

# A Hundred Years of Isolation

A Cooperative Reading of Ella Flagg Young's  
*Isolation in the Schools* by Chicago Teachers Today\*

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This is a story of a group of Chicago educators working for the dignity of teaching and learning by resisting compartmentalization, stratification, and separation in schools. Humanizing alternatives to oppressive school conditions emerge from the process of studying *experience*, which can't be scripted or tested but which reveals the complexities of human lives and spirits. This article will describe two group processes these educators engaged in during a recent Teachers' Inquiry Project seminar, with an emphasis on communication—blocks and openings that are larger, and more minute, and vastly more multidimensional, than artificial notions of communication associated with textbook teaching and learning. The interactive experiential processes these educators engaged in brought to the surface relationships of power and conflict in education that usually remain unaddressed but that, explored collectively, can be transformative for both teachers and students.

Ella Flagg Young (1845–1918) held numerous powerful posts in the world of education, from superintendent of Chicago Schools, to the head of the National Association for Education, to principal of Chicago Normal School (a teaching college that later became Chicago State University). She was a strong suffragist, and her feminist outlook grounds her writing in a spirit of struggle that feels very timely despite language that can feel dated and obscure at times. Putting Young's text in dialogue with her colleagues of

\* With thanks to Teacher's Inquiry Project seminar participants and fellow leaders Tina Nolan and Joan Bradbury. Thanks also to Francis W. Parker School for supporting the seminar.

*Schools: Studies in Education*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Fall 2014).

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the present day highlights the political dimension of education philosophy, especially as it bears out in Chicago's civic and educational life. This essay argues that Young's 1900 notion of combating "Isolation in the Schools" provides a philosophical support for educators not only working together but also helping one another to recognize and combat oppression in their lives and that of the young people they work with.

In the essay's first part, I will look at Young's argument in the context of the world of 1900, when conflicts over education policy and practice were directly connected to the women's movement: in fighting isolation in the public schools, Young sought to build an education system that respects the capacities of teachers and children and that is fully integrated in the world outside of schools. In the second part of the essay, I will show how a group of Chicago educators answered the challenges of isolation with two activities related to Young's book: a collective reading and an exercise informed by Theater of the Oppressed.

## Chicago, 1900

Alongside infamous corruption and oppression ravaging the lives of workers, especially immigrants and migrants, powerful coalitions are forming among these same groups to fight for humane conditions in their workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools. These coalitions include people with social power: educators in schools and universities, settlement house workers, and others, demand—and create—social institutions that respect human life and growth and communities. Women are prominent in leading what comes to be called the Progressive movement: Jane Addams, Anita McCormick Blaine, and Margaret Haley, among other women, occupy important social and political positions and are able to move between city hall and the streets. They lead the way in developing civic practices that improve democratic society, such as investigative research, community forums, adult learning programs, social gatherings, and support for education that both respects individual capacities and fosters social responsibility. This becomes known as progressive education, and it is articulated in a corpus of texts that continue to inform education today.

This is the backdrop of *Isolation in the Schools*, a book written by the first woman superintendent of schools of a major US city. Ella Flagg Young wrote it as a dissertation under preeminent progressive philosopher John Dewey, while she was in the midst of political battles over control of Chicago schools. The themes of the battles were the same then as today: Who should regulate teachers' responsibility for student learning? Do business and bank-

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ing leaders have the answers to improving education? How much should business interests affect school decision making? These were questions that concerned progressive educators of the nineteenth century as much as they do progressive educators today, but the context in which each of these educators was located (and is located at present) affects the shape of progressive education in ways that are often overlooked.

Progressive education leader Dewey, for instance, was securely ensconced at the University of Chicago, and this position limited the extent to which his philosophy of education could meet the complexities of democratic education in Chicago. Some scholars critique Dewey's failure to carry out the real-world social applications of his education philosophy in his Laboratory School:

As Dewey acutely and strongly emphasized, in the preindustrial informal learning system, children learned by real-world, consequential doing. But in the isolated, artificial Laboratory School, which his scientism led him to develop, children learned by simulated, make-believe, inconsequential doing of well-structured problems whose solutions were well-known, presented no real challenge, and required no real imagination or initiative. (Benson Harkavy, and Puckett 2007, 32)

Whereas many of her progressive male colleagues were professors who enjoyed more social privileges, and from this protected context constructed educational philosophies that may or may not be applicable in actual schools, Young focused squarely on a pressing and real problem. She was on the front lines of the battle for public school teachers' voice in public education. In challenging the predominantly male school board, controlled by powerful textbook company and real estate interests, she exposed herself to censure, ridicule, and professional death (Blount 2002).

