

IT SHOULD JUST BE EDUCATION

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY NORMALIZED AS ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

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ABSTRACT

For a generation since the release of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), the idea of a pedagogy for critical consciousness has fascinated North American educators. Their treatment of critical pedagogy, however, has been largely theoretical; very little of the work of North American scholars has addressed teaching and learning in schools or in out-of-school work with youth. While we now have some examples of critical pedagogy in practice in classrooms and non-school spaces (Darder, 1991; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008; Fisher, 2007; Stovall, 2006), we are in need of further research because many questions remain unanswered. For example, what are the goals of critical pedagogy when it is applied in work with youth? How is "success" measured? How can analysis of ongoing projects illuminate what we mean by critical pedagogy with urban American youth? In this article we seek to answer some of these questions through the analysis of two long-running intervention projects that attempt to frame critical pedagogy as academically empowering in critical learning communities. Specifically, this paper explores critical pedagogy in two Southern California programs that work with youth across school and non-school settings: the Council of Youth Research (1999-2011) and the Black Male Youth Academy (2006-2011).

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Through an analysis of multiple forms of data, including field notes, student work products, student reflections, and conversations with outside actors who have engaged these youth, we seek to understand the role of critical pedagogy across three domains: critical literacy development, empowered identity development, and the promotion of civic engagement for social change. Additionally, through an investigation of pedagogical moments—when youth themselves are in dual roles as students and public intellectuals—we hope to develop a grounded theory of pedagogical practice that can inform work with youth in classroom and out-of-school settings.

INTRODUCTION

“The trip to New Orleans was an experience that changes a person. I never thought I could be such a revolutionary, but an experience like AERA tells me that I have a future in this field. It tells me that I am not someone that will sit around and take oppression; I am some one who will be an advocate for change. After listening to educators and administrators applaud us on our work, I realized that I can make a change.”—Jason, CYR student

“New Orleans was very live and it’s great. But presentation-wise, the kinda work we were doing showed that we can get Black males around the whole United States properly educated. We can get people out of the mindset of stereotypes that they see in music videos and films that portray young Black males struggling in school; not really going to school, gangbanging and stuff—we have to try to get those images out their heads so they can go to college and be somebody.”—Trevor, BMYA Student

These students are describing transformative educational experiences—experiences that demonstrate powerful changes in students’ learning, identity development, and views of the world. These experiences are not inspired by standardized test preparation or through instruction in basic skills; instead, they arise from enriching learning spaces that push students to their intellectual limits and connect them to meaningful, authentic ways to express their ideas. This is critical pedagogy. It should not be considered radical—it should just be education.

NEOLIBERALISM AND REINFORCING THE BANKING MODEL THROUGH TESTING

In an era of hyperstandardization and “racing to the top,” many public school educators see critical pedagogy as a subversive practice (Kincheloe, 2009). This disapproving view has led to critical pedagogy’s increasing marginalization in public education. The existing discourses of accountability and standardization have implications for what serves as dominant pedagogical practice. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on accountability, has particularly detrimental impacts on stu-

dents of color, as traditionally marginalized and oppressed communities continue to experience the negative effects of cultural dominance through schooling. In *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (Shor & Freire, 1987) through a dialogue, Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, note that schools are set-up to “market” ideas and work against the development of critical thinking (p. 8). Educators are expected to teach dominant values and historical perspectives with the explicit goal of achieving higher Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) or Academic Performance Index (API) scores. This banking model of education devalues the incorporation of variety in the canon of texts and limits discourse of legitimate literacy practices (Lee, 1995), thus contributing to the academic, cultural, political and economic disenfranchisement of urban youth of color. Although educators have attempted to employ practices that subvert this dominance through critical pedagogy, they often lack an alternative language to draw upon in order to justify their efforts. Even further, “the learning sciences have not yet adequately addressed the ways that culture is integral to learning” (Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2006, p. 489) and as such, have insufficiently given weight to alternative practices that are academically empowering, civically engaging and supportive of positive identity development.

We assert that critical pedagogy addresses these concerns. Not only can critical pedagogy respond to the neoliberal discourse around high stakes testing and standards based education, but it can react to the pressures that teachers face when attempting to engage their youth through learning strategies that are relevant, empowering and academically supportive. Critical pedagogy helps us rethink the way we engage students and analyze forms of learning in non-dominant communities so that effective approaches to learning and teaching can be applied and understood. Lee (1995) adds that while there has been progress in research literature, there is non-implementation or a lack of teaching strategies that potentially support effective approaches to learning that serve predominantly poor, ethnically- and linguistically-diverse students. Reevaluating our theoretical framework and pedagogical practices by presenting the work critical educators are doing under the radar may offer directional insight as many urban youth and educators find themselves at odds in the classroom.

