

## **Helping urban schools work for teachers and students**

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## Democratic Education

Helping Urban Schools

The Black & Latino Policy Institute

**Issue:** Small schools intend to keep students engaged in school, affect aggressive behaviors, and have very few discipline problems.

**This begs the question:** How will this be accomplished?

**Answer:** Democratic schools and classrooms

As adults who are United States citizens, we are expected to be experts in the ideals of democracy and the democratic process. Yet, during the May 2003 primary elections only 2.1% of eligible voters in Marion County's Center Township turned out. In major elections, turn out has been under 50%. Could there be a link among public schools, civics curricula, student-participation in school governance, civic responsibility and voter/citizen participation in the democratic process? The B&LPI believes so.

And many other educators agree. Presently, representing the educational mainstream is the Association for Curriculum and Curriculum Development (ASCD) and its "**First Amendment Schools**" initiative. Eleven 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment schools around the country are exploring ways for students to better understand their roles as citizens in a democracy as they learn a deeper practical appreciation of the five freedoms of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment. Schools need to reclaim the purpose of public education and the notion that one's education is part of a larger good and so can contribute to the betterment of society. Here are ASCD's "The Basics for creating democratic schools."

1. **Find as many ways as possible for students to take responsibility for the daily life of the/their school.**
2. **Find ways for students to apply the critical thinking skills that are essential to citizenship.**
3. **Practice the rights and the responsibilities of the U.S. Constitution with the school.**

In the Winter 2003 issue of *Curriculum Update*, "Civic Virtue in the Schools: Engaging a New Generation of Citizens," ASCD continues its push for democratic schools. At Federal Hocking High School it is just as import to create good citizens as getting kids jobs. The have kids develop their "democratic muscle" by give students a real voice in school matters. Why? Elementary and Middle Schools are democracy's "training grounds" or laboratory, and "**High school is democracy's finishing school**—the last shared experience that all Americans will enjoy; the place where the skills and dispositions that citizens in a democracy need should be secured and nurtured in all our youth" (p. 2).

Also, this year, the International Democratic Schools Conference will meet in the United States for the first time in its 11-year history. Previous meetings were held in such countries as Japan, Ukraine, Israel, England, Austria, New Zealand, and involved as many

as 500 people from 25 countries. This year's IDEC session intends to raise questions and make recommendations regarding the education systems in several countries that are becoming more focused in standardization and one-size-fits-all approach, creating a situation that only works for a small number of students.

All of these examples mean **action** and the circumstances to slowly learn to share in real school and classroom decisions: curriculum, scheduling, discipline, and school climate. This will give students the opportunity to begin, to learn, to have the same opportunity to make mistakes like adults make daily in our local, state, and federal legislatures. As well as in school, civic virtue suggests students be involved in local, state, and federal elections—working or volunteering for the candidate/party of their choice, for individual or group community service learning projects, assessment opportunities, career exploration, completing course requirements, extra credit, or for its own sake.

**As is reflected in the principles of the United States, students are less likely to break school and classroom rules they helped create. Students are also more likely to respect authority, if they have some say as to that authority.** These are notions that American 5<sup>th</sup> graders easily understand. The point is the adults have never “practiced what they preached.” We want democracy in China; we just don't want it in the public schools, especially the high schools.

However, some public school staff may not feel comfortable with democratic schools demands that encourage a climate where adults share power and responsibility with students because they have had no experience of genuine power sharing themselves in school. As adults, we must stop and then reverse this negative cycle that is argued contributes to a lack of citizen/ civic involvement and low voter turnout and model (provide genuine power sharing opportunities at school—i.e., input into classroom and school rules) for students about how to be citizens in a democracy so that they will model for their children and students...and so on.

Shared Decision Making In the Classroom

### **Part A Why we need it**

Most teachers are aware of the phenomenon known as burnout—there are days when it seems that all of our normally bright enthusiastic light bulbs have gone out. Many times, dealing with student behavior is an issue. Most behavioral interventions involve some sort of punishment or negative consequences or some manipulation designed to correct disruptive actions (Gathercoal, 1991). Yet, *experience tells us that punishment does not work at all with many students, particularly those with low self-esteem* (Kohn, 1993). The repeat "offenders" in IPS detention/suspension rooms are a daily confirmation of the failure of punishment. So, who is really being penalized? Who's really in distress here? I think it is the teachers—they are burning out from trying to coerce students into obedience.

## **Burnout and aggressive behavior**

What about students? Does burnout lead to disengagement, apathy, or conversely, thoughtlessness or aggression? The fact is, students often act this way (Kohn, 1993). But, now let us ask what we have learned from the workplace about what causes burnout: *the best predictor, it turns out, is not too much work or overtime, bad supervisors, too little pay or problems with co-workers—rather it is powerlessness—a lack of control over what one is doing (Kohn, 1993). Even an amateur psychologist knows: feelings of impotence lead to stress.*

## **Aggressive behavior, powerlessness and shared decision-making**

Powerlessness is our inability to affect change. Aggressive behavior is not the child of power, but of powerlessness. Violence arises not out of excessive power, but out of powerlessness. Bronowski notes, "Violence is the expression of impotence." Involve students proportionally, patiently and with wisdom and care in the decision that directly affect them in school and aggressive school behavior will decrease.

## **Rewards and punishments vs. shared decision-making**

Instead of writing names on the board, using group punishments and rewards, corporeal exercises, escalating detention time, or threatening suspension why not use something that will strengthen student empowerment and responsibility while affecting the factors that contribute to stress and burnout? Many educators suggest a proven strategy: **shared decision-making** (AERO-GRAMME, 1998; Barr & Parrett, 1995, 1997; Beadi, 1996; Bolmeier, 1995; California Department of Education, 1996; Changing Schools, 1995; Douglas, 1995; Dugger & Dugger, 1998; Duke & Ganseder, 1990; Fleming, 1996; Freiberg, 1996; Gathercoal, 1991; Gerzon, 1997; Gregory, 1993; Griffin, 1995; Kellmayer, 1998; King, Silvey, Holliday & Johnston, 1998; Kohn, 1993; MAEO, 1995; Panico, 1998; Parker, 1997; Schneider, 1996; Slater, 1994; Smink, 1997; Tyack, 1997; Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985; Wood, 1989; Zachlod, 1996).

Consider Glasser's, "The needs that drive us all." Sharing in decisions/having choices may be ontological, a part of the human spirit.

Those who feel more control over what happens to them rarely become ill despite high levels of stress (Kohn, 1993).

The key to transforming student apathy into student engagement, may be as simple as allowing students to make decisions about their learning (Kohn, 1993).

Children learn about responsibility as they make decisions about how their classroom is run (Zachlod, 1996).

Shared decision making with children and youth takes time--time to listen to what they have to say and to thoughtfully respond to student's ideas, suggestions, and especially their questions (Zachlod, 1996).

Creating caring classrooms and supportive schools through shared decision-making with students gives students opportunities to become citizens in the classroom rather than tourists (Frieberg, 1996).

Giving students a sense of ownership in their classrooms can lead to the open and cooperative learning environment that most teachers dream about (Zachlod, 1996).

Everyday ought to include one block of time in which students can decide what to do (Kohn, 1993).

Although we teach the world about democracy, we rarely practice it in our schools and classrooms (Frieberg, 1996).

Is there a relationship between a 40+% IPS high school drop out rate and less than half of the registered city voters going the the polls?

### **Part B Why we don't have it or "A list of excuses used by teachers."**

1. The absolute freedom excuse: If we let kids decide chaos will follow or "We run this school, the student's don't." (Kohn, 1993).

2. The time excuse: If students were entitled to make decisions about school and had to agree on everything they did, there wouldn't be time to do anything else (Kohn, 1993).

3. The children need limits and structure excuse: This issue is a red herring. The real issue is however, not whether limits and rules are needed, but rather who sets them—the adults alone or the adults and students together (Kohn, 1993).

4. The administration won't let me excuse: But, what else is a teacher to do when school districts pay poorly, their union is weak, and while society blames everything on the schools, highly controlling districts/administrations leave teachers very little discretion about either curricular or disciplinary issues. Thus, are powerless teachers feeling, "If I am not a part of important decisions that affect me, why should I let kids decide anything?" (Duke & Gansneder, 1990; Kohn, 1993).

