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Power Lunch: Optimizing Extra-Curricular Reading Groups at Oakeside High¹

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¹ All proper names are pseudonyms

Abstract

There is a major problem when ninth- and tenth-graders are reading at a fifth grade level. It is more than just an indicator of students' unwillingness to participate in school – it is a reflection of student disengagement; disengagement being more than just typical teenage rebellion.

Teenagers become disengaged for a multitude of reasons, but a key feature of engagement is close, trusting, caring relationships with teachers. Within the context of an extra-curricular reading group which met twice a week during student's lunchtime, culturally relevant literature was used to create teacher-student relationships and boost overall engagement with scholastic material.

Power Lunch: Optimizing Extra-Curricular Reading Groups at Oakside High

Setting the Stage

Omar, a freshman in high school, enters his English class. He really did not want to come today, but he has already skipped twice this week; it is only Wednesday. Omar got pretty good grades, up until this year. High school is very different for him than elementary school or junior high was. He just moved from a small town to a much bigger one. He used to know everyone at his old schools – including all the teachers. Most of them were Mexican like him. This new place; it is a much different story. He has not made very many friends yet and there are a whole lot more people and much more diversity at this huge new school.

Omar used to love school. Mondays were great because everyone would discuss what they did over the weekend and there were new and exciting lessons to start on. That does not happen here; he dreads Mondays. Omar cannot remember a teacher here asking how his weekend was – he cannot remember a teacher asking him anything! He is pretty sure (three months into the year) no one even knows his name. Up until last year, he arrived at each class ready to go, homework done, and excited to learn new things. Now, he has been skipping almost as many classes as he attends, and he only does about one-third of the assignments he is given.

Omar's family is very worried about him. His whole demeanor has changed. He used to be very respectful and responsible, but now he is rude, refuses to do his chores, and will not be involved with anything they do. At first his father thought that it was just normal teenage rebellion. He believed that it was a phase that Omar would quickly grow out of. It has been months now, and things have not improved. Omar's mother, remembering how many friends he

had back before the moved is convinced that he made quick friends with some bad kids and has fallen in with the wrong crowd. They decide that they must act before things get worse.

Omar's parents try to talk about him about what is going on. He will not open up, so they go to the school. They are used to being able to easily get in contact with Omar's teachers, so they are more than a little surprised when they call the office and are told that they will have to either schedule a meeting, or e-mail the teacher – leaving a message is not an option. They find it unsettling that the school is so nonchalant about Omar's situation, but they schedule a meeting – the soonest one being two weeks away – with the home-room teacher.

Upon sitting down with Mrs. Stephens, she does not immediately know who Omar is. They have to explain to her what he looks like, and still it takes quite a while for it to finally *click*. Once they begin the conversation the teacher makes one thing very clear – that Omar does not care about school. He is disengaged, does not respect her, and will not pay attention to what they are doing in class. She tells them that this happens a lot with the Hispanic students at the school. She says that they just come to a point where they “switch off” and there is nothing anyone can do about it.

When they get home, Omar's parents are at a loss. His teacher offered no solution but to say that if Omar didn't start caring and getting his work done, he would fail out of school before he made it to sophomore year. Seeing no option but to beg Omar to show an interest and at least do the bare minimum, his parents cautiously approach him. They tell him what the teacher told him – and ask him to try harder. He does not have a whole lot to say in response. He simply tells them that he does not need to be in school, that it is not going to get him anywhere, and his teachers really do not even notice whether he in class or not. He tells them, “If they don't care whether I do good and pass, why should I?”

What is the Issue and Why is it a Problem?

Omar's story is fictional, but the situation is very real and happening in classrooms every single day. Students are disengaged – from their teachers, their peers, and schooling in general. Lisa Pellerin (2000) of the American Educational Research Association defined school engagement as a student's "psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (p.3). Disengagement, then, could be defined as a lack of investment and effort in school. She goes on to say that the National Center for Effective Secondary Schools found it to be the "most immediate and persistent issue" that students and teachers face. She found that students in high school and middle school most often become disengaged when they "encounter the impersonal context of junior and senior high schools" (p.3). The National Academy of Science's Research Council had this to say about teens and disengagement: "Academic motivation decreases steadily from the early grades of elementary school into high school. Furthermore, adolescents are too old and too independent to follow teachers' demands out of obedience, and many are too young, inexperienced, or uninformed to fully appreciate the value of succeeding in school" (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008, p.1). The question arises, then, if students have less and less interest and motivation in school as they move from elementary to secondary education – why do they still attend classes and do some work? If there is truly no desire to learn and no value is seen the endeavor, why is *any* effort put forth? The simple answer is that though they have disconnected from school, they still *want* to be engaged, but there are things standing in the way.

