Popular Media, Critical Pedagogy, and Inner City Youth

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In this article, we explored ways youth, traditionally silenced, engaged with popular culture to voice experiences and challenge dominant narratives of public schools and daily lives. We also considered how educators use popular culture as critical pedagogy with inner city youth. Through ethnographic bricolage and case study methods, and drawing from cultural studies and critical pedagogy, we have presented two case studies. One study highlighted how a school used popular theatre and critical literacy to connect with students' experiences. The second focused on narratives in students' rap songs. These case studies highlight the risks, challenges, and potential for building respectful and reciprocal relationships with students.

Key words: rap music, popular theatre, ethnography, bricolage, case study, schools, poverty

Dans cet article, les auteurs analysent comment des jeunes, d'ordinaire réduits au silence, utilisent la culture populaire pour exprimer leur vécu et contester les discours dominants des écoles publiques. Ils étudient également comment des éducateurs ont recours à la culture populaire comme outil de pédagogie critique auprès de jeunes de quartiers défavorisés. Utilisant un montage ethnographique et s'appuyant sur des études culturelles et la pédagogie critique, ils présentent deux études de cas. L'une met en relief comment une école s'est servie du théâtre populaire et de la littératie critique pour faire le lien avec les expériences des élèves. L'autre est axée sur les narrations des élèves dans des chansons « *rap*» de leur cru. Ces études de cas montrent bien les risques, les défis et les possibilités d'établir des liens réciproques et respectueux avec les élèves.

Mots clés : rap, théâtre populaire, ethnographie, étude de cas, écoles, pauvreté

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In this article, we present narratives of youth and educators who were participants in two research projects in inner city alternative schools in Edmonton. As teachers and researchers in these schools, we explored our involvement with young people's engagement of popular culture to voice their experiences and challenge dominant narratives in their public schooling and daily lives. We also examine how both the researchers and other teachers used popular culture as critical pedagogy in these educational contexts with inner city youth. Diane's work—a case study at Inner City High School (ICHS)[1] in Edmonton—highlights how the school recognized students' experiences as important in meeting educational needs. Brett's ethnographic research of the music program at Boyle Street Education Centre (BSEC) focused on narratives performed through students' rap songs. In both instances, critical pedagogy approaches arose from the recognition of the need to value the voices of youth who have traditionally been silenced or unheard, and attend to the importance of popular cultural practices in young people's lives. Our projects sought to create and open up ways of incorporating popular culture as critical practice in contemporary urban classrooms. We take a cue from Weiner (2003), who reminds us of the importance of moving beyond critiques of popular texts and practices, to focus upon the relations and social contexts in which these practices take place.

The urban schools that are the focus of our studies shared many common characteristics. Both schools serve a population of students who left the mainstream public school system prior to high school completion. Both schools are located in older and poorer inner city fringe neighbourhoods bordering Edmonton's downtown business core. Most students involved in the studies were between the ages of 14 and 21, and have had a wide range of experiences in schools, including gaps in their education ranging from a few months to several years. Because of the transient nature of their lives, most have attended many different schools. Poverty was a primary concern for all students, with most living independently or in group-home settings. Of those who lived with parents, most were in single parent homes. Many students reported periods of homelessness. Students identified having had frequent experiences with racism and discrimination in public schools. Over 50 per cent of the students in our studies reported Aboriginal heritage.

Many students also indicated having been arrested many times. Additional factors contributing to their difficulties in schools included drug use and addictions (e.g., alcohol, crystal meth), gang involvement and violence (e.g., stealing cars, fighting, dealing drugs), and struggles with depression and suicide. Because of these challenging dynamics, both schools sought relevant and respectful ways of engaging with students to provide meaningful and successful educational opportunities.

LOCATING THE RESEARCH

As doctoral students working within separate departments at the University of Alberta, we first met at an Aboriginal education conference where we began talking about the similarities and shared concerns in our work. We found that we both had known and worked with several of the same students, and we shared questions about ways to better engage and create dialogue with young people through critical education and popular culture. We additionally shared similar concerns about negotiating our own positions with students as white, older, educated, and relatively affluent people in positions of authority. We both sought to break down hierarchical structures of authority through our teaching practices as staff members at these schools. Additionally, we wanted to incorporate these same approaches to our doctoral projects in these contexts. Brett's music-creation option class was well suited to this approach. Diane's practice considered the use of popular theatre, photography, and video as tools for literacy development.

