


# Teach Like Lives Depend on It: Agitate, Arouse, and Inspire

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## Abstract

This article analyzes teaching that begins with the realities, ideologies, and articulations of dispossessed youth of color to shift perceptions of cultural deficits into potential academic strengths that are also critical. Drawing on culturally relevant, critical pedagogical, and critical literacy theories to understand the educational needs of historically dispossessed cultural groups in the United States and propose a humanizing pedagogy, this article offers critical participatory teacher analysis that suggests this can be done by (a) agitating students politically, (b) arousing their critical curiosity, and (c) inspiring self and social transformation.

## Keywords

culturally relevant pedagogy, subjects, literacy, urban education, minority academic success, student self-esteem, youth development, race, identity, diversity, social, academic achievement, best practices, social, African American students

Until we have [an education] . . . where we reflect how we gon solve our own problems then [dispossessed youth] ain't gonna relate to school . . . And I love education, knowhatimsayin? But if education ain't elevatin' me . . . it ain't taking me where I need to go out [of this oppression], then fuck education. At least [theirs] . . .

Stic Man of the rap duo Dead Prez (2000)

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Stic Man's harsh critique of U.S. schools is a sentiment shared widely across a generation of dispossessed youth in urban communities. Discussing education in urban communities require that we problematize apolitical notions of "urban" and discuss dispossession. As Tuck (2012) indicated, "The term 'urban' is often used in 'polite' conversation to refer to . . . poor people of color specifically" (p. 12). Instead, Grande (2004) argued that "foregrounding of capitalist relations as the axis of exploitation helps to frame the history of indigenous peoples as one of dispossession and not simply oppression" (p. 165). "Urban" focuses on what communities of color do not have in the context of U.S. society while "dispossessed" acknowledges what has historically been stolen from Third World people worldwide. According to Lynn (1999), "To ignore this reality is to belie the history of this nation entirely" (p. 622). A large majority of historically dispossessed people persists as Third World communities still dominated in the United States, essentially existing as "internal colonies" (Gutierrez, 2004, p. 281). It is from this understanding of social relations and material conditions that this article interprets culturally relevant pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy to enact a humanizing pedagogy serving historically dispossessed youth of color.

To Stic Man's point, students in urban schools often resist American schooling ideologies because its "official" curricula silence the voices, sensibilities, and lived experiences of dispossessed youth of color throughout the country. Thus, dispossessed people are not understood on their terms, or in relation to a social system whose history is based on legacies of their subjugation. Instead, "urban youth are often blamed for society's ills" (Stovall, 2006, p. 586). According to Chomsky (2004), schools in the United States have historically been "institutions responsible for the indoctrination of the young" (p. 553) because they privilege the interests of dominant cultures (Akbar, 1984; Goodwin, 2010; Watkins, 2001). Not responding to social toxins facing dispossessed youth in urban communities leads to poor health and academic difficulties (Duncan-Andrade, 2011) while inadequately preparing them with the critical sensibilities needed to deal with the dehumanizing conditions of their everyday lives. Denying dispossessed youth an education that prepares them to confront the toxic unjust social conditions of their everyday life intensifies the colonial conditions that they face.

To address this conflict, this article offers practitioner analysis to put forth teaching processes for engaging dispossessed youth in urban schools with humanizing pedagogies that begin with their realities, ideologies, and ways of communicating their understanding of the world. Furthermore, this study foregrounds students' voices to illuminate the potential of humanizing education to shift perceptions of cultural deficits in students into potential academic strengths. As most of the research on humanizing education, culturally

relevant teaching, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy have been theoretically or outcome focused, I wanted to pay more attention to the process and potential of applying this work in the classroom. I was not only interested in examining what this work looked like but also offer practitioner insight into understanding how these types of practices can be facilitated. This study asks, how is teaching students to critically read their world and the word humanizing for Black and Brown youth in South Los Angeles (SLA)? More specifically, what can teachers do to develop effective practices that disrupt dehumanization? Furthermore, what process can teachers follow to engage students in humanizing education?

## **A Framework of Humanizing Pedagogy**

This article confronts the disconnect between schools and the challenges facing dispossessed youth by honoring Bartolome's (1994) commentary that "[u]nless educational methods are situated in the students' cultural experiences, students will continue to show difficulty in mastering content area that is not only alien to their reality, but is often antagonistic toward their culture and lived experiences" (p. 191). Humanizing pedagogies can adhere to state-mandated learning standards and also support students' yearning "for freedom and justice, and . . . to struggle to recover their lost humanity" (Freire, 1970/2002, p. 44). Pedagogy concerns itself with who is involved in the teaching and learning, what is being taught, how it is being taught, and why—people, content, method, and purpose. The importance of a humanizing pedagogy can be understood in context of the reality teachers are often confronted with when working with students in urban schools. As Greene (1986) described,

[W]hen we reach out, we experience a kind of blankness. We sense people living under a weight, a nameless inertial mass. How are we to justify our concern for their awakening? Where are the sources of questioning, of restlessness? How are we to move the young to break with the given, the taken-for-granted—to move towards what might be, what is not yet? (p. 428)

This struggle requires that we apply humanizing pedagogies in the most holistic manner possible and embrace the notion that the humanity of oppressed people is worthy of their own study.

Humanizing pedagogies provide a humanizing education that helps historically dispossessed children study as a means to radically heal (Ginwright, 2010) from their suffering. It also allows young people to explore the depths of their "unresolved historical grief!" while helping to cultivate a deeper

knowledge of and compassion for self, mobilizing efforts to develop a deeper sense of control over their collective lives. According to Freire, “Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization . . . as [a] historical reality” and takes on “humanization [as] a viable possibility” (p. 43). This requires cultivating “critical hope, which rejects the despair of hopelessness” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 5). Humanizing education is complex because it tries to move, in beautifully contested ways, children and communities to where they want to go while grappling with the painful pasts that they have to confront to get there. The humanization that emerges, then, edify and empower the very communities who are engaging humanizing education.

A humanizing pedagogy is culturally relevant and critical because it draws on students’ lived experiences and cultural ways of knowing in a process that is socially transformative. Ladson-Billings (1994/2009) asserted that “[C]ulturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three propositions: (a) academic success, (b) cultural competence, and (c) “students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Essentially, the basis of this practice is the way that educators facilitate students’ ability to transition between and across their multiple identities, while developing in them an awareness of the world and their position in it. Academic achievement and student learning are about challenging students’ minds so that teachers can improve their students’ ability to think—apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information to excel in schools. Cultural competence is the ability to help students grow in the knowledge and understanding of their own culture while acquiring skills in other cultures, typically mainstream culture which we expect students to navigate to become socially, politically, and economically viable. Critical consciousness helps students understand that what they are learning is not only useful to them but also for a larger social purpose.

