

Keeping urban students in school and graduating: Adding a history of labor to the curriculum of IPS

This is a proposal to include the history of labor in the curriculum of those Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) serving working-class neighborhoods, families, and students.

A history of labor is particularly important for working-class families and students attending Indianapolis Manual, Tech, Washington, Howe, and Arlington. Adding this history to the curriculum will have a direct and positive affect on increasing graduation rates of urban working-class students who will acquire a greater sense of purpose to engage in schooling in order to gain the credentials and skills needed to improve working conditions, collectively bargain for a better deal, and improve their working-class neighborhoods for their families by challenging and changing the social-economic conditions.

This is not a new idea. On December 10, 2009 Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle signed AB 172, the Labor History in the Schools bill, ending 12 years of efforts by key legislators, workers, unions and others to pass legislation making the teaching of labor history and collective bargaining part of the state's standards.

The legislation was needed because of the appalling lack of knowledge high school graduates have about labor history. All Americans must realize when schools talk about the history of working people they are talking about the history of the United States. For Hoosiers, this will validate what many already know: the backs and hands of the working class have built Indianapolis and Indiana.

A history of labor will enable IPS urban working-class students to take pride in their education due to the recognition of the efforts by their friends and family in areas such as the struggle for workers rights, the collective bargaining process, fair wages, safe working conditions, child labor laws, and the 40 hour week. A history of labor will help students understand the real role of working men and women in making America a better place. In studying labor, urban working-class students learn important lessons—above all the contributions generations of labor activists, many of whom were killed, imprisoned, beaten, or threatened as they built our nation, democratizing and humanizing its often brutal workplaces.

Organic intellectualism: Strength-based orientations that help urban working-class students stand out

A review of labor shows the main types: manual and mental or intellectual labor. What is important here is mental labor is built on the foundation of manual labor. Intellectual labor would not be possible if it were not for the labor needed to meet our basic needs.

Italian philosopher, writer, politician, and political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) notes, "all [people] are intellectuals ... but not all [people] have in society the function of intellectuals." According to Gramsci, each person has a level of intelligence resulting for the interaction with the world and that these interactions

are most always constrained by such factors as race, gender, and class. The fact that each student experiences the world differently means each comes to school with different forms of intellectualism (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

However, our urban public schools are often ill-equipped to identify and develop a student's "organic intellectualism." Instead they end up sorting so-called intellectuals from so-called non-intellectuals through teaching methods that value the ability to acquire and reproduce information--using specific formats within rigid timeframes, leaving the organic intelligence of urban students unrecognized, unappreciated, and thus under-utilized in school and society.

Schools as places perpetuating false divisions: mental vs. manual labor

Gramsci went on to argue that schools are often the social institution used to validate this unnatural division in society, one where an individual is cast as either *Homo sapiens* (one who thinks/works with his or her mind) or *Homo faber* (one who labors/works with his or her hands). *Gramsci's approach questions and breaks down the division between thinker and worker and replaces it with a paradigm that values the intellectual potential in all people.*

The current "Work Ethics" curriculum (used by various districts around the country including in Indiana) is filled with good intentions for helping students acquire work habits/ethics to get and hold a job, but is clearly written from the point of view of management and unbalanced in its approach to informing high school students about the responsibilities and challenges of the world of work. For example there is neither a history of labor nor a review of the responsibilities and work ethics of employers. See "Work Ethics for What?" (Loflin, 2008).

