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A Plan for Democratic Public Schooling

Diana Concepcion
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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A Plan for Democratic Public Schooling

by

Diana Concepcion

A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial

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September 1, 2020	Carrie Hintz
Date	Thesis Advisor

September 1, 2020	Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis
Date	Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT

A Plan for Democratic Public Schooling

by

Diana Concepcion

Advisor: Carrie Hintz

This project addresses concerns within inner-city public schools while restructuring how we facilitate learning in our school buildings. It provides an overview of continued research on challenges faced in public schools including reform policy (testing and curricular changes), privatization, day-to-day structures and how they impact the academic and social-emotional development of our students. By examining our current designs and policies, we are able to identify why and how these systems have not been beneficial to our students, and we are able to find basic solutions in supporting the holistic needs of our students. This project proposes a school plan which aims to implement democratic methods in the classroom, steer clear of the test-prep curriculum by providing a balance of authentic and multicultural content, and support the social-emotional needs of students by creating a culture of positivity and building a strong community. Each aspect of the school has been thoroughly planned to ensure balance of power in leadership, true rigor in learning, and maintenance of both emotional and physical safety of students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

Urban public schools contain structures which create significant boundaries and challenges for the academic and social-emotional growth of its children. Although some of these problems seem almost invisible to those who are either not working in the field or to those who benefit from maintaining the status quo, scholars have been intensely studying and displaying the root of those problems. Despite these efforts, there are ongoing concerns: an achievement gap which does not show signs of closing, increased segregation in public schools, and a negative perception of the learning system from those who are deprived of sufficient, equitable resources. To solve these problems, we must revisit how we provide education, understand the root of inequities within schools, and redefine learning in those schools which have been labeled as failing. I have designed a school model that supports the needs of its students by valuing diversity, student voice and maintaining a balance in power, curriculum, and student development. I recognize that the implementation of a somewhat radical perspective requires significant changes in a larger educational system, in addition to the destruction of political boundaries. This project aims to provide a sense of what we can do for all of our students who attend public schools if we choose to make these priorities. This paper explains my concern, research and data used to develop my school plan.

Curricular Concerns

I have taken pride in and felt immense gratitude for the beautiful relationships developed in my classroom throughout my teaching career. School culture is not just another label on a teacher's checklist; it is at the core of learning, certainly one of the pillars which support academic, social, and emotional growth. My first goal at the beginning of each year is to create a physical space that students are happy in and want to learn in, a space that my students feel comfortable calling their own. Despite the positive energy I aim to cultivate yearly and my students' success in doing so, each year I face the same wall of questions and challenges that I frequently have felt are out of my control.

First, teachers are expected to meet the demands of a curriculum that is skill based because the school's livelihood is dependent upon state test scores.[1] Educators are judged on their ability to teach students how to test, therefore much of their work is this, sometimes unknowingly following guidelines that are not truly educating students. Teaching content (not skills) and focusing on critical thinking would foster authentic and engaging education.[2] Despite how extensively skills are taught, we continue to see a knowledge gap amongst social classes. Our low-income minority groups perform significantly lower than their counterparts. Secondly, public schools, including charters, are at the mercy of testing because the school's reputation, funding and ability to remain open is highly dependent on state assessments.[3] Wexler notes:

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[1] On information regarding the significance of test scores and its role in school policy, see Ravitch's *Reign of Error* Chapter 11.

[2] See Wexler's *The Knowledge Gap*, especially Chapters 2-5.

[3] For more on education policy, see Hortsford, Scoot, and Anderson.

a 2007 study found that about half of all children in schools serving middle class students or above, were subjected to repetitive instruction in basic skills, but in schools serving low-income children, the proportion soared to 91 percent. One thing is clear: when schools are under pressure to raise test scores, administrators maximize the time spent on reading and math. (Wexler 20)

Not only is more time spent on reading and math, but much of the time is allotted to test-prep sessions (teaching children how to best answer multiple choice questions). Regardless of this test prep model, schools are not reaching the goal of closing the learning gap:

Test scores of low income and minority students are consistently far below those of their more affluent, largely white peers… 80 percent of low income fourth - and eighth-graders scored below proficient level compared to about 50 percent of their higher-income peers. (Wexler 20)

It is also important to note the demographics of urban public schools in order to understand that our methods, which are heavily implemented in urban schools, are specifically impacting low-income and minority communities. The majority of students enrolled in New York City Public Schools are minority, low income students. According to the NYC Department of Education website, the total number of students is 1,126,501 (119,551 of those are in charter schools). The demographic are as follows:

Demographics of NYC Public Schools

Hispanic Black Asian White

Economic Status of Families Enrolled in NYC Public Schools

Below the Poverty Line Above the poverty line
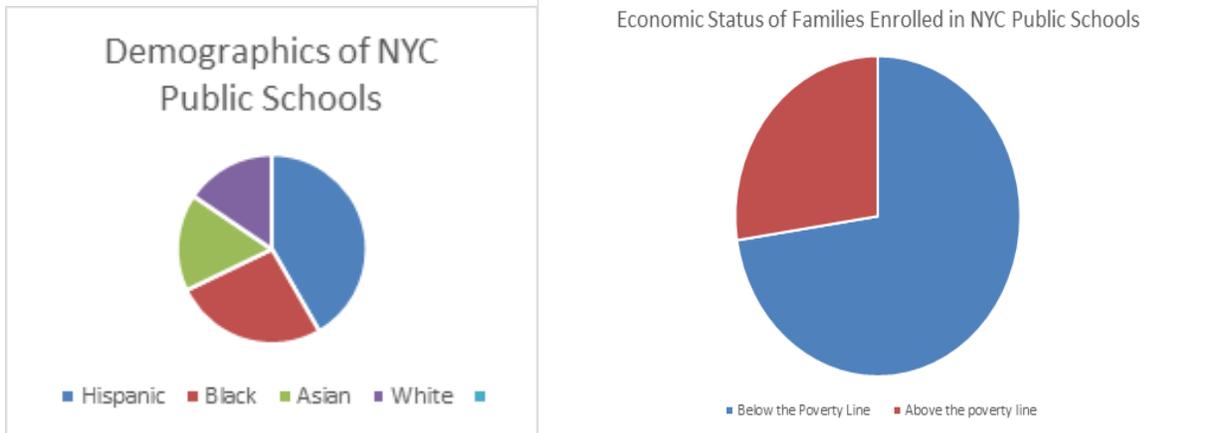
I have consistently questioned how we can cultivate a space for learning which will show authentic academic growth, while encouraging student and community voice; a space without the restraints of nonsensical policies which ultimately prevent our achievement gap from closing. First, we must eliminate the test-prep model and create a balanced curriculum that is content based, prioritizing all subjects equally (literature, language arts, math, social studies, science, arts, and physical health). I propose that we also reflect upon and define democracy within our schools to strengthen education.

Democracy in Schools

Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane emphasizes the ambiguity of the word democracy, suggesting that it is a political threat to powerful, rich social groups in the United States because it would call for equity within public institutions (including schools). Considering the evident segregation amongst students of diverse socio- economic statuses, inequities in schools and the learning gap, our current educational policies are making it significantly challenging for students in poverty to rise into a higher social class.