In her writing, as in her activism and her leadership (Young went on to direct the National Education Association as well), Young addresses what she sees to be the root cause of inadequate education: the deprofessionalizing of teachers. If teachers don't have the freedom to create educational practices, curriculum, and theory, they will just reinforce a mechanized and dehumanizing schooling system. Young writes:

Daily one sees teachers trying to hold a class to some statement in the text book that is without content for the pupils, or to a chain of reasoning that is but a form to them, and then, after creating conditions

foreign to those under which thought plays freely, say with much fervor: “Think! Think! You must think. Why don’t you think?” How much difference is there between this method of the teachers and that of principals and superintendents who announce their conclusions in theory and their ideals in practice, and then say to the teachers, “Take these thoughts of mine and be original in using them”? With the stress, the motion, the change, originated always in one part of the organization, and then conveyed to the other in mandatory form, a peculiar reactionary movement has set in. (Young 1900, 15)

Students cannot learn to be independent thinkers if their teachers aren’t taught, trusted, and supported to be independent thinkers. In her biographical sketch of Young, Jackie Blount documents how Superintendent Young herself supported teachers thinking:

For the next three years [after becoming Superintendent of Chicago Schools], Ella Flagg Young enjoyed a period of unprecedented cooperation from the school board, teachers, and the Chicago community. She was able to enact reforms almost immediately. For one, she reorganized the administrative structure of the system, changing many of the positions in the process; she decentralized some of the key system-level functions, such as coordinating substitute-teachers. She also insisted that assistant and district superintendents spend more time in the schools. The principalship, which she regarded as highly important, was a position that she endeavored to change from one of rigid accounting and paperwork to one requiring a deep knowledge of educational affairs. Among her many other duties, she juggled district boundaries, worked to upgrade facilities throughout the system, led efforts to coordinate and integrate the curriculum, campaigned for improved and more appropriate teacher preparation, added deans to schools to help counsel students—a remarkable innovation at the time—instituted sex hygiene courses—among the first to be offered in schools anywhere—and worked to enhance the industrial courses available to both girls and boys.

Perhaps one of her most vital contributions was the creation of teachers’ councils, in which teachers collectively made decisions about their working conditions, including curriculum and administrative decisions. She made sure that time was built into the school calendar for teachers to meet regularly in these councils (Blount 2002, 168).

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Professional freedom, then, was neither individualist nor disorganized. Nor was it abstract or theoretical. Like other progressives, Young was intentional about putting in place structures that ensured space for educators to think, talk, and plan for the education of students. And when it came to it, she fought for that space in highly public, politically charged forums.

Creating the conditions for professional autonomy and collaboration for teachers meant going up against powers arrayed to constrict teachers' freedom. While Young doesn't point fingers in her text, Blount is specific about who these powers were: business interests controlled Chicago school board decision making. She describes the political forces Young was contending with as superintendent of Chicago schools:

Some board members regularly accepted kickbacks from publishers seeking exclusive deals to sell textbooks to the Chicago schools. Confronting this practice directly, Young campaigned to select books instead by their quality. A few board members sought to abuse their control of school land by seeking to sell it for personal speculative business ventures. Young intervened once again because she believed that such misappropriated resources not only were selfishly used but also could have been employed to boost teachers' meager salaries. Her attention to these issues antagonized the board members who otherwise stood to profit. In retaliation, they sought her removal. Young resigned later that year because she believed that she lacked the full support of the board. (Blount 2002, 169)

The reaches of Young's own power become clear in the next chapter of the story, however. Coalitions of women leaders, including Jane Addams and other suffragists, fought to restore Young to her position. They succeeded, but the battle lines between women progressives and school board members had congealed. Blount cites one of Young's supporters, Mrs. George Bass, who wrote:

