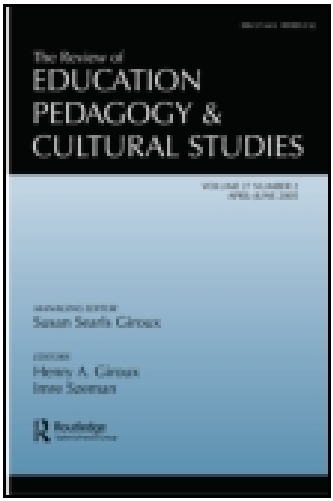

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Your Best Friend or Your Worst Enemy: Youth Popular Culture, Pedagogy, and Curriculum in Urban Classrooms

Jeffrey M. R. Duncan-Andrade

This article discusses the potential of youth popular culture to create an engaging and empowering twenty-first-century curriculum in schools. Specifically, the paper investigates three key questions around the issue of developing a culturally relevant curriculum for students traditionally disenfranchised by U.S. schools: 1) What popular cultural literacies are urban youth investing themselves in? 2) Why are they investing themselves in these areas? and 3) How can schools more effectively incorporate those literacies into the school culture? The paper begins with the proposition that teachers should make better use of their access to youth cultural interests. Next, the paper draws on education theory and interviews with students from an urban high school to examine the relevance of youth popular culture to curricular design. The paper concludes with a call for educators to build on the momentum of the 1980s multicultural education movement by developing pedagogical strategies and curricula that draw on youth cultural literacies. Ultimately, this paper aims to synthesize data and theory as a means of discussing promising ways to teach urban students.

POPULAR CULTURE AND PEDAGOGY

It is important to begin with a discussion of the term youth popular culture and its relevance in relation to pedagogy. Broadly defined, youth popular culture includes the various cultural activities in which young people invest their time, including but not limited to: music, television, movies, video games, sport, Internet, text messaging, style, and language practices. Central to a discussion

of youth popular culture is the point that culture is not just a process of consumption (critical or passive); it is also a process of production, of individual and collective interpretation (meaning making) through representations of styles, discursive practices, semiotics, and texts. The complexity of this relationship between cultural consumption and production warrants some attention here in order to more fully understand youth popular culture as a pedagogical tool.

Recent theoretical notions of the purpose and role of popular culture in society suggest that it is a "rapidly shifting ... argument and debate about a society and its own culture" (Hall, 1992). Williams (1980) argues that any discussion of culture must pay attention to the dynamic nature of culture as a set of "activities of men [and women] in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process" (Williams, 1991: 410). West's (1990) "new cultural politics of difference" and Hall's (1992) discussion of popular culture echo Williams's insistence that modern discussions of culture recognize popular culture as a simultaneous site of resistance and commodification. For West (1999) there is "a new kind of cultural worker in the making, associated with a new politics of difference" (West, 1999: 119). This cultural worker grapples with what West calls "an inescapable double-bind" as their cultural participation and production "is a gesture that is simultaneously progressive and co-opted" (120). This description of a new century popular cultural participant fits with Hall's insistence that the struggle over cultural hegemony is "waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else" (468) and that space is inherently a contradictory space.

Nowhere is the contradictory nature of popular culture more clear than in youth popular culture—a socio-politically charged space because of its increasing influence on the cultural sensibilities of this country's next generation. The growing sophistication of the culture industry and its increasing focus on youth, has spurred debate over the implications of popular culture for the field of education, particularly around issues of pedagogy. To better understand the competing pedagogical ideologies, it is worth drawing from Grossberg (1994) at length. He suggests that there are four types of pedagogical practices, all of which differently engage the value of popular culture in education.

Grossberg's first model, "hierarchical practice," is one where the teacher is judge and jury of truth. He is careful to recognize that there are times when it is appropriate for teachers to take

this sort of authoritative stance, but that the problem emerges when:

> ... the teacher assumes that he or she understands the real meanings of particular texts and practices, the real relations of power embodied within them, and the real interests of the different social groups brought together in the classroom or in the broader society. (Grossberg, 1994)

This culturally imperialistic approach to teaching, what Freire (1970) referred to as the "banking concept of education" is symbolic of a set of material relations of power where teachers control the creation, interpretation, legitimation, and dissemination of knowledge and students are expected to "patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (53) that information.

Grossberg's second model, "dialogic practice", attempts to avoid a teacher-centered system of knowledge control by creating opportunities for the silenced to speak for themselves. To be sure, it is important that educators actively engage their students in Hall's argument and debate over cultural sensibilities. However, as Grossberg points out, educators seeking to give voice to the voiceless, often wrongly presume that these groups have not already created these spaces for themselves (16). They fail to recognize that historically marginalized student groups often develop sophisticated ways of cultural participation that schools do not acknowledge or legitimate (MacLeod, 1987; Willis, 1981), and that these cultural activities are often responses to structural and material conditions of inequality.