As all Americans know, school success rates in urban districts are low. One factor is urban working-class students reject "education" because public urban school culture defines as insufficient and inferior--and so rejects--the urban working-class culture students bring such as language, views of authority, what it means to be smart, and the purpose of schooling. School success is seemingly attained by admitting the inferiority of one's culture, class, and community and undergoing a sort of educational rehabilitation process through assimilation into what culture commentator D'Souza (1995) calls "culturally superior ways." Historically, this well-meaning but misguided approach results in making school the enemy and defines school success for urban students as turning their back on "the neighborhood" and joining the other team, i.e. to go to school and becoming a part of the status quo that keeps the community down. This adversarial relationship has been the case with Irish students in English schools, Aborigines in Australian schools and in any situation where the dominant culture, which run the public schools, confuse (for political/economic reasons) assimilation with education with respect to their so-called minority students. Non-dominant cultures and economic classes experience the "social slights" of school district policies and school staff who view as defective or even detest the culture of their students. In these instances, students from the non-dominant cultures rightly reject schooling because they realize they are not being educated in their

own self-interests, but in the interests of others (Finn, 1999).

This mutual disrespect--schools degrading students' culture and their communities, and students rejecting education--hurts everyone. Can it be overcome?

Enabling students to be successful while maintaining their identities as urban working-class youth (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008)

Current urban school plans focus on improving instruction and learning conditions with the goal of increasing the number of students who are able to

- "escape" poverty and attend college and
- "better themselves" or to "move up."

Researcher Angela Valenzuela (1999) has called this a **subtractive model of schooling**. She says urban schools "subtract resources" from students by:

- dismissing their definition of education, and
- assimilationist policies/practices minimizing their culture and language.

Urban students are asked (sometimes indirectly, sometimes directly) **to exchange the culture of their home and community for the so-called "higher culture" of the school in exchange for access to college**. Such an approach often reduces the life choices of students into a false binary, that of

- choosing between staying behind as a failure, and
- "getting out" as a success.

Faced with the prospect of leaving their communities behind to be a success, many working-class urban youth of all colors opt out of school. They choose to retain an urban and working-class identity they perceive to be in conflict with the expectations of schools, even if the cost of that choice is school failure.

To be effective, urban education reform movements must begin to develop partnerships with communities that provide young people the opportunity to be successful while maintaining their identities as urban working-class youth. This is the aim of a history of labor curriculum.

Valenzuela calls this an **additive model** of education. It focuses on the design of urban school culture, curriculum, and pedagogy that identifies the working-class culture and neighborhoods of urban students as *assets rather than as things to be ignored and/or replaced*.

The dilemma of society's desire for success for urban working-class youth: The costs of academic success

We know only too well urban working-class students can succeed academically yet, at great personal and social costs including alienation from

- family
- their home language
- their neighborhood
- progressive social values

- worker's rights
- organized labor movements.

To improve this tragic situation, a history of labor curriculum in urban education:

- strives to create spaces for urban students to learn as they also embrace and develop affirmed and empowered identities as intellectuals, as urban working-class youth, and as members of historically marginalized ethnic groups;
- relies on scholarship that views urban working-class history as a powerful, but oftentimes under-utilized *point of intervention* for urban schools; and
- fosters the understanding that organized labor remains the best guarantee of economic protection and political advocacy for workers.

In conclusion

A history of labor and the recognition of the accomplishments of the working classes by school staff may be what are missing from the present IPS school culture that seems unable to bridge the disconnect between the middle-class school culture and the lower-class communities from which most urban students arrive.

School staff teaching in historically working-class neighborhoods cannot ignore, degrade, or even downplay the significance and relevance of a history of labor to their working-class students' academic success while expecting unquestioned obedience and cooperation from those who reject a school culture which rejects as inherently deficient who they basically are.

References

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Wisconsin Department of Education, Social Studies: Liner notes from *Lessons in Labor History* (No. 2200, 2001, 94 pp., \$30)

The history of the American labor union is the history of America. It is the study of the enormous social and economic forces that swept our great land in the last three centuries.

*The collection of study suggestions, background material, performance tasks, and lesson plans included in *Lessons in Labor History* is offered to you as a guide for incorporating the rich history of the American worker into what you already do in the classroom. Use of these materials will lead to an expanded labor history knowledge base and a greater appreciation of the role of organized labor in this country's growth.*

Since most students move from school to the work environment at some point in their lives, it is our hope that this material will help them learn critical lessons about the unions' contributions to society.

