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Research Essay: Eckles Prize

I first started thinking about my topic of research by considering what aspects of the Higher Achievement Program (HAP) interested me. I had the unique opportunity to combine my experience volunteering for HAP with my academic studies specific to social change and educational organizations in this case. This semester has pushed me to question what makes an organization successful. Looking into Higher Achievement as a program, especially through this paper and through discussions with my classmates, I have found that HAP is undoubtedly one of the most well run programs of its kind. I began questioning why, thinking more about what their daily goals are – beyond academics. The program has a very strong philosophy, and they clearly demand more than academics from their students; it is a program to help middle school students gain self-confidence find success, starting with acceptance to a top high school. This type of philosophy linked me to something I had read for class about Critical Pedagogy. After taking a quick survey of scholarship on the subject through online catalogues such as LexisNexis and JSTOR, I came up with a few questions to guide my research. 1) What Aspects of Critical Pedagogy does the Higher Achievement Program use? 2) How does HAP use community time and scholar (student) leadership and participation to teach community engagement? And 3) What is unique about the context in which HAP works and how does this affect these aspects of their programming? On the topic, I found information about Critical Pedagogy, Democratic Education, and Well-Rounded Education. To begin this original search, with the guidance of our class librarian, I brainstormed related words and topics that I could search.

It was not until I did further research on these theories that I decided that Critical Pedagogy was the best theory to focus my argument on – as it really started the conversation about education in this way. I struggled to understand the difference between Critical Pedagogy and Democratic Education, because the two philosophies look almost identical in practice; however they come from different origins and have different goals. Although this was a big ‘aha!’ moment for me, in the end I decided that exploring their differences was not crucial to my argument.

I balanced my research between scholarship and real life examples. I looked at the subjects of Critical Pedagogy and Democratic Education, and also set out to observe more closely the Public Education system and the Higher Achievement Program, so that I could compare the theories with the way that HAP runs.

The bulk of my most useful research of Critical Pedagogy rooted from a quick scan of encyclopedias to identify the most influential scholars on the subject. From there I went on to read the books of Paulo Freire, the founder of the theory, Henry Giroux, and Ira Shor, along with other scholars that I found in adjacent stacks in the library. Exploring this section was definitely one of the most fun parts of this research process. It was really a process; I always checked the bibliography of sources and was comforted to find that I was going in circles, always coming back to the same central scholars. While I knew the older books and sources that I used were legitimate due to their authors, the most influential theorists on the subject, I still wanted to find more recent criticism and commentary. With further research I found a radio interview with Henry Giroux and several more recent articles.

Researching HAP and finding information to illustrate the current state of the public education system took a different process. I made sure to thoroughly read the Higher Achievement website and all the literature that I had received about their philosophy. Having

volunteered at the Ward 7 site for a few months at this point, I talked with Cedric Howard, the Assistant Center Director, and he agreed to let me interview him. This helped me tremendously in gaining a better picture of the organization as a whole and its goals. He gave me more words and ideas to consider and compare with Critical Pedagogy's traditional language. Instead of talking about 'problem-posing pedagogy' and democracy, HAP has its own vocabulary, including Advancing Youth Development (AYD), adultism, and the four pillars of freedom, justice, voice, and solidarity. My talk with him also convinced me that I needed to understand HAP in the context of DC public education. Earlier in the semester I attended an orientation for the program, which provided me with a basic understanding of their outlook on education. Then later I decided to attend a special training on AYD. I also found videos and referenced my own experience with the program to show its influence from many perspectives. To contrast the program with the public education system I found articles about Michelle Rhee, DC public education, and I looked back at census records.

All in all, I think I thoroughly researched my topic, drawing from diverse sources, but being sure to weigh more heavily information from leaders in every subject I considered.

Critical Pedagogy and Democratic Education:
Applications in the Higher Achievement Program

On a Monday evening at the Higher Achievement Program (HAP) center in Ward 7 of the District of Columbia, Ms. Martine stands in the middle of the hallway of Kelly Miller Middle School, surrounded by a large circle of students eagerly awaiting instruction. Tonight’s activity is titled: “True Colors Word Cluster Sort,” an exercise that uses a simple selection of characteristics to put each person into a color category that explains more about his or her personality—strengths, weaknesses, and traits they have that might conflict with others.

	Orange	Gold	Blue	Green
Row 1	Active Opportunistic Spontaneous A: _____2_____	Parental Traditional Responsible B: _____4_____	Authentic Harmonious Compassionate C: _____1_____	Versatile Inventive Competent D: _____3_____

Example from “True Colors Word Clusters Sort”: The numbers from 4 to 1 designate what this student most identifies with to what they least identify with. When all the numbers in each column (there are 5 total rows) are added together, the column with the highest total corresponds with this scholar’s personality.