Similar to dialogic practice, Grossberg's "praxical pedagogy" can underestimate the cultural activity that is already taking place in the lives of students. The praxical pedagogy model draws heavily from critical pedagogy's aim to develop agency among marginalized groups to change their material conditions. It moves from critical dialogue for understanding toward a pedagogy of action where students are given tools to "intervene into their own history" (16). Grossberg points out that this approach can be doubly problematic. First, it can lead teachers to operate from the deficit perspective that students are coming to the classroom as "empty vessels" (Freire, 1970), lacking the skills and experiences that would allow them to be active agents for change. Secondly, teachers run the risk of replicating the shortcomings of hierarchical pedagogy if they presume that there are a fixed set of skills that will empower students to engage in critical action. Teachers must be aware that a scripted approach to developing agency in young people discounts critical cultural activities that are already there and overlooks the fact that oppressive conditions require context-specific solutions.

To manage the complexity of fulfilling the role of instructional leader, while avoiding a replication of oppressive relations of power, Grossberg suggests that teachers "locate places from which [they] can construct and disseminate knowledge in relation to the materiality of power, conflict, and oppression" (17). He describes a fourth pedagogical model, a "pedagogy of articulation and risk" that avoids the pitfalls of the first three models while maintaining some claims to authority and a commitment to developing the capacity of students as critical civic participants. It is a pedagogy that: "... neither starts with nor works within a set of texts but, rather, deals with the formations of the popular, the cartographies of taste, stability, and mobility within which students are located" (18). This fourth space admits to an understanding of the complexity of culture and the role of the pedagogue in navigating that complexity. A pedagogy of articulation and risk recognizes that popular culture is a pre-imminent site of contestation for cultural hegemonic practices (Hall, 1996). It denies false binaries which suggest that students are at once either passive or critical recipients and producers of culture. Finally, it bares false witness to the paralyzing notion that cultural hegemony is a zero-sum game by insisting that cultural activity is "always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture" (468).

RETHINKING THE VALUE OF YOUTH POPULAR CULTURE IN SCHOOLS

Teachers are often the group of outsiders most familiar with youth popular culture, from style to media to language practices. This rich database of information is, at best, untapped by schools. At worst, schools reject and debase youth culture as academically irrelevant and socially reprehensible. This adversarial position, often taken by teachers, contributes to many students' perceptions that school is at odds with their personal and cultural interests. Regardless of teachers' and school officials' good intentions, the choice to make youth culture one of the central battlegrounds over cultural sensibilities creates needless and destructive cultural distances instead of opening access to knowledge and supporting, trusting relationships.

To understand the potential of youth culture as a pedagogical scaffold, it is important to explore two dimensions of it: 1) youth culture as an avenue that can provide teachers with access to knowledge of and relationships with their students; and 2) youth culture as an avenue that can provide youth with access to the broader society's valued knowledge. A final caveat that is important to include in all discussions of teachers' accessing youth

culture for pedagogical and democratic ends: Nothing said here suggests that the teacher abrogate her or his own cultural predilections or "standards" in favor of what may be, almost by definition, transient styles, language, and so forth. Not all cultural discontinuities can be or should be resolved. Perhaps the most important lesson here is that the cultures present in classrooms and under examination here should be seen as additive, rather than as zero sum.

With the growing pervasiveness and persuasiveness of twenty-first-century youth culture, most particularly the media (television, music, video games, movies, magazines), traditional school curriculum, coupled with traditional pedagogies, stand little chance of capturing the hearts and minds of young people. Traditional teacher education has approached this attention to "hearts and minds" from psychological (largely behavioral) perspectives. Some educational theorists have become increasingly more critical of this treatment of learning as a largely individual matter, "culture" as an impediment to learning (Hull, Rose, Fraser, & Castellano, 1991; McDermott & Varenne, 1995; Valdes, 1996). Building on criticisms of cultural deficit models, an increasing number of studies have focused on culture as additive, encouraging schools to make better use of students' cultures (Moll et al., 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). This "culture as additive" scholarship emphasizes that the ready access that schools have to students' cultures can be an important tool for teachers attempting to create more engaging educational environments.[1]

Basic teacherly sensibilities, honed through attention to the lives of students sometimes referred to as 'caring (Noddings, 1992) give teachers tremendous access to youth cultural interests. Through an on-going analysis of these popular cultural interests, teachers will be better able to design curriculum that keeps pace with modern media's cultural production machine. This knowledge of youth culture will also permit teachers to provide their students with productive critiques of the more negative elements. Without this grounding, teachers are left to moralizing sermons and culturally isolating out of hand dismissals that have been problematized by the aforementioned literature that critiques cultural deficit models.

Why is this a useful goal for classroom teachers? Many educators agree that schools should give young people access to critical thinking skills. The place where the ideological road splits is over the question of how to best accomplish this goal. For most, critical thinking means that students can engage in analysis and critique of a set of texts similar to those examined in the teacher's schooling experience. In this model, academic literacy is imparted using time

honored curricula (often referred to as the canon) and pedagogical strategies. This method of schooling positions students as empty vessels and teachers as the depositers of knowledge into these vessels (described by Freire (1970) as the "banking concept of education").

Valenzuela (1999) refers to this pedagogical approach as "aesthetic caring", and differentiates between this sort of schooling and "educación", an approach that foregrounds an ethic of "authentic caring". According to Valenzuela (1999), "schooling" emphasizes an aesthetic caring for students, one that brokers caring as a trade-off; that is, students are cared for in proportion to their willingness to exchange their own cultural sensibilities for the dominant cultural preferences of the school. Teachers who promote "education" (or educación[2]) over schooling employ an ethic of authentic caring; that is, they create a classroom culture that draws from the cultural sensibilities of young people as a point of strength for increasing intellectual development (Valenzuela, 1999; see also Moll et al., 1992).