Critical pedagogy facilitates spaces where students “recognize and attempt to transform those undemocratic and oppressive features of hegemonic control that often structure everyday classroom existence in ways not readily apparent” (McLaren, 1994/2003, p. 78). It taps into student agency by facilitating their critical social consciousness and raising awareness of the sociopolitical context that it is embedded in. Critical pedagogy goes beyond equity discourses that have tamed explicit liberation agendas in social justice education theory. Along those lines, Giroux (1992) called for teaching practices that reflect

a politics that is attentive to the material and human suffering exhibited in forms of domestic colonialism expressed in racial violence, shameful unemployment among black youth, and the growing numbers of minorities who daily join the ranks of the hungry and homeless. (p. 19)

Together, culturally relevant critical pedagogies draw from students' cultural frameworks, lived experiences, and diverse learning styles to specifically engage "in the task of reframing, refunctioning, and reposing" (McLaren, 2000, p. 185) essential questions to transform power/knowledge relations.

This pedagogy must also improve the academic and critical literacy for dispossessed youth while honoring Freire and Macedo's (1987) position that young people must learn to read and write the world and the word so as to transform hostile social conditions that undermine their humanity. The architect of this framing, Paulo Freire (1970/1988), argued that literacy programs must be informed by "a radical pedagogy so that the students' language will cease to provide its speakers the experience of subordination and, moreover, may be brandished as a weapon of resistance to the dominance of standard language" (p. 154). To practice a radical pedagogy, Perry, Steele, and Hilliard's (2003) indigenous African American philosophy of education is also relevant to the predominantly Black student context on which this pedagogy was applied. She posed a pressing question relevant to other dispossessed communities: "Why should one focus on learning in school if that learning doesn't . . . have the capacity to affect, inform, or alter . . . one's status as a member of an oppressed group?" (p. 11). Perry answers this question in her final analysis by asserting that students must "Read and write . . . as an act of resistance, as a political act, for racial uplift, so [they] can lead [their] people well in the struggle for liberation!" (p. 19). The theoretical purpose of this type of humanizing pedagogy is clear—relevant education confronts oppression, affirms the humanity of the learner, and uses literacy as a tool to transform their realities and subvert subjugation.

## Research Context, Principles, and Design

I conducted a teacher inquiry and critical participatory action research (CPAR; Morrell, 2006) to honor Sleeter's (2012) call for more "research showing how teachers can learn to use [culturally responsive pedagogy] in their classrooms" (p. 578). Teacher research allows us to "know if what we are teaching is serving the students under our care" (Goswami, Lewis, Rutherford, & Waft, 2009, p. 2) while CPAR "opens up spaces for populations who were formerly only regarded as the objects of research to act as the subjects and empowered participants in research that matters a great deal to them" (Morrell, 2006, p. 62). This research productively responds to the call

from urban educators who search urgently for concrete practitioner insights to help transform the lives of students in their classrooms and communities.

Aware of my outside positionality as an Americanized Pilipino, I made it clear that my interests in teaching in an ethnic community different from my own was not about a fascination with, or mission to save, Black or Latina/o people. As someone who was pushed out of Los Angeles public schools early during my 10th grade year, I had a vested interest in finding ways to help students identify the root causes of their struggles to transform them. My interest in writing this study was to focus on students who not only “hated” school but also generally lacked a critique of social oppression and were not motivated by social justice. I understood that because I was so closely tied to the study, I was not going to eliminate bias. Drawing from my role as a classroom teacher with similar social dispositions and urban sensibilities as many of my students actually helped me gain access and depth.

The SLA communities that surrounded Slauson High School (SHS) had social networks that were strong, families engaged with one another by celebrating the varying joys of life, and was made up of many working people making the most of what they had. Youth were also vibrant in talent, brilliance, and resilience despite the social toxins imposed on their communities. Still, 2 weeks before the start of the 2005-2006 school year, the effects of a series of gang-related shootings were intensified by the murder of a recent graduate who was shot, point blank, in the immediate school community. At the time of this study, the Slauson Park District (SPD) of SLA had a 72.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) Black population. The SPD was also seeing an influx of Latina/o populations throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The co-existence among Black and Brown populations in SLA drew significant media attention for “racial tensions” at its high schools and in local communities. Similar to larger Los Angeles, dehumanization in this context was due in large part to the history of gang-related violence contributing to 136, or 28%, of the city’s 480 total homicides in 2006 (Krikorian, 2007). According to a number of problematic “rankings,” the Rising Slauson Crips (RSC) was unquestionably one of the largest and more notorious gangs in the city and were one of the first three gangs to receive a city gang injunction. SHS is typically associated with the RSC. Despite these realities, issues concerning social toxins in the community were not discussed to any degree during the professional development preceding and continuing through the school year.

SHS’s student demographic was predominantly Black (66%) and Brown (33%), and its Academic Performance Index ranked in the lowest percentile statewide. Many teachers would complain that SHS could be called Slauson College due to the hundreds of youth often roaming the campus freely—delightfully for many—during class hours. Students, however, generally felt

that teachers had low expectations and were disengaging. Consequent to reports of SHS's loss of accreditation, hundreds of parents began to check their students out of the school, dropping enrollment from 3,142 in 2004-2005 to 2,501 in 2005-2006, for a difference of 641 students. Yet for the 5 academic years prior, enrollment at SHS steadily increased. In response to district-enforced reform efforts, the Slauson Community Coalition, an organization of parents, students, community members, and teachers, intensified their efforts toward educational equity and organized against the ongoing destabilizing of the school. To this day, this group strives to maintain local pride in a historically stigmatized area of the city.

Traditional data collection strategies were used in the form of analysis of field notes, student work and other artifacts, classroom video, and student interviews. Spanning the 10 months during the 2005-2006 academic year, data collection took place nearly every day in a second period, 12th-grade English course chosen for practical purposes. The focal class included 14 boys and 17 girls, with 27 Black and 4 Brown students. A lot of students in the focal class would often banter that my honors period were "good kids" while also competing with my third period for being the most "hood," or having the most street-credible students enrolled.

In addition to more than 100 field note entries, I recorded more than 100 hr of audio and 50 hr of video of classroom instruction, activities, and dialogue. In addition to every student participating in an exit interview, there were 4 whole-class interviews and 12 in-depth interviews that I believed would inform the study if interrogated further. As a classroom teacher, the notion of focusing on focal students in an action research study is problematic because it is antithetical to our responsibilities to teach an entire roster of children. While I have substantial corroborating data from the entire class to support the findings, for the purposes of data and information reduction, I am choosing to narrate this analysis through the experiences of a couple of students. My prior publications have focused on the classroom experiences of other students in this class (Camangian, 2009, 2010, 2013). Focal students in the writing of this particular article were selected for three reasons: First, they showed ideologically transformative growth while developing profound critical analysis of their community's social conditions. Second, these students transitioned effectively between lived experience, social theory, and academics and the challenges of everyday life. Furthermore, the ways they were becoming conscious, capturing their voice, and increasing achievement in class also served to resonate with, inspire, and highly engage their peers. Third, these students fit high "at-risk" profiles for reasons well beyond the sub-1.5 cumulative grade point averages that had evidenced their prior disengagement with school.

