Tanya Domi:
Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of The City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:
Michelle Fine is a distinguished professor of critical psychology, women's studies, social welfare, American studies and urban education at the Graduate Center, CUNY. She is a founding faculty member of the Public Science Project, a university, community research space designed in collaboration with movements for racial and educational justice. As a scholar, expert witness in litigation, a teacher and an educational activist, her work centers theoretically, and epistemically on questions of justice and dignity, privilege and oppression, and how solidarities emerge.

Tanya Domi:
Her PhD student working with Dr. Fine is Mica Baum-Tuccillo, who is a researcher with the Public Science Project, a Publics Lab fellow, and a doctoral student in critical psychology at the Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi:
They are currently working on research about youth justice and police reform in collaboration was several community-based and public organizations, including the Youth Justice Research Collaborative, Children's Defense Fund, Youth Represent and Citizens' Committee for Children. Mica is a licensed social worker and formally a teacher and student at an alternative transfer high school in New York City. Welcome to the Thought Project, Michelle Fine, and Mica Baum-Tuccillo.

Michelle Fine:
It's a pleasure to be here. Thanks Tanya.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Thanks for having us, Tanya.

Tanya Domi:
It's really good to have both of you here, ironically for our listeners, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in New York State suspending high stakes testing this past year, and some educational experts think the pandemic may provide the impetus to re-examine these testing procedures that have often held back many students from advancing to graduation from high school. Those students who may have failed or had a major life event that prevented them from moving forward to graduation may end up in schools that are referred to as alternative transfer high schools, which are typically viewed as a last chance opportunity for students on the margins to graduate and maybe able to move forward to adulthood and other educational opportunities.

Tanya Domi:
Our guests today have studied these schools in New York City as a social science participatory research project under the auspices of the Public Science Project at the Graduate Center, CUNY. So late last year,
Both of you through the auspices of the Public Science Project, published a report, along with some colleagues that you worked with in other organizations, the name of this report is, And Still They Rise: Lessons from Students in New York City’s Alternative Transfer High Schools. How did you both get interested in learning more about transfer high schools and how did you go about this research?

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
You want to start Michelle?

Michelle Fine:
Sure. So I’m going to let Mica tell most of the details, but I've been on the faculty at the Graduate Center for a long time, and I’m one of the founders, the Public Science Project. And we’re a research organization that works in solidarity with social movements, community-based organizations and youth groups or folks in prison under siege.

Michelle Fine:
We came upon this opportunity in large part because Mica had been working with the alternative transfer schools. And we discovered in part, because of Mica’s leadership, that there was a major survey conducted with young people who attended these schools, the largest survey in the country. I knew about the alternative schools because I had worked with them before, I knew they were buried treasures in the New York City Department of Education. They were considered, as you suggested Tanya, last chance schools, but really these were for young people who were thrown out or took time off or were pushed out or were bored by or were scared in, or were deliciously creative and innovative, and not likely to fit into their first high school.

Michelle Fine:
And so these were schools that I had a lot of respect for, and I jumped at the opportunity to be a part of a collaboration to work with young people, educators and community-based organizations to analyze the data and then figure out the social movements that could use such a report. But Mica, you want to detail how we got involved?