Sonya Douglas Horsford cohesively addresses issues of equity and race in her work and understands that they are connected to power and identity. She suggests that we should critique liberal ideologies and acknowledge that schools are not currently a platform for creating equal opportunity. There are decisive factors associated with race which determine how opportunities are presented from a young age within our schools. Horsford connects concerns of racial inequality within our educational system to the implications of negative effects the privatization movement will ultimately have on marginalized groups if nothing is done to prevent them. The reality is that not all students have an equally leveled playing field, and that there is an illusion of opportunity to obtain an American Dream which for some students is practically unattainable, not because their teachers are failing them, but because they are victims in a larger system meant to keep them oppressed. All these concerns must be acknowledged and discussed in our efforts to make schools democratic. She suggests that inner-city school communities have the power to collectively acknowledge these inequities, and push for changes to end them:

It is true that powerful interests with corporate money have amassed great power in the era of the policy arena, but these 'Astroturf or grasstops' organizations are no match for

powerful grassroots social movements composed of educators, parents, citizens, and students. (Hosford et al 191)

Horsford would agree that to change education, we would need to evaluate greater issues around it, including social policies and systems of oppression. Our children need to collectively understand the reasons behind challenging daily experiences which are linked to policy, historical timelines, as well as academics.

Once we acknowledge the root of the problem, we can aim for instilling power in our students through the democratic environment as defined by Beane and Apple: one which not only involves the active voice of the people (everyone in the school community including students), but one which encompasses the following conditions, all of which can be implemented into a school's routine.

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.

2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.

3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.

4. Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good."

5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.

6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an "ideal" to be pursued as an "idealized" set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people.

7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life.

The concept of democracy in schools extends to the role adults play within the school building. Parents, educators, and community members would actively participate in the development of school policies. Creating these policies amongst a larger, more diverse group of adults would inevitably lead to contradictions, but it opens the possibility for greater ideas which focus on the growth of children in the community and improvement of the community itself. When we place school policy in the hands of the people who live in the community, we eliminate the detrimental effects of for-profit organizations and politicians that are completely detached from these spaces, their values, and their ideologies. This would allow school decisions to be authentically created in the best interest of our students.

My school model is based on the goal to best serve students in urban schools by using Beane and Apple's model to intentionally cultivate and apply democracy within the school community. Goals, routines, academics, procedures, and any other school policy decisions would be dependent on and determined by the entire school community. The school would promote academic growth in multiple content areas while providing necessary tools for students to reflect upon their own learning through cooperative peer activities. It would adequately support the social-emotional needs by incorporating a social-emotional learning program, while also professional support of school psychologists and therapists. Students will be encouraged not to compete for test scores, but to think of themselves, their actions and responsibilities, as part of a larger community.

Shifting Away from Test-Centered Learning

The competitive and individualistic nature of American culture is evidently embedded in our public schools. We should stop to consider to what extent these ideologies are preparing and strengthening our children in multiple areas of education, and to what extent we are harming their development by depriving them of building meaningful communal relationships. Competition is not directly spoken of in my school but it is felt and thought of by our students, tied to the way their entire learning process is set up, a curriculum which revolves around standardized testing that has little room for critical conversation amongst youth groups.

Recent policies which force test prep also diminish the quality of education for our students in urban schools.[4] When a school's success is primarily determined by test scores, those grades become priority; maintaining high test scores equates to funding and ultimately not being shut down by the state. As an educator in a charter school, I see how misleading test scores are to parents and students. We are raising a generation of children who believe their intelligence is measured by a scale of one to four without considering how these test scores are reached, and without prioritizing the depth of learning. We are taking time and money away from arts, extra-curricular activities and subjects that are not "testing subjects" to create a test prep environment. We teach with a core belief, or rather excuse which we have come to accept, that students need to learn to read before they can read to learn. Instead of focusing more on critical thinking, we mostly teach children basic skills of identifying text features, structures or sequence in what they read. The truth is that this skills-based approach is preparing students for testing because of

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[4] "The differences in quality and climate between urban and suburban schools and, most specifically, between schools with students of low socioeconomic backgrounds and high socioeconomic backgrounds is a central problem related to inequalities of the results." (Sadovnik, Cookson, Semel, Coughlan 28) This text outlines how policies have caused inequities in urban schools, hindering the education of students in low income and minority groups.

demands of the Common Core, demands of funding, and fear of school closure, not preparing students to be active members of a greater society.

Tests are the center of most academic conversation. We do not speak profoundly of artistic skills, nor scientific abilities or historical knowledge. Instead, teachers casually speak of students as being fours, threes or twos depending on how they score on practice tests throughout the year. In grades K-8 students are placed in classes based on their academic levels, rather than having heterogeneous grouping.[5] This heightens the sense of competition and individualism. It creates a space for students to not only take pride in their own capabilities (which is good), but to see themselves as doing significantly better than others, seeing themselves as winners and the others as losers for obtaining lower scores on exams. In observing the dynamics of my three classes inside and outside of the classroom, I noticed that few students tend to mingle in between groups. More importantly, there is an awful negative label placed on the "low" class. Students have expressed being treated as inferior on the playground. Students in the "high" class have also expressed not being liked by their peers outside of their own group.

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[5] See Maureen T. Hallinan's "Tracking: From Theory to Practice" for further information regarding impact of academic grouping on social dynamics.

Cooperative Learning and Socialization

David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson express the dangers of individualistic and competitive values, suggesting the need for cooperative learning environments. Cooperative learning leans away from the individualistic and competitive mindset, encouraging students to focus on outcomes that would be beneficial to themselves and the community as a whole.

> Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning. Within cooperative learning groups, students are given two responsibilities; to learn the assigned material and make sure that all other members of their group do likewise. In cooperative learning situations, students perceive that they can reach their learning goals only if the other students in the learning group also do so. (Johnson and Johnson page 5)

We can enhance learning while teaching children about social interdependence by making our classes and small groups diverse. It would be most beneficial if within our classroom workshops students are not grouped by academic level. Our workshop currently consists of homogenous grouping to target specific Common Core Standards, and the resources we use are primarily Test Prep material. While we do aim to have students at least working together once a week in these groups, for this practice to be more effective, we should implement the different models more frequently throughout the year (using strategies of formal cooperative learning, informal cooperative learning and base groups). We can easily facilitate these practices multiple times a week.

The social construct of the classroom is a key component to learning; being intentional in implementing a positive learning space which facilitates healthy relationships is also significant in my school model.

It is vital that the organization of pupil learning must be strategically constructed in relation to social interaction with teachers and peers as well as particular learning tasks. (Kutnick and Blatchford 24)[6]

My school plan would incorporate models of cooperative learning as defined by Jonson and Johnson.

