segregation is facilitated through disciplinary projects that produce official documentation of failures in student academic performance and behavior, as well as teacher and principal failures to adhere to scripted, sequenced curriculum and other mandates. Foucault (1995) described the “carceral city” (p. 307) in which a permanent underclass of delinquents is purposefully maintained to support the illicit activities of the ruling class. In the same way, districts sometimes deepen the perception that segregated schools are failing through the mechanisms described here and characterize such schools as a permanent underclass. This advantages those white stakeholders who covertly (and occasionally overtly) resist desegregation through proposed rezoning efforts, a phenomenon widely seen across the U.S. school system (Shyman, 2018).

Agency and Acts of Resistance

The influence of Foucault’s (1995) genealogy of the disciplinary society has been to raise the curtain on our own subjugations and taken-for-granted roles in perpetuating oppressions. Yet Foucault, especially in his earlier works (Deveaux, 1994), may have obfuscated the function (and even the possibility) of human agency. His complex analysis of the post-structural nature of power relations as ever-shifting and fractal-like makes it difficult to argue for the role of human agency in a Foucauldian analysis of panopticism. Yet Browne’s (2015) critical reinterpretation of panopticism allows us to reconceptualize the ways in which human agency functions as resistance to totalizing surveillance in classrooms and school systems. As Noah has pointed out, Foucault’s (1995) contention that the panopticon produces docile bodies is often incongruent with our lived experiences. Browne, citing Boyne (2000), detailed a range of activities from prison riots to the formation of subcultures within oppressive institutions that reveal human agencies at work. Browne’s concept of dark sousveillance encompasses Noah’s description of the ways in which students go unseen, as well as Mann’s (2013) definition of sousveillance: “observation or recording by an entity not in a position of power or authority over the subject of the veillance” (p. 3). “Dark sousveillance is an analytical frame that takes disruptive staring and talking back as a form of argumentation”

(Browne, 2015, p. 164) and resistance with the potential to disrupt power relations.

Parents, students and communities have used dark sousveillance to resist the racializing surveillance enacted through accountability and classroom management practices such as those we have described. For example, dark sousveillance subverted an attempt to implement a scripted reading curriculum that contained racist tropes and stereotypes in text and images when parents and teachers got hold of early copies and exposed them to the media, forcing district officials to cancel the contract with the curriculum distributor (Loewus, 2015). Students of color have captured racist and violent acts of discipline in the classroom through the use of cell phone videos (e.g., Associated Press, 2016). Parents of color have likewise captured teachers on video using racist speech (e.g., NBC10 Philadelphia, 2019). And students have used dark sousveillance to expose racist actions and discourses of peers (e.g., Lorenz & Rosmen, 2020). These examples of dark sousveillance have produced widespread outrage and systemic changes, illuminating the potential of human agency to disrupt and transform subjectivities and power relations. Browne (2015) suggested such moments of dark sousveillance can be strategies for “coping, resistance and critique” and characterized them as “acts of freedom” (p. 68). Dark sousveillance can also shift how students, parents, teachers, and school and district administrators think about observation, who can watch whom, and who has the capacity to exercise power, potentially catalyzing a broader transformation in discourses around school surveillance.

Conclusion

Through our experiences at the school and district levels, we have illustrated how widespread practices of surveillance create a hierarchical network that aims to produce docility in students, teachers, principals, and district officials. In many ways the Panopticon succeeds in ensuring the “automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1995, p. 201). But this aim is never fully realized, for power engenders resistance: at every level of the educational pyramid we find individuals and communities demanding to define themselves, refusing to self-surveil, exclaiming that they have not internalized docility. As Simone Browne’s (2015) work reminds us, when individuals resist and speak back to surveillance, they produce some degree of autonomy and form a foundation for collective resistance that challenges disciplining and racializing mechanisms. The process of reflection taken up in this paper has shifted the ways we understand ourselves as educators and the ways we think about our relations with others at every level of the school system. Using Foucault’s and Browne’s work to reflect on our experiences helps us to see the ways we unknowingly perpetuated forms of

domination and to envision possibilities for resistance to panoptic and racializing surveillance.

