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# **A Bumpy Journey to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in an Urban Middle School: Are We There Yet?**

**Carol Lloyd Rozansky**

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

## **Abstract**

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) offers the promise of increased success for underserved students in urban schools. This qualitative case study examines a middle school reading teacher's understandings and implementation of CRP and the researcher's supportive role over a three-semester collaboration. Two categories of results are described: evidence of the teacher's increasing CRP and tensions in the collaboration. Increased CRP was evidenced by the teacher's enhanced emphasis on high expectations, metacognitive strategies, critical literacy, and units connected to students' cultures. Tensions included sporadic meetings, overlooked prerequisite instruction, ignored supportive materials, and problematic classroom management. Implications are included.

**Keywords:** Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Teacher-Researcher Collaboration, Urban Schools, Middle Schools

Teachers and researchers, especially those practicing in urban schools, are aware of the achievement gap between students of color and white students, and between students with less and more economic resources. There is a narrowing of the achievement gap

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in reading for 9 and 14-year-olds, but not for 17-year-olds (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009). In the state in which this research was conducted, the gap between White and African American students' reading was the ninth-largest in the United States (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). In her Presidential Address, then AERA-President Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) challenged members to move beyond the plethora of studies describing the achievement gap to applied research that contributes to eliminating it.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) offers the promise of increased success for students who have been historically marginalized by inequitable educational systems (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRP is a research-based construct that melds the cultural knowledge and ways of being of marginalized students, particularly African Americans, with teachers' pedagogical understandings and behaviors. Within this perspective, a student's culture is not an impediment to learning but a strength.

Many teachers with a disposition for CRP do not implement it, do not implement it effectively, or do not know how to implement it in their classrooms. Camille (a pseudonym) was an eighth-grade reading teacher in an urban school with a large percentage of students of color and in poverty, and with high achievement gaps. She and I believed that CRP would lead to increased student achievement. However, we first needed to understand what it could look like in her classroom.

## **Theoretical Framework and Related Research**

Pedagogy denotes the multi-layered reality of teaching. This study is based on two compatible views of pedagogy: critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogy.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

The foundation of critical pedagogy is the view that schooling is not neutral (McLaren, 2007) because it distributes power

unequally and inequitably to students (Kincheloe, 2004). Through conscientization (Freire, 1993), i.e., critical consciousness, educators with a critical stance identify the educational practices and structures that privilege certain ways of knowing, knowledge, and demonstrations of academic success over others. In their work in universities and PreK-12 schools, critical educators point out how historical and pervasive educational practices cause inequitable opportunities and oppressive conditions for particular groups of students, most typically students who live in poverty and students of color.

Many educators do not recognize the inequities of public education, instead believing that meritocracy exists (Oakes & Lipton, 2003). Critical pedagogy has the potential to provide educators with the theoretical knowledge they can translate into practices that promote anti-oppressive (Kumashiro, 2000), democratic, socially just, and equitable education. Critical pedagogy speaks to “teachers...who are weary of being clerks or technocrats” (Greene, 1995, p. 2). It challenges teachers to develop “an antimethod pedagogy that refuses the rigidity of models and methodological paradigms” (Macedo & Freire, 1998, xvii). Camille was often expected to enact the role of technocrat and implement prepackaged programs.

## **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant pedagogy is praxis; it is critical pedagogy in action. Its purposes are to develop students’ academic success, cultural competency, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To effectively teach children of color, teachers must often teach in ways that are different from and may contradict what they learned in teacher education programs, from professional development, and from administrators (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Students’ low test scores and teachers’ misunderstandings of cultural behaviors often lead to teachers’ underestimation of the academic achievements and potential of students of color, and thus to placement in low-level tracks with low-level instruction (Hilliard, 1992). This perpetuates the cycle of teachers’ low

expectations, students' low achievement (Oakes & Lipton, 2003), and students' decreased opportunities for personal accomplishment and goal attainment. In contrast, teachers who practice CRP have high expectations of all of their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). They respect them, their parents, and the communities in which they teach. They relate to their students as human beings, not as objects who need to demonstrate knowledge that is based on hegemonic practices such as standardized testing (McLaren, 2007). They provide more, not fewer, opportunities to these underserved students (Delpit, 2006).

### **Purpose of the Study**

My work as a university faculty is framed in critical social justice, meaning that I believe it is essential to analyze education from a critical perspective (conscientization), and to expose and act on the inequities that I find. Camille had a beginning understanding of critical pedagogy and of CRP. She agreed to work with me in this exploratory, qualitative study. My research questions were:

1. What did CRP look like in Camille's class over the three semesters of the study? How, if at all, did her understandings of CRP evolve?
2. What types of supports did I implement? How did Camille perceive these? How did I perceive these?

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This qualitative case study is an "*instrumental case study* [italics in original], a particular case [that] is examined to provide insight into an issue..." (Stake, 1994, p. 237). It is also critical research, which "generally focuses on the rationale, the design, and the implementation of curricula and pedagogies that will produce excellence and empowerment for all students" (Morrell, 2009, p. 98). In the end, we did not reach the goal of critical research but we certainly moved closer to it.



## **Context of the Study**

Camille and I had a professional relationship prior to this study. I taught three of her courses in her masters/reading endorsement program including a course entitled Critical Pedagogy: Teaching for Social Justice. We had also worked together in the prior year on a research study about mediating her students' critical literacy through Boal's (1979) liberatory theatre. She described that experience as "life-changing." Because she had a developing understanding of critical pedagogy, CRP, and research-based reading instruction, she looked forward to reconsidering and possibly disrupting her teaching practices to increase her effectiveness as a reading teacher of low-achieving, high-poverty, racially diverse, urban students. This case study attempted to increase Camille's understandings and implementations of more expansive praxis, and inform me about ways in which I could support that praxis.

This study took place in three sections of Camille's eighth-grade reading classes over three semesters in 2008 and 2009. I visited her classroom, on average, one and a half class periods per week. Each visit typically lasted the entire class period of 90 minutes. She often asked me to work with a group or to help individual students.

Camille selected focus classrooms that were the "most difficult," meaning that these students were behaviorally difficult, thus making it tough for her to teach. The students had been placed in these reading classes based on low scores on reading tests. There were 8-15 students per class, most of whom were African American, with a few Latino and White students. Eighty percent of the schools' population qualified for free or reduced-priced lunch.

## **Data Sources and Analysis**

The data consisted of four categories that allowed me to triangulate and to pay attention to both Camille's and my understandings of our interactions.

- I took field notes of Camille's words and actions on a template with Ladson-Billings' three CRP criteria to analyze her pedagogy when it occurred (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). I included a general sense of students' words and actions and collected handouts for context.
- I wrote retrospective reactions to my observations (field notes).
- I wrote retrospective notes about conversations we had after class and collected our emails.
- I wrote notes about our discussions about my role in supporting her CRP.

I used systematic qualitative methodology and inductive analysis, namely, grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), to answer my research questions and verify my real time CRP category identification (Huberman & Miles, 1994). To accomplish this, I read and re-read the data, applying the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) to inductively develop themes from these data that provided insight into Camille's implementation of CRP and my role in the process.

## **Results**

In general, Camille demonstrated increased understandings and applications of CRP over the three semesters of this study. Many of her applications of CRP were sabotaged, however, by classroom management issues and vague, confusing directions.

I learned that it was often difficult to provide feedback or suggestions without appearing critical. Also, it was not unusual for Camille to be proud of the instruction that I found troubling. On the other hand, my modeling and our conversations often lead to altered pedagogy that moved her closer to CRP.

For the purposes of this paper, I report on two categories of results: evidence of Camille's increasing CRP and our tensions about our interactions, though these often overlapped.

## **Evidence of Camille's Increasing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant pedagogy was evident in many ways. Camille always honored the students' prior experiences, which were mainly couched in poverty and race. She showed this, for example, by encouraging general conversations, through asking about school events, and by giving students opportunities to talk about personal tragedy, such as when a student's cousin was recently shot and killed by a police officer. On the other hand, she rarely connected these conversations to curriculum or used them to generate new lessons.