Formal cooperative learning requires significant guidance from the teacher and is the closest model to what we already do. Academic objectives are specified and explained prior to each session and students are encouraged to complete questions together through dialogue. However, within these sessions we should also include a social skill objective which we have not incorporated into learning. This would be a great opportunity to instill social values while cultivating an open space for discussion about what these values should be, allowing students to evaluate not only their academic progress, but how well they work within the group.

Informal cooperative learning would require us to provide time for small group discussion before and after instruction. This would provide time for students to process, summarize and think critically about the content taught in each lesson, while the teacher steps back and observes these discussions. We are accustomed to providing lead questions, but there

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[6] For more information on peer-based learning and the benefits of social interaction, see *Effective Group Work in Primary Classrooms* by Peter Kutnick and Peter Blatchford

should be little guidance here, allowing students to naturally focus on the parts of the lesson which they choose to discuss.

Base groups are furthest from what we are accustomed to but may provide needed and long-lasting mentorship for our students. They are meant to provide a space of peer encouragement, support, and academic guidance over an extended period of time, crossing into academic years. This is certainly feasible in a K-8 structure since students grow together from childhood into young adolescent years. Groups would meet regularly to discuss academic progress, verifying that each member is staying on task with responsibilities and assignments. They also take responsibility for supporting students who may not have been present during some class sessions. Middle school and high school advisory could be conducted in the form of base groups, carrying into the next year.

Administration should avoid pushback by properly introducing cooperative learning and provide all necessary resources. Concern for time restraints (hours taken away from test preparation) will be raised by teachers. Despite the amount of time needed for this to work, we must acknowledge that it is going to teach our students to become enthusiastic learners who will take pride in their development and joy in their level of independence, especially in Middle School. It will educate our students in different content areas at a level much more in depth than we have been exposing them to. They will learn about their own power as well as the role they choose to take in their society. With intentional steps and involvement of the leadership, we can improve education in our public schools.

A sense of ownership and interdependence would help students grow together within the school community and improve interaction amongst one another. It would also help social development as students confront and resolve conflicts together.

> Resnick argued that it is important not to socialize learners into unproductive views of their own learning and intelligence but to provide social space within the classroom where children's learning can be supported incrementally via interactions with their teachers and peers. It is, thus, important for learners to acquire robust and enduring 'habits of mind' in which effort and the ability to learn from others are naturally seen as important in learning. (Kutnick and Blatchford, page 24)

This theory suggests that learning is strongest when students are not only focused on their own academic development and intelligence, but understand the importance of everyone's development. This theory encourages students to teach and learn from each other through interaction. It would be the school's responsibility to provide spaces within the classroom and outside of the classroom for this to occur.

With this in mind, our entire curriculum, teaching tools, and methods of instruction need to incorporate consistent and true peer-to- peer interaction. In this model, teachers would not dominate instruction, but instead facilitate and encourage learning.

> Pedagogy in a classroom context is not just about the teacher enhancing the learning of a single person; it includes all pupils in the class and takes place within particular social, learning and physical constraints (e.g., such as class size and composition).

My school plan designs a classroom which allows for the implementation of these methods, as well as the space and resources for shared learning

Inequities in Schools

My experience and close examination of education policies have made it clear that there are so many intricacies and deciding factors in the success of our students within various neighborhoods, and that there are several fallacies negatively driving public education. Extensive studies have been made and texts published addressing this issue[7], and yet the constant fight against unjust policies which have been labeled as reform seems to become more challenging each year with new battles to take on. In more recent years, the continuation and development of charter schools (for profit and nonprofit), has depended on standardized testing, inevitably making these schools testing zones as opposed to learning environments. In their work of advocacy for authentic, valuable, and equitable education, Diane Ravitch, Natalie Wexler and Sonya Douglas Horsford identify key points that educators, parents and students should more readily be made aware of. All three advocates examine the inequities within public schooling and the dangers of current reform movements which will inevitably deprive our minority and low-income students of opportunity for academic success. There is a direct correlation between socio-economic status, the current skill-based curriculum (resulting from decades of inefficient policies)[8], and policy makers' push for privatization; if we do not call for action as school communities, the future of public education and the detrimental effects of our so called reform may be worse than imagined.

Ravitch describes our current policies as an intentional attack on public schools, one motivated by profit and power as opposed to the well-being of children within these schools. She

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[7] See "The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality: Possibilities of Democratic Schooling" by Sonya Douglas Horsford, Janelle T. Scott, and Gary L. Anderson. Also see *Learning in a Burning House* by Horsford.
[8] See Hortsford's *Learning in Burning House* especially chapter 1.

asserts that "the privatization agenda excites the interest of edu-entrepreneurs, who see it as a golden opportunity to make money." (Ravitch 37) She also emphasizes the negative impacts of privatization in low-income communities by highlighting realities of heavily concentrated poverty in the inner city as well as continued and increasing segregation, explaining that corporate reformers ignore the connection between poverty and academic success, framing teachers as incompetent individuals who seek to make excuses for their own shortcomings:

> Today's reformers insist that public education is a failed expertise and that all these strategies have been tried and failed. They assert that the best way to save education is to hand it over to private management and let the markets sort out the winners and the losers. They wish to substitute private choices for the public's responsibility to provide good schools for children. (Ravitch 36)

In this case, those private choices are not predominantly made by those who are directly in the field, nor those whose learning is impacted. In a true model of democratic learning, school decisions, choices, and any reform needed would be based on and made by the community itself. She explains the reform movement is mostly funded and run by major foundations, Wall Street Hedge Fund Managers, entrepreneurs, and leaders in US Department of Education[9] (Ravitch 19).

When we ignore the fact that living in poverty brings a wide range of issues which need to be addressed, problems outside of a school's control, we fail to support those unique needs:[10]

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[9] See Ravitch Chapter 3 for further information on school reformers.

[10] Ravitch asserts, "If the American public understood that reformers want to privatize their public schools and divert their taxes to pay profits of investors, it would be hard to sell the corporate idea of reform." (Ravitch 35).

Decades of social science research have demonstrated that differences in the quality of

schools can explain about one-third of the variation of student achievement. But the other

two-thirds is attributable to non-school factors. (Ravitch 102)

We must look at larger social structures in addition to the quality of schools before we address

grading systems in schools that have been labeled as failures. We also should not ignore the

potential for psychological impacts on students and adults alike when schools are labeled as

such. The label "failing school" has an underlying implication that not only teachers are terrible,

but that the students are as well. We must then consider what this means when the majority of

school closures and/or restructuring is occurring in minority and low-income neighborhoods.