5. Not an excuse, but a reality: Teachers like what power they do have. Teachers only see control or chaos. They like control. Thus, teachers often simply lack the gumption to give kids choices. Parting with power is not easy, if only the results are less predictable than in a situation where they have complete control. Asking students to decide even about the simplest thing can be scary. Unfortunately, teachers do not realize that shared decision-making with students is a gradual process with tremendous opportunities to teach students authentic responsibility and skills in respect, listening, deliberation, and compromise (Beck, 1998; Kohn, 1993; Parker, 1997).

6. The vote for me and I'll return (Russia) to a paternal dictatorship excuse—or they are not mature enough, they can't handle freedom, they don't understand democracy yet, they can't handle these kinds of decisions/responsibilities, and listen for yourself, they want us to make the decisions for them...which leads to the last factor...

7. Actual resistance from students: This is not surprising, given that most students have been conditioned to accept a posture of passivity at school. It is disconcerting to be asked (by adults)—much less be expected—to take responsibility for the way things are in schools and classrooms. Most resistance from students comes in these forms:

- a. They refuse—that's your job as adults to decide. This is another great teachable moment teachers miss to discuss power/control and what make school/learning exciting.
- b. They test adults—if given the chance to help make decisions, students will make outlandish suggestion to see if the adults really mean what they say.
- c. They parrot—students say what they think adults want to hear (Kohn, 1993).

The key question here is how we, as adults/teachers and examples, respond to these maneuvers and how we face ourselves in the mirror as citizens in the land of the free and the home of the brave. In attempting to conclude that students are unable to handle the responsibility of making and sharing decisions or being unworthy of having it, or that they can't think for themselves (we must think for them), we must realize it is not naive or Utopian to think that students can make responsible decisions about how their school, classroom and their own learning. In fact it is quite "American," if you will, to wish that our students/future citizens are not parrots, or are people who never take risks, question authority, or desire to be a part of the decision making process that affects their lives. We teachers do not want to create adults who do not vote or who are not responsible citizens because in the classroom/school they were treated in such a way as to feel powerless, burned out, compliant, controlled, and silenced (Kohn, 1993).

For many years, teachers have offered ideas to enhance student achievement and motivation, but these thoughts are unlikely to make a difference in helping students reach their potential as learners and citizens when they are left out of the decision making process (Beck, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Scherer, 1994).

Perhaps IPS Small Schools through the above reasoning, suggestions, and the latest ASCD initiatives can be an example to other districts: At risk youth are empowered to be better students and citizens of the classroom, school and community when given the opportunity to share in classroom and school decisions. One would do well to wager that expanding

real (that means practical or practiced) civic virtue in the public schools will also get more students involved in the democratic and elective/voting processes after they become 18.

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## Teaching for social justice\*

Helping Urban Schools

Black & Latino Policy Institute

### How can a focus on teaching for social justice energize teaching and learning in an urban school?

What enables some teachers to reach the same students whom other teachers cannot seem to reach? The main difference between effective urban teachers and the average teacher came from their focus on student-empowering social justice pedagogy.

These teachers subscribe to Paulo Freire's (1970) idea that effective education for marginalized groups must employ a liberatory pedagogy—that is, one that aims to help students become critical change agents who feel capable of and responsible for addressing social injustices in their communities. One urban educator explains,

“Racial, cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic status has no effect on students' abilities to acquire knowledge. Schools should provide students with the fundamental skills and ideas necessary to develop within the system while also preparing them to transform the system.”

Another urban educator cites a series of problems with the institutional culture of urban schools:

“The first thing I wonder about urban schools is, Where is the love? Even a surface-level analysis of our school reveals that students dislike the school; they are unengaged and exhibit resistance. The environment is not child/student-centered. This is reflected in the scripted or mandated programming: a set of de-contextualized academic exercises--learning disconnected from the day-to-day lives of students, and an overemphasis on basic skills. Students have become machines; they are not allowed to question the relevance of what they are learning. They are forced to perform for the sake of the task at hand. In short, our schools reflect a prison system mentality, a lot like the conditions in urban communities.”

### Liberatory pedagogy guidelines: The 4Es

Urban educators must consider the idea that they can best care for students by giving them the academic and critical skills to act as change agents in their communities. Teaching students using the "4Es" of emancipatory pedagogy does this.

- *Engage*. Provide culturally responsive teaching that validates students' funds of knowledge.
- *Experience*. Expose students to various possible realities by presenting narratives that show the perspectives of those often unheard in society.

- *Empower*. Use a critical and transformative pedagogy to give students a sense of agency, both individual and collective, to act on the conditions in their lives.

- *Enact*. Create opportunities for students to act out their growing sense of agency, learning from and reflecting on their successes and struggles.

### Social justice curriculum and academic achievement

One social justice educator develops traditional academic skills by paying attention to students' cultures, critical thinking, and agency:

“My practice begins with the recognition of the *students' cultural capital*: language, culture, family, interests, and so on. . . . My goal is to offer counter-discourse to the traditional curriculum and to incorporate this in a fluid, meaningful, and empowering way. It is important that my pedagogy identify forms of oppression—and not ambiguously, either, or else students feel like things cannot change.”

### Students' cultural capital vs. deficit model of children

During a spring 2004 meeting one high ranking IPS administrator, with a doctorate in education, believed the problems with K-2 children entering the system was that their “School Readiness Levels are low.” This was explained as, “Increased numbers of students entering school lacking an understanding of experiential language that is used for the basis of instruction and learning, and lacking an understanding of school culture and socialization.” These students were viewed as problematic: “Lack of experience and unfamiliar with school language.”

Interestingly, urban educators who teach for social justice do not see the situation this way. They see the “language, culture, family, interests” of the working class urban poor as cultural capital—as a strength upon which to build relationships and instruction. The IPS administrator sees this “cultural capital” (this type/level of experiences) as insufficient, inappropriate, or as a deficit. Social justice educators would rewrite the above statement as: “Increased numbers of *teachers* entering school lacking an understanding of experiential language that is used *by students* and *that will be used by the teacher* for the basis of instruction and learning, and *the teacher is* lacking an understanding of *the student's* culture and the socialization *processes of that culture*.” These *teachers* were viewed as problematic: “*Teacher lacks* experience *with student's* culture and unfamiliar with *student's* language.”

Recent brain research (Scherer, 1997) suggests that the brain connects new information to what it already knows. The onus is on teacher to connect to the brain and culture (cultural capital) of the student. The urban poor and minority come to school with a wealth of experiences, etc.--unfortunately they are not the educator's experiences, etc., and thus are seen as inappropriate. More

unfortunately, the stigma is put on the student as deficient. The real question is, “Are schools ready for students?” not just, “Are students ready for school?”

#### More on: Social justice curriculum and academic achievement

Successful urban teachers are keenly aware of the dire conditions in which many of their students live. They believe that they should not ignore these conditions, but instead should talk about them in the classroom. They design their pedagogy to empower students with tools for recognizing, naming, analyzing, and confronting the most acute social conditions facing them: poverty, racism, violence, and inequality.

To these teachers, success means both raising students' test scores and developing students' ability to think critically and act constructively. They insist that one without the other is unlikely to reduce the opportunity gap for urban students. They do not accept urban poverty as an excuse for underachievement by either teachers or students. Instead, they see unequal material conditions as a set of constraints students can and should transform.

Teaching for social justice educators noted that after students participated in these social justice oriented learning activities, class members significantly raised their scores in three of the reading program's measured areas: applications, strategies, and conventions.

These teachers contend that their students' success is a result of instructional strategies that enable students to apply what they learn in the classroom to real issues in their lives. Here teachers emphasize the importance of letting students come to their own conclusions about the effectiveness of their activities as they studied, planned, and carried out solutions to problems. They believe the real victory here is that students felt empowered to apply the lessons they learned in school when challenging the immediate conditions of their lives.

#### School success: To leave or return to the community?

Less successful urban teachers tend to have more modest ambitions, such as wanting their students to study for tests, behave well in class, and persist in school—go to college, get good paying jobs and move out of the hood to the suburbs. Here education is seen as a vehicle to escape financially impoverished communities.

However, the philosophies of social justice embraced by these urban educators go beyond this traditional narrative. These teachers view education as a vehicle to invest in that can improve conditions in urban areas. They want their students to become college graduates who will come back and transform their own urban communities.

#### What this means for teachers

All of this implies that teacher must ask themselves and answer this question: “How can urban schools create a formal space for teachers to investigate and

question their philosophies and beliefs and learn from colleagues who provide relevant, socially transformative instruction?"

