Rethinking the 20th century position claiming urban schools are failing: Transforming urban education for urban students, urban teachers, urban neighborhoods, and the 21st century

Summary: *Are America's urban public schools failing? Is their mission to educate all children equally and effectively? What are urban educators doing for students who recognize the importance of learning, but are unwilling to assume a submissive posture in rigid schools which routinely deny them a sense of curiosity, autonomy, culture, and self-worth—where they become bored, alienated, or disruptive and opting out of schooling, even to their own detriment?*

What if current reformers are wrong in presuming urban schools are broken? Perhaps urban public schools are not broken and doing exactly what they are designed to do. If so, the biggest challenge confronting urban school reform is the development of instructional practices that encourage students to invest in their public schools as viable social institutions.

For this to happen, urban schools must interrupt and resist popular, but ineffective, state and national reform policies and invest in the development of counter strategies: 1) provide students with the opportunity to be successful while maintaining their identities as urban youth; 2) move toward education practices that counteract the role urban schools play in maintaining social inequalities; and, 3) while focusing on developing the academic skills, create opportunities for urban students to be agents for social change in their own communities and critical partners in reforming education practice and policy in their own schools.

Since urban schools are situated among the few institutions producing opportunities to contest structural inequalities, these institutions must also develop critical counter-cultural communities of practice which use critical pedagogy--a liberative approach to teaching urban students to be critical thinkers who question and challenge injustices (educational, intellectual, social, political, economical), and the beliefs and practices that enable these injustices.

Finally, the paper challenges the myth of meritocracy and exposes the hype around equal educational opportunity; proposes an equitable educational system which refutes "one-size-fits-all" normalcy; re-examines resistance to urban schooling as problematic; promotes a literacy which is powerful and political, concerning the ability to analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and apply as opposed to a literacy that is merely functional; critiques the "college going culture" as a middle-class ideology that ignores the material conditions of urban communities which are more pertinent to the lives of students; exposes the limits of multi-cultural education; and, questions the present model of success which promotes a concept of achievement based on individualism, "escaping" the neighborhood, and wealth accumulation rather than on critical thinking and social change.

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"The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our peers, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom."
-- bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*

● **Introduction**

Facing the stark reality of urban public schools which have historically and consistently enabled high dropout rates, excessive teacher turnover, and low levels of achievement, our public education authorities have introduced policies which have led to "…high stakes testing, NCLB, and the capitulation of common sense to 'zero tolerance' actions in schools. The pressure on teachers and administrators to produce test scores and total compliance has been a corrupting influence across the board, and it has led to a new horrid phenomenon of educators blaming students for not performing to impossible expectations. Now with the Gates and Broad plan to tie teacher tenure and promotion to test scores, we can expect a further deterioration of the teacher-student relationship that was once based on trust and care--and a further transition from educator to prison guard. Competition for top performing students will be even more fierce, and the pushing out of low performers will become even more severe. This has turned urban schools into hostile and alienating environments for many youth, effectively treating them as dropouts-in-waiting" (The Advancement Project, 2010).

This worrisome development raises questions: What does a democracy require of its urban schools: education as conformity or education as the practice of freedom? Regarding today's urban schools, what are the advantages of a school climate, curriculum, teaching methods that liberates students and involves them in solving the very social-economic problems which hinder their school success?

Education as the practice of individual and collective freedom means urban education which is:
- concerned with human liberation--liberating ourselves from the unnecessary constraints to our freedom and full development
- rooted in the every-day lived experiences of marginalized urban students
- centered on a critique of structural economic, and racial oppression
- focused on a dialogue with the classroom teacher instead of a one-way transmission of knowledge/curriculum
- structured to empower students as collective agents of social change

Perhaps what this means is only within a commitment to freedom and social change can urban schools genuinely motivate students to develop sophisticated academic literacies. Here urban students learn to read and write well so they may be better able to review texts that emerge in their every-day lives and the live of citizens in their neighborhood and community. Mainly these texts concern those that serve to limit, constrain, or control actions or thought. These are the

very texts needing to be critiqued, contextualized, and ultimately re-written by critically empowered and critically literate citizens, which is what America wants all its students to become and how America want them to act.

Education as the practice of individual and collective freedom means the ultimate goal of urban education is to help make inner-city students be more critical consumers of all information in their daily lives and to give them the skills to become more capable producers of relevant social and political counter-information.

● Urban schools are not failing: Moving to a 21st century vision of urban education

To a large degree, public discussions on education recognize but leave unchallenged the fact that wealthier communities have better educational opportunities than low-income. It does not make sense then to compare schools across these communities and then pronounce urban schools as failures.

Thus, the "failure" of urban schools is not actually the result of failing:
- on one hand schools are producing academic failure at alarming rates;
- yet, urban schools are doing this inside a systematic structural design that essentially predetermines winners and losers
  - one set of schools is given the resources necessary to succeed and another group of schools is not

If our public school system has never made it its actual mission to educate all children equally and effectively then reformers are wrong in presuming urban schools are broken: **urban schools are not broken; they are doing exactly what they are designed to do.**

This argument is not meant to excuse the academic failure in many urban schools, but move away from 20th century approaches improving urban schools.

• Two reasons why school failure in urban districts is tolerated
1. The Politics of Failure
Perpetual urban school failure is tolerated because deep down our nation subscribes to the belief that someone has to fail in school.