This article explores the literacy ideologies and practices that two programs use to facilitate the use of critical pedagogy in non-dominant communities and their impact on urban youth. Further, we seek to articulate the ways in which the use of critical pedagogy supports an empowered identity and promotes civic engagement for social change across participatory spaces and domains. We will present two long-running projects, the Council of Youth Research (2001-2011) and the Black Male Youth Academy (2006-2011), that may offer a framework to demonstrate how critical pedagogy, when normalized, can contribute to the academic, political and cultural empowerment of urban youth. By reviewing the use of critical pedagogy and its relationship to critical literacy and academic literacy

development, we intend to answer the following questions: What are the goals of critical pedagogy when it is applied in work with urban American youth? How can the analysis of ongoing projects illuminate what we mean by critical pedagogy with urban American youth? How do we measure “success”? We seek answers to these questions through an investigation of pedagogical moments –when youth are positioned as both public intellectuals and change agents. Finally, we conclude with a grounded theoretical analysis of these programs and practices by reflecting on the academic, personal and civic engagement of urban students.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND THE EDUCATION OF URBAN YOUTH: THE INTERSECTION OF CRITICAL RESEARCH AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

In order to effectively situate critical pedagogy as a legitimate educational practice, we must reassert an appropriate approach to learning. Many learning practices, which attempt to develop academic literacy in urban youth of color, frequently exclude the forms of capital these youth bring into the learning environment and mitigate the degree to which critical skills inform the learning community. Currently employed literacy practices such as Bloom’s Taxonomy or Marzano’s Instructional Strategies have narrowly-constructed definitions of learning which lead to narrowly-constructed approaches to learning (Meacham, 2001). This is true both in the classroom and in the research literature that promotes deficit analyses of students’ learning abilities and academic underachievement. Gutierrez argues that a “historicized view of literacy requires a focus on activity as the unit of analysis, as activity systems are historically evolving, artifact-mediated systems” (as cited in Blackburn & Clark, Eds., 2007, p. xi). This focus on activity systems must take into account a community’s culturally prescribed learning practices to best determine how to effectively engage students in the classroom.

A central factor in the effective use of critical pedagogy is the cultural relevance of its application. Teaching strategies must employ holistic approaches to help students achieve academically and focus on cultural and linguistic integrity (Howard, 2001). These strategies require that teachers incorporate culturally sensitive approaches to learning in order to challenge knowledge that is both dominant and privileged. Further, the process of privileging students’ funds of knowledge, cultural heritage and development of critical consciousness is embedded within the use of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1974). As a framework, critical pedagogy can also serve as both an educator’s philosophical and methodological approach to teaching and learning by empowering students to actively generate and privilege their own historical tradition through problem posing activity and the practice of reflection. This type of pedagogy is both anti-oppressive and counterhegemonic and leads to the development of critical literacy affording urban

youth the opportunity to recognize socially constructed knowledge in order to inform their experience.

Critical literacy, as a tool for political and cultural empowerment, must incorporate the teaching practices resulting from the use of critical pedagogy. There are frameworks and methods to promote critical literacy for the purposes of developing academic achievement in urban youth. Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2002) challenge educators to "...find ways to forge meaningful relationships with students who come from different worlds, while also helping these students develop academic skills and the skills needed to become critical citizens in a multicultural democracy" (p. 88). This approach is emblematic of the necessity to understand and apply learning theory in a way that positively impacts students' development of critical consciousness in underserved communities. Further, an appreciation of multiple forms of literacy allows the educator to view learning as a cultural process (Calfee & Sperling, 2010).