Conceptual Framework

We initially considered how the two schools used popular culture as critical pedagogy and how our own practices reflected the philosophies of these schools. Critical pedagogy and popular media literature provided a context for our thinking about the schools' critical engagements. Critical pedagogy provides a way of seeing an unjust social order and revealing how this injustice has caused problems in the lives of young people who live in impoverished conditions. It offers an approach to education, through dialogue and reflection, whereby the effects of power can be interrogated and the needs of students met

(Apple, 1990). Shor (1987) additionally illustrates the need to situate formal learning within students' cultures. Through the process of "unveiling … reality and thereby coming to know it critically" (Freire, 1996, p. 51) those who have been disenfranchised come to explore their own social and cultural realities, draw their own conclusions, and work toward appropriate responses.

Critical pedagogy and cultural studies approaches offer understandings of how young people use popular cultural representations to construct and express the meaningfulness of their lives, identities, and cultures (Giroux, 2001; Hall, 1997). These approaches interrogate mainstream cultural representations and encourage youth to construct their own representations through understandings of their own realities. Willis (1990) referred to the "extraordinary symbolic creativity of the multitude of ways in which young people use, humanise, decorate and invest meanings within their common and immediate life spaces and social practices" (p. 6). Creative engagement with popular culture allows youth "a sense that they are controlling their own representation, that they are in control of their own cultural identity, and are creatively shaping and moulding language, style, and self into something new" (Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2003, p. 21). If schools are to become more relevant spaces for young people, it is useful to listen to the stories youth are telling educators through their use of popular culture. Graveline (1998) has added that "insisting on people representing their own voices, their own stories" as a "central pedagogical tool" is imperative in the classroom (p. 124). Lincoln and Denzin (2003) noted: "We can study experience only through its representations, through the ways in which stories are told" (p. 240). Representation and narrative are useful concepts for developing better understandings of how young people draw from a variety of popular media to continually re-define and reposition themselves within the social contexts of their everyday lives.

Reflections on Critical Practice

Our research is thus concerned with creative media use, and the ways that young people narrativise their everyday lives through popular media in inner city alternative schools. Teachers and students in these

contexts co-create meaningful practices that move beyond the simple re-creation of dominant popular culture narratives. In creating the conditions for dialogue, we learned about ourselves. Apple (1990) has noted this reflection on society is joined with self-reflection in a critical analysis. We feel that engagement in a critical process with the youth in our studies helped us to better understand our own positions within these environments.

In relation to the practices of the two schools in our studies, we asked how they constructed educational opportunities for student experience to inform critical discussions and understandings of the daily lives of youth. Youth in these schools, who have been marginalized and silenced in prior schooling and social locations, expressed their own diverse consciousness and share their understandings with others in the classroom. For example, a young Aboriginal woman reflected on how her involvement in a popular theatre activity while she was a student at ICHS[2] caused her to think about an issue from a different perspective when she played the part of a White girl.

We were actually in the play and working on the scene and I thought about my opinion on it and I had to because of the play and there was a girl that was vocal in the play and she was the one who was saying the things about White people. 'You took our land, took our this and that' and I had no idea how to react to that because that's purely on defence mechanisms. *(ICHS Youth Worker)*

Young people's reflections on their involvement in popular theatre created spaces for dialogue on issues relevant to their lives.

Doing Media as Critical Engagement

The young people in our studies often expressed that they believed no one was listening to them. One student at Boyle Street Education Centre related the following narrative about an interaction he had while recording city sounds for a sonic composition about the city subway system.

