

Making Up for Lost Time: The Power of Engaging Students in Co-Created Social Justice Projects

Steven Goodman

Abstract

In this commentary on urban education, I argue that the expanded and accelerated student learning recovery programs designed to make up for racial disparities in pandemic-related learning loss create an important opportunity for educators and students to co-create engaging programs that practice a culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy. Drawing from 40 years of experience working in New York City with over-age and under-credited students, multilingual immigrant and refugee students, and middle school students living in temporary housing, I propose a pedagogical approach that teaches to students' strengths and connects their learning to their lives, rather than enmeshing them in remedial instruction to try to make up for lost time. I use three student social justice documentary projects to illustrate the kind of student-centered teaching strategies, education theories, and transformative experiences students can have in post-pandemic afterschool, weekend, and summer programs. This approach is driven by a culturally responsive and sustaining education curriculum that (1) connects students' learning to their lives, challenges them to critically research the inequities they face in their schools and communities, and enables them to formulate actions to address them; (2) fosters a caring, inclusive learning environment with close student-teacher relationships that attend to students' social-emotional needs and tap into the wealth of their family and community resources; and (3) facilitates rigorous project-based learning, wherein students collaboratively create new knowledge and make their stories, music, and voices heard by their community.

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education, strengths-based teaching, cultural wealth, youth participatory action research, project-based learning

Introduction

Researchers report that students of color are falling as much as a full school year behind their white peers in more affluent schools, due to the unprecedented disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the pre-existing racial equity gaps (Dorn et al., 2021a, 2021b). Strategies to mitigate students' accumulated learning loss of the last two years include expanded and accelerated learning during and after school, on weekends, and over the summer. These recovery strategies offer intensive tutoring, test prep, and remediation (Barnum, 2021; Dorn et al., 2021a, 2021b; UNESCO, 2020). However, giving students more of what didn't work before the pandemic but with greater intensity is the wrong response, and it will do little to address the social and emotional trauma they have experienced or to remedy disparities in the race and class achievement gap.

Educators should instead seize this extraordinary opportunity by partnering with their students to co-create highly engaging afterschool and weekend enrichment programs that practice a culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) pedagogy that teaches to students' strengths and connects their learning to their lives, rather than enmeshing them in remedial work to try to make up for lost time. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2017) stresses the importance of linking learning "to the challenges the students are confronting . . . racial profiling, mass incarceration, or inequality in suspension [that] may be impacting students directly . . . Failure to engage them is exactly why students do not trust schools to be places that deal honestly and forthrightly with the issues of their lives" (p. 146). As called for by the Black Education Research Collective (2021), this approach builds trust between schools and Black families and their communities, and prepares students for civic life by teaching the truth about the world around them. Far from being remedial, engaging students in collaborative community inquiry develops their critical literacy and social-emotional skills while also leveraging



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their family, community, and individual assets. As Geneva Gay (2010) describes it, this pedagogy uses “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches *to and through* the strengths of these students” (p. 31).

Using a structural racial justice lens of decolonization, this approach applies a social, political, and historical analysis of our nation as a settler-colonial capitalist state, whose wealth was built through the theft of land and genocidal wars against indigenous peoples, and the enforced labor and brutal mass enslavement of Africans. It sees the longstanding racial inequities in our schools as a part of the larger problem of systemic racism that also pervades our criminal justice, health care, housing, legal, and electoral systems. From a student-centered perspective, decolonizing our schools and society at large is not simply a metaphor but a process, whereby critical understanding of this history is linked to an analysis of the contemporary conditions of students who are migrants and refugees from Indigenous communities in formerly colonized lands, such as Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and beyond, and whose families are too often exploited, criminalized, and deported. This approach also explores the radical history of those who resisted, organized, marched, and spoke out for freedom and justice and those who continue to do so today.