Student disengagement is a huge issue because, unless corrected, it leads to students dropping out of school. There is a reason that school is compulsory – education is incredibly

important to adolescents' future. If students are allowed (or arguably pushed) to a place of disengagement, they are not being adequately educated. Student disengagement is not just an unpleasant reality – it is indicative of a social injustice. If students are disengaged, they are not being adequately educated which neglects them as human beings, limits future potential, and negatively impacts their potential to be a part of a successful society.

A major reason for personal disengagement, as cited by Hispanic and Latino youth (the main focus of this study) is a lack of caring on the part of educators. Since teachers often claim the reason they got into the profession is *because* they care about youth and want to make a difference in their lives; there is an obvious disconnect between adolescents and educators as to the definition and appearance of caring in the context of classroom and schools in general. There is a fundamental injustice present in the sheer fact that many students don't feel adequately for by people put in place to do just that.

Literature Review

I was guided to my body of literature by Dr. Miguel Lopez, a faculty member, instructor of several of my classes, and leader of the lunch time reading group. When I sought out literature to supplement the reading suggestions I had been giving, I found that it was extremely difficult to come by substantive literature on the subject of student disengagement, though it is widely regarded as a pressing issue in today's education. Much of the literature I came across suggested things such as, "try something new", "do physical activities", and "incorporate kids' interests into lessons" – i.e. include sports in a study of averages. For the most part, the literature was superficial, as were the actions suggested. Below I will discuss major themes from across the

literature that I found to be relevant (addressing the moral and ethical issues surrounding disengagement, as well as analysis of the issue).

Consequences of Disengagement

Disengagement from school leads to students' eventual dropping out. This has consequences that continue interminably. Lawrence Felice (1981) cites statistical findings that assert the importance of time in school as an indicator of job mobility: "...the number of years of education completed is the primary determinant of occupational success; more important than family background, measured intelligence, or school grade point average" (p. 416). Because it is so important to social mobility, dropping out of school prematurely can be seen as a primary barrier to later success in life. Felice points out that minority students make up the majority of high school drop-outs, and that a school's inability or refusal to accept the responsibility or "holding" these students denies them "an equal educational opportunity" (p.416).

Reasons for Disengagement

Felice (1981) provides philosophical perspective on why students come to the conclusion that school is not necessary. There is an "exchange" relationship between schools and children; in order for the relationship to continue, both sides need to see a "profit". When one side feels they are "receiving the short end" (usually the student) they become angry and seek to break off the "disadvantageous exchange" (p.416). Schools must convince students that the benefits they are receiving by staying in school (immediately or in the future) are greater than the costs, or else students will become disenfranchised and thereby disengage from the experience.

Studies show that teachers very often perceive minority students as less interested in academics, hostile towards authority, and generally more rebellious than their white peers

(Felice, Valenzuela, Bartolome, Flores-Gonzales). There is a strong tie between teacher's expectations of students, student's perspective on their own abilities, and actual performance. If a teacher enters into a relationship with a minority student with the pre-conceived notion that the student is not going to put in much effort, the student will achieve less than if the teacher had high expectations. Many minority students arrive in the classroom feeling as though they have limited social mobility to begin with; teachers' prejudices serve to confirm them, leading to lower achievement, and the cycle is perpetuated.

Felice points out schools' implication in student dropouts, saying, "A school that permits [discreetly racist] and/or encourages [overtly racist] minority students to drop out through the exercise of institutionally racist policies is a school that is failing to provide an equal educational opportunity for students of differing social, economic, and cultural backgrounds" (p.424). Furthermore, he places blame on administrators and those carrying out policy, saying "It is incumbent upon... [policy-makers]...to insure that minority students are not penalized by subtle, institutionally racist rules, practices, and policies" (p.424).

How can Teachers Keep Students Engaged?

The problem of student disengagement goes beyond students not wanting to be in school. Students' lack of interest in school is indicative of a school's inability to engage students. From the literature, it became evident that in order for teachers to get adolescents involved in school, there must first be a relationship with the student. The reason most often given for why and how teaching takes place is "caring". Teachers come to work every day because they "care" about children and want to help them build a future, give them opportunities, etc. Despite teachers' expressed intentions, it is not at all uncommon to hear kids say that their teachers "Just don't

care”. This is especially true among minority students, and it more often than not goes unaddressed; labeled as exaggeration, an excuse for laziness, or rebellion. You would be hard pressed to find a teacher who would say that they do not care about their students, but the problem is that they do not care for the students themselves – as they are – independent of who they are in a classroom context, which is what the students are seeking. In order to effectively teach children from minority backgrounds, educators have to approach caring from a fundamentally different point of view and figure out what it means to care within their cultural and political context.