She goes on to explain that we all have individual characteristics that affect the ways we learn and interact with others. She points to Mr. Cedric, the Assistant Center Director, at one point and says [in this exercise] “I learned things about Mr. Cedric that I didn’t know before.” After the kids then fill out their own sheets and identify themselves as Orange, Gold, Blue, or Green, they break into color groups to discuss what is special about their group and what they have in common. Jokingly, Mr. Cedric strolls over to his *own* team, inspiring a chant that ‘Gold is the best.’

* * *

The Higher Achievement Program is an after-school program that works in particularly deprived neighborhoods of Washington D.C. The teaching methods, philosophy, expectations, and resources that HAP offers its students are the opposite of daytime public education in every

way. The D.C. public schools are known to be among the worst in the country, and so in this context Higher Achievement has designed a program that challenges the failure that these students are destined to know. “We do not have a nation right now where every child has an equal chance in life, because poor black kids don’t have an equal shot” says Chancellor of D.C. Public Schools, Michelle Rhee (Thomas, 2008, p. 25). Every one of Higher Achievement’s centers works in an area of Washington D.C. where schools lack resources, education levels are poor, and families ill equipped to push their kids up to success. Ward 7, where the previous story took place, has a population, as reported by the 2000 census, that is 98.6% Black or African American. The segregation of Washington D.C. and inequality in the public school system has provided an environment that does not empower African-American students, since their schools are often the worst. These fundamental problems of equality call for a new kind of educational philosophy, which Higher Achievement effectively employs. Higher Achievement values the four pillars of Freedom, Justice, Voice, and Solidarity to teach a new way of looking at the world, education, and possibility, specially adapted to work for students in disadvantaged communities.

Decades before Higher Achievement’s founding or Ms. Martine’s activity, Paulo Freire, a world-renowned Brazilian educator, described a teaching philosophy that valued teacher-student dialogue, individualized curriculum, and a social understanding of the world. His theory, called Critical Pedagogy, defined a way to effectively teach to the “oppressed” and lift them up in society (Gadotti, 2010, p. 1). Coming from the “liberation theology” movement, Freire was devoted to the Marxist principles of overthrowing power and ending oppression. With this mindset he developed a teaching technique catered toward the ‘peasant’ class, and with that, discovered that policies in the classroom can relate directly to the rules and ways of society.

When Critical Pedagogy is applied today, the peasant class that Freire originally applied his theory to is often reinterpreted as the disadvantaged class anywhere; in HAP's case the African American and minority students of D.C.'s Ward 7. "This is a great discovery," Freire writes in *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1987), "education is politics!" (p. 46). Teachers, he says, should be questioning the politics that they bring into their own classrooms, "That is, in favor of whom am I being a teacher?" (Freire, 1987, p. 46). Freire acknowledged that teaching disadvantaged students requires a particular environment that could prove to students that they have power to control their own education and their lives after it, goals that Higher Achievement shares. His theory of "problem-posing education" stressed a horizontal relationship between teacher and student, and uses dialogue as an important teaching method.

Critical Pedagogy says: students and teachers learn together through dialogue, with dialogue defined as "the encounter between [humans], mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Bartlett, 2005, p. 346). Freire argues that, "no one knows everything," so the best learning comes from sharing and discovering each other's knowledge (Bartlett, 2005, p. 346). Lesley Bartlett uses the term "friendship strategy" to describe the relationship between teachers and students in this kind of program, where teachers focus on creating an environment of friendship, trust, and equality inside the classroom (2005, p. 352). This model also encourages students to share their experiences of social problems, and uses observation and discussion to investigate how the world works. This process leads students to understand the problems with society and furthermore teaches them the skills to speak their minds, encouraging them to speak out for social justice.

Others in the field have worked with Freire and expanded on the modern application of his model. Ira Shor, an expert on the theory, explained, "As Freire discussed it, dialogue is an instructional method, a theory about discourse and learning, and a politics for cultural

democracy. Its techniques and ideas extend beyond teaching and communication into human and social development,” says Shor (1992, p. 86). The traditional education system lacks this goal of social change. Critical Pedagogy, as Freire’s method has been named, empowers students with the knowledge that individuals can change small parts of their own lives, such as a relationship with a teacher, and then they can tackle even larger problems that affect many.