Ravitch believes that racial segregation and poverty are social problems, not problems that

schools are responsible for, and that these are the issues that must be addressed in order to see

significant change. Testing and accountability add to the problems which reformers claim to

solve. A significant component of recent reform has been the development of charter schools

whose test scores are crucial in their funding and ability to remain open. Perhaps more intriguing

is the amount of buy-in charter schools have received over the years with press coverage, falsely

claiming to be saviors responsible for closing the achievement gap.[11]

As an educator in a charter school, I too see how misleading test scores are to parents

and students. We are raising a generation of children who believe their intelligence is measured

by a scale of one to four. Yet, tests are the center of most academic conversation. We do not

speak profoundly of artistic skills, nor scientific abilities or historical knowledge. Students pay

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[11] See *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* by Diane Ravitch, especially chapters 4 and 5.

little to no mind to these subjects because they are in an environment which has taught them to do so. [12]

Natalie Wexler's *The Knowledge Gap* details the restraints placed on students by the No Child Left Behind Act. We teach with a core belief, or rather excuse which we have come to accept, that students need to learn to read before they can read to learn. Instead of focusing more on critical thinking, we teach children basic skills of identifying text features, characters, or sequence. The truth is that a skills-based approach is actually preparing students for testing because of demands of the Common Core, demands of funding, and fear of school closure. We do not teach to read in order to read to learn; we prioritize these skills above others because we are obsessive about meeting policy demands in order to stay afloat.

Wexler describes the Common Core as primarily a list of skills, not an actual curriculum, but we treat it as such instead of encouraging children to learn more about additional content. We follow Piaget's theory that young students are not ready to learn complex content about history and science, but this concept has already been contradicted by evidence, such as models of Montessori schools whose premise is self-directed learning, not test-centered curricula. Such schools have proven students can think both critically and abstractly:

> It turns out that it's also good for them; if young children are introduced to history and science in concrete and understandable ways, chances are they'll be far better equipped to re-engage with them with more nuance later on. At the same time, teaching disconnected comprehension skills boost neither comprehension nor reading scores. (Wexler 29)

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[12] For more information on conditioning students to test, see Natalie Wexler's *The Knowledge Gap* Chapter 6.

Teachers should be focusing on content and not skills: no matter how extensively skills are taught, the test score gap comes from the lack of knowledge. We must also be realistic about which communities are affected by this. Private schools do not have the pressures and threats of standardized testing causing school closures and the majority of public school students are minorities and disadvantaged. The traumatic experiences are again, imposed on minority, low-income communities.

In *Learning in a Burning House*, Sonya Douglas Horsford cohesively outlines a critical race theory which helps us evaluate issues of equity and race, and understand that they are connected to power and identity. This theory is based on the belief that storytelling allows us to learn from the experiences of marginalized groups. She suggests that we critique liberal ideologies and acknowledge that schools are not a platform for creating equal opportunity toward the American Dream. There are decisive factors associated with race, determining how opportunities are presented from a young age, including in education.

Horsford quotes Dr. King's metaphor of the integration in schools being a burning house, a space which is worse than the segregated spaces because of hostility, violence, and continued oppression. We need to consider to which extent we are engaging students in diverse and inclusive spaces and questioning if we ever authentically integrated schools. She explains that Dr. King reminded everyone that the only solution to win against the burning house would be for activists to become firefighters; understand the source of these flames and battle against them. In other words, we need to understand the role of race in education to fight for equality adequately and successfully, approaching racial inequalities with these four steps: racial literacy, racial realism, racial reconstruction, racial reconciliation. We begin with racial literacy, an understanding of how race is used to implement power, inequality and oppression within society

and within the educational system. Secondly, racial realism is necessary to acknowledge that racism is still a reality of American society, strategically and intentionally used to limit opportunities for minorities, oppressing marginalized groups in concentrated communities through systemic policies. Thirdly, racial reconstruction involves moving toward a shift in how we collaboratively define and engage in conversations of race, working to eliminate negative stereotypes of different groups. Lastly, racial reconciliation is necessary to heal the wounds caused by prejudices within social groups and in schools, focusing on generational trauma in addition to psychological effects.

In *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality*, Horsford connects concerns of racial inequality within our education system to the implications of negative effects the privatization movement will ultimately have on marginalized groups if nothing is done to prevent them. The reality is that not all students have an equally leveled playing field, and that there is an illusion of opportunity to obtain an American Dream which for some students is practically unattainable, not because their teachers are failing them, but because they are victims in a larger system meant to keep them oppressed:

> It is true that powerful interests with corporate money have amassed great power in the era of the policy arena, but these 'Astroturf or grasstops' organizations are no match for powerful grassroots social movements composed of educators, parents, citizens, and students. (Hosford et al 191).

We need policy movements to drive the necessary changes. One example presented in this chapter is the Philadelphia schools taking back control and voice by having an elected school board. This would not have been possible without teachers as well as the movement to elect the

right local politicians and a civil rights lawyer as district attorney. This success story of a community regaining control over its own school policies was possible only because of grass roots initiatives. An intentional social movement involving the community cultivated change which can be gained elsewhere if properly organized.

Horsford would agree that in order to change education, we would need to evaluate greater issues around it, including social policies and systems of oppression. Our communities need to collectively understand the reasons behind challenging daily experiences which are linked to policy, historical timelines, as well as academics:

> A praxis perspective does not merely apply scholarly knowledge to a social problem or set of experiences but rather uses the knowledge learned within everyday life to reflect on those experiences as well as on scholarly knowledge… This set of concerns sees both scholarship and practice as intimately linked and mutually informing each other, rejecting views that see theory as superior to practice. (Horsford 27)

If we can be more intentional about raising awareness of the politics of education in an academic setting for all educators, if we can encourage educators to think more independently of what school should be, to connect politics of education to their daily routines, there will be greater understanding of how our students are being affected by policy. We would also simultaneously be encouraging teachers to reflect upon their own practices and role in the school. Teachers would question the effectiveness and results of how they have been taught to practice their craft, and how they can be involved in fighting for improvement on a larger scale.

Public education should be a safe space that addresses all needs of our students and does not ignore the realities of racial prejudices our students experience. We should constantly aim

toward improving our schools by providing necessary resources, not taking them away nor shutting down schools. Resources include not only the physical tools for learning, but also extracurricular programs, mentoring, and spaces for social-emotional development. In order to obtain equity, we also need to address the areas in which students in poverty need support that extend outside of the scope of education.

I have had the opportunity to work with teachers who are activists constantly fighting for the rights of their children and communities, but I have also seen vast amounts of teachers, who become discouraged by the powers against us. Despite these concerns, acquiescing to injustices will only allow for increased oppression. Choosing to sit back and not strategize ways to prevent attacks on public schooling will not only prevent this from ending but will push it as far as its leaders choose to take it. Corporate reformers and anyone else profiting off the system of public schooling would, in essence, be given free range to do as they please because no one is stopping them.

I propose that as teachers and/or advocates in our local communities, we continue to raise awareness and fight against more evident oppressive structures, helping our colleagues and peers understand the gravity by voicing our concerns. When our work speaks volumes through the success of our students, as well as the trust we build with parents and students, we must use that respect to unveil realities too many of us choose to silence.

My research detailed in this paper explores the problems within our public schools, and justifies the logistics explained in my school plan. My main goal is to target the problems that I identify through my experience and my research by making our schools more democratic at their core. This means, we would need to implement a balance of power in administration, instead on

a hierarchical configuration. We would intentionally create spaces that focus on the development of each child, from early stages through adolescence. The administrative, curricular, and social-emotional propositions are informed by my research to promote authentic learning and improve learning experiences for students in urban schools. I suggest that the academic gaps discussed in this paper are not necessarily caused by socio-economic differences, but that they are direct results of our inability to provide the resources and educational structures for students in low socio-economic communities. My plan for democratic schooling fosters the growth of students in all areas of their development; it is free of bureaucracies, valuing the voice of everyone in the school community while cultivating spaces of harmony and solidarity.