There was also opposition on the part of the board because of the increasing interest which the women of Chicago took in the schools over which Mrs. Young was placed and they disliked their increasingly definite knowledge of school affairs. It is true that the women of my city have followed every phase of the school situation during the past few years. A proof of their interest was seen when about two years ago. Mrs. Young was put out of her position. The women rose up, held a mass meeting, and packed the great auditorium, calling on the mayor

to replace [i.e., reinstate] Mrs. Young. There is no need of going through the subsequent events. It is sufficient to say that she was replaced [reinstated]. The bitter feeling of the board increased after this until the opposition to Mrs. Young became open on the part of some of the members who said they would like to get rid of the entire influence of the women. (Blount 2002, 169–70)

Blount's biography suggests that strong links existed between education, feminism, and labor in turn-of-the-century Chicago. Young emphasizes that freedom is not only political. It's professional, pedagogical, and philosophical: "To prove that some cannot teach unless they possess freedom is not enough; it must be predicated that freedom belongs to that form of activity which characterizes the teacher" (Young 1900, 16). As Blount explains,

[Young] worried that it would not be enough for administrators merely to dribble some limited powers down to teachers, but instead she believed that teachers needed to possess real power from the start. This power required that schools provide time and space for teachers to engage in the intellectual, legislative, and logistical functions of running their schools. This, in turn, would be part of and consistent with a larger social system in which students, parents, administrators, and community members participated similarly in a meaningful democratic process to govern the schools wisely. Short of this schools would devolve into automated units that slotted students into narrowly defined roles in society, effectively killing their capacity for responsible and free thought and robbing them of their humanity and a sense of personal meaning. For teachers to have this power, they would need to have the freedom to create their own ideas, and then execute them. First, though, they would need to see more clearly the oppressive conditions in which they roiled. (Blount 2002, 172)

Young fought for democratic education in the belief that schools are a conduit for social change. She saw teachers as leaders in supporting independent thought and collective action in American society.

## **Chicago, 2012**

September opens with the Chicago teachers strike, carried out with unprecedented community support: parents and students know that the teach-

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ers are fighting for the conditions needed for learning, for growing up safe and healthy, and for contributing to democratic society. The end of the 2012–13 school year brings the retaliation of the Chicago power structure, represented by the mayor and his unelected school board and influenced by financiers interested in investment opportunities represented by charter schools. They close a record 50 schools, over the loud protests of students, parents, and teachers.

Meanwhile, strains on inquiry-based education and teacher professionalism continue in the form of the roll-out of new standards and assessment, including the REACH (Recognizing Educators Advancing Chicago's Students) evaluation and Common Core State Standards. Though on paper these standards emphasize inquiry, thinking, and discussion, the mechanisms by which they are promoted often work at cross-purposes with independent thinking. Teachers are stressed and fearful—just like their students feel when they are being sorted and judged rather than being helped to grow, be curious, be imaginative and resourceful.

I want to highlight a few additional germane events happening around the same time, suggestive of the frame Young offers. These are moments that dramatize the separation of school conditions from actual learning and teaching. They suggest that the formulaic education that textbook and testing companies thrust upon children is not just philosophically questionable but represents an ongoing condition of violence—against thinking, against human beings. One standout moment is a recent Youtube video gone viral: it shows a professional development session in which Chicago educators are told to recite standards. The sight and sound of a roomful of professionals scrunched into small desks repeating a script in unison incarnates a deprofessionalized teaching force. Teachers are vulnerable to the forces of isolation, and it hurts to see them humiliated in this way. However, teachers also push back powerfully, as when teachers at several Chicago schools refuse to administer the Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) in view of the fact that the test scores will not be used for any pedagogical purpose. Fellow teachers, parents, and students from across the country support the teachers who risk their jobs to stand up for authentic education.