In fact, this quasi-Darwinian belief system is built into most schools through the existence of a largely unchallenged **pedagogical system of grading and testing** that by its very design guarantees failure for some.

This system for perpetuating unequal educational outcomes has been justified by racist and classist pseudo-scientific theories, often referred to as **deficit models**. See Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and class structure in American* (1994) which suggests blacks and Latinos are intellectually inferior to whites.

Least we forget, during the October 2009 meeting of the Education Roundtable, Indiana's Governor Daniels handed out Murray's 2008 book, *Real Education*. What is worrisome, Murray's assumption that "…there are only a limited number of academically gifted people and these are America's future leaders, that only

this elite can enjoy college productively and that the non-gifted shouldn't be channeled by their high school counselors into training for that college chimera, which wouldn't make them happy anyway" made a lot of sense to the governor.

Under these models, educational failure results from the inferiority of the student, the family, the community and its culture. In fact, it's presumed those who do well in school either come from America's dominant culture, or being academically successful, have assimilated into its "culturally superior ways" (D'Souza, 1995).

2. The Economics of Failure: Social-economic reproduction
Public schools are America's socioeconomic sorting machine--the main place where economic futures are cast and people are sorted into their future roles.

In short, some people must fill the least desirable places in society, and it is important that they feel they deserve to be in those positions or, at the very least, that there is a formal mechanism to justify their place there: urban schools. This point is validated by the current chant some suburban students yell to the students of urban schools at football games: "Your dad works for my dad."

In effect, the high-stakes nature of this sorting process plays itself out behind the rhetoric of opportunity and the myth of school-based meritocracy which suggests all students compete under the same set of rules with equal opportunity. Still, in the game of education, some students have **high levels of social, political, economic capital.** This guarantees an unfair competition, one that for centuries has produced the same unequal outcomes in schools and in the larger society.

- **Embracing two important truths**
1. The myth of meritocracy and exposing the hype about "opportunity"
The few exceptional students who combine fortitude and fortune to succeed in under-resourced schools play an important role in this myth making, **confirming for the public that opportunity exists for anyone who wants it bad enough.**

The flip side of this opens the door for others to spout that the reason some do not make it is simply because they and their families do not care about education (Hass, 2010), or "they don't want it bad enough" or did not work hard enough.

This is, of course, untrue.   See: http://agonist.org/the_myth_of_hard_work/

The stratified nature of our current society creates a social pyramid that has no room at the top for the masses. This structure requires people to be sorted, and schools are the mechanism used to resolve this messy social conundrum, which was previously accomplished through overtly racist and classist social policies. Do suburban school districts offer Home Economics or cosmetology courses? Which schools have ROTC?

"At some point we must come to grips with the fact that we are not a nation of opportunity for all but a nation built upon grand stories of opportunity for all."
-- Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*

The fact that opportunity exists (currently defined as all children having access to

public schools) helps maintain the rhetoric of a democratic and meritocratic society where competition churns the cream to the top, ultimately benefiting society as a whole by rewarding the most deserving.

What is interesting and revealing is the overwhelming majority of those who benefit most from this sorting process are those who look, talk, think, and act most like those who already have power.

This is **inequality by design** and well documented. Our public schools play a role in the perpetuation of this rigged social lottery: the nation's poorest are the most likely to be denied access to a quality education and blamed (directly or indirectly) for their academic "failure." The fact they are in poor neighborhoods *is the stamp of justification for one's position in the labor force and society*.

With remarkable consistency, our urban public schools serving urban students disproportionately produce the citizens who will spend most of their adult lives holding the least desirable and least mobile socio-economic positions

- prison
- low-ranking military positions
- low-semi-skilled labor
- service sector labor

and these positions will be overwhelmingly and disproportionately occupied by residents emerging from America's poorest communities.

2. Urban schools are not failing—the factories of failure are working to justify social and economic stratification
If urban schools have been criticized as "factories for failure" then their failures **means they are in fact successful at producing the results they are designed to produce.** We can't call schools designed to fail "failing schools."

- ## 20th century approaches: How previous plans have missed the mark

Academic failure in urban schools persists despite increasing attention to the problem from a variety of sources including NCLB and millions of dollars.

The failure of these efforts can be traced to the fact these resources have not been used to address the context of urban life and poverty directly.

The logic behind increasing material resources has been rooted in notions that
- **urban schools fail because they lack the resources and support suburban schools receive**
- **that is, *they fail because they are not like suburban schools.***

This thinking has led to a growing number of reform plans that reduce larger and more pressing social and systemic issues of poverty such as
- nutrition,
- health,
- environment,
- violence

to the more "measurable" issue of **material resources**.

Following this logic, urban school reform has committed itself to supplementing a wide range of **institutional material resources** as the "cure-all" for low

achievement, and so rolling out money for:
- high-stakes testing and test preparation programs
- decreasing school and class sizes
- bringing in the best teachers and offering incentives
- increasing the number of computers and/or textbooks per student
- implementing scripted literacy and math programs
- improving facilities

Yet, none of these efforts has produced notable gains in urban school success.

