

**DECOLONIZING PEDAGOGY IN THE AMERICAN  
CLASSROOM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The decolonizing pedagogy proposed in this paper sets out to assist students to actively reflect, critique and work against the existing forms of discrimination and exploitation in the United States while simultaneously preparing them for the concrete exigencies of its educational and/or professional spaces. It understands that the dominant curricular design, instructional practice, and forms of assessment in schools function to sustain and reproduce neocolonial domination, capitalist exploitation, a difference of domination and the ideological frameworks that sustain these. It argues for a pedagogy that challenges the dominant practices of schooling and makes schools concrete sites for the developing of critical consciousness in the interests of working class, indigenous and non-white peoples.

### **School Experience**

The view that every child has a right to a quality education and that schools must ensure access and quality is essential to discourse on rights based democracy and social justice (Leder, 2006). Cassidy & Bates (2005) state that “It has been documented that in North American schooling contexts, resources are unevenly distributed related to race/ethnicity, gender, and socio economic class such that social inequities are continually reproduced” (2005, p. 80). Thus, for a large number of people, “participating in today’s mainstream schooling is not only problematic, it is impossible” (2005, p. 79). It is crucial to consider the many challenges identified by youth – the hours that schools operate are not flexible enough, there are too many students per classroom, there are too many restrictions, the effort required is intimidating, course content does not connect to their lives, and they feel labeled and unable to get the support they need with their

studies. Community issues of poverty, hunger, drug use/abuse, homelessness/unstable housing and isolation from family comprised another intersecting tapestry equally crucial to youth disengagement from school.

In the spring and fall of 2006, I spent some time with the students and teachers at a couple of schools in The Bronx, East Harlem, Westbury and Roosevelt, Long Island where we introduced the topic of digital storytelling. The demographics during the 2006-2007 academic year was comprised of 76.5% Latino children, 0.6% White Anglo Saxon and 22.4% from Africa (specifically from Ghana and from Senegal). Furthermore, 456 students were in transitional bilingual classes and 448 receiving ESL services, while the poverty rate school wide was at 84.8%. In an effort to celebrate and enrich the writing unit to follow while celebrating the diversity that the schools had to offer, I suggested that the teachers develop a digital story. The students responded quite enthusiastically to this “new” project, simply because they became empowered, they were at the center of the project. They told their stories, they told them in English, Spanish and a variety of African languages. They brought in artifacts that were representative of who they were and what they loved; pictures of their families, their homes, their pets, and also of their home towns. Prior to the unit of study students were instructed in using a variety of software; consequently, they became quite comfortable using the computer. To celebrate their work and validate their effort, students showed their presentations to their classmates and also to their parents, their teachers and their Assistant Principals and Principal as well. It was quite an emotional journey. As the months went by and they took charge of their own learning, the teachers also noticed less “behavior issues”. Students also used their lunch hour to continue to work on the project. Occasionally, some stayed after school, enthusiastic to utilize technology to polish off their pieces. Most importantly for me, as the social scientist, was the

excitement displayed by the teachers who took a chance, who felt excited about “thinking outside the box”, while providing opportunities for their students to challenge themselves and validate their culture.

## **Introduction**

A basic premise for the call for a decolonizing pedagogy is that the dominant economic, cultural, political, judicial and educational arrangements in contemporary “American society” are those of an internal neocolonialism produced by the mutually reinforcing systems of colonial domination and capitalist exploitation that have organized social relations throughout the history of the United States.

