

# Epilogue

## *What Do You Believe In?*

In the final months of my primary field research in the summer of 2014, I attended beginning-of-the-year professional development sessions at the two charter schools I had followed most closely over the course of the previous academic period. Like many charter school networks, these two schools required teachers to begin their academic working year weeks before students arrived, much earlier than most traditional public schools. I experienced this myself as I reported to work in 2008 three weeks before my fellow Teach for America corps members who were employed in NYC Department of Education schools. As committed as teachers in charter schools claimed to be, the dog days of summer have a way of sapping the energy of even the most zealous. Zadie, a white local and the principal at one of my primary field sites, needed a way to inspire her teachers and she turned to a medium often used by managers of all stripes—the inspirational YouTube video. Clicking through her professional development powerpoint deck to a slide that read, “Do you believe?” Zadie began playing a recording of a speech by fifth grader Dalton Sherman, delivered

in 2008 to a gathering of thousands of Dallas Public School teachers. Sherman begins,

I believe in me. Do you believe in me? Do you believe I can stand up here, fearless, and talk to all 20,000 of you? . . . Because here's the deal: I can do anything, be anything, create anything, dream anything, become anything—because you believe in me. And it rubs off on me. Let me ask you a question. . . . Do you believe in my classmates? Do you believe that every single one of us can graduate ready for college or the workplace?

You better. Because next week, we're all showing up in your schools—all 157,000 of us—and what we need from you is to believe that we can reach our highest potential. No matter where we come from . . . you better not give up on us. No, you better not.

Because, as you know, in some cases, you're all we've got. You're the ones who feed us, who wipe our tears, who hold our hands or hug us when we need it. You're the ones who love us when sometimes it feels like no else does—and when we need it the most. Don't give up on my classmates.

Do you believe in your colleagues? I hope so. They came to your school because they wanted to make a difference, too. Believe in them, trust them, and lean on them when times get tough—and we all know, we kids can sometimes make it tough.

So, whether you're a counselor or a librarian, a teacher assistant, or work in the front office, whether you serve up meals in the cafeteria or keep the halls clean, or whether you're a teacher or a principal, we need you! Please, believe in your colleagues, and they'll believe in you.

Do you believe in yourself? Do you believe that what you're doing is shaping not just my generation, but that of my children—and my children's children? There's probably easier ways to make a living, but I want to tell you, on behalf of all of the students in Dallas, we need you. We need you now more than ever. Believe in yourself.

Finally, do you believe that every child in Dallas needs to be ready for college or the workplace? Do you believe that Dallas students can achieve? We need you, ladies and gentlemen. We need you

to know that what you are doing is the most important job in the city today. We need you to believe in us, in your colleagues, in yourselves and in our goals. If you don't believe—well, I'm not going there. I want to thank you for what you do—for me and for so many others.

Do you believe in me? Because I believe in me. And you helped me get to where I am today.

I noticed that not all the teachers in the room seemed particularly enthralled or engaged while the video was playing. At the end of the playback, Zadie said to the room, “That video always gets me choked up, particularly at the point where he bows and you realize the power of words.” Zadie asked the gathered staff to spend the next five minutes filling in the box on their professional development worksheet for that day titled, “What do you believe in?” When the teachers shared, they talked about believing in hard work, believing in themselves, and most of all believing in “our kids.”

Charter school teachers have often been depicted as fundamentally different kinds of workers and education professionals. But Sherman's speech wasn't given to a group of charter school teachers; it was given to the general body of Dallas public school teachers. Sherman's speech shows what education reformers and teachers in charter schools share with their colleagues in traditional public schools. Educators in both charters and traditional public schools tend to share many of the beliefs evoked in Sherman's speech. As the teachers in Zadie's school emphasized, I would venture that they share with the teachers in Dallas some kind of belief in the potential and capacity of the students they serve, the vast majority of whom are Black and brown and come from low-income families and segregated communities. Above and beyond this common belief in the capabilities and futures of students, these educators shared a stronger, but less

explicitly articulated belief that, in a society structured through racialized dominance and class stratification, teachers are ultimately responsible for their students.