Indeed, material resources are important. Just view the unwavering efforts of wealthy communities to the maintenance of highly resourced schools. It's just that their students can avoid dealing daily with systemic social/economic issues. This is why Carnegie's "Schools for a New Society" initiative suggests a **dynamic vision** for urban high schools requiring collaboration with community stakeholders to focus an urban school's mission more directly on and be more attentive to **the most pressing needs of the community.**

Resources must be used to address directly the context of urban life and poverty that shapes the lives of students and the surrounding community:
- **focusing on pedagogies that challenge the social and economic inequities that confront urban youth**
- helping schools, and teachers most directly, **in the development and implementation of pedagogy and curricula that**
    - **address the conditions of urban life, and**
    - **develops a sense of power among students for altering those conditions.**

● A 21ˢᵗ century approach: no longer "fixing failure"

An urban school reform approach that situates itself solidly in the 21ˢᵗ century
- shifts the blame from the victims of an unjust system onto the fiscal, political, ideological policies deliberately undercutting/demeaning schools.
- challenges the 20ᵗʰ century rhetoric of **"fixing failure"** that has driven countless reform measures aimed at improving the achievement of the country's most disenfranchised youth, particularly the urban students

It is important that we analyze this tolerance for failure if we are to move toward a set of structures and critical educational practices in urban schools that
- provide young people a reason to invest in the education their schools
- offer an education that challenges and transforms social, economic, political and educational injustices
- provide ways of teaching/learning that are:
    - critical of the present society and its public schools
    - politically, culturally, and locally relevant.

All of the above issues and discussion lead to one question: SINCE SCHOOLS ARE NOT FAILING--doing precisely what they are designed to do--<u>WHAT CAN BE DONE?</u>

FIRST: The biggest challenge confronting urban schools
According to the Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation, the biggest challenges facing urban school reformers are:

- ***the development of instructional practices that encourage students to invest in schools as a viable social Institution***
  - enabling teachers to capture the minds and hearts of students
    - combining the interests of students with a critical focus
- providing hope and a sense that their investment will be rewarded
  - giving students something students can believe in.

As a consequence, the starting point and motivator for urban schools is to

- **recognize the conditions of inequality**
- **enable the desire in students to overturn these conditions for themselves and all suffering communities.**

For both educator and student, this means

- discarding the framework of meritocracy
- critically embracing the role of the "***underdog.***"

It means framing a classroom and school culture utilizing critical pedagogy to:

- *critique notions of equal opportunity and access,*
- *making education a weapon to name, analyze, deconstruct, and act upon the unequal conditions in urban schools, urban communities, and other disenfranchised communities across the nation/world.*

- **How to meet this challenge: *Enabling students to be successful while maintaining their identities as urban youth*.**

What does it means to achieve: Different definitions of success
To begin, we must understand there are different definitions of success:

- one for the wealthy: how close one can replicate one's community
- one for the urban poor: how far away one can get from one's community

Defining success for urban students in terms of how far they live from where they grew up can connect their success with the suffering of others.

School funding currently focuses on improving instruction and learning conditions, with the goal of increasing the number of students who are able to

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

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

- dismissing their definition of education
- 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 <u>false binary</u>, 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 urban youth of all colors opt out of school. They choose to retain an urban and cultural 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 youth.

Valenzuela calls this an **additive model** of education. It focuses on the design of urban school culture, curriculum, and pedagogy that identifies the cultures and communities of urban students *as assets rather than as things to be replaced.*

The dilemma of society's desire for success for urban youth: The costs of academic success
We know only too well urban students can succeed academically yet, at great personal and social costs including alienation from
- family
- their home language
- their neighborhood
- progressive social values.

As a result of this tragic situation, a critical pedagogy in urban education
- strives to create spaces for students to learn as they also embrace and develop affirmed and empowered identities as intellectuals, as urban youth, and as members of historically marginalized ethnic groups
- relies on scholarship that views youth culture as a powerful, but oftentimes under-utilized, *point of intervention* for schools.

"I failed your class 'cause I ain't with your reasoning. You tryin' to make me you."
-- Boogie Down Productions, 1989

So, it's not just about "acting white," it's also playing for "the other team"
"Acting white" is a negative term usually applied to African-Americans referring to a person's perceived betrayal of their culture by assuming the social expectations of white society. Success in education is seen as a form of being disloyal to one's "blackness" and culture. Urban students are told being educated means self-rejection and accepting the school's definition of who they are as inadequate.

"Every time I see a young person who has come through the system to a stage he could profit from the system and identify with it, but who identifies more with the struggle Black people who have not had his chance, every time I find such a person I take new hope. I feel new life as a result."
-- Ella J. Baker, 1973, Civil Rights activist

Although race is primary for black students, "acting while" also means joining the other team, Prof. Duncan-Andrade applies this to many urban students of all

colors who reject being successful in school if it means not supporting the "underdog" and turning your back on the home team, i.e. the neighborhood.

The "other team" consists of mainstream society/culture ("the system") whose members use their wealth, power, and social/political advantage to maintain their "higher status" and "keep us (the underdogs) down." The other team:
- "thinks the are better than" those who live in the inner-city
- looks down on and distains the life and people there
- uses only Standard English or has replaced their home language with Standard English/Language of Wider Communication.

SECOND: Educators should create a critical counter-culture community of practice in their classrooms and school programs
This counter-culture will deliberately study, critique, confront, and replace--with a culture of excellence and justice--any and all forms of
- low expectations
- social exploitation
- political exploitation
- economic exploitation

These efforts should begin by
- confronting the immediate material conditions of the community where the teaching is taking place.
  - This means developing a curriculum and pedagogy that
    - address the material concerns of students and their communities (education, housing, justice, jobs, etc.)
- creating opportunities for students to use what they are learning in ways that directly impact their lives.
  - This means developing a curriculum and pedagogy that
    - permit and encourage students to use what they are learning to act upon those concerns.
- preparing students to develop common goals and ready them to work collectively toward them.
- working to connect the local struggle for freedom to larger state, national, and global struggles over similar issues.