The dominant condition characterizing social existence in the United States is defined as a colonial one because there continues to be a structured relationship of cultural, political, and economic domination and subordination between Europeans, on the one hand, and the indigenous and non-white peoples, on the other. What’s more, this relationship continues to serve primarily the interests of a dominant white, English-speaking and Christian population. From this perspective, it is understood that people (the children in the South Bronx, East Harlem, Westbury and Roosevelt, Long Island) live in internal domination and capitalist exploitation because they engage in and instantiate in the very production and reproduction of their material existence and its cultural expression; the past, the present and future condition of the differing groups in the United States is materialized in the practice of their everyday lives, through the labor and mundane displacements of their very bodies (the children whose parents who continue to work two and three minimum wage jobs, perform jobs that are considered “unwanted” by most

Americans, etc.). It is also understood, however, that people do not simply choose to engage in processes and practices that make and remake their condition; they engage in everyday activity and relate to others in the production and reproduction of their social existence with the weight of a colonial and capitalist past squarely on their backs and sharply on their minds. Those circumstances can be changed instead of merely reproduced and made anew, the very practice that makes possible people's existence and instantiates their dominion, exploitation, and difference holds the potential to radically transform them. Mere practice, however, will not lead to this transformation; it must be practice that is grounded in a critical consciousness of the current circumstances and the very possibilities of their transformation. Therefore, the very idea that social reality can be transformed **through praxis** – guided action aimed at transforming individuals and their world that is reflected on and leads to further action – is very important to the conception of a **decolonizing pedagogy**.

An important goal is to get the students to understand that action in the world is largely determined by the way we see ourselves within it, and a correct perception necessitates an ongoing reflection on our world and our positioning within it. This understanding of the malleability of social reality and the transformative potential of human practice finds clear expression in Freire's (1990) pedagogy of the oppressed:

“Just as objective social reality exists not by chance, but as the product of action, so it not transformed by chance. If men [/women] produce social reality (which in the “inversion of praxis” turns back upon them and conditions them), then transforming that reality is an historical task, a task for men [/women]. [...] The latter, whose task it is to struggle for their liberation together with those who show true solidarity, must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle. One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge men's' [/women's] consciousness. Functionally oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 36).

Although our decolonizing perspective acknowledges that the past isn't the present, it argues that the former can neither exist nor be understood outside of the latter. It is impossible for social subjects to be disconnected from time and space; their being in the world can not be detached from and unaffected by the chronologies and specialities of their cultural-historical (Cole, 1996) existence – an existence in which the present is directly born from and sustained through cultural practices inherited from the past. My colleagues and I, of course, do not argue that we are living the actual colonial domination or capitalist exploitation of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many of the practices and processes of early colonial domination and capitalist exploitation have been altered, abandoned, or legally terminated, but essential features of that domination and exploitation continue to structure the economic, social, political, and cultural relations between differing groups in contemporary “American” society. What’s more, the corporal genocide and cultural annihilation of indigenous and nonwhite peoples is far from over. Although the sounds of the dismantling of educational and linguistic rights implied by aforementioned propositions loudly remind us of the ongoing annihilation, the sight and smell of decomposing corpses along the US-Mexico border force us to recall the continuing genocide (Eschbach, 1999).

In contemporary times, brown bodies die at the altars of Western colonialism’s economic, political, and cultural arrangements in smaller proportions and from different causes than in past centuries, but they continue to be sacrificed nonetheless. It is in response to the sacrificial slaughters in the social spaces of the border, the workplace, the classroom, and in the mind that we call for a decolonized existence. In response to the backlash pedagogies we currently encounter, we specifically propose the politics and praxis of a decolonizing pedagogy.

Research has shown that standardized models of public education do not effectively address the needs of many students; particularly those who face forms of social marginalization. Studies relate a host of complex inter-related personal-familial, school-related and societal variables contributing to the lack of fit between students and schools (Spruck & Powrie, 2005; Stringfield & Land, 2002; Audus & Williams, 2002; Manning & Baruth, 1995). It is crucial to address the needs of disenfranchised students who leave school due to multiple social and educational barriers (De la Rosa, 2005; Jeffires & Singer, 2003; Saunders & Saunders, 2002; Kallis & Saunders, 1999; Kellmayer, 1995; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Rayurd, 1995).