Lilia Bartolome (1994) critiques the “one size fits all” model of education which operates under the “assumption that instructional methods that are deemed effective for mainstream populations will benefit *all* students, no matter what their backgrounds may be” (p.175). Schools are a vehicle by which non-whites – “politically, socially, economically subordinate in the greater society” – are made to remain subordinate to the “mainstream” culture – “macroculture that has its roots in Western European traditions...[holding] traditionally WASP bodies of knowledge, language use, values, norms and beliefs” (p.175).

Bartolome (1994) believes that there is a need to view the present-day perceptions, conditions, and concerns that students face through a “sociohistorical” lens because it allows teachers to “comprehend the quasi-colonial nature of minority education” (p.176). Teachers very often see student’s problems as things that need to be taken care of, but rarely see themselves as part of the issue. In order to enact real change, teachers need to examine the ways in which they “dehumanize” minority students by ignoring the things they bring with them to school: “culture, language, history, and values” (p.176). In order to raise academics among subordinated youth, there must be a real discussion of the ways in which school make and keep them subordinated.

Bartolome calls for “...politically informed teacher[s, whose] use of methods can create conditions that enable subordinated students to move from their usual passive position to one of active and critical engagement” (Bartolome, 1994, p.177). Educators need to move beyond the “methods fetish” so they may build learning situations that are “informed by both action and reflection”.

A “one size fits all” approach to teaching is ineffective, because it does not allow for adaptation that allows effectiveness in diverse learning environments among a diverse student population. When teachers work to understand the political context in which they are teaching, it allows them to recognize their ability to perpetuate the status quo, or to work towards a change in the “sociocultural reality at the classroom and school level” in order to ensure that “the culture at this micro-level does not reflect the macro-level inequalities, such as asymmetrical power relations that relegate certain cultural groups to a subordinate status” (Bartolome, 1994, p.178).

Teachers can combat social inequality in both explicit and less direct ways – ranging from frank discussions that allow students to communicate their own experiences, to maintaining a democratic classroom that instills in students a sense that they have the “rights and responsibilities of full citizenship” there, and so they “come to expect respectful treatment and authentic estimation in other contexts” (Bartolome, 1994, p.179).

Bartolome (1994) points out that, whether explicit or implicit, a teacher’s subscription to a belief that there is a disadvantage to being part of a historically (and contemporarily) subordinated group renders even the best of educational methodologies ineffective in their hands. Using course material that is relevant to the lives of subordinated youth is often seen as being in competition or opposition to the things that are valued by the larger society, but Bartolome

(1994) says that this needs not be true – in fact, she points out that teachers who work with these students have a “responsibility” to help students acquire skills and knowledge “deemed desirable by the greater society” (p. 183). Very importantly, these essential pieces of education should be *added* to a student’s already present knowledge base, NOT replace it.

Culture’s Role in Engagement and Relationship-Building

First and second generation Mexican American students regularly outperform their third and later generation peers. This phenomena has been blamed on the “fact” that immigrants are eager to adapt to life and succeed in American, while those who were born here are “anti - school” and lack the same drive. Through her study, Valenzuela wanted to show that the shortcomings attributed to U.S. born Mexican-Americans are in fact created by the system that organizes and implements schooling. She claims that these students are not anti-school, but rather, they are against the schooling they receive which they believe disrespects them.

Nilda Flores-Gonzales’ research into kids' identity development outlines the ways in which Latino students become either “street kids” or “school kids” – whether they stay engaged in school, or not. Ultimately she shows, similarly to Valenzuela, that the nature of the education they receive, and the relationships they have with teachers have the most impact on which path students take. In both author’s work, a major indicator of student success is whether or not the students were able to find niches in which they feel a sense of belonging. Adolescents are at an age where they are forming their identities, and relationships with teachers can help them reconcile their cultural, gender, socioeconomic and other personal identifiers with their school identity, but they also showed that it takes a whole lot more than just telling students, “You should stay in school”, “I want you to succeed”, or “Go to college” to build the necessary

relationship. Those words are hollow unless you can show a student that you really care for and respect all the parts of them, not just the student, because it is only a small piece of their overall character.