- **A counter-culture community of practice: Resisting dominance**
According to Professors Ducan-Anrade and Morrell, a major way for urban public schools to work for urban students is for neighborhood and community members, and school teachers/coaches to use their institutional capital to develop schools/classrooms/programs which
- counter the *negative stereotypes* that the very nature of the intellect and culture of urban families/students (especially Black and Latino) are
  - inferior and defective,
  - a source of social pathology
  - non-intellectual
  - the cause of poor school performance/ the achievement gap
In review, efforts must be made to create an (counter-dominance) educational counter-culture that makes the following qualities normal in the classroom:

- self-respect
- self-realization
- group achievement
- critical self-consciousness
- academic excellence

- **Critical pedagogy as a core principle of a counter-culture community of practice**

Critical pedagogy is a teaching approach grounded in critical theory. Critical pedagogy attempts to help students question and challenge domination (educational, intellectual, social, political, economical), and the beliefs and practices that dominate. In other words, it is a theory and practice of helping students achieve critical consciousness.

Prof. Ira Shor notes, "Critical pedagogy centers on habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse."

Critical pedagogy includes relationships between teaching and learning. It is a continuous process of unlearning, learning and relearning, reflection, evaluation and the impact that these actions have on the students, in particular students who have been historically and continue to be disenfranchised by traditional schooling. From: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_pedagogy.

- **How to develop critical counter-cultural communities of practice**

To create these cultures, schools must draw upon the "cycle of critical praxis" to:
- create a dynamic curriculum based on a relevant and authentic problem or issue that is identified in collaboration with youth:

Cycle of Critical Praxis
(1) Identify a problem
(2) Research the problem
(3) Develop a collective plan of action to address the problem
(4) Implement the collective plan of action
(5) Evaluate the action, assess its efficacy, and re-examine/re-assess the state of the problem, developing a renewed commitment to a remedy.

The cycle of critical praxis
- reveals powerful opportunities for critical pedagogy with students—especially urban youth
- enables a dialogue between school staff and students in the classroom/school, not a one-way conversation the staff controls
  - breaks down the inherent power relations in traditional pedagogy—the type of power relations free/democratic schools avoid and identifies students as collaborators with adults
  - fundamentally repositions students as actors and as contributors to the struggle for social change

- identifies youth popular culture as a legitimate site for engagement and developing sophisticated thinking, academic, social, & political skills by engaging their own social worlds
  - involves continued action for social justice--sees education as a tool for eliminating oppressive relationships and conditions
  - requires educators to recognize the ways in which the current system of education is rigged to produce unequal outcomes.

- **Cycle of Critical Praxis and academic excellence**

Critical pedagogies do not focus on critiquing and changing society to the exclusion of the development of sophisticated literacy and numeracy skills. Critical pedagogy via the Cycle of Critical Praxis asks:
  - to what extent are students emerging as competent readers and writers working at sophisticated levels?
  - to what extent does the outcome in the academic settings meet or even exceed content area standards in the disciplines?
  - to what extent do the students make more quantifiable academic transformations, including raised grade point averages and test scores and admission into colleges and universities?

Indentify the vehicle: Enabling critical praxis

To implement critical pedagogy in urban contexts, it is vital that educators identify and articulate to students the vehicle for delivering critical pedagogy (critical praxis, critical research, critical media literacy, etc.).

This vehicle (aka "frame of reference") must be
  - intriguing enough to generate student engagement
  - relevant enough to warrant student investment.

> *"The brain connects new information to what it already knows."*

In short, educators must be able to
  - explain to students
    - in a compelling way
  - *why they should invest in the project*.

This explanation should answer the common student question:
Why is this important to me
  - in this moment?
  - in my future life?
  - in the future life of my community?

Vehicles for implementing critical pedagogy should
  - draw from culturally relevant material
  - make prominent and value the knowledge of students as
    - legitimate
    - intellectual
  - builds on students' existing knowledge base of
    - their own culture
    - their own language

○ popular culture	○ local, US, global history
• build on students'	
○ needs	○ interests
○ concerns	

Critical pedagogues can/should build bridges to other forms of knowledge giving students access to the Language of Wider Communication allowing them to

- crack into dominant institutions
- extract resources from dominant institutions
- change dominate institutions.

● Major characteristics of an urban school counter-culture

1. *The achievement of outstanding individuals is put in perspective*

The achievement of outstanding individuals using their success to escape the severe structural inequalities of poverty cannot be considered merely positive.

In fact, these isolated cases only reinforce the dominant negative stereotype which suggests that only an exceptional few "who have what it takes" can find success in urban schools and that success is partially defined by their ability to leave their community to join a more "successful" one.

This concept is helpful because the traditional individualized model of success does not prioritize shifts in social consciousness that lead to collective public action against inequity.

Quite the contrary, it contributes to reproducing the current social order by reinforcing a "survival-of-the-fittest" paradigm that legitimizes inequitable opportunities and outcomes.

To counter this traditional idea of success, a school/classroom counter-culture must emphasize the development of structures supporting success and collective consciousness for **all** its participants rather than a select few.