### **Defining the colonial existence in the United States**

The social condition in the United States is defined as a colonial one because there continues to be a structured relationship of cultural, political, and economic domination and subordination between Europeans, and indigenous non white peoples. This relationship continues to serve primarily the interests of a dominant White, English speaking, and Christian population. It is an internal colonial condition because the colonizing/dominant and colonized/subordinate populations coexist and are often integrated, and even share citizenship within the same national borders. This internal colonial condition is perpetuated by capitalism and capitalist social relations – a capitalism that Almaguer discussed as advanced monopoly capitalism and we currently see as global capitalism (McLaren & Frahmndpur, 2000; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). It is also understood that people do not simply choose to engage in processes and practices that make and remake their condition; they engage in everyday activity and relate to others in the production and reproduction of their social existence with the weight of a colonial and capitalist

past on their backs and in their minds. Those circumstances can be changed instead of merely reproduced and made anew; the very practice that makes possible people's existence and instantiates their domination, exploitation, and difference holds the potential to radically transform them. Mere practice alone will not lead to this transformation. The idea that social reality can be transformed through praxis – guided action aimed at transforming individuals and their world that is reflected on and leads to further action – is fundamentally important to our conception of decolonizing pedagogy.

The great majority of the children in the school in The Bronx, East Harlem or parts of Long Island, whether recent immigrants, second generation, or later, could be considered as either working class or poor, and very likely to remain that way (Lopez, Popkin, & Tellez, 1996; Ortiz, 1996; Treiman & Lee, 1996). The Latino/a population nationally are also overwhelmingly working class and low income. Let's consider just two national indicators: In 2002, 28% of the Latino/children younger than 18 (school age) lived below the poverty line level (compared to 9.5% for Whites); and 21.4% of Latinos were living in poverty (7.8% for Whites) (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002). In a study done on Latinos in Los Angeles by Ortiz (1996); this sociologist concluded that, given existing structural and economic conditions, this population would remain permanently in the low working class. Whether her prediction is right or not, the point is that this low social class status is more or less stable, a more or less "fixed" structural condition of Latinos in urban settings. This socioeconomic standing, as is well known, has major implications for the schooling of children (Lee & Burkman, 2002).

Themes of democracy and social justice are of primary importance in alternative models seeking to address the learning needs of socially marginalized students. As Goldstein & Selby



indicate, “our schools and communities are still divided by discrimination” (2000, p. 17) which makes mainstream school structure and its practices disempowering for many students.

The rapid spread of new technologies in the home and workplace, and as the bases for economic development, has had a differential impact on the wealthy versus the poor. The use of computers in schools reflects the stratification of the system, with the wealthier schools doing the most interesting intellectual work with the technology. Similarly, the use of the internet, for example, is mostly a middle class phenomenon, hardly influencing working class life and work; and even when social class is taken into account, there are differential uses of this resource by different ethnic groups. Few studies are available that analyze successful applications of technological solutions to the schooling of Latino/a children. The issue remains not how to adapt the technology to existing circumstances but, rather, how to use the technology to create fundamentally new circumstances for the children’s schooling.

Students’ cultural world and their structural position must be fully apprehended, with school based adults deliberately bringing issues of race, difference and power into central focus. This approach necessitates the abandonment of color-blind curriculum and a neutral assimilation process. The practice of individualizing collective problems must also be relinquished. A more profound and involved understanding of the socioeconomic, linguistic, sociocultural, and structural barriers that obstruct the mobility of Mexican youth needs to inform all caring relationships (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Phelan et al, 1993; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). “Authentic caring cannot exist unless it is imbued with and motivated by such political clarity” (p. 109).

## **Equality and Social Justice**

Scholars of color and those interested in social justice and equity need to challenge several mainstream assumptions about our youth and schools in order to impact action, social justice, and equity sooner rather than later. Educationally based assumptions needing challenge include: (1) the United States as a meritocratic system; (2) the notion that racism has been “solved”; (3) educational tracking as neutral; and (4) the purpose of schooling as assimilation (Cochran – Smith, 2003).