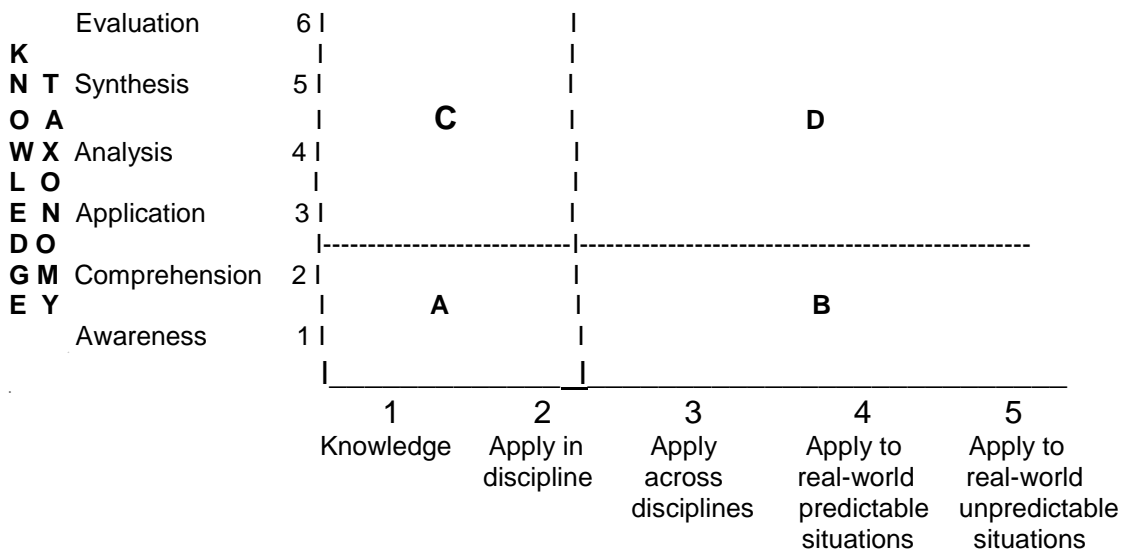
In summary

This emphasis on "naming and transforming" negative ideological and social conditions provides an open classroom dialogue that encourages students to identify and critique non-democratic structures in their lives. As students expressed their strong opinions about problems, they were empowered to "be dynamic, intellectual, and critical of what is going on."

In conclusion: Teaching for social justice as student self-actualization

It is no coincident that the "4Es" approach is reflected in the accelerated learning model "Rigor/Relevance Framework" (Dagget, 1998). Using this paradigm encourages and allows students to use/apply the higher order thinking skills of Bloom's Taxonomy side of the framework—Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Thus, as students are encouraged to *Empower* and *Enact*—apply knowledge at higher stages, they are moved toward the higher end of the framework's Application Model—Apply Across Disciplines, Apply to Real-world Predictable Situations, Apply to Real-world Unpredictable Situations, and Innovation.

**Dagget's Rigor/Relevance Framework**



**APPLICATION MODEL**

The 4Es outline keep students oriented toward the D quadrant where they are applying what they have learned using higher order thinking skills in real-world situations with real-world outcomes—challenging and changing the very issues of poverty, politics, and inequality that affect school success. This is self-actualization. This is teaching for social justice.

\* A compilation of ideas and quotes from “Developing Social Justice Educators” by Jeffery M. R. Duncan-Andrade in *Educational Leadership*, March 2005, Volume 62, Number 6. Dr. Duncan-Andrade holds a joint appointment as Director of Urban Teacher Development, Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, UCLA and Assistant Professor of RAZA Studies and Education and Coordinator of Educational Equity Initiative, Cesar Chavez Institute, San Francisco State University.

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## Pedagogy of poverty\*

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### Deficit model of children

In urban schools, due to a deficit model of children (denial of strengths focus on weakness: What don't these kids know? What skills do they lack? What can't they do?) schools are seen as warehouses, and places for remediation and repair where hopelessness and despair describe the climate. The message is: Schools would function much better if certain kids simply didn't show up.

### The school experience

Plus, the following structures of urban schools that lead to a factory-like operation characterized by hierarchy, control, and anonymity, turn teachers into clerks and students into objects to fear and coerce:

- the vehicle for teaching and learning is the total group in a classroom
- the teacher is the strategic pivotal figure in the group
- the classroom norms governing the group are mainly based on what maintains this strategic role
- the emotional tone is "emotionally flat" or bland (Johnston & Wetherwill, 1998)
- ability grouping
- grade retention
- college pressures
- working alone
- learning that is information rich and experience poor
- an irrelevant curriculum that students must endure and frequently ignore (De La Rosa, 1998)
- the strict schedule
- the division of knowledge
- the press of time
- the pretense towards rational efficiency
- meager resources
- large numbers of students
- zero tolerance policies

### Failure driven schools: Groundwork for the pedagogy of poverty

Failure driven schools thrive on sharp and ugly stereotypes that attach like barnacles to "these kids." This manifests in the normalization of failure, which is accompanied by low expectations and the acceptance of inadequate effort; and, the conflation of low skills with the lack of intelligence.

And urban schools may respond to these false lessons by adopting what Martin Haberman calls the *pedagogy of poverty*: a set of acts and behaviors—handing out information and directions and tests, monitoring work, punishing

noncompliance—that, taken together and performed to the systematic exclusions of other acts, disable students. This pedagogy of poverty insures failure.

Good teaching is the opposite of pedagogy of poverty: involving students in issues of vital concern to them, allowing choice and active engagement, and helping students see major concepts, big ideas, and general principles in their work.

*Powerful, hopeful learning projects always begin with learners*

Knowing students as multi-dimensional persons takes asking and answering these two questions:

1. What resources (not those based solely on middle-class concepts) do kids bring with them to school? How can schools build bridges between these experiences, knowledge, and skills (street smarts, music/movies/TV shows/video games—both what they listen to and watch and what family members/relatives do, card/board games, dances, family cuisine, family background/family members, family experiences, personal/family politics and religion; negative experiences: dealings with welfare/social workers, the police, jail, landlords, shopping experiences) and deeper, wider ways of knowing? See B&LPI’s “Student Interest Survey” (Loflin, 2005).
2. How can schools create a climate for learning that is wide enough to help and challenges a variety of students?

Possible answers

- a. Small schools environment: fighting anonymity and disconnection—teachers can get to know the strengths, talents, and gifts of each student, and help them follow their ideas, interests, dreams, or vocational choices.
- b. Tap into parents: Parents/guardians are natural allies in the struggle for better education. Educators must stop paying lip-service to parental involvement--seeing parents as clients, not partners. Educators must expand parental involvement from answering the phone or making sure Jamal or Teresa behave to involving them in school decisions such as hiring of teachers, staff, and security; budget matters; curriculum; scheduling; school climate; behavior rules/discipline matters; funding and lobbying matters. If parents are not qualified in these areas, then train them to be. See B&LPI’s “The Sham of Parental Involvement: Saying we want it vs. actually having it.”
- c. The community connection: problem-based/project-based curriculum—students will meet in advisories to address topics of their choice that relate to the community or school. The community or school problems chosen for study and solving will bring a wide variety of community people to the table to engage in open conversations with students and staff. All will engage one another as

equals. Each will be considered experts on their own lives, and primary stakeholders and decision makers when it comes to their own community, children, and education. Consequently, solving community problems will be everyone's work.

Creating collaborative, student-centered/community-centered approaches to education that will challenge the historical structural inequality of public schools by having students study and help solve the very problems--of poverty and social injustice--that impede school success can make a difference.

What curriculum best describes education in a public school in a democracy?

Creating an authentic community of parent, teachers, and students, that is capable of identifying obstacles and opportunities, setting standards and expectations, grappling with questions of what knowledge and experiences are of most value, and deciding together how best to provide full access to this curriculum best describes education in a public school in a democracy.

\*Compilation of quotes and ideas from "The school a community built" (Stovall & Ayres, 2005).

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## Culturally Relevant Teaching\*

Helping Urban Schools

The Black & Latino Policy Institute

The problem: Historically, American schools represent a paradox—for some students they are both a barrier and the solution to full participation in society. (Ladson-Billings, 1994)\*

### *Ideas and facts supporting the paradox*

No challenge has been more daunting than improving the academic achievement of African American students. Burdened with a history that includes the denial of education, separate and unequal education, and relegation to unsafe, substandard inner-city schools, the quest for quality education remains an elusive dream for the African American community. However, it does remain a dream—perhaps the most powerful for the people of African descent in this nation.