I argue now for the more widespread practice of this student-centered critical pedagogical framework because I have seen it working in classroom and afterschool settings over the past four decades. This is a highly effective approach to engaging over-age and under-credited students who

attend alternative and transfer schools in New York City, multilingual immigrant and refugee students in the international high schools, and middle school students who live in temporary housing. As the founding director of the Educational Video Center, a New York City-based nonprofit, I draw from my experience co-creating social justice projects with teachers and students (Goodman, 2018) to consider what our most disengaged learners will need in order to be drawn back into education. This pedagogy is informed by the history of activist educators who engaged their students in participatory action research and taught literacy for freedom, which is more relevant than ever with today's Jim Crow-like voter suppression. These activists include Septima Clark's citizenship schools in South Carolina, the SNCC freedom schools in Mississippi, Paulo Freire's adult literacy culture circles in Brazil, and Grace Lee Boggs' Detroit Summer, a multiracial, intergenerational collective that develops youth leadership.

Student projects can take a range of forms, but because my work has been media based, I will discuss the implications for teaching and learning of three social justice documentary projects that I co-facilitated with New York City students, teachers, and social workers prior to the pandemic. Through these projects, which were conducted in classroom, afterschool, and weekend workshop settings, the students investigated and proposed actions to address police abuse and gentrification in Harlem, policing and immigrant rights in Washington Heights, and the rights of students living in temporary housing in the Bronx.

These three cases illustrate the kind of student-centered teaching strategies, participatory education theories, and transformative experiences students can experience in summer and weekend programs that are driven by a co-created, CR-S education curricula that (1) connects student learning to their lives and challenges them to critically research the inequities they face in their schools and communities, and to formulate the actions needed to address them; (2) fosters a caring, inclusive learning environment with close student-teacher relationships that attend to students' social-emotional needs and tap into their wealth of family and community resources; and (3) facilitates rigorous project-based learning, wherein students collaboratively create new knowledge and make their stories, music, and voices heard by their community (Akomo et al., 2008; Mirra et al., 2013; Paris & Alim, 2017). Extra care will be needed to support students' social-emotional well-being, as many are struggling with Covid-related grief, depression, and trauma.

Co-Created Projects

For the three projects, teachers partnered with students to co-create an inquiry-based documentary curriculum in phases. The students chose the main social justice issues they wanted to investigate. They brainstormed about social problems experienced in their everyday lives that they wanted to raise awareness about and change. Over the course of the project, the students decided (1) the student, family, and community sources they would survey or interview; (2) the argument they would make; (3) the story they would tell; (4) the music, spoken word, and art they would create to tell it; and (5) the actions they would advocate for to address the problem. These experiences gave students a great sense of agency and ownership over their learning, as well as practice in democratic decision-making.

Teachers facilitated the activities that helped students build the critical and technical skills they needed to conduct the community research, media production, interviewing, editing, and reflection/action phases of the process. Practitioners taught according to students' strengths and looked for ways to leverage their interests and abilities, such as inviting students who like to rap to compose a piece for the project, those who like to draw to create animation, or an English as a New Language (ENL) student to conduct or translate interviews in their home language. Contributing to the project in these ways reinforced students' feelings of being needed by the group. Throughout the process, the teacher was learning from the art, knowledge, and experiences her students, their families, and the community was sharing.

When conducting their research, the students first turned to each other as sources of knowledge and experience on the social problem they were addressing. This approach draws in part from the tradition of youth participatory action research (YPAR), which has roots in mid-20th-century

African, Asian, and Latin American anti-colonial and liberation theology, which inspired struggles and maintains that problems of injustice can best be solved by those who directly experience them. YPAR also draws from critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), which highlights the validity of personal experiential knowledge. The roots of this theory go back to slave narratives and Native American storytelling that seek to preserve their culture in history and myth, and in stories told from marginalized people's points of view that challenge the dominant narratives. As active researchers, these young people provided their own unique insights and insider perspectives through a range of techniques, including surveys, focus groups, oral histories, and interviews (Petrone et al., 2021).

ENL high school students participating in a ten-week YPAR project in Manhattan's predominantly Dominican community of Washington Heights interviewed each other and people on the streets to gather stories of how racially discriminatory police practices affect this immigrant community. While filming these street conversations, meetings with immigrant rights lawyers, and protests, they discovered connections between "broken windows" arrests of immigrants for misdemeanors, such as turnstile jumping and selling churros in the subway, and their subsequent deportation. They then used this information when they questioned local NYPD officers about it, on camera. Even though the students had to fight their nervousness when talking to strangers on the streets or to lawyers and police officers, they understood that these issues are urgent and relevant, since their school and community had a high number of unauthorized immigrant families. In the eight-week Saturday workshop called Know Your Rights, middle and high school students from the Bronx interviewed fellow students, school social workers, and community and family members for their project on homelessness. They bore witness to the conditions of housing insecurity, as some of them are among the more than one in ten New York City students living in shelters or doubled up in apartments shared with friends or relatives.

