

Moving beyond structural determinism: Urban schools as places to contest and eradicate inequalities

Advancing the ideas of Professors Jeffery Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell

“The purpose of education for urban students is not to help them get out of poverty, but to get rid of poverty.”
~ Jeff Duncan-Andrade

What are urban public schools for? *The role of urban public schools in educating urban students must be put in perspective. When education is confused with assimilation, public schools become institutions which can perpetuate the status quo. Consequently, historically for marginalized groups, schools can be seen as institutions manipulating funding and curriculum, and even forcing standardizing testing--providing a “mis-education” which regularly reproduces social inequalities. Thus, for some urban students their local school is a public institution which they must learn to manipulate, navigate, or somehow “survive” hopefully with the skills and knowledge to move on. For others, their local school is a public institution promising academic success, but in many instances turning out to be a source of self-doubt rather than self-development. Finally, for many urban students their neighborhood public school is actually a political site focusing on having them trade the culture of their home and community for the so-called “higher culture” of the school in exchange for access to college.*

However, regarding today’s urban schools, what are the advantages of a school ethos, curriculum, and teaching methods which empower students and involve them in solving the very social-economic problems that not only plague their communities, but hinder their own academic success? Instead of making public education an experience where urban students are asked to put up with the social toxins they face each day in order to “escape” poverty, what if education becomes a weapon to name, analyze, deconstruct, act upon and change the unequal conditions in their schools and essentially disenfranchised communities?

This proposal argues that because most public urban schools are in pockets of poverty, these institutions are uniquely situated as community centers for anti-poverty actions. It is quite justifiable that those who suffer from the immediacy of poverty and other social toxins be directly involved in the eradication of these conditions. Thus, urban students, and their communities, must reason with their neighborhood school and local district to provide them pedagogy and curricula addressing the conditions of urban life, and foster among them a sense of opportunity and power for altering those conditions.

“The paradox of educational inequality is that urban schools remain among the few institutions that produce opportunities to contest structural inequalities.”

~ Jeffery Duncan-Andrade & Ernest Morrell

- ***Urban public schools as sites of neighborhood social transformation: Situating the work of educational transformation within the larger context of urban poverty***

“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.” ~ Jeff Duncan-Andrade & Ernest Morrell

The challenge for urban education is this: will we be able to solve our serious urban social ills without some sort of major educational transformation? What is profound and challenging is:

- our urban public schools exist as important sites of intervention.

Thus, the work of urban students, their communities and their teachers is to build and enable an urban **anti-poverty education** which will be responsible for the eradication of the very poverty which plagues urban neighborhoods and families, and impedes the academic success of students.

An anti-poverty urban education is:

- rooted in the every-day lived experiences of marginalized urban students
 - centered on a critique of structural economic, political, social, educational inequalities.
- structured to empower urban students and their neighborhood/community as collective agents of social change.
 - focused on a constant dialogue among students/community with the classroom teacher, the school, and the district instead of a one-way transmission of knowledge/curriculum.
- based on specific pedagogy and an anti-poverty praxis curriculum of research, evaluation, planning, acting, and assessment aimed at eventually eradicating urban poverty.

- ***How previous plans have missed the mark: failing to address the context of urban life directly***

Academic failure in urban schools persists despite years of 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 social toxins such as poverty directly.

The logic behind increasing material resources for schools has been rooted in notions that

- urban schools fail because they lack the resources and support suburban schools receive that is--they are not like suburban schools.

This thinking has led to a growing number of reform plans reducing larger and more pressing social and systemic issues of poverty such as

- nutrition,
- health,
- environment, and
- 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 by rolling out money for:

- high-stakes testing and test prep 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, and
- improving facilities.

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

“Urban schools must address the conditions of urban life, and develops a sense of power among students for altering those conditions.” ~ Jeffery Duncan-Andrade & Ernest Morrell

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 anti-poverty curricula that
 - address the conditions of urban life, and
 - develop a sense of power among students for altering those conditions.

Urban districts and neighborhood schools must provide urban students a set of structures and critical educational practices in their schools:

- giving them a reason to invest in their education and their school, and
- offering an education that challenges and transforms social, economic, political and educational injustices they face each day.

As a consequence, the starting points and motivators for urban schools are to:

- recognize the systemic conditions of inequality, and
- foster the desire in students to overturn these conditions for themselves.

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

- critique notions of equal opportunity and access,
 - making education a weapon for urban students to name, analyze, deconstruct, and act upon the unequal conditions in their school and neighborhoods,
- develop academic skills needed by urban students within a context of social critique and struggle for social change.