Schools can be tools of social reproduction, replicating the inequitable social structures in society (Willis, 1977). Similarly, they often promote assimilation with narrow assumptions of Anglo-conformity embedded in the processes of schooling (Spring, 1994). Conversely, however, schools also can be loci of change wherein inequitable social and cultural structures and practices are challenged, resisted, refused, co-opted, and altered (Levinson & Holland, 1996).

Additive schooling is about seeing language and ethnic identity as assets that “figure precisely in what it means to be educated in U.S. society” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 270). It is about the maintenance of community and culture and at the same time expanding one’s ability to engage fully in additional cultures and communities. In contrast, subtractive schooling, the most common historical practice imposed on Latinos in American public schools, promotes an assimilative process wherein minority children abandon their first languages and cultures as they acquire the dominant language and culture. This practice thereby cuts off Latinos’ ability to communicate and participate across cultural and language boundaries. Furthermore, it prevents the possibilities of building on the strengths of one’s first culture and language.

Ogbu (1978) explains why some groups achieve more success in our schools, according to one's membership in cultural groups that are either "involuntary" or "voluntary" minorities. The former include African Americans, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans; the latter include most Asian immigrant groups and Cubans (among others). Voluntary minorities came to the United States voluntarily and have maintained a dual frame of reference (to the United States as well as to their country of origin), and are better able to react to discrimination and develop or maintain a sense of independence from U.S. cultural and social dynamics. Involuntary minorities are American by virtue of conquest or involuntary migration such as slavery. Their cultural identity is developed in opposition to mainstream U.S. cultural norms, including a stance toward the relevance, or irrelevance of schooling. In many ways Ogbu's model helps us to understand why Cuban Americans do so well in school whereas Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans do less well, although he does not explain why Mexican Americans are considered involuntary immigrants when the majority in the United States now, numerically, are here because of voluntary immigration and not conquest (descent from peoples in the Southwest when it was the northwest region of Mexico). Researchers will continue to investigate further how these historical legacies shape contemporary educational opportunity and sociocultural dynamics that interact with school experiences.

## **Dropouts or Push outs?**

The conversations I have had with youth in the South Bronx, East Harlem, Westbury and Roosevelt (in Long Island) showed recurring themes. Youth felt excluded in the current educational system; there was a lack of understanding in the school system of the complexities of youth's lives; and youth who felt marginalized were over represented in the number of "dropouts". Informal discussions with youth expanded these concerns. Youth talked about feeling overwhelmed with school work and many had been socially promoted without "learning" the concepts. These students felt pushed through and they commonly reported "feeling stupid" when describing their educational experience. Youth expressed being labeled and marginalized based on aspects of their backgrounds, identities and lifestyles. They also alluded to the educational structure as not suited to their reality.

Educators in their everyday practice come face-to-face with the challenges of youth who leave school before completing high school (De Broucker, 2006; Willms, 2003; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Bernard, 1997). Many factors impact students' ability to stay and succeed in school, factors which span individual, familial, peer and school and socio cultural contexts. Economic hardships, family challenges, student disinterest in curriculum, mental health issues, forms of social discrimination, peer challenges, ineffective pedagogical practices, disconnection to school culture, interpersonal conflict and lack of classroom supports are some of the variables linked to lack of student engagement and success in school (Wrigley & Powrie, 2005; Stringfield & Land, 2002; McGee, 2001; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Donmeyer & Kos, 1993; Hixson & Tinzman, 1990).