As well, when students behave in urban schools in ways that are attempts to "go along to get ahead" they see success at schools as navigating school pitfalls and negative climate. This helps them make it through school, but no attempts are made to challenge and counter inequalities they face and consequently actually affecting change in the school. Unfortunately, these "successful" students simply perpetuate the pitfalls, problems, and issues, leaving the school situation and climate the same as it was when they arrived and for those coming after them.

This 20th century strategy (See Pierce's 2005 book, *Polite Protest*) not only makes no sense, but is tragic. It directly disrespects the "Fight the power"/anti-establishment, "keepin' it real; keepin' it right" political character of global youth culture by presenting a false choice between "going along to get ahead" or school failure—and while providing no viable alternative.

This strategy epitomizes the **generational and social class disconnect** between current middle-class educators of color and global youth culture. See the well intended attempt by the National Council on Education Black Children to

reason with African American students to do what it takes to graduate as stated in the Student Section of its National Blueprint for Action IV (Loflin, 2009a). In this case, the adults do not suggest a counter-culture. Instead they advise students on how to make it through without asking too many questions, getting in/causing trouble, breaking the rules, or getting suspended/expelled.

2. *The concept and issue of "double-consciousness" is put in perspective:* How critical pedagogy enables a critical consciousness
A viable counter-culture seeking to make academic excellence and collective achievement normal in urban schools **raises the political awareness of students of color regarding the critical "double-consciousness" demanded of them if they are to become successful in school and the larger society.**

Du Bois (1903/1996) **explained the idea of "double-consciousness" as the effect black people in America experience by having to struggle with an awareness of one's self as well as an awareness of how others perceive them--** this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, and measuring oneself by the values of others. This is a problem because the danger of double consciousness resides in conforming and/or changing one's identity to fit the perception of others.

A critical double-consciousness is realized when a person faced with this internal battle **is able to develop a critically conscious response** to these conditions. Such a person is able to acquire the

- mechanical skills (**an explicit understanding of the rules and codes of power)** so necessary to navigate oppressive social conditions/institutions
- critical skills to analyze and resist the hostility he or she endures and to develop a strong sense of self and community.

This means developing a "private self-consciousness" of acute self-awareness and introspection such that one is examining one's inner feelings and emotions and not preoccupied with how others view them.

Du Bois refers to the development of private self-consciousness as a means to empowerment. <u>Critical pedagogy helps foster such awareness</u>.

3. *The issue of oppositional behavior is put into perspective:* Transformative resistance as a useful strategy for achievement and success
Throughout the development of urban public education there is a history of urban students rejecting their schooling experience through their non-compliance, disruptive or oppositional behaviors, and by simply dropping out.

What is profound for those educators and youth advocates who seek solidarity with urban students with respect to their rejection of public schooling, and for these oppositional students themselves, there are now both understanding and support for their concerns in Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal's (2001) concept of "**transformative resistance.**"

What this brings to the discussion of why urban schools are not working is the

idea that not all resistance is bad or wrong; non-compliance and/or oppositional behavior by students (forced by law to attend a dropout factory where in many cases they have less than a 50% chance of passing ISTEP and/or graduating) may not only be a political act by students, but a mentally healthy response to a situation where success has the possibility of being defined as shutting down one's "private self-consciousness" and critical awareness—denying there own experiences and virtually becoming invisible—in order to graduate.

Through this powerful idea, the authors distinguish among forms of resistance—some of which are more personally and politically empowering for the student, other students, teachers, the school, and the community:
- **conformist** (self-serving): the student messes school up for themselves and everyone else too
- **self-defeating** (self-destructive): the student gets expelled
- **transformative** (self-actualizing/self-realizing): the concept of an individual and/or collective resistance that results in positive and transformational change for the student(s), school, and the community.

"The right of all children to learn and become productive citizens compels each employee of IPS to contribute to an environment conducive to learning and instruction through the appropriate methodologies so that all children will develop life skills and become self-actualized individuals."
-- IPS Instructional Mission, found during the fall semester 2005
on wall in hallway just outside the man office at Northwest H.S.

Oppositional resistance can be conceptualized as a set of shared values, beliefs and attitudes that reject dominant social norms and thus can contribute to behaviors that make it difficult to do well in school and achieve in general.

However, in a school/classroom counter-culture community of practice, resistance can be transformational and enable all urban students to challenge the negative stereotypes in school and engage in local political struggles over quality of life issues in their neighborhood.

Transformative resistance supports the development of an urban achievement ideology where academic success can support urban students' notions of what it means to be black or brown or white working class.
- oppositional resistance is viewed as a form of resistance that contributes to educational failure and a host of youth problems,
- transformative resistance is linked to social change
  - allows urban youth of all colors to reject self blame for schooling or community problems and
  - fosters a critical worldview that is informed by their particular social, economic, and political position.

When urban educators finally decide to enter the 21st century **and acquire the ability and the sense of solidarity to not just understand and respect the cultures of their students, but to also share the politics of their students** (See "Cultural competency is not enough: Advancing culturally relevant teaching

as politically relevant teaching" (Loflin, 2009b) they will be compelled to establish a counter-cultural community of practice with their students.

