

EMPHASIZING INNER GROWTH AND COMMUNITY WELFARE IN EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

LA IMPORTANCIA DEL CRECIMIENTO INTERNO Y EL BIENESTAR COMUNITARIO EN LA EVALUACIÓN EDUCATIVA PARA LA JUSTICIA SOCIAL

A IMPORTÂNCIA DO CRESCIMENTO INTERNO E O BEM-ESTAR COMUNITÁRIO NA AVALIAÇÃO EDUCATIVA PARA A JUSTIÇA SOCIAL

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"The experience of the learning self is not composed of the steps up a curricular scaffold of objectives or cognitive schemas, nor is it composed of the standardized tests used to supposedly 'measure' its progress, retrospectively, after it has already occurred. The only material evidence we have of what makes a curriculum or pedagogy 'educational' is that lived experience" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 35).

In a nearly all African-American high school not far from the capital of the United States of America, I recently witnessed the academic violence of high-stakes education (Lipman, 2005; McCarthy, 2002). As part of a yearlong collaborative study with teachers, I was attending a workshop for students who had repeatedly failed the mandated, statewide high school examination. The workshop took place in 2009, during my second bi-weekly visit to Marshfield High School.¹ This examination, in combination with the successful completion of the local school district's required curriculum, would determine whether or not students received their high school diploma, an "economic necessity" according to former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.

This article contrasts the high-stakes standardized education I observed at Marshfield with the Freedom Schools movement and National Rites of Passage Institute (NROPI), both of which were established to give African American youth an education that honors their heritage and celebrates their humanity. I argue that the latter two programs' focus on students' lived experience provides the kind of material evidence needed to evaluate whether or not such education has contributed to the realization of social justice (Ellsworth, 2005). Although I have written about the contested nature of this term (North, 2006, 2008), I use Sturman's definition here:

"Social justice should include components of distribution, principles of curriculum justice, and should also draw attention to non-material components of equity, such as empowerment. Consistent with all three and guiding all three should be a focus on the least advantaged" (Sturman, 1997, p. 116).

Before turning to the specific forms of evaluation described above, I briefly explain the conceptual framework underlying my collaborative research as well as my methodology.

1. RATIONALE FOR LOCAL INQUIRY AND ACTION

The collaborative research in which a Marshfield social studies teacher, Leslie, and I participated involved four other teachers from diverse educational settings in the surrounding area. As the organizer and facilitator of this study, I borrowed the label *inquiry-to-action group* (ItAG) from the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE, 2010) to describe it. A group of teachers dedicated to struggling for social justice in the U.S. public school system and larger society, NYCoRE organizes and mobilizes teachers, develops curricula, and collaborates with community, parent, and student associations. NYCoRE's website defines ItAGs as "similar to a study group, but the goal is that after the group inquires into a particular topic, they will together create action around their area of study" (NYCoRE, 2010, parr. 4).

Approaching this research as an ItAG enabled me to challenge the dominant U.S. educational research model that so often creates a rift between the teachers working directly with youth and the university scholars, administrators, policymakers, and curriculum designers who largely shape the elementary and secondary educational agenda (Apple, 2000; West, 2004; Zeichner and Noffke, 2001). In other words, I

¹ The study's school and teacher names in this manuscript are pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

approached our six-person inquiry group as a learning community in which teacher expertise and experience—rather than the university-based researcher’s—were central to the inquiry process. Group member participation in discussions and subsequent actions were not only vital but also valued and sustained (Tirrell-Corbin and Cooper, 2008).

Moreover, I began this study understanding that U.S. urban public schools and their teachers are under attack due to increased standardization, privatization, and testing (Picower, 2007). Given that the deep structure of schooling (Tye, 2000) often constrains teachers’ abilities both to form coalitions of like-minded professionals and to examine critically their own and others’ philosophies and practices, I sought to present an opportunity for these teachers and myself to unite in the “practical transformation of the real world” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 333). Accordingly, we met to inquire into an issue of shared concern and to develop and implement a plan of action to address it. In line with participatory action research tenets (Park, 1993), our focus of inquiry emerged from the group members via a collaborative process. More specifically, we explored significance of connectedness—between people and ideas—to meaningful student learning.