## **Spanish Speaking Students as Deficit?**

Migrant education needs to be created in some schools to expand the school's responsibilities. High absenteeism and transient behavior characterize the migrant Latino child. The itinerant lifestyle was/is not compatible with conventional school expectations. The itinerant patterns that characterize our nation's migrant workers, the essential gatherers of fresh fruit and vegetables, had supposedly shortchanged their children's life experiences. The school, at times, neither understands nor accepts these worker's lifestyles. Usually travel is associated with broadening one's knowledge of the world; however, a migrant farm worker's traveling experiences and knowledge are not recognized or valued. "They've only seen the world from the back of a migrant worker's truck" said one report. Most school programs adopted a clinical view, that is, they viewed the child as without any strengths, inflicted with a sickness to be cured, with only symptoms of weakness and with deficiencies that need to be compensated for. Nobody denies the fact that immigrants to this country need to learn English, but must they be humiliated and dehumanized because of their language and culture? A child comes to school willingly and ready to learn. She/he comes with a wealth of knowledge based on his/her cultural and linguistic assets. So, to continually "blame the victim" is a one-sided argument. Rosen and Ortego (1969) reported that poorly trained and unsophisticated teachers with cultural biases and profoundly ignorant notions concerning how language is learned were tragically too common in the schools. This is still seen today in 2007 in many schools around New York City and the suburbs as well. Prior to the 1960's, and unbeknown to many, the education of Latinos consisted primarily of district segregated schools with limited human and material resources, where discrimination was rampant, teachers held low expectations of Latino/a students, schools were saturated with exclusionary policies and practices, and the curriculum was irrelevant to their lives (Arias, 1986; Carter & Segura, 1979; Donato, 1999; Romero, Hondagneu-Sotelo, & Ortiz, 1997; San Miguel,

1987). We must resist and continue to right all the wrongs; we must prevail and plant seeds for the generations to come; we must unite in our efforts to construct and maintain a just society; we must act or we will perish by our own lack of courage; but our own collusion, or by our own will to remain as part of the status quo.

### **Blending Diversity with Language and Unity: Social Justice and Democracy in Education**

It is reasonable to accept the idea that social unity is an important concern for any society. The question is: Can social unity be attained only through monoculturalism and monolingualism? Those who adhere to the “melting pot” view of the United States would appear to answer this question with a “YES”. According to this view, everyone should reject “foreign” cultural characteristics and quickly assimilate into the majority culture (Rodriguez, 1999). For the assimilationists, one culture fits all. There have been many voices raised against this monolithic view of U.S. culture (Banks, 2002; Banks & McGee Banks, 2001; Garcia, 2001; Ovando & Collier, 1998). The multiculturalists believe that pluralism is an inherent feature of U.S. society from its very founding to the present. For the multiculturalists, E Pluribus Unum is not merely a slogan to be placed on the currency of the nation but a logo that aptly describes a basic feature of the nation in all its historic and contemporary diversity.

Those people who are seen as not susceptible to assimilation are regarded as targets for destruction, enslavement, or erasure (Menchaca, 1997). Teaching in this context adopts a subtractive stance (Valenzuela, 1999). The goal is to extract and subtract from students all “foreign” language and cultural elements and replace them with “superior” elliptic Euro-Anglo language and culture. The curriculum is infused with Euro-Anglo American history and culture

and there is the systematic erasure of the histories, languages, and cultures of all other groups across the land (Macedo, 1994; Menchaca, 1999; Padilla, 1995; Perez, 1999).

### **Participatory democracy and social justice**

A construct of democracy to include within educational discourse is the need for “authentic democracy” as opposed to “false democracy” (Leder, 2006). The distinction stems from notions to explore democracy more broadly as “a way of life” and a “moral way of living” as articulated by educators like John Dewey. Some central notions are “how we live and work and talk together. [is].. embedded in and builds upon how we develop and practice skills of making everyday decisions, communicating our interests and listening to others, and respecting differences of perspectives and peoples” (Efrat & Schimmel, 2003, p. 4). Concepts of “inclusive” and “deliberative democracy” assert the value of difference and the importance of constructing our individual and collective lives from dialogue and decision-making as influenced by multiple perspectives and social relations.

Lacking real democratic engagement are schools which identify youth by deficit-based labels such as “at risk”, “drop out” and “juvenile delinquent”. Schools which concentrate on youth behavior modification, personal-social rehabilitation, conformity, curriculum “basics”, rote learning, skills-based approaches and job readiness programs also lack deep democratic engagement (Schutz & Harris, 2001; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001; McGee, 2001; Raywid, 1995). When youth become positioned as diverse learners and knowledge constructors who are given authentic voice and agency to shape their learning experience deeper notions of democracy become enacted.