Critical literacy can be linked to cultural identity and can inform attempts to create structured learning environments, situated learning and basic literacy development. The way we theorize human learning using either a socio-cultural or constructivist approach, carry different ontological or epistemological assumptions and can have a tremendous impact on knowledge construction, transformation and participation (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, p. 227). Giroux (1998) argues for the importance of a critical, pedagogical process that is counter-hegemonic and validates multiple forms of expression as well as the social and cultural experiences of the learner (as cited in Torres, 1998). Urban youth must be able to see themselves as learners in charge of their own sociopolitical and academic development. And because critical pedagogy intends to surface existing knowledge using problematization and reflection, it fits the criteria needed to facilitate a liberatory educational experience. Recognizing that constructivist approaches to learning are not sufficient to effectively design learning environments (Polman, 2006), it is necessary to apply new approaches to learning and instructional design to facilitate deep understanding (Carver, 2006). Through its reflectivity, critical pedagogy serves as a legitimate form of engagement to develop learning models and hybrid spaces. Reflection, through writing and speech, offers an example of an academic practice to engage urban youth in the development of strong academic and civic identities while strengthening learning.

We see this type of critical education taking place in communities of practice that utilize critical pedagogy to empower youth. Models based on this approach, such as Jeff-Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell's (2007) program which focuses on popular culture as a tool to engage students in learning, are good examples of the how researchers and educators can provide appropriate spaces for learning utilizing critical pedagogy. Morrell (2008) uses the pedagogy of popular culture to gear learning toward social justice, prepare future teachers, develop literacy

policy and facilitate student empowerment. Both Duncan-Andrade and Morrell expand the use of critical pedagogy to validate the experiences of non-dominant communities, encourage the placement of learning within sociocultural contexts, critique power dynamics and provide a space for academic achievement in the traditional classroom setting.

Extending beyond youth empowerment and simple critiques of power relations, the use of critical pedagogy to develop critical youth researchers has the potential to expand academic and civic identity development while facilitating social change. Through youth participatory action research (YPAR), urban youth become critical youth researchers who employ critical research methodologies to tell their stories and position them as experts in their own educational experiences (Camarrota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2006). Methodologically, YPAR challenges traditional notions of research and academic engagement by presenting learning opportunities for urban youth and by providing students with a space to create and enact their own research agendas. Since YPAR responds to the privilege of those who are legitimized to produce knowledge, critical educators are able to employ conceptual, intellectual and practical tools that help urban youth think differently about the nature of the problems they face and identify solution-oriented approaches. As an effective learning tool, YPAR transforms the traditional learning space by carving out room for urban youth to develop experiential knowledge, conduct research on their own experiences and act as agents of change in issues that impact them directly.

While critical pedagogy establishes a foundational approach to teaching and learning, the use of YPAR engages students in academic activities such as interviewing, transcribing, writing and teaching, among others. It allows a community of learners to become teachers and alter the educational discourse in and beyond their environment. Training urban youth of color as action researchers helps them describe the problems they face, identify transformative research questions and gain mastery of the very instruments we use in this study. We believe this creates an enviable hunger for change and acts as a vehicle to engage students in a learning process that is both relevant and highly instructive by challenging the traditional educational mold that critical pedagogy intends to subvert.

Our hope in presenting two Southern California programs that work with youth across school and non-school settings—the Black Male Youth Academy (2006-2011) and the Council of Youth Research (1999-2011)—is to show the ways critical pedagogy can be employed in different settings. Although each program works closely with urban youth of color, the Black Male Youth Academy has an explicit focus on African American male youth and incorporates heritage-based education. The Council of Youth Research (CYR), as a long-standing community of practice, demonstrates the existence of a model that has the potential to influence educational theory and practice.

The Black Male Youth Academy (BMYA)

The Black Male Youth Academy (BMYA) is a YPAR program that focuses on utilizing effective literacy practices with African American male youth. The BMYA is a space created for African American male youth who participate in a specialized learning environment using youth participatory action research. A goal of this space is to help youth develop critical literacy and a deeper understanding of themselves through heritage-based education. The program teaches students about the history of African Americans and about the African diaspora using critical pedagogy to help them identify their relationship to power, to history, to their community and to personal responsibility. Students are expected to assess the community conditions using theories they learn in the space and to develop a research action plan to present to potential collaborators to implement their ideas for change. They are taught to use research methodologies to seek input (conduct interviews and develop surveys), document their learning process (documentary filmmaking) and propose solutions (PowerPoint presentations). Through this process, students are expected to engage in their community as public intellectuals and storytellers while improving their academic skills to become better writers, thinkers and producers of knowledge.