Flores-Gonzales looked at how inner-city Latino students acquire identities in relation to school, and what it means for their completion of high school. If the identity that they develop for themselves is not affirmed in the treatment and within the curriculum they experience at school, they are unable to reconcile their “street kid” and “school kid” identities, and are forced to choose one; usually they become street kids.

For many Latino youth labeled “lazy” or “underachieving”, or who dropped out, a common reason they cited for not being engaged or “giving up” was the fact that they couldn’t identify that the people around them – their peers, teachers, or administrators – really cared for them. Caring is viewed in fundamentally different ways for different people and between different cultures. In the case of most Latinos, caring involves a deep respect and recognition of culture, so there is a conflict with the systems in place at most schools, which Valenzuela (1999) explains: “Children from Mexico and other parts of Latin America are strongly driven to succeed and they adhere to traditional enabling values like familism, respect for teachers, and a strong work ethic in their quest for upward mobility... loyalty to one's homeland culture provides important social, cultural, and emotional resources that help youth navigate through the educational system”. Therefore, school structures, which attempt to force assimilation and strip students of this identity in favor of becoming “American”, remove the characteristics of these students that help their success.

Beyond being “subtractive” by taking away cultural markers that help students succeed, “...schools are organized formally and informally in ways that fracture students' cultural and ethnic identities, creating social, linguistic, and cultural divisions among the students and between the students and the staff” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.5). This is especially troubling because the relations that students have with school personally – especially teachers – have a huge impact on whether or not students feel like they find a place in school, or if they are alienated. Once again, a difficult-to-break cycle is created. To put it simply: students can't form close relationships because school policy creates a partition between students and administrators, and then students are further alienated because they need a strong relationship with teachers to feel like they belong. Valenzuela says that students invest in schools if their friends are, or if their teachers are invested in them, but policies it very difficult, if not nearly impossible, for students who also wish to maintain cultural integrity.

Among minority races, many adolescents reject schooling because “they correlate academic achievement with "acting white," and because they infer minimal payoff to effort in schooling” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.17). The adoption of this sentiment grows with “extended contact” and “opposition to” the dominant culture. This means that the longer a child is in school (accompanied by "forceful incorporation") and finds opposition to their attempts to maintain their own identity; the less likely they are to see value in school.

Against Latino Youth and Stripping of Culture

“Urban youth, including Mexican American children, frequently choose clothing and accessories that their teachers interpret as signaling disinterest in schooling” because “they consciously or unconsciously oppose the cultural practices and discourses associated with the

dominant group” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.18). To clarify, teachers interpret students’ unwillingness to adopt a new culture and forgo their own as a disinterest in school. Just because a student does not want to abandon his or her background, does not mean that he or she does not want to be educated. What they reject is *schooling*— “the *content* of their education and the way it is *offered* to them” (p.19, emphasis added). When teachers encounter the clothing and attitudes they interpret as rebellious or as not caring, they don’t try to forge deep and meaningful relationships with these students. When teachers believe that students don’t care, and therefore don’t make attempts to connect, they confirm the beliefs students have about schools being impersonal, uncaring, “irrelevant” and “lifeless”.

Education in the U.S. seeks to create “Americans”; therefore the presence of any other culture poses a threat. This results in “Mexican youth who ‘learn’ perhaps no stronger lesson in school than to devalue the Spanish language, Mexico, Mexican culture, and all things Mexican” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.19). Because of this, the cultural values of respect for authority, belief in the ability to achieve, and optimism are inadvertently removed. As this takes place, and the later generations of Mexican youth form more and more oppositional personalities and appearances, the gap between them and their more recently immigrated peers widens because recent immigrants are “appalled by the attire and comportment of their roguish U.S. born counterparts” and “the more culturally assimilated youth shun their immigrant counterparts as ‘uncool,’ subdued, and ‘embarrassing’ for embodying characteristics they wish to disclaim” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.19). Hostility also grows because the recent immigrants regularly outperform the more assimilated youth specifically because they maintain the characteristics that the adapted youth have either spurned or had stripped from them. Valenzuela later explains the consequences and cyclical nature of these issues, stating “Besides fueling misunderstandings and intolerance

between first and later generations of Mexican youth, the systematic undervaluing of people and things Mexican erodes relations among students, as well as between teachers and students.

Cultural distance produces social distance, which in turn reinforces cultural distance” (p.20).

Differing Definitions of Caring

Nell Noddings expresses a need for caring relationships between students and teachers such that students truly feel that they matter to their teachers. This is not the traditional sense of caring in which teachers do what they believe is best for students – caring in this context occurs only when teachers do what *is* best for students, and the students agree. These kinds of relationships, though essential, are extremely difficult to forge because there is often a fundamental misunderstanding on either side as to what caring about (and in) school really means.