Perceived as the most direct avenue to the realization of the dream, education and access to schooling have been cherished privileges among African Americans; yet, the dropout rate is high. The high school dropout rate in New York and California is about 35 percent; in inner cities, where large numbers of African American live, the rate nears 50 percent (Chan and Momparler, 1991). In Indianapolis, using the Promoting Power analysis concept, it is approximately 63.2% (Balfanz and Legters, 2003; IPS 2003).

Today, African-Americans find themselves in a downward spiral. Continually, they lag behind their white counterparts on standardized measures. This continues during changing demographics. Although blacks make up 12-13% of the U.S. population, their children of make up over 30% of the public school population. In IPS it 57.98% (IPS, 2003 ). In the 20 largest districts, Black children make up over 70%. Black teachers make up less than 5% of public school teachers. In many instances, both black and white teacher are not prepared to teach African American students.

One look at the statistics provides other insights. African American students continue to lag significantly behind their white counter parts on all standard measures of achievement (Bray, 1987). African American children are three times as likely to drop out of school as white children are and twice as likely to be suspended from school (Edelman, 1987). African American male students are only about 17 percent of the public school population, but 41 per-cent of the special-education population (Kunjufu, 1984). These dismal statistics hold despite the two waves of educational reform initiated in 1980s.

These poor education statistics for African American students correlate with some harsh social and economic realities. Nearly one out of two African American children is poor. The rate of infant mortality among African Americans is twice that of whites. African American children are five times as likely as white children to be dependent on welfare and to become pregnant as teens; they are four times as likely to live with neither parent, three times as likely to live in a female-headed household, and twice as likely to live in

substandard housing (Harlan, 1985). More young African American men are under the control of the criminal justice system than in college (Chan and Momparler, 1991). Indeed, an African American boy who was born in California in 1988 is three times more likely to be murdered than to be admitted to the University of California.

More Paradox: Why do black youth reject school despite knowing its importance? (Hamovitch, 1999)

### ***Public school's sales pitch***

School makes it simple: work hard, follow the rules, and success will come. This idea is accepted by society and is portrayed as its central ideology: Success=opportunity + effort. African American students and their families, like most other Americans, accept this. Although students accept it, they ultimately reject the idea of status attainment proposed and promoted by schools. They accept the set of ideas as their own. They tell adults they want to be successful middle class, but are unable to translate their attitudes into behaviors. They adopt the idea of the central success ideology, but don't act on it. Many fail to invest in school because they don't see it as paying off in the marketplace. But blacks will conform to school expectations if they have hope—hope that they will have a place in the mainstream economy.

Public school teachers and staff find themselves in an unenviable situation in attempting to accomplish meritocratic goals without being able to control important resources like family income, the structure of the economy, whiter racism and the culture of the public urban schools. The students and parents know the schools are controlled by the majority and can be indifferent to the failure of blacks. They are aware of discrimination in society and the economy. Black youth hear two voices: the language of mobility, promise and hope and then the doubts from their personal experiences. Although school personnel continue to attempt to re-socialize students into the beliefs of the achievement ideology, they must realize kids do not live in a social vacuum and will reject the deal.

Trying to create hope by silencing negative voices about schools, by ignoring barriers to students' success and by representing the success/achievement ideology as a complete picture of how our social and economic system works...is not working. It is being rejected by many African American youth as exemplified in the poor test scores and graduation rates.

### ***Hope and the economy***

The place of the parent(s) in the economy is an important factor in a student's academic success or demise. Hope is related to students and parents economic and social power. Many youth can't see a future for themselves in mainstream economy--they see high unemployment rate among African Americans. Yet, if they had more hope they would try in school.

More statistics

Black students see themselves isolated by race- and class-based neighborhoods and school systems: IPS 58% black. They perceive they live in a racist society: Black males are 5% of U.S. population and 60% of the prison population. Blacks are 13% of the people doing drugs, yet are 70% of those in prison on drug related charges.

### ***The school as enemy***

Many African American students have a negative perception of school. And they live with parents who have ambiguous attitudes about schools. They see that race acts inside the school to give groups of students systematically different experiences. They realize that society supports property rights over human rights since the quality of educational experience is related to the value of property in various neighborhoods. Schools invert Black values by a depreciation of African American culture and accomplishments, by asking students to endorse individual competition, and to endure a context that values breadth over depth and noninvolvement over personal engagement. These characteristics stand in opposition to black values of kinship and a sense of people-hood. Thus the school is defined as an institution that competes with and is not complimentary to their own cultural identity.

Race and class impact on the likelihood that one will see one's culture represented and endorsed in school. Schools then become a source of self-doubt rather than self-development.

### ***Schooling vs. education***

Shijaa (1993) articulates a conceptual distinction between school and education that is useful in trying to understand the plight of many IPS students. Schooling as he understands it, implies a tie to the social order and nation state. It suggests schools as an institution that represents the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture that seeks to assimilate oppressed groups such as poor African-American. Education, on the other hand, involves learning that transmits the cultural uniqueness of the non-dominant group to the next generation.

Urban schools do not see the distinction between schooling and assimilation—schooling as cultural blending. They assume that kids are not troubled by the tension between the dominate and subordinate culture. But there is evidence that this cultural divide between black student and their schools is such a powerful factor that it forces students to choose between cultures. Consequently, many Black youth choose the mentally healthy thing and drop out. Thus, education does not occur for them within the schools.

Due to schooling's assimilation tendencies crossing cultural boundaries is difficult because students interpret acting or speaking correctly as an imposition on black people by white people. Blacks must keep an oppositional language and culture at the expense of assimilation in order to protect their feelings of self-worth.

### ***Alternatives of the status quo vs. alternatives to it***

Alternatives schools were students are sent do not support the student's critique of social institutions. Alternative schools of choice permit students to express their pent up emotions of school and other institutions (the economy, politics, the news, church, the police and the judicial system, the family). Here, education might take place in which students come to genuinely rethink their relationship to schools and institutions and make important decisions about what success means to them how they plan to realize their goals and how barriers can be overcome.

One thing is clear, urban compensatory programs that attempt to force African American youth to deny their own experiences and commonsense views are destined to failure.

#### *Framed and pushed out, suspended, expelled,...*

High schools marginalize many of their students for class, culture, historical and psychological reasons. Students are conceived of as being deficient according to standards reflecting the culture of the dominant economic group. To protect themselves, schools silence and delegitimize any negative criticism of school and social institutions--school alienates its unsuccessful students by silencing their culture, norms, and practices ...thus influencing youth to blame only themselves for school failure.

However, many students are failures not because they are unintelligent, but because they have negative perceptions of the school and because they have not adopted its achievement ideology as the proper response to their lower-class status.

Although the list of why students are expelled or suspended reflect genuine individual situations and/or problems, to what extent are students sent to a program like CMSC school alternative due to society and schools? Educator Kelly posits that the **traditional school's norms** (reflecting society's) **actually create "misfits."**

The majority of alternative schools have a negative image because of the 'types' of students who attend them. However, Kelly asks the question: Is who gets defined as deviant and for what reasons a matter of political and economic power? In the social matrix that attempts to define deviant, do some groups have the advantage due to age, gender, class, or race? Kelly argues that schools actually create nonconformity by making rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and then applying the rules, labeling those who break them as 'outsiders' (p. 69). She proves her idea by pointing out the fact that most of the students who are in alternatives have violated white, middle-class gender norms created according to the traditional school system's standards of behavior and social/academic success (Kelly, 1993). It is no coincidence that in major urban school districts, black youth are expelled more often and for longer than their white counterparts (Solida, 2000) and /or sent to alternatives (Loflin, 2002).

According to Johnston and Wetherwill (1998), is very important to any students who have a marginal status position in society and who are bordering on feelings of alienation and estrangement." They conclude:

Many of these students recognize the importance of learning, but are unwilling to assume the submissive posture in educational institutions which routinely denies them a sense of autonomy and self-worth (p. 182).

### *Conclusions*

Black children and youth will continue to reject a society where they and their families are seen as the causes of urban decay, rather than as victims of it. Students will continue to reject a school system and an economy that produces a class system that regulates them to a lower-class existence.