Critical theorists such as Apple (1990) argue that these competing pedagogical ideologies are the result of the fact that education is inherently a 'political act.' For that reason, Apple suggests that a liberatory education should focus on the development of critical literacies and sensibilities that challenge traditional ways of schooling. Likewise, Delpit (1995) and Darling-Hammond (1997, 1998) both remind us that power and politics are being brokered every day in schools. From this more critical perspective on schooling, teachers recognize school as an institution that mitigates the distribution of power and the development of identity; they also stake a claim to their capacity as agents of change, disrupting the business-as-usual approach to pedagogy and curriculum. The tool for this raised consciousness is self-critical reflexivity. This process challenges one's own political and cultural subjectivities as they are manifested in the choices made about what is taught and how it is taught. Ultimately, the goal of such a process is to better understand what works for kids, why it is working, and how schools can become more adept at incorporating those things into the classroom and the larger school culture.

THE RELEVANCE OF YOUTH POPULAR CULTURE FOR CURRICULUM DESIGN

According to Nielsen's "Report on Television" Neilsen Media Research, (1998) the average child watches three hours of television a day. The Kaiser Foundation (1999) reports that this

engagement with electronic media more than doubles to six and one half hours per day when various forms of electronic media are included (i.e., television, movies, video games). This increasingly intense investment of U.S. youth in the media has led the American Academy of Pediatricians (2001) to issue a policy statement regarding the impact of this issue on children's health. The policy statement lists several recommendations for parents and educators, including the following:

- View television programs along with children, and discuss the content.
- Use controversial programming as a stepping-off point to initiate discussions about family values, violence, sex and sexuality, and drugs.
- Support efforts to establish comprehensive media-education programs in schools (Committee on Public Education, 2001).

More recent studies of youth and the media indicate that the hours spent with electronic media are even higher among poor students of color (Goodman, 2003; Nielson Media Research, 2000). Given this data and the Academy of Pediatrician's recommendations for addressing the growing relevance of the media in the lives of young people, two questions seem particularly relevant for teachers to investigate when pursuing a pedagogy and curriculum that addresses the cultural needs of urban children: 1) What are students investing themselves in? 2) How are they investing themselves in these areas? The answers, although dynamic enough to require on-going inquiry, are readily available to educators if they talk with and observe their students.

A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE ON YOUTH CULTURE

While teaching high school English in Oakland, California, I spent significant amounts of my time studying the popular culture of my students. I sought to make their engagement with popular cultural texts (particularly films, music, and television) a centerpiece of intellectual inquiry in the classroom. One tool I used to become informed about the usefulness of youth popular cultural texts was interviews with students. I typically interviewed students from across the academic performance spectrum to allow for multiple perspectives. The interviews used in this piece are from three of my African-American, male, twelfth-grade students.[3] Isaiah was a consistent honor-roll student who attended Howard University after graduation. Shaun was a student whose grade point average hovered around 2.5 for most of his high school career; he briefly

attended Hayward State University before dropping out to work full time. Yancey was a student who struggled to be consistent in school, but was able to do just enough to pass most of his courses; he managed to gather enough credits to graduate and was considering a local junior college.

What good, popular culture?

Andrade: Do you think that using things out of popular culture can allow students to learn the skills they'll need to do well on the AP and the SAT type of tests, to write critically, and develop the ability to find spaces in canonical literature that they can relate to? Or, is there just nothing there in the canonical literature for them to relate to?

Yancey: I think if you show someone how to handle popular culture, if they can understand that, then I think they can understand canonical. Yeah. They can definitely relate that as one and take it on a, take it together [putting his hands together to make a ball]. I mean, I think that's what your question was.

Andrade: To take the popular culture together with traditional literature?

Shaun: Yup.

Yancey: Yeah.

Shaun [pointing at Yancey]: I agree with him.

Yancey: Yeah, I agree. That, that if you can understand popular culture, if you're taught how to understand it as popular culture, that if you're taught to look at it in a certain way and analyze it in a certain way ...

Shaun [interjecting]: Critique it, yup.

Yancey: ... then I think, definitely, you can take that knowledge and analyze anything.

My students' sensibilities about the pedagogical power of popular culture in classrooms is not a particularly novel idea—theoretical positions on the value of this instructional approach date back to the early twentieth century (Dewey, 1938).

In his insightful text on the importance of incorporating learned experiences into the curriculum, Dewey (1938) argues:

> ...[it is important to] emphasize the fact, first, that young people in traditional schools do have experiences... It sets a problem to the educator. It is [her]/his business to arrange for the kind of experiences which, while they do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities, are nevertheless,

> more than immediately enjoyable since they promote having desirable future experiences. (27)

Modern critical literacy theorists have continued to make the case for the value of critical examinations of youth cultural literacies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, in press; Gee, 2004; Giroux, 1983, 1997; Kress, 2003; Lee, 1993; Morrell, 2004; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2003). Critical educational theorists have also maintained that school curricula and pedagogy should more profoundly reflect the popular cultural interests and needs of students (Giroux et al., 1996; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002, 2003).