“*Educación*” is more than just the Spanish word for education. Within the context of schools, it embodies Mexican culture. It “provides instructions on how one should live in the world. With its emphasis on respect, responsibility, and sociality, it provides a benchmark against which all humans are to be judged, formally educated or not” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.21). It is indivisible from caring. As such, caring – in the way that Latino students need – “accords moral authority to teachers and institutional structures that value and actively promote respect and a search for connection, between teacher and student and among students themselves” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.21).

Valenzuela (1999) points out that schools are built around “aesthetic caring” – meaning that attention is paid to ideas and things, rather than the things that should be – caring and nurturing relationships. She critiques the fact that teachers overly concerned with form and “non-

personal content” and hardly (if at all) pay attention to children’s “subjective reality” (p.21) – their everyday lives. This caring is not recognized by children, so it is as though they do not care at all; according to Noddings and Valenzuela’s definitions, in fact, they do not. Authentic caring is about more than just academics and mastery of school subjects. It instills children with responsibilities – moral, social, and personal – that become the foundation for all other education. It also includes teaching competence in society – “wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.23).

There is a huge barrier to education when teachers want students to care about school, but the students demand to be cared for themselves before they care about school. Valenzuela (1999) describes this constant problem as “students and school officials talking past each other” (p.24). Neither side is hearing what the other is saying, but keeps making demands; each group becomes frustrated, and ultimately gives up after developing a deep sense of alienation from the other side. What is more, teachers and school officials don’t understand that what they are asking goes beyond simply students to care about classes, it is asking them to adopt and align themselves with a curriculum and culture that many students perceive as “dismissive” or with people that they feel “hold their culture and community in contempt” (p.25). The only way for students to care (in a way that officials recognize), then, is to “subtract” their culture from the equation and give up a very important piece of themselves. When they refuse to do so, their education and social environments suffer. Because administrators do not understand (or in some cases just do not care) what their requests entail for subordinate students, “U.S. born youth, who hear in the demand to ‘care about’ school an implicit threat to their ethnic identity, often withdraw or rebel” (Valenzuela, 1999, p.24).

Latino students are not alone in wanting to be free to be themselves. William Ayers (1997) cites Louise Kaplan, who said that adolescents, “wish above all to achieve some realistic power over the real world in which they live while at the same time remaining true to their values and ideals” (p.139). He repeats the words of a troubled teen, but the words could very well have come out of the mouth of almost any adolescent: “See me for who I am...” (p.139). There is a fear of “being looked at but never seen”; adolescents, especially those in conflicted situations want to be noticed, significant, and heard.

Modern classroom rhetoric expresses an equal valuing of all cultures, but indicators of immersion in non-white culture (such as primarily speaking a language other than English, coming from a low socio-economic status, or conforming to cultural practices that are in opposition to the mainstream white culture) are seen as deficiencies. These prejudices can be pervasive and sneaky, and unless teachers take the time and are willing to evaluate their own ideologies, they may continue unchecked. Going back to Valenzuela’s work – unacknowledged or unexamined personal prejudices on the part of teachers are often the reason that students find their teachers to be uncaring. The contradiction of teachers saying they respect and value students and their culture, but then acting in ways that exhibit their preconceptions (whether personally noted or not) hurts students and prevents them from forming trusting relationships – thereby hampering teaching and learning.

For Latino students in particular, a feeling that they are being cared for as a whole is vital to trust. One of the reasons that this work was so interesting and significant for me is that I grew up in the same town, with the same cultural background as these students, but even though I often didn’t feel that my teachers really cared or “spoke to” the things I brought to the classroom with me – like family history and culture – I still trusted that they knew how to educate me.

While they didn't educate in a way that acknowledged and "cared for" my status as a Mexican-Cuban American, they did indicate to me that they cared about me as a student – which was always "enough" for me. A key difference between me and the students I worked with is my socio-economic background, and my own identity formation. I didn't grow up in the "inner-city". My culture never clashed with my education. For me I was first and foremost a student, then a Latina, whereas these students are first and foremost Latino, and then have to negotiate their status as students.

Method

Context

Oakside High, the pseudonym for the school in which the project took (and continues to take) place is a grades nine through 12 high school with a student population of approximately 2,500. The city in which it is located is mid-sized and has a high Hispanic population (70%), as does the school itself (97.7%) – much higher than county (74%) or district (82.3%) averages. The school is located in a part of town that is well-known for gang-violence, and in which a high proportion of citizens live in poverty.