### The Solution: Culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994)\*

#### *Culturally relevant teaching vs. assimilationists schooling*

Culturally relevant teaching offers a solution to problems in the education of African Americans and offers an opportunity to make those problems central to the debate about education in general, especially teacher preparation. Through culturally relevant approaches and classroom climate, teachers transcend the material and instructional strategy. This teaching practice helps both teachers and students construct knowledge and move beyond the state- and district-required curricula to achieve academic and cultural excellence.

The 3 basics of culturally relevant teaching:

**A. Conception of self and others**—Teachers with culturally relevant practices have high self esteem and a high regard for others.

#### **Culturally Relevant**

Teacher sees herself as an artist, teaching as an art.

Teacher see herself as part of the community and teaching as giving something back to the community, encourages students to do the same.

Teacher believes all students can succeed.

Teacher helps students make connections between their community, national, and global identities.

Teacher sees teaching as "pulling knowledge out"—like "digging" or "mining."

#### **Assimilationist**

Teacher see herself as technician, teaching as a technical task.

Teacher sees herself as an individual who may or may not be a part of the community; she encourages achievement as a means to escape community.

Teacher believes failure is inevitable for some.

Teacher homogenizes students into one "American" identity.

Teacher sees teaching as "putting knowledge into"—like "banking."

**B. Social Relations**--How teachers' perceptions of themselves and others affects the way they structure their social relationships.

**Culturally Relevant**

Teacher-student relationship is fluid, humanely equitable, extends to interactions beyond the classroom and into the community.

Teacher demonstrates a connectedness with all students.

Teacher encourages a "community of learners."

Teacher encourages students to learn collaboratively. Students are expected to teach each other and be responsible for each other.

**Assimilationist**

Teacher-student relationship is fixed, tends to be hierarchical and limited to formal classroom roles.

Teacher demonstrates connections with individual students.

Teacher encourages competitive achievement.

Teacher encourages students to learn individually, in isolation.

**C. Concepts of Knowledge**--How culturally relevant teaching helps students understand, confront, and create knowledge

**Culturally Relevant**

Knowledge is continuously re-created, recycling and shared by teachers and students. It is not static or unchanging.

Knowledge is viewed critically.

Teacher is passionate about knowledge.

Teacher helps students develop necessary skills.

Teacher sees excellence as a complex standard that may involve some postulates but takes student diversity and individual differences into account.

**Assimilationist**

Knowledge is static and is passed in one direction, from teacher to student.

Knowledge is viewed as infallible.

Teacher is detached, neutral about knowledge.

Teacher expects students to demonstrate prerequisite skills.

Teacher sees excellence as a postulate that exists independently from student diversity or individual differences.

### *Guidelines for Culturally relevant schools and classrooms*

- When students are treated as competent they are likely to demonstrate competence.
- When teachers provide instructional “scaffolding,” students can move from what they know to what they need to know—extending students’ thinking and abilities by building on something they have already mastered.
- The focus of the classroom must be instructional, not personal: the message that the classroom is a place where teachers engage students in serious work is communicated clearly to everyone.
- Effective teaching involves in-depth knowledge of both the students and the subject matter.
- Culturally relevant schools provide self-determination—mandatorially follow the local, state and federal mandates many not always be in the best interests of parent and their children.
- These schools honor and respect the students’ home culture—students’ language they bring is not seen as deficient, i.e., a corruption of English; familial organizations are not considered unsophisticated; and, historical, cultural, and scientific contributions to the American culture are not rendered trivial.
- They help all students understand the world as it is and equip them to change it for the better—to struggle against social injustice and fulfill America’s promise.
- Students whose educational, economic, social, political and cultural futures are more tenuous are helped to become intellectual leaders in the classroom.
- Students are apprenticed in a learning community rather than taught in a isolated and unrelated way.
- Students’ real-life experiences are legitimized as they become a part of the “official” curriculum.
- Teachers and students participate in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature and oratory, unspoken and multimedia.
- Teachers and students engage in a collective struggle against the status quo.
- Teachers are cognizant of themselves as political being—they recognize the political nature of their work.
- Separate schools or culturally relevant better schools for all children
- Some may view the idea of culturally relevant teaching as promoting separate schools for African American children and youth. Yet, the challenge to make schools work for this so-called minority can lead to making schools work for all children. Culturally relevant ideals do not seek separate and better schools for black children, but culturally relevant better public schools for all children.

\* All of the ideas presented here are from: Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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**Cultural competency is not enough:  
Advancing culturally relevant teaching  
as politically relevant teaching**

*Summary: The purpose of this pamphlet is to examine culturally relevant teaching as a political pedagogy and a contemporary manifestation of what was considered "good" teaching in many African American communities served by segregated schools. An examination of accounts of these schools that were valued by students and families reveals that the "good" of these institutions hinged not simply on the cultural similarities between teachers and students, but more importantly on the "political clarity" of the teachers. That is, these educators recognized the existence of oppression in their students' lives and sought to use their personal, professional, and social power to encourage children to understand and undermine their subordination. Thus, it was not the fact they shared the students' culture, but that they shared their politics. Teachers used their knowledge of society's inequities and their influence to empower their marginalized students. By recognizing the political and historical dimensions of culturally relevant teaching its applications are broadened, expanding to issues of racism and social injustice that are relevant to all Americans.*



## **Schooling for democratic citizenship or second-class citizenship? Formal education as a means to prepare students to take an active role in making society**

The issue of cultural competence for all urban teachers is limited. Although discussions concerning culture are needed, the fundamental issue or question for urban educators concerns the purpose of public education: Is it a means of social transformation in the form of education for the personal and social emancipation for their students or system maintenance of the status quo?

Over the last 20 years, the idea of cultural competence maintained that successful teachers of children of color must be aware of the cultural distinctiveness and strengths of their students. Indiana Law IC 20-10.2-8, Cultural Competency in Educational Environments, mandates training for pre-service and regular public school teachers. By sharing and understanding a variety of cultures, urban educators will be more committed to their students.

### **Two limitations of cultural competency**

#### **Cultural awareness is not enough**

Cultural competency is based on a system of behaviors, attitudes and policies that enable teachers to work effectively in diverse, multi-cultural environments. Unfortunately, cultural competency is important yet insufficient preconditions for teaching students from marginalized groups and has limited culturally relevant teaching. The concept limits orientation to understanding and appreciating culture--ignoring the political realities in urban schooling with which many educators cope, confront, simply avoid, or naively do not recognize.

#### **Unintended consequences**

Cultural competency, for middle-class teachers of all skin tones, who work in urban schools, is supposed to make schools work. Cultural competency will enable relationships, decrease discipline referrals; consequently, it will increase academic performance. Basically, it will quiet things down, and especially avert the political controversy that made cultural competency an issue in the first place. Indeed, cultural competency is a necessity for urban teachers. Nonetheless, it can also perpetuate a school climate that limits teachers who see public schools as opportunities to talk about race and class contradictions in our society, recognizing racism as a fact of life for themselves and their students. As a result, these educators have to pretend that inequity and injustice do not exist because cultural competency mandates now

preclude discordant voices and perspectives. Eventually, racism will be regarded neither as a matter worth discussing, nor as a lingering problem that white students and faculty need to recognize and address: each teacher is culturally competent; and, so all is well in our public schools.

### **Other unintended consequences**

The unintended silencing affects of the cultural competency mandate on the daily experiences of African American students can "persuade" them to pawn their awareness of inequity in their communities and schools for the persona of a "good" student. Students train themselves to produce two voices: one's "own" voice alternated with an "academic" voice. These voices are affected by the expectations of everyone, both those who support cultural competency as well as those who do not. Students may deny class, gender, and race conflict; repeat the words of hard work, success, and their "natural" sequence; and, stifle any desire to disrupt. The price of success of the cultural competency initiative may be muting one's own voice.

Such evidence also reveals how urban schools generally do not educate their students to see public schools and themselves as "locations of possibility" for fostering social justice.

Urban teachers, who see beyond the well meaning, but limited cultural competency concept, and who have not lost **political clarity**, will continue to have emancipatory practices and philosophies. Operating subversively, they view their classrooms as sites of resistance where they take control not accorded to them in the school power hierarchy.