Reflection

I joined the MALS program after several years of teaching in NYC schools. My experience includes regular public school, charter school, and catholic. All schools I have taught in are composed primarily of minority students of low-income families. My concerns about the achievement gap and the inequities in education which cause it, encourage my continued learning of these issues. I believe it is imperative for everyone who has a career in public education, to question the implementation of policies and discover best practices which would be most beneficial to our students.

I chose the MALS track with a concentration in Urban Education because its flexible program gave me the opportunity to explore and research areas that are not typically a part of an education track. In addition to the two courses in Urban Education, I took a class in Child Psychology, Youth in Groups, and Environmental Psychology. Of these, Childhood Psychology was the first class I took, and it made me realize just how significant it is for educators and leaders in education to understand child development. Pedagogy should be driven by an understanding of psychology. My research in environmental psychology focused on the interconnectedness of individuals in a community, and how humans are affected by their physical space. Research in this class helped me explore ways to cultivate positive community spaces. The Youth in Groups course exposed me to research on how children interact with one another, how important those interactions are to their development, and the role they have in our society which can undermine their abilities to think for themselves. I was able to connect this research to my research in urban education and educational policy, helping me create a democratic, attainable, instrumental school plan.

<div align="center">**Part Two:**</div>

<div align="center">**Democratic School Plan**</div>

Introduction

Teaching in NYC public schools for nearly ten years has been a tremendously enriching

experience which has also opened my eyes and understanding to how our system works in urban

schools. While I do believe school communities in urban settings are, for the most part,

composed of teachers and administration who want what is best for students, and whose initial

and primary mission has always been to provide an education of substance for all students

equally, I also have been dissatisfied in the overall approach taken in how we prepare our

students for their world. My experience, along with my research, has encouraged me to develop a

plan which places student needs at its center; an idea which seems simple enough but has been

blurred by bureaucratic boundaries and detrimental curricular reform. I believe that if we take

learning back to the basics in setting up our urban schools, if we create a model that encompasses

multiple areas of child and adolescent development, we will not only do justice to our students,

but we will close the learning gap.

The goal of this plan is to improve both equity and equality in urban public education by

providing access to rigorous instruction, a balanced model of learning and flexible learning

methods for students across academic levels. This model steers away from our traditional form

of measuring mastery through ELA and Math NYS testing and focuses on a more holistic

curriculum which equally values and foregrounds, Literature, Language Arts, Math, Science,

Social Studies, Creative Arts, and Physical Education. It is also unique in its administrative

design, balancing decision, and power amongst the school community. This model is also

designed to adequately meet the social emotional needs of all children and adolescents by

prioritizing emotional intelligence, skill-based approaches in resolving conflict, and counseling for all students. The physical school environment is designed to support both personal and academic growth of each adolescent.

In creating this model, I have adapted ideologies used in Finnish's National Core Curriculum for Basic Education. Every school is expected to build its operating culture and functioning as a learning community on these four pillars:

1. Respecting the uniqueness of each student and guaranteeing the right to a good education

2. Promoting each student's growth as a civilized/educated human being and as an active citizen of a democratic society

3. Valuing cultural diversity and regarding it as a source of richness

4. Understanding the necessity of living sustainably.

    (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, 15-17).
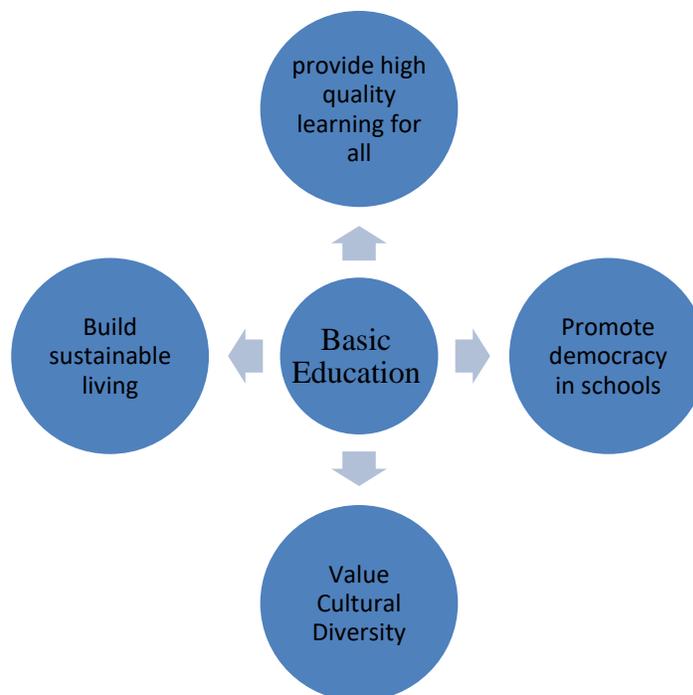
I chose the approach used in Finnish public schools because this country has become a leader in academic development for the last two decades. I also believe that their approach most closely matches my model of democracy in schools, while also prioritizing the development of each child. In this system, family background (cultural and financial) has less of an impact on students' academic achievement. In addition, schools are built to prioritize the mental and emotional health of students and teachers, creating the best, positive environment for learning. (Timothy D. Walker, Chapter 1).

Leadership and Policy

In defining and implementing leadership, we need to change the traditional model of school administration into one that encompasses the entire schools community. This model balances eight different theories in leadership in order to sustain democracy and organization within the school. The school principal, and additional administrative leaders and teachers, will be responsible for maintaining the safety of its children physically, mentally, and emotionally. It is up to the administrative team to ascertain a supportive and healthy learning environment throughout the school. The principal will intentionally utilize and implement the eight methods leadership which are listed in the diagram.

Holistic Model for Educational Leadership

Instructional Leadership

> *The focus of the principal was seen to be on the promotion of an effective instructional climate, in providing teachers with advice and support as they delivered the curriculum.* (Bennet and Anderson 24)

➢ In a traditional sense, the principal must be qualified to provide expertise on teaching and learning. These qualifications will include but not be limited to extensive work in the classroom (minimum ten years), graduate level education, and a record of professional development over the course of his or her career.

➢ The principal must consistently remain up to date with new technologies, methods and issues which arise within the realm of education. It is the principal's duty to remain up to date with such information.

Situational Leadership

> *Situational Leadership requires the administrators to fully immerse themselves in their school community and be intimately knowledgeable about the context within which they work.* (Bennet and Anderson 23).

➢ The principal must be knowledgeable about direction coaching, supporting, and delegating. He or she should be keenly aware of needs in the school community by identifying when faculty needs coaching for improvement, when support is needed (resources or time), and when work should be delegated amongst departments.

➢ Being aware of needs within the school community is a preventative measure which also ensures the safety, well-being, and progression of everyone within the school.