Units of analysis focused on two key areas: (a) processes and (b) potential. The categories of analysis were not preset units of analysis based on previous research on humanizing education because these units of analysis have not been explored fully. Thus, the concepts laid out in the findings were derived from the data through inductive content analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While coding related to *processes* included destabilization, arguments, anger, confusion, curiosity, realization, indignation, agency, and hope, coding for *potential* included academic engagement, generative themes connecting text and students' community context, ideology, analysis, re-thinking reality, and critical consciousness. My findings represent the consolidation of codes that were most prevalent throughout all sources of data.

## The Process and Potential of Humanizing Education

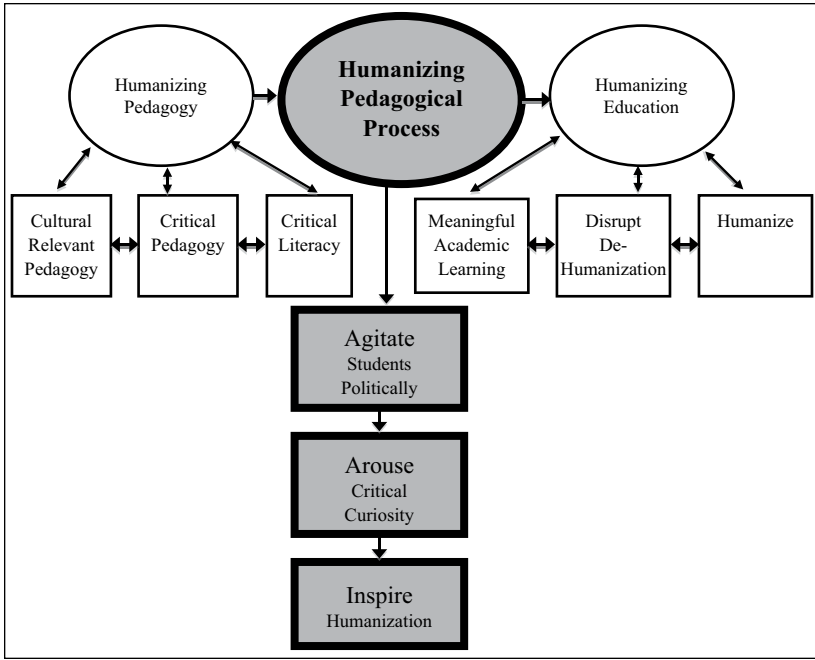
The following findings suggest that teachers can effectively engage dispossessed youth in humanizing education by (a) agitating students politically, (b) arousing their critical curiosity, and (c) inspiring self and socially transformative behavior. Figure 1 illustrates a model for activating a humanizing pedagogy. As discussed in the theoretical framework, humanizing pedagogy is informed by, and can inform, cultural relevant and critical pedagogy and critical literacy as shown on the left side of Figure 1 below. The key part of this model is the middle as it demonstrates the humanizing pedagogical process—agitating, arousing, and inspiring—found in this study. A humanizing pedagogical process leads to a humanizing education that entails meaningful learning experiences providing students the tools necessary to recognize and disrupt dehumanization to engage in their own journey toward humanization. Because the process of humanizing pedagogy has not been theorized much in previous literature, the significance of this study is that it names and illustrates one way a humanizing pedagogical process can lead to humanizing education.

These practices have the potential to engage students in meaningful academic learning, recognizing dehumanization to disrupt it, and cultivating humanizing behaviors. The following discussion further illustrates how this process looked in the context of this study.

### *Agitate*

We need liberatory leadership in urban classrooms. Liberatory leadership entails being honest about the historical and material contradictions that have created the social conditions impacting oppressed communities throughout





**Figure 1.** Activating humanizing pedagogy.

the world. Furthermore, this type of teacher-leadership would foster opportunities for students to interpret and discuss relevant actions that might lead to transformative change. Imani's understanding of community irrelevant banking approaches to teaching, however, effectively captures the contradiction,

[Teachers] don't think their students' personal struggles is important. That's the main problem already. You're not identifying with your students. They're identifying with the system. . . . What does that have to do with our history right now? It doesn't identify with my community. . . . That's not right cuz we don't know about ourselves. And they show things that make us hate ourselves even more.

Relevance thus involves opportunities during which students learn about and understand social issues in ways that resonate with the deeply intimate and often hostile ways they experience such issues. A practice of many social movements, political agitation personalizes social issues, triggers emotional responses, and ultimately unsettles and motivates students toward transformative self and social change.

Agitation can occur when students engage with course content that connects to and/or directly reflects the social issues they face in their lived realities “lead[ing] students to recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 49). Agitation incites mixed emotions, even cognitive dissonance, while opening up the space for them to negotiate this independently through individual assignments, and collaboratively with their classmates. For the most part, this type of learning is not always polite. Instead, agitation captures the passion, frustration, and anger that often characterize the reality of dispossessed youth in dispossessed communities.

The following example took place at the beginning of the school year. Students were sharing with each other preliminary stages of their writing, revealing the ways they constructed their varying cultural identities. I prompted student narratives with the following questions: “What do you stand for? What experiences have you had that made you this way? Who do you want to become? How are you going to become this way? What does this mean for your community?” Asking students to critically reflect on their identities triggered a dialogue where youth in class began holding each other accountable to the perceived needs of their community. The following dialogue illustrates the ways in which youth firmly challenged one another to understand the consequences of their reactionary behavior, examine notions of power along racial lines, and call for fundamental social change. For example, Tyjuan responded to Leon’s proud proclamations of being gang-related, violently enforcing his identity on others,

We’re divided. When you go to a White community, they’re one . . . Over here, we’re . . . holding the next person down. Our priorities aren’t up to standard. In White communities, they focus on power. On money. On helping one another prosper. But as far as us, we’re trying to hold the other person down.

Tyjuan’s perspective of the existence of White solidarity, however accurate or inaccurate it might be, showed how he had experienced power being highly concentrated in European American communities in contrast to his own. As a rebuttal, Leon offered his viewpoint on the phenomenon,

That’s the funny thing cuz that’s all [we] know how to do. It’s hard to . . . get a job . . . But it’s real easy to . . . hit a lick (do something illegal to make money) . . .

Reflecting on his point, Tyjuan replied, “Feel you. I mean, they already feel like they at their lowest point.” The exchange marked an understanding of the economic struggle facing many in their community. On one hand,

Tyjuan argued that horizontal violence is holding Black people down. On the other hand, he replied to Leon that he understood where they were coming from in their economically underdeveloped and overexploited community. Together, they validated each other's perspectives as Black men struggling through the material conditions of their lives.