Writing about the ongoing failure of U.S. urban school reforms to effect sustainable change, Payne (2008) beautifully summed up our rationale for this focus: “To the extent that the problems we are trying to solve are problems of connectedness, a strictly academic approach may not take us all the way” (p. 96). Having recognized the importance of connectedness and inquired into its mechanisms, our group aspired to do something with our findings that would make a difference in the lives of our students; that is, we shifted our time and energy from inquiry toward collective action (Picower, 2007). One of our actions involved planning a university-based research symposium at which students from each school shared their visions of an ideal learning environment with each other, graduate students, and faculty members.

2. METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

As noted above, my participatory methodology aimed to shake up unequal relations of power, queer the relationships between the teacher participants and me, the initiator of the research, bring social theory to life via critique and imagination, and produce change-spurring artifacts and actions (McClelland and Fine, 2008). I found four of the participating educators via personal and professional contacts who identified these teachers as committed to positive social change. I found the fifth teacher participant through a one-page flyer distributed to the schools in my university’s professional development schools network. Having previously studied and experienced the tensions and partiality of social justice stances (North, 2009), I did not prescribe who did and did not qualify as a social change agent when recruiting participants. Indeed, the top of the recruitment flyer included the following quote from one of my favorite spiritual teachers:

“There is nobody on the planet, neither those whom we see as the oppressed nor those whom we see as the oppressor, who doesn’t have what it takes to wake up. We all need support and encouragement to be aware of what we think, what we say, what we do” (Chodron, 1997, p. 73).

Moreover, I intentionally recruited teachers with diverse life histories and social affiliations who worked in varied school settings, believing that a “chorus of voices” would occasion opportunities “to challenge the blindness and passivity that can accompany static notions of unity as well as to raise heretofore unasked questions” (Miller, 1990, pp. 86-87).

So as to construct individual portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997) of each group member, which enabled all of us to know more about each other and the diverse spaces in which we taught, I made two- to three-hour bi-weekly visits to each teacher's classroom throughout 2009. These visits also allowed me to ask the group members about the similarities and differences I observed across sites during our monthly ItAG meetings. Moreover, I conducted in-depth interviews (Fontana and Frey, 2000) with each teacher to learn more about his or her life history and educational philosophies. The material evidence in this article comes not only from Leslie's interview transcript and my encounters with her school but also a presentation about a Philadelphia Freedom School that I attended while co-presenting with Leslie and other ItAG members at an educational conference.

Moreover, I include data from the NROPI documentary and website. I decided to compare the student evaluation occurring at Leslie's school to that within these two programs (rather than another ItAG member's school) because these programs work directly with a student population much like Marshfield's. That is, the Philadelphia Freedom School and NROPI work with African American youth, many of whom come from low-income households due to historic and ongoing institutionalized racism in the United States. Although one ItAG member's high school served Latino and African American students, it was a private Catholic school. I, however, wanted to demonstrate the public, secular alternatives to high stakes, standardized education that already exist in the United States and could reach many more students if the United States exerted the political will to integrate such learning opportunities, which are often extracurricular, into public schooling. I thus turn to my contradictory experiences with Leslie's school, the Philadelphia Freedom School, and NROPI, believing such divergent encounters hold promise for compelling us to examine our assumptions and become open to different readings of assessment for social justice. In Lorde's terms, "Once you have light, then you can measure its degree" (Evans, 2004, p. 75).

3. ACADEMIC VIOLENCE VIA HIGH-STAKES TESTING

"Were the [Obama] administration to embrace a broader and bolder vision of [school] reform and devise policies to back it up...It would encourage students and teachers to utilize their talent, creativity and imagination rather than allowing the school curriculum to be reduced to preparing students to perform on standardized tests. And it would recognize that schools have an essential role to play in renewing and invigorating American democracy by encouraging critical thinking and civic engagement" (Noguera, 2010, parr. 2).

"Perfect education is education that's free, Chances for everyone, open opportunity" (Marshfield Students, from "Our Perfect School" poem).