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Yeah. The first thing I would say is that I am tremendously grateful and indebted to my own transfer school community, alternative high school community, that I’ve been a part of now for more than a decade. I was both a student, so I’m an alumni of an alternative transfer school in New York City. And then also taught at that same school and was sort of on staff at that same school a year later. And just have tremendous connections to that community, both with teachers of mine who I still get lunch with and mentors, but also tons of peers who I got to know there.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
So how we got involved I think is a longer story, but I think what motivated the project in some ways was that we were particularly concerned about an accountability measure that had been passed with the Every Student Succeeds Act and that these schools were particularly vulnerable to in terms of the state required a 67% graduation rate, which for these schools who are really working with young people who have sort of struggled along a linear trajectory through high school, they really can’t satisfy that requirement in a way that makes sense for the work that they do and the students that they serve.
Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
And so we were really looking at this as a policy injustice, that we also saw as a racial injustice and a class injustice because transfer schools are disproportionately filled with young people of color, immigrants, English language learners, and young people dealing with financial insecurity and housing insecurity. And just honestly the sort of fraying social safety net that we’ve all really come to recognize in COVID. But many of us knew before that [crosstalk 00:07:21] racism, right? And so we saw this as a really unjust accountability policy and started to work with some non-profits and educators and principals and students and young people to think about how we could look at that.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Then as COVID hit and we’re writing the report and New York City and the students and their families in particular got hit really hard, the work around alternative high schools in New York City took on an even more intense meaning. And we could see how the context of these overlapping health crisis structural inequality and structural racism and state violence, and COVID were really overlapping in the transfer school population. And really importantly, we saw how transfer schools really led the way because they had already been devising and implementing these expansively creative ways of engaging and educating young people, of building educational communities of respect and dignity and care and intellectual riviere.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
So rather than seeing these wonderful institutions get supported in this really difficult moment, we saw how, when they needed it the most, when these young people needed it the most, the schools at community-based organizations were having their budgets flashed, they were on the austerity chopping block. And that really motivated the work.

Tanya Domi:
At the same time and that’s. Right.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Exactly. These alternative schools have always been centers of pedagogical and institutional creativity and caring dedication, and institutions that resist a one-size-fits-all approach to accountability, but they haven’t really been recognized as such. And so that gave a lot of momentum to the work.

Tanya Domi:
So in a lot of these groups are associated to alternative high schools in what ways? You worked in a coalition with a number of groups, how are they connected to these schools and these communities in terms of supporting education? I’m sure other aspects of life, basic aspects of life.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Absolutely. Yeah. The organizations that work closely with transfer schools are really a part of the transfer school family. It’s hard to describe alternative transfer schools without their community-based organizations. They’re really integrated in terms of offering all different kinds of support services, but also academic services. It’s both and, and relationships, right.
And in terms of specifics, there's college counseling and career counseling and that kind of thing. There's mental health counseling that these organizations can offer there's extracurricular activities. And outside of school work, there's internship programs, there's different kinds of working groups, both probably academic and also kind of social-emotional, there's profound ongoing relationships with counselor advocates in these organizations that are deeply embedded in the schools.

Tanya Domi:
So this was a perfect kind of project for the Public Science Project, right? And in terms of participatory research, you had not only the students in the schools, but you had all these other supporting community organizations.

Michelle Fine:
So what we love about the Public Science Project is the opportunity to generate public facing science, that can then be carried by movements or organizations or groups into either organizing or policy struggles. This reports set at the intersection of advocacy, organizing schools who are holding the most marginal young people in the city with dignity and care and a state that has an accountability expectation of 67% graduation rate, which is just unrealistic given what's happening to young people's lives and irresponsible, and frankly, racist and classist, inconsequence.

Tanya Domi:
And also arbitrary, right? Very arbitrary.

Michelle Fine:
Arbitrary. And what we found by going into the schools and Mica can articulate this better than I, is that they had actually built accountability systems within the school. So that this notion of an external arbitrary accountability metric is in such ethical opposition to the kinds of rich, social, emotional, academic, and cultural accountabilities that these schools and community-based organizations have established with the young people, their families, and their neighborhoods. And this survey really made visible all the ways in which these schools hold encourage, have high expectations and then scaffold these young people, so they can try to, and in many cases do complete their high school education.

Michelle Fine:
But as Mica was suggesting, these schools are like those oak trees that look singular, but you look underground and you see a whole network of roots holding them up. That's what these schools in collaboration with community-based organizations. So we were very lucky to be invited in. They needed evidence of their impact, of their culturally responsive pedagogy, and of the gifts of the students and the educators. And we were in a good position to openly, and with the sense of strong objectivity, engage those questions with the schools. So should Mica maybe review some of the findings, kindly?