References

- Angus, G., & Winslade, J. M. (2015). How Foucault's panopticon governs special education in California. *Wisdom in Education*, 5(1), 1–11.
- Associated Press (2016, September 2). Deputy who tossed a S.C. high school student won't be charged. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/03/afternoonupdate/deputy-who-tossed-a-sc-high-school-student-wont-be-charged.html>
- Boyne, R. (2000). Post-Panopticism. *Economy and Society* 29(2), 285–307.
- Browne, S. (2015). *Dark matters: On the surveillance of blackness*. Duke University Press Books.
- Bushnell, M. (2003). Teachers in the schoolhouse panopticon: Complicity and resistance. *Education and Urban Society*, 35(3), 251–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124503035003001>
- Deever, B. (1991, April 2). *The panopticon of tracking: Desegregation and curriculum change in a southern school, 1968–1972* [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of The Society for the Study of Curriculum History, Chicago, IL, United States. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED406459>
- Deveaux, M. (1994). Feminism and empowerment: A critical reading of Foucault. *Feminist Studies*, 20(2), 223–247.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archeology of knowledge*. Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. The Harvester Press.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction* (vol. 1). Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (2nd Vintage Books ed.). Vintage Books.
- Gallagher, M. (2010). Are schools panoptic? *Surveillance & Society*, 7(3/4), 262–272.
- Gilliom, J. (2010). Lying, cheating, and teaching to the test. In T. Monahan & R. D. Torres (Eds.), *Schools under surveillance: Cultures of control in public education* (pp. 194–209). Rutgers University Press.
- Goldstein, R. A. (2004). Who needs the government to police us when we can do it ourselves? The new panopticon in teaching. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 4(3), 320–328. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708603262715>
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black* (1st ed). Between the Lines.
- Hope, A. (2013). Foucault, panopticism and school surveillance research. In M. Murphy (Ed.), *Social theory and education research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida* (pp. 35–51). Routledge.
- Huberman, M., Parrish, T., Hannan, S., Arellanes, M., & Shambaugh, L. (2011). *Turnaround schools in California: Who are they and what strategies do they use?* California Comprehensive Center at WestEd. <https://www.air.org/resource/turnaround-schools-california-who-are-they-and-what-strategies-do-they-use>
- Loewus, L. (2015, September 18). Offensive early-literacy books anger Minneapolis teachers, are pulled. *Education Week*. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2015/09/offensive_early-literacy_books_anger_minneapolis_teachers.html
- Lorenz, T. & Rosman, K. (2020, June 16). High school students and alumni are using social media to expose racism. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/style/blm-accounts-social-media-high-school.html>
- Mann, S. (2013). Veillance and reciprocal transparency: Surveillance versus souveillance, AR glass, lifelogging and wearable computing.” *2013 IEEE International Symposium on Technology and Society (ISTAS)*, 1–12. <http://wearcam.org/veillance/part1.pdf>
- Morgan, A. (2005). Governmentality versus choice in contemporary special education. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(3), 325–348.
- NBC10 Philadelphia. (2019, October 10). *Teacher goes on racist rant in school parking lot after fender bender, parent says*. <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/national-international/drexel-hill-middle-school-teacher-racist-rant-upper-darby-pennsylvania/1979363/>
- Office for Civil Rights (2020). *Guidance on the voluntary use of race to achieve diversity and avoid racial isolation in elementary and secondary schools*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/guidance-ese-201111.html>
- Selwyn, N. (2011). ‘It’s all about standardisation’ – Exploring the digital (re)configuration of school management and administration. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(4), 473–488. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2011.625003>
- Shyman, E. (2018). Smoke and mirrors: A thematically based polemic of whiteness and the myth of desegregation in US school reform. *whiteness*

and Education, 3(2), 122-140.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2018.1545247>

- Simmons, L. (2010). The docile body in school space. In T. Monahan & R. D. Torres (Eds.), *Schools under surveillance: Cultures of control in public education* (pp. 55–70). Rutgers University Press.
- Yang, K. W. (2009). Discipline or punish? Some suggestions for school policy and teacher practice. *Language Arts*, 87(1), 49–61.