Leslie did not need to underscore grim statistics for me to recognize that economic devastation significantly shaped the landscape surrounding Marshall High School.² As I approached the school for the first time in January 2009, I passed several boarded-up homes and businesses, including a Montessori preschool and toy store. Leslie told me that an upwardly mobile white middle class established Marshfield as a *country-club school* in the 1960s but quickly took their children elsewhere when efforts to enforce the 1954 *Brown* U.S. Supreme Court decision in the 1970s resulted in the school's desegregation.

² According to the school's website, 65 percent of students receive free and reduced lunch, a frequent proxy for poverty in U.S. educational research.

Contemporarily, the school website reported an 89 percent African American student population revealing the ongoing segregation of U.S. youth given the national black population's size of 13 percent in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Unsurprisingly then, the social studies classes that I observed were comprised entirely of black students. As has occurred across the United States, the mandate to desegregate Marshfield ultimately contributed to its re-segregation (Bell, 2004). Such *de facto* segregation means black experiences continue to remain largely invisible to whites, "making it easier for whites to maintain racial stereotypes about black values and culture" and "to deny or ignore their suffering" (Alexander, 2010, p. 190).

As noted above, I observed the Passage Plan government workshop during my second trip to Marshfield High School. The state's department of education describes the Passage Plan as an alternative path to graduation that is meaningful, rigorous, and explicitly linked to state standards. The *regular plan* requires that students pass a graduation examination in four content areas (algebra-data analysis, biology, English, and government) to receive their diploma. The state's department of education also espouses the philosophy that the earlier students take a graduation examination, the more opportunities they have to pass it. Thus at Marshfield, most students complete a government course as tenth graders and take the accompanying mandated examination for the first time at the end of their tenth-grade year. The state created the Passage Plan for students who passed their required courses in the four content areas but failed one or more of the four mandated graduation examinations at least twice. Leslie described the Passage Plan as follows:

"...the projects are designed by, in my case, economists, geographers...it would be equivalent to a high school level history fair, where a lot of research is put in. It's supposed to [take] seven hours...most of the questions...start out being factual, and then they require you to synthesize and analyze information...And then either you...do a PowerPoint or [write] a journal or diary entry" (Leslie, personal communication).

Leslie further explained that the state wanted students to work on these projects independently, but several students who had worked alone did the projects *totally wrong*. The school's teacher leaders, which included Leslie, decided to address this problem by designing workshops for students who needed individualized help to successfully complete Passage Plan projects. As she described this solution,

"We're going to take the kids out of their classes...and for two days straight [with three or four teachers], all 50 kids, or however many need to graduate, we'll go sit in the library, and we will walk them through every question. We will teach them the concept, and I'll say, 'Now answer question one'...You can't really tell them the answer, but you can walk them through it because what are you going to do?" (Leslie, personal communication).

More recently, Leslie wrote, "I will work day and night during October to get 57 students to pass [the Passage Plan projects]. Meanwhile I am supposed to teach my [other] students. This means no lunch and no break most days" (Personal communication, September 14, 2010). Her words demonstrate that even as a labor union member, she is not ensured reasonable work hours (Pattillo, 2007).

The workshop that I attended was designed to help students finish a Passage Plan project on the U.S. Electoral College, which is responsible for the formal election of the U.S. president and vice president. In the Plan packet's language, students were expected to explain the role of the Electoral College and how it impacts the people and government. Initially, I was pleased to find out that a score on a one-size-fits-all test was not the sole determinant of a student's high school graduation status. After witnessing the workshop, however, I realized that the stick-and-carrot approach of the high-stakes test seemed to reduce even this project-based "choice" to point grubbing. After all, each graduation exam had a specific

passing score, and the Passage Plan projects ultimately made up missed points, if done *correctly*. Yet the Plan literature did not emphasize the accumulation of points. It highlighted something far loftier: the ability to think critically about whether or not the U.S. Electoral College is an effective governmental structure in a twenty-first century democracy. Such a goal resembled the late Asa Hilliard's conception of academic excellence:

"'Excellence' in education is much more than a matter of high test scores on standardized minimum or advanced competency examinations. We expect the schools to expand the scope of knowledge and to develop the rational reflective and critical capacities of our children" (Tillman, 2008, p. 597).