“The first five values [of “Empowering Education”]—participatory, affective, situated, multicultural, and problem-posing pedagogy—define some differences between traditional education and the program model described...An empowering teacher does not talk knowledge *at* students but talks *with* them” (Shor, 1992, p. 85). HAP’s activity, the “True Colors Word Cluster Sort” demonstrates this type of teacher-student interaction, evident in the students’ responsibility to discuss the qualities that they discover, in Ms. Martine’s example where she told students about her own experience with the activity, and in Mr. Cedric’s joking comments with his own team. This activity depends on the participation of every student, the goal being that they learn from their discussions.

Critical Pedagogy is a philosophy that uses democratic principles as teaching methods, encouraging students to break out of assigned societal roles, question what is given to them in life, and also develop knowledge in a way accessible to the underprivileged. There is another very similar theory called “Democratic Education,” linked to Critical Pedagogy in practice. Democratic Education emphasizes inclusiveness, defined rights, and informed participatory decision-making, creating a sense of self-competence, belonging, usefulness, hope, excitement, creativity, ownership, and equality (Knight, 2000, 197). Democratic Education focuses on the role of democracy in the students’ lives to come, and Critical Pedagogy focuses on using democratic techniques to escape poverty. However this difference in perspective is not significant for the purpose of understanding the Higher Achievement Program or its educational

philosophy that supports these methods. HAP rather works with all of these goals underlying their main purpose to improve grades and performance in school. The example of the “True Colors Word Cluster Sort” illustrates how HAP applies these teaching methods to enhance the experience of their students, transforming the program from a simple tutoring program to a community in itself that empowers students to take on responsibility and understand themselves in relation to the world.

Henry Giroux, one of the founders of Critical Pedagogy in the United States, is also an advocate of radical democracy and the implementation of democratic ideals in the education system. In a radio interview with Kris Welch of KPFA on March 4, 2010, Giroux said, “the crisis in public education is really about the crisis in democracy.” He argues that we have seen “the transformation of the school from an invaluable public good and laboratory for critical learning and engaged citizenship to a containment site modeled after prisons” (Welch, 2010). Freedom, a classic democratic value, is overshadowed in our current education system by punishment and rule enforcement that ignores the input of students and denies them the opportunity to contribute to the boundaries in their own educational environment. The ‘prison-like’ schools that the U.S. has today work only to defeat America’s youth. The learning environment that HAP fosters for its students is one of the most important characteristics of its programming.

Organizations, such as HAP, that supplement traditional education start because of the deficits in the supplied system and the barriers that this system has to reform. Able to set their own agenda, supplementary programs can practice the theories of Critical Pedagogy and Democratic Education in programs tailored to an underprivileged student population. Critical Pedagogy was originally designed to teach the working class in a way that empowers them with the choice to move up in society, but also with the ethics to understand giving back to the

community and changing the society in which they live. It tries ardently to let students understand this world through exploration. The Higher Achievement Program of Washington D.C. is a modern day example of the application of Critical Pedagogy and Democratic Education.

Higher Achievement's mission is to "develop academic skills, behaviors, and attitudes in academically motivated and underserved middle school children to improve their grades, test scores, attendance, and opportunities – resulting in acceptance to top high schools" (Higher Achievement Program, 2006, p. 1). Their means to the end result of improved academic performance relies on youth input, motivation, and the development of leadership and cognitive skills. They address their program to "academically motivated" middle school children as a testament to their understanding that student drive is a fundamental contribution to their learning experience. HAP does their part by expecting effort and responsibility from the students, starting with their name: "scholars," not students. HAP promises equal commitment to the scholars, evident in their name for teachers: "mentors." Both titles imply more than just learning or teaching, but rather a responsibility to address the entire well being of community and their counterparts.

The example of the "True Colors Word Cluster Sort" activity from the beginning demonstrates how organizations apply these theories to social action in the community. Ms. Martine led the activity, but instead of lecturing students on different types of personalities she gave the scholars the tools to form their own opinions and experience an open conversation with their peers and mentors. Rather than giving scholars the answers to her questions about the strengths, weaknesses, and annoyances of each group of people, she let the scholars engage in dialogue with each other to formulate a list for each question. To bring it together, she instructed each group to appoint a speaker that would represent their color. After each group leader shared,

she facilitated a discussion on what they had learned about each type of person and how this knowledge should affect the ways that scholars work together in the future. In this activity, Ms. Martine was practicing “problem posing education.” She helped the scholars by giving them the right questions, but in the end all the answers came from the scholars themselves. A very engaging form of teaching, this method also helped scholars learn to analyze new information.