For Giroux and Simon (1989), this challenge of using popular culture in classrooms can place teachers at an intellectual and pedagogical crossroads:

> Popular culture and social difference can be taken up by educators either as a pleasurable form of knowledge/power ... or such practices can be understood as the terrain on which we meet our students in a pedagogical encounter informed by a project of possibility that enables rather than disables human imagination and capacities in the service of individual joy, collective prosperity, and social justice. (Giroux & Simon, 1989)

Recent classroom based studies support the merit of the latter of these two roads; that is, educational practices that engage urban students of color in critical intellectual interactions with youth popular cultural forms:

> When challenged by a critical educator, students begin to understand that the more profound dimension of their freedom lies exactly in the recognition of constraints that can be overcome. They can discover for themselves, in the process of becoming more and more critical, that it is impossible to deny the constitutive power of their consciousness in the social practice in which they participate. The radical pedagogy is dialectical and has as its goal to enable students to become critical of the hegemonic practices that have shaped their experiences and perceptions in hopes of freeing themselves from the bonds of these dominating ideologies. In order for this to happen, learners must be involved in tranformative discourse, which legitimizes the wishes, decisions, and dreams of the people involved. (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2003)

This sort of empowering pedagogy, focused on developing students' capacities as agents of critical awareness and social change, must consist of a critical youth cultural literacy; one that deconstructs the formation of cultural sensibilities resultant from "the power of postmodern literacies such as film and television" (McLaren & Hammer, 1996).

Sadly, my experience is that teachers who do use popular culture often do so in ways that unwittingly reinforce the already present cultural hierarchy. They do this by using the popular cultural texts (usually movies, music, or sport) as a reward, given out to students after the "important work" in the class has been done. In the English classroom, this most commonly manifests itself in the form of a movie at the end of a curriculum unit. This usually translates into one or two days of "fun time" where kids don't have to learn and teachers don't have to teach. The film is never treated as a text to be studied, and what's worse is that this leads to a tacit agreement between student and teacher that youth popular culture is simply a school's tool of pacification unworthy of intellectual interrogation. Young people are never taught to see their engagement with media as a form of literacy development, nor are they taught how to enhance and refine that development.

For some time I have found this misuse of youth culture to be troubling and culturally imperialistic on the part of our educational system. It presumes that for the vast majority of students' free time—upwards of 60 hours per week—students are intellectually unengaged. While this may be true in some senses, I would argue that schools have some culpability in this disengagement with media. Rather than providing young people with the tools for a critical media literacy, we have villainized their culture of media literacy and unwittingly set off a war between the legitimate knowledge of schools and the nefarious knowledge of youth culture. This is a silly war for educators to fight for a number of reasons: 1) It wrongly presumes the higher cultural and intellectual order of printed texts, an argument for which we have no evidence other than our own imperialistic cultural sensibilities; 2) It wrongly presumes that we could not teach the same higher-order thinking skills across academic content areas, using a rich combination of media texts[4] and printed texts; 3) It wrongly presumes that to turn to a pedagogy and curriculum that emphasizes the use of youth popular cultural texts will insure that children will never learn to love reading printed texts and therefore be denied important literacy skills and the richness of the literary canon; 4) It wrongly presumes that education is not supposed to be fun for young people but is, instead, a right of passage into adulthood where their childlike sensibilities are removed and replaced with the more upstanding sensibilities of adults; and 5) It wrongly presumes that popular cultural texts are more engaging for young people because they are simplistic and nurture a more visceral interaction.

The Nielsen studies (1998, 2000) make it clear that our children are reading texts and that they are doing it with the voracity

we might well attribute to budding literary scholars. These studies only further confirm Luke's (1997) preceding argument that there is an "urgent need for educators to engage constructively with media, popular and youth culture to better understand how these discourses structure childhood, adolescence and students' knowledge" (Luke, 1997: xx). The problem with moving this project forward is that many educators do not see youth cultural texts as texts at all. But, young people do:

Andrade: What types of popular cultural texts do you feel are powerful for their ability to teach young people?

Shaun: Well, there was one article, not a article, but you know there is this magazine called *The Source*. You know that. I mean *The Source* will give you some information to make you think about the world. That's how I look at it. *The Source* is kinda biased too though—they biased toward the East Coast over the West. So, I couldn't just say *The Source*. But, I mean, *The Source* do have some powerful stuff in it—you just gotta go through and look for it, and look, and look. 'Cause I mean some of them articles you don't really care for, but I don't really care, it doesn't matter to me. I mean, I don't really care what hooriders are doing after they tour. But, they do talk and get deep, I mean, like the letters. I think we should go into the letters in here sometimes.

Andrade: What about music? Do you think there's music that's deep?

Shaun: A lot. A lot of music is deep. Damn near every single tape Tupac has made you could sit there and write any kind of critique, analyzation. Goodie MOB, who else? Fatal.

Isaiah: KRS One.

Shaun: KRS One. Yeah, that's, ooh!

Yancey: That's a deep boy right there.

Andrade: What's deep about KRS One or Goodie MOB or Tupac?

Shaun: They sit there and tell you what's going on in their lives. And every time they talk about something that's going on in their life, you can always relate it back to your life [Isaiah and Yancey shake their heads in affirmation], that's how I look at it. And, like certain songs on an album, like what song, 'cause I remember we had that assignment where you pick your own song. I had so many rap songs I had up in my head that it was ridiculous [Yancey and Isaiah laugh and nod their heads as to affirm the feeling]. I had like Tupac, and I had Dogg Pound, I had, man, I must have

printed out like three different, what ya ma call it, playlists.