At times it's like, it's like, 'cause they see a Native guy they think I'm gonna ask them for money. Like, I had this stereotype just a couple days ago. I was walking down the street, and went up to ask this lady a question. I was like, 'um, I was wondering if you could help me out?' and she was like 'no no, I got nothing!' and I'm like 'hold on man, you never even listened to the question yet! I just

wanted to interview you about what you thought about Churchill Station!' (MC Ed Mile)

Stories such as Ed Mile's highlight the need to listen to young people, and create spaces for the discussion of issues that are closed down in other conversations. Stories that young people have to tell open up possibilities to engage in shared dialogue. Fine, Weis, Centrie, and Roberts (2000) refer to these openings as "free spaces" where young people are "'homesteading'—finding unsuspecting places within their geographic locations, their public institutions, and their spiritual lives to sculpt real and imaginary corners for peace, solace, communion, personal and collective identity work" (p. 132). As teachers and researchers our aim was to develop our classrooms, our schools, and our pedagogies to address these concerns, using popular culture and valuing youth experiences to transform our classrooms into more supportive, dialogic, and democratic spaces.

METHODS

Diane's research project at ICHS followed a case study approach as outlined by Stake (1995). She based her findings on individual interviews and focus group discussions with students and staff, as well as her participation in daily sharing circles and weekly staff meetings. Reflections on her practice as a teacher in this school informed the analysis. Formal data collection took place over a two-month period and involved 12 students and 8 staff members. She sought a wide range of student experience in addition to an approximately equal representation of gender as well as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. This study was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Education and the Extension Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. Approval was also granted from Inner City High School.

Brett's research at BSEC represented a bricolage of narrative, arts-based, and performance methods reflective of Lincoln and Denzin's (2003) presentation of ethnographic techniques that emerge where and when young people involved in the research rapped, shouted, danced, performed, and sang their stories. The research—called *The Beat of Boyle Street* music program—brought Brett to the school four days a week for three years to teach students to use audio production software to create

their own music, raps, beats, dance tracks, soundscapes, and spoken-word poems. This study was reviewed and approved by both the University of Alberta Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Research Ethics Board and the Board of Directors of Boyle Street Education Centre.

RESEARCH CONTEXTS

Boyle Street Education Centre

Boyle Street Education Centre (BSEC), established in 1996, was the first charter school in Alberta. The school was initially housed within the Boyle Street Community Services Co-Op, an agency providing essential social services to people living in poverty in Edmonton's inner city. BSEC was located in the basement of the Co-Op until August 2004, when the school relocated four blocks away to provide more space. The school offers a core curriculum including science, math, social studies, and language arts, plus a variety of option courses, such as Cree language and culture, cosmetology, video, music production, fashion studies, and work experience programs. In addition to the music program, BSEC recently added a hip-hop/breakdancing class. The school's mission is to re-engage students who have been unsuccessful or have had interruptions in their school experience. Brett's work at BSEC was federally funded (through the National Crime Prevention Strategy, Community Mobilization Program) and sought to re-engage young people in education through their interests in popular music, particularly rap and hip-hop.

Inner City High School

Inner City High School (ICHS) in Edmonton provides an academic program, as well as literacy/bridging and options courses, built on a foundation of critical pedagogy. ICHS was established in 1993 as a private school; about 700 youth have gone through the program. The school objectives are aimed at engaging youth who left public high schools prior to completion because of the social situations of their lives and prior schooling experiences that reflect a process Freire and Giroux (1989) identify as making "some students voiceless" (p. ix).

The school's founder and principal, J. Cloutier, developed the program with a unique understanding of students who have had difficulties in public schools. Cloutier identified his own life story, similar to many of the students' stories, as being an important component in this understanding (Cloutier, 2002). Relating, from personal experience to the reality and psychological pressures faced by many inner city youth, he acquired formal education that he felt enabled him to help these youth succeed. Although incorporating many informal education approaches within school programming (e.g. Elders), Cloutier wanted to ensure a structure was in place to give youth an opportunity to complete high school. He knew from personal experience that these youth were not lacking intelligence, just opportunities.

USING POPULAR MEDIA AS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The program at ICHS initially grew out of the belief that drama was a powerful tool for addressing social issues. Teachers adopted a popular theatre approach because it allowed inexperienced and less articulate participants to do sophisticated social analysis (Cloutier, 2002). Popular theatre strives for social change by involving individuals as groups or members of communities in identifying issues of concern, points of change, and analyzing how change could happen (Prentki & Selman, 2000). Through this medium, youth at ICHS were able to explore their own social reality, draw their own conclusions, and work toward appropriate responses. A youth worker and former ICHS student outlined this process.