This dialogue became a springboard for critical discussion. Stephen told Leon, "That's what they want you to do. That's what they want you to think," while Janelle added, "They want you to give up. When people think like you, you holding us down." Leon seemed to open up to the class' critique of his lifestyle by raising his brows, nodding up and down and pondering their thoughts. Yet as students kept problematizing the tensions within their community, Leon became defensive and declared, "Nobody can convince me that I'm wrong. Nobody in this world can convince me that what I've done or what I'm doing is wrong. Anything I ever did." Although they were able to discuss the tension of behaving in ways that reinforce the oppression facing Black people, Leon was not willing to admit that the use of force or criminal undertakings he was involved with were wrong.

The intensity in the room was palpable; as students spoke with and over each other, more of them began raising their hands to offer their perspectives on Leon's stance. One student assessed that gang mentalities similar to Leon acted upon a person's fear of competing against the rest of society for a more widely legitimate approach to improving her or his quality of life. A young woman asked why he was willing to weaken the Black community; another pled for Leon to plan for his own future and change his ways. The attention drove Leon to argue defensively, "Don't nobody think 3 years down the line . . . cuz you could die any moment in South Central, man. Any given day." Here, Leon plead that long-term planning was not his priority because, based on his lived experience, he did not have enough evidence to believe in his own chances to survive. Due to his acute awareness of his surroundings, Leon was fatalistically worried about death, which loomed for him and for many people in his community. Students continued to engage in a discussion that pressed for Leon's transformative needs.

Rather than limit their classroom experience to the ahistorical and impersonal ways that schooling has been shaped by official curricula, this prompting, which students had created among a classroom community, opened up the space for youth to reflect on essential issues of immediate relevance to their community. Later during an interview, Leon said of this process, "I think you was like, [messing] with our ideas. You [messed] with mine, I could tell you" (Laughs). Asking him how these processes affected his learning, Leon said,

I wanna say . . . at first . . . it didn't make me want to change myself, it made me want to question myself. And then as the class went along, it made me really want to change some of the things I did.

Another example is from a dialogue that took place during the anticipatory sets and early reading comprehension when students were discussing Paulo Freire's (1970/2002) "fear of freedom" notion in Chapter 1 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. When the oppressed practice fear of freedom "they prefer the security of conformity" over "the creative communion produced by . . . the very pursuit of freedom" (p. 48). Connecting theoretical constructs to their communities served to address the concrete issues, tensions, and concerns of their everyday lives while also creating opportunities for more critically intellectual conversations among students. What was important for me, here, was to move the class from static, academic understandings of theory to engage in a personal, honest, and often intense interpretation of their lived experiences and social perspectives.

The discussions presented here came after small group discussions of the question, "What is fear of freedom? How does this play out in your community?" The discussion was aimed at inquiring about the students' feelings and thoughts on how these theories applied to their social experiences. Students were engaged with one another, competing to get their opinions in, and sharing their varying understandings of conformity, as it existed in their communities. I invited students to think about the different ways they could transform conformity. After listening to a few ideas different students had, I asked whether or not the class thought the suggestions were realistic. Imani stood up and stated passionately,

That's that fairy tale life, yo. That isn't realistic cuz Black people are ignorant and they don't listen to each other. That's why [there's] so many problems in the community . . . It's possible, it's not very realistic for Black people to do.

One student responded by arguing that Imani was right, whereas another student made the claim that Black people with money were able to practice the respectful communication, Imani did not believe her community could. Another student said that middle class and wealthier Black people were "basically White." This triggered further conversation about notions of conformity and the difference between "selling out" and "playing the game." When I asked, "[T]here are no Black families without money who try to work their relationships out?" Imani stated rather angrily,

[shaking head no] Cuz they're just ignorant. The people I know are just used to being that ghetto trash, every man for they self mentally, where they're only worried about their selves. Or, forgetting about everybody else. Or, doing what they gotta do for somebody that's close to them. They don't do stuff for other people. They're just . . . ignorant.

Interestingly enough, when I asked Imani, "How are you any different than any racist who says the same thing about Black folks?" She answered, "I might be ignorant in some ways too." Although Imani's overall response did offer insight into her reactionary perspective, she seemed to express a comfortable sense of confusion at the end of her answer. Rather than claiming to be different than the very community she was condemning, Imani communicated a state of realization about her own perspective toward her own people that she was projecting her community having toward her. The vulnerability of this realization set the stage for Imani to inquire further.

Central to the development of solidarity among teachers and students in urban contexts is the willingness to engage in "real talk," or open and honest conversations that address the questions with which the young people are most concerned. During her end of the year interview, Imani suggested that, "dialogue . . . with your peers, that make you really learn stuff about yourself and your community . . . just hearing two different sides of things make you realize things." Similarly, Leon said,

[I]n the classroom I had to step outside of my box, I had to listen to people that I wouldn't listen to outside the classroom . . . And that made me, uh, that in itself brought a change in me.

Such authentic dialogue, however, necessitates that teachers create the spaces for students to connect and develop deeper understandings of each other, so that all forms of dialogue work to improve the overall quality of the classroom culture. Beyond cultivating "safe" spaces for dialogue, we must foster classroom cultures that critically nurture the ability for teachers and students to confront the painful parts of our lives and the struggles facing oppressed people (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

## **Arouse**

Although agitation pushes students to become unsettled about the social conditions, ideology, and social practice that shape their experiences, such a practice sets the stage for arousing critical curiosities to take place. Arousal involves guiding students to learn more about their state of being unsettled. Leon expressed the importance of this when he said,

I can honestly say there wasn't one assignment . . . that had no significance to me—or who we are or our ancestors . . . So . . . it strikes your interest and once it strikes your interest, it actually gets your attention. And once it gets your attention, that just takes off.

To arouse students' critical intellectualism, teachers must connect learning to students' experiential knowledge and encourage them to study in the interests of their communities. Currently, school curriculum is increasingly scripted and often do not address the quality of life experienced by marginalized communities within North American society. Course content that reflect the subjective realities shaping the lives of students in urban schools position them to better cultivate philosophies that acknowledge how oppressed people of color in, and beyond, their communities are suffering in very similar ways. In other words, students can develop worldviews that, in part, clarify for them their struggles and inform how they want to move forward with their lives to change their relationship to oppression.

The student work I focus on in this section come from a unit in which students read socially provocative texts to construct philosophies for social change. In the first example, Leon does an analysis of "The Willie Lynch Letter." A fictional speech supposedly delivered on the bank of the James River in Virginia in 1712, William Lynch claimed to have a "fool proof method" for controlling Africans in the United States for "at least 300 years," which then led to a series of atrocious mental conditioning. In the second example, Imani writes an essay analyzing Malcolm X's (1963) "Message to the Grassroots," a speech he delivered in Detroit, Michigan, and which, in part, contrasted Black consciousness with Negro consciousness; while the former was a more socially transformative construct, the latter was more deculturalizing and assimilationist.