In the early stages of the study, Camille demonstrated low academic expectations. For example, the students were more likely to read aloud than silently, she often read to them more than they read, and students frequently avoided silent reading time by searching for a book in the library that they rarely read. However, after I modeled the process of encouraging students I worked with to read to themselves and then discuss the text, as well as discussing this instructional practice in face-to-face and email conversations, Camille began to expect students to read silently more often. After several conversations between us about a district-required computer-assisted reading program that she believed was minimally contributing to her students' literacy, she de-emphasized it. She explained that she felt empowered to make these changes because of our collaboration.

Sometimes Camille encouraged critical literacy (McLaughlin, & DeVogd, 2004) by bringing in current events articles that connected to her students and described situations of unfairness, lack of opportunity, or other types of oppression. Her directions, however, were often confusing, and students became frustrated with the tasks. After I volunteered to conduct one such lesson that clearly identified expectations and carefully organized materials, she noticed students' engagement and learning, and used my lesson as a model for subsequent readings of critical, current events.

During the study, Camille increased her modeling of metacognitive strategies, including oral and written think alouds. She frequently told students about the importance of connecting their background knowledge to text. Over the course of this study, she modeled additional metacognitive strategies and reminded students that these would help them succeed in high school and college. It was common to hear her tell students that they were as smart as other students.

### **Tensions in our Collaboration**

Though there were many positive outcomes of our collaboration, there were tensions as well. An overriding tension for me was the lack of fidelity to our agreed-upon process. We agreed to communicate on a regular basis through emails; short, informal meetings after her class; time to develop culturally relevant units; and meetings to analyze and evaluate our collaboration and students' academic learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. I imagined that remarkable things would happen: that we would develop powerful units that clearly demonstrated CRP, that I would greatly enhance my ability to effectively work with teachers in urban schools, and that she would greatly enhance her ability to effectively work with her urban students. Instead, our interactions were sporadic and our results, though valuable, were not what I had imagined. When I asked Camille about her general sense of our collaboration, she always responded positively and often commented on how much she appreciated my ideas. In fact, she told her students several times that she tried to "challenge you just like Dr. Rozansky challenges me."

A recurring tension was Camille's failure to recognize that students needed certain skills to successfully complete tasks that could have been effective instances of CRP. For example, she developed new units connected to students' cultures, such as a Motown music unit. Her high expectations were manifested in an assignment to create a PowerPoint presentation about a Motown musician. However, she neglected to teach students the skills they needed to succeed. This resulted in several unproductive days as students erratically surfed the web and created PowerPoints that

mainly consisted of pictures and random text copied and pasted from the internet.

Sometimes when I believed I was being supportive, Camille did not seem to want or have time for my idea. For example, at the end of the first semester, I gave her a copy of Ladson-Billings' (1994) book about CRP. Surprisingly, she did not read any of it for several months and then only a few pages. This caused tension for me because I thought it would promote useful and challenging dialogue, and for Camille because she felt guilty whenever I asked about the book.

Classroom management was another source of tension. I offered to give her some articles about management in urban classrooms that she indicated would be useful. She did not read them and misplaced them. Classroom management became so problematic that, at one point during the third semester, Camille asked me to start visiting a different class. She had become embarrassed by the frequent management difficulties and did not want me in the classroom to witness them.

Vocabulary instruction was another area of tension. Camille demonstrated high expectations by teaching students Greek and Latin derivatives. However, students rarely remembered what the terms meant, were rarely able to apply this strategy, and the words Camille provided lacked context and semantic connections. However, she was proud of these lessons, emphasizing the similarities between these lessons and lessons high-tracked students experienced. I was also frustrated because I knew that she had learned about effective vocabulary instruction in her masters program.

## **Discussion**

When this study began, Camille occasionally implemented CRP. As time went on, she became more conscious about whether or not her units and lessons connected with students' cultures. She seemed more purposeful in deciding what and how to teach. She increased the number of lessons that promoted students' critical literacy, focusing more on the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the

characters and the oppressive situations described in the texts. She expanded the Motown unit, continued to teach students reading strategies to help them be independent and successful readers, and always treated students with respect. Her words and lessons reflected higher expectations. Most of her CRP fell into the category of academic achievement and critical analysis of the social order. There was little that explicitly addressed students' cultural competence. And the impact of her academic achievement focus was questionable.

Camille's unclear directions and ineffective vocabulary instruction, for example, contributed to students' lack of engagement and inappropriate behaviors. She rarely identified these as obstacles, however, since she had often spent hours preparing guiding worksheets and other materials without realizing that she had inadvertently omitted important information or steps.

Prior to the study, we agreed to have regular meetings to share how things were going. However, we met infrequently, which did not provide enough time to deconstruct what was happening in her classroom, discuss readings, or plan units together.

### **Conclusions/Implications**

Because human beings have the mental capacity to make choices, they must intervene in the world (Freire, 1998). Thus, we need to move from conscientization to praxis (Darder & Mirón, 2006), i.e., from critical observation to action.

CRP has been described in multiple contexts by several researchers. However, a profound question exists: How can this stance be developed in teachers who do not already demonstrate such a perspective or perhaps display just the beginnings, yet voice or demonstrate a proclivity or disposition for such pedagogy?

Though this study provides one example of some forward motion along the path to CRP with one teacher, I neglected to consider the school context. CRP challenges the hegemony of

traditional schooling. Successful school change occurs in schools in which administrators and teachers share goals, meet regularly to problem-solve, and develop a collegial, community-like atmosphere (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hord, 2009). Camille was operating independently of her colleagues. Though her principal approved of our collaboration, I was her only support. A challenge is to increase understandings of how CRP can be the focus of school-based learning communities while also supporting the dedication of individual teachers who are committed to their culturally diverse students through culturally relevant pedagogy.

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# **College Readiness for All: Assessing the Impact of English Professional Development on Teaching Practice and Student Learning**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the effects of a statewide effort to reduce college remediation rates by training high school teachers and providing them with an expository reading and writing curriculum. The authors rely on mixed methods, including observations, teacher and student surveys, and test data from urban high schools. Findings suggest that the program, now used in over 250 schools in California, improved student motivation and reading and writing skills and teacher confidence and skills. Findings suggest the benefits of a systematic K-16 partnership to empower urban high school literacy offerings to reduce college remediation rates.

**Keywords:** Teacher Development, College Readiness, Literacy, Student Learning

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Preparing all students for college and career readiness is a relatively new focus for some high schools. In the past, schools have focused on having students meet college eligibility requirements (including Carnegie unit requirements) and helping students with the college admissions process (Besvinick, 1961; Chaney, Burgdorf & Atash, 1997). However, educational leaders and policy-makers are recognizing that large numbers of incoming college students are not “college ready” in literacy or math, despite their meeting course-based eligibility requirements (Conley, 2010; Conley, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Schiller & Muller, 2003). This reality has been a particular problem for schools that serve working class and poor students of color. For example, in a large longitudinal study of course taking records in an urban district, Saunders, Silver and Zarate (2008) found that only 24% of all students on free and reduced lunch graduated with sufficient completion of courses required for entry into California’s public university system. In the state of California, while approximately 33% of high school seniors are eligible to enter the California State University (CSU), more than 50% of entering freshmen need remediation in English or writing (<http://www.calstate.edu/eap/>). Students must pass English and Math Placement tests or can waive out if they meet SAT or AP minimum standards. Reducing the need for remediation has been a California State University (CSU) priority since 1997, and this past year, the Chancellor announced a plan, requiring all students to fulfill remediation before formal matriculation to any California State campus.

Recognizing that waiting until students come to college for remediation is a reactive measure, the CSU designed a major reform effort aimed at increasing students' literacy and math skills before they finish high school. The CSU Early Assessment Program (EAP) is a major collaborative effort by three California agencies, the California State University (CSU), the California Department of Education (CDE), and the California State Board of Education. Its main goals are to increase readiness of California’s high school graduates and to strengthen instruction in reading and writing to enable teachers to teach their students the literacy skills they will need in college. To do so, the CSU in partnership with the statewide English task force developed a systemic approach

(The Early Assessment Program) that integrates professional development, curriculum, and teacher-student-text interaction.