In their peer interviews, students explained that they sometimes fall asleep in class because they have to wake up at 5 am for the more than two-hour bus ride they take each way between their shelter and the school. They described the lack of wi-fi access in the shelter, which they needed to do homework. One student reported that her family was evicted when her mother withheld rent because the landlord refused to fix the hazardous conditions in their apartment. A parent spoke of the lack of privacy in the shelter for herself and her children. Had the students known then about the recently uncovered fraud and sexual abuse scandals involving operators of the shelters where they were living, their anger and sense of betrayal by the adults running the shelters would surely have been even greater.

Community Trauma and Cultural Wealth

After students conducted interviews, the teachers facilitated viewing sessions that helped students make sense of their research and connect their learning to their lives. Discussing the issues raised in their interviews sometimes made students feel angry, overwhelmed, and hopeless that anything will change. Bringing community advocacy organizers, college professors, parents, and school social workers to speak to the student groups helped them break down complex concepts like gentrification, "broken windows" policing, and the school-to-prison pipeline, and to understand the sociopolitical context of their personal experiences. These community partners provided positive role models who were teaching and organizing in the community and showing students that change is possible.

Developing students' resilience and encouraging their continued engagement in the project required spaces where they felt safe, respected, and listened to. For example, even though the students living in temporary housing showed great strength and resilience and were not responsible for being homeless, some felt shame because of their situation. This required the adult facilitators to have a sense of cultural humility and to self-reflect on their position of privilege, particularly white educators.

One strategy that each group used was to create a group agreement, which they kept posted on the wall, to establish norms and ground rules for doing well-functioning work and for having conversations. Every session of the Saturday workshop began with a short team-building game that

allowed students to laugh and have fun getting to know each other better. Students also participated in activities such as “highs and lows,” which gave them and the adults a dedicated time to share high or low points from their week. These activities enabled the facilitators and students to build closer relationships and to express empathy, which lifted some of the emotional burdens everyone carried with them into the room.

Many students were struggling with mental health problems. Informed by the research on adverse childhood experiences, the group practiced mindfulness and other trauma-sensitive strategies, and social workers counseled students individually as needed. Research on adverse community experiences, trauma, and resilience (Pinderhughes et al., 2015) broadened the focus on trauma from individualized household violence and abuse to the lasting damage done to communities by the structural violence *behind* the everyday violence, such as widespread job loss, poverty-level wages, and oppressive policing, and to address the collective organizing needed for community resilience and well-being.

This approach holds two truths at the same time. Many students come from exploited and oppressed communities that have been historically marginalized, yet they also come from families and communities with rich cultures, knowledge, and networks that students bring with them to school. A CR-S pedagogy fosters student healing and resilience, as well as strength-based practices.

Critiquing Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, Tarra Yosso (2005) proposes other areas for educators to leverage in order to better understand the empowering potential of communities of color. This includes *aspirational capital*, or “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers”; *linguistic capital*, the multiple language and social communication skills of these communities and their engagement in traditions of storytelling, oral histories, parables, and proverbs; and *familial capital*, which is the “cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin)” (pp. 78-79) that carry a sense of community memory and commitment to well-being.

When teachers provide spaces where students can access this diverse capital, they are creating more inclusive and humanizing learning environments. As students working on their projects were investigating their chosen subjects, they and their teachers learned to value and learn from other students, teachers, college professors, community leaders, and family members. The community became a laboratory for learning, as their interviews took place in class, at local colleges and nonprofits, in civic offices, on the street corner (as in Figure 1; Goodman, 2019), and sometimes in each other’s homes.