The entire logic of contemporary education reform falls apart if students no longer need teachers or, rather, no longer believe they need education in the ways that currently prevail. By posing schools as the sole institution necessary for combating inequality, charter schools betray the belief not only that students need to be improved but also that improvement is the key to incorporation into a universal body politic in which there are no fundamental racialized cleavages. Schools and teachers must refuse this burden. These refusals need not be destructive or internalist.<sup>1</sup> We can see attenuated forms of these kinds of refusals among the “racial arbitrageurs” discussed in chapter 3. When Darcy, Sage, and Morgan put mostly white transplant reformers in rooms with local Black elders and community authorities, there was a subtle game of refusal at play. These arbitrageurs were communicating to these reformers that though they may have seized control of school governance from the “backbone of the Black middle class,” the arbitrageurs’ authority was not exclusively wrapped up in these institutions; they had a cultural and communal authority that the arbitrageurs displayed not necessarily with the goal of creating mutual understanding. Morgan may have wanted her teachers to connect with students and community elders, but Darcy, Roland, and the BOC sought to reclaim territory for Black leadership that needed not be understood by white reformers, only respected. Refusals can be generative without being progressive or radical.

Unchallenged by proponents of any kind of school is the idea that education should be organized as a form of work. What would it mean to refuse teaching and schooling as work? I can’t imagine

it, in part because this would require imagining a society without work, a task beyond the horizon of this text. But what kinds of consequences and articulations emerge when we try to think education beyond the work ethic? As discussed in chapter 2, it is crucial to go beyond critiquing the working conditions of teachers in charter schools and apprehend the racial politics of professionalizing education labor as work itself. The fact that refusing work in totality seems so unthinkable speaks to the embeddedness of productivist ethics in both American and capitalist society.<sup>2</sup> In chapter 1, I argued that charter schools' conceptions of talent and human capital atomized teachers as a racial leadership class. In chapter 2, I argued that these schools embraced affective demands and rituals that militated against the endurance of teachers and employees who weren't socially isolated enough to devote extended hours to work. In both chapters, the figure of the veteran teacher (likely Black given the district makeup before Katrina) who asks what time school gets out is used to indicate their unsuitability for the charter school workplace. I prefer to see these limits veterans set on their work as important refusals. In education reform, any limit to work intensity was seen as harmful to children. Rather than view the demands of veteran teachers, of teachers with families, or of teachers who didn't want to work eighty-hour weeks as selfish, we should see these as potentially liberating refusals of work. Supporting these demands could help break the link between work and schooling.

Refusing is not an easy stance to take, however, even when one recognizes its potential. Most education professionals expressed reservations about the project of charter schools. Principals and teachers would complain about the ways that testing warped their pedagogical imperatives, yet they committed long hours to test prep and impressed upon their students the importance of

state tests. These educators may have disliked or even hated testing, but they acted as if test-based accountability not only was inevitable but was legitimate. While there are plenty of charter school advocates who will defend strict discipline policies, many teachers I spoke with found it profoundly alienating to enforce silence, march children along taped lines on hallway floors, display zero tolerance for minor infractions, move children's names up and down charts to indicate their behavioral performance for the day, yell at children, call parents about "behavior problems," suspend students, or reward students for "good behavior," to name a few classroom-management techniques. Nevertheless, the vast majority of teachers in these schools proceeded to teach as if these discipline structures were necessary and desirable. I know this from personal experience. "What do you believe in?" can be an insidiously taunting question.

Refusal is one of the great promises of anthropology. At our best, we refuse to take the world for granted and in so doing hold out the possibility that the world could be otherwise. But our powers of demystification can only take us so far. In this book, I have not sought to pull back the curtain on the Wizard of Racialization or to incite shock at the forms of exclusion and inequality perpetuated by the working cultures of charters schools. In each chapter of this work, I have depicted individuals and communities who have deep commitments to public schooling as a mechanism of social justice and biopolitical improvement. As much as I wish to speculate on what it might look like to refuse the linkage between schooling and improvement, what their stories show is why it is so hard to do so and how enthralled we all are to our fantasies of race, education, and work, which are inextricably bound together.