The Early Assessment Program (EAP) professional development effort began in 2003 and has led to the training of over 6,000 teachers statewide. This effort has proven to be very successful, according to previous evaluation reports (Hafner and Joseph, 2009, Hafner and Slovacek, 2006). The two professional development programs are Reading Institute for Academic Preparation (RIAP), and the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC). Both programs focus on helping teachers develop a stronger understanding of effective strategies to prepare students for college level reading and writing. Typically high school English curricula focus on narrative approaches and do not include expository reading and writing approaches that students need to thrive in college (Conley, 2010). A 10-day effort that is available to any high school teacher, RIAP focuses on research-based teaching strategies and reading and writing across the curriculum. The ERWC professional development is a 5-day program and is a college preparatory course for English teachers using the ERWC curricular materials.

Both programs introduce teachers to the curricular component of the intervention, called ERWC. CSU English faculty and high school teachers and administrators developed the Expository Reading and Writing course, which is a rhetoric-based college preparatory course that emphasizes an in-depth study of expository, analytical, and argumentative writing. The course has been adopted by over 250 schools in California, and is used by most urban districts including Los Angeles Unified, San Diego Unified, Long Beach Unified, Montebello, Pomona, Salinas and Riverside.

The curriculum is aligned with state standards for 11th and 12th grades in English language arts and is structured around an assignment template that addresses several stages of reading and writing. It engages students in a study of rhetoric and composition, and teaches them strategies to work with any text. The goal of the course is to prepare college bound seniors for the literacy demands of higher education. The students develop

proficiency in expository, analytical and argumentative reading and writing. By the end of the course, students are expected to be able to use rhetorical and analytical strategies independently when reading unfamiliar text and writing in response to them. ERWC has a binder for each semester that includes various modules or units, most of which are non-fiction or op-ed pieces, although two nonfiction books are also included. The topics of the texts, such as fast food, the value of life, and racial profiling engage students. In each module, the binder includes a series of pre-reading, reading, post-reading, pre-writing, and writing activities teachers can use.

All of these materials focus on providing students with rhetorical strategies to help students analyze texts, skills that are critical to their success in college. They help students learn to annotate text, differentiate a first and second reading, recognize the arguments an author makes, and identify the kinds of evidence and appeals that were used. These strategies are especially important for urban youth, who do not always receive the most qualified English teachers in inner city schools. Many of these urban youth enter college needing remediation in reading and writing.

The EAP approach is a model for current federal and national efforts to prepare more students for college and work. In 2009, the federal government announced a plan to link Title I monies to college readiness. In 2009, the National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) announced college and career ready standards, which embed EAP beliefs, and in the spring of 2010, they released for public comment core their standards for K-12 English and Mathematics.<sup>1</sup> The English standards highlight the need to prepare students for expository reading and writing (<http://www.corestandards.org/>).

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of a state-wide English professional development and curriculum effort on teaching practice and on student learning.

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<sup>1</sup> This consortium includes 48 states, territories, and the District of Columbia.

The questions this article addresses are:

1. What changes are seen in participating teachers' instructional practices, strategies and knowledge?
2. What are students' beliefs and attitudes regarding the ERWC class and its impact?
3. What evidence of student learning is seen?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Although fourth grade reading achievement on the NAEP has increased from 1971 to 2004 to the highest achievement in 37 years, and Black and Hispanic fourth graders made large gains between 1999 and 2004 on NAEP, the data on 13 and 17 year olds show a stable trend over the last 33 years (Rampey, Dion & Donahue, 2009). National reading data from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP over time show that twelfth graders in 2005 scored lower than those in 1992 (from 292 to 286) and declines were seen at all levels of performance since 1992 (US Department of Education, 2005). The percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders performing at or above the "proficient" level declined from 40% in 1992 to 35% in 2005. Thus 65% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders can be considered to be reading below grade level (Loomis & Bourque, 2001). In addition, gaps between white and minority high school students (often 20 points difference or more) remained unchanged over the 1992-2005 timeframe. Gewertz (2009) found that less than one quarter of last school year's seniors who took the ACT scored at the "college ready" level in all four subject areas.

As educators struggle with the concept of college ready versus college eligible, it becomes apparent that there needs to be a stronger alignment between what high schools are teaching and what skills and knowledge universities expect entering students to have (Dounay, 2006, Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Instructors believe there is a mismatch between what students can do at the end of high school and what is expected of them in college. In the past, the high school English curriculum was driven by literature and grammar. Yet, traditional literature classes have not been successful in providing students with skills to enable them to read expository college texts. One educator explains: "high school

English teachers...view themselves as outside the teaching of reading, because the assumption has been that students come to them knowing how to read” (Ericson, 2001, p. 1).

There is a national need for comprehensive policies and organizational structures to foster curricular coordination between high schools and postsecondary institutions (Venezia, Callan, Finny, Kirst, & Usdan, 2005). Recently, a panel of educational researchers drew up a set of recommendations of how best to meet the needs of struggling readers (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). The panel recommended the need for direct explicit instruction, motivation and self-directed learning, text-based collaborative learning, diverse texts, intensive writing, ongoing formative assessment, long-term professional development for teachers, the use of teacher teams, and a comprehensive literacy program.

In the area of curriculum reform, recent research points to the fact that site and district administrators are crucial to effective curriculum reform. Elmore (2005) points out that large-scale improvement is a “property of organizations.” Elmore’s research also suggests that there are only three ways to increase student learning and performance: a) increase the knowledge and skills of teachers; b) change the content of the curriculum and c) alter the relationship of the student to the teacher and the content (Elmore, 2007). This paper will explore major changes in teaching and learning as identified by teachers who have participated in the professional development and now use the ERWC curricular materials.

## **Methods**

### **Study Design**

For the evaluation of the effectiveness of the English professional development initiative, a mixed method design was used. The process and outcome data were collected using a variety of methods, including surveys from teacher/participants and students, teacher observations and interviews, as well as analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.



## **Sample**

Evaluators visited five schools in three urban districts that use the ERWC modules in college preparatory courses. The districts, as well as the schools, were chosen based on their ongoing commitment to reform, resulting in a purposive sample. Four out of the five schools used the 12<sup>th</sup> grade course for seniors and one school used the modules throughout all four grade levels. All schools taught diverse student populations with most serving large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. The sample was made up of twenty-three teachers. 90% of the participating teachers had been through the ERWC training, and some had taken the RIAP training or other professional development. Teachers were observed in the classroom and interviewed. Students of twenty one out of twenty three teachers responded to a short survey, resulting in a collection of 446 surveys.

## **Measures**

Measures included a teacher web survey, a short student survey, an observation rubric, and a teacher interview protocol. Only results from the web survey, student survey, and observation rubric are presented in this paper.

## **Data Analysis**

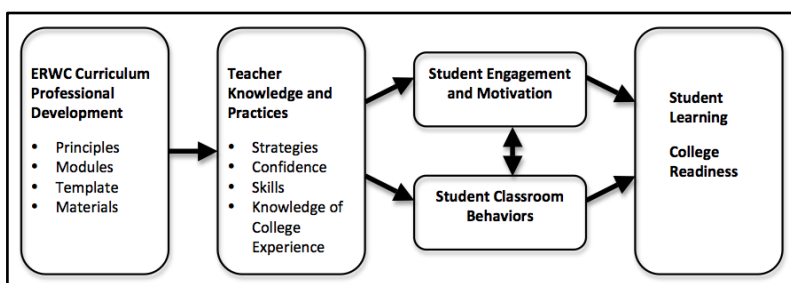
After collecting the data, the interview tapes were transcribed, as were the field and observation notes. The open-ended survey questions were analyzed using coding as well as qualitative software. The teacher web survey was sent to approximately 2,000 participants in a statewide participant database. Two hundred eighty teachers answered the survey, a 14% response rate. The teachers who responded to the statewide survey were those that had taught the ERWC class. All quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS.

## **Results**

Only responses from teachers who reported they had

participated in the ERWC training were included in these results. The teacher questionnaire contained six questions with open-ended responses. An analysis of the teacher responses to these survey questions revealed an underlying structure of the effect of the ERWC professional development on teaching practices, student engagement and behavior and student learning, illustrated in the logic model in Figure 1.

*Figure 1. LOGIC MODEL: Impact of English Professional Development on Teaching Practices, Student Learning, and College Readiness*



The first part of the logic model includes the curriculum’s principles, modules, template and materials. The second part of the logic model includes the impact of the curriculum on teaching practices, strategies, confidence and skills (including skills in using materials). Teachers were asked to describe whether they made any changes (e.g., materials, pedagogical approaches, use of texts, and approach to assessment) as a result of attending the professional development program. Teachers’ comments focused on three ways in which the ERWC professional development changed their teaching: using strategies, using ERWC materials (skills gained), and improved self-confidence.