FIGURE 1.
STUDENTS
CONDUCTING
INTERVIEWS IN
THE COMMUNITY

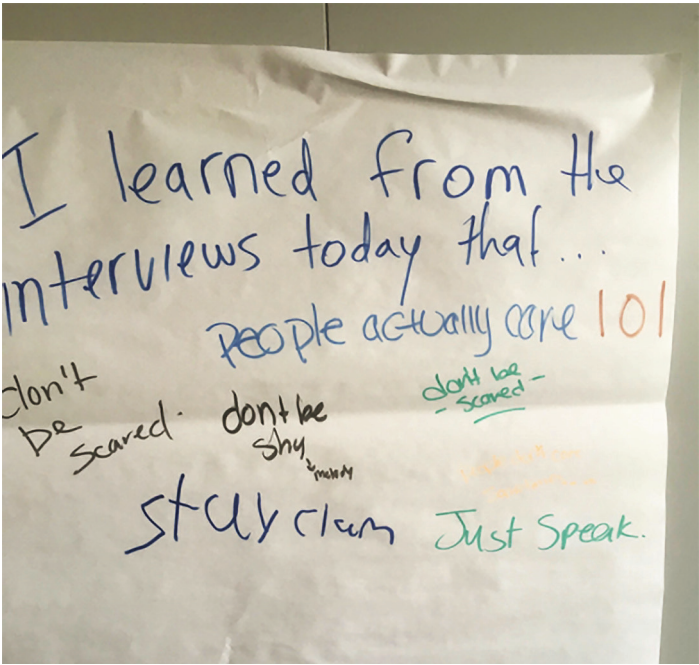
In the project on student homelessness, one student interviewed her mother and sister at their shelter about the problems of living there. This interview showed the 7th-grade student's linguistic capital, as she translated from Spanish to English and back during the interview with her mother. She even translated the Spanish, saying, "Even the cats have keys to come in!" which her mother used to describe their utter lack of privacy and security in the shelter. She also showed her familial capital when she explained how she helps her younger siblings with their homework each night. She and her younger sister showed aspirational capital when, in the face of great adversity, they expressed their hope of becoming a doctor and a teacher, respectively. Notably, she displayed great courage in telling her family's story in the hope that it could improve the future well-being of her peers and other families. Finally, the hugs, smiles, and jokes shared by the children and their mother during the interview and while eating together afterward showed the love and affection they have for each other.

Creating and Distributing Knowledge

Giving an overview of the documentary-making process, teachers worked with students to fill in key milestones in their production calendar. Planning backwards from the date of their school/community screening of the final video, teachers created multiple entry points for students to encounter and learn to solve open-ended problems (including technical, artistic, literacy, and social-emotional) from start to finish. To facilitate this kind of project-based learning effectively, practitioners needed to use modeling, scaffolding, coaching, and peer-teaching strategies. They often started by modeling an activity with students, such as conducting an interview, then stepped back to allow students to practice and solve problems on their own or in small groups. Teachers used "wall talk" and other reflection activities to help students self-assess their growth over the course of the project. Wall talk, whereby students give themselves advice on where to make improvements and make visible the sense of confidence they are developing in learning to ask authentic questions and make their voices heard (Goodman, 2019), is shown in Figure 2 .

Teachers increased student engagement by explaining the purpose of the skill or information students were learning and why it mattered. When a teacher scaffolded reading skills with a jigsaw or annotation activity, for example, students were more likely to be engaged if they understood that they would need that information to conduct an upcoming interview or for a narration they would write. The students' learning was given purpose and reinforced throughout the process.

FIGURE 2.
**STUDENT "WALL TALK"
REFLECTIONS ON THEIR
FIRST COMMUNITY
INTERVIEWS**



Developing students' social-emotional well-being and self-confidence as learners was built into the technical aspects of the workshop. As soon as a student learned a skill, such as how to operate the camera or tablet or use a function in the editing software, they taught a peer what they learned. Encouraging such informal peer teaching decentered the teacher and distributed knowledge and responsibility for teaching to all students. Reinforcing their skills and building their confidence and pleasure in learning through these small but visible successes was especially important for students who didn't have a strong identity as successful students.

Students came to understand that mistakes, such as a shaky camera or a mumbled question, were a natural part of the project-based learning process, one that required them to step outside their comfort zone with each new task. Learning from their mistakes and supporting each other in their next effort helped students build a sense of resilience. Knowing that each task they performed contributed to the successful completion of the documentary and to the overall success of the group, they also developed a sense of mutual accountability.