- ***Urban schools and classrooms as a critical counter-culture community of practice***

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 school is located;

- this means developing an anti-poverty curriculum and pedagogy that
 - addresses the material concerns of students and their communities (housing, crime, jobs, etc.)
- creating opportunities for students to use what they are learning in ways that directly impact their lives;
 - this means developing an anti-poverty curriculum and a pedagogy with students
 - permitting and encouraging them 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.

• **Some characteristics of a critical counter-culture community of practice**

Resisting dominance

Urban students, with the support of their families and community, will reason with the school district to enable their neighborhood school to implement a pedagogy and anti-poverty curriculum framework aimed at eradicating the very social toxins which impede their academic success. That is, the purpose of the school is not to get students out of poverty, but to get rid of poverty.

An anti-poverty academic paradigm would:

- counter the negative stereotypes that the very nature of the intellect and culture of urban families/students (Black, Latino, working-class white) are:
 - inferior & defective,
 - a source of social pathology,
 - non-intellectual, and
 - 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,
- critical self-consciousness,
- academic excellence, and
- group achievement.

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 cultural), and the beliefs and practices that dominate. In other words, it is a theory and practice of helping students achieve critical consciousness.

"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."

~ Dr. Ira Shor

"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." ~ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_pedagogy

The “Cycle of Critical Praxis” as critical pedagogy

The Cycle of Critical Praxis

- (1) students identify a problem that is authentic and relevant;
- (2) students research the problem;
- (3) students develop a collective plan of action to address the problem;
- (4) students implement the collective plan of action; and
- (5) students 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,
- fosters 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 urban schools avoid--and identifies students as collaborators with adults.
 - fundamentally repositions students as actors and as contributors to the struggle for social change.
 - identifies global youth culture (Hip Hop) as a legitimate site for engagement and developing sophisticated thinking, academic, social, and political skills by engaging their own social worlds.
- involves continued action for social justice--sees anti-poverty pedagogy and curricula as tools for eliminating oppressive relationships and conditions.
- requires urban 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 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 state content area standards in the disciplines?
- to what extent do the students make more quantifiable academic transformations, including raised grade point averages, test scores, and university admission?

Identify the vehicle: Enabling critical praxis

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

This vehicle (aka “frame of reference”) must be vital and relevant enough to warrant staff investment. In short, urban students and their community must be able to

- explain to their neighborhood school and wider school district,
 - in a compelling way,
 - why they should invest in an anti-poverty approach to schooling and academics.

Students must justify their rationale for an anti-poverty education on these common questions:

- Why is this important to me

- in this moment?
- in my future life?
- in the future life of my community?

Students must make sure their school understands that the “vehicles” for implementing critical pedagogy

- are drawn from culturally and politically relevant material, and
- make prominent/value the existing knowledge base they have gained from their everyday life experiences as
 - legitimate, and
 - intellectual.

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) as critical pedagogy

YPAR trains urban students in the research process:

- (1) problem identification,
- (2) data collection,
- (3) data analysis, and
- (4) action.

Benefits for urban students:

- Positive interpersonal skills
- Cognitive growth & maturity
- Positive future orientation (i.e. higher educational aspirations).
- Academic proficiency
- Job readiness
- Self-efficacy
- Civic knowledge & skills
- Civic motivation

www.peerresources.org/curriculum/what-is-youth-led-research/

Standardization as a barrier to anti-poverty education: reducing opportunities to resist

The increasing standardization of pedagogy through undue attention to scripted curriculum and standardized testing threatens to reduce dramatically chances to show that our public urban schools are

- places which actually reproduce inequality, and
- public urban schools are particularly situated to confront and eradicate urban poverty.

It is imperative that our urban schools develop a concrete counter-strategy to these increasingly popular state and national reform policies (NCLB/RTTT) by enabling pedagogical practices and anti-poverty curricula situated in critical analyses of the role of public education in social-economic inequality.

In summary,

Urban students of all ages intuitively understand and appreciate the benefits and problems of urban life. They learn very early what the dangers are and what it takes to survive. Thus, an existential question arises automatically for them: why isn't something being done about it? This paper recommends a way for something to be “done about it.” The proposal makes a direct challenge to urban students to be the major force moving beyond structural determinism to make their neighborhood public schools places to contest and eradicate inequalities.

“Moving beyond structural determinism: Urban schools as places to contest and eradicate inequalities” is a compilation of direct quotes and concepts from *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* by Dr. Jeffery Duncan-Andrade and Dr. Ernest Morrell published in 2008 by Peter Lang. The essay is composed by johnharrisloflin@yahoo.com of the South East Working-Class Task Force.