After the warm-up games and those group building games we get into more issue-based things, like sculptures…we go into themes, sometimes on like respect, and they [the students] come up with solutions of how they can go from disrespect to respect. I mean, that's a pretty big thing. (ICHS Youth Worker)

This process of empowerment "involves learning to question and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that would provide individuals and their communities" with the basis for transforming the wider social order (Graveline, 1998, p. 124).

Issues identified by the youth at ICHS and explored through drama included racism, violence, and prostitution. The drama program

provided real life contexts for "learning as the outcome of diverse struggles rather than as the passive reception of information" (Giroux, 2000, p. 127).

Since popular theatre exercises are most often about social issues, then the kind of analysis that takes place is fairly significant as well… it often takes place just through presenting scenes without any kind of moralizing by the facilitators and it's the youth [who] are able to draw [out] what they're ready for from that process. (ICHS Teacher)

One student talked about how drama helped him focus on school. Through involvement in "a lot of drama skits on everyday living and how you see things … you're aware of a lot more things in the downtown area and the people that surround you" (ICHS Student). Popular theatre helped a number of the youth work through many of the issues that were having a negative effect on their lives (Cloutier, 1997). Once engaged in this healing process, they began to see education as a way to change their lives. Cloutier (1997) recognised the process of conscientization, defined by Friere (1996) as actions participants engage in to transform their social situations, as that undertaken with these youth. This process ultimately led to the development of ICHS. Teachers at the school then incorporated popular theatre into the educational program.

At BSEC, rap music represents a type of knowledge and artistry that is valued in the classroom. This approach is not new. For instance, Kun (1994) described working through a unit on poetry with inner city students that began with writing raps. He asked: "to what extent can we work through rap as a paradigm for the incorporation of music into the daily lesson plan?" (Kun, 1994, sample 7, para. 1). For many students, rap music is not only part of their everyday lives, but also something that they can make by themselves to express valuable kinds of knowledge and broader social relationships. Along these lines Dimitriadis (2001b) noted that teachers should begin to understand rap as part of "under explored resources for thinking through what counts as 'the pedagogical' for increasingly disenfranchised young people" (p. 34).

The Beat of Boyle Street is innovative in that students learned how to make their own rap music using computers and audio production

software. Many students at BSEC reported that music class, with the opportunity to rap, make remixes, or simply hang out and talk about music, was the primary reason they got up in the morning and came to school. Making a rap song provided a sense of accomplishment and success, and an area to build upon existing strengths and confidence, which in turn translated across a whole range of school competencies.

In an interview with CBC radio about his raps, one student commented:

I came to this school back in like '99-2000, and that year I was having a lot of struggles at home, and problems with issues with police and stuff and court problems. The next time I came here was this year. This year I started coming here in September when I got out [of Edmonton's youth detention centre] on September 28th, and then I heard about this music class and I thought 'Holy smokes!' and it's just what I needed 'cause that's what I like doing, writing lyrics since I was 12 years old. (MC Rasta P)

In one of his compositions, MC Rasta P rapped about how he felt that rap music was helping him to turn his life around. The first verse of the song, titled "Rhyme Spree," explains how, although he continued to struggle, he was using rap to change his life.

> *Some Natives can't even get out of their own fucking position,*
> *To kill the pain, go out and get drunk, is their only mission.*
> *I love the people looking for love in the all wrong places,*
> *Got 'em making babies, trying to hustle cash, got 'em catching cases.*
> *Already a lot of nechies in jail, man I don't wanna fail,*
> *But with all this freedom I remind myself I ain't even living well.*
> *Sometimes breakfast, sometimes supper, sometimes a snack here and there,*
> *A lot of kids going wild since their parents don't even care.*
> *I try to stay focused, make something happen like hocus-pocus*
> *Stick to this rap thing 'cause like mary jane it's the dopest.*
> *No hood rat, no mall rat, I'm past all that,*
> *Believe me, entrepreneur coming up in this game,*
> *Y'all know my name, Rasta P, it shouldn't change, it's still the same.*
> *(MC Rasta P)*