The actions taken for this project took place in a number of settings, ranging from the students' own classroom to a classroom and the dining commons on the CSUMB campus. The classroom at Oakside High where the regular, twice-weekly meetings took place was an English classroom. It was a room that the students were familiar with and felt comfortable in. During discussions, students who were not part of the group often filtered in and out, but never actually came into contact with the reading group participants or joined the discussions.

Participants and Participant Selection

The ongoing study consists of nine students who willingly take part in the group. Of the nine, two of the participants are girls. The students are freshmen and sophomores, with ages ranging from about 14 to 16. All the students we worked with are Hispanic.

Researcher

This project was originally relevant to me because it involved working with students from my hometown, whose everyday lives seemed a world away from my own. I remember growing up and fearing crossing over onto the EAST SIDE. I grew up being afraid to travel outside my own neighborhood. Since the time I was old enough to think about it, I was sure that I wanted to move out of the city – I had to get out, because in my mind there was no redeemable quality to find there. I left for a college in southern California right out of high school, and for the first time in my life, the newspaper headlines were about more than gang violence and things to be feared. During my three years away from home, I can only remember one gang-related event – there was a stabbing that was thought to have *possible* gang ties. People were up in arms and really scared, but I remember thinking, “It’s *possibly* gang related? And it was a stabbing? What are people freaking out about? People get shot EVERY DAY back home, and it’s DEFINITELY gang-related!” It was scary when I realized that I so easily minimized a horrible event because of the bad things that I had seen in my past. I had never had a real connection to the violence, but it had changed me. When I finally returned home I was eager to find a way to leave again, because after years away I had forgotten what it was like to be inundated by the horrors of gang violence and each instance shocked and terrified me.

I remember worrying about my younger cousins; hoping that they would be able to avoid getting sucked into a gang; wondering how they would get out of town. Children who come from

an area overwhelmed by issues of poverty and violence are very often told to get an education so they can get out. That was always my plan. Last year, a conversation in a class made me change my mind. I was introduced to the idea of making home a better place, so that people did not have to “get out”. I began to think about how I was fortunate enough to pursue the dream of moving away, while many children would never be able to entertain the idea. From then on, I began a pursuit of understanding more about the people in my city, and doing what I could to make it a place that people want to *stay*.

I see coming from the same town and cultural background as the student participants as the major factors that helped me to find success with this project. Upon meeting the students, they showed an interest in the fact that I was born and grew up in the same place as them, and I went on to college. I believe myself to be open to new information and experiences, so it was my hope that flexibility would help me connect with the children. I was afraid from the start, though, that my very different experiences in the city would create a barrier to understanding. I went to the high school that is often seen as the “best” in the city. I took all the honors and advanced placement classes, and my teenage years were dominated by my participation in water polo – I led a very white-washed life. While all these kids were clearly identifiable as Latinos, I am only Hispanic in name and physical appearance. My biggest fear was that being from the other side of town would inhibit my ability to relate to the kids. I grew up fearing their neighborhood, but for me it was simple – I simply avoided it. I hoped that it was not too late to show an interest. Another fear I had was that my own deeply-seeded fear of and aversion to the area would hinder my performance there. I was definitely biased – I grew up under the impression that kids from the East Side *wanted* to be in gangs, that they sought them out, and that school was lowest on their list of things to do. I had to work very hard to consider how differences in our lifestyles lead

to our different outlooks on life, school, and the area we were working in, as well as culture, family, and what is “normal”. These kids often said that they were not afraid of gangs, that things were not as bad as the newspapers and television made it seem. I had to be sure that I did not bring my prejudices with me into the classroom. Most of all, I did not want to put down the area that they called home because of my own issues with it.

Procedure

In order to collect data for my study, I attempted to collect data through in-group discussions and a paper and pencil survey. I found the students to be completely unwilling to fill out the survey. As such, I have a complete lack of hard data to analyze. Instead, I will discuss what happened with the group.

The group met twice a week, Wednesday and Thursday, during lunch. The students and group leaders would gather a set of desks and form a circle to facilitate easy discussion. We would start off the day by asking if there were any “burning questions” that students wanted to discuss before we began working through the text. We would then begin to analyze the book, taking into account both words and pictures. The students were asked to examine the book using typical literary conventions such as critical reading and examining syntax, but they were also asked to make connections with their everyday lives. Students were given weekly questions on the chapters we discussed, but most of the time they were left uncompleted.