Regardless of the Bridge Plan authors' good intentions, on a rainy February morning, one month after President Barack Obama's inauguration, I watched an almost entirely black group of 40-plus students plod through a packet of information, charts, and maps because their high school diploma was on the line.³ I later reflected that most of the students bent over their Plan packets could now imagine themselves assuming the country's highest office with more confidence than at any other time in U.S. history. Yet, I also asked myself, if these students' public schooling did not go beyond penning what the authorities deemed satisfactory—and, more specifically, include critical examination of U.S. authorities' repeated failure to uplift the black poor as well as to celebrate black communities' ability "to break through racism, taboos, and stereotypes to create the greatest social movement in American history" (Williams, 2005, p. 30)—why would we envision their participation in transforming governmental institutions like the Electoral College? Such authentic engagement with governmental structures would require analytical and moral imagination that a Passage Plan workshop could not and did not cultivate (Noguera, 2010).

I empathized with Leslie's sense that she lacked immediate alternatives for helping these students to obtain their high school diploma, but I worried about the messages students might be appropriating about themselves via their repeated failure on the high school examination and their participation in the remedy for that failure—the Passage Plan workshop. Did they see this prescribed solution for their academic failure as reinforcing the notion that they were insufficiently qualified for higher learning and, as such, the objects rather than subjects of their futures (Carbado, 2002; Payne, 2008)? More hopefully, did they view this attempt to facilitate their attainment of a diploma as their teachers' recognition that they counted "too much to be allowed to mess up their own education" (Payne, 2008, p. 108)? I still do not know the answer to these questions but did observe one student stomp out of the room after saying loudly that she was not going to tolerate such disrespect.

I also noticed and was haunted by a banner that celebrated the school's *quest* for quality education for every student as I left the media center that day. Although definitions of a *quality education* will remain contested, I would hope that policy makers, parents, educators, students, and local leaders could come together and agree that doing everything in our power to help students pass a test is not synonymous with this slogan. The high-stakes activity I witnessed that February morning ultimately struck me as the enemy of children with unrecognized genius much more than an innocent school reform activity (Tillman, 2008). Once again, we had a quick fix aimed at racial uplift that left the responsibility of student

³ One table consisted of students in Marshfield's English for Speakers of Other Languages Program on which I could write another manuscript given how the language-based segregation of student groups within Marshfield was reminiscent of ghettos established "to contain and control groups of people defined by race" (Alexander, 2010, p. 130).

achievement squarely on the shoulders of individual students and their teachers, not the state or federal government. Yet the state and the nation had created these educational policies, policies that relied upon efficiency and punishment more than a commitment to social justice (Pattillo, 2007). In sum, the Passage Plan workshop continued the deluded and harmful story that black students both embodied risk and indicated failure and inefficiency (Johnson, 2009). As such, it represented evaluation for social *in*justice.

4. GROWING PROMISE AND STRENGTH

“The desire to push yourself...leads to inner growth and can’t be measured by grades, tests, or homework. Only you can measure the honesty and intensity of your desire” (McCarthy, 2002, p. 13).

Unfortunately, my study did not include a public high school site wherein African American students experienced an emancipatory curriculum. Such a curriculum would enable students to understand history through a critical lens that recognized African intellectual achievement and addressed social oppression, to view themselves as agents of social change, and to learn about cultural resources within their own communities that could contribute to healing and social transformation (Potts, 2003). I learned, however, of two educational programs that aspired to realize these very goals: Freedom Schools and the National Rights of Passage Institute. These programs not only evaluated students’ academic capacities through more standardized assessments but also asked students to evaluate their own inner growth as well as their contributions toward enriching their local communities, nation, and world. In the remaining pages of this article, I describe these programs and emphasize student assessments of the programs as one form of evaluation for social justice.

4.1. “Freedom Schools”

“The challenge of social justice is to evoke a sense of community that we need to make our nation a better place, just as we make it a safer place” (Edelman, n.d.).

A year after observing the Passage Plan workshop, Leslie and I had the opportunity to present at an educational conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There I watched a documentary called *Freedom School* (Porter and Das, 2009) about a six-week summer school for African American middle-school students in West Philadelphia, an area notorious for its high murder rate. Subsequently, I listened to the program creators’ rich descriptions of this school. The Children’s Defense Fund (2010) founded Freedom Schools in 1995 to promote a love of reading, increase young people’s self-esteem, and connect children and families to community resources. Since that time, over 80,000 children from across the United States have experienced a summer or after-school Freedom School.

