Final Praxis Evaluation

The school that I was placed in is one of a kind. My field site was a high school that first opened its doors this year. The school only consists of first years. And its student population is predominantly Black and Latino/a with a very diverse teaching/administrative staff. Upon my first arrival, I my surroundings made me realized that it was located on the outskirts of Philadelphia, in a dilapidated section of the city. The community surrounding the school seemed in need of renovation, but obviously, did not have the money to do so, rendering it defenseless against gentrification. The neighboring university is currently encroaching the small community.

The high school stands out from the rest of the community. It is the first place that I noticed hopes for innovation and revival in the area. The school is starting on a clean slate, and has the chance to invent alternative approaches to secondary education. I have noticed innovation manifest in various parts of this school’s structural dynamics. From teaching methods to disciplinary measures, the school has found ways to implement change. Unfortunately, the school’s ambition encounters roadblocks when it comes to finding ways to fund this innovation. And yet, teachers, students, and administrators, all find ways to pursue education despite their economic barriers.

I noticed issues of identity, access, and innovation in three major areas while observing my site. First was the demand for a systematic un-schooling for students most harmed by the failures of the American Education system. Second was the challenge of preserving culture and teaching in this context to a homogonous group of students learning in a society that teaches about their identity in a marginal context. I feel like this is an issue when a student’s culture is historically treated as less dominate in compared to the larger societal hegemony. For my paper, I am applying this issue to the young, predominantly Black and Latino/a students in school being taught with curriculums with an Anglo-American bias. And third, was the taskof finding ways to push students to take their education outside of the classroom and into their homes and communities.

 In Pathways to College for Young Black Scholars: A Community Cultural Wealth Perspective, Uma Jaykamaur describes the journey of young Black scholars on a quest for higher education. The students’ “pathway to college” is very different because it utilizes the development of cultural capital to put students on this trajectory. She defined three forms of capital that I found most relevant to the issues and attempts at innovation at my site. The forms of capital were cultural, inspirational, and resistant.

 I believe that this lack of attention (and access) to appreciation for variations in cultural wealth is the reason behind the push of un-schooling at my site. The students at my cite (like many other students with marginal identities in America) had received an education that paid no attention to their specific identity development. Jaykamaur refers to this as ignoring “cultural wealth in marginalized groups” (556), showing her concern for the absence of Black culture in American schools.

I believe that the public school system is not conducive to positive identity development at times. The premise at my school site is to negate some of these negative perceptions of self that students internalize, through a process they call un-schooling. During this process, students are prompted to consciously and subconsciously challenge their notions of what it means to be a student. In every class, students engaged in activities that encouraged them to envision their ideal school and education. By doing this, the school is giving students agency in shaping their educational experience, and calling for them to think of how they are the primary actors needed to make this change.

During my first visit to the school, I noticed that the teacher in the class I observed used un-schooling in her pedagogical approaches to teaching social studies. She works on ways to incorporate black cultural capital into her lesson plans each class. What this teacher is doing is providing her students with the tools to rethink how they view themselves by giving them a different version of history. The students in her class are being taught history, but with a focus on their histories. I believe that by providing students with cultural capital, the teacher is creating an education that helps students see themselves as active actors in history and today. Similar to the way that the Young Black scholars in Jaykamaur’s study redefined themselves through cultural capital.

This positive reinforcement facilitates the un-schooling needed to help students of color redefine their identities. Once students are able to redefine themselves and understand that they have agency in shaping their educational experience, then changes in their aspirational goals will also follow. Jaykamaur terms this aspirational capital, and defines it as the “notion of resilience and specially refers to the ability to maintain hopes, aspirations, and visions of success despite social and cultural barriers”(557). This is a form of capital that is being instilled in the students at my site. They are being taught to shoot for the starts despite the many challenges that they may have to face to get there. I fell like aspirational capital is a result of showing students that they have cultural capital, because when a student can find value in their capital, then their perception of goals can be subject to change.

 To me, the accumulation of these two forms of capital can lead to what Jaykamaur calls resistant capital, which may be the solution to the third issue I raised about my site. Resistant capital is “knowledge and skills learned from challenging inequality” (557). In almost every class, the goal of students’ education is to challenge inequalities they face in their everyday lives. This includes inequalities in funding for public schools. The students learn about the inequalities inherent in the American school system, and about the inequalities they encounter daily outside of school. Putting education in this context is what can help students take their education from outside of the classroom and into their daily lives and communities. Students are learning how to identity the language of oppression, and challenge it with resistance. This resistance can manifest in various ways. Students can resist by challenging their social positions despite challenge they may encounter, or go into their communities and help it challenge inequality as well.

Overall, I have a lot of hope for my site. This school is very unique in its kind. It is trying to change the lives of its students one step at a time, even though they meet many challenges with funding and support. The teachers and students all come to school with a hunger for change, and this hunger is what will keep the school energized at times when it seems rough…