Data Analysis

Although it was difficult to find a way to quantify, the level of engagement that these students had with the text was phenomenal. These students, for the most part were reading somewhere around a 5th grade level, though they were in high school. Their engagement with the

text at all, something that most were not doing in their normal everyday English classes, was evidence of our success in creating an environment in which these students felt comfortable and cared-for enough to engage the curriculum. Even though the participants did not fill out the survey that was provided, I learned something from it. The survey was in no way tied to anything they were doing. Everything the students participated in and talked about was something that they cared about. It became clear that the survey flopped because I did nothing to make the students care about it, or in some way showed that the survey would in some way help them.

Results

The only data collected was based on students' answers to in-group discussions. Students answers did, overwhelmingly reinforce the fact our strategies were successful. Students' willingness to read and engage based on the fact that they could relate with the material was evident when we asked what the book was about and why they liked it. Some of the answers we got were:

“*Yummy* is a story about my life.”

“I liked the book because it's about reality. It's about things that happen in my neighborhood.”

“I liked the book because of the pictures. It made it easier for me to read.”

“The story made me think about my friends and my life.”

“I was interested in the story because I could see that other kids in other places live like us. I wanted to keep reading.”

These students who were not reading their assigned books in other classes and barely sliding by in school were coming in and doing work that they did not have to, because the things we were reading about, talking about, and doing actually resonated with them. They were doing academic work they were not forced to because it mattered to them.

Action Justification

Flores-Gonzales lays out the seven factors that contribute to the development of “School-kid” identities (Taken directly from *School Kids/Street Kids* p.154-155):

1. School kids have opportunities to take on the socially appropriate role of students.
2. They can count on the support of their teachers and peers.
3. They get recognition and awards.
4. They develop close and warm relationships with teachers and other school kids.
5. They receive constant positive feedback for their adequate performance as students.
6. They are given opportunities to explore and incorporate into their school-kid identity various other school-related identities.
7. They are encouraged to explore possibilities for their future and to aspire – and expect – to become socially mobile.

These characteristics of school kids are rather abstract, and while it makes sense that a scholastically engaged adolescent would embody them, it can be difficult to articulate ways to help students acquire them.

Rather than just giving educators an idea of what students need to succeed, she also gives ways that teachers can assist students in their pursuit. Our action with the reading group reflects the things that recommendations Flores-Gonzales puts forth for ways in which schools can assist students in become school kids. We met with students twice weekly as our normal meeting, but there were also field-trips and actions outside of class that helped the formation of strong relationships and guidance towards a reconciled “school-kid” and “street-kid” persona for the nine student volunteers.

First, Flores-Gonzales suggests the need to introduce students to a challenging curriculum that they find meaningful - students should be able and want to engage material because they can relate, and lessons “speak to their reality” (p.155). We did this by introducing the students to

culturally relevant literature. The books we used contained events and cultures that the students were familiar with and a part of. *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* recounts the tale of an eleven year-old boy that becomes involved in a gang, commits a murder, and then is killed himself; students at Oakside are very familiar with gang violence – it is an everyday occurrence. *Graffiti Girl* is a novel that follows a Mexican girl from a town very much like Oakside, who struggles to express her true self as an artist through the controversial medium of graffiti. *Mexican White Boy* is the story of a biracial teen (half-Mexican/half-white) who struggles to find his place between the cultures and within his own family. The main characters in the stories all shared commonalities with our students. When asked why they liked the books, the most common answer was always, “I can relate.” Discussions were used to explore writing conventions and use critical reading skills as they would have in mainstream English class, but in this case the students actually read the books because the material was fitting in their lives.

Second, Flores-Gonzales points out that students should be made to feel as though they “count”, and are “somebody” – teachers know their names, absence will be noted, treated with respect and dignity. Dr. Lopez provided us with cards that showed the students photos, as well as their names so that we could learn them – showing the students we would take the effort to know who they were. Whenever a student failed to show up to one of the meetings, an effort was made to find out the reason, and to be sure that the student was informed of what had happened during discussion so as to stay up-to-date. The literature we discussed covered very deep and sometimes emotional topics such as gang involvement and the search to find acceptance of one’s culture, so discussions sometimes produced conversations that were sensitive. The students were made to feel that they could share their experiences and be honest; no one was to laugh at or mock students.