Isaiah: Yeah, lyrics.

Shaun: Yeah, lyrics. I must have printed out at least three different ones and just sat there and had to look at them, see which one I thought was the deepest, which one I could write the most on. There was so many out there. The one song that really stuck out to me, that I still be thinkin' about right now is, 'Reality' by Dogg Pound. I like that song. That song, man, every time I listen to it, it just make me think.

Yancey: Well, I would relate music as, basically poetry. It's too many that I could probably name off, but I know most of the time when I listen to music, like I would say, you know, sometimes I'll just listen to the beats and listen to the music, not pertaining to the words. But when I do decide, ok, let me pay attention to this artist and see where he's coming from and see what he's saying, they're *real* deep. I mean, they dig in there! It's just like watching *The Godfather*. It's like, "wow!" It's like, this is just not, you know, "hey baby let's go groove" ...

Shaun [interjecting]: [smirking at the stereotypes of music] "kick it."

Yancey: ... or whatever. It's politics in there. It talks about, you know, [pounding his fist into his hand for emphasis] society and, and the drugs and ...

Shaun [interjecting]: Struggle! The struggle!

Yancey: ... yeah, the struggle there is, and that people don't see [Shaun nods his head in agreement]. The media, you know, what the media decides to not so much talk about and cover up, it's all out in the music, you know. It's just like books you know, people that read books probably have a better understanding than people that just watch the news or watch t.v. of how hard it is to live in the United States. I think the people that have been through those struggles, when I listen to their lyrics, it's like they've been there and they've done that and the way they tell it's like they bring you right in their face and it's like you begin to understand a lot more. And you're like, it's just like "wow!" It's *real* deep.

Shaun: The reason I say he [KRS One] is deep is because he talks onto subjects that people usually don't want to talk about. Let me think of one song [pause] (to himself): I've got so many songs in my head.

Rather than seeing artists such as KRS One or Tupac Shakur as the creators of intellectually meritous texts, we categorize them and other youth cultural texts, such as electronic media and music, as central contributors to national health concerns over youth violence and adolescent obesity (Malkin, 2003; Steele, 1990). I wonder if we would be attributing these same national health crises to books if children were spending the same amount of time on the couch reading as they are currently spending engaging with electronic media? Would we argue that children are dropping out of school and using foul language because they read J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* a dozen times over? Would we argue that children were committing patricide because they played Hamlet in the school play? It is difficult to picture a scenario where we reproach a child for reading too much, but we are quick to chastise children for spending too much time in front of electronic media. This speaks to a conservative national mentality so entrenched in historical notions of literacy that it is dismissive of the potential of youth popular cultural literacies to be one of the richest sources for critical literacy development to emerge in our lifetimes (Gee, 2004; Kress, 2003; Luke, 1999). What is worse is that while we do not deny the impact of the media on young people—Shaun has "so many songs" in his head—we shirk our responsibility as educators to engage young people in the project of critical media literacy development, an endeavor that will better equip them to engage these influential texts.

Young people are well aware of the power present in popular cultural texts. They are also confident that teachers could use these texts to teach them the academic literacy skills that schools purport to want to develop in their students.

Yancey: I would pertain KRS One, basically a hundred percent, to *Savage Inequalities*. I would relate those two real closely to one another. For Kozol in *Savage Inequalities*, he's basically just talking about our school system and the way it's corrupted by the government and how our society is built and how there is such a false in the word "United" States; how it's such a free and liberal country. If I didn't read *Savage Inequalities*, I think listening to KRS One basically would tell me everything that was in *Savage Inequalities*. I think I could basically relate because he breaks it down the same way, it's just with a, you're hearing it instead of reading it and it's got a beat to it so you're more interested perhaps. You know, you might be grooving to it and it could

be digging deep. But, I relate those two hand in hand. [Smirking] Students probably could teach the teachers.

Andrade: What type of impact do you think that would have on students . . .

Shaun: (exhaling loudly, smiling, and laughing) gshhhhh . . .

Andrade: . . . if there was a KRS One class or a rap in literature class, or something like that?

Shaun: Well, uh, just like, I know what you're saying. But I mean at Cal Berkeley don't they have like a Tupac class?

Andrade: Yeah.

Shaun: I bet you that attendance is like a hundred percent isn't it? It's like I know if they was to have one of those classes here, it wouldn't be no, I don't think there'd be that many people cuttin'. I bet you the class'd be overfull and to the point that people are still in line in the office tryin' to get in. And the reason I say that is because, if they had a Gooddie M.O.B., 2Pac, or KRS One class, that's automatic. People already know about them, and they already listen to them, so they already have influence over people. So that's just going to make them want to come to the class even more to learn what they are talking about. And it's going to make them, how you say, just for the fact that it's them teaching, I think they're gonna give them a little more respect than they're gonna give to a regular teacher. I'm not sayin' that regular teachers don't get respect, I'm just sayin' they'd be more obedient in class, that's how I'd say it.

Andrade: Do you think that, those classes, those works, those authors could teach kids the same skills that teachers currently try to teach kids using Shakespeare, Chaucer?