Teachers indicated that the ERWC training had an influence on their teaching of English, especially the strategies for teaching introduced by the workshop. Teachers were very appreciative of the strategies they gained from the workshop, especially the scaffolding technique.

One of the largest group of comments concerned changes in the teaching of reading, mentioned by more than one of every four teachers (26%). Another large group of comments (31.7%) concerned teachers' use of ERWC strategies, either in general or by reference to specific strategies. These comments indicate that the goals and objectives of the ERWC professional development training are being realized.

A sizeable proportion of the teachers (32.9%) mentioned using materials provided by ERWC, including the modules, the template, and non-fiction readings in general. Teachers were asked about their use of the curricular material. A majority (55%) reported just using "a few modules," 17% reported they did not use materials at all or just used the template, and 28% reported high use: at least one semester (or more) of modules used.

Not only were many changes made in their teaching, but also nearly all the changes were stated positively with descriptive words such as "*improved*," "*better*," and "*more*." Teachers expressed confidence and feelings that they had learned new methods and better strategies for teaching as well as how to structure learning. They also appreciated having the ability to provide clear expectations for learning and to hold students accountable for learning. Many of the comments expressed a new appreciation for what students need to succeed in college. One teacher noted: "*I have a clear picture of what students need in order to succeed beyond high school.*"

The next part of the logic model addresses the twin aspects of student engagement and motivation and student classroom behavior. It appears that these are two intermediary influences between teaching practices and student learning: a change in student attitudes and a concomitant change in student behavior.

It is rare in the world of research on classroom teaching to encounter such terms as "passion," "excitement," "motivation," "enjoyment," or "engagement" when describing the impacts on students of a professional development program for teachers. When asked what benefits the ERWC course had on their students' reading and writing skills and on their enjoyment of

English, the teacher respondents described common student responses to the ERWC experience as “liking” or “loving” the course. Teachers report that students displayed high interest in the subject matter of the course and had close connections to the subject matter in the ERWC class. Teachers attributed some of the greater student engagement to the greater amount of student buy-into the course.

Teachers who responded to the survey who had participated in the ERWC professional development training reported that students used class time much more efficiently. This was attributed on the one hand to better preparation on the part of students and on the other hand to more participation in higher-level class discussions. Students seemed to be more focused on developing their conversational skills, and in paying more attention to the classroom discussion. Teachers also reported that students spent more time on task, practiced the knowledge and skills more, and as a result were more likely to overcome identified weaknesses. Students also developed their ability to apply concepts and skills to tasks outside the classroom.

The last part of the logic model is student learning and college readiness. It is not often that teachers’ comments are filled with qualifiers such as “improved,” “better,” “higher,” and “deeper.” However, the teachers who participated in the ERWC professional development training overwhelmingly used such comments on this question concerning their students’ learning in general. Teachers also praised their students as being more “college ready,” more able to “pass tests,” and more able to “meet standards.” Other teachers’ comments include “More students are passing placement tests,” “I think they are better writers, thinkers and conversationalists,” and “Benefits include a keener eye for analyzing texts.”

Teachers were asked whether they noticed any improvement in their students’ reading and writing skills since they started using the materials. Overall, 85% reported improvements. Teachers also noted that their students exhibited improvements in specific skills such as reading, writing, and critical thinking. In particular, students developed better skills at note-taking and synthesis.

Students in ERWC classes had greater understanding of the text and of the author and also exhibited greater rhetorical and analytical skills. The teachers also felt that students became better at writing essays and improved in their usage of grammar and vocabulary. Students were more likely to derive meaning from their texts, to express their own opinions or to make and defend arguments about assigned readings. Teachers reported believing that the curriculum helps students learn specific skills to use with any academic text in college. As one teacher cited: “Understanding argument and annotation and charting, all the techniques that are used in this kind of work...are much more cross-applicable to all of their courses.”

### **Observation Findings**

An observational rubric was used to assess the evidence that the eight ERWC principles were present in teachers’ classroom teaching. The rubric rating scale ranged from 1= almost never present, 2= evident less than 50% of the time, 3=evident more than 50% of the time and 4 = notably evident. See Table 1 below for principles and mean ratings. The average overall rating was 3.11, which signifies a principle was evident more than 50% of the time. The highest rated criteria included “alignment with English language arts standards, and “integration of reading and writing processes.” The lowest rated criterion was “research-based methodologies.” Findings indicate that a majority of teachers observed showed fidelity of implementation according to the ERWC principles. A multiple analysis of variance was run on the eight scale scores by school. Schools were found to differ significantly. Criteria that showed the largest significant differences were rhetorical approach, classroom management and flexibility. Two schools showed a lower degree of fidelity of implementation, with mean ratings of 2.65 and 2.23. Interviews with teachers at the schools helped to show a linkage between training, amount of time in continued professional development around literacy, collaboration, and effective implementation of the literacy strategies embedded in the curriculum.

Table 1  
*ERWC Principles and Average Observation Ratings.*

	Principle	Scale	Mean
1.	The integration of interactive reading and writing processes	Integrate	3.21
2.	A rhetorical approach to text fosters critical thinking (template)	Rhetoric	3.08
3.	Materials and themes engage student interest	Engagement	3.04
4.	Classroom activities designed to model and foster successful practices of readers and writers	Activities	3.12
5.	Research-based methodologies with a consistent relationship between theory and practice	Research	2.96
6.	Structure that ensure alignment with English language arts standards	ELA	3.38
7.	Flexibility to allow teacher to respond to students' needs	Flexibility	3.04
8.	Teachers keep students engaged and show classroom management	Management	3.08
Overall mean			3.11

### **Student Survey Findings**

A total of 446 students responded, for a response rate of 91%. Survey findings show positive improvement as self-reported by the ERWC students. 85% of surveyed students agreed that the course prepared them for college-level work. The course material was reported as being not very challenging by 17.2% of surveyed students, as being somewhat challenging by 59.7% and the other 23% felt very challenged by the course material.

Additionally, students' rated their self confidence in their reading and writing skills favorably; 36% reported improved confidence in reading and 46% reported feeling more self-assured of their writing skills. 65% of students reported learning new

strategies that can be applied in other classes. The most commonly reported strategies learned were better writing strategies, annotation, rhetorical précis, and better reading skills.

### **School Test Score Findings**

Test data from the five participating schools were compiled and analyzed and compared with state-level statistics. Outcome data included school APIs in 2004 and 2008, CST –English language arts (CST-ELA) 11<sup>th</sup> grade scale mean and percent proficient and above in 2004 and 2008, percent proficient on the English Placement Test (EPT) 2004 and 2008, and graduation rate 2008. The study schools significantly outperformed the state level on the graduation rate (mean of 90% vs. state 80%), on the API gain (mean of 69 point gain vs. 31 point gain by the state), and on the CST-ELA gain in percent proficient (7 percentage point gain vs. 4% gain by the state).

### **Discussion and Implications**

Results of this professional development evaluation are promising and suggest that the program is effective in better preparing students for college literacy. Initial findings show that results come from a sustained and intensive effort to help high schools make the shift from narrative reading and writing to expository reading and writing. Multiple changes were seen in participating teachers' instructional practices, strategies, and knowledge. Both teachers and students report beneficial results for students, and test results also confirm this. Site visit findings confirm that a majority of teachers observed showed fidelity of implementation and a continued investment in the ERWC principles.

The study has some limitations. The first is a low response rate to the teacher web survey of 14%. However, a similar survey has been given statewide to teachers for the past several years, and results in other years were very similar. Another limitation is the fact that the study used purposive sampling of districts and

schools, and thus the results may be more positive than if a random sample of districts and schools had been used.

These professional development findings align with Elmore's three methods of increasing student learning and performance (Elmore, 2007). First, broad evidence has been seen of increased knowledge and skills for teachers in terms of techniques and strategies to increase students' ability to read, analyze, and write expository prose. Second, the English curriculum is a demonstrated improvement over traditional approaches to expository reading and writing, as it is an intentional approach that scaffolds specific ways to analyze expository text through very high interest, current pieces of short expository text. Third, the curriculum changes students' relationship to text and to learning via increased motivation, engagement with text, increased discussion, and preparation in class and deep critical thinking. These findings suggest the benefits of a systematic K-16 partnership to empower urban high school literacy offerings to reduce college remediation rates.