During this period, a number of Chicago educators gather to engage in reflection on practice from across different education contexts: museum, classroom, high school, elementary, private, public. The aim of the seminar is to learn in ways that both draw on the opportunity for cross-fertilization between contexts and enable collective reflection on how we learn. These reflection sessions, facilitated by Teachers' Inquiry Project leaders Joan Bradbury, Tina Nolan, and myself, are centered on Descriptive Inquiry Processes, as

developed at Prospect School and Center by Pat Carini and other progressive educators. The Teachers' Inquiry Project was developed in Chicago as a resource for educators to learn together "to make teaching in Chicago sustainable work, both day-to-day and over the course of a life, supporting teachers as practitioners of democracy" (<http://teachersinquiryproject.org>). One of the processes the Chicago educators engage in is Close Reading of a Text. The text we read is *Isolation in the Schools*.

The text speaks to the very purpose of the seminar: it condemns debilitating forces of separation in schools and holds up a democratic vision of teacher autonomy and collaboration as the key to authentic student learning. Young analyzes the isolation of schools from society, the isolation of students from teachers, and above all the isolation of the human being from his/her own powers of creativity, thought, and understanding. She declares that the teaching force is primarily women because men won't put up with the "drudgery" and disempowerment endemic in the field.

Young speaks clearly about power in education—both the dangers of oppression and the possibilities for transformation. In the nineteenth century, when options for women were few, the teaching profession had the potential to be a "seminary for social power" for women, to use the terms of fearful anti-suffragists (Hoffman 2003). A life of education could mean independence, power, and autonomy. Through her writing, education, and civic leadership and through specific practices like instituting teachers' councils, Young rooted the social power of teachers in commitment to human dignity.

Young's emphasis on respecting the intelligence of the human being corresponds well with the Descriptive Inquiry processes featured in the seminar, which seminar leader Joan Bradbury frames:

There is an underlying belief in human capacity widely distributed and a belief that all of us set out to make sense of our world, to find meaning—children as well as adults. So what we work from (the content of our inquiry)—whether it is our own experience, a student's work, a teacher's description of a child—we are working descriptively from practice, from the real world in all its detail and diversity.

And the process of inquiry arises from the same commitment and belief: that because we each have a unique perspective growing out of our own individual experience, we will each have something to contribute to the group, and together we can build an understanding that none of us, individually, could come to by ourselves. These processes are not set in stone but rather are designed to be adapted and framed



for the specific situations and purposes each group has. (XXX, “Seminar Notes” 2013)

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Teacher inquiry processes are an embodiment of educators reaching past the isolation that Young is concerned about to learn together. This is a living, changing, nonfinalized process.

In what follows, I try to convey the flow of the seminar discussion of *Isolation in the Schools*—the discussion, of course, consisted mostly of women—using participants’ own words as much as possible. That November night the teachers reading *Isolation in the Schools* mused: “Granting freedom for teachers—it can’t just be for teachers who have a higher role, in order for what Young calls the ‘teaching corps’ to understand this is imbedded, an essential part of their job . . . freedom has to be across the board for everyone, no matter what position they’re in or how long they’ve been teaching or what grade level they teach.”

It was clear to the educators that Young is not just talking philosophy here. She is taking a stand against the imposition of methods and standards from above, and this stand is both political and professional. Young directly correlates the constraints on teachers with constraints on students, and she suggests that, far from educating, external directives in education make people vulnerable to repression, and thus they are antithetical to education in democratic society. These institutional powers obstruct the democratic dance between individual growth and the common good, “those delicate laws which make a soul-development in [the] great social body” (Young 1900, 16). As the educators discussed the various manifestations of isolation, the truth became clearer and clearer, *that teaching is a social profession*. Isolation negates teaching. The more ways we can combat isolation, the stronger our teaching will be.

Creative, original thinking that is authentic to the individual depends on connection, and connection involves an intelligence of its own:

Isolation in any social organization means more than separation in space. It means deprivation of the exercise of inherent powers, both originative and constructive—negation. Cooperation means more than spontaneity in following another’s lead; evolution of potential powers through a reaction, initiated by the self and terminating in creative intelligence, is always involved in its operation. (Young 1900, 21)

Isolation means compartmentalization and divorce from real life and, in Young’s words, “drudgery”—the enemy of thought, learning, and vitality.

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“Deprives of interest and powers,” educators note: *this* is how people are held down; universal standards are the opposite of education for liberation.