Shaun: Yeah, most definitely I do. Because, the way they'll do it I think it'll get the kids' attention more than what the teachers are doing. Because Shakespeare and *The Odyssey*, not tryin' to hooride, but those kinds of books, people I mean, I wouldn't have read that unless you assigned it and that's on the real. I wouldn't have went in there and grabbed it and looked at it or nuttin'. I would have just passed it, "whew," and moved onto something else. I mean *The Odyssey*, that just automatically make you, not even that, how you say, just the width, just how big the books look, automatically when you see it. I'm not tryin' to say that's the reason I'm gonna turn a book down just cause of the width. I'll grab a skinny book and be like "nah." I'm just saying, I mean,

> I grap a fat book and read it if it's interesting. It's like the book I got at the house reading now, is ... about Death Row. It's about how corrupt Suge Knight was and how he did all this, and I know hecka stuff that I didn't never know about Suge Knight and all that stuff. And that book is about, like, about three hundred, fo' hundred pages. I'm only on like a hundred pages now. And I'm still goin' to certain chapters and readin' it all over just cause I'm interested in that kinda stuff.

Worth noting is that both Shaun and Yancey reference printed texts in their discussion about the value of popular cultural texts. They are not arguing for the banishment of printed texts. They are arguing for a more culturally relevant curriculum, one that encourages them to bring to bear the youth cultural knowledge that they possess.

Perhaps the recent test score scare tactics that encourage educators to believe we are dealing with a growing population of illiterate children are wide of the mark. Perhaps the student resistance to printed texts that we are seeing in schools is a conscious response by students to what Valenzuela has called "aesthetic caring" (Valenzuela, 1999). Kohl has characterized this as a student's decision to "not learn" (Kohl, 1994). This way of looking at student performance in schools drastically changes our notions of what is actually causing trends of failure. It encourages educators to do away with deficit notions of diminished intellectual capacity on the part of the student by considering acts of resistance to the curriculum as a form of student agency; that not learning is a statement on the part of students to say that they will not be subjected to a curriculum and pedagogy that is dismissive of them and their cultural knowledge.

Both Yancey and Shaun suggest that educators need to rethink their position on "official knowledge" (Apple, 1993):

> Yancey: I think, definitely, I think those types of artists such as KRS One, Goodie MOB, so on and so forth should definitely be accepted into our school system. For the simple reason that they basically have the same qualifications as any other writer. I mean basically when they're writing, I mean, they're putting it down on paper and they're just saying it with a beat and rhyming it out to you. But, that shouldn't mean ...
>
> Shaun [interjecting]:
>
> That's even more complex.

Yancey: ... yeah, basically. It shouldn't even be looked upon differently. I don't know. I think that maybe our, uh, the way the school system is set up they're maybe intimidated by bringing such a thing out. That the students that might actually want to learn this and be able to get something out of it to use in each day of our lives now, to be able to push, strive to excellence through that literature. I think they see it as being, I think they see it as kids will probably understand that better so why don't we make it difficult for them. And if they can make it through this difficult process then they can make it through another difficult process. And, I mean, I disagree with that.

Shaun: Uh huh. Yup.

Yancey: I think that just because it perceives to be music and it looks easy to understand. You can take music to a whole different level. I mean, it's on you, on how you teach it, how you take upon it, how dig you deep, I mean, how far down you dig into the music. If you listen to just, you know, the beat and you just let it go through your ears and you're just dancing to it, that's another story. But, if you're sitting there and you're actually writing what he says down and, or she says down, and you look at it and you study it, you can get a lot out of that.

Shaun: Fo' sho'!

These student perspectives resonate with an increasing body of research (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, in press; Finn, 1999; Moll et al., 1992; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999) that has found that urban students, particularly urban students of color, are mis-portrayed as being intellectually disengaged. In fact, what we find in discussions with urban youngsters is not necessarily that they want less time in classrooms; rather they want classrooms that are more worth spending time in.

Andrade: What would you change about this class, or the unit, or the way that the class incorporates popular culture and the canon?

Shaun: I remember before when someone said that the class should be longer. And I agree with him that the class should be longer because when we are in class and we're discussing, I mean like when we watch a film like *The Godfather* or something, we'd watch it for like the first 15 or 20 minutes of class and then we've only got like 30 minutes left to discuss it. But, if we're going to

discuss *The Godfather* it's going to take longer than 30 minutes to discuss a little, like, one and a half scenes. So, I mean, that's why I think class needs to be at least two hours long.

Yancey: I would agree to class being longer, as to this class. But, seeing, pertaining that to my other classes ...

Shaun [interjecting]:
Yeah, that's true.

Yancey: ... I think I would definitely suffer to be able to sit in one of those other classes for two hours, for the simple fact that I think the teacher basically doesn't have enough curriculum set up for us to participate in. So, basically, all you're doing is, I mean going in there to be sitting there, and you know ...

Shaun [interjecting]:
Waste of time.

Yancey: ... there's nuttin' to do, basically. I've literally dropped a class, completely, because of that situation. Where I would walk into the class and the teacher had nothing set up and it's basically talk time, you know, social time, social hour. And, to make it two hours, for all classes, I think is, it would be good, but they would have to definitely evaluate each class a lot more and justify as to why that class should be longer. For the simple fact that if I was to be in that class for two hours, simply just falling behind when I could be in such a class where the teacher is prepared to teach you and you're ready to get knowledge ...

Shaun: Information.