MC Rasta P employed rap music—so insidious to many adult/middle-class/white people for its connotations of gangstas, ghettos, thugs, sex, and violence (Mahiri & Conner, 2003)—to escape or counter some of the aspects of that lifestyle. He had been too close to those hard realities, and this rap represented his hopes and dreams for a better future. Rapping opened a space of respite and solace, a space to begin to create a new story, and a point of re-entry into his education. Although many young people in *The Beat of Boyle Street* did not want to sit down and talk about their anger or frustrations, they did want to rap about it, or select a set of songs for a "mixed CD" that articulated their feelings. Raps, such as MC Rasta P's, opened critical dialogues between students and teachers that questioned how popular media challenged contemporary understandings of social issues such as racial and class conflicts.

RETHINKING RELATIONSHIPS: RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT AND CRITICAL DIALOGUE

Our work in these projects required us to occupy and think through the multiple and shifting roles we played within the classroom—as teachers, researchers, musicians, advocates, and as students—and to rethink the ways that we constructed and understood ourselves in these contexts. For example, students' rap songs challenged Brett to recognize the political relationships and power dynamics inherent in his interactions with students. The following short rap created by a young Aboriginal woman (MC "Glorious") describes her experiences in city spaces filled with racism and hatred.

> *When I'm rolling on the bus, all I see is bad streets,*
> *No peace, when I'm bumping to my beats,*
> *Makes me wanna give up on life, cut myself with a knife*
> *It hurts to see my brothers, begging for money, stuck in the game,*
> *Feeling the shame,*
> *Please God, we fought for our land, we brought our clan,*
> *Been real to our band*
> *When I see us now, the girl makes me wanna hurl,*
> *Why we gotta be hated and jaded and waited on?*

Stop the racist-ism, start the creatist-ism
People look at me like I'm nothing,
But deep down inside I feel I'm something.
When I'm strolling through the 'hood all I see is people up to no
good. (MC "Glorious")

This rap expresses aspects of one young woman's struggles to feel that she was "something" as she moved through the city on public transport and listened to music in her headphones, always under the gaze of the people around her. For her, making rap music offered what Soja (1996) identified as new lived spaces of representation, in the form of "creatist-ism" which she uses to counter the "racist-ism" that she experienced, and saw affecting Aboriginal people throughout the city.

After helping this student to make a recording of this rap, Brett reflected in his journal.

The last line offers a bit of a conundrum as the reader [listener] is forced to ask which people are "up to no good"? Does she mean her "brothers" who are panhandling and "stuck in the game" of cycles of alcoholism, poverty, and violence? Or, does she mean the people who are up to no good are those with the power of the gaze, the racists who look at her like she's nothing because she is Aboriginal? At first listen, I had the first interpretation—I was thinking along established lines through which I understood being "up to no good" as panhandling and drinking. So am I just like the people who look at this young woman like she's nothing? It required additional times of listening to this song for me to reconsider my position, and recognize how I was being complicit in the perpetuation of "racist-isms." Despite my best intentions, I too was getting up to no good. (Brett, journal entry)

This passage illustrates how a shift occurred in Brett's thinking during the course of his research, a moment that has been identified by others as a coming clean at the self-other hyphen (Dimitriadis, 2001a; Fine, 1998; Fine & Weis, 1998), and creating spaces for new subjectivities for teachers, researchers, or students alike.

Grossberg (1994) argued that the task of a politically engaged pedagogy is "never to convince a predefined subject to adopt a new position. Rather the task is to win an already positioned, already invested individual or group to a different set of places, a different

organization of the space of possibilities" (p. 19). Rap music and popular culture offer one possibility for creating meaningfully shared spaces for critical practice. Making rap music in the classroom also indicates how Brett began rethinking his relationships with students, questioning whose story was being told, and recognizing that his story was bound up with students' narrative raps.

At ICHS, the school staff endeavoured to be flexible and caring in their interactions with youth to foster critical dialogue. A student explained how important these relations were to her success.