Cedric Howard, Assistant Center Director at the Ward 7 Achievement center, says that programming for this half-hour long “Community Meeting” time corresponds with the larger events that Higher Achievement schedules throughout the year, such as a spelling bee, poetry contest, or in this case, elections for the Ward 7 Ambassador Contest. In the weeks leading up to the Ambassador Contest, in which the scholars choose student representatives from their center to the organization, Community Meeting time features activities such as a discussion of the necessary qualities an Ambassador possesses, practice debates, and campaign speeches. The responsibility that the elected students will take on is another example of Higher Achievement’s commitment to democratic principles and to teaching leadership through experience with peers and adults. The election process teaches them to identify qualities and commitment necessary to lead their peers. Furthermore, once elected, these students have the opportunity to communicate what they want to change about the program. This imparts to the students the power to affect HAP policy put in place by the leaders of the organization.

Cedric Howard, known as “Mr. Cedric” to scholars and mentors alike, explains a piece of HAP’s philosophy: “There is a term called ‘adultism’ that we definitely try to stay away from” (2010). This term refers to the attitude that most kids learn when they are young, that parents know everything and that kids have no say. Though he acknowledges that as the adults at center, the directors have the final say, he says, “we don’t want to run a program that assumes we know what the scholars want without hearing their voice... It’s a delicate balancing act” (2010). In the

application of Critical Pedagogy, Mr. Cedric maintains an environment of friendship, trust, and equality as stated in Lesley Bartlett's "friendship strategy," but reserves the right to be an authority. This more practical approach strays only slightly from Freire's original theory, and this deviation allows a more realistic model. The air of "friendship" is still there in Mr. Cedric's joking comments to his own teammates (a group of middle schoolers half his height) and in Ms. Martine's probing questions that she only just realized to ask when doing the activity herself. Scholars learn that they are working with their teachers, and so they not only have the experience of working with others, but they also learn to see their teachers and mentors as realistic role models.

Higher Achievement believes in "Advancing Youth Development" (AYD): "Youth is what drives the program," says Mr. Cedric, "so we definitely want their opinions about the programming that they are getting" (Howard, 2010). Scholars learn that they have control over their experience at HAP, their education, and the world. When one issue arose about girls hitting each other at center, Ms. Martine led a discussion with them about why this should not be acceptable. Every girl attended. Again, rather than lecturing the girls with a list of rules and punishments, she had them make their own list. Her job was to constantly ask why they felt a certain way and assure that they ended with a resolution that favored everyone at center. The girls came up with a no hitting rule, but agreed that sometimes it happens in a playful way and that the adults should allow scholars time to explain the situation before getting angry. The high expectations that HAP directors and mentors hold their scholars to, empower scholars to realize the maturity and academic success that they are capable of when addressing an issue.

Mentoring Sessions both begin and end with empowering positive affirmations. "Shout-outs" recognize triumphs of Freedom, Justice, Voice, and Solidarity in both scholars and mentors. A shout-out for voice could be a Mentor applauding his/her Scholar's candid poetry; a

shout-out for solidarity could be Scholars thanking their Mentor for helping their group through a tough lesson or day. Scholars flourish in this environment that offers examples of good deeds and their rewards. HAP's four pillars explicitly utilize democratic language to express what they value in student performance: Freedom, Justice, Voice, and Solidarity. If the goal is improved grades, this is how they will get there. Full participation in the program means that the scholars adopt Freedom, Justice, Voice, and Solidarity as their own guides to success and morals in life.

“We work a lot to reach back to alum and have them come back to keep our scholars motivated, to volunteer or just to come back to speak on special occasions” says Mr. Cedric of post-graduate involvement (Howard, 2010). Scholars are constantly presented with role models of all ages and backgrounds, from mentors, to alumni, to older scholars. Everyone in the program is working for the future: to improve next quarter's grades, get into a good high school, go to college, help the community. Critical Pedagogy advances the basic motivations of public schooling, such as grades, to encompass an overall well being and drive for success beyond immediate consequences. The changes that HAP encourages in its Scholars will continue to help them succeed after middle school and high school. “We don't want them to feel like the program is over when they graduate,” says Mr. Cedric, “We still want to give them that support” (Howard, 2010). HAP provides them with a solid academic base and state of mind to move on to their next step: High School. With that come more responsibilities—to themselves, the program, and the community. In addition to the core literature and math classes that HAP offers, they teach a variety of seminar classes, including *Careers and Technology*, *Public Speaking*, and *International Affairs*.