### **Political clarity or cultural competence or both?**

#### **The concept of political clarity: Education as "oppositional consciousness"**

African Americans have long lived a disturbing contradiction--the experiences of systemic racial oppression in the first modern democracy, and exploitation in a country founded on the ideals of justice and liberty. The social institution of formal education has not been untouched by or sheltered from the larger contradiction of racism in the U.S

There has been a longstanding discussion among African Americans about the role that formal education could play in either maintaining or transforming the existing social order, reflecting the crucial roles that teachers play in abetting or subverting a social system of domination.

## **Recognizing schooling as a "socio-political institution"**

Because public schools socialize children into particular ways of seeing themselves, others, and the society in which they will function as adults, these social institutions have been a key site for Black resistance to White domination.

In manifesting such resistance from slavery throughout segregation, African Americans were making a profoundly political statement: They believed in being considered and treated as equal citizens in society; they were painfully aware of their social, political, and economic subjugation and would work to resist it; and, they understood that formal education played a key role in either encouraging true democracy or sanctioning a system of continued oppression.

By recognizing the political nature of formal education, many African American teachers in segregated schools that existed before *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, used their classrooms to promote an "oppositional consciousness" or an ideology of resistance against the "hegemonic ideology." They sought to redirect the blame for suffering from divine and personal domains to the system of human domination itself. This helped develop ideas about the rightness of social justice and provided conceptions of a just society.

Based on African Americans' apprehension of their oppression, this philosophy encouraged the cooperation of both men and women to contest the racist premise of their intellectual and moral inferiority as people of African descent. They wanted to make sure African American children matured with the psychological and academic strengths necessary to subvert white domination.

As "quiet revolutionaries," these educators, capitalizing on this classroom influence, were committing political acts because it contradicted the racist rhetoric of Black inferiority.

## **Advancing culturally relevant teaching: Characteristics of politically relevant teaching**

Due to the anti-assimilationist orientation of the culturally relevant teaching concept of Gloria Ladson-Billings, it is viewed more accurately as politically relevant teaching.

The basis of politically relevant teaching states: Cultural similarity and understanding are important yet insufficient preconditions for teaching students from marginalized groups.

Therefore, these teachers are mindful not only of the cultural norms, values, and practices of their students, but more importantly of the political realities and aspirations of people of color. As a result,

their pedagogy is "relevant" to the political experiences of inequity and disenfranchisement of their students.

- Because of the political understanding of education held by these educators, their actions are sensitive to and supportive of the anti-racism and anti-oppression struggles of students of color. They are conscious of the presence of racism which surrounds students with distorted and overwhelmingly negative images of the cultures, histories, and possibilities of people of color.
- As a result, politically relevant teachers view their classrooms as key sites of resistance, where students of color especially can come to see themselves and their communities in affirming ways while gaining access to mainstream "codes of power."
- Therefore, they successfully encourage their students to be competent and comfortable in both their home culture and the larger society.
- The philosophical beliefs held by such educators believe public education has a responsibility to prepare students to take an active role in making society truly democratic.

**Tamara Beauboeuf-LaFontant's concluding remarks:  
"Education as the practice of freedom"**

The political clarity of generations of Black teachers is less a reflection of culture and more an embodiment of these educators' personal and political commitments.

This means that any urban educator, regardless of color and culture, may be limited by the best intentions reflected in cultural competency. Without a genuine identification with the political realities students (and the families and communities) face, *cultural competency is not enough*.

Teaching incorporates one's professional training, cultural identity, and ideological commitments. It is the convergence of all these sources of identity that defines one's practice and thinking as an educator.

*While cultural similarity and understanding between teachers and students are certainly helpful, these points of connection are not sufficient for addressing and remedying the contemporary problems of underachievement, alienation, and dropping out that too many students of color experience.*

In order to emphasize the political understanding of social systems of power and a personal commitment to educating children, regardless of their social origins, Indiana must advance culturally relevant teaching as politically relevant teaching.

This advancement is an attempt to expand the concept of cultural competence and culturally relevant teaching by drawing attention to the political clarity, or the courage and savvy of such Hoosier educators committed to reaching out to and successfully educating "other people's children."

The significance of politically relevant teachers to education lies in their belief that schools can be vehicles for social change, community building, and access to the mainstream; and that educators can take a leading role in promoting social justice.

*Such a belief in the power and potential of schools and educators is less a cultural trait than it is a personal and political conviction.*

Advancing culturally relevant teaching as "politically relevant teaching" is important for at least three reasons:

1. Discussions of "culture" as a reference for teaching can gloss over the complexity of class, gender, and ethnic diversity that exists within any "cultural" group. However, centering on the political draws attention to the active decision making and commitments of an educator to uphold certain viewpoints (e.g., hegemonic or oppositional; oppressive or democratic) that transcend culture;
2. The term "political relevance" compels us to see beyond what is sometimes presented as an essentialist quality of social groupings. The concept of political relevance maintains that there is a political history of striving to bring the practice of democracy in line with our founding ideals, and that this "positive struggle" has included people of various cultural and social backgrounds; and,
3. Consciously focusing our attention on the political rather than cultural experiences of students provides us with a way of productively engaging with the reality of a majority white female teaching force educating an increasingly non-white public school population.

If we consider that the successful education of poor students and students of color hinges on political congruence between teachers and students, rather than on cultural competency, we become interested in helping teachers identify and reflect on their political convictions and their pedagogy as a manifestation of their stance towards the positive struggle for democracy.

Beauboeuf-LaFontant took the title of her paper, as well as many of the section headings, from the work of feminist educator and cultural critic bell hooks (*Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*). She closes her paper with a description of the personal and social implications of politically relevant teaching written by bell hooks:

“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 comrades, 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.”

This pamphlet is a compilation of quotes from Tamara Beauboeuf-LaFontant’s 1999 article, “A Movement Against and Beyond Boundaries: Politically Relevant Teaching among African-American Teachers.” *Teachers College Record*, 100(4), p. 702-723.

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## Media Literacy: Art as the 4<sup>th</sup> R

Helping Urban Schools

Black & Latino Policy Institute

**Issue:** A Small Learning Community intends to prepare all students for success.

**This begs the question:** How will they reach all students?

**Answer:** Media Literacy: Art as the 4<sup>th</sup> R

Most schools discuss what foreign language the school will teach. Spanish, French, Japanese...are mentioned. Curiously, "the arts" are not. Yet, that's what "the arts" are, another language. Dance, sculpting, weaving, pottery, drama and screen/play writing, poetry, singing, playing and composing music, drawing/painting/animation, movie and video making are now ways of self expression, expressing ideas, understanding and expressing understanding—making them invaluable classroom tools. Presently, what is absolutely astounding, is that this point of view is being expanded, mostly due to desktop publishing—creating the concept of **media literacy**.

In an era when students design Web sites for projects and integrate video, graphics, and animation into their presentations, **art is fast becoming the new literacy of our times:** To be fully literate, art must be included. Easy-to-use multimedia computer technology has open up the world of the "artist" in us all.

### **Redefining Literacy** (Scherer, 1999)

Multimedia communications is spreading throughout the internationally connected world of the Internet—citizens of the world are moving away from "**text-centric**" communications and towards **pictures, diagrams, sound, movement**, and other more **universal forms** (Mahiri, 2004) of communication.

For many students, multi-media opportunities in school can provide for:

1. Improved expression and communication—the arts increase a student's ability to express themselves because it provides more ways for self-expression and increases the spectrum of people with whom now can communicate.
2. Alternative assessments—what students know but are unable to show, express, prove, via other forms, if provide options for success, can show they know/understand.
3. Cognitive and attitudinal improvement—due to art requiring expertise in synthesis and evaluation, being active in the arts improves cognitive functions. In addition, **the many arts are learning's best friend**—inducing student to come to school and be receptive to learning.

4. Multi-cultural awareness and personal growth—there is no better way to understand and appreciate the diversity and commonality of people than through art. Also, the arts provide an opportunity for self-knowledge through self-expression, motor skills development, creativity, and working with others.

5. Improves teaching—the adage, “If students do not learn through the way you teach, then then teach them through the way they learn” applies here. Learning in and through the arts provides instructors a multitude of ways to get students to understand facts, ideas, and concepts, and to demonstrate understanding.

**Media literacy is:** how to use any/all of the arts to communicate, how to understand. So, teaching students to evaluate the many media images that surround them, will give them the tools to make responsible choices about what they see and here. This empowers students to take control of their reactions and to see the effects that media messages, especially advertising, have on their emotions, desires, and beliefs.