Youth learn in different ways, have different needs, thrive in different environments, or respond differently to various approaches. There should be no judgment placed on the issues that youth face, or on the youth themselves. Rather than think “How can we provide an educational option that would help ‘fix’ these issues/youth?”, the teachers and I took the approach that youth who have complex life worlds require educational options which reflect the reality of their lives.

### **The introduction of new texts**

I stumbled upon a conference that sparked the idea of advocacy for migrant farm workers with my colleagues from Adelphi University and I approached the Principals with the idea of introducing new texts into the buildings. I met with the teachers after school a few Fridays afternoons and ran the idea by them. They were all very supportive and that is how the texts “*My Diary From Here to There*”, “*Voices in the Fields*” and “*A Day in Grapes*” were purchased. The beauty of “*My Diary From Here to There*” is that it is written in two languages, Spanish and English. The students are mostly of Latino background so it made sense to introduce these books. The pictures are very colorful and the students could relate to the characters since they or their families had migrated from Central and South America. The story tells the journey of what it is like to move from one place to another, the concept of “culture shock” and “language stress” were brought to the surface and the students expressed their feelings about moving, about what it was like to make new friends, go to a new school, live in a city where there were not many trees (as one student pointed out). The books showed examples of packing, of things that people decide to take with them. The images reflected beautiful brown skinned people that looked just like they did. The students went on to describe what they missed the most, what they could bring, and what they left behind. It was an emotional component that is rarely seen in the curriculum



since so many teachers are forced to follow a pacing chart and then move to the next activity without giving the students the chance to process or digest what is given to them. To quote Alfie Kohn (2004), “schools have become glorified test prep centers”, and everyone teaches to the test. This is especially prevalent in low income urban schools. As teachers, literacy professionals and educational leaders, we are most concerned with reaching all students with relevant and socially useful skills and information. However, poor and working class students are more likely to be in schools in which restricted school literacy (Miller & Borowicz, 2007) is the preferred mode of instruction that limits conceptions of literacy learning toward a print bias and traditional practice of chalk and talk.

### **The Courage to Think Outside the Box**

The teachers were delighted to finally be able to do something a little different, something meaningful, something exciting and fun. The writing activities did not have to have a rubric, students got to see how exciting it can be to have a “journal”, to write your secrets, your feelings but above all, to write them in any language you want! Having Spanish being put at the same level of English brought a sense of pride to their lives, we were on the way to bringing Spanish back to life where monolingualism is still the norm. By having the students do digital story telling, the teachers became facilitators, coaches, not the “sage on stage” any more. The students got to tell their stories via the use of technology, by learning how to create power points. The stories were genuine, emotional and most of all “their stories”. The books were the platform that led them to use their creativity, their imagination. Teachers also learned to **respect** the students’ privacy. Many stories were quite painful to hear; we all agreed to be non-judgmental. Many

students were here illegally, some of their parents were here illegally as well. We heard stories about crossing the border, how long it took, what it was like, etc. According to Sonia Nieto (In Wade, 2007), “Because a social justice education teaches youngsters to value and model dignity and decency, using social justice as a framework for the curriculum will in the long run make a greater difference in the lives of students, teachers, and the nation than passing a test or mastering the latest science experiment” (p. xi.). We take Nieto’s endorsement of social justice in the curriculum as an indication that we are on the right track – that recognizing the contribution of labor, and in fact to frame labor as the prime mover of events throughout history, is socially healthy and will result in the “greater difference in the lives of students, teachers and the nation” as referred to by Nieto.