Tanya Domi:
Yes. We can talk about that. I just wanted to ask you really quickly, how long did it take, I'd like to hear, how long did you participate in this process with the schools and the students and the community groups? And this isn't in exception either, New York City's not the only city in the United States that has transfer schools, right? They're all over the country.
Michelle Fine:
I can do this and then Mica can fill in on the findings and the length of time.

Tanya Domi:
Okay, good.

Michelle Fine:
There are alternative schools all over the country. Whoever's listening to this podcast, if you were a creative thinker in high school and you left one and went to another, you probably went to an alternative school. I've given talks about this work at a conference in Berkeley, at a conference in Auckland, New Zealand at a conference in Colorado. And there's always somebody on the chat saying, "If it wasn't for those schools, I'd be dead." "If it wasn't for those schools, I would be a drug addict." "If it wasn't for those schools, I wouldn't have a PhD and be teaching now." So yes, these alternative schools, and in fact, a number of those schools have contacted us about replicating our study and our hope is to bring together when we can hug again, alternative school networks from around the country, because they haven't had the evidence of their impact the way we now have it.

Tanya Domi:
Tell us how long, and then present the findings of the report for our listeners.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
The process had different phases as research so often does. And being sort of in the middle of my doctoral work, I realized that these projects take tremendous effort and time and thought. And the products of the research are often in between ended at the end, right? Like there was a lot that happened in terms of conversations and development in this project before the report actually happened.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
But the Public Science Project got involved once the data had already been collected. And we were invited to do this as a kind of review of this project that an organization that works very closely with transfer school was called [The Skulta 00:15:21] had done. And the survey itself was in 2018, and was developed through a participatory process that included a series of meetings with students in alternate transfer schools, educators, staff, and community-based organizations and principals, and this nonprofit that was sort of orchestrating the process.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Once the survey was developed, it went out to principals, principals had to approve on it or vice-principal, and then it went out to the schools, and responses were collected.

Michelle Fine:
Can I just tag something?

Tanya Domi:
Please.
Michelle Fine:

What Mica is identifying is like a core commitment of participatory work, that the questions on the survey or a hybrid of standardized questions that young people are asked, but more important homegrown questions that young people and educators and counselors-

Tanya Domi:

Created together.

Michelle Fine:

It would be important for us to know, do people feel respected? Do they feel like these schools are rigorous? Did they feel like teachers appreciate who they are racially and ethnically? So the questions themselves were generated by the people most impacted. And then the survey was created and sent out to a broad sample of schools and young people. Sorry, go ahead Mica.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:

It's so important, and sometimes easy to take for granted when that's the work you're doing constantly, but you're absolutely right. In terms of when the project was first started and the question at hand was sort of, what is an ethical, just accountability framework for these alternative schools or how can we imagine something or something different or something more expansive, something more humane? Developing questions with those most impacted by the schools, most dedicated and involved in on the ground in these schools is critical. It's essential to the process.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:

So just to get back to sort of the timeline, then the data was sort of collected. There were some programmatic meetings around the data. So the first people who looked at that data were, again, the people who were most involved in these schools, they looked at the data as what it meant for their own practice, right? And then the Public Science Project was invited to do a broader sort of review of the data, looking both at the policy landscape and how the data addresses and speaks to the policy landscape, but also what kind of grounded information we could gather about the work that these schools are doing and the phenomenal young people in them.

Tanya Domi:

So you analyze the data and then wrote the report based upon the review of the data in your interviews. Can you share with us the summary findings of the report? Like what do you think are the main takeaways from what you actually report on after examining this community in these schools?