The ongoing challenge is to work with urban, inner-city high schools to ensure that everyone leaving high school is ready for college or career. Because of budget constraints, in California fewer long-term professional development sessions are now being offered. Findings suggest that using these materials as part of the work of English departments can strengthen the outcomes for teachers and students. In addition, empowering teachers and students to better understand what skills colleges expect will enhance access and equity for all students. As the federal government and other national efforts move towards embedding college and career ready English standards in high school, the California model is certainly a model to investigate further. Tracking the benefits of the curriculum and professional development into the college experiences of the high school students is also highly desired.

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# **What's the purpose?: How urban adolescents of color interpret and respond to noble and ignoble purposes constructed in media texts**

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## **Abstract**

This research examines how urban adolescents of color who are placed at risk of academic and social failure interpret and respond to noble and ignoble purposes constructed in media texts. Drawing from New Literacy Studies, which provide impetuses for educators and researchers to explore youth's literacy practices and media engagements as they occur and evolve in alternative teaching/learning contexts, this study uses participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and participant journals to determine youth's conceptions of *purposes*. These interpretive methods provide data sets that show how this particular group of youth are, or are not, responsive to noble and ignoble purposes. A Stanford Center on Adolescence 2008 *Youth Purpose Research Award* funded this research.

**Keywords:** African American urban adolescents, New Literacy Studies, Media Studies, Purpose, Urban education

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Urban adolescents of color have historically been marginalized and underserved in schools (Weis & Fine, 2000; McLaren, 2006). Their subjection to race and class oppression has remained stable in tandem with this marginalization, rendering their academic achievement and social success arguably inconsistent and at risk of intergenerational underdevelopment (Gadsden & Wagner, 1995; Gadsden, 1998, 1999). However, emerging studies of these youth's literacy practices present important ideas about where and how they engage in literacy work and are deemed successful and engaged. These studies dare us to imagine literate activities that thrive within and beyond the walls of the classroom and in relationship to media texts—the oral, print, digital, still and moving visual images, and periodic phenomena that couch information (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Knobel, 1999, 2001; Mahiri, 1997; Moje, 2000, 2004; Schultz, 2002). New Literacy Studies (NLS) support the cultivation of this work.

### **Urban Adolescents of Color, New Literacy Studies, and Purpose: A Brief Review of the Literature**

NLS examines the intersections of adolescent literacy practices, teaching/learning contexts, and engagements with media and technology (Moore, Bean, Birdshaw, & Rycik, 1999; Knobel, 1999; Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Leander & Sheehy, 2004; Staples, 2008a, 2008b). These studies are distinct from traditional inquiries into adolescent thinking and action because they attend to the purpose driven, socially situated, and culturally responsive ways individual and communities of young people construct and use literacy practices (Moje, 2000; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; O'Brien, 2001; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002; Kress, 2003, Staples, 2010). Literacy practices are the reading, writing, speaking and listening tactics used to communicate ideas, transfer knowledge, generate questions, develop wisdom, and construct new texts (Staples, 2007, 2008).

In addition to these foci, NLS contributes important understandings about the ways adolescent literacies evolve and are used in contexts, in addition to the communities of learning that are built as a result of them (Schultz, 2002; Moore, Bean,

Birdshaw, & Rycik, 1999). These studies counter notions that literacy learning and engagements take place exclusively in schools and in relationship to traditional print documents alone by explaining the ways they emerge and function within communities and homes (Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002), community centers and alternative academic programs (Mahiri, 1997; Moje, 2000) and art/music initiatives (Schultz, 2002; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). These works also suggest possibilities for imagining research that presents youth, and urban adolescents of color in particular, as integral and highly valuable informants about their uses of texts and literacies in contexts other than schools or regular classrooms.

In relationship to a call for re-envisioned literacy education that is attentive to media, learning, and contexts, Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, and Whitin (2006) suggest effective literacy education and research must also promote critical understanding about urban adolescents' existing use of new media and literacies for their own diverse purposes and contemplation of purposes. "Purpose" addresses the intentions young people form to give their lives meaningful direction and also contribute to the greater good. Damon, Menon and Bronk (2003) further define purpose as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (p. 121). They call for research that assists our understanding of "the processes and conditions responsible for cultivating noble purposes in the young" (2003, p. 126). This delineation is particularly important for urban adolescents of color who are consistently placed at risk of academic and social failure and thereby may be simultaneously at risk of assuming underdeveloped, skewed, or ignoble purposes. To attend closely to this abstract concept, it is important to initiate and draw from rich, analytical descriptions of the ways youth merge literacies and texts in alternative teaching/learning contexts in order to interrogate and construct purposes. Yet, research on the ways urban adolescents of color use literacy practices and texts in the service of understanding and developing purpose is ostensibly absent in NLS literature. More specifically, attention to the ways urban adolescents of color interpret and respond to the "noble" and

“ignoble” purposes constructed in media texts has not been explored.

### **Research Question**

How do urban adolescents of color placed at risk of academic and social failure interpret and respond to “noble” and “ignoble” purposes constructed in media texts?

### **Methodology**

The study centered in this article took place in a northeastern urban high school in the United States called Old City<sup>2</sup> High School. Its student population is 98% African American and nearly 80% of students qualify for free breakfast and/or lunch. The school is situated in a historically significant, yet economically impoverished community with strong social, intergenerational ties among its members. Over the span of one academic year (nine [9] months), I (Jeanine) facilitated a literacy community to engage media texts that present characters with strong noble and ignoble purposes. The texts included: films and various popular culture periodicals. To conduct this study, I worked with ten (10) students, ages 16–18. I used participant journals, interviews and group responsive conversation recordings as responsive artifacts. I met with students to engage texts and participate in activities for two (2) hours, two-four (2–4) times per week for one academic year.

A triangulated methodological framework useful for analyzing data sets that reveal the ways urban adolescents use literacies and engage texts to interpret and respond to purpose includes sociocultural discourse analysis (Gee, 1990; Gee & Green, 1998), endarkened feminist frameworks for interpreting written works (Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2000; Dillard, 2000) and theories about adolescent literacies to understand students’ choices and actions (Knobel, 1999; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Moje, 2002). James Gee’s pioneering work in sociocultural discourse

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<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym.

analysis provides systems for coding, interrogating, and interpreting data that contain voice (i.e. audio transcripts). These ways include reviewing student generated artifacts to note instances of word choice, phrasing, recurrences of voiced attention to certain phenomena and absences of verbalized attention to certain phenomena, in addition to ways of talking about purposes that were particular (i.e. unique, surprising, provocative). Correspondingly, endarkened feminist epistemologies provided a means for grappling with responsive written data that emerged in relationship to various types of texts. Interpretive adolescent literacy theories provided systems to explore the methods students used to engage media in relationship to their own questions, concerns, and stances about socially, politically and culturally charged content. These lenses cooperated to help us (Jeanine and Stephanie) consider the ways students generated talk and writing around characters' purposes in ways that were particular to their individual and collective standpoints and sociocultural situations.

## **Data Collection Methods and Analysis**

### **Preliminary Survey**

We designed a preliminary survey comprised of open ended and multiple choice questions to gauge potential participants' range of literacy practices, media use, and senses of purpose.

### **Participant-Observer Observations**

I (Jeanine) acted as participant-observers in the literacy community and noted youth's patterns of selections, verbalized interpretations, and responses to noble and ignoble purposes portrayed in media texts.

### **Participant Journals**

We designed semi-structured participant journal prompts (i.e. with some pre-determined research-based prompts to couch reader responses see: Staples, 2007 & Staples, 2008a, 2008b). These journals provided consistent views of the ways participants

grappled with noble and ignoble purposes constructed in media texts over time.

## **Participant Interviews and Conversations**

We designed semi-structured in-process and exit interviews, in addition to small and large focus groups, to delve deeper into youth's interpretation of and responses to noble and ignoble purposes depicted in media texts.