### **Emerging Themes Across the Content Areas**

In the case of the “*First Day in Grapes*”, the common themes that kept popping up were: self esteem issues, bullying (which in today’s terms also includes cyber bullying), courage, pride, migrant families, making friends, and the Latino/Hispanic contributions to our society from the east to the west and from the south to the north of Central America to the southern part of the United States. Culturally and linguistically diverse learners were re-introduced to key characters and events from the labor movement while immersed in a standards-based instructional program in listening, speaking, reading and writing and viewing. Focusing on immigrants’ experiences and working class consciousness connects foundational literacy strategy instruction in the processes of making learning **personally meaningful**. The students came from homes where the parents receive low wages and do not remain in one place long enough to qualify for government aid such as food stamps or disability payments. They are not protected by federal laws resulting

in long hours or low salaries and migrant families often live in substandard housing (otherwise known as the projects). Many of them lack adequate health care as well.

Many of the students are ELL (English language learners) so these texts are a useful way to help them transition to a very difficult language to master. The story can be a stepping stone for a program that incorporates content area while mastering English. For example, in nutrition, The Bronx students had cooking classes where they were exposed to a variety of vegetables and healthy eating. They would learn about where the vegetables were grown, their nutritional value and the number of servings per day that are recommended in a healthy diet. They learned how to measure so words like table spoon and tea spoon were not only displayed on word charts, they also manipulated these utensils while using TPR (Total Physical Response) to actually cook in class and eat what they had produced. This was a very creative way to include mathematics in the curriculum. In the area of civics, or citizenship, role plays proved to be very effective. The teachers had the students pretend to be Chico (the character in the book) and how he had to find ways to defend himself against the bullying at school. The students were in charge of coming up with solutions to these problems. There was a decrease in fighting in the school yard during lunch and /or recess. One student told of how he courageously defended a boy from being picked on. He told the boy it was not worth getting into a fight since then his mother would be called to the school and he ran the risk of getting suspended. Listed in the table below is a list of the themes that I encountered and where they were found.

## **Youth as experts of their own lives**

Reframed as “the experts in their own lives” rather than as mere recipients of educational goods, youth facing forms of systemic marginalization know how these inequalities shape their daily lives (both in and out of school) and what is required to

**Table 1: Themes**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Where found</b>
Self esteem	Power point presentations
Bullying	Lunch periods
Family Pride	Digital storytelling
Making Friends	Digital story telling
Courage	After school sessions of re-writing
Migrant families	Lunch periods

break down these systemic marginalization practices. We all understood that full participation in their own learning would enable youth to respond creatively, in partnership with educators and the community, to their lives as learners.

Participatory perspectives view learning as a relational process rather than as something that is given or done to students’ (Daloz, 1986) thereby positioning teachers and students as collaborators in knowledge construction (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000; Heron & Reason, 1997). With youth situated as experts in their lives, learning becomes a political act “where dominant knowledge is deconstructed and new knowledge is constructed” (Berry, 1998, p. 45). Youth strengths, resilience, resources, agency, voice and lived knowledge, moreover, become centralized in the learning process (Kim, 2006; Cassidy & bates, 2005; Pasco,

2003; Fine, 1991). An alternative learning environment which, to use Berry's phrase, immerses youth "in an epistemological world ... of their [own] making" rather than one which is predominately upheld by the authority of "teachers and textbooks" (1998, p. 42).

While alternative schools began in the 1960's as a progressive, democratic movement (Schutz and Harris, 2001; Kellmayer, 1995; Raywid, 1995), many alternative schools designed for marginalized students, (increasingly prevalent in the 1990s) have fallen short in centering themselves within participatory democratic and social justice educational discourse (McGee, 2001; Schutz and Harris, 201; Dunbar, 1999; Raywid, 1995). Others have failed to make explicit how their programs are explicitly attempting to engage rights-based, representation and participatory democratic educational principles and practices.

Youth who were involved became researchers during the second half of the 2006-2007 academic year. Not only did the youth experience the empowerment and voice as leaders, but we witnessed the power of their social justice and democratic principles being lived in practice – youth serving as educational change makers and experts in their own lives.