Finally, **different ways of teaching** are illustrated in *Postmodern Educator: Arts based inquiries* (Diamond & Mullin, 1999) teachers are encouraged to promote the development of arts-based narrative inquires/research by their students by using artistic forms (stories, poems, narratives, visuals) as instructional devices. The arts allow both teacher and student to “become” within the environment of the curriculum where they are free to access a variety of media in which to express themselves. This also allowed students to pick/use different media to learn from/through and to show/assess what they learned.

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## Rites of Passage

Helping Urban Schools

Black & Latino Policy Institute

**Issue:** Youth are searching for a passage from childhood and school.

**This begs the question:** What is the right passage?

**Answer:** Combine the walkabout model (challenge areas) and the accelerated model (powerful learning experiences).

Youth are searching for a passage from childhood and school to adulthood. In the process, they seek **challenges**. They know from experience dealing with challenges leads to self-discovery. Puberty puts youth on the path of self-realizations. Because puberty is a purely physical event and something they have no control over, it may be one of the few things youth regard.

Compared to so-called primitive societies, post-modern America offers neither official or pro-social rites of passage, nor the challenges that provide youth the format and specific rites that lead to adulthood. Official rites, no; but youth, due to the ontological nature of psychological development, put into motion by puberty--simply put--must show others they are no longer children and so act-out, through their own peer culture conceived rites and challenges, this universal event.

Consequently and unfortunately, most of these peer-conceived challenges and rites are anti-social activities. Smoking cigarettes, consuming alcohol and/or drugs, having sex, joining a gang, being a mother or father, going to prison, and other **risk-taking** behaviors are what the youth subculture has created as ways youth can prove they are no longer children.

To get a better view of what happens to youth after puberty in different societies, let compare America with the Australian aborigines. The aboriginal rite of passage, the **walkabout**, is a 6-month long test during which youth must survive alone in the wilderness and return to the tribe as an adult or dies in the attempt.

In contrast, we prepare and test our youth's readiness--their demonstration of the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be a contributor to society--with written exams. These exams test skills very removed from actual experience they will have in real life. Our high school students write; they do not act. They solve familiar theoretical problems; they do not apply what they know in strange, but real situations. Our youth are under direction and in a protected environment to the end. They do not go out into the world to demonstrate that they are prepared to survive in, and contribute to, our society. Their preparation is

primarily for the mastery of content and skills in the “disciplines” and has little to do with reaching maturity, achieving adulthood, or developing fully as a person. The isolation the walkabout involves is in sharp contrast to the high schools. In an extended period of solitude at a crucial stage of development, tribal youth are confronted with challenges to their competence as well as their inner and spiritual resources. In our large schools, students are seldom formally separated from others. There is little formal opportunity to confront their anxieties, explore inner resources, and come to terms with the world and their future. Finally, unlike the predominately left-brain orientation of our schools, the outback experiences accentuate the **right-brain** development due to challenges that require heightened sensory perception, instinct, and intuition. Just read Marlo Morgan’s *Mutant Message Down Under*. As well, check out Patrice Somé’s, *Of Water and Spirit*.

Our Western view of schooling makes abstractions out of such events. It creates exams that are sucked dry of the richness of experience, in the end having little to do with anything directly critical or even significant that students can anticipate being involved in as an adult—except the pursuit of more formal education and more written exams. And yet, it is clear that what will matter to students and to Indiana is **not their test writing ability or even what they know about, but what they feel, what they stand for, what they can do, and what they are becoming as a person!**

However, schools are there to educate. The small schools are not in the rites of passage business...or are they?

Surprisingly, what has just been discussed sounds like the **powerful learning experiences** of Hank Levin’s Accelerated Model (Levin, 1989). This experiential approach is similar to the traditional outcomes of the walkabout concept. Students get academically, emotionally, and experientially involved in solving a real-world issue or problem. Through research, assessment, and proposals students produce and carry out solutions. What if small schools were able to educate students while at the same time providing rites of passage—where graduating would also be graduating from youth to adulthood?

Fortunately this is exactly what nationally acclaimed educator and youth advocate Maurice Gibbons asked over 30 years ago in the May, 1974 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, “Walkabout: Searching for the Right Passage From Child to Adulthood.”

--*What would an appropriate and challenging walkabout for high school students in America be like?*

--*What sensibilities, knowledge, attitudes, and competencies are necessary for a full and productive adult life?*

--*What kinds of experiences will have the power to focus student’s energy on*

*achieving these goals?*

*--What kind of performance will demonstrate to the student, the school, and the community that the goals have been achieved?*

To answer these questions, Gibbons suggested these guidelines for making a model that would work for students in a high school in his *PDK* essay:

“First it would be experiential, not virtual; not knowledge about aerodynamics and planes; not flying a simulator, but the experience of solo flight in which the mastery of relevant abstract knowledge and skills is manifest in the performance.

“Second, it should be a challenge which extends the capacities of the student as fully as possible, urging him to consider every limitation they perceive in himself as a barrier to be broken through; not a goal which is easily accessible, such as playing an instrument they already play competently, but a risky goal that calls for a major extension of their talent, such as earning a chair in a junior symphony or a gig at a reputable under-21 club.

“Third, it should be a challenge the student choose for himself. The major challenge for youth in our society is making decisions. In some societies there are few choices; in technological societies like ours there is a bewildering array of alternatives in life-style, work, politics, products, possessions, recreation, dress, relationships, environments, etc. Success in our lives depends on the ability to make appropriate choices. Yet, in most schools students make few decisions of any importance and receive no training in decision-making or in the implementation or reassessment cycle, which constitutes the basic growth patterns. Too often graduation cuts students loose to muddle through for themselves. In this walkabout model, teachers and parents may help, but in a Carl Rogers style—by facilitating the student’s decision making, not by making the decisions for him. The test of the walkabout, and of life, is not what he can do under a teacher’s direction, but what the teachers has empowered him to decide and to do on his own.

“In addition, the trial should be an important learning experience in itself. It should involve not only the demonstration of the student’s knowledge, skill, and achievement, but also a significant confrontation with himself: his awareness, his adaptability to situations, his competence, his nature as a person.

“Finally, the trial and ceremony should be appropriate, appropriate not as a test of schooling which has gone before, but as a transition from school learning to the life which will follow afterwards. And the completion of the walkabout should bring parents, teachers, friends, and others to share the moment with him, to confirm his achievement, and to consolidate the spirit of community in which he is a member” (p. 598).

Using the above criteria as a basis, small schools have the opportunity to use the following challenge area in combination with course outcomes, state graduation requirements, and students' needs, interests, and career goals to create a situation where students not only fulfill the requirements for passing particular high school courses and general state graduation requirements, but also have experiences and the various rites of passage that signify a break from childhood and the entrance into adulthood.

## **CHALLENGES AREAS**

**Adventure and Field Experience:** a challenge to the student's daring, endurance, and skill in an unfamiliar environment. Adapting, changing and observing new places with a sense of excitement and curiosity, students grow and widen their perspective on life. Particularly related to science and social studies, the challenge involves activities outside school. Movement combined with new ideas is bound to constitute an adventure.

**Creativity and Enrichment:** a challenge to explore, cultivate, and express one's own imagination. The challenge culminates in an esthetically pleasing form. Students are encouraged to venture outside the classroom to meet this challenge, which includes both content (experiencing) and process (doing).

**Service:** a challenge to identify a human need for assistance and provide it; to express caring without expectation of reward.

**Practical Skills:** a challenge to explore a utilitarian activity, to learn knowledge and skills necessary to work in that field, and to produce something useful. Practical skills are not usually taught in high school, but are important for functioning in society. Students will challenge themselves to master skills they feel will help them function as an adult.

**Logical inquiry and research:** a challenge to explore one's curiosity, to formulate a question or problem of personal or academic importance, and to pursue an answer or solution systematically and wherever appropriate, by investigation. This challenges students to satisfy their curiosity by research, scientific experiments, surveys, interviews, and other types of investigations. Finding will be presented in a comprehensive and organized manner.

**Cognitive Skills:** a challenge to take on the responsibility to develop basic academic competencies necessary to survive intellectually and to provide leadership in most communities. Although course competencies are already defined for students, the challenge lies in how much they extend themselves in fulfilling them.