When teachers developed local partnerships that enabled them to tap into the cultural wealth and diverse funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) in their community, they expanded the networks of resources and social capital available to the students and their families. The ENL students working on the policing and immigrant rights project expressed feelings of pride and self-affirmation after they interviewed community immigrant rights lawyers, who could provide them with critical assistance if any of their own family members ever faced deportation. When they interviewed the director of the school office for students living in temporary housing, the students learned about the educational rights they and their families were entitled to under the McKinney-Vento Act, and how to self-advocate.

Students' social capital and sense of civic engagement can be strengthened through this kind of process. As part of their project investigating police abuse and gentrification, for example, transfer high school students traveled to the office of the New York City Brooklyn borough president, who is now the mayor of New York City, to interview him there. One student explained that this experience inspired him to study politics. He was moved by the borough president's story about growing up as a Black male in New York, including being beaten by NYPD officers and then working for police accountability as a political leader.

The students producing this documentary developed pride in local Black history when a historian who was a project co-facilitator taught them about the recently uncovered history of Seneca Village (Copeland et al., n.d.), a thriving 19th-century community of predominantly middle-class African Americans that was located near their Upper West Side Manhattan school. In their video, they retold the story of how all the residents were forced to leave Seneca Village when it was razed and its identity erased by the creation of Central Park. The students also researched the history of the Trail of Tears, the dark tale of when the U.S. government drove Native Americans from their homes, which caused thousands to die of hunger and disease along their 5,000-mile trek westward. They connected these historical examples of the forced removal of people of color to Harlem residents' contemporary stories of stop-and-frisk police harassment and of being displaced from their homes by the spread of gentrification.

Moving from Research to Action

Presenting their project to school and community audiences for public dialogue and action is the last phase of a YPAR project, whether the action is writing a policy paper, making a conference presentation, or creating a work of art, music, drama, photography, video, or spoken word. To arrive at this point, students in the three documentary projects had to review their research and interview footage and then come to a consensus about the best order for presenting their findings to their audiences in order to tell a story, make their argument, and propose an action. This involved noting the main themes and questions they addressed and the order in which they wanted them to appear. For example, students working on policing and gentrification displayed the main themes across the classroom wall and divided their project into sections: gentrification general, gentrification and policing, gentrification and historical context, and solutions. They placed Post-It notes under the

sections with the quotes from their footage that they liked best. They added music, still images, charts, and narration to their research to make it a compelling and artful story. They presented their final project at a school-wide meeting, which led to a powerful dialogue among students, teachers, school leaders, police officers, and city council members. The students concluded their video on police and immigrant rights with a narration in English and Spanish that taught the community audience about their legal rights, should immigration agents knock on their door.

They presented their documentary to their peers at school, to teachers at a professional development conference, at Know Your Rights community workshops, and to the general public on community access television. The team working on the temporary housing project concluded their film with a call to action, which requested that shelters be located closer to their schools, that students with long bus rides be allowed to start school later, and that shelters provide library and recreational facilities. They asked that social workers and teachers be better informed about their rights to an equitable education under the McKinney-Vento Act, and for teachers to get to know their students better and be understanding of the injustices they experience. While they proposed actions to improve the conditions of youth homelessness, the students also insisted that they were not defined by those conditions. They reframed how they were represented by filming each other having fun and showing off their various interests and creative talents, including step dancing, drawing, performing a student's rap commentary on Black history, and more.

When the students presented their homelessness video at a Columbia University School of Social Work Conference, it moved school social workers and teachers in the audience to renew efforts to destigmatize the problem of student homelessness and reverse the compassion deficit in schools. The social workers and district leaders present eagerly asked to show the students' film in their schools and thus spread their voices.

My hope is that these sketches of transformative student learning and action from before the pandemic will open new possibilities for practitioners and students working together in culturally responsive, sustaining spaces, including extended day, weekend, or summer programs. Over the past two-plus years, our students have suffered devastating losses on many levels, including lost learning. As we make up for lost time and take up the work of re-engaging students in learning, rather than speeding up remediation, we should slow down and redouble our efforts to truly connect with our students through relevant and challenging enrichment programs. Educators must teach to and through their strengths to help them connect their learning to their lives, and to draw from their deep well of family, community, and cultural resources. In these difficult times, we need these students' voices and stories, their fresh insights, their art and their knowledge to move us toward a more just and equitable world.

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