Yancey: Basically.

Isaiah: Yeah, I mean I've had the fortunate experience of being in your class all but one year since the eighth grade. Prior to that it was more or less you read, you know what I'm saying, you read short stories, novels, etcetera and it's just a story. You basically just summarize the plot, you know, and the characters, and "why did Peter do such and such," you know. I think it's very important that, the way we take it in here is much more in depth analysis of the text and that it's texts that mean something to us. And it is, I mean, as far as just understanding it not just from the words, but also for the implications of it in a person or the individual's circumstance ... I mean I understand what other teachers do in their classes as far as doing a book report and what that consists of. I mean it's not about just knowing what a character did or just the

> basic plot, but the implications of their actions and a character's motives. That's very important in understanding any text, and most teachers don't do that.

In my experience, these three students' comments reflect the sentiments of many urban students in their desire for a more intellectually rigorous literacy curriculum that employs youth popular culture as a bridge to traditional literacy skills. To be sure, young people want the opportunity to represent their own cultural knowledge, but they are also clamoring for pedagogies that employ this knowledge as a scaffold into skills that allow for more complex literary analyses. To some degree, this request is quite the opposite of current curriculum and pedagogy trends in urban public schools.

BACK(WARDS) TO BASICS

Steven Goodman, a renowned educator of urban youth in New York City, critiques conservative cultural and literacy theorists for their unwillingness to recognize the cultural and linguistic assets urban youth develop in their homes and communities. He highlights the work of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (2001) as a prime example of the increasingly powerful conservative voice in urban school literacy programs; a voice that is calling for a return to drill-and-practice exercises that frequently cause "low income urban students to become even more detached and disengaged from school because it widens the disconnect between what students are exposed to out of school and what they are force-fed in school" (Goodman, 2003).

Rather than approaching the problem from Hirsh's deficit model which calls for educators to see poor students, particularly students of color, as culturally deficient, more progressive literacy theorists see the problem with the school-based literacy gap as resting largely on the shoulders of the school (Finn, 1999; Gee, 2004; Lee, 1993; Mahiri, 1998; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2003). These perspectives on literacy recognize that there are many forms of cultural literacy and that schools have traditionally provided only one such form. The debate for progressives is not over whether school-based literacy is important, but over how schools can better use the richness of community-based literacies as scaffolds into school-based literacies.

RETHINKING CULTURAL RELEVANCE IN CLASSROOM LITERACY

The 1980s gave rise to a multicultural education movement that called cultural awareness to the front of educational debate. The

positive impact that emerged out of this discourse cannot be overstated. It has made teachers around the nation more sensitive to the needs of students of color, particularly in the selection of curriculum. James Banks, often at the center of this dialogue, insists on the need for a multicultural pedagogy and curriculum:

> Teachers should also select content from diverse ethnic groups so that students from various cultures will see their images in the curriculum. Educational equity will exist for all students when teachers become sensitive to the cultural diversity in their classrooms, vary their teaching styles so as to appeal to a diverse student population, and modify their curricula to include ethnic content. (Banks, 1994)." Sadly, twenty years after Banks originally published this call for more ethnic content in the curriculum, many educators continue to employ culture as a proxy for race. So, while the curriculum has become more multiethnic, the pedagogical method of delivering this content remains virtually unchanged.

Educators must expand multicultural education to include a broader definition of culture. This will mean developing curriculum, as well as pedagogy, that empowers students to critically engage the electronic media and other forms of youth popular culture (i.e., music, style, sport). Inside of these cultural spaces, students often display the same academic literacy skills (critique, analysis, memorization, recitation, oral presentation) that we are asking them to produce in the classroom. A multicultural curriculum and pedagogy should be using youth culture to scaffold these skills into academic literacy.

MAKING YOUTH CULTURE PART OF A MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Urban students come to the classroom with many of the skills that teachers expect to teach each them. They can analyze text. They can develop and support an argument. They understand concepts of theme, characterization, rhyme, rhythm, meter and tone. They display these skill sets almost every day when they talk about things that are relevant to them as teenagers—this is what I refer to as youth culture. To bridge this gap between youth culture and the culture of the classroom, teachers must learn about the interests of their students and find ways to value them in their classroom pedagogy. A classroom would not have to become a live version of MTV to incorporate youth culture in the pedagogy. The goal is to help students to understand that the texts they choose to access are really quite similar to the texts that they often reject as irrelevant. At its core, this approach to pedagogy believes that

a rigorous multicultural curriculum should be a marriage of the student's culture and canonical culture.

Not surprisingly, students intuitively understand the potential of this sort of pedagogical scaffold:

Shaun: If you learn one way to cook on a stove, you can always go to another stove and learn to cook. That's just like if you learn popular culture, you can come back and learn how to use canonical culture. Because learning, basically all you have to do is use you 'mind and be interested in what you are learning. Because if you are bored in class you are just going to doze off in class and sleep (aside: cause some teachers will let you sleep I ain't even gonna lie.) If it's interesting though, you'll stay up and you'll participate and you'll try to get some points of information in. But no matter what you'll always try to learn. But I think if you are allowed to learn from that pop culture and then that teacher tried to bring you into the canonical, or the regular text, I think if you are paying attention in this one (pop culture) and they can relate it to the other then the person will learn both ways. I can say for myself that I did that in this class.