Located in South Los Angeles at Vernon High School, the program is embedded in the school's master calendar as an assigned elective course that is both graded and counted toward attendance. It takes place during the advisory period, Monday through Thursday, and hosts approximately 20 -25 African American male youth in grades nine through twelve. During the 2010-2011 school year, 42% of the young men were system-involved youth and had grade point averages (GPA) between 1.2 and 3.6. However, every student who matriculated in the program through graduation enrolled in a college/university or trade school. The curriculum incorporates the use of critical race theory with the intent to develop critical consciousness and critical literacy skills. The program also incorporates California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) preparation, California Standardized Test preparation, basic academic literacy skills development and college preparation. The program works to provide a "safe in-school space" for personal conversations, a learning environment that attempts to validate each student's cultural history, access to college level coursework and a caring environment with high academic performance expectations.

The Council of Youth Research (CYR)

The Council of Youth Research (CYR) is a community of high school students, teachers, university professors, and graduate student researchers in Los Angeles committed to conducting research aimed at improving the conditions in urban schools and injecting the voices of young people into conversations around education policy and reform. The program originated in 1999 when two UCLA profes-

sors responded to a school district's request for data with the decision to directly involve young people in research in order get their perspectives about their schools. For the past decade, generations of students and teachers have met over summers and after school during the school year to ask questions and collect data about educational issues exposing inequalities and offering a new model for critical urban education. Students have surveyed or interviewed hundreds of young people, educators, and politicians over the years, and they have shared research at dozens of presentations both locally in Los Angeles and across the country through the use of PowerPoint presentations, video documentaries, spoken word, and blogs.

The students in the program, who all identify as Latina/o and African American, hail from high schools in East Los Angeles, South Los Angeles, and Watts—all communities within Los Angeles that suffer disproportionately from concentrated poverty, systemic racism and underperforming schools, but also draw strength from deep historical traditions of protest and resistance. A mentor-teacher from each school recommends students to the program who would benefit from the exposure to critical pedagogy; students from each school then work together in teams on collaborative research projects.

2010-2011 School Year

Data for this study were drawn from both programs, the CYR and the BMYA, during the 2010-2011 school year and the preceding summer. For the Council, we begin with the Summer Seminar, a five-week summer intensive research-training program, involving 29 high school student participants and five teachers. For the BMYA, we begin with the fall 2010 school year, involving 22 African American male youth in grades 9-12 and two teachers. This study relies upon participant observations conducted by the authors and documented through field notes during the summer seminar course, classroom time, weekly meetings throughout the school year, various research trips, presentations at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in New Orleans and a presentation hosted by the Black Male Institute (BMI) Think Tank Conference at UCLA. Additional data was gathered from students' college application or scholarship essays, work products and media coverage.

In each program, there was an overarching theme for research conducted by the students. The CYR's was "(Re)Form, (Re)Claim, (Re)Volt: Toward a Movement for Educational Justice in California" and the BMYA's was "Exploring Identity: Reflecting on the Images of Black Males in Society." Research plans were developed collaboratively between the students, the teachers, graduate students and university faculty and involved the exploration of questions that were centered on topics chosen by the students. Utilizing YPAR (Cammerota & Fine, 2007; Morrell, 2008) to guide the collection of quantitative and qualitative data, students developed and gathered hundreds of surveys, interviews, field notes and

created work products such as essays, reflections, blogs, PowerPoint presentations and documentary films. Given our roles as educators and transformative intellectuals (Denzin, 2009), we rely upon a grounded theoretical approach (Corbin & Stauss, 2008) and the ethnographic analyses of discourse and literacy events (Gee, 2010; Heath, 1982; & Street, 1984) as we seek to illuminate critical pedagogy as a central practice to advance social justice in education. We hope to demonstrate a grounded theory of pedagogical practice that can inform work with youth in classroom and out-of-school settings.

FROM CRITICAL PEDAGOGY TO CRITICAL LITERACY

To develop a framework for grounding our own research, we decided to reflect on the practice of Paulo Freire. It is often overlooked in contemporary academic circles, but we never forget that the original Brazilian education projects that led to the publication of Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* were centered on literacy education. Literacy has long been the central focus of educational practice, but frequently ignored in the educational discourse on testing and standards based education. Theresa Perry (1995) describes the history of literacy for freedom and the freedom that emerges from literacy as a rallying call against oppression for the African-American community. James Anderson (1988) documents many of the instances where Blacks and Whites alike risked their lives to help newly freed slaves learn to read and write. And while very important work has been done that problematizes an essential notion of literacy (Street, 1984) and exposes complex ways that local communities use language and texts (Barton & Hamilton, 1988), we still believe that learning and deconstructing codes of power (Delpit, 1988) is an important goal for any educational practice with youth.

