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# No Shortcuts on the Journey to Learning for Students or Teachers

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## **NO SHORTCUTS ON THE JOURNEY TO LEARNING FOR STUDENTS OR TEACHERS**

**alison coviello & susan stires**

Despite the focus of the No Child Left Behind Act, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress still indicate an achievement gap that has not significantly changed since desegregation (Dillon, 2009). Although most members of the public view students who attend low-performing, underserved schools in terms of (perceived) deficits, many teachers who staff these schools see their students very differently. They believe that their students are capable of learning; that they have a foundation of knowledge, experiences, and meaning-making tools; and that they can succeed in all of areas in schooling— and beyond. Teacher educators must therefore be prepared to provide the background information and knowledge about instruction that teacher candidates need to be able to see and support the strengths of students in underserved schools, enabling them both to succeed.

There are various ways schools of education can accomplish this. These include designing new courses and revising existing offerings—for example, by adding readings that reflect the demographic changes and instructional challenges in contemporary high-needs schools. The other major component of teacher preparation that needs to be reexamined and modified is supervision of teacher candidates in the classroom. Fieldwork may be extended so that education students have more time to engage in instruction and implement curriculum; it should also include a placement in a public high-needs setting with sufficient, high-level supervision.

We also believe that as part of their program, teacher candidates should engage in site-based research, with teacher educators who mentor them and/or collaborate with them. The benefits of this practice are many, but most salient is that when teachers or teacher candidates participate in research, they look at teaching as inquiry and as an open learning experience in which they are constantly engaged. Added to this are the benefits of broadening their own knowledge base and contributing to others' knowledge through sharing what they have learned (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Site-based studies also highlight the importance of understanding context, which, in turn, is critical to understanding high-needs, traditionally underserved schools.

In order to demonstrate the value of site-based studies, we describe a teacher research study; a parallel teacher educator study; the implications of the findings of both; and the value of this experience. Alison's teacher research study led to her master's thesis under my (Susan's) guidance. Although I was Alison's mentor for the project and thesis, I also conducted my own connected study, and we collaborated on considering the implications of our investigations.

Alison was a master's candidate in education and a relatively new teacher in the South Bronx when we met. She designed an integrated social studies and literacy curriculum on U. S. Westward Expansion (a topic of study required by the New York State Department of Education) for her fourth-grade class. In high-needs urban schools, this social studies unit is typically covered in a few weeks through textbook readings and test-like exercises in high needs urban schools. Alison, however, wanted a more interesting, engaging, and substantive experience for her students. She also wanted them to learn in an enriched, democratic environment, and she wanted to study their learning. As Alison's mentor, I was interested in her project and in studying her teaching and her own learning.

### **The Long Trail: Alison Describes Her Classroom-Based Research**

High-stakes standardized assessments are currently at the forefront of most public school agendas (Freeland Walker, 2000). Such tests are intended to improve the quality of teaching. However, McNeil (2000) notes that, in focusing on improving test scores, schools serving students who historically perform below level on standardized tests are, in fact, often forced to narrow their curricula to a few basic skills and scattered bits of content knowledge. In many settings, social studies and science are taught only cursorily or even omitted entirely. Unsettled by the possibility that this might happen in my own classroom, I sought a way to support my fourth-grade students' long-term understanding of content while authentically engaging them as readers, writers, and speakers (Gardner & Boix-Mansilla, 1994). To that end, I developed a content-based literacy curriculum that combined literacy instruction with social studies content (see Appendix A, [www.bankstreet.edu/gsoccasionalpapers](http://www.bankstreet.edu/gsoccasionalpapers)).

To analyze the teaching and learning that occurred during our class's study of this integrated unit, I utilized five tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy: (1) supporting student agency; (2) developing an inclusive classroom community; (3) making deliberate connections between new content and students' own identities; (4) expanding student perspectives; and (5) increasing students' world knowledge.

As I looked at the work that my students and I did together, I wondered, first, how this integrated unit of study on Westward Expansion supported the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and, second, how this work contributed to students' knowledge, understanding, and thinking. During the unit, I acted as a participant observer. First, I observed and recorded the comments, questions, attitudes, and actions of my 21 students, and then I analyzed their writings, illustrations, and projects. In the following subsections, I offer just a few examples of the ways that this unit addressed the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy and of the deep knowledge that my students ultimately developed.