Among the four Higher Achievement centers in D.C., Ward 7's schools are in the most dire situation, but their center has also been the most successful. The center in Ward 7 has the highest average improvement rate and the smallest number of scholars in the “Needs

Remediation” category, determined by grades (Howard, 2010). Speaking to the differences in Ward 7’s Community Meeting programming, Mr. Cedric sighs, “The needs of our students are a little different than other scholars at other centers... The schools in Ward 7 and 8 are the most under resourced schools in the District of Columbia” (Howard, 2010). Even the impressive facility of Kelly Miller Middle School is only a façade for one of the most worrisome schools in the area.

Mr. Cedric explains that scholars that attend Kelly Miller are given extra attention, because they “aren’t really receiving as quality an education as their peers” (Howard, 2010). Kelly Miller is an example of the failure of the public education system, based on traditional education techniques. The problems are overwhelming, but one thing is certain: students would benefit from a full time education in the Higher Achievement style. Mr. Cedric points to the lack of strong leadership and the overall atmosphere of Kelly Miller, not conducive to learning, as the school’s worst traits. When Mr. Cedric says “leadership” is to blame, he means well-informed leadership that has a philosophy and a purpose. The theories of Critical Pedagogy and Democratic Education do put pressure on teachers to create a healthy learning environment, to truly be a mentor, a friend, not just an authority figure. However, Mr. Cedric implies that this type of reform must start from above. One teacher cannot change the atmosphere and attitude of an entire student body or school system; only a larger effort can reform the atmosphere of an educational institution.

The theories of Critical Pedagogy and Democratic Education demand an awareness of culture in the classroom. As teachers in an unfamiliar and difficult situation, how do Higher Achievement Mentors overcome cultural differences with their Scholars? And why do these differences play a role in an educational experience? Ira Shor writes in *Empowering Education* (1992), “Culture is what human beings do, make, and say....Social experience gives people

systems of thought, language, behavior, aspirations, and relationships. However, groups occupy unequal cultural positions in society; not all have equal power to determining the fate of society or of their own particular group” (p. 201). Part of creating a productive learning environment means addressing these cultural differences and adapting. On Monday evenings at the Ward 7 Higher Achievement center, about three quarters of the mentors are white, standing out among the scholars they teach, and all of the mentors travel to far away parts of the city when they return home at the end of the night. Mentors and scholars in this program come from completely different cultures. Shor suggests that teachers must educate themselves on the culture of the students before they can teach. “A teacher’s education can begin before class through researching students, to discover their language and issues” (Shor, 1992, p. 202). HAP acknowledges the culture of their scholars, sometimes in celebration, and sometimes with a watchful eye. When a scholar uses grammatically incorrect local colloquial language, saying, “we was...” a Mentor quickly corrects him/her. When a mentor seeks a substitute for their class, they advise their replacement to talk with them first, so that they may pass on information about their scholars. In the poetry unit, Scholars listen to Jazz and Blues as fun examples of famous African-American poetry. The culture that comes up at center also includes issues such as family troubles, social skills, and exposure to different parts of society. To help mentors deal with these particularly difficult situations, Higher Achievement center directors check in weekly with Mentors.

HAP deals with the differences in the culture of their participants also by forming their own culture. Mentor and Board member Annie Lineham tells others “what differentiates Higher Achievement is the strength of its culture and the rigor with which they approach their program” (Five Star Films, 2008). In any other situation the mix of culture that exists at Ward 7’s Higher Achievement center could be uncomfortable, unnatural, and problematic, but instead it is full of

spirit, strength, support, motivation, and fun. Community Meeting includes chants, complete with foot stomping and hand clapping with reminders to “keep coming back.” Feedback at the end of each session ensures that scholars and mentors are happy with how they are learning, their progress, the relationships they have, and the quality of the material. HAP bridges the gap between white and black, wealthy and poor, insider and outsider by asking both groups to contribute to the way that center operates. The commitment that both Scholars and Mentors make to the program ensures an investment in the environment, culture, and goals of the program and the people present.

In modern application, Critical Pedagogy manifests in programs that can target disadvantaged communities and be so radical in practice as to rethink the traditional education system. Areas where students have seldom seen opportunity or encouragement react particularly well to a fresh environment where every moment is a chance to engage, lead, and learn. For Higher Achievement, the four pillars of Freedom, Justice, Voice, and Solidarity provide the democratic backbone for a program that demands student involvement. Such a foundation has helped Higher Achievement fulfill its purpose and in the process win awards for its success as an academic program outside of school.

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