### **Discussion: On *The Matrix* (A Brief Review Of An Engaged Media Text)**

*The Matrix* was among the more salient media texts students engaged within the study. A synopsis follows:

In the near future, computer hacker Neo is contracted by underground freedom fighters who explain that reality as he understands it is actually a complex computer simulation called the Matrix. Created by a malevolent Artificial Intelligence, the Matrix hides the truth from humanity, allowing them to live a convincing, simulated life in 1999 while machines grow and harvest people to use as an ongoing energy source. The leader of the freedom fighters, Morpheus, believes Neo is "The One" who will lead humanity to freedom and overthrow the machines. Together with Trinity (a female Captain in the Resistance), Neo and Morpheus fight against the machines' enslavement of humanity as Neo begins to believe and accept his role as "The One" (Gittes, Pereyra, & redcommander27, *n.d.*).

As students discussed representations of purpose in this media text, they coordinated themselves to discuss whether Neo, in particular, could be described as having either a noble or ignoble purpose. Students defined noble purpose as "the reason that someone is living"; an individual's "fundamental intention" or "function" that renders "positive effects in one's personal life and in the lives of others" (Whole Group Conversation, February 10, 2009). Interestingly, students similarly defined ignoble purpose.



They surmised that an ignoble purpose is also, “the reason that someone is living”; an individual’s “fundamental intention” or “function” that renders “negative effects in one’s personal life and the lives of others” (Whole Group Conversation, February 20, 2009). Per information found in the initial survey, none of the adolescent participants had discovered their purpose at the time of the study. They were, however, very intrigued by the idea of identifying the purposes of others, including *Matrix* characters.

*The Matrix* is essentially a dystopia, a wasteland cloaked in the illusion of a type of banal functionality. Students helped themselves to grasp its nuances by juxtaposing physical traits of their high school and physical traits of the earth in the *Matrix*. For example, students noted that their school, an historic architectural gem from the outside with tangible facades of efficiency, actually suffered similar negative ruptures in organizational structure and citizens’ repressed happiness. Once students understood the context of the world storied in the media text, they invoked a specific strategy to determine Neo’s purpose. First, they asked a series of questions designed within the context of whole group responsive conversations:

1. What does the character *do* in the media story? (That is, what kind of actions do they commit to? Do these actions yield positive or negative consequences? What evidence do you have to support these conclusions?)
2. What does the character *say* in the media story? (That is, what kind of language does the character use to communicate his ideas, interests, goals, etc.? Does this language help or hurt people?)
3. What does the character *think* about? (That is, what occupies the characters thoughts (usually evidenced by voice-overs and flashbacks)? Are they evil thoughts or benevolent ones? Do these thoughts bear on his actions and/or language?)

Students recorded these questions (which emerged over time within responsive whole group conversations), in their journals. They applied these questions, in concert with one another, as a type of interpretive framework, to understand purpose as it was

represented in the characters of this and other media texts. Students determined that Neo embodied a noble purpose. They concluded that the meaning of his life/existence was rooted in “salvation...which is good it makes people free” and “justice....which is good because it makes people equal” (Kelly and John<sup>3</sup>, respectively, Whole Group Conversation, September 17, 2009).

## Findings

Preliminary findings suggest that the African American urban adolescent youth in this study:

1. Establish criteria for identifying noble and ignoble purposes
2. Understand noble purposes deeply (i.e. ascribe personal affiliations to them, implicate themselves or close loved ones as potential benefactors of them, conceptualize features of them that have multiple meanings)
3. Understand ignoble purposes deeply (i.e. relate personal and personally relayed lived experiences to them, correlate them with dishonorable purposes portrayed in multiple media and print texts)
4. Are hesitant to assume affiliations with purposes in either case
5. Begin to consider “reverberations” of purpose (i.e. social implications that include local and global contexts)

These findings represent emergences found in analyzed data before the close of the inquiry period. They are presented because of the consistency with which they evolved across multiple data sets during the first six months of the study. All students consistently focused on using the *do*, *say*, *think* interpretive framework in order to make sense of the purpose of characters constructed in media texts. When considering the nature of purpose (and whether it was noble or ignoble) students extended

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms.

their interpretive framework so that it could include stories of people they knew from their families, network of friends and associates, and neighborhood community members. These personal stories, juxtaposed with various media stores like *The Matrix*, helped students to feel comfortable and familiar with the conclusions they drew during periods of talk and writing. These stories helped students to form concrete narrative parallels which enabled deeper understandings of the abstract concept. Students agreed, however, that because purposes were so “important” and “permanent” or immutable, they were hesitant to assume affiliations with either noble or ignoble purposes (Sieta and Devon<sup>4</sup>, respectively, Whole Group Conversation, December 1, 2009). This hesitation indicates that students have a sophisticated understanding of the impacts one’s purpose can have and the significance it has in relation one’s life trajectory and the community in which one is situated.

### **Contribution and Significance**

The findings of this study are promising because of the insights they provide into the literacy practices that African American urban adolescent youth invoke and evolve after school. These practices shed light on students’ literate lives as a whole. The study is limited by its scope and duration. However, it points to a need for additional inquiries into the literate lives of these students and considerations of the ways they draw conclusions, reason and integrate personal narratives, all of which are literate practices, in the service of an inquiry. It also points to the ways students do this work collaboratively, and in relationship to rather difficult abstract concepts.

It is imperative for teachers and researchers to understand youth’s processes for development beyond the “school-sanctioned labels that carry with them baggage, or disparaging connotations” (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000, p. 401). That is, the literature calls for the emergence of research that attends to the ways we can understand adolescents beyond the labels of “non-

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms.

reader,” “low literate,” “purposeless” and “troublemaker” and instead as the “artists”, “poets”, “cultural critics”, and “tech designers” they often become when engaged in multimodal literacy work with media in alternative contexts. Urban youth of color in particular often must navigate deficit-laden discourses pertaining to their personhood, communities, academic abilities, and critical capacities. Opportunities to articulate the self and one’s personal trajectory outside of these discourses, while using a variety of media texts to do so, provide essential arenas for self-expression, creativity and fulfillment. Such opportunities are impetuses for understanding and developing purpose. As Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (2000) assert, “youth need spaces to work through the pains of oppressed identities, to explore the pleasures of not-yet identities, and to organize movements for purposes we have not yet imagined” (p. xiv).

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# Renewing Urban Education: Learning Cycles and the Pedagogy of Possibility

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## Abstract

Learning cycles were developed in Brazil as an innovative project in order to address the needs and characteristics of the country's growing heterogeneous urban population. This new school model aims at reducing dropout rates and student failure as well as providing a non-interrupted school experience for diverse learners. In this article, the author describes and analyzes the main elements of learning cycles and compares them to the traditional grade system. The model may not have immediate application in the American educational system, but it does force us to consider urban education from a different and renewed perspective, particularly given socio-economic disparities in society and a growing culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

**Keywords:** School Models, Learning Cycles, Cycled Schools, Grade Levels

## The Grade System

Schools are multi-faceted and complex institutions. As centers of learning, they represent the official knowledge, values and beliefs of a society (Apple, 2000). As microcosms of the larger society,

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they have a determinant role in the socialization process of the youth (Berns, 2009). As children learn how to read and write, they also learn how to function in an organized society.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, “A school is an administrative unit dedicated to and designed to impart skills and knowledge to students. [It] is organized to efficiently deliver sequential instruction from one or more teachers” (WDPI, 2009). In order to organize the learning process described in this definition, schools have long established a grade system where a specific body of knowledge is assigned to a specific grade level.

Based on the premise that certain skills, cognitive abilities and pieces of information correspond to certain age levels in terms of maturity and readiness, educators and psychologists have categorized and divided learning into grades. The idea of a grade being assigned to a specific age group within a carefully described developmental phase of a child has been so ingrained in the way we define and understand schooling that describing what a first, second or third grader should know has become common knowledge within our school culture.

Learning is progressive and cumulative, but advancement through the grade system is stepwise. While the grade system is useful for simplification and management of education, it has serious consequences for those who do not fit in. Failing and repeating grades, dropping out of school, being left behind and not performing at the expected grade level have become the norm in many schools across the country, particularly in urban areas. School reform focuses mainly on instruction, class sizes, and assessment of students, teachers, and learning outcomes. The effect that the grade-level model may have on students, teachers, and on the practice of teaching and learning, however, is not usually taken into consideration.