### **Student Agency**

Throughout the unit, my students consistently asked content-related questions, looked for resources on their own, connected new content knowledge with independent reading or whole-class mini-lessons, and engaged in unprompted, independent projects. For example, Jeff (all student names are pseudonyms) both inquired about the cost of the Louisiana Purchase territory and then questioned why Sacagawea was willing to accompany men who carried guns. Notably, these concerns about money and personal safety relate directly to Jeff's own experience of growing up in an inner city. On another occasion, Cristina asked: "Did anyone die while they (the Lewis and Clark crew) were carrying the boats over the huge mountains?" And as he learned about an unfamiliar, yet intriguing, way of life, Tony considered: "Did they like getting dirty?" and "How come they wore the same clothes?"

For the students, armed with curiosity and some information, what began as simple inquiry turned into a purposeful, independent answer-seeking project. This was evident in the way that they avidly searched for and used various resources. Knowing about the Lewis and Clark journey prompted Tony to ask if he could take Sacagawea's biography home. In another situation, Kasaan asked for permission to go to the school library and returned shortly afterward showing off his book about Westward Expansion to the rest of the class. His enthusiasm persisted as he later exchanged this first book for one specifically about pioneer schools. While these anecdotes may not, at first, appear significant, it was not typical for my students to enthusiastically seek books to read outside of school, openly share them with peers, or show them off proudly. These events were truly noteworthy.

Several students also began content-related projects independently. After finding directions in a library book on how to construct a model wagon, Leo built

one of his own. On another day, Jeff arrived at school with two pioneer toys that he had made himself. Just a week before the unit ended, he brought in a diorama depicting Pawnee Indian life. Later that day, his mother described the tiring night her family had endured as Jeff insisted on staying up until 1:15 a.m. to complete the project. “He’s not usually into things like this,” she explained, “so I had to let him do it.” Thus, during this integrated, content-centered unit, an often distracted student became an enthusiastic and independent learner. Without a doubt, the authenticity of the curriculum sparked my students’ motivation and supported a commitment to learning. Had our lessons focused solely on literacy skills and used fragmented, disconnected readings, my students probably would not have found compelling, real-life material to connect with. In turn, the fervent curiosity, fierce independence, and extreme pride that they displayed during this unit likely would not have emerged.

### **Classroom Community**

Nieto (2000) points out that many students who might not fit the educator’s image of able learners are often left out of classroom learning communities. During the unit on Westward Expansion, all of the students in our class were members of imaginary pioneer families and had specific tasks to accomplish. In this way, everyone had opportunities to participate in meaningful ways. On one day, while packing supplies for their journey west, one family engaged in a lively debate over pack weight. After Valerie suggested loading five or six barrels of water into her family’s wagon, the following conversation ensued:

Leo: That’s like 1000 pounds. Are you buggin’?

Valerie: Do you want to survive or die from dehydration?

Leo: All right, I’ll survive. So Jon and I can ride on horses.

Valerie: Do we have dishes? And where are we going to eat? On the ground?

It was, then, this unit’s content that provided opportunities for my students to have authentic conversations with one another. As they exchanged ideas, a meaningful and inclusive community of learners emerged.

### **Connecting New Content to Prior Experiences**

Nieto (2000) observes that all students come to school with a store of knowledge gained from past experiences. While she acknowledges that the experi-

ences of students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds are likely to differ greatly from those of students from the dominant culture, Nieto stresses that these experiences are no less valuable. Thus, one primary goal of culturally responsive pedagogy is to enable students to connect their own experiences with new learning. The content of the Westward Expansion unit allowed students to do this. The following example illustrates how powerful some of these associations were. In a letter to me, Angel expressed his personal link to Sarah, a character in Patricia MacLachlan's *Sarah, Plain and Tall*: "I read Chapter 7. On page 40 Sarah was with tears and Annie (Anna) and me have the same thing because I put things in my mind too like Annie." In this case, Angel's personal experiences as a foster child in multiple families scaffolded his understanding of Anna's desire for Sarah to be her new mother. Hence, the unit's content offered Angel an opportunity to build upon his own experiences and develop new knowledge as well.