Covering the "Warning: Possible Interloping Negatives" section of "The Willie Lynch Letter," Leon spoke about Black history being stolen and expressed his anger toward people of color's reality being defined by White supremacist thought. He answered the question, "Do these psychological effects still exist, where and how?" Examining his world with the words from the text, Leon spoke scathingly about his understanding of reality,

I feel like [these psychological effects still exist], for the simple fact . . . the idea of the image of a beautiful Africa changed. Like, you see a beautiful woman or something, you think light skin, long hair . . . And when you think of an ugly [Black person] . . . you think, dark skinned . . . nappy hair. When you think dark skin, you think dirty. It's not that it makes you less of a person for thinking that, it's just the [lies] that [were] embedded in your brain, like your whole mental thought process.

In addition to pointing out the consequences of internalized oppression, Leon combined his reading ability with his critical analysis and his cultural voice, leading him to communicate with an empowered oral intensity. Text and context coalesced as he connected to his audience and the classroom discourse. Leon provided a critically relevant interpretation of “The Willie Lynch Letter” that reflected the students’ immediate community realities. When considering that the desires of the oppressed are often guided by their appreciation of their oppressors’ humanity—in this case, standards of physical attractiveness—Leon offered an honest evaluation for the ways he saw this normalized in his community,

As far as cross breeding, it still goes on, but it’s not forced upon each other. It’s like . . . tradition . . . the [thing] to do. In order to make a pretty baby, and the idea of a pretty baby is like, “I want it to be light skinned, and it’s gonna have curly hair” . . . And you go off and meet you a nice lil’ partner, that’s light-skinned with curly hair, green eyes, [etc.]. And the baby comes out looking less and less black and losing what they were in the first place . . . We losing sight of what our people originally were. So due to that, we lose sight of what a true beautiful African is, due to our own crossbreeding.

Leon, arguably, essentializes Blackness and Black beauty through the promotion of monoraciality, which we must help students complicate. Focusing on the early development of his consciousness, however, his critique of oppressive discourse defining beauty in their community was aimed at the ways Africans—like many people of color worldwide—aspire to alter perceived levels of physical attractiveness based on their internalized oppression. In this way, Leon illuminated his observations regarding how Black communities sometimes aspire toward notions of attractiveness that are based on paradigms that socially devalue the phenotypical traits of people of color worldwide, and African-type features especially. Despite “the unwillingness by African Americans to discuss or perhaps even admit to their personal struggles associated with attractiveness” (Parmer, Arnold, Natt, & Janson, 2004, p. 232), Leon critically engaged often deeply sensitive, yet unnamed, intra-racial tensions of the community in which a majority of the students were members.

On completion of his presentation, Leon simultaneously expressed his frustration as a man of color, called attention to his growing anger, and also moved toward developing a strategy of social transformation. Leon talked in relation to his own plan of action, answering the, “How do you feel about this and why?” question for his groups’ assigned reading,

I felt kind of stupid, not just for myself, but for all people of color. Because it is a cycle, and their plan worked. It worked hella good. And I realized that [it] is still working. So in my eyes, they like re-created the image of like [a beautiful black person] and I thought about it, and they could create the image of anything. And it gets to the point where they keep remaking and remaking everything, and you start seeing the world through the same glasses they looking at. But, you not realizing it because you have no true history. You only have . . . what they left you with, what they told you is true . . . I'm kind of upset, and lost at the same time . . .

Revealing his sense of humiliation, Leon connected this emotion with his frustration over a dominant White culture's ability to mystify reality among people of color. His disappointment was pointed at people of color's vulnerability when missing a clear sense of their own histories. Leon's anger, coupled with confusion, was a result of the grim reality that a system of oppression actually worked and that its objects of domination were defenseless against the ideologies imposed on them.

Imani analyzed Malcolm X's "Message to the Grassroots" for her Philosophy for Social Change essay. In the following essay excerpt, Imani explained that White supremacy shapes the consciousness of people of color altogether, and Black communities specifically. According to her, imposing Eurocentric worldviews on communities of color maintains White dominance over their communities. To challenge White supremacist thought, Imani argued that Black communities needed to determine their own notions of dignity. Reading Malcolm X critically helped Imani see the implications White supremacist thought had on the historical amnesia and fractured identities of Black people in the United States as evidenced early in her essay,

White supremacy manipulates the media, history, popular culture, and implements lower standards for the Black community in order to exploit our labor and to strip us of our heritage. Therefore, the Black community must discover our own rich history and culture from an ethnic point of view to achieve self-determination, a positive and strong self-identity, and reach our own definition of success . . . Blacks are too ashamed of ourselves that we start to internalize that the closer that we are affiliated with Whites, the more superior we feel than other Blacks . . . Blinded, Blacks are unable to make decisions independent of White's influence . . .

Furthermore, Imani expressed a deep frustration with her community's identity being defined by the cultural paradigms of those whose interests are at odds with the cultural, political, and psychological needs of Black people experiencing White oppression as she understood it. Imani built on her earlier



analysis, citing the speech to make more concrete points about the strategic psychological manipulation of White ideological state apparatus' use of Black figures to communicate ideas that serve social systems that oppress their community. She asserts that being critical of ideologies imposed on them would be a way to recover from the social control governing their thoughts. Finally, Imani claimed that this was a necessary pre-condition for determining their own destiny as Black people living in the context of White domination:

Malcolm reveals that the structure of White supremacy takes "a so-called Negro, and makes him prominent . . . [until] he becomes a spokesman for Negroes" (7). Sell out Blacks like these are set up as idols for other Blacks to follow. Since these Whites are in control of the prominent "Negro," they are capable of controlling masses of Blacks. White supremacists know that we are unwilling to listen to a person who does not relate to our struggle. They utilize the prominent Negro in order to convince the Black community the message White supremacists wants to use to control us. The "inferior" internalizing of various colored people to Whites continually grows as they are "taught . . . to suffer—peacefully" (6) under White oppression. Our suffering is psychological due to this systematic loss of our self-identity . . . To become stronger as a community, Blacks must be critical of the information that we are taught to internalize. By exterminating internal White supremacy, we are able to determine our self-identity and create a clear purpose for ourselves . . .

Implicit in her analysis was an awareness of the consent on which people of color internalized White supremacist thought as a means toward affirming their own humanity at the expense of their own communities. Bearing in mind this contradiction, regardless of their desire to be successful in a White-dominated society, oppressed communities of color would always be at the behest of their oppressors.

Socially relevant, provocative assignments helped arouse Leon and Imani's critical curiosities, stimulate academic engagement and apply critical perspectives concerning their psychological histories as descendants of African people. Leon was able to make connections between two women of color's experiences as marginalized people and connect it to his struggle as a young, Black man,

Anzaldua's [Borderlands] . . . how she was talking about she had three choices: to be a nun, a housewife, or a hooker . . . then I apply it to what I'm doing as a young black an in an urban community, I only have three choices: I'ma pick up a gun, or a basketball, or rap, or I'ma sell dope. It's like damn, that really connects . . . and it make you wonder why . . . When I read Audre Lorde, I seen

that . . . our own people, like she was getting hated on by other black men as a lesbian. And that's the same [thing] that White people do to us.