Alternative models to the grade system are already in practice. Schools organized around learning cycles, such as the *escolas cicladas* (cycled schools) in Brazil, represent a more engaged commitment to students and demonstrate a distinctive

understanding of how learning is, and should be, part of our lives. In cycled schools, there are no grades and progression is based on learning outcomes demonstrated through students' engagement and performance in realistic projects. In this article, I describe and analyze this educational model developed and implemented in urban schools in Brazil focusing on its structure and the results it has provided so far in establishing a pedagogy of possibility for the renewal of urban public schools.

### **Learning Cycles**

Critics of the grade system point out that schools organized in grades are too tied to the content that needs to be taught and learned at each grade level (Krug & Azevedo, 2000) and that the grade system assumes that learning is a linear process (Krug, 2001). When content becomes the axis of the learning and schooling processes, teachers spend most of their time transmitting information and testing students, and the classroom becomes the sole center of school interaction and dynamics. Moreover, there is neither time nor place for developing students' critical or higher order thinking skills (Gardner, 2004). Knowledge and thinking become separate entities and there is no space for providing students with an integrated view of learning.

The discussion on redefining schooling and schools in Brazil is parallel to the redemocratization of the country, which started in the mid-1980s. While restructuring its educational system, Brazil aimed at creating democratic practices to promote access to education for all students and mechanisms to ensure not only a high quality education for all its citizens, but a way for students of school age to stay in school. Moreover, for a country that was learning democracy, there was a particular concern with developing a curriculum that would speak to the student population it had to educate in terms of their interests, characteristics, needs and socio-economic condition. Students do not stay in school not only because they fail or cannot seem to make adequate progress, but also because they have needs and responsibilities to their families and communities. If schools were

to address those needs as part of their curriculum, there would be a better chance of keeping students in school.

In order to be effective and democratic, a school system needs to be in tune with the student population it serves and, for a developing country like Brazil, this implied creating a new understanding of what schools should be and how they should function. Flexibility was the key element in this discussion. The Brazilian student who needs to work and provide for his/her family needs to be able to attend a school that would adapt to his/her needs, and not the other way around.

Social promotion is not an acceptable solution, as it is only a way to disguise the problem and make social inequalities even more visible. In order to address issues of equity and access in education, a solution needed to take into account student backgrounds and socio-economic disparities in society.

Given its strict organization, the grade system only reinforces social inequalities by excluding students who cannot conform to its structure. It does not accommodate diverse learners, learning styles, and particularly, learners from low socio-economic status. By being selective, the grade system also gets rid of a large number of students which, in turn, affects the larger socio-economic development of the country, as fewer students in school results in an uneducated work force.

In Brazil, the discussion on educational policies led to a transformation in the way schooling is understood. When the Brazilian *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação* (Guidelines and Bases for Education), was approved in 1996, it allowed for innovations in the curricular structure of what is known in Brazil as “fundamental education” (pre-high school) and flexibility in the implementation of school curricula, schedule, space and utilization (Naiditch, in press). Schools could be organized based on the specific characteristics of the student population they served as long as they guaranteed differentiated instruction and developed concrete objectives for those students.

Learning cycles were initially developed as a way to combat rising dropout rates and to fight against a pattern of failing

students who were chronically repeating the same grade (Mainardes, 2009). They were also seen as a response to the need for providing students with a non-interrupted schooling experience.

Learning cycles is the name given to the educational system that eliminates learning centered on grades and replaces them with cycles. Cycles differ from grades because they organize learning in longer periods of time as opposed to an academic year and allow students to progress at their own pace based on individual differences, needs, backgrounds, and life circumstances. Schools that implement cycles instead of grades are referred to as cycled schools. The premise of the model is that given the non-linear and asymmetrical nature of learning, schools should be organized based on individual progression. Because students come to school from a variety of backgrounds (socio-economic, cultural ethnic, linguistic, etc.), it is assumed that their learning process and cognitive development will also be varied, i.e., students will progress at different paces and rhythm. The system of learning cycles aims at respecting students' individual differences as well as the way they learn and relate to the material and content, particularly in terms of pace, learning routes and styles. Students will advance through cycles as they demonstrate an understanding and mastery of the contents of each cycle, but their progression is individual, i.e., learners do not advance as a class and the assessment of their progress is based on individual achievement.

Learning cycles have been described in the literature as a model that allows for flexibility, particularly in term of time, assessment, and curriculum (Bernstein, 1996; 2003). Time is not measured as an academic year. Learners may stay in school longer than the usual time that it may take to complete their basic education (pre high-school), but when they graduate, the assumption is that they have developed the necessary skills and knowledge to participate as productive citizens in the socio-economic life of a society. Assessment is also differentiated because it is not measured based on students' performance on standardized tests designed to measure what every learner should know at every grade. Learners' assessment in learning cycles is based on the way they engage and succeed in completing a

number of projects that require the use of knowledge and skills developed in the classroom. The curriculum is developed connecting content areas to issues that stem from the community so that learners can make meaningful relationships and become more engaged in their learning process. Teachers are also encouraged to use the community as a larger classroom and go beyond the physical space of the school to provide learners with hands-on activities and practical applications of the content they are studying in class.

Proponents of learning cycles believe in teaching and learning as heterogeneous and non-linear processes. Students may or may not be on similar levels in terms of their cognitive skills, knowledge and learning paths (Perrenoud, 2002). Therefore, experimentation with a school model that speaks to various types of learning and learners is encouraged. The model allows for freedom in terms of presenting content differentially, organizing learning materials and school schedule and curriculum (Azevedo, 2007).

Learning cycles were initially developed in order to address the needs and characteristics of a particular student population; students that more often than not need to work and have responsibilities with their families and communities. Moreover, the system also seems to be addressing the needs of communities with lower socio-economic status where interruption in the schooling process is all too common and some learners may need to drop out of school. One of the most important tenets of the system of learning cycles is that schools need to adapt to the types of learners they serve and not the other way around.

The research described in this article was developed in the city of Porto Alegre in southern Brazil. The educational system in Porto Alegre has been widely researched and described in the literature as progressive, innovative and efficient (Fischman & Gandin, 2007; Gandin & Apple, 2002). The municipal department of education has implemented the learning cycles model as a way to improve the education of all its students and produce quality results; a literate and educated population.

## Method

This qualitative study was built in collaboration between the researcher and research participants. The researcher has lived in Porto Alegre and has worked in the public school system as a teacher educator for almost five years. The participants of this study were the teachers, students, administrators, parents and community members involved in developing the learning cycle project in one of the school districts in Porto Alegre. Participant observation methodology was used as the data gathering technique. The researcher acted both as an observer and a participant, to varying degrees, in the study. The observation took place in the schools and in the communities surrounding them. The researcher approached participants in their own environment to learn about the model, its implementation and main characteristics. In order to understand the model from a broader perspective, open ended interviews were carried out with volunteer members of the school community.

The discussion developed in this article is based on observation that was done in a school that had implemented learning cycles in a poor community on the outskirts of Porto Alegre. Observation was registered through field notes recording all accounts and observations (Facett, 2009). Semi-structured interviews with a selected number of volunteer participants were also taped and transcribed (Seidman, 2006). Field note and interview data were divided into content units from which categories were later developed. The discussion developed in the next section is a result of two years of visits, interaction, observation and interviews with school and community members.

Even though the researcher interviewed teachers, administrators, parents and students, the focus of this paper is on the model of learning cycles from conception to implementation and the different perspectives were used to inform the research and provide a broad understanding of how the model works. Learning cycles are a result of team work and can only be developed if a group of educators is committed to the project, so, the analysis below is a result of observation, interaction and interviews with

ten teachers who volunteered their time and agreed to give the researcher full access to their classrooms, lessons, activities, assessment tools, and students.

The categories of analysis include how school/schooling is defined, how students are grouped into cycles, how time and space are understood within the model, how the curriculum is conceived and developed, and how teachers' roles differ from those in the traditional grade system. An example of how the model works is also provided to illustrate the principles of learning cycles.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Redefining School**

Instead of grades, schools offer three learning cycles of three years each which corresponds to the nine years of what is known in Brazil as fundamental education (pre-high school). Students are assessed when they enroll at school and placed in the cycle that corresponds to their current literacy level. They can choose when they will be attending school (morning, afternoon or evening shift), but are strongly encouraged to be in school for as much time as they can afford, preferably for two shifts. The shifts do not need to be consecutive. For example, a student can attend school in the morning and in the evening, and go to work in the afternoon. Flexibility is the key term for learning cycles, as schools need to adapt to the socio-economic reality of its students. In Brazil, many students need to balance between work and study, so schools that allow for a more flexible schedule are more likely to succeed in retaining students.