Cooperation, as Young sees it, is not a mild matter of people getting along, but a catalyst: through good teaching, cooperation and collaboration happen. Separate entities together in different combinations can create new possibilities. Individuals communicating through creative intelligence—that’s learning.

Educators noted that Young’s thesis of democratic education complemented Jane Addams’s and others’ revolutionary work at Hull House (which Young herself was also part of). Hull House turned around the negative situation of isolation of immigrants and made it positive. In this way, it stood for the transformation from isolation to cooperation. Lilian Weber expands this picture to include the impact of immigrants as a whole on American culture:

Immigrants . . . in their coming, challenged the deference to class and educational status and asserted themselves as people with potential. They organized cultural experiences to sustain themselves in this strange land; they joined educational enterprises—literary societies, singing clubs, and so on—to help map their own path to self-fulfillment, without Old-World constraints. They, of course, used the public schools, as well as these extra-school experiences, but it is clear from the number of communal educational groups that the schools provided insufficient nutrients for the ordinary person’s drive for further development and cultural continuity. (Cited in Engel 2005, 39)

Weber’s depiction of the relationship of immigration to democracy suggests a similar possibility for teachers, specifically women teachers, on the margins of established power. The immigrants, like Young, are questioning the authority of the status quo, including the goal of an education that is geared only to prepare students for the workplace. For educators to develop an intelligent critique and better approaches for the future requires community, intellectual exchange, and “powers of origination” among educators; in this sense Young’s teachers’ councils (later abolished by the Chicago School Board) functioned very much like Hull House: as incubators of democratic power.

What does the relationship between isolation and cooperation look like in our schools today? Teachers in the seminar noted how competitive their schools are and how this competitiveness can work at cross-purposes with

expressed educational aims. Bullying and success are part of the same continuum of isolation in school. All the educators noted that Young's thesis held true in their experience: as more cooperation is enabled, creative intelligence is increased.

As an example of a metacognitive experience of cooperation, I will describe a Theatre of the Oppressed exercise the group engaged in. Theatre of the Oppressed exercises enable people to look together at problems, conflicts, and tensions experienced in group life (whether that be in families, in the workplace, or in other settings) and construct new approaches that foster more democratic and more liberating relationships. Theatre of the Oppressed, developed by Augusto Boal and associates all over the world, is closely related to Pedagogy of the Oppressed, developed by Paulo Freire and continued in critical pedagogy approaches and many other branches of what is generally called "liberatory education." The boundary-crossing exercises involved in Theatre of the Oppressed enable people to experiment with creating democratic ways of interacting and learning. Such experiments challenge the kind of stratification and abstraction that Young sought to change in American schools. Boal writes:

When does a session of The Theatre of the Oppressed end? Never—since the objective is not to close a cycle, to generate a catharsis, or to end a development. On the contrary, its objective is to encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative creativity, to change spectators into protagonists. And it is precisely for these reasons that the Theatre of the Oppressed should be the initiator of changes the culmination of which is not the aesthetic phenomenon but real life. (Boal 2002, 245)

The boundary-crossing exercises involved in Theatre of the Oppressed enable people to experiment with creating democratic ways of being, interacting, and learning. Such experiments challenge the kind of stratification and abstraction that Young eschews in American schools.

At a time when education policies and social conditions choke teaching and learning in many urban schools, teachers need to be able to forge for themselves liberating intellectual space that many schools aren't providing. Furthermore, they need space where they can develop tools for engaging conflict—not just students' conflict, but the conflict that affects them as teachers, colleagues, and professionals. Classroom management is not this tool; neither is union grievance.

In the microcosm of the human society that is a school, teachers encounter conflict constantly, from running afoul of an administrator who expects lesson plans in a certain folder to a confrontation with a student over repeated absences. While such conflicts absorb a lot of attention, much bigger conflicts lie under the surface, like subterranean lava, invisible but tremendously powerful. These are the conflicts that have to do with power, control, and identity. At moments these conflicts erupt, such as in a teachers' strike or a struggle over a particular school board decision, but on a day-to-day level teachers are experiencing these deeper conflicts and rarely have language, much less strategies, for dealing with them in ways that are empowering and educational.