Shaun makes use of a vivid metaphor to articulate a common sense principle of learning theory: if the curriculum and pedagogy are interesting to young people, they'll be excited about learning.

Students want a classroom culture that reflects expanded definitions of literacy. They want literacy instruction that emphasizes more meaningful learning activities that allow them to develop academic literacy skills that are transferable to their daily lives:

Andrade: Drawing from your experience with *The Godfather Trilogy* in this class, would you suggest that teachers use film as text in their classrooms?

Yancey: For me, definitely. Because before, a film like *The Godfather* was more or less like a movie for entertainment. But, now, I can watch *The Godfather* over and over again and I know I'll find something new. And I'll be like, wow, I didn't know that. I didn't know that connected. You know, it's that deep thought in there, that when you're watching it, you're really thinking about like simple, like I'm talking about simple, I mean like some hand gestures. Every movement is like a big issue in that film that you can definitely relate it to something.

Before that, before you explained it to us and analyzed it with us and showed it to us, when you're talking about it my lips drop. I'll be like, "huh"? Sometimes it'll be like extreme, but, no doubt about it, it makes sense. So, you know, we just learned to take it from there.

Shaun: Cause when you be talking about the movie, cause at first we'll watch a scene and you'll stop it. And you'll ask us a question, like "you got any questions?" And you'll see everybody in class don't want to say nothing so they'll just sit there all quiet. And then you start sparking conversation and then everybody just starts getting into it. Especially like, oh what's that scene, like in the very first scene of *The Godfather* when he says, [impersonating the voice of Vito's character] "I believe in America" [Yancey and Isaiah laugh]. I never really even like tripped off that part of the movie. I just watched it and knew that dude was gonna die sooner or later. That's all I'm knowin', like when he gonna die, when he gonna die? But then after you watched it in here, and you were talking about belief in America and then the movie showed how when he was a little kid and how America was all corrupt and how all this stuff comes back on him. It was just like, damn, I never noticed that. It's always something new.

Yancey: Yeah, I was able to get a lot from the film. I would just add something simple to it like a symbol that I never thought of when I would watch films. Like how they're particularly, they got, like when *The Godfather* started out. It started out that scene where it didn't show the face of the Godfather, it showed his back and his hand. And, [laughing] I thought hey, the cameraman was just doin' that just to be doin' it. But, there's a much bigger issue behind that. And now, I mean [smiling] I be wantin' to go watch any little movies that come out and try to find that little story in every film ...

Yancey: I want to add on a little bit more. I think also from this class, that um, it's given me like, I mean, I know when I see like people talk about films or even a book, instead of just seeing it for what it's like, I guess the cover I would say. Or, when you're just watching a film, you're just watching it for entertainment or reading a book for entertainment. I have the want, it's like a challenge to me, to figure out what the writer of that book or the producer of the film is thinking or what his motive is, as to why he's doing this, like why, why. That question

> 'why' always revolving through my head. Like, "why is this happening" or "why is this particular story talking about this subject"—where does it connect to it?

For both Shaun and Yancey, the use of popular film[5] and music as legitimate academic texts provided a variety of opportunities to develop skills of analysis and discussion. More importantly though, it has added to their media literacy tool kit, "challenging" them to change the way they interact with the media in their lives.

New literacy theorists (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, in press; Gee, 2004; Gutiérrez, 1995; Gutiérrez & Stone, 2002; Kress, 2003; Lee, 1993; Morrell, 2004; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2003) have crafted broader definitions of literacy activities that would support a pedagogical approach that challenges traditionalist notions of literacy being tied exclusively to print. A curriculum that draws from youth culture would embrace these expanding definitions of literacy by viewing students as producers of and participants in various cultural literacies, such as: image, style, and discursive practices. This more inclusive approach to literacy instruction recognizes students as cultural producers with their own spheres of emerging literacy participation. This pedagogy of articulation and risk (Grossberg, 1994) values and learns from the cultural literacies students bring to the classroom and assists them as they expand those literacies and develop new ones. Teachers should aim to develop young people's critical literacy, but they should also recognize students as producers of literacy and support that production. For Freire, this is the ultimate form of critical pedagogy; that is, engaging young people in critical dialogues over various literacies, providing space for production of these literacies, and then valuing those products enough to engage in critical dialogue over them. If, indeed, urban schools hope to advance the spirit of critical pedagogy and the multicultural education movement, then they would do well to listen to young people and make better use of youth cultural literacies in their pedagogy and curriculum.

NOTES

1. The issue of student disengagement is well documented (Finn, 1999; Kohl, 1994; MacLeod, 1987). This paper is not an attempt to duplicate that work, but, instead, aims to discuss promising solutions to the problem.
2. Valenzuela highlights the difference in the U. S. use of the term education, which often means "schooling" for Mexican children, and the Mexican term *educación* which elicits the expectation of a more holistic, authentically caring relationship.

3. Pseudonyms are used for all three students.
4. Important to consider here are the types of media texts that are employed in the classroom. Students can be just as disengaged with dated and culturally irrelevant films and documentaries as they are with traditional texts.
5. The *Godfather* Trilogy, although stretching back into the 1970s, remains popular with students, particularly because of ongoing popular cultural references to the mafia and the godfather (see HBO's hit series "The Sopranos" and Snoop Dogg's album "The Doggfather").

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