**Futurism and decision-making:** a challenge to pick a situation and create possible out-comes based on various scenarios. This is a challenge to identify alternatives in the decision making process, evaluating how each one might affect their lives and the lives of others. We make a number of decisions every day, and as an adult, students will have to make even more.

This is the framework not only for a successful simultaneous passage through high school and adolescence, but a test of passage for the staff and the school itself. We, as adults and school staff, cannot deny students what we ourselves seek by creating small schools: the opportunity to test our limitations, imagination, curiosity, confidence, hopes, and endurance—simply put, the process of individuation. The school is a metaphor for what is required of the students--recapitulating the very acts and challenges the students will tackle in order to graduate and become adults. Every one in the school will be doing what the walkabout concept is. It is no coincident that both the aboriginal elders' goals for its youth and the goals of our school, for both staff and students, are the same:

- gain knowledge
- use all our skills and abilities
- apply knowledge to real problems
- see tangible results and act accordingly
- have time for introspection and to assimilate what we have learned, and...

all through the trial of "school" itself.

If we deny students the opportunity to be channeled through various rites we will deny ourselves the opportunity to learn from them these very important lessons. Researchers Herbert & Otto's article gives these insights:

**Adolescents are fully engaged in the process of clarifying and developing their identity—they issue the challenge, a reminder to adults that identity formation is a life-long process.**

**Adolescents are at a point of major impetus in self-actualization and enfoldment—they symbolize the human potential actively committed to self-realization.**

**The adolescent is a growth catalyst, offering adults a challenge and opportunity to grow with and through them.**

The adolescent represent a force for social and institutional regeneration—a challenge to our school to be an example of what a restructured high school will look like.

**The adolescent represents the wave of the future—the nature of their being and the quality of their developing self foreshadows the man or woman of tomorrow—this is a challenge to adults that their time is soon to pass and it is nearer the time to pass on the key to the next generation.**

The educators must realize that youth seek the right passage from childhood to adulthood. In many institutions in America the rites passage are not offered and the youth innately create their own. The public schools have an opportunity to facilitate this very impotent transition. The school and the staff will be in the process of self-actualization. We cannot deny this same need and opportunity to our students.

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## The sham of parental involvement

Helping Urban Schools

Black & Latino Policy Institute

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of (our public schools) but (the parents) themselves; and if (school staff) think them not enlightened enough to (share in school related decisions) with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.

-- paraphrased from Thomas Jefferson

***Issue: Saying we want parental and community involvement vs. actually having parental and community involvement: How the empowered can empower others.***

***Problem: There exists a cultural gap between parents and teachers***

### The familiarity gap between parents and educators

Most urban teachers do not live in the neighborhood/community where they work. Due to many reasons, teachers don't actually feel comfortable around parents. Historically, all meetings are at school and never in neighborhoods where families live. Parents/guardians are seen as clients, not partners. Traditionally, educators limit the definition of participation to what is convenient and beneficial for them. The very middle-class values teachers model as the goal of education, not only prevent an understanding of and respect for ethnic/working class cultures, but gives opportunity and reason to talk about parents behind their back--making fun of their language, dress and hair styles, child-rearing approaches, diet, living circumstances, cars they drive, values, sense of humor, pastimes.

*Problem: Many parents and community members feel inadequate about their ability to make important school-related decisions*

### Benefits of parental and community involvement in schools

Substantial research in the last 20 years has shown that when parents and the community are involved in education, students perform better. Studies also show that when parents and the community are actively involved in a school or a program within a school, it results in improved relationships between the school and the parent/community (Khan, 1996). Other research (Beecher, 1984) shows parents and community members develop more positive attitudes about school and school personnel, help gather support in the community for the school, become even more active in community affairs, develop increased self-confidence as activist, and enroll in other educational programs.

### Parental involvement: Holistic education

Schools can be institutions for involving the community in decision-making concerning school policies and programs. The mounting pressure has been

for making school more democratic and curriculum more relevant. The underlying assumption of this view is greater community involvement will result in better education for students (Levin, 1982).

This has culminated in a change in the attitudes parents and the community have toward what schools are for, expressed through greater emphasis on basic academic skills, and by the use of the word "community" together with the right of parents to choose schools and to sit on their governing bodies.

The issue of parental involvement and community participations in school decision-making is much larger than improving math and reading scores. It is central to our democracy and that parents and citizens participate in governing public institutions. We can no longer look at school, parents, and community as three separate entities (Henderson, 1989).

#### How Indiana urban schools can remove barriers: From clients to partners

Traditionally, parents and community members who have been associated with public schools have been viewed as clients. The client concept implies that parents and community members are dependent on an expert's opinions, passive recipient of services, in need of redirection, and peripheral in decision-making.

On the other hand, partners suggests that parents and community members are active and central in decision-making and its implementation, have equal strengths and equivalent expertise, are reciprocal in contributing and receiving services, and sharing responsibility as well as accountability with the so-called professionals.

#### Other barriers and their removal

Research (Liontos, 1991) provides evidence that parents and community members associate some of the barriers to authentic involvement to themselves. These may include feelings of inadequacy, failure, and poor self-worth, as well as past negative experiences with school as students as well as parents or adults. Some community members consider schools as "institutionalized authority" hence seeing schools as beyond questioning and criticism—"Those folks have been to college. They must know what they are doing."

There are also clear interactions and correlations between race, class, educational level and a parent or community person perceptions and their participation in school activities of various sorts (Carr & Wilson, 1997).

Research reveals that although school administrators support the general idea of parental involvement they consider involvement worthwhile only if it relates to the parent's children rather than to the broader issues related to the school at large. *They do not support parental and community involvement in school policy*



*decisions such as hiring and firing of teachers and principals or in determination of priorities for the school budget. But, why?*

Khan (1996) notes:

- it requires a major deviation from standard operating procedures and introduces a strong element of risk into an institution that tries to avoid uncertainty and resists change.
- the regular flow of decision making may be interrupted, and there is a risk that community members will achieve too much power or create conflict in an institution that seeks stable internal and external relationships.
- any activity involved in sharing power beyond the current repertoire of school activities such as answering the phone, fund raising, or helping out in classrooms would require training and experience on the part of teachers and administration
- it poses a threat to school administrators' undivided authority and ability to manage change, and also to teachers' professional autonomy. School personnel see running a school as their job, what they were trained to do, thus not a job for "amateurs."

This situation creates an unfortunate cycle that in the long run benefits no one—the schools, citizens, or children. Nationally, many communities and school officials view genuine parental and community involvement in school decisions as problematic suggesting such things be left to the experts. This discourages community members from gaining needed experiences. In turn, school officials and educators perceive this inexperience and/or a lack of training on the part of parents and community members to make decisions as a barrier to involving them in shared school decision-making.

School must serve their public function, this is making democracy work through a process of sharing power, proving a democratic vision and working together with parents and community to create a multicultural and multiracial democracy.

**Segue:** Systems theorists and systematic change advocates are particularly interested in authentic parental and community participation in school decisions because it is seen as the primary path to substantive change owned by the entire community. Also, stakeholder participation is most closely aligned with the values of user-designed schools which is fundamental to systemic change (Carr & Wilson, 1997). Yet, there is no guarantee that intentional or inadvertent barriers, that are inherent in the institution of public schools, can be removed.

It is thus important for educators to begin to unravel the mysteries of authentic parental and community involvement and to mandate policies that will insure future barriers will not exist. This becomes increasingly important with the advent of programs that seek to gain community shared ownership and designship.

*Suggested solutions:* Employing strategies for seeking out, inviting in, and retaining historically disenfranchised populations in school-related decision making is essential to the allover concept if small schools are to last, act as a fundamental change agent, and be a national example of how parents, community, and schools can work together for students.

- Educators must mandate ongoing training for parents and community members, who sense their own inadequacies, to provide them with the sufficient knowledge and skills to prepare them to share power and make the important decisions in school related areas such as board responsibilities, school design, school climate, scheduling, hiring staff, budget decisions, facility management, curriculum design and textbook choices, assessment, time tables and deadlines, public relations, and running meetings.
- Try meeting at McDonalds, churches, Boys/Girls Clubs, community organizations, park community centers, or libraries in the neighborhoods of parents/guardian: Stop just meeting at the school! Move around.
- Plans must also be mandated to orient teachers and administrators to work with parents and community persons in partnership with confidence and team spirit rather than apprehension and mistrust that "outsiders are trying to tell them how to do their job."

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