

THUG LIFE Pedagogy: Engaging disaffected urban students

To engage the more alienated youth, many of whom live with seemingly intractable poverty and violence, urban educators must investigate the use of a pedagogy which responds directly to the social conditions. This is particularly the case in districts like the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) where graduation rates and college eligibility rates for these disaffected youth are low. In contrast, in some districts outside IPS, school graduation rates are more than 90%, college eligibility rates are more than 85%, the median income above \$100,000, and violent crime is virtually non-existent.

Critical pedagogy arises out of indignation/anger about this contrast. It is an attempt to balance the anger of those critically conscious educators who see the above differences against an awareness that the future is *not* predetermined; and, that anger should be partnered with the critical hope that we have the capacity (and responsibility) to act to change oppressive conditions.

According to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004), teachers who want to engage the more seriously disengaged urban students must develop pedagogy that balances indignation over these inequitable conditions with critical hope that their work will change them. This means providing students with an education that prepares them to analyze their world critically by putting the skills and tools of critical thinking, research, and intellectual production in their hands so through their own self-determination they can enable social justice for their neighborhood.

This is what Prof. Duncan-Andrade calls THUG LIFE pedagogy

Duncan-Andrade borrows the term THUG LIFE from Tupac Shakur. Although there are those who are critical of the fact that some of the messages delivered by Tupac were highly problematic, critically conscious urban educators should be aware that even after his death in 1996, Tupac remains wildly popular among young oppressed peoples in the US and around the globe.

To be sure, the music and poetry that Tupac used as a medium to deliver his message are key to his popularity. Yet, the longevity and extent of his popularity can be attributed to the portion of his work that speaks to the righteous indignation that festers in almost every person who detests injustice. Only 25 at his death, Tupac had just begun the development of a theory of humanization for oppressed peoples that drew from their indignation. He argued that oppressed people needed to search within themselves and their communities for freedom and that this required adults to pay special attention to children born into a society that hates them.

For Tupac, hate that is passed on to children through the cycle of social inequity destroys communities. He gave his theory an acronym, THUG LIFE (*The*

Hate U Gave Little Infants Fucks Everyone), a deliberate appropriation of a phrase that has associations with the racist stereotype of urban men of color as street thugs. In an interview, Tupac explained:

“By ‘thug’ I mean, not criminal or someone that beats you over the head. I mean the underdog. The person that had nothing and succeeds, he's a thug because he overcame all obstacles. It doesn't have anything to do with the dictionary's version of ‘thug.’ To me ‘thug’ is my pride, not being someone that goes against the law, not being someone that takes, but being someone that has nothing, and even though I have nothing and there's no home for me to go to, my head is up high. My chest is out. I walk tall. I talk loud. I'm being strong. ... We gonna start slowly but surely taking our communities back. Regulate our community. Organize. We need to start taking care of our own. We gotta start somewhere, and I don't know about anything else, but this, to me, is a start.” (See Lazin's 2003 book, *Tupac: Resurrection*)

This is the type of young person a THUG LIFE pedagogy aims to nurture Much like Tupac, Duncan-Andrade believes that the hatred, rage, hostility, and indignation that result from any group of people systematically being denied their right to food, clothing, shelter, education, and justice will ultimately cause a society to implode. Likewise, properly channeled, those legitimate feelings can be developed into the courage to act and fundamentally change the direction of a society, even in the face of the broader society's cowardice. In fact, the necessary courage dramatically and justly to alter the direction of an empire might be found only among those who suffer under its oppressive weight.

“THUG LIFE Pedagogy: Engaging the more alienated urban student” is a compilation by John Harris Loflin of ideas and quotes taken from *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* by Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell.

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