Theatre of the Oppressed explores how institutional power operates within each individual. For educators, as part of a hierarchical education system, it is important to develop understanding of systemic power as it affects us and as we carry it ourselves in relation to our students and our colleagues. So, for our seminar, each participant brought in a scenario featuring a conflict involving power dynamics, a conflict that was not resolved satisfactorily and that the group could explore creatively together. We chose to work with the story that Lily, a community educator participating in the group, shared. The conflict she described had happened earlier in the week at the center for homeless youth that this community educator worked at. A youth had a weapon and refused to relinquish it; Lily was in the position of having to send her back to the streets. This was a terribly painful moment for Lily as well as for the youth. Lily explained:

I thought so many things during this. (1) Just sheer frustration that a youth would even think to bring a weapon into the space when we deem it as "safe" and that youth should know that absolutely NO weapons are allowed. (2) I also felt such sadness and frustration that a youth feels it absolutely necessary to bring a weapon and keep it on their person the entire time in order to feel safe. This was an encounter where values of conflict were in a push/pull (what the youth values and what I value for the youth): value of life and safety (totally different perspectives). Both values stayed in play. (Seminar Notes 2013)

In the meeting, the educators took turns acting out the moment of conflict between Lily and the youth over and over again, trying out different ways of approaching it. The aim of this collective work was to uncover new

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possibilities for connection, growth, and change—in the very moments of conflict that are most stressful.

Teachers reflected weeks later on that session:

- We paid close attention to space and posture, as expressed between the three characters in the scene as well as the overarching context of inside/outside and how important that dichotomy is for a vulnerable youth.
- We got a start at peeling away the multiple, overlapping, contradictory layers of power in the scene, wondering who had power when and how. Was power located within the scene? How can adults who are working for youth empowerment handle the faceless institutional powers that set the rules that we follow?
- Observation can be rubricked into something not meaningful, but if it is channeled through connection to someone who matters to you, more meaningful learning happens. Getting out of our comfort zones is important for learning. Theatre of the Oppressed and other inquiry processes give us the space to be productively uncomfortable.
- We saw multiple viewpoints enacted, which led to greater compassion. We saw that accessing more viewpoints would help us in other scenarios too.
- So much of education is about reducing and enclosing; it is important for us to identify and create many ways of opening up multiple viewpoints.
- We were struck by the personal wash of it—so aware of the group’s listening skills and how there was a regeneration with each person who entered the “scene.”

Lily concluded our session with a powerful reflection: “I went back to [the community center] with all of your voices in my head. Thinking about: how could I shift my style? The youth returned that night. She sat with me all night with her feet in my lap, letting me listen.” Too often educators are alone with their experiences, stories, and dilemmas. When they can move out of isolation into connection, new possibilities for creativity, equality, and growth emerge. This is empowering for them and for the young people they work with.

This is an example of what it looks like when educators are learning, collaboratively, stretching past isolation. They show the work of gathering a

brain trust and letting the work, action, and thought evolve in and from the group.

The education profession is a form of public leadership that involves care, attention, listening, observing—making space and holding it for others. As the life and writing of Ella Flagg Young attest, creating the conditions of freedom is a political act and creates conflict. Creative powers and new possibilities emerge when people challenge the hierarchies that Young associates with isolation. It seems to me that Chicago educators like these, who are challenging power differences within and around them, help to sustain the conditions needed for democracy.

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## **Abstract**

This piece explores questions of power, conflict, and community in education through a story of Chicago educators engaging in experiential inquiry processes. One of these processes is a Theatre of the Oppressed exercise for dealing with conflict in education settings. The other process described here focuses on a text that emerged from and describes conflict in education. This text is a little-known manifesto of progressive education written in Chicago in 1900 that denounces the school system's disempowerment of teachers, their experiences, and their voices. This text, written by feminist educator Ella Flagg Young, offers an important corrective to progressive education literature by foregrounding the issue of power imbalance in education. By describing the educators' Theatre of the Oppressed process next to their reading of Young's *Isolation in the Schools*, I seek to further discussion of power in education settings. I argue that group inquiry processes that facilitate analysis of power, as it operates both in interpersonal life and in systemic structures, embody the kind of power that Young sought for educators to create and sustain in the face of an education system dominated by wealthy white males.

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