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:

Yeah, definitely. And also maybe after this, I definitely want to get to our process around developing the recommendations whenever, because that was a sort of separate [crosstalk 00:18:34] process, but I think it was also important.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
In terms of the findings, we found that, as we've sort of been alluding to that these school are tremendously strong communities, working really closely with students who have been marginalized by a lot of our social and political decisions. We found that these schools provide tremendous opportunities and resources that are aligned directly with students' needs, both learning needs and also social-emotional needs and also economic needs. We really found that young people identified their transfer schools as really helping them in concrete ways, both skill-wise and also sort of life-wise. And providing opportunities and resources that really mitigate effects of neighborhood divestment and failing social safety nets. That was sort of our first finding.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
We also found that transfer schools have this really wonderful mix of kind of care and compassion for young people, like a real matrix of caring compassion, and also really high expectations. So these are places where young people come and they feel seen, I can not reiterate enough how many alumni and current students I spoke to who just felt like they could arrive at their school and feel like people really understood them, could really see where they wanted to go and help them get there, right. That combination of kind of, "I see you, but I also respect you and your intellectual capacity and your desire for accomplishment."

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
And then finally, we sort of found that transfer schools really develop a kind of accountability structure that is both personal and collective. And we see in education generally, a kind of merit-based very individualized kind of liberal idea of accountability. And transfer school is really kind of flipped that around and offer an ethos of sort of collective responsibility and collaboration, and really a strong social network of help for both academic work and life, everything, on inside and outside [crosstalk 00:20:54].

Tanya Domi:
Right. Everyday life, like living. Right?

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Right.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah. [crosstalk 00:20:58].

Michelle Fine:
Can I offer some little footnotes before you get to-

Tanya Domi:
I would love for you to do that.

Michelle Fine:
... the participatory recommendations? So on each of those findings, one, who would the students? Two, who were the schools? And three, what is the policy context? So the students, I went in thinking these were kids who all had a really hard time and mental health struggles and drugs, because when I went to high school, the alternative school was for kids who were really struggling. And we found that,
but we also found lots of young people like Mica, who were kind of bored in their first schools or creative, or had a lot of family responsibility and needed to take time off, or didn't like all the police in their schools or all of the tests and their schools and were searching for different space.

Michelle Fine:
So I think it's important to kind of correct the misrepresentation of who these some very heterogeneous group of young people [inaudible 00:22:00] graduated, went off to Harvard, is now getting a doctorate. There are those stories. There are stories of people who don't graduate, but feels so proud of having gone back and learned how to trust an educator or learn how to write or learn how to advocate for their own child in school. So it's a very heterogeneous group of young people.

Michelle Fine:
The second for me, surprising, and mostly these are confessions of my stereotypes that these were schools filled with care, but that wasn't instead of academic expectations, it was a prerequisite. That is, these were schools that were loving and demanding. And the young people talked about that in their data that teachers had high expectations of them, but scaffolded their way to get there. And I remember in the early seventies, there were lots of schools that were very caring, but not very rigorous and the there were those that were rigorous, but not very caring. And what was kind of interesting, even though the alternative schools are very different from each other and probably uneven is that the blend of care and expectation is high.

Michelle Fine:
But the third at the policy landscape is that these schools are constantly under surveillance and worrying about being closed down. And that was a kind of appropriate institutional paranoia and anxiety that was really disconcerting because it's very hard to be loving and have high expectations while you're worried that if people don't graduate-

Tanya Domi:
You're going to be closed [crosstalk 00:00:23:39].

Michelle Fine:
... or you accept a high need and probably not likely to graduate, or immigrants from another country, but trying to get educated, that that kind of surveillance is so dysfunctional to building ethical communities. And these were not schools that were resisting accountability, but they were critical of the kind of single metrics surveillance and-

Tanya Domi:
The methodology.

Michelle Fine:
[crosstalk 00:24:06] ability to which they were exposed to.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Absolutely. And that's so helpful. And I just want to add to the first point that you made in terms of heterogeneity. I think the term transfer itself is in some ways problematic and it's a relatively new term
and we've kind of pushed through our writing to really refer to the schools as alternative schools, New York City's Alternative Schools, partially because that's how the country refers to them, right? And in New York City, they are referred differently as transfer schools, which in some ways implies a kind of failure.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
And I think alternative offers the possibility of creating something different that might work better and kind of references the more hopeful origins of these schools, right? And that was really the original intention behind the creation of New York City's Alternative Schools of the 1960s and the eventual establishment of the Department of Education's Alternative School Division in the 1970s.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
And I think really alternative suggests extending schooling to a wide range of young people who really are in search of something else or different, or just that works better for them. And young people have so many different desires, needs, expectations, trajectories, schedules, family lives. Right? And so really trying to think about that is something that we felt was important to this project.