### **Bridging Contexts to Expand Student Identities**

Sociocultural theory (Nieto, 2000) maintains that the contexts of students' lives greatly influence school success. Accordingly, culturally relevant pedagogy calls for educators to recognize the political, social, and economic hurdles that students like mine regularly confront, while also providing students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in diverse contexts. Thus, while not discounting students' identities, curriculum should act as a bridge to new experiences, situations, and contexts.

Because my students acquired a deep knowledge of Westward Expansion, they were able to think, speak, and act as pioneers and Native Americans. Student conversations, writing, speech, dress, and actions all reveal the bridges across which my students made their way back and forth between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Jerome brought a Native American bow to our unit's concluding celebration. When asked by a visiting third grader where he had gotten this artifact, Jerome answered in full pioneer character, telling an elaborate story about his trade with a group of Native Americans. Surely, Jerome's new familiarity with the time period enabled him to imagine and behave as if he lived in this historical period.

### **Increasing Student Knowledge**

To ensure that this integrated unit of study led to student learning, a critical review of my students' acquisition of knowledge was necessary. As evidenced by

the responses I received to the oral evaluation that I administered at the conclusion of the unit (see Appendix B, [www.bankstreet.edu/gs/occasionalpapers](http://www.bankstreet.edu/gs/occasionalpapers)) my students developed historical understandings of the Westward Expansion, accurate knowledge of geographic landforms and ecosystems, and an appreciation of our country's broad transformation over time. Perhaps most significantly, this content-focused literacy unit introduced students to multiple points of view and encouraged them to think critically about these diverse perspectives. For example, various students noted the political problems that Westward Expansion in the United States caused for the Native Americans already living on the land. Jeff insightfully explained the dilemma from both the pioneer and Native American perspectives:

The West was small to the Indians to have both of them there. But the pioneers thought for the both of them...it wasn't. [After], the East got a little calmer and the West got a little complicated because the Indians didn't like the pioneers living on their land without permission.

Thus, in addition to gaining valuable knowledge and understandings of another time period, this content-focused literacy unit also afforded students unique opportunities to think critically about very real dilemmas.

### **Continuing the Journey: Susan Provides an Outside Perspective**

Visiting Alison's school for several months, I was struck by the order that prevailed inside, which contrasted with the audible traffic on the street outside. In this industrial section of the city, there is always a high volume of traffic from a nearby expressway ramp. Trucks rumble and exhaust abounds in front of the school and adjacent housing project, where students and their families live.

Inside Alison's fourth-grade classroom, I was further struck by the intellectual rigor, excitement, and rich environment there, which in turn contrasted with the decorated, but stark, hallways of the school. Along with the usual reference charts and materials in Alison's classroom, there were displays of the class's various studies—animals and their habitats; the author, Gary Soto; and the current unit on Westward Expansion. There was also evidence that 21 individual children and their teacher spent time learning together in this classroom.

Alison's 16 boys and 5 girls came from a rich variety of cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds. Some were from families that had lived in this northern city for generations; others were from families that had migrated from the American South; and still others were from families that had immigrated from the

Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America. A few children lived in families with both of their parents and siblings. However, most lived in less conventional family structures, including single parents and siblings; grandparents and other relatives, such as aunts; and foster families. Except for street noises, the classroom was a calm but busy environment, with students engaged in meaningful activities and projects.

I came to Alison's classroom by way of self-invitation. I admired her as a student and was interested in her thesis topic and her rejection of a deficit model to describe students who come from economically disadvantaged families. Further, Alison's class afforded me an opportunity to pursue a new research setting. My previous research had been in Chinatown with first grade English Language Learners, and I wanted the challenge of exploring a similarly economically disadvantaged population in a culturally different setting. I also decided that I wanted to examine the nexus between teaching and learning for older elementary students. My question became: Given opportunities to study interesting content presented through language- and literature-rich experiences, to what extent would the students be successful, and if they were, what did the teacher know and do that influenced that success?