The model is based on the principle of non-retention, i.e., students within a cycle will not fail if they do not achieve all the learning objectives for that cycle, and a chance will be given to those students who lag behind to be identified and be sent to learning laboratories. These learning laboratories provide additional and more personalized instruction for those who need it. It also extends school time and opposes the traditional view that there is a fixed schedule for students to be at school. Students can come to the learning laboratories at their own convenience. They



attend their cycle on one shift and are encouraged to stay for an additional shift to participate in learning laboratories.

### **Age and Maturity**

In learning cycles, students will ideally be working within their age range. An attempt is made to group students aged 6 to 8, 9 to 11, and 12 to 14 in the first, second and third cycles, respectively. However, that is not always possible, given that there are students who need to stay within a cycle for a longer period of time, and also students who drop out and later decide to come back to school. Therefore, although there may be variation in the age range of students within a cycle, the rationale is that regardless of age, students in the same learning cycle have the same aims and needs. However, there is a separation in the schooling system between adult and child education, which respects learners' maturity, interests, and cognitive ability.

### **Time and Space**

Organizing the learning process and the schooling experience in cycles instead of grades requires a structural change. The academic year is extended and students understand that they will remain working in the same community of learners for three years. This new way of looking at the schooling experience breaks up with that idea of giving students a year to acquire and become competent in a number of skills that they may not necessarily be able to develop in a specific grade during the course of one academic year. In order to get into a new cycle students need to acquire a number of skills, particularly basic language and mathematical literacy, and the understanding is that some students need more time. Teachers are responsible for assessing students' progress and they decide collectively when a learner is ready to move to the next cycle. Learning space is also extended beyond the classroom and the school and teachers are encouraged to explore the community for new learning opportunities wherever they may take place. Learning cycles shift the focus of education from the idea of what one should know at every grade to the real purpose of education, which is learning itself.

In other words, this model aims at preparing students with the knowledge and skills which are necessary to function as active participants in society. Learning is a lifelong process and one needs time to acquire, understand and use the knowledge and skills one gains at school. It also takes time to form and enable citizens to participate in the life of a democratic society.

## **The Curriculum**

Because learning cycles are offered in low-income communities, the schools understand their role in preparing students for citizenship and life in the larger society. In that sense, learning cycles have succeeded in reorganizing schools as public spaces with more democratic pedagogical practices. The curriculum focuses on developing projects around themes that emerge from the communities that they serve and this creates a stronger connection between schools, families and community.

Content is still a major concern, but special effort is made to present content and content areas in an integrated way, without having to separate social studies from language arts, for example. This opposes the traditional fragmentation of knowledge that is supported in the grade system. The premise of learning cycles is that the more integrated the curriculum is, the more meaningful it becomes for students, especially in terms of life applications and skills.

## **Teachers' Roles**

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the project with the integration of content areas, teachers need to be able to work collaboratively. They also need to create new ways of implementing varied assessment tools and criteria.

In the grade system, many teachers who cannot succeed in either covering all the topics that need to be covered or in having students ready for the next level may not necessarily take the outcomes of the learning process as their responsibility. It becomes an issue for the teacher at the next grade level. In the learning cycles, the teacher becomes more responsible and

accountable for learning outcomes and, given that they will be working with the same group of students for a period of three years, they also get to know their learners more deeply and develop stronger relationships with the families and communities, which will reflect in the way they plan their teaching to support the needs of their students. Teachers also take turns working in the cycles and the learning laboratories.

Cooperative learning is a premise for both students and teachers, particularly because knowledge is built collectively. In an education system organized in cycles, collective knowledge seems to be more valued because it is legitimized by those involved in the process and because both teachers' and students' prior knowledge and experiences are taken into account (Freire, 1992).

Each cycle has one main teacher who will stay with that group of students for the duration of the cycle. There are specific content area teachers that rotate between the different cycles and labs. In order to attend to the principle of more individualized instruction, the educational districts have tried to keep the number of students at around 25 students per cycle, but because no one should have access to school denied, some cycles will have to attend more students at certain times, especially because of the flexible schedules provided. Teachers divide their time between the cycle and the learning laboratories and this helps them observe students attentively as well as recognize and address learning problems as soon as they are identified.

Teachers who work closely with a group of students for a longer period of time are also better able to assess their students' performance and learning without necessarily having to resort to testing. In fact, it is up to the teachers to decide when a learner is ready to move to the next cycle. There are no standardized tests. Teachers use portfolios, class work, writing samples, and their observation in order to assess students.

### **How the Model Works: An Example**

An example of learning cycles and integrated curriculum

comes from a recycling center developed to create jobs for a poor community in Porto Alegre. The recycling center complemented the work developed at the local school. During the research period, I was able to witness how classroom discussions and activities promoted awareness about labor issues and social condition. Learners in all the cycles were involved in the process of developing the center with their families and this motivated and prompted them to read and write about their reality. Students used what they had learned in class to engage in projects in the recycling center and integrated math, language and social studies skills to address the needs of the center. Students' contributions varied based on their knowledge and skill level. This hands-on approach involved both basic and more complex skills, such as identifying, counting and sorting different types of materials, organizing lists, creating spreadsheets, communicating with local agencies and factories, and contacting buyers and donors. Reading, writing and talking about one's own condition and environment empowers learners and motivates them to learn (Freire, 1980). It also creates a stronger connection among schools, families and community.

In the cycles, lessons were responsive to the progress of the students. In the labs, students received more individualized attention and developed activities that focused on their specific needs. In the recycling center, teachers observed students closely, taking notes, and identifying learners' strengths and weaknesses. In the laboratories, learners received additional tutoring in the areas needed by teachers of different content areas who make themselves available to provide individual support for struggling learners.

By focusing on the specific demographic and socioeconomic features of the communities they serve, cycled schools fulfill a meaningful purpose in society and make themselves relevant to the communities they serve. Education becomes indeed the practice of freedom (Freire, 1980), the means by which students will deal with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world in critical and creative ways.

## **Implications and Conclusion**

The grade system has been a long established traditional way of organizing schooling. If students do not achieve what is expected of them at each grade level, however, a problem is generated that may not be addressed until the system finds a way within its own structure to get rid of those students. This does not mean that the system is inherently wrong or solely responsible for student failure. However, it does point to the need of reassessing its purpose and function in society and of rethinking ways of improving it.

Policymakers need to understand that in order to remain functional and serve its purpose in society, schools need to adapt to the different types of learners and communities they serve. Homogeneous classrooms are a myth and learners who do not conform to traditional models should not be punished by the educational system. Instead, schools should develop initiatives in order to accommodate all learners and supplement the learning that occurs in the classroom by extending the school experience and making it more meaningful to students and more relevant to societal needs.

Learning cycles represent an attempt at trying out a different way of organizing formal education, particularly in order to address the needs and specific characteristics of a student population that seems to have been neglected by the official educational system. Learning cycles also represent a more humanistic and differentiated pedagogical approach (Perrenoud, 2000).

Despite having been used in Brazil for a considerable amount of time now, learning cycles have been implemented by a relatively small number of schools – 11.1%, according to the Brazilian Institute of Educational Research (INEP, 2005). However, the interest in learning cycles seems to be growing especially because of their purpose of serving low-income students in mostly poor neighborhoods. In Porto Alegre, the implementation of the model in working class communities has

resulted in larger numbers of school enrollment and student retention (Freitas, 1999).

The model proposed by the learning cycles reminds us that schools should not be *one size fits all*. Schools have the responsibility of serving and respecting all its students and the knowledge they bring with them. Learning cycles may also help us reconsider urban education in general by providing urban student populations with an alternative school model that could be more suitable and appropriate, particularly in areas of culturally, linguistically, and socio-economic diversity. Given the economic needs of urban student populations, schools need to develop pedagogical approaches that offer opportunities for non-traditional students to attend school and pursue a degree. In order to develop a pedagogy of possibility, schools need to redefine themselves and respond to the evolving and changing needs of the society they serve.

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