Such a community will prepare urban students to use those practices and tools to engage in the process of transformative resistance. That is, teachers must help students envision ways they can use their institutional success to transform conditions of inequity, **rather than just for personal gain:**

- challenge the deficit thinking and low expectations of the school/district
- counter the emphasis on testing and grading that lends itself to a social system that emphasizes individual achievement
- resist the temptations of the model of individual achievement (often promoted in schools and sports programs) by
  - emphasizing collective learning and teamwork over strictly individual assignments
  - finding ways for student to share the "community practices" with all urban students--acquiring, reinforcing and developing young people's sense of collectivity and community.

Further support of **transformational resistance** is from Dr. A. A. Akom (2003) in his paper, "Re-examining Resistance as Oppositional Behavior" which shows how resistance can be a useful strategy for achievement and success, and how minority students can be academically successful without being conformists, and without rejecting their race-ethnicity. Here urban African American students who did well in school (made good grades/gained a viable pragmatic use of Standard English) while resisting school authority, demanding equal opportunity, supporting the "underdogs" team--staying true to the neighborhood and especially their home language--did not receive the barbs and taunts of "acting white" from their peers.

4. *The issue of an equal educational system vs. an equitable educational system is put in perspective*

Policymakers must find the courage to commit resources to addressing the challenges facing urban schools. Everyone knows that school funding policies are unequal and inadequate in every state in the country.

"If our society did not have this social compact around unequal funding, then people would not make entire life choices on the basis of access to school districts, and realtors would not be able to use public schools as selling points."
-- Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*, p. 173

A policy for truly equal funding would be a step in the right direction. However, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell do not believe the ultimate goal is an equal education for all. Instead, to be a truly great society we must have an **equitable educational system**.

An *equal education system believes* that everyone should get
- the same education (America has not done this yet)

An *equitable education believes* that people should receive

- an education specific to the needs (social, economic, linguistic, political) of the people being served as defined by their circumstances
- *this would not mean less or more, but different*
- the resources and pedagogy would match the specific community needs.

If such a thing as a psycho-analysis of today's prototypical culture were possible…such an investigation would needs show the sickness proper to the time to consist precisely in normality.   --Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

- **An equitable educational system: The end of "one-size-fits-all" normalcy**

A great and enlightened 21st century public school system would have an *equitable educational system* which would automatically

- move away from educational practices that primarily measure student achievement on the basis of assimilation into white middle-class norms.

The ability of a student to read, write, and do arithmetic at the highest levels is *not* what is being referred to as white middle-class norms. It is much deeper.

The use by our current educational system of curriculum, pedagogy, and measurements of these skills that center around white middle-class epistemologies. (Epistemology is the study or theory of the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge; how or the ways we understand everything; how we create knowledge.) Most urban educators, administrators, and school boards assume without question the "superiority" of such white middle-class ways of knowing.

Thus, the path to acquiring those skills (K-12 public education) is automatically associated with the belief that the "skills" will be and/or must be applied in the service of the existing power structure (economic, social, and political).

Now this would be fine if all students in US public schools were white and middle-class. The problem is in urban districts, most students are not; yet, the system has continually served the interests of middle-class whites over them. (See Watkins' 2001 book, *The White Architects of Black Education.*) This is so powerful and pervasive, and thus dominant and persuasive, a few families, students, and teachers of color see the trade-off as worthwhile. Even fewer see the system for what it is and consciously maintain a critical consciousness.

But, for most, our existing public school system translates into poor students of color and (even working-class urban white students) choosing between two distinct cultural worlds, that of

- their family and community
- the existing power structure.

No educational system in a multi-cultural democratic society should force large portions of its children to make such a choice.

An equitable education system would nurture students' own cultural identities and promote the use of their school success in the service of their communities, educating urban students in their own self-interest.

- **Critical Pedagogy and One-size-fits-all**

Not all children learn at the same pace or in the same ways, even though schools mostly operate as if they do.

"Our Alliance is proposing a shift away from high standards for uniformity to high standards for diversity."
> -- from Lynn Stoddard, Founding Member Educating for Human Greatness Alliance

Thus, inequitable outcomes of schooling that result from one-size-fits-all pedagogical practices **should be attributed to social design rather than student inadequacies.**

Almost all schools in the United States sort students on the basis of age, and they frequently sort them even further using faulty measurements of ability (See *Keeping Track: How schools structure inequality:* Oakes, 1985*).* Once the sorting is done, all students are
- taught from pre-programmed curricula
    - promoting the same pacing
    - promoting the same instructional methods.

Educators mostly ignore or explain away the fact that this approach to teaching produces results that contradict our talk that "all children can learn."

The application of critical pedagogy requires educators to challenge the existing one-size-fits-all pedagogical and assessment models. This requires an understanding that students enter public schools with different zones/levels of development and preparedness which provide tremendous opportunities for educators who are prepared and willing to:
- diversify the strategies they use for
    - motivation
    - instructional pedagogy
    - academic support
    - social support.

"all [people] are intellectuals ... but not all [people] have in society the function of intellectuals."   -- A. Gramsci

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

According to Gramsci, each person has a level of intelligence that results 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. However, school is often ill-equipped to indentify/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 organic intelligence of urban student's unrecognized, unappreciated and thus underutilized in school.

Gramsci also argues that public schools are often the social institution used to validate this unnatural social division, 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 concept should bridge the division between thinker and worker and **replace it with a paradigm that values the intellectual potential in all people.**

To help our urban public school educators move toward an appreciation of the variety of individual "organic intellectual" natures, they must consider Arnold Skromme's 1989 book, *The Seven Ability Plan: Seven Bell Curves for Each Student.* It supports the "organic intellectualism" concept with 6 hidden abilities not tested in school which go beyond the academic (memory/analytical abilities):

- creativity
- dexterity
- empathy

- judgment
- motivation
- personality.