I observed in Alison's classroom twice a week for half a day in February, March, and April during the eight weeks of the study. I found that the students were successful overall, both as a group in which they supported one another and in individual, unique ways. As a result of my research, I was able to identify three equally important major themes in Alison's teaching. I describe them below, providing an example of each.

### Teacher as Authority and Respected Fellow Learner

Alison's complex role, ranging from authority to learner, coupled with her students' regard for her knowledge, is the first salient theme that emerged from my observational notes, interviews, and document collection. In this example from a combination literature circle/guided reading group, Alison fulfilled a dual role. She was both the expert reader who had introduced the book and then provided guidance to her students as they read, and a member of the discussion that followed as they made sense of their reading and learned from one another.

Yonley, Liza, Valerie, Leo, and Marcus were reading *Bound for Oregon* by Jean Van Leeuwen. Alison asked the students to bring Leo up to date since he had been absent, providing an authentic reason for the students to collaboratively retell the major events of the chapter while Leo listened.

Yonley: Mariellen's two younger sisters got sick with cholera. The father took a mirror to see if they were still breathing. It was a looking glass.

Marcus: Both of them got better, but one was bad.

Valerie: He saw fog (moisture from her breath). He gave her milk and soda. She got better.

(There is a brief side discussion of baking soda.)

Marcus: They were in a separate tent because cholera is contagious.

Liza: Germs travel and other people wouldn't catch it.

Marcus: I don't get why the father didn't get it.

Alison: He probably had a stronger immune system.

Here, after Yonley gives a brief summary of the chapter, each of the students provides a major event and/or revealing detail from it. The students' inferences and speculation provide evidence of deep involvement with the text.

### Structures for Successful Learning

The second theme I identified was Alison's establishment of structures for successful learning. These include planning, expectations, collaboration, and support for practice and independence. Alison helped her students work in various small group structures as well as in the whole group; she assisted them with establishing places to work; and she differentiated instruction according to her students' needs. Also, she connected present ideas with previous ones; gave clear directions; made specific assignments; and prepared, explained, and modeled instructional organizers, such as the Peer Conference Sheet for Pioneer Journals (see Appendix C, [www.bankstreet.edu/gs/occasionalpapers](http://www.bankstreet.edu/gs/occasionalpapers)). This myriad of structures provided a safety net for some of the students and a springboard for others, depending on who they were as learners.

### Mutual Trust and Respect

Finally, Alison displayed her belief in the students and their families—in their capabilities, intelligence, and life experiences (including those they imagined)—with consistency and caring (Noddings, 1984). In turn, they responded by trusting and respecting her. The most significant example of Alison's stance came at the end of the study when she took seriously the students' suggestion that she include more material about Black pioneers. However, there are many other examples, from every day of the study, of her respect for her students. Alison asked for

their suggestions about where and how to display information they gathered; she allowed them to make choices about what they read and wrote about; and she asked for their ideas about what to present during the celebration of their learning on Pioneer Day. Perhaps this mutual trust and respect was most obvious during the final minutes of this celebration when the students gathered before an audience of parents and guardians, two visiting classes, and teachers.

After the students had finished their group presentations, they all got together and sang “Paper of Pins.” When Alison first taught them this pioneer song, the students had identified it as a white person’s song, but they understood its meaning across cultures. They remarked, “Oh, she played him.” Next, they had a lengthy question-and-answer session with students and teachers from other classes that demonstrated how much knowledge they had gained through doing research and reading historical fiction (see Appendix D, [www.bankstreet.edu/gsoccasionalpapers](http://www.bankstreet.edu/gsoccasionalpapers)). Their confidence and enthusiasm for the material and for one another in their roles as fellow pioneers in the westward journey was also evident. Implicit in the celebration was the students’ trust in Alison and their capacity to learn with—as well as from—her.

Although each of the themes has been described individually, most of the activities and experiences of the Westward Expansion unit involved all three at once. For example, when Alison had the students write their responses in their pioneer family journals, she demonstrated her knowledge of the material; of the uses and process of journal writing; and of collaborative learning. She took into account her understanding of the students’ capacities and interests as she planned and organized each activity. She provided the students with opportunities to use what they were learning in playful, imaginative ways, and she responded to their efforts with careful attention. The students in turn knew that Alison was interested in their work and that they would receive help if they needed it. As a result their trust and respect, along with their sense of responsibility, grew stronger.