For these reasons we use the development of critical literacy as one important measure of the "success" of critical pedagogical practice. Critical literacy goes beyond reading and writing—it is a set of cognitive, emotional and sociopolitical skills whereby individuals are able to understand and articulate relations of power, dominance and hegemony using media, text, artifacts, oral tradition and experience that both illuminate and disrupt internalized oppression. Have youth learned to produce powerful texts? Are they reading the word and the world in more powerful ways? Do they envision themselves as willing and able to speak truth to power using traditional and multi-modal genres of communication? We seek to answer these questions by exploring how students in these programs read and write the word and the world.

Reading and Writing the Word

Roughly 29 high school students stream into a lecture hall at the UCLA Law School for the start of Summer Seminar. Some are stepping onto a college campus

for the first time, while some of the returning students have come to see themselves as college students. The first week of the seminar involves intense study of social theory and provides students with a foundation for the research they will engage in for the remainder of the summer and school year. Summer Seminar expectations become clearly understood when students show their surprise after receiving their course readers -thick bound volumes filled with scholarly essays from the likes of Paulo Freire, Jay MacLeod, Angela Valenzuela, and Tara Yosso.

Students are also provided with laptops, UCLA labeled notebooks and highlighters and are tasked with writing reflections on the discussion in order to detail their thoughts and perspectives. This type of engagement helps youth develop their academic literacy skills throughout the course of the seminar—they write responses to writing prompts each day and participate in college preparation workshops while conducting their research. In their writing, they reflect on the dialogue by applying theories like community cultural wealth to their own communities. In his reflection, Alfredo writes:

I think cultural wealth can be brought into schools by having traditional community events that educate students about their culture and others' cultures. Now while this is happening, the community can invest in these events. My community is at the bottom of the hierarchy—a community where everyone feels like the oppressed without realizing that we can change that mentality. If the community is informed about the society around them and knows that they can change it, their minds will expand.

Alfredo's reflection represents the synthesis and application of complex social theories to real life situations; it demonstrates how critical literacy builds upon and expands traditional academic literacies in ways that are meaningful and relevant to students.

Developing critical literacy through critical pedagogy is a “value-added” form of teaching and learning. In addition to gaining crucial academic literacy skills, students receive the benefit of learning how to analyze the world around them in order to make more empowered choices as individuals and democratic participants. In the BMYA, some of the class discussions were focused on the idea of power and identity in order to understand images in the media and the impact on African American male youth. Students watched a popular YouTube video called “Lemme Smang It” and were tasked with analyzing the portrayal of young women and Black men. They were then asked to draw connections between the YouTube video and the images of Jim Crow era. After a very lively viewing, there was plenty to discuss:

James: Our Black community grows as we change. To me, that's how I look at it. We go from like the Jim Crow laws and how we were separated from eating at this restaurant with White people. To me, that's not good at all, that bothers

me. How could you do that to another human if you're human?...And it's like yeah, you might not care, but think about it. What if it was still going on? How would you feel now?

Teacher: Okay, Martin? (hand was raised)

Martin: Umm, I don't know if this is what you wanted to hear—but [I'm responding to] how White people went from like, talking about Black people on their own and [how] it's now Black people talking about themselves. That's what you wanted to hear?

James: I can agree with him.

Martin: Like Black people are not [just here for] entertainment. We know we're not—like that's not what really happens (referring to the video).

Student: I have a question.

Martin (continues): Not all Black people do that. But like, the media gives people the impression that all Black are like that and Black people aren't like that.

Martin provides an analysis that juxtaposes the individual choices and personal responsibility of African Americans with the images of the video, yet he is able to articulate the degree to which personally responsibility ends and corporate dominance begins. His distinction between the role of the media and the role of the individual expresses critical literacy and a complex understanding of the discussion. Martin understood that the conditions that led to the creation of the video are reflective of much larger elements within society and he situates the responsibility for those conditions in a historical narrative that exists outside the actions of African American males. This type of intellectual activity is a form of comprehension as he demonstrates his ability to respond intellectually. Martin's comprehension and response express the use of critical literacy because he reconceptualizes the knowledge he acquired from the class literature and shares that knowledge in the classroom space. In each program, students were encouraged to act as experts of their own knowledge and teachers used critical pedagogy to privilege student expertise in democratic ways.