Third, Flores-Gonzales says Kids should be guided and aided in developing many deep relationships with teachers and peers. In order for this to happen, teachers must listen to students and actually hear them, take their needs into account, and encourage individual skill development. As a way to help students build relationships with both instructors and among their peers, interaction opportunities were presented outside of the classroom in addition to the meetings that took place at school. The students were taken to a class meeting at CSUMB in which the college students were discussing *Graffiti Girl* – giving them an opportunity to interact with “school kids” who made it to a higher level of education, allowing them time with their classmates outside of their own class, and letting them show others their knowledge in a new and exciting environment. They were taken to lunch in the dining commons to further encourage them to see the benefit of continued education, despite the fact that there was nothing academic going on there. Students were encouraged to pursue and hone their individual talents and praised for doing so- for example a student was able to negotiate credit in his regular English class for a rap he penned about *Mexican WhiteBoy*. Sometimes involvement in things that are not inherently academic can help build a desire to be involved in scholastic endeavors.

In order to “redefine achievement” the group functioned very differently from a normal class. First off, the lunch time group was very small, ensuring that there was little competition for attention and ample time to express one’s self should it be desired. Students were given assignments, but they were not punished for not completing them and the “homework” was ungraded. The students in this group were involved entirely by choice. Students that spoke up and were engaged in conversation were rewarded and recognized regardless of whether their answer was correct. Effort was shown to matter as an encouraging way to keep students interested in the group. Fear of “looking stupid” stops a lot of adolescents from stepping out of

their comfort zones, but when students are made to feel safe, regardless of whether they are right or wrong, it allows them express their thoughts and have their misconceptions corrected if need be.

Flores-Gonzales points out that the need to present many opportunities for students to develop multiple identities that are related to school. Being involved in extra-curriculars such as the reading group is one way to be involved, but not have a GPA or skill-level requirement. Unlike sports teams and other programs usually offered by schools, involvement in the reading group was not withheld if a student did not have a certain grade level in their normal daily curriculum or if they had misbehaved in another class. Anyone who wanted to be involved in the group could be, and sometimes students were even allowed out of lunch-time detention in order to join a discussion. The group was also highly democratic – the students were able to say whether or not they wanted to read a book and had input as to how it would be discussed, so students had control and responsibility for their own learning experience.

Lastly, Flores-Gonzales expresses the need to help students develop ambitious but *realistic* aspirations for the future. This involves more than just telling the children to dream big, and work hard, because telling them to believe that hard work always pays off can very easily result in broken trust and crippling disappointment when things do not pan out, despite every effort that *should* have resulted in success. This group worked to give students tools to “stand on their own two feet” by *acknowledging* the struggles that came up. There was a tragedy during the time that we worked with the students – a boy close to many group members was shot and killed. It resulted in a couple meetings where none of the students came. The students were not chastised for skipping or for their subsequent desire to move on from *Yummy* – it was too difficult to discuss the death of the character when the death of a close friend was so close to

home. Grieving was allowed and when the students were ready to move forward, the group did – as a whole – onto a book that would still engage the readers, but not touch on such a sensitive subject as the previous one.

Essentially, everything we did was about making sure that the group remained engaged in academic pursuits. It was not a class that they were graded for, and they received no reward for attendance other than praise for good work and participation and the opportunity to be involved in even more academic immersion with the trip to CSUMB.

Critical Reflection/Conclusions

Action Taken

While reflecting on the action taken, I am quite satisfied with its success. Initially, I was not sure exactly what we were trying to accomplish with this group – better reading skills? increased desire to be more involved in school? less of a likelihood of joining a gang? In the end we accomplished all these things, as well as a much deeper understanding of why these things are all necessary. One of the main issues I see with this process is that it does not touch enough students. It is obvious that our approach worked, but we were only able to work with nine students twice a week. These sorts of tactics should be used in all classrooms, every day!

Lessons Learned

Through my participation in this study, I learned quite a lot about the impact that culture and caring have on education. I learned quite a lot about myself, and my point of view on the place of culture in the classroom, as well as my own educational history and ties to culture. Before meeting these students and immersing myself in the literature on the subject, I could not understand how students could say they saw the value of education but then turn around and

“waste” the educational opportunities that were given to them. I learned that to them, a better marker of success was staying true to themselves and maintaining the things that made them who they are. Teachers have to help students reconcile the feeling that they have to choose between an education and maintaining cultural and personal integrity. The whole process has made me question my own education – that I had previous thought was great. I realized that I, unlike these students, was blindly stripped of a lot of my cultural heritage, I *did not* question why I did not see myself represented in the things I learned and was exposed to every day. I realize now that I should have questioned what I saw, and I wish I had had someone to point it out to me. Ultimately it is my hope that in the future, this group will continue, and that the ideas will spread to regular classrooms and beyond.

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