

INCREASING URBAN STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOL: TOWARD THE EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING MODEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the findings of a case study of one K-10 urban expeditionary learning (EL) school. Drawing on theoretical perspectives consistent with the sociocultural theory, data were collected from a variety of sources that included a survey, interviews, field notes from classroom observations and other school activities. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. The study revealed that expeditionary learning in York school was successful because of the school culture, structure, teachers' commitment, and community engagement. This implies that urban school reform hinges on choosing the right reform model, committed teachers and an engaging curriculum.

Keywords: Expeditionary learning, Urban school reform, Student engagement

Historically, among public schools in the US, inner-city students—mostly minorities—experience disproportionate underachievement (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Delpit, 2006). This tendency is often referred to as the achievement gap. Although the challenge to close this gap has received attention from well-intentioned teachers and policy makers for years, they have achieved only a limited success (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010; Cunningham, 2007; Darling-Hammond; 2010). Researchers believe that improving disadvantaged urban schools is a complex and multifaceted endeavor that requires a comprehensive and integrated set of community, school, and related social programs (Bryk et al., 2010). In order to be effective, such schools must alter the quality and quantity of learning opportunities that these students encounter (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Since World War II, efforts to improve instruction and student achievement in American schools have led to several approaches to moving research into practice which have motivated successive waves of federal education policies, beginning with the curriculum reform of the 1960s, the development of federal programs during the 1970s and beyond, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In 1991, The New American Schools Development Corporation issued a call for proposals for comprehensive “break the mold” school reforms to improve achievement in the country’s lowest-performing schools. In response, Outward Bound organized a design team made up of several

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interest groups and wrote a proposal for Expeditionary Learning. In 1993, ten demonstration schools in five cities agreed to partner with Expeditionary Learning. Expeditionary Learning has been found to be an effective model of school reform (Cross, 2004).

Expeditionary Learning (EL) Schools' Outward Bound program is a comprehensive K-12 educational design that combines rigorous academic content and real world projects called "learning expeditions" with active teaching and community service. EL schools' literature states that they are "interested in creating good schools of a certain kind—more humane, adventurous and rigorous than the norm" (Woodfin, 2009, p. 196). Expeditionary learning is experiential in nature and conceptualized on some design principles, among which are the primacy of self-discovery, collaboration and competition, service and compassion, and taking responsibility for learning (Cousins, 2000). I argue the need to recognize EL as a highly promising model of urban school reform. This study aims to highlight key aspects of one EL school that promotes engagement and student achievement.

The following questions are pertinent to the study: What cultural, structural, or pedagogical factors within one EL school facilitate student engagement and ultimately student achievement? How do these factors manifest in everyday interaction between teachers and students and among students?

Theoretical Frame

I approach this study using a sociocultural framework, which posits that human activity and mental functioning do not occur in isolation but rather emerge as people interact within particular spaces (Vygotsky, 1978). Socioculturalists believe that elements in the social environment such as the classroom, school, and family/community impact teaching and learning processes and thereby impact educational outcomes (Schoen, 2011). Knowledge is mutually constituted and dynamically co-constructed by both teachers and students and the classroom is conceived as a learning-centered context for learning. Sociocultural theory emphasizes the building of a community of learners that utilizes collaborative learning, authentic assessment, and active students' participation in three mutually constituted planes: apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Rogoff, 1994; Wertsch, 1995). This perspective therefore offers a way to examine one expeditionary learning school as a social unit and how its unique approach to educating urban students increases their engagement with school.

Context of the Study

Transcripts for this study were obtained from a year-long study of one expeditionary school located in an urban district of a medium-sized city in the northeastern USA. The school district has 34,000 students and about 3500 teachers. York school (all names are pseudonyms) is a K-10 school and will become K-12 by 2015. Seventy-two percent of the students are on free or reduced

cost meals. The racial makeup of the school is Black, 75%, Hispanics, 8%, White, 14% and others 3%.

York operated as a traditional school until 2001 when the teachers and administrators were given the option to choose a reform model from choices such as Reading First, America's Choice, Success for All and the Expeditionary Learning (EL) model. York teachers and staff voted overwhelmingly to adopt the EL model (Peck, 2010; Woodfin, 2009). Since then, the school has been described as a hallmark of success and has won numerous awards such as the "High Performing Gap Closing School" Award, and a National Blue Ribbon School Award from the United States Department of Education in 2010. Admission into this school is based on a city-wide drawing and students are not restricted by geographic zone. The school accepts students based on a random lottery for approximately 30 kindergarten slots and a few other slots in other grade levels that inevitably open up each year due to attrition.