Martin's explanation affords the teacher the opportunity to engage and “draw out” the deductive reasoning reflected in Martin's response while Alfredo (the author of the reflection) relies on theory to position himself and his community against oppression. This type of engagement is particularly important as we seek to integrate critical pedagogy and contend that it be viewed as an academic tool. The academic banter is important because it demonstrates the competencies students develop when they master new literature and concepts.

Writing for their Lives

As the programs progressed further into the fall, participants in the CYR and BMYA shifted their focus to college preparation. Noting that college application deadlines were near, it was immensely important to ensure that students received the academic support they needed to apply. Each program conducted college application, personal statement and financial aid workshops and provided one-on-one support to each graduating senior. The students' college application essays help reveal the extent to which the CYR and BMYA allowed them to deepen their understanding of the conditions they experienced on a daily basis in their schools and communities. Betty explained that the CYR allowed her to "express my concerns and issues affecting my education." Jonathan said that the CYR "made me conscious of my school environment and motivated me to pursue solutions to inequalities that students like me face." And Steve summed up the work that the CYR does to connect learning to the real world: "we discuss issues that affect our education and go out to share findings and solutions/action plans with our communities in the hope that our work will make a difference in improving the education of other students like us."

Similarly, in the BMYA, Vince writes in detail:

When I began Vernon High School, I was introduced to a program called The Black Male Youth Academy. This program helped guide me through my life obstacles and plan for a brighter future. Although my mom and I struggled, the BMYA was the one place I go to for solace. Being in that program taught me to be more open minded and showed me my potential. When we were asked again what we wanted to be, no one laughed at me. Instead, people showed me support and helped me learn that if I wanted to achieve something, I'd have to go out and get it.

Vince identifies the BMYA as a place where he could "go to for solace" and "taught him how to be more open minded." It is important to understand that as he experiences the use of critical pedagogy and works to develop critical literacy, he found these activities reassuring and safe. Further, he understood the need to be personally responsible for his own success and since "no one laughed" at him, he did not have to worry about acting White (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

As Freire clearly articulates, critical pedagogy is about achieving freedom and accessing one's humanity. Youth in the CYR and BMYA demonstrate, through their writing, the value of their experiences and the successful employment of critical pedagogy. Nearly every senior in the CYR and BMYA for the 2010-2011 school year graduated from high school and enrolled in post secondary education—a testament to the way that critical pedagogy develops critical literacy and provides students with the skills they need to succeed academically with no need for "drill and kill" or high-stakes testing. Further, each program provided access

to college campuses through college tours, presentations and meetings which sent purposeful messages about the academic expectations students were required to meet and the identity that students were expected to develop as scholars and intellectuals. This aim to become scholars, which requires a transition in their identity, is a deeply important process as youth embody their roles as critical youth researchers.

EMPOWERED IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

In all of the national conversations about achievement and school reform, the focus is largely on models that associate academic achievement with improved test scores. We maintain that too little attention is paid to increasing academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and fostering culturally affirming and socially connected identities. We know from the literature on achievement motivation that youth will not be motivated to perform in school if they do not see themselves as students and intellectuals (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). We also know that many students have high academic aspirations, but these aspirations are muted by a low academic self-concept (Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991) that is fueled by an often abrasive and alienating educational system. Increasing academic achievement must be accompanied with an increase in academic motivation and engagement.

In this study, we rely on the expressions and reflections that youth have made about these transformations in identity while we employ our ethnographic lenses to observe how youth are adapting new roles for themselves as evidence of transformations in identity. That is, we focus simultaneously on changes in how they see themselves and how that correlates to the assumption of different roles and responsibilities within the community of practice (Lave, 1996). We also examine key exchanges between adults and students and among the students that play a major role in these identity shifts.

Self-Identifying as Researchers and Intellectuals: Refuting Stereotypes and Redefining Urban Youth

From the moment students join the CYR and BMYA, teachers, faculty and graduate students refer to them as researchers and intellectuals. Oftentimes, the narrative that students are hearing about themselves in this space is at odds with the usual messages they receive; as one BMYA student Damian reports, “My 9th grade Algebra teacher, Mr. Moller, yelled at me and said he wished I would fail.” With the many negative perceptions that have been foisted upon them for years by the media, past teachers and sometimes themselves, students are taught how to understand where these perceptions and identities come from through the theories they learn and the research they conduct. While becoming critical youth researchers contributes to students’ identity development (Oakes & Rogers, 2006),

sharing findings with adult audiences through public presentations has a particularly powerful influence on students' self-identifications as intellectuals.