"Funds of knowledge"
Reform-minded individuals and collectives must be better equipped to identify the most acute issues in the social context of urban schools. Teachers and schools more generally, need support to develop and implement **pedagogy that investigates and draws from the social contexts of the lives of urban youth.**

Rather than presenting the neighborhood as a place to rise above, Luis Moll has referred to these contexts as a student's "funds of knowledge." That is:

- **schools must equip themselves to draw from the knowledge students bring with them to school**
  - o knowledge that is often not in their textbooks but is acquired from the streets, family cultural traditions, youth culture, and the media.

5. *What urban schools are for is put in perspective:* Beyond structural determinism: Schools as places to contest inequalities

"The paradox of educational inequality is that schools remain among the few institutions that produce opportunities to contest structural inequalities."
-- Professors Ducan-Andrade & Morrell

- **Schools as sites of major social transformation**: **Situating the work of educational transformation within a larger context of social movements**
One cannot examine and become intimate with the problems of American urban schools without also becoming aware that *the answers are much broader than simply improving the academic achievement of a subset of students.*

Simply put, we will not be able to solve our serious social ills without some sort of *major social transformation.* What is profound and challenging is

- our urban public schools *exist as important sites of intervention*.
  - o Thus, the work of urban educators and their students *can contribute to these larger social movements.*

The role of urban public schools in social justice actions must be put in perspective: **public schools are political sites.** Schools can be seen as political sites keeping things the way they are. For some urban students they can be seen as political sites which they must learn to maneuver, navigate, or somehow "survive" hopefully with the skills and grades to move on. For others, public schools are political sites promising academic success, but in many instances turning out to be sources of self-doubt rather than self-development.

"I want to cultivate students…who want to find ways to make learning their own, and who ultimately see that connection between what they do in school and the reality and possibility of their lives. But I have concerns that the education system, as it currently exists, is a white elephant, running behind the real world. In order to be purposeful, education has to be in sync with the world as it exists today."   -- Johanna Riddle, educator

Standardization threatens to reduce opportunities to resist
Some have argued that the increasing standardization of pedagogy through undue attention to scripted **curriculum and standardized testing threatens to reduce dramatically these opportunities to contest the ideas that *public schools are places which actually reproduce inequality.***

It is imperative that teachers and teacher educators **develop a concrete counter-strategy** to these increasingly popular state and national reform policies (NCLB/RTTT) by enabling **pedagogical practices situated in critical analyses of the role of urban schools in social inequality**.

Furthermore, this *transformational critical pedagogy* develops
- academic skills among populations that have traditionally been failed by these urban schools
- necessary skills among individuals within a context of social critique and struggle for social change.

6. *Going to college is put in perspective:* The limitations of the "college going" culture: A middle-class ideology which ignores pertinent problems of urban communities.
The liberal model of urban education reform makes the mistake of attempting to replicate the schooling ideology of the middle class, emphasizing a "college-going culture." In so doing, it all but
- **ignores the material conditions of urban communities, which are more pertinent to the lives of students and are far removed from the rhetoric of college.**

Public schools, especially charters, which "guarantee" its students will attend university cannot equally guarantee graduation, although this is implied. Nationally, 41% of African Americans who start college graduate in 6 years. In Indiana the number is 36%. The number for white Hoosiers is 59%. Thus, very few public urban schools are able to prepare students to complete college. This

must be addressed realistically with authentic school reform and not with sales pitches or innuendo. http://measuringup2008.highereducation.org/

An education with relevance: Increasing college eligibility

Let's be clear, urban students should go to college at rates equal to their more affluent counterparts. The point here is a schooling environment that emphasizes the relationship between education and the most pressing conditions in the community, **an education with relevance**, *is most likely to produce notable increases in college eligibility.*

We advocate for an urban education model that
- **utilizes critical counter-cultural communities of practice (4Cs),**
- **developing a critical and engaged citizenry with**
  - **a democratic sensibility that**
    - **critiques and acts against all forms of inequality.**

A **counter-cultural community of practice recognizes** *the existence of a dominant set of institutional norms and practices. The community of practice intentionally sets itself up to counter those powerful norms and practices.*

Making college a realistic option

The unique lives and conditions of urban youth deserve an education system that accomplishes two goals in concert with one another:
1. preparation to confront the conditions of social and economic inequity in their daily lives, and
2. access to the academic literacies (reading, writing, math) that make college attendance a realistic option.

This approach to reform is a **double investment in urban communities**:
- it provides pedagogy and curricula that lend immediate relevance to school in the lives of urban youth.
- it also works to break the cycle of disinvestment of human capital in urban communities by
  - creating graduates who recognize their potential agency to improve urban centers and their neighborhoods,
    - rather than seeing them as places to escape.
- These prospects offer:
  - urban students a renewed sense of purpose with regard to school,
  - urban neighborhoods the necessary human and institutional capital to contribute to its social, economic, and political revitalization.

7. *Multi-cultural education is put into perspective*: **Moving beyond the 20th century definitions of multi-cultural education**

To institute this more critical pedagogy, urban educators must **move beyond the pedagogical reform efforts of the multicultural education movement**, *which have also failed to deal with the conditions of modern urban life.*

Critical pedagogy and multi-cultural education

The relative failure of multicultural education or culturally relevant approaches stem not from the concepts, but from the <u>misapplication</u> of their principles.