Dialogical Leadership

> *Those with whom the leader was interacting often had a more complete understanding of their situation than did the leader. Thus, it was incumbent upon the leader to establish a dialogue with those whom he or she wished to lead. Only through discussion could truth be determined, and appropriate action be developed and implemented actions appropriate not only to the leaders but to the followers as well.* (Bennet and Anderson 26) .

➢ Departments will be based on content areas, each department consisting of a lead teacher. The leadership team of teachers will be responsible for making school-wide decisions alongside the principal.

➢ It is the principal's duty to ensure consistent communication across leadership teams as well as all faculty members. Weekly meetings will be in place between the principal and leadership team, and the principal with the entire faculty.

➢ Check ins will occur as needed

➢ The principal is expected to have an open door policy, in which anyone in the school community can reach out during school hours to address concerns (dependent on the principal's availability, and may be based on a scheduled meeting plan)

Ethical Leadership

Notions of caring, justice and ethics are foundations on which observed behavior is constructed. (Bennet and Anderson 25).

➢ While ethical leadership implies implementation of the leader's own morals, ethical consideration should be based on the community, keeping in mind diverse cultures, religions, and beliefs. Ethical standards should be composed by student, faculty, and the principal's input.

Collaborative Leadership

The principal establishes external and internal linkages for the school. Externally, these linkages require better communication, co-operation, collaboration, and co-ordination with social community agencies. Internally, trust and congeniality must be established between teachers, students, and administrators. The principal must facilitate this process if leadership is to be effective. (Bennet and Anderson 25).

➢ It is necessary to maintain consistent positive relationships with community agencies and organizations. This would allow for the building of positive relationships amongst teachers and students with the neighborhood (home to a vast majority of students).

➢ It is also imperative to forge positive relationships with parents through consistent communication, educational outreach, and family activities.

➢ Mentorship will be implemented with an SEL plan but is encouraged in the daily interaction amongst students and adults within the building. Teacher qualifications and sustainability of a position will also be based on the ability to maintain these positive relationships.

Servant Leadership

The legitimate power of a leader only develops if the leader sees himself or herself as a servant of those being led. Leaders have to achieve balance between their operating and conceptual talents; the former carries the organization forward in its daily tasks and objectives and the latter permits leaders to see the whole within the perspective of time, both past and present… The desire to serve outweighs the need for peer recognition. (Bennet and Anderson 24).

➢ It is necessary for administration to see themselves as being in service to faculty, ensuring their resources are readily provided, and ensuring that mental health is a priority. This includes setting realistic and reasonable schedules which allow for mental breaks, while also honoring time off when needed.

➢ The tone amongst faculty and administration should be of equality and partnership, not hierarchy.

Influencing Leadership

The purpose of this leadership style is to achieve organizational goals by enhancing the productivity and satisfaction of the workforce. Such a person must be sensitive to the issues of the day, know the source of those issues, and be able to recognize what values are involved. (Bennet and Anderson 26).

➢ Decisions and actions are based on a direct awareness of community needs. This will coincide with consistent communication between faculty, team leaders and the principal.
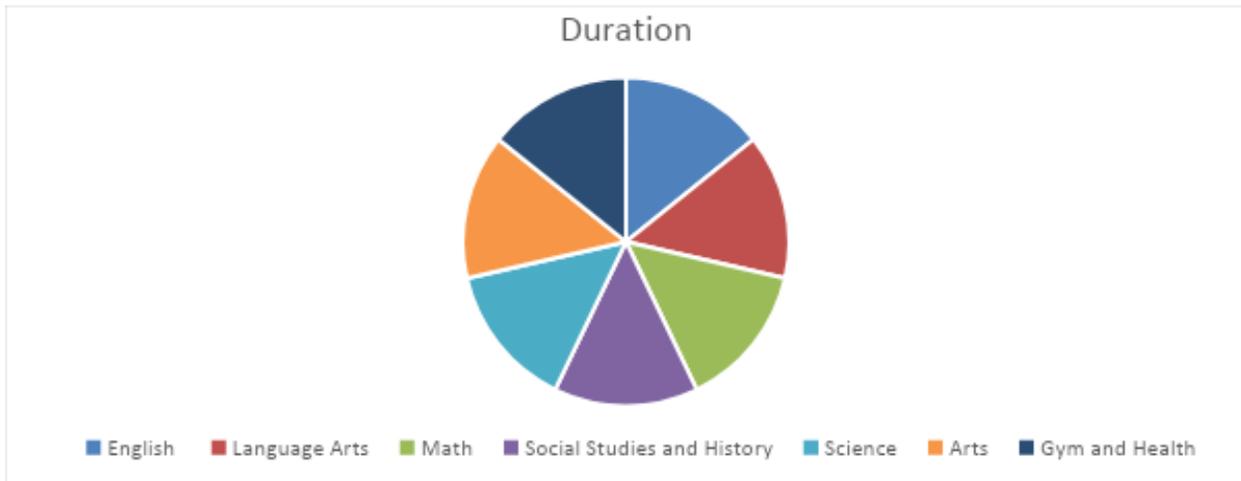
Transformational Leadership

The principal is not content with being the only leader. Rather, she or he facilitates the development of leadership abilities within all staff. She or he does this by identifying and articulating a vision for the school, conveying expectations for high levels of performance, and providing both intellectual stimulation and individualized support. The

staff are transformed from followers to leaders within the organization. (Bennet and Anderson 27).

> ➢ Leadership is divided amongst the principal and the team leaders. Content leadership ensures the best level of education in each subject, while the principal maintains organization and structure.

Balanced Academics

This model gives equal importance to all subjects listed below, focusing on a content-based curriculum (not test-based). Students in all subjects will be regularly assessed through their development of projects within each year. Student performance will not be determined by standardized testing, but by the implementation and application of knowledge in all subjects.

Duration

■ English ■ Language Arts ■ Math ■ Social Studies and History ■ Science ■ Arts ■ Gym and Health

Sample Schedule

7:30-8:00am	Arrival, Breakfast, Lockers
8:00- 8:45am	Mathematics
8:50- 9:35am	Science
9:40- 10:25	Physical Education
10:30- 11:15	Language Arts
11:20- 12:05	Lunch
12:10- 12:55	Literature
1:00- 1:45	Social Studies
1:50- 2:35	Art

Social Studies

    People, Places and Environments

        Students study the connection between people and geographical spaces

        historically and throughout the world. Students will examine the relationship

people have with their physical world, how they are impacted by climate and climate change, as well as the productive use of natural resources. Students will also examine the impact humans have on the natural world, examining environmental shifts and climate change.

Civic Ideals and Practices

Students will learn a variety of civic ideals practiced across the world, identifying ways to bridge gaps between government and civilians in a society. There will be a focus on rights and freedom of individuals, evaluating how these freedoms have been violated and how they can be supported for a more equitable living.

Culture and Diversity

Students will examine how diverse groups have adapted to and created culture throughout the world historically including but not limited to beliefs, values, traditions, institutions. The curriculum will tie into the development of language, arts, and sciences within each cultural group.