Tanya Domi:
Okay. And with respect to the recommendations, talk about how that was developed in terms of the participation on developing those recommendations.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Yeah. and this goes back to Michelle's point about really involving people who are on the ground with really deep, grounded expertise in the process all the time. And throughout the process of writing the report, we invited and facilitated a lot of participation with various voices in education sector. And then after we had a draft of the report and the findings, we had several participatory sessions where we developed recommendations that both kind of came out of the findings, but also addressed these pressing concerns from people most connected to these schools who really understood the policy landscape and the effects of the policies on the ground.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
So these sessions included alternative school students, alumni, educators, principals, staff, leaders of community-based organizations who work closely with these schools like Good Shepherd, the New York Performance Standards Consortium, attorneys and advocates who work on education justice, like from New York Civil Liberties Union, policy analysts from Center for American Progress, people who were involved in charter or alternative schools and policy makers at the city and state level. And we developed the recommendations in the sessions to both like speak to the science, but also speak to the political need. And I think it was especially important not just ethically but important in terms of the validity and strength of the recommendations [crosstalk 00:27:08] included students and alumni and educators, right? Because [crosstalk 00:27:12]

Tanya Domi:
And their voices are very much in it. Right?

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Absolutely. As Michelle has given me the words for this, we sort of see this as a practice of academic humility, but it's also a recognition of where wisdom and expertise really lives.

Tanya Domi:
Absolutely.

Michelle Fine:
Can I explain why this isn't a bias, for readers or thinking, "Oh, they only talk to the people who like the schools and then they can talk to them again and got recommendations." That actually we invite a broad array of stakeholders and say, "Here's the evidence, help us interpret it." And then when somebody says, "Well, all of these schools are wonderful." We then say, "Somebody must have another opinion." "Tell us how would we hold these schools accountable? How would we build a process if it's not the 67%?" So we honor the perspective of those closest to the practice. The science is an opportunity to amplify a range of perspectives on the evidence and where the evidence in then move to advocating around accountability, advocating around austerity cuts, advocating around a broader array of schools in general, not just advocacy for these schools, but these schools invite us to say, and COVID invites us to say, "What should schooling be?"

Michelle Fine:
A lot of people are loving being on Zoom. A lot of people, communities of color are saying, "I think we want to homeschool our kids." Because they don't want to have to deal with the racism or the Eurocentric curriculum. A lot of parents who are in the opt-out movement and are like, "I don't want my kid participating in a heavy testing environment. So this is a moment to be rethinking educational possibilities. And whereas I think we began, certainly I began thinking, "Alternative schools are sweet, marginal whatevers." I ended up compelled that within these schools are some core elements of what education, inclusion, respect, and recognition and academic expectations must be across schools, not just for schools at the margins.

Tanya Domi:
Right. I would just like to say to our listeners that the Center for American Progress is highly reputable, highly rigorous, and is a major player inside Washington. So if they were... I just want to say that that's an indicator of just how willing you were to submit to review by all kinds of people in a discussion. It's kind of like an active, a very activist peer review, so to speak, right?

Michelle Fine:
Exactly. That's [crosstalk 00:29:53]. It's a beautiful way to put it.