Similarly, Imani expressed the importance of a curriculum that helped her develop a framework for understanding the hegemonic ways in which she was complicit in her own subordination,

One of the most intense things was really looking at [Gramsci's chapter on] hegemony . . . That's when I really wanted to learn, like, "what the . . .?" I'm sitting back here doing nothing and I'm thinking that's right. That's what they want me to think . . .

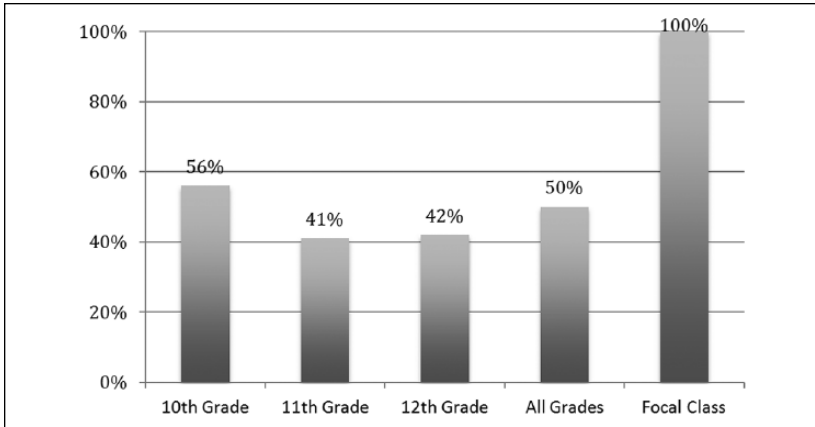
Fanon's (1963/2005) analysis also resonated with Imani's historical understanding of dispossession and social inequity in the present moment,

*Wretched of the Earth* had me looking at the differences between our communities and . . . their neighborhoods . . . What'd they do for it? You inherited it from slavery, so it's actually [ours], and you still living off that and we still strugglin. Our ancestors struggling and we still don't [have anything]. That made me really look at the system of how they keep us down . . . All those readings. That got my attention . . . Everything has a meaning now . . . I see, like, the real meaning to stuff. Or, I could put it together myself now, knowing stuff . . .

The potentially motivating power of socially relevant learning opportunities for youth of color is captured by Leon's following statement:

It's self-stimulating, you know, to be in a classroom and find out like basically what's happening in the world. It's not so much you doing it for a grade. You doing it for yourself. You know what I'm saying? You really wanna know. It spark your interests. So, I'm basically doing it for myself. Like, it gets to the point where if it's an essay I'm assigned, in the past, I probably felt like I was doing my essay just to get a grade. Now if I'm writing an essay, I feel like I'm writing for a reason. Or for a cause.

Engaging readings that help students demystify their oppression is important for students to have concrete, historical ways to explain their current condition as oppressed people. This resulted in deeper investment in the academic process of reading, analyzing, and writing. Figure 2 shows comparative data to illustrate this point. During the 2005-2006 school year, 56% of 10th graders passed the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) for English/Language Arts (ELA); 41% of the 11th graders; 42% of the 12th



**Figure 2.** SHS's 2005-2006 CAHSEE ELA passing rate.

Note. SHS = Slauson High School; CAHSEE = California High School Exit Exam; ELA = English/Language Arts.

graders; and 50% of all students at SHS combined. However, a pedagogy that aimed to be humanizing, relevant, and critical led to increased engagement in the academic heavy lifting that resulted in achievement. The more relevant the curriculum was made to respond the students and communities' humanizing needs, the more students were interested in practicing traditional academic literacies. This proved the old adage true: that repetition is the key to mastery. Although some would argue that the CAHSEE is at the bottom threshold of what we should hope urban students master, it is still significant to note that 100% of the students in the focal class (or for all my classes this year for that matter) passed the ELA component.

So as to not romanticize the potential of a humanizing pedagogy in this context, I must state that there were some students who were selective in developing their social consciousness, motivated to reflect on the intersections of oppression that they identified with more than considering other systems of subjugation that they had the privilege to overlook. Academically, some students engaged in the rigor but did not push themselves to develop a sophisticated social analysis. Still, others developed sophisticated social analysis but did not engage as eagerly in the academic rigor. In a Freireian (2002) sense, problem-posing pedagogy positions students to recognize how they perceive their position in the social margins by allowing students to "overcome their false perception of reality" (p. 86). Even more, this engagement allowed students the language and lens "to name the world, to change it" (p. 88).

## Inspire

Inspiring humanization requires the ability to problematize reality, liberate one's voice, and possess the ability to foster hope in otherwise seemingly hopeless conditions. Arousing student intellectual curiosity increased their interests in studying but did not automatically result in the kind of embodied wisdom needed to make this learning outwardly humanizing for others also needing the motivation to recognize its urgency. This requires designing assessments that develop and evaluate young people on the compassion, critical social analysis, and leadership qualities needed to disrupt dehumanizing social conditions. Inspiration, as a student-learning outcome, seeks to develop in young people the ability to understand and awaken the collective consciousness of others with analysis that appeals to the moral dispositions of their listeners. To inspire, teachers and students must be able to not only identify and illuminate the intimate ways hegemonic thought is present in the immediate reality but also craft social commentary so that it bares out perspectives that resonate with oppressed people's most pressing needs.

The following example was my attempt at inspiring students to take pride in their culminating presentations. The first group began their presentation in a way I found rather lackadaisical and disinteresting. To intervene, I "read and react[ed]" (Duncan-Andrade, 2010, p. 217) to the moment and offered a motivational talk to disrupt students' superficial attempt to present a performance interpretation of their group's collective philosophy for social change,

It's not, this isn't for a grade, this is for our life! They're [student presenters] not talking about question number one, or question number two, or question number three. Or the SAT or the textbook. They're talking about your life. So if we don't take our lives serious, we will never live! And we will continue to be these slaves, we will continue to be these colonized people they want us to be! We will be our own enemy because our enemy has created us in their own image. And if you're down with that, you're going to do your work the same way they did it, not necessarily them, but work like that. And what we want instead is for us to do work like we're trying to survive in the world. [slowly] Read, write, speak, think, like our lives depend on it. Cause your life depends on it. Your children's children's lives depend on it. And if you want to go out like a punk, then go out like a punk. I don't! Cause I hate losing. But this isn't basketball or football that we're talking about, we're talking about . . . livelihood. Food, clothing, shelter. Peace of mind, self-esteem. [pause] And if you don't value those for you or people that you love, then you will continue to think that being knowledgeable is about getting a grade and not about saving our lives. I want you to go up there, speak to us, teach us like our lives depend on it.