Data sources for this study included interviews, survey, and field notes from classroom observations of three grade levels. Data analysis was ongoing and recursive and was aimed at uncovering patterns of actions, events, practices, and behavior among participants (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998). This process involved a thematic analysis (Elly, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991). Steps in the thematic analysis include establishing thinking units, categories, themes and integrating findings. By examining what teachers and students were doing, what they said, and the activities and contexts in which they were immersed, I was able to deduce themes. Triangulation of data sources, refining working themes and member checks were additional standards used to enhance trustworthiness.

York school has a unique culture and structure that contribute to student engagement and overall academic achievement. Other aspects of the school that contribute to its success include teacher professional development as well as its community outreach programs.

School Culture

A very important factor in York school's success is the school culture. Some of the unique aspects of the school culture include collaboration, the use of learning expeditions, service learning, and its community orientation. Rogoff (2003) defines a community as a group of people who have some common and continuing organization, values, understanding, history, and practices. Perhaps one of the most distinguishing characteristics of this school is the sense of community within the school. One of the ways that this community is achieved is through the school-wide morning meetings. This is a 45-50 minute weekly gathering of teachers, students, administrators, and some parents. The school-wide morning meeting can best be described as a complete entertainment package, interspersed with powerful learning. It is, in the words of Woodfin (2009), a celebration of the music and dance styles of African American urban culture as much as a demonstration of how learning can be connected powerfully to performance. It also serves an integration purpose as content area subjects such as math, science, social studies, music, and art are all integrated with literacy

through performance.

For this meeting, all the teachers and their students file into the school gym and arrange themselves in a semi-circular formation during which they are initially treated to different popular hip-pop music such as the Black Eyed Peas “Let’s Get It Started” and others like the “Gangnam Style” by PSY. The entire series of events are facilitated by the sixth-grade disc jockeys of the school’s mock radio station, WGYB (We Got Your Back). The assembly starts by having the students recite the Pledge of Allegiance, the school pledge, and the model citizens’ pledge. Standard events include announcements and awards of various kinds, recitation of poems, performances about letters, numbers, and books of the week. Each week, one grade level performs at the meeting. Lisa, an eighth grader who transferred to York school from another school reflected on this:

In this school we do things more as a community. In my former school it was separate; the whole school never really did anything together. But in this school, we do things together and it’s more of a community than just separate parts. It’s like a family kind of. We all look out for each other and teachers look out for us... so like a family. We all got to know each other really well. We do a lot of stuff as a group so we get to know different students. We don’t just work in groups with the people we’ve become friends with; we work with new people each time

The way this student felt as a member of the school community contrasts sharply from that of her former school where individualism prevailed. Her response also highlights a very important aspect of the school: collaboration.

Collaboration

In York school, collaboration is a core practice which teachers and students adhere to. Teachers work collaboratively to design and implement the curriculum. A second grade teacher, Mrs. Watson had this to say about collaboration in the school:

We do a lot of collaboration. That was new to me when I came to this school; I was always used to just doing my own thing, doing things my way, but when I came here, everything is teamwork, everything is collaboration. So we have two planning periods a week, which are an hour long. We have two specials back to back for the kids so it gives us a full hour twice a week. During that time we plan each week together and we’re doing the same thing in each classroom. So the three teachers – the special education teacher, the other second grade teacher and I – we collaborate in everything, all the plans, all the assessments, everything there is.

Collaboration ensures that all teachers have a common goal of meeting curricular standards and implement them uniformly. Collaboration among teachers is just one side of the coin; students are encouraged and in fact collaborate daily in their learning. Within the spirit of collaboration, students are encouraged to compete, not with each other but with their own personal best and with rigorous standards and excellence. Apart from collaboration, learning expeditions provide the basis for most learning activities in the school.

Learning Expeditions

Learning expeditions are the hallmark of EL schools. An expedition is an in-depth study of a topic through long-term investigations that combine rigorous academic content with active learning and community service that lead to authentic projects. EL schools' expeditions involve field trips, use of experts, guest speakers, and hands-on problem solving activities.