The repeated lesson that the Shaw Freedom School founders, Valerie Adams, Chonika Coleman, and Diana Slaughter-Defoe, taught the young people at this school was, “We want you to do the best you can do, but we also want everybody to do the best. So let’s look at and pool our resources so that we all can do the best we can do” (Porter and Das, 2009). In contrast to the individualistic, competitive form of evaluation described above, the freedom-school teachers, called servant-leader interns, both recognized the uniqueness of each student and encouraged all members to collaboratively achieve liberation. The school’s creators also emphasized that they not only recruited committed interns, who were also university students, but also ensured those interns felt supported in their work by creating space and time for them to debrief activities as a team and seek assistance when they struggled.

The school curriculum included the reading of six culturally relevant texts, such as *Day of Tears* by Julius Lester, about the largest slave auction in U.S. history and its aftermath. Moreover, each morning the students participated in *Harambee*, which means let's pull together in Kiswahili. This ritual involved the performance of celebratory and affirming activities, like culturally-centered singing and dancing. The school's adults also actively engaged parents and other community members in the school's happenings and held parent meetings both to discuss how individual students were doing, academically and in life, and to offer parents strategies that worked well in the school. As one parent said at a meeting, "It's important that we know who we are and keep up with ourselves because...it's good for our children to also see that we're taking care of ourselves so they can follow the cycle" (Porter and Das, 2009). Additionally, the school emphasized student-centered social actions. In the words of one intern, "We evaluate a problem in the community and, based on that problem, come up with solutions. And we actually carry out the solutions" (Porter and Das, 2009). The action in the film involved delivering a petition to a United States senator to support legislation that would provide health insurance for Pennsylvania's numerous uninsured children.

Within the presentation of the Shaw Freedom School, then, I saw and heard the successful challenging of institutional conditions that inhibit students—the most vulnerable members of the West Philadelphia community—from participating in the determination of their own actions (Duncan, 2002). Although the Shaw school's creators did not address evaluation explicitly, I learned from an outside evaluation of another summer Freedom School (Philliber Research Associates, 2008) that the average freedom school student significantly improved her reading score on a standardized test, and parents reported that their children demonstrated an increased love of learning and cultural appreciation. A more important measure in the context of this article is the Shaw students' assessment of the school founders' claim that the school provided a safe place for those in it to grow. More specifically, Coleman said about the school's adults, "We come in every day with the idea that all these young people are great. Their culture, their history is great. And we're going to be living examples of that so that they can be the best that they can be" (Porter and Das, 2009).

Regarding the significance of the academic lessons at Shaw Freedom School, one student claimed,

"I think it do matter that we learn about our history, about slavery. Because if you...ever think about it and you never learned about it you'll wonder, like, where you come from. Why is we black? And why is other people white? You'll wonder all those questions and you won't find out answers" (Porter and Das, 2009).

Another student commented on her close relationship with the interns, asserting, "Everybody's going to miss all the interns...Certain people didn't show us the love and affection, and when [the interns] did, it sticks with us. Because we never have been showed love and affection like the way they treated us" (Porter and Das, 2009). These qualitative student evaluations of the school evoked the sense of community aimed at collective freedom that Edelman championed in the quote above. As such, the students' words reclaimed the meaning of *education for social justice*. The National Rites of Passage Institute similarly challenged me to rethink the meaning of educational assessment in the context of social justice aims.

4.2. The National Rights of Passage Institute

"Rites of Passage is nothing more than a cultural antihistamine to prevent children and young people from having an allergic reaction to a socially toxic environment" (Hill, Kubic, and Zaccaro, 2009).

Soon after attending the Philadelphia conference, I learned of the National Rights of Passage Institute (NROPI) via my connection to the Education for Liberation Network (see www.edliberation.org). Like Freedom Schools, NROPI teaches young African American people about their history, lineage, and obligation to serve the community. Describing NROPI as an African-centered approach to human development, its founder, Paul Hill, Jr., emphasizes ritual and ceremony to help young people come to know themselves and their purposes for existence as they transition from childhood to adulthood. Arguing that schools frequently do not satisfactorily fulfill the cognitive, physical, psychological/emotional, affective and cultural requirements of true rites of passage, Hill (2010) has developed after-school programming that restores holistic socialization processes for youth and relies upon adult facilitators who place the youth's interests at the center of this journey.