The definition of culture in multicultural education is too narrow
- "culture" in school curricula has largely been a proxy for "race/ethnicity"
- thus, other central aspects of culture are not considered:
  - the non-school cultural practices of students at home, in neighborhoods, or as participants in popular youth/adult culture.

The development of the cultural approach of critical pedagogy to teaching methods and curriculum **goes beyond the present limitations of the multi-cultural concept** because it:
- values the cultural sensibilities and interests of students
- places the child at the center of the curriculum, such that
  - the school curriculum draws from the lived experiences of the child to expand into broader horizons
- thus it does not replace the knowledge children bring with them to school;
  - it builds on it.

This makes the relevance of school immediately apparent, given students would be engaging school knowledge through the lens of their lived social reality.

8. ***The place and purpose of Standard English is put in perspective:* Language of Wider Communication (LWC) and social justice: Standard English as the language of power**
Urban students need to understand, interpret, and produce in LWC, developing linguistic competencies and literacy skills for jobs, school, and citizenship. It is also an important prerequisite for critical pedagogy and the Cycle of Critical Praxis. If urban students can not read and write in the LWC, they can not:
- adequately critique or refute texts they do not understand
- reason with and/or critique the *status quo* in its own language.

Powerful literacy vs. domestic literacy
Since public schools are institutions designed to maintain the *status quo*, literacy is different for the working classes than it is for those who are expected to achieve powerful status in society. Therefore, students of the upper middle classes receive powerful levels of literacy reflecting the positions they will inherit. *Powerful literacy* concerns the ability to analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and apply.

"Education is never neutral, Freire informs us; it either domesticates or liberates"
-- Patrick Finn *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating working class children in their own self interest*

Finn, in his 1999 book, *Literacy with an Attitude*, notes most urban students receive instruction in *domestic literacy*, a combination of
- performative literacy--decoding, sentence structure knowledge
- functional literacy--reading *USA Today* or completing a job application.

This suggests schools maintain a basic level of literacy so the masses are

employable and content, but not so much that they will seek power. There is no effort to educate the masses to such a high level they'll want to change anything.

Learning how to read and write as a political act
This aspect of the LWC (aka Dr. Lisa Delpit's "Language of Power"*)* reveals the political importance of literacy. Historically, urban residents lack the political capital to look out for their own self interests. As a result, for urban students, learning how to read and write (enhancing the potential of political power) becomes a political necessity and thus a political act. Literate citizens can
- know the basics of democracy and self-rule
- better understand and engage in public issues
- elect virtuous leaders
- sustain the delicate balance between liberty and order.

The political necessity for literacy is also reflected in the characteristics and requirements which are necessary to become a part of "the culture of power."

9. *Pedagogy of poverty:* Responses to unruly student by urban teachers are put in perspective
In many urban classrooms students simply refuse to just sit still, be quiet, and listen. Urban children recognize the importance of learning, but some are unwilling to assume a submissive posture in rigid schools which routinely deny them a sense of curiosity, autonomy, culture, and self-worth. Consequently, in many instances, educators are unable to engage students in meaningful learning experiences. Students become bored, alienated, or disruptive.

Some students refuse to recognize the authority of the teacher to the point that the teacher gives up on the class or the teacher shifts to the role of uncompromising dictator, regaining some semblance of control, and then interpreting the authoritarian approach to be the most effective one for urban students.

Due to the stereotype of the unruly inner-city child unable or unwilling to stake a claim to her or his education (Hass, 2010), it is usually students and families who get blamed for these discipline issues, and the generalization is reinforced.

Pedagogy of poverty: Penal pedagogy
Insert into this scenario the culture of poverty "experts" who place the causes of problems with students and their families. Their solution is a pedagogy of poverty
- one-size-fits-all standards-based instruction
- "back to basics" drill-and-kill scripted instruction
- tracking
- high-stakes testing
- zero-tolerance discipline policies
  - enforced by threats of placement or actual placement in "soft jail" alternatives for those who do not "fit in" (Tailoring teaching sites, 2007).

This view of urban students is particularly disturbing because they come from those educators and policy makers who live outside urban communities.

Ruby Payne, the more widely read educator associated with this view, claims that teachers should teach their students to examine individuals who have attained prosperity to learn the hidden rules of wealth creation. Payne's program argues that teachers should be trained to "provide a window of escape for individuals who are intent on improving their economic lot."

This concept also promotes a model of achievement that is
- individualistic
- escapist
- based on wealth accumulation rather than on
  - critical thinking
  - social change.

● Conclusions

Given the idea that students are limited by 2 false choices: school failure or assimilation; reject your home culture and identity or live with stigma and poverty, this paper proposes a third option based on these ideas: a) provide inner-city students the opportunity to be successful while maintaining their identities as urban youth; 2) develop a school ethos and instructional practices that encourage students to invest in schools as a viable social institution; 3) respect and utilize, not suppress or punish students' opposition to public education by recognizing the conditions of anger, inequality, and rejection of schooling; and 4) use our public schools as sites which enable the desire in students to review, analyze, evaluate, and take action to overturn unequal conditions in urban schools, urban neighborhoods, and other disenfranchised and suffering communities across the nation, and the world. This is social, economic, political, and cultural self-determination, the right of all Americans.

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