To increase the intensity on which students were to teach each other, I took the moment to re-communicate our humanizing learning goals as a class to illuminate the relationship between oppression and education, and to encourage them to find fundamental connections to humanizing approaches to academic learning. Inspiration is less of an end goal and more a part of ongoing processes that is a central part of a humanizing education. Most of the students I taught in this context came to school disenchanted from the process of schooling and have internalized willed not-learning (Kohl, 1994) practices of not taking pride over their learning. This required consistently framing studying as something larger than participating in the mundane practices of seemingly routine approaches to school. This happened on an ongoing basis; at different times in the year; at the various times I observed slippage in students' efforts.

Beyond being a pedagogical practice used to motivate students to learn, the ability to inspire others is also a skill set humanizing education must foster to disrupt dehumanization as it exists in the immediate reality. The accumulation of assessments measuring students' ability to inspire prepared them to agitate, arouse, and inspire peers outside of our class as well. Recognizing the hegemonic ways internalized oppression existed in their communities, students showed concern with heightening community and social consciousness on campus. As part of our annual, end-of-the-year assembly to showcase class-related work to other classes as a way to remedy student identified social struggles, students decided to use this year's space to engage others specifically around racial tensions between Black and Brown communities spilling into the school and surfacing into persistent, escalating aggressions on campus. Students used their narratives, poetry, and research projects to inspire critical thinking, transformative behaviors, and to open up space for participating classes to voice their social and political perspectives aloud.

As the school year continued the conviction on which students presented their developing perspectives deepened in class. The quality of their public speaking and the intensity of their scathing analysis did not weaken despite the presence of hundreds of their peers. Baldwin (1985) wrote that if children "intend to [grow up, they] must at once decide that [they] are stronger than this [criminal] conspiracy [to destroy them] and must never make [their] peace with it" and that "it is their responsibility to change society if [they] think of [themselves as] educated [people]" (p. 331). Recognizing society as worthy of critical interrogation allows students to develop identities through the ways that they critically make sense of their objective reality, problem-pose their liberation, and indict social systems that undermine their humanity. An education, in this sense, is not only more than developing academic skills and accessing information but also bears responsibility for learners to inspire.

After the hosts started the assembly with opening words, the first student to perform their work was Imani. This is part of what she performed,

If they can divide us/then how could we multiply?  
 All along they're holding the answer to the question  
 Get too close to the message and the kill or arrest us  
 But I hold the essence cuz the truth is untold  
 Why pay for gold when it's what your homeland owns?  
 Can't stand on their own  
 All of the red land's stole  
 So greed is portrayed from all the red man's goals . . .  
 Pay attention to this system  
 You only have two decisions: you either end up dead or in prison  
 How is this hate driven?  
 All I know is this ain't livin . . .  
 I'm on a mission not only to make you listen  
 But be a prescription to our impaired vision

Imani appealed to the audience's pride as colonized communities seeking humanization by connecting to their uninformed yet intimate ways they experience dispossession. By utilizing poetic devices to illuminate the contradiction consuming jewels which colonized people have been dispossessed of in their homelands, Imani implied that being conscious of this would allow the audience to navigate out of their positions of powerlessness. Her dynamic, high-energy delivery encouraged listeners to do more than participate in the oppression they found themselves in.

Similarly, Leon's political speech offered a socio-historical critique of the type of xenophobia and internalized racial hatred that is uninformed by a material analysis of colonial dispossession. He claimed that structures of White supremacy isolated their communities to compete for limited resources with others of whom they are taught to hate. In this speech, Leon used the Wizard of Oz as a metaphor to discuss the plight of their communities. Emerald City represented their goals, while the poppy field where Dorothy, the protagonists, fell asleep on her way to the aforementioned capital city epitomized the ways that "We're all asleep." Leon continued to describe how he was beginning to transform his fatalistic fears,

I look around the streets and I'm scared . . . We be to more funerals than anything in life . . . More than half our community either dead, mentally dead, smoked out, or locked up in prison for more years than we can count . . . but then I heard us speak, and I heard our poems, and I ain't scared anymore. Cuz it's not over. Cuz we intelligent. Cuz we alive . . . And we're not fooled. So we

don't have to be scared for our families no more cuz we are all here—Black and Brown.

Leon inspired their divided communities to join together by framing their future in a positive light, delivering a sincere, humble appeal to overcome their collective suffering.

Leon went back to his metaphor and explained that similar to Dorothy in the poppy field, his community was sleeping, but the difference was that she was not ever going to make it to her destination because she lost focus. Similarly, he made the argument that their community has lost focus. This assembly, specifically, helped Leon voice his concern for the racial tensions while, more importantly, take the opportunity for him to encourage his peers to see anew,

While we're fighting each other for scraps of the master's table, what we not asking? Not, how come Mexicans got more than me? How come they're buying more houses on the block than me? But, how come we're not sitting at the table together? We're on the floor fighting, and there are seats up there that are ours. That's the distraction. That's the poppy field. That's the sleep.

Leon continued to speak extemporaneously about the distraction fashion, vanity, hyper-valuing of sex, xenophobia, and gang participation played in their consciousness, saying, "We're so busy playing that we don't see what's really happening. Our focus is good. We're just focused on the wrong thing . . ." Leon then offered an analysis that illustrated the contradiction that disproportionate numbers of Black and Brown populations in prison has, arguing that "we're not criminal" but that "this system is set up for us to fail."

He made the link to colonialism by talking about the genocide of large populations of indigenous people, the stealing of Mexico, and the "importing of Black people as slaves," challenging peers to re-think their investment into uncritical allegiances to their African American identities because "the same [people] that made us slaves in America stole this country from [Mexicans]." In his conclusion, Leon called on his peers to see the bigger picture because doing otherwise would only make privileged communities stronger at oppressed community's expense,

While we're fighting, while we're struggling, there's a much bigger war happening because as long as I could feed you into the machine called the prison, I will still make money. All I'm saying, just like Dorothy, is wake up, shake it off, and choose a different focus . . . because while we're getting destructed by the lies, [White supremacy] is becoming stronger.

Leon inspired by being animated in nature, encouraging attendees to awaken from distractions that maintained their ongoing dispossession. He was not there for his needs as much as he was there for theirs, describing what they should do together. Rather than letting their perceived differences interfere with their solidarity, Leon called for the unification of Black and Brown communities. Their connectedness, in essence, was rooted in identical community underdevelopment, economic exploitation, and overcoming similar struggles.