Importantly, NROPI's curriculum includes a spiritual element that seeks to deepen students' understanding of their purpose in life and connection to all living beings (Hill, 2010; Potts, 2003). Thus it asks students to look inward both to discover their talents and resilience as well as their sense of belonging to their ancestors and the oneness of all things. This goal of revitalizing inner resources within students via African history and wisdom teachings diverges sharply from that of scoring well on externally mandated, standardized assessments. If realizing social justice involves a sense of individual and collective well-being, however, NROPI's focus on helping students tap into something larger than themselves seems essential to fueling young people's commitment to participate in their communities as change agents.

Testimonials in the documentary illustrate that NROPI's programming—or *way of life* as Hill described it—has made a positive difference in the well-being of participating youth. For example, a father and his teenage son established an NROPI process called My Brother/My Sister at the son's high school after he expressed concern about its increasingly punitive environment (student suspensions quintupled as the student population doubled in size). The 18 students who actively participated in this program learned about African traditions and cultural mores and had the opportunity to collectively work through school and life issues. Although all 18 participants were accepted to universities and were described by school staff as having *improved attitudes*, the younger founder said about My Brother/My Sister, "You don't do this because it's expected of you or it's the cool thing to do...by you having a focus on yourself, you're able to establish your goals and your values...and just move through life stronger" (personal communication). Another student described My Brother/My Sister as providing a space to realize who she is and what her ancestral culture includes, "things I never knew before but probably should have" (personal communication). Thus, again, I encountered student evaluations based on narratives of inner growth, not test scores or grades.

Indeed, Hill defied the belief that we must use external measures to evaluate student growth when he said about evidence-based success, "It's an a-ha moment. A-ha! I understand and I get what Rites of Passage is. That's what I want [the young people] to leave with" (Hill, personal communication). Although taxpayers, policymakers, and funders will continue to require narrow measures of accountability that are easily and cheaply amassed and calculated, I hope those of us committed to education for social justice will continue to push for the valorization of student-generated assessments of not only their intellectual development but also their capacity to let their lives speak in ways that allow them to love their neighbors and themselves (Palmer, 2000).

5. CONCLUSION

In 2009, Microsoft founder and educational philanthropist Bill Gates said the following about educational reform: It doesn't really matter whether you are driven by an ethical commitment to equal opportunity or by a long-term economic vision for this country. Both lines of reasoning lead to the same conclusion. We need to measure progress. We need to hold teachers and schools accountable. We need to give all students a chance to make the most of their lives.

While I certainly agree with his aim of enabling all students to reach their full potential, the words *measure* and *progress* merit careful attention, particularly given Gates' claim that the underlying purpose of our work matters little. If measuring student learns equates to succeeding on standardized tests or their high-stakes alternatives, like the Bridge Project described above, I believe we will contribute more to academic violence than peace and justice (McCarthy, 2002). Additionally, if *progress* represents making ever more profits at the expense of our neighbors near and far, then I have little doubt that the social stressors and toxins in the lives of the least advantaged will continue to grow exponentially (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). However, if we could see fit to measure progress according to how genuinely and often students consider others' well-being, we might have a shot at realizing social justice through education. I agree with Edelman (1993) who claims that showing concern for others will take young people "further in life than any college or professional degree" (p. 52).

Both the Shaw Freedom School and NROPI stress the relationship between individual development and positive, significant contributions to our communities. As such, evaluations of their success must attend not only to academic achievement but also to the cultivation of a social fabric that alleviates human suffering and environmental degradation. Such evaluations can come from looking outward, at the observable and felt effects of our actions in the world, as well as inward, at the growth of our inner lives. After all, "if our institutions are rigid, it is because our hearts fear change; if they set us in mindless competition with each other, it is because we value victory over all else; if they are heedless of human well-being, it is because something in us is heartless as well" (Palmer, 2000, pp. 77-78).

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