[The staff] were really supportive of me…they always tried to help me even though I was not even really serious about school and they still tried to encourage me…they always take you back, no matter what…I've gone through a lot of shit and it's helpful to have someone that cares about you, tries to help you even though you haven't been as good, the best person or made the best choices…they still accept you and are willing to help you. (ICHS Student)

Many students started and stopped the program a number of times before they established a routine of coming to school regularly. School staff members paid careful attention to relationship building through respectful dialogue that encouraged students to continue attending school. In Diane's discussions with ICHS staff, one teacher noted that in their relations with disenfranchised youth, "you have to stop the bleeding before you can engage in critical questioning" (ICHS Teacher). The process of stopping the bleeding and building the conditions for pedagogy began when students first arrived at the school. Early relations focused on positive, accepting interactions that lead to establishing trust as a crucial component of academic engagement.

A youth worker talked about how he tried to build this trust in initial contacts with new students.

They've [the youth] gone through so much and faced so much adversity in their lives that they don't know who they can trust. And they've tried to trust so many people throughout the years that when they first come in they just look at me as just another guy… after a series of one on ones then they start to see that I'm genuine and then they start to crack the shell a little bit. (ICHS Youth Worker)

Openness in interactions with students and abilities to relate to some of their personal experiences helped this staff member establish relationships where youth felt comfortable talking with him.

Diane reflected on her own relationships with students in this school. She wanted to better understand how she established trust leading to openness in dialogue. She recognized the importance of listening to students and creating an atmosphere that was non-judgmental but also came to believe in the necessity of contributing to the relationship through sharing of her own stories. These stories emerged from different social locations yet offered many points of connection that youth readily responded to. She felt that by opening up to them, spaces were created whereby youth could offer their knowledge. Young people's knowledge was validated through this process. Diane felt the students also validated her in this process, as worthy of receiving what they had to offer.

New students coming into ICHS progressed through a series of courses designed to bring their reading, writing, and analytical skills up to grade level prior to starting an academic program. These courses were set up as short-term modules to allow students the opportunity to experience academic success quickly, leading to an increase in self confidence and a desire to continue coming to school. These early courses began with literacy where, through drama, photography, video, reading, and writing, students explored the social issues in their lives. When ICHS students began this process, many of them looked at the school and surrounding community as focal points for photography and descriptive writing. They then moved on to examine these objects more critically through questioning and dialogue with other students and staff members. Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) provide support for the type of media literacy programs offered at ICHS, asserting that creative writing reflecting greater self understanding must be motivated by tapping into feelings, such as desire, pain, ambition, and curiosity.

At ICHS, topics for literacy projects were identified and developed by the students based on problems they felt had significant impact on their lives. Often for ICHS students the realities of street life became early topics for writing and other forms of creative expression. Emotional responses, such as anger at police, racism, or frustrations of

homelessness, became motivators for their work. These courses are in keeping with Weiner's (2003) assertion that they "help students see ideology as lived experience in literature, music, painting and social interaction" (p. 61). The next level of literacy courses at ICHS moved students into media analysis.

I think we really try to look at the way of the world as well as [the ways] the youth that come here manipulate it in order to survive. And I think we look at how they have been maybe manipulated by the world and the structures that they're up against. And we deliberately have elements within our literacy program to help us discuss those issues. Like we'll watch a movie because it's an in to talking about how the world is not a fair place. (ICHS Teacher)

ICHS students identified news stories or advertising campaigns and worked through critical questions that lead them to discern how media shapes understandings. Significantly, these students understood themselves differently in relation to the ways inner city youth are portrayed by mainstream media.

DISCUSSION: ALTERNATIVE VISIONS AND VOICES

For Weaver and Daspit (1999) and Knoblauch and Brannon (1993), critical pedagogy can critique and connect popular culture and education, engage in questions about the power of representation, and change realities in schools. This approach was adopted by teachers at ICHS to incorporate critical questioning in "the arts and … the literacy program[s] [that were used] to look at the world around us" (ICHS Teacher). Teaching in this school reflected an approach put forth by Giroux (1994) to view "students as bearers of diverse social memories with a right to speak and represent themselves in the quest for learning and self determination" (p. 279). This approach coincides with Weaver and Daspit's (1999) claim that critical pedagogy should promote students, teachers, and administrators who are able to negotiate within the terrain of popular culture to constantly remake their own identities.