While studying plants as part of a science expedition on the interconnection of plants and animals, Watson's second grade students planted sunflower seeds and observed as they grew into flowering plants. They wrote weekly observations in their science notebooks and recorded all changes that they noticed. In addition, the children visited a local public market where they saw several species of plants displayed by vendors at the market. They also learned how to select and buy the best quality fruits and vegetables. After the market trip, a guest teacher presented a "food tasting" lesson to the students. She brought in a variety of fruits and vegetables to demonstrate parts of plants such as roots, stems, leaves, flowers, fruits and seeds. They also had a field trip to study the maple tree and the production of maple syrup. All these activities were done in connection with only one aspect of the bigger expedition. There were several other field trips made as a result of the expedition.

Eighth graders, on the other hand, embarked on a science-based expedition titled "What Makes Me, Me." This was an expedition that involved the study of human cells, DNA, genetics, and the role of race in the development of the US. As part of this expedition, students read an anchor text for language arts titled *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot. The field trips that students participated in as part of this expedition included a visit to a local theater to view *The Way of All Flesh*, which was a BBC documentary on Henrietta Lacks. In addition, the students had a field trip to a nearby university to view the electron and confocal microscopes which were mentioned in the book about Henrietta Lacks. The students also had a Skype interview with Dr. Lengauer, who has worked on cancer research and HeLa cells. Finally, the students produced a science-based magazine that communicated information similar to that of the *Rolling Stone* magazine.

In the spring of the same academic year, the eighth graders participated on a social studies expedition titled "What Makes Us Us?" (coded as WMUU), that examined how conflict affected and shaped communities, with a focus on WWII, the civil rights movement, the great migration, and the great depression. As part of

this expedition, six prominent and successful African Americans were invited as guest speakers. They shared with the students their life histories and how they “beat the odds” of discrimination and racism during some of the local conflicts. The students later watched a documentary titled *July '64*, which was about the city’s race riots, and also *Coney 2012*, which is a documentary about a Ugandan warlord. These documentaries were dissected not only for their content but also for their production features. The students then produced their own documentary about the city’s civil rights movement and race riots after interviewing many of the principal actors. In a survey at the end of the year, all students agreed that the expeditions were very engaging and fun. Interviews of some eighth graders reiterated the survey result. Tessy, a female eighth grader noted:

I like this school because we do expeditionary learning and it’s really fun. We do more hands-on activities most of the time, like field studies. I like the fact that we also get to work more with technology. For example during the WMUU expedition, we made a documentary about What Makes Us, Us... I was one of the four editors from each class. We learned how to use iMovie and put together a documentary that’s about an hour long. It was really fun.

The vignette above demonstrates the power of expeditionary learning on student motivation and learning. Also note that the student was one of the editors who worked on the documentary.

Another eighth grader, Larry discussed the impact of one guest speaker on his learning during the WMUU expedition:

I just liked the way he spoke and I liked what he was saying because it seemed very true. He went through a lot of things but he’s still, I’m not going to say *very* famous, but he’s very educated even though he went through a lot of things as an African American in the past...he still went and got his Ph.D. I mean it just motivates me to try to work hard.... If he can go through a lot of things and still was able to succeed and be famous, it just inspires me that I can still do it too. And it should be easier for me because I have more opportunities now than he did.

As we can see from this student, the expedition connected meaningfully to his life because the guest speakers were African Americans who experienced some of the conflicts that they read about. This is what Larson and Marsh (2005) describe as efficacious learning. Efficacious learning ensures that learning is connected meaningfully to learners’ social and cultural background. Another way that learning is connected to students’ lives is through service learning.

Service Learning

A very important aspect of expeditionary learning is the use of service

learning. Service learning is an educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets community needs. In addition, students reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the topic under study, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. In the EL model, service learning is an integral part of academic work, not an afterthought or add-on. It is an extension of the ethic of kindness and service that permeates the school. Students and teachers regularly discuss the ways they can contribute to a better world.

The eighth graders had a community service component to the expedition described earlier. The science expedition, “What Makes Me, Me” (WMMM) was basically a study of human cells including cancer cells. For service learning, the students made and donated blankets as well as money to “Teens with Cancer.” This money was raised from the sale of the magazines that the students produced as the end product of the expedition. For the WMUU expedition, students created a documentary about the city’s experience during the race riots of the '60s. They researched about the race riots and civil rights movement and interviewed several elderly people. The documentary was later distributed to several community leaders and also donated to the local library. The documentary was a service to the community because it was the first of its kind and it helped provide resources about the city’s race riots and civil rights movement.