After the formal presentations, students across the different classes were offered the floor to make comments, ask questions, and share poetry or make informal presentations of their own. The presentations triggered a range of tense, emotional responses that did not necessarily align with the political lines presented by our class. Students in the focal class encouraged honest responses and used the contradictions in other students' statements to analyze further. Consistently putting students in position to engage in critical dialogue, study in the interests of their communities, and be assessed on the compassion and leadership necessary to reframe ideologies used to rationalize hegemony helped the very young people who experienced dehumanization to do the important work of humanization. Leon's self-reflection and observations speak to his developing identity as a leader during the time of the interview and the power of capturing student voices and providing critical analysis to students' efforts to incite transformative change,

I would say I took a leadership role. Like when I spoke, people listened and actually valued what I said . . . I broke up the conversation about Mexicans and Blacks with some intelligent [words] and they actually fed off of it . . . It's like the way I . . . talked about [it] . . . [M]y voice, you know, I'm a leader! And I feel like in my eyes, like, all of us in class felt like we were leaders . . . I felt like our opinions . . . were really valued.

Imani echoed Leon's sentiments in her own way by saying,

I wasn't really a leader when I started [your class] . . . I was leading my people into destruction . . . I look at myself as kind of a role model now. I'm not older than nobody, but I changed a lot. And I feel that people is still confused, caught in the hegemony, you know? There's a lot of people who's still confused and I helped change that. I gave them some knowledge that I learned to maybe try to help solve our problems.

The event may not have transformed the racial tensions in ways that made any long-term change, but students were able to disrupt the dehumanizing narratives shaping much of the immediate divide and conquer hegemony by



calling for solidarity in a context that would otherwise normalize divisive conditions.

Inspiration, as an instructional practice and student outcome, must channel the hurt and desire of listeners to personify the pathos for community suffering that too often goes unacknowledged. It is a political gesture to express, either implicitly or explicitly, that we understand the intimate burdens of our listener's suffering. To state this outright is to indict and critique the society that makes scathing analysis of oppression essential to our healing and humanization. By cultivating the attitude and mind-set to help others see the bigger picture and set collective goals to overcome oppression, inspiration is infectious in that it has the power to transform reactionary politics and self-defeating resistance. Students' ability to impact others in this way defines, in part, achievement from a humanizing educational perspective.

## **Centering Students' Lives While Navigating Professional Expectations**

As described by Stic Man in the quote at the beginning of this article, student disengagement is often rooted in the apparent dissonance between students' complex lives and our classrooms. For historically dispossessed people, a culturally relevant and critical education requires a "vision to recognize decolonial strategies and imagine a reality beyond the colonial structure" (Paperson, 2010, pp. 8-9). Humanizing pedagogies as a response to dispossession draws on traditions of culturally relevant and critical pedagogies to develop critical literacies that foster the type of learning that leads to revolutionary transformation in lives. Humanizing pedagogies, then, aims to teach students to love themselves, love people, and see humanizing education as part of a long history of struggle for radical social justice. In this way, humanizing pedagogies helps students radically heal from their suffering, allowing young people to explore the depths of their grief while helping them develop a deeper sense of control over their individual and collective destinies.

Humanizing pedagogies protect people from the current contradictions confronting them, be it self-hate, sexual objectification, over-exploitation, gentrification, the prison industrial complex, or police brutality. Humanizing pedagogies even educate young people on how to have empowering racial, gendered, and class-based relationships with one another. Meaning, we must be much more mindful to understand intersecting systems of oppression, even centering gender and sexuality in our process toward humanization that currently privileges race and class struggles—I say this, first, with myself in mind. Noguera's (2003) argument on teaching Black males applies here, "Without such an understanding, efforts to influence the attitudes

and behaviors of [dispossessed youth] will most likely fail to capture their imaginations and be ignored” (p. 453). This requires creating learning opportunities that respond to the articulated needs of all young folk who struggle to navigate the social conditions of their everyday lives. At the same time, “To have a meaningful impact, this reconceptualization must consist of more than mere token inserts of ethnicity, gender, and class into existing curricular structures and paradigms” (Ball, 1995, p. 286). Beyond learning simply for learning’s sake, we must encourage our students to see the critical literacy skills we teach as important to their survival as people. In other words, humanizing pedagogies draws on cultural relevance, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy to push the political boundaries of schooling so that it accounts for the humanizing learning needed for historically dispossessed people.

As seen in the findings, humanizing pedagogies awaken the critical consciousness and compassion needed to revive revolutionary fervor to recover, reframe, and redirect the ambitions and apprehensions of communities under attack by the toxic contempt of colonialism. The learning that occurred celebrated humanity and helped students better understand the interrelated historical-material, cultural, and social context on which they found themselves. The significance of this approach to a humanizing pedagogy was seen in the ways it was organically complex and channeled the pain and aspirations of young people against the very deep-seeded hatred that have been imposed on their humanity. It recognized the voices of people who too often go unheard, but whose survival in a predatory America is a testament to their ability to survive against the odds. The very practice of this humanizing pedagogy was an indictment of the social system that made it vital. As a result, the learning that emerged captured the creative expression and critical reframing of struggle as validation of these students’ humanity. As Winn and Jackson (2011) stated, “It is through holistic acceptance and support . . . that radical healing can begin for individuals who have been ignored and silenced” (p. 620). In this way, humanizing pedagogies unpack all the beautiful, contradictory, and complex realities of everyday life on the margins so as to cultivate hope in otherwise hopeless conditions.

The practice of humanizing pedagogies compel teachers in urban schools to focus more on developing transformative practices rather than the pressures of high-stakes testing that use pre-packaged, standardized curriculum. Urban teachers must genuinely ground and reground their teaching in the articulated needs of their students and their communities. To do this, urban teachers must challenge deficit models and treat our students’ worlds as assets worthy of social analysis and intellectual introspection (Milner, 2005). In this way, the academic structures that too often silence students from articulating their most pressing needs will become the very spaces that they engage in humanizing

learning experiences that amplify their voices, problematize their personal decision making, and awaken their collective connections.

To honor our professional obligations, moreover, urban teachers must develop critically responsive interpretations of academic standards so that we can create intellectually rigorous and humanizing learning experiences for our students. Although the learning standards hysteria has been associated with the ill-will of the educational reform policy, the reality is that teachers in public schools are still highly accountable to these frameworks in their subject-area classrooms. This requires teachers to gain enough familiarity with these expectations so that they can critically navigate them while also creating ways for students to bring in their own cultures to critically analyze and connect to more sanctioned forms of learning in schools.

In turn, urban educators must design assessments that develop and evaluate young people on the critical consciousness, compassion, and leadership qualities needed to transform unjust social conditions. Toward this end, we must motivate students to transform the world and leverage this desire to also learn in school—which we should see as hand in hand. With these priorities in mind, we respond to student “failure” and disengagement by having them discuss the experiences that shape their worldview through our content areas and the critical and cultural perspectives that will help them develop alternative ideologies concerning their communities. In many ways, this approach validates students in schools that usually do otherwise. We must navigate the institutions we occupy in ways that maintain our professional integrity while not apologizing for its role in maintaining unjust social orders. Instead, we must join our students and communities by providing the type of learning necessary to transform oppressive suffering. This is what it means to teach like lives depend on it.

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