Power, Authority and Government

Students will learn the foundations of governance and the functionality of government structures throughout the world. These studies will encourage critique of government structures in various institutions on a local and national level.

Science, Technology and Society

Students will focus on the advancement of technology across the globe, its practicality, and its impact on different societies. Students will evaluate its benefits as well as its long-term impact on how we interact with each other and our world across social groups and institutions.

Literature Curriculum

The English department will focus on content-based learning as opposed to skilled based practices. By incorporating engaging literature with thematic units (not skill-based units), students will practice and develop their critical thinking skills, connecting their reading across curricular boundaries. Literature will focus on multicultural works which are representative of diverse societies, places, and artistic styles. The English Department aims to think beyond the Canon of British and American Literature, redefining what can be considered as classic, noteworthy work.

In addition, literature should encourage students to consider their own moral and ethical encounters within their own lives.

Titles may include but are not limited to the following:

- *Koyal Dark*, Mango Sweet by Kashmera Sheth

- *Skin I'm In* by Sharon G. Flake

- *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat

- Selections from *Drown* by Junot Diaz

- *Wreath of Emmett Till* by Marilyn Nelson

- *The Other Wes Moore* by Wes Moore

- *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

- *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai

- *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson

- *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang

- *Return to Sender* by Julia Alvarez

- *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez

- *Drawing from Memory* by Allen Say

- *Our Stories Remember: American Indian History, Culture and Values through Storytelling* by Joseph Bruchac

- *The Surrender Tree: Poem's of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom* by Margarita Engle

- T*he Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* by Francisco Jimenez

- *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* by Virginia Hamilton

- *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* by Judith Ortiz Cofer

Themes may include but are not limited to the following:

Identity and Coming of Age

Familial and Societal Relationships

Oppression and Oppressive Societal Structures

Resilience and Overcoming Obstacles

Power and Corruption

Courage and Heroism

Language and Writing Curriculum

The language course will focus on the mechanics of writing, providing an overview of linguistics, grammar, sentence structure and composition. Throughout the course, students will participate in a multitude of expository and creative writing while collaboratively engaging in a thorough writing process.

Science Curriculum

Life Science

This would consist of the interconnectedness of living organisms. It will also explore the progression species over time. Students will interact with nature, learning how they are connected to their planet while considering the importance of sustainability in the near future.

Earth and Space

Students will evaluate the structure of the universe and Earth, focusing on astronomy, oceanography and meteorology.

Physical Science

Students will study principles of our physical space including matter, energy, motion and force. Topics will include mechanics, thermodynamics, relativity, and electromagnetism.

Technology

Technology will focus on engineering and the development of new technologies. Students will understand the impact of these developments on our world.

Mathematics Curriculum

Number and Operations

- Use factors, multiples, prime factorization, and relatively prime numbers to solve problems.

- Develop meaning for integers and represent and compare quantities with them.

Algebra

- Represent, analyze, and generalize a variety of patterns with tables, graphs, words, and, when possible, symbolic rules.

- Relate and compare different forms of representation for a relationship.

- Identify functions as linear or nonlinear and contrast their properties from tables, graphs, or equations.

- Generalize patterns using explicitly defined and recursively defined functions.

- Understand relations and functions and select, convert flexibly among, and use various representations for them.

- Analyze functions of one variable by investigating rates of change, intercepts, zeros, asymptotes, and local and global behavior.

Geometry

- Use coordinate geometry to represent and examine the properties of geometric shapes.

- Use coordinate geometry to examine special geometric shapes, such as regular polygons or those with pairs of parallel or perpendicular sides.

Measurements

- Understand both metric and customary systems of measurement.

- Understand relationships among units and convert from one unit to another within the same system.

- Understand, select, and use units of appropriate size and type to measure angles, perimeter, area, surface area, and volume.

Data Analysis and Probability

- Formulate questions, design studies, and collect data about a characteristic shared by two populations or different characteristics within one population.

- Select, create, and use appropriate graphical representations of data, including histograms, box plots, and scatter plots.

Art Curriculum

Students will study the history of and engage in the following forms of art. The art program will also be responsible for cultivating an understanding of each area through direct involvement and field trips. The art curriculum will aim to stimulate creativity and improve self-expression.

Visual Arts

Visual arts will involve the exploration of aesthetic expression through drawing, painting, creating sculptures, and different forms of media.

Performance Arts

Performance arts will incorporate multicultural dances while exploring the history of their origins. Students will also be exposed to a variety of drama, how it has changed over the centuries, and how it is presented in different cultures. Students will develop their own form of art based on acquired knowledge and their own self-expression.

Music

Students will explore how music has developed over time in different countries. Students will choose from a range of instruments to learn to play. With guidance from their teachers and consistent practice, students will develop techniques and create shows throughout the year.

Physical Education

The physical education program will incorporate extensive teaching of physical health and the body and well as physical activity and exercise. Under the umbrella of healthy living, students will learn about healthy eating, safety and injury prevention, substance abuse, and mental health. Students will also develop active living and physical activity skills by engaging in a range of sports, recreational activities, and fitness activities which can be incorporated into their daily lives.

Physical Activities may include dance, yoga, swimming and contact sports. Students will be encouraged to find an activity which they are most comfortable developing in depth over time. These activities will serve as beneficial to the mind and body.

Physical Classroom Space

Students must feel comfortable and safe in their learning environment to be able to not only focus on their learning, but to build a love of learning. Students will regularly be allotted break time during each class to move around the classroom and socialize with their peers. Students will also take ownership over their learning by documenting what the class has learned each day, and monitoring one another's' growth. By doing so, students will be able to support one another using their own strengths and acquired knowledge.

Key Components

1. Sit/stand desks for classrooms and intentional implementation of movement and discussion strategies

2. Variety of spaces in the classroom for different methods of learning

3. Wide-range of literature and research texts

4. Access to technology

5. Bright lights and soothing colors throughout the walls

6. Plants within the classroom to improve air quality

7. All areas should be well kept and clear of clutter

8. Artwork around the classroom

9. physical spaces for students to adapt models of cooperative learning in all content areas

Social- Emotional Learning

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Individual, Subjective Growth

Students will have access to guided meditation in the morning before beginning their day.

These meditative practices will focus on therapeutic meditation with the goal of having students recognize what their individual circumstances and problems are, while reflecting upon the things that they can control.

This will ideally be conducted with support from the school counselor and social worker.

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Individual Action/Behavior Skills

Students will meet regularly to engage in discussion regarding concerns within the school community.

Students will take part in determining what their education should look like and voice areas of concerns that are leading to behavioral infractions. In addition, they will work closely with teachers to devise an action plan.

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Mindful School Culture and Relationships

Students and faculty should consistently reflect on and voice the relationships within the school community.

There should be room for growth on a social level, and transparent communication amongst students and adults. These practices should be implemented in each class' curriculum as well as transitional time and activities outside of the classroom.