Students in the CYR and BMYA traveled to New Orleans in the spring of 2011 to present at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). This was a particularly impactful experience as some flew for the first time and each of them learned about the damage Hurricane Katrina caused in communities of color. Students spoke to an audience of educational researchers and expressed a sense of change, both personally and academically, from the experience. After the trip, which included presentations for both CYR and BMYA participants, students wrote reflections about their experience. Diana showcased a view of herself as a developing citizen; as she reported: "This presentation showed how effective we are as civic agents." Ervin, a BMYA student, explained: "The trip to New Orleans for me was fun. The experience got us to see that the world is not just in LA or Inglewood. Basically it was inspirational... the work we did for the presentations, it was fun too." Ricardo recognized the impact the experience in the CYR had on him in school: "The experience I had in New Orleans changed my identity as a student by helping me to become more demanding." Betty called the trip "memorable and life-changing" and said that she would always remember that "I not only caused great impact at AERA, but I gave the best of me."

The validation that students experienced for their hard work in a public arena from individuals who are considered traditional researchers helped them realize what they had accomplished and how powerful their voices were. Further, their ability to present research to a professional community demonstrated a high degree of academic competency including the skills they need in order to be prepared for college. As students identified themselves as intellectuals, the critical literacy skills they gained throughout the research process allowed them to recognize how infrequently urban youth were viewed in this way. As a result, they saw their success not solely as individual accomplishments, but as proof of how students like them are capable of success when given meaningful opportunities. In her reflection about her experience in New Orleans, Irene explained that their presentations "show the world what students are capable of and how much we're not going to stand for the disproportional conditions in our schools and communities." Angela expressed pride that she was able to "speak on behalf of many students about changes we would like to see in the educational system."

Students' exposure to critical social theories allowed them to name stereotypes that serve to marginalize and prevent them from realizing their potential. Importantly, students recognized through their experiences in the CYR and BMYA that they were able to redefine the urban youth image. We conclude that it is because the learning community uses critical pedagogy that students are enabled to dem-

onstrate and create knowledge to analyze themselves and their society in order to foster empowerment in the face of injustice.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Critical pedagogy intends to teach students in humanizing and empowering ways, yet it also seeks to encourage empowered collectives to create change in the world and to challenge inequitable treatment. The explicit linkage between academic knowledge, critical literacy and social action distinguishes critical pedagogy from traditional models of pedagogy that align with accountability frameworks. A fundamental assumption of the high-stakes testing and accountability movements is that knowledge students gain in traditional academic settings will be applicable and transfer to “real world” activities in the workforce. This assumption is flawed in two respects—first, it does not provide students with opportunities to utilize knowledge in meaningful, authentic ways; and second, it ignores the historic mission of schools to prepare students to become effective democratic participants. In this section, we demonstrate how students in the BMYA and CYR connect their learning to meaningful civic action, and how this connection motivates students to acquire academic skills.

Meaningful, Authentic Assessment through Civic Action

Over the course of the year, students from both programs spent dozens of hours developing research questions, conducting fieldwork, analyzing data, and creating presentations about the conditions they experienced in their schools. Within this model of project-based learning, academic literacy skill building took place organically as students prepared for meaningful, authentic assessments. Students had multiple opportunities to refine their literacy skills as they continued to work on their research projects throughout the school year and prepared for new presentations, whether through carefully wording and re-wording interview questions, pulling powerful quotes from an interview to put on a PowerPoint slide, summarizing the salient points from complicated social theory for an audience, or crafting demands for change that apply to various audiences. CYR students traveled to Sacramento in order to interview public officials about the state’s efforts (or lack thereof) to ensure that all students in California public schools received a quality education. Instead of simply learning the names of their district representatives and the way that the California State Legislature worked as an academic exercise, students eagerly pursued this information because of their pressing need to become knowledgeable about the people they would be interviewing and their efforts on behalf of public education. Students gained valuable civic knowledge and skills in an engaging way precisely because they saw an authentic use for it;

namely, their strong and very personally meaningful desire to understand the unequal conditions they experienced in their schools.