## **Democracy in education as a community issue**

As learning comes to be viewed, more broadly, “as life” and pedagogy as a “complex conversation”, the boundaries separating education and the community (i.e. life) become blurred. Investing meaningful time and resources in fostering meaningful connections with youth, and in supporting their voice, are central aspects of their work. What youth portray to the school community is often very different than what they are willing to reveal to university professors. For example, many youth would share with me that they acted out and skipped school as a mechanism to protect themselves because they were seeking to hide the reality that they don’t understand what’s happening in the classroom. We were, moreover, explicitly engaged with the challenges of poverty, drugs, violence, homelessness, and sexual exploitation which were the “norm” in the lives of many youth.

## **Findings**

We understand that it may be difficult to affirm the values of plurality and difference while working to build a community of people who have a feeling of agency, who are ready to speak for themselves. Yet, once the distinctiveness of the many voices in a classroom is attended to, the importance of identifying shared beliefs will be heightened. Again, these beliefs can only emerge out of a dialogue and regard for others in their freedom, in their possibility. Through offering experiences of the arts and storytelling, teachers can keep seeking connection points among their personal histories and the histories of those they teach. Students can be offered more and more time for telling their stories, or dancing or perhaps singing them. Students can be provoked to imaginatively transmute some of their stories into media that can be shared in such a

fashion that friends can begin looking together and moving together in a forever expanding space in their world. Given their expanding sense of diversity, their storytelling and their joining together may be informed now and then by outrage too – outrage at injustices and reifications and violations. Not only do teachers and learners together need to tell and choose; they have to look toward untapped possibility – to light the fuse, to explore what it means to transform that possibility.

## **Conclusion**

How can educators and community members address the complex life worlds and educational needs of marginalized youth without positioning the principles and practices of democracy and social justice at the center of these efforts? This is a question that must be addressed when developing innovative educational alternatives. In this paper, I have examined how those engaged in a democratic participatory process of creating both an educational context and curriculum for learning. In this innovation, youth were recognized as **experts** and offered the opportunity to engage in their own voice in ways which are essential to their **empowerment** and success as learners. In promoting the full participation of relevant groups, we discovered the significance of framing education as a **community issue**. We engaged in a diversity of democratic and social justice process including rights-based, representational and participatory perspectives and practices. Alternative programs which center youth's voice and complex life worlds offer innovative opportunities to engage justice and democracy.

The stigma of “disabled” or “low IQ” or “lower socioeconomic class” too frequently forces young people to become the recipients of “treatment” or “training”, sometimes from the most benevolent motives on the part of those hoping “to help”. Far too seldom are such young people looked upon as beings capable of imagining, of choosing, and of acting from their own vantage points on perceived possibility. Instead, they are subjected to outside pressures, manipulations, and predictions. The supporting structures that exist are not used to sustain a sense of agency among those they shelter; instead, they legitimate treatment, remediation, control – anything but difference and release.

In taking up this opportunity, we moved from educational reform to educational transformation and at the front are brave teachers who challenge the mediocrity of institutionalized education. From my experiences in The Bronx, East Harlem and parts of Long Island (such as Westbury and Roosevelt), I learned to listen more and speak less and experience the need to do more, to better educate myself and serve justice. I learned to value the powerful stories trapped in the bodies of these young students.



## **Recommendations**

Storytelling is one of the reasons we should argue strenuously for the presence of the arts in the classroom. We are finding out how storytelling helps, how drawing helps; but we need to go further to create situations in which something new can be added each day to a learner's life. Post modern thinking does not conceive the human subject as either predetermined or finally defined. It thinks of people in process, in pursuit of themselves, and it is to be hoped, of possibilities and their connectedness, feeling called on truly to attend – to read the student's world, to look at the student's sketch – teachers may find themselves responding imaginatively and at length, ethically to these children. To respond to those once called at risk, once carelessly marginalized, as living beings capable of choosing for themselves is, we believe, to be principled. Attending that way, we may be more likely to initiate normative communities, illuminated by principle and informed by responsibility and care.

## **About the Author**

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