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Equitable Social Structure and System of School and Society

Revise a curriculum to steer away from constant test prep. Create a culture of project-based learning that is relevant to today's social issues.

Devise a social action plan with students in which social justice concerns of the community are addressed. Provide opportunities to become involved in social justice issues within the neighborhood, stretching beyond the school community.

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Teachers, administration, and students will work collaboratively to implement transformational structures within the school community. Sessions of guided meditation will be offered to

students and teachers. In addition, members of the school community will meet to intentionally plan toward changes in social structures and routines that have proven to be problematic for the development of our students, and binding for the success of our teachers.

Our first step in implementing a mindfulness program that addresses social justice issues is to provide social emotional learning for students and teachers which is currently nonexistent in our school. It is imperative to evaluate the systems we have unintentionally and intentionally created in the culture of our school which pose challenges in self-reflective and individual growth. Some of these challenges include but are not limited to the lack of counselors available. Our school counselor and social worker do not have enough time to service their students adequately and are frequently required to carry out disciplinary action as opposed to providing counseling sessions for students in need. As a school that is predominantly populated by minority students from low-income families, it is anticipated that a higher percentage of our students are likely to experience trauma than would be the case in schools that are composed predominantly of upper-class Caucasian students *(Healing the Hurt* 5). However, rather than having necessary supports in place, the structures we have create further stressors for our students and do not address the preexisting concerns.

Goals

1. Develop social-emotional learning amongst students.
2. Provide an understanding and analysis of social-emotional learning and where we have been lacking in the school community. This will incorporate educating teachers on how to implement a safe and caring school culture in a daily routine.

3. Create intentional plans to target specific areas in need of improvement within the classroom, school community, and throughout the neighborhood.

4. Develop a culture of unification and solidarity to investigate unjust systems and work toward seeking social justice.

Timeline

I. Individual Growth

We must consider the meaning of mindfulness and use it as a starting point for developing a curriculum of social emotional learning. If we use the following as a foundation, we will be able to begin with reflective practices to address the individualized needs of our students and teachers:

> *Mindfulness relates to the self-regulation of attention, or the ability to intentionally attend to, and be vigilant of, certain stimuli while ignoring or suppressing others. The second feature has to do with the relationship with or orientation toward experience, specifically one characterized by nonjudgment, acceptance, and inquisitiveness. (Mindfulness in School Psychology 531).*

We must teach our students to be aware and reflective of their own circumstances while understanding and being careful not to define acceptance as tolerance for unjust systems. Acceptance here should be an understanding that traumatic, difficult, or unjust situations are in existence, and that we must acknowledge them for all their realities while working toward change. In teaching students and teachers to be aware of unjust realities within the communities, and to respond in ways that are not purely emotional but rather inquisitive and goal oriented, we can collaboratively devise plans that are efficient and effective:

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990) is perhaps the most

frequently used and studied method of mindfulness training. MBSR is an intensive, 8-

week group intervention designed to teach and promote the use of mindfulness in

everyday life. Individuals learn three core mindfulness techniques: mindful breathing

(concentrating on the sensation of breathing while, at the same time, remaining open to

other bodily sensations, thought processes, and emotions), the body-scan exercise

(progressively applying awareness to different parts of the body), and mindful stretching

(a series of slow stretches or yogic poses). (Mindfulness in School Psychology 533)

Incorporating these meditative practices would involve significantly changing the current

schedule but will foster emotional awareness and growth of our students in order to teach them

how to face the difficult realities and oppressive systems in a way that they can strategically fight

against them.

II.   Action/Behavior Concerns

Once we have established a routine of meditation practices, we will roll in a team for school

improvement during the third and fourth month. In paying close attention to the present, we can

evaluate problems from the root of their issue. Ideally, we will meet as a team which is equally

composed of administration, teachers, students, and parents to evaluate behavior action plans that

are currently in place. We will look closely at disciplinary actions and the infractions that led to

these. We will also evaluate and consider preventative measures that should be created. If our

students are receiving adequate emotional development, there should be fewer behavioral

problems.

III.   Mindful School Culture

We will then target the professional development of teachers more closely, focusing on environmental, development and childhood psychology. I would likely particularly use techniques that have proven to work within public systems of other countries. In reviewing Timothy D. Walker's *Teach Like Finland* we could use some of the highlighted structures to significantly alter the culture of our school to one that is more sensitive to emotional well-being of students and adults in our building.

Timothy D. Walker provides educational strategies which he believes reasonably easy to implement with a goal of turning around failing schools and creating a more positive environment. He draws comparisons between the structure of American schooling, the stressors associated with it, and the culture of Finland's successful public-school system. He highlights that learning in these schools has been progressive even though comparatively little funding is used, and families are not as involved in education as in other countries. Among these strategies, he emphasizes the importance of five critical elements.

> A. Balanced and holistic education for all children addressing all subjects evenly, allows students to strive at their best subjects. Classes are not segregated by socio-economic status.
>
> B. Teacher education requires graduate level research courses which combine both psychology and pedagogy, better preparing them for the classroom. Teachers in Finland hold a higher level of respect and recognition than in American culture.
>
> C. Health and well-being of children are prioritized in schools. Schools have a well-fair team to address anything which may hinder learning, even if it is occurring outside of the school.

D. School leadership must have substantial experience in the classroom. Leaders are also expected to continue teaching to remain connected with what is occurring in the classroom. By doing so, the leadership team is equipped to make the most informed decisions with student needs as their focal point.

E. There are youth policies in place to provide resources in support of a child's emotional and social development outside of school. Associations provide opportunities for cultural activities outside of school which directly impact learning. These activities include opportunities to be involved with community improvement programs, in addition to sports and art programs.

Drawing a comparison between Finnish schools and American schools provides practical solutions for problems America has struggled with in public schooling. High stress-environments which stem from high stakes tests, little time for break, and prison-like buildings have had a direct impact on opportunity for success. Work-life balance is so heavily prioritized that the time spent in the classroom is consistently productive. Teachers are not overworked and burning out at massive rates, but instead are thriving in their careers. When teachers are at their best, so are their students. The culture we have created is exhausting for our students as much as it is for our teachers. Without a positive relaxed environment, learning becomes somewhat of a forceful act, not one derived from motivation. Stressors not only impact academic success, but naturally influence mental health, increase drop-out rates, and punitive disciplinary action against children.

Implementing these strategies in American schools would be challenging because it requires a shift in culture, buy-in, and a change in priorities. It would require us to treat happiness and a stress-free environment as first and foremost. We would need to steer away from excessive test-

prep curriculum and more holistic growth of the individual. We would need to find ways to allocate our funds differently, prioritizing sports and the arts just as much as we do major subjects. It would also call for cultivating a sense of community among adults in schools. We would have to spend less time competing and more time creating a sense of belonging.

IV.   Targeting Social Justice Concerns

Social justice teams will work toward targeting specific issues within the school community while developing plans to organize and work in support of social justice. Ideally, students at this stage will be prepared to approach social justice concerns holistically, while considering what they have learned of their own experiences and growth over the course of mindfulness meditation practices and meeting within the school community.

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