Importantly, the CYR provides students with a meaningful form of assessment for their learning through community presentations. Over the course of the 2010-2011 school year, students not only presented at the AERA conference in New Orleans, but also at the University of California, Los Angeles Labor Center for local school district officials, at UCLA and Antioch for pre-service teachers, and at individual schools for administrators and teachers. In each case, students presented findings and crafted very specific recommendations for change directed to particular stakeholders—from students and parents to teachers and public officials. Indeed, these recommendations were presented as “demands” that emphasized the urgency of their research and the necessity for action. In one case, a group of students ended their presentation about the social and physical environment of their school by telling students and parents to “volunteer your time, money and energy to help develop green spaces,” while pushing state officials to “change the way you perceive our communities” and to “invest in our community based on priorities we set.” One of the participating schools is now in the process of extending the CYR learning model into classrooms to expose more students to this empowering form of pedagogy and to strengthen their ability to advocate for their communities.

Similarly, students from the BMYA were working hard to prepare for their presentation at the UCLA Black Male Institute Research Think Tank when in the course of completing their documentary film, their high definition digital cameras were stolen from the class. When students learned of the break-in and subsequent theft, they were outraged. They argued about their next steps and decided to make their voices heard by addressing their local elected officials. Having learned during the course about different levels of government, a smaller group of students were designated to work on a presentation on behalf of the class and take their concerns to the local School Board. Students met after school for nearly a week in order to prepare for their presentation. Two students were then chosen to go to the School Board meeting and speak on behalf of the whole group. At the Board meeting Charles, an 11th grade BMYA student, began by saying,

We are here tonight to make you aware of things we must change in order to improve our education at Vernon High School so that we can be successful, have the tools we need to go to college and make the social and physical ecology of our environment better.

Given the depth with which students come to master theory, conduct research and tell their story, it should be no surprise that they stand up for themselves. Charles continued,

I've been to Palos Verdes, Beverly Hills and Santa Monica and I was like wow! They have the tools they need to succeed. Their libraries are up to date. They had the staff they needed, the updated security systems. A modern computer lab and cultural activities that supported them. There is no reason we should be treated any less. We need the District to support our education.

We assert that critical pedagogy helps students use what they learned in their research to analyze their school conditions and empowers them to take humanizing steps. By deciding to respond to the theft at their school, Charles used his understanding of theory to challenge the school board to act and provide an equitable education—one that is provided to more affluent communities. Not only does critical pedagogy give students academic skills to succeed in school—it helps students to develop the kind of critical consciousness that encourages them to challenge inequalities and seek justice for their communities.

ON CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY AND EQUITY

Critical pedagogy is more than a process through which educators engage urban youth in a culturally relevant learning manner. Effectively used, it is a framework that helps students connect to their own histories, develop legitimate uses of their voices and employ tools to navigate social and political barriers. It allows critical educators to situate various non-dominant narratives as legitimate forms of expression in a diverse set of cultural practices, languages and ideological frameworks (Giroux, 1999). It values students' identities and expands how we look at literacy by emphasizing problem-posing education in the learning environment to allow empowered students to challenge their social conditions. It also calls on educators to be more effective in the classroom by providing a space where students can act as public intellectuals and demonstrate skills applicable to much broader academic and social contexts.

We believe the shift in the sociopolitical identities of our youth indicate success. Instead of programs like the CYR and BMYA being perceived as extras or having value because they can improve test scores or help students get better grades, schools should be looking at these programs to understand how their activities demonstrate that students learn, develop academic competencies and produce college-level work. Further, we reason that it is because of the use of critical pedagogy that students have developed these academic capabilities and that high stakes testing does not adequately assess learning, skills or competencies. The outcomes youth demonstrate in the BMYA and CYR go far beyond test-taking and basic academic literacy development as students share the ways in which theories and research influence the way they live and express transformative youth voice.

These CYR and BMYA demonstrate that critical pedagogy can be used to develop skills that are highly valuable in post-secondary environments and it is

our conclusion that they help bridge the intellectual divide between what we consider authentic learning and the pressure schools face to perform. In each case, the use of critical pedagogy helped motivate urban youth of color to succeed academically as the relationship between culture and schooling was deconstructed and reconstructed, building upon their cultural heritage (Ladson-Billings, 1997). Barry Osborne (1996) argues that teachers must start with the funds of knowledge that students bring into the learning environment, and we stress that they must be aware of their own subjectivity if they are to counter efforts to silence or exclude them from effective learning environments. It is our goal to honor the tension that exists in the dialectic between theory and practice as we employ strategies grounded in critical pedagogy; as critical educators and researchers who seek social justice, we believe these projects shed light on the value critical pedagogy holds to challenge existing neoliberal conceptions of high stakes testing. By honoring and consistently privileging the power urban youth enact as agents of social change, critical pedagogy provides new hope both in and out of the classroom.

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