Teacher Learning and Community Engagement

EL schools focus on improving student achievement by developing quality teachers. Professional development, feedback, and coaching are carefully aligned to formal evaluation systems in order to promote the professional growth of teachers and ensure school-wide excellence. In York school, the leadership supports inquiry-based staff development approach that involves study groups and structured observations to help teachers focus on the relationship between student learning and instructional and assessment practices. Teachers learn from external agents such as the school designers and also from each other and share students’ assessment data in ways that promote student learning.

The school has several teacher learning groups which include grade level teams, data-inquiry teams and cross disciplinary teams. These groups meet weekly or monthly and share data to improve their pedagogy. Teacher learning is not restricted to curriculum or assessment. As part of community outreach, teachers also worked to understand the neighborhood where the school is located and learn about the cultures of the people and about parents of their students.

Parent and Community Outreach

Researchers of minority education have stressed the need to make use of students’ funds of knowledge (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Funds of knowledge are culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential to household and individual functioning. Funds of knowledge are similar to an

instructional practice known as cultural modeling (Lee, 2007) in which students' out of school practices and routines are linked to school practices to support academic learning. Teachers cannot make use of either student's funds of knowledge or cultural modeling if they do not understand their students, their families, and community. In an exceptional effort to connect to parents and the school community, York school teachers and administrators embarked on an *Urban Expedition*. Funded by a grant from a local university, this expedition was designed to help teachers better connect to the parents of their students and understand the community where the school is located. York school leadership and staff are cognizant of certain assumptions, albeit wrongly, often made about urban teachers and families. Two of the assumptions are that White teachers cannot effectively teach students of color and that urban families do not participate in or care about their children's education. They hoped the urban expedition would help to curb any deficit thinking

The urban expedition was designed to achieve certain objectives: to increase teachers' awareness of the cultures of the students and their families; to help teachers reflect upon and critique the meaning of "high expectations" for all students; and to expand their understanding and commitment to equity and culturally responsive teaching at the school. By walking in the shoes of their students and parents, they believe that teachers would be more sensitive to issues involving students and their families. During the expedition, teachers were led by parent facilitators. They stopped at some of the parents' homes to break bread and socialize with them. They explored local libraries and grocery stores and learned about neighborhood associations. They also had conversations with community leaders and parents. A survey and interview of teachers who participated in the expedition indicated that the expedition deepened the empathic relationship between staff and families. More staff members were willing to engage in conversations with their students' families and became more knowledgeable about community resources and comfortable with visiting students' neighborhoods. York school also partners with some community organizations to attract grant money or use the expertise available in the community.

Community Partners

One of the core practices of this school is their community engagement. A strong parent/teacher association helps to ensure that parents' voices are heard and well represented in all the activities of the school. In addition, the school partners with local businesses and organizations, as well as area colleges and experts. There are also several community partners and professionals who volunteer their time to come in and talk to the students or teach their skills. York school has a partnership with a nearby appellate court. Lawyers in the court volunteer in the school and work with students on the topic of law and order. In addition, the students usually visit the court where they watch live Supreme Court cases and also prepare mock cases related to the topics they are learning. A local community bank partnered with the school to design a financial literacy course. They also support the school with grants and manpower. A host of other community

agencies and institutions also support the school through grants and other forms of collaboration.

Discussion and Implications

Urban schooling has traditionally been associated with low achievement, high dropout rates, and low college attainment. However, there are also success stories. Successful urban schools are those that have teachers who are committed to a collective responsibility for improved students' learning, strong leadership, strong staff collaboration, professional development, shared assessment data leading to instructional decisions, and outreach to parents and communities (Bryk et al., 2010; Cunningham, 2007). In addition, such schools emphasize high expectations for student learning, as well as higher level thinking and self-regulation (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008). These qualities are the hallmark of York School and they represent what colleges and employers want more of and align with the vision of the new Common Core Curriculum's emphasis on career and job readiness.

This study implies that given committed teachers and leadership, as well as the right school reform model, the problems usually associated with urban schools such as high dropout rates, low achievement, and less student and family engagement with school could be drastically reduced or eliminated. Urban students need schools with highly committed teachers, engaging content and a school community where students feel loved and accepted for who they are. In the current era of high stakes testing where innovative teaching and meaningful curriculum are often compromised, it is critical to highlight successful schools in which innovative teaching and high test scores are simultaneously achieved—where the focus on achieving curriculum standards does not mean teaching to the test but giving students the opportunity for meaningful and engaging learning.

The question of what is it that makes good schools good and why it is urgent that we figure out how to make them available to all children is a critical one and should be the concern of all educators especially those committed to urban teaching and learning.

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