### **Arrival at Planned Destinations: We Discuss Implications**

We believe that the findings of our studies have crucial implications for the lives of America’s urban, economically underprivileged youth, and their teachers. The need for educators to give careful attention to the specific circumstances of such students demands a reallocation of priorities. First and foremost, it is obvious that large-scale curricular redesign is necessary. Currently, students from underserved communities are viewed primarily through a deficit-based ideological lens—one that results in fragmented curriculum and uses basal texts, formatted

workbooks, and textbooks to promote skills needed to pass tests. Encouraging educators, including school leaders, to view their students through an ability-anchored philosophical lens, such as sociocultural theory—and, in turn, to practice culturally relevant pedagogy in which content acquisition and developed thinking processes are educational priorities—is critical to successful curricular and instructional design. This change, which begins with validating the experiences of economically underprivileged children, will require professional development for teachers in designing curriculum based on a broader range of children’s literature and primary sources. Further, support will be necessary for teachers to implement integrated curriculum in which student interest, understanding, and knowledge are the most valued learning outcomes.

Second, valuing the students is essential for conducting teacher research in inner-city classrooms. Teachers can learn about their own practice through research and also contribute to the wider body of knowledge about teaching and learning in urban schools. If schools can become centers of inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) they can also increase the momentum for educational change. More classroom-based studies will mean that more teachers will contribute to that change. Studies like ours, which give voice to the students and teachers who are most affected by under-resourced schools, need to reach educators and the general public alike.

Third, the outcomes of this study also point to the necessity for critical analysis of accountability measures. Meaningful summative assessments, like Alison’s oral interview, should focus attention on students’ thinking processes (such as inquiry, analysis, and synthesis), as well as on their attainment of meaningful content knowledge. Informal, ongoing assessments of how students are learning are as necessary as final assessments of their knowledge of content and acquisition of specific skills. Ongoing assessment, for example, Alison’s conference notes, can and should lead to meaningful endpoint evaluations such as narrative assessments. *Accountability lies in our responsibility to our students and their learning.* Alison’s accountability was evident in her planning, based on continuous assessments; her scaffolding of learning experiences; her daily instruction through whole class mini-lessons, small group discussions, and individual conferences; her high expectations of students; and her utter belief in them. Teacher research, with its rich data and analyses, can lead to documented assessment that extends far beyond the narrow standardized measures currently in use.

Finally, there is a need to promote greater care of students’ intellectual and

emotional needs. If teaching and learning is a joint project determined primarily by the relationship between teacher and student (Nieto, 2000, Stires & Genishi, 2008), then we believe that it is imperative to understand what makes that relationship work. Alison is conscious that her view of students and their learning, which includes how she promotes relationships among them, directly affects what and how she teaches. Her students come to understand that they too bear responsibility for their relationship with her and with their classmates, and, by extension, for all their relationships—in other words, that it matters both how they treat others and that they learn. Alison knows that creating this twofold understanding cannot be taken for granted with her students, as it might be with some other student populations. She must invest in it, and she must help her students do so as well. Qualitative teacher research captures nuances of behavior that provide evidence, including incidents that are unique and telling, of the value of such investments for students and teachers alike.

### **Final Thoughts: Settling In**

Alison's content-based literacy unit proved enormously successful at motivating student inquiry and exploration; encouraging participation in group discussions and analysis; promoting understanding through connection to prior experiences; and developing a knowledge base for future reading, writing, and learning. In turn, rather than emerging from the unit of study having acquired isolated skills and disconnected facts that are unlikely to promote success outside of highly specific academic circumstances, students acquired valuable, integrated knowledge and developed their thinking processes. Because Alison documented her work, she knows what took place and why.

Teacher educators have an important role to play in developing teacher research. Susan has continued to promote teacher research at her college and to work with graduate students on individual projects. Classroom teachers can promote teacher research as well. Teaching fifth grade at her school, Alison has conducted research on new questions that have evolved over time. She also supports colleagues in developing integrated curricula, encouraging democratic participation in classrooms, and researching answers to questions of their own. Through teacher research our work is generative and life-long.

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