Tanya Domi:
[crosstalk 00:29:56] Oh, I'm glad. I'm glad that I can connect there. But I have colleagues and friends at the center and I know about their work and it's highly reputable. And if they're weighing in on your report, that really, really does say something about the excellence of your process and your outcome. Very quickly, let's hear what your recommendations were.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
And these are broadly, right? Broadway recommendations. The first one really speaks to the need for a more robust set of secondary pathways, right? Young people need and deserve a range of secondary school options. That's part of what we've been talking about. This also includes removing this incentives that deter schools from helping students find alternatives, but this is also deeply connected to decoupling standardized testing from New York State's graduation requirements. Because for transfer schools, this is a key issue, right? Because too often, it's these standardized tests that holds students back from graduating. And then sort of falsely lower these schools, graduation rates, right? Which then gets them in trouble with the state. And that's a really cyclical process that's really problematic.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
And we can talk a little bit more about sort of other reasons why we need to decouple standardized tests from graduation, but for transfer schools, that's really a central issue to why graduation rates become so low. Other than the fact that these schools are really welcoming young people who have fallen behind in one way or another for various reasons, [crosstalk 00:31:25].

Tanya Domi:
Right. For different reasons. Right.

Michelle Fine:
It's important to note though, that for listeners outside of New York or even inside to recognize that New York is one of only 10 states that have a high stakes graduation requirement. 40 States in our country have decided not to have a single test as a graduation requirement. New York State has a single indicator that is five high-stakes Regents Exams, if that was lifted. And there were a range of ways that graduation could be determined. Of course, the graduation rates at these schools and other schools will be much higher, but [crosstalk 00:32:07], historically stubborn and advocated for by elites, not educators to maintain this region space graduation requirement. This year because of COVID, that has been lifted. And again, it opens a window on to what are the multiple ways in which we could hold ourselves and our students accountable rather than a single indicator?

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
And then our second recommendation, it really lines up with that, that schools should held accountable with a range of measures. That nobody here is against accountability, we all believe in good schools for all young people, but there needs to be a range of measures that highlight the strength of these schools and the particular niche that they're serving for New York City students. So specifically that means that we recommend New York State discard the consideration of a 67% graduation rate. And that's the really one specific sort of accountability metric that we talk about. But we also talk about the need to form a blue ribbon commission or some kind of participatory working group, that's led by students and alumni and educators and counselors and administrators and community partners from these schools that can really develop an ethical accountability framework. And there are some more specific possibilities that are outlined in the report, but we really feel like it's important that that group of people who are most invested, most on the ground are really involved in developing that framework. Michelle, can you add anything to that?

Michelle Fine:
Yeah. At our recommendation round table, there was a colleague from the state who works with charter schools who indicated to us that they are generating an array of metrics for graduation and they are not
accountable simply for the 67%. Even though I've been very critical of the ways in which charter schools have been organized in our country and in our state, it is important that they are kind of on the cutting edge of being invited to be innovative about graduation requirements, whereas public schools, which can't be so selective about who their students are and it can throw them out at whim, are held to a very narrow and arbitrary. So I think the charter schools are opening up a conversation about multiple accountability frameworks that the public schools should also have access. [crosstalk 00:00:34:36]. Go ahead Mica.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Yeah. And the final sort of broad recommendation is that we really need to fully fund these schools and their partner organizations. And we saw how urgent that has become over these last few months with COVID. And we specifically believe that we should take money out of policing and reallocate that funding into schools. And that might look like getting police out of schools as well and reallocating that funding.

Tanya Domi:
Okay. Our listeners can go to the Public Science Project website and they can get the executive summary and the full report, just Google it to our listeners. I think as an academic that has been trained in social science methods, I am always enthralled by the work that Michelle is leading with her colleagues and with her students at the Public Science Project. I think it's very inspiring and the region should be paying attention to what you're. I congratulate all of you.

Michelle Fine:
Thank you Tanya. Thank for [crosstalk 00:35:41].

Tanya Domi:
And all the people that work with you, it's really admirable. And as I said to both of you yesterday, if my parents had gotten divorced earlier, I probably would have ended up in an alternative high school. So on that note, thank you. And we will see you again. I hope soon with another incredible project.

Michelle Fine:
Thank you.

Mica Baum-Tuccillo:
Thanks so much Tanya. And these was great.

Tanya Domi:
Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guests, distinguished professor, Michelle Fine and PhD student, Mica Baum-Tuccillo of the Graduate Center, CUNY.

Tanya Domi:
The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.