At ICHS teachers and youth workers often incorporated critical approaches that connected popular media forms with discussions of the power of representation.

Digital media and also basic photography…gives somebody a purpose to go out into the community and look at it. I mean literally looking at it through a lens that you also have something between you and the community and you have a stake there that not everyone else has…once they're given that prop they would go out and really look at the community with a different purpose…they have a role that's valid within the community…suddenly they have a place within the community…and at the same time they're not a part of it. They're separate so they can really look at it from the other side…it gives them a power they haven't had before. (ICHS Teacher)

Students used this medium to critique the messages in the world around them and consider alternative representations of the images they saw. Photography not only provided opportunities to view the world critically but also allowed students to name and talk about the community of which they were part.

According to Freire (1996), an emancipatory praxis must be informed by the experiences and voices of the disempowered. At ICHS, the program was adapted to meet the needs of the current students. As previously noted, this flexibility was essential to student success. Student experiences were the basis for popular theatre and literacy programs where students used their voices to express themselves, while working on social and academic skills needed for academic success and in the larger community.

The use of the arts is critical in our work because the use of the arts allows us to address academic deficiencies in a way that allows students to maintain some sense of dignity and self worth and also promotes their confidence at the same time. We're able to move towards the academic courses and feel good about the whole process rather than putting them into a reading program that highlights their deficiencies. (ICHS Teacher)

Through media and art, in literacy courses, staff at ICHS have recognized that students "don't need a lot of skill to produce something that is sort of 'wowing' … and they have something that they can feel proud about … and they're beaming … it's really important … if they can tackle the confidence the rest will follow" (ICHS Youth Worker). Confidence is an essential component of academic success and creating a desire to continue formal learning.

The project at BSEC also built confidence through teaching young people to make their own rap music using computer technology and audio production software. Dimitriadis (2001a) argued that it is important to validate a wide range of competencies in the classroom, such as emceeing or rapping, and utilize knowledge gained from efforts to survive on the streets. Along these lines, one BSEC student—who raps under the name "MC P.A."—noted:

I started here at Boyle Street Education about when I was sixteen, and when I was coming here it was going good, you know, the people were there for me, but I didn't try hard, you know I ended up dropping out, I ended up doing a lot of things and getting in trouble, whatnot. It took me until now [age 19] to, like, finally get into it. I feel I've come a long way from when I was younger to now. And, it's like, I don't know, I'm a dedicated student now, it's a full time thing now… music gives me, now that I'm in this classroom, and what I've learned here so far, it gives me a new perspective on music, you know. It just like opens up doors you know so I can see where I'm going with it, it's not just something I listen to anymore, it's something I do. (MC P.A.)

This narrative highlights the importance of doing popular cultural practices. Grossberg (1994) argued that these practices are "not only the sites and the stakes of struggle, but also the weapons as well. Cultural practices not only represent power, they deploy it as well" (p. 7). MC P.A. has written raps that are illustrative of struggles for self-representation, and which spoke of Aboriginal pride in the face of pervasive negativity, the value of getting an education, and the importance of listening to the voices of Aboriginal youth.

The Beat of Boyle Street supported young people speaking through their creative musical voices and hip-hop compositions. More importantly, the processes of doing music together allowed teachers, researchers, and students to enter into new relationships, support and challenge existing power dynamics, and explore new spaces of identity formation. Fiske (1989) claimed "the study of popular culture requires the study not only of the cultural commodities out of which it is made, but also of the ways that people use them. The latter are far more creative and varied than the former" (p. 15). At BSEC, hip-hop provided different ways for students and teachers to "learn how to position"

themselves, as well as contest how they have been positioned, within struggles over power (Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2003, p. 12). Rose (1994) reminds educators that young people need to be in control of their own representations; making raps provided the students at Boyle Street Education Centre some sense of agency and power in an arena that sustained self-determination, creativity, and shaping identity on their own terms and turf.

RISKS, CHALLENGES, AND POTENTIAL

Our research projects sought to illuminate ways in which teachers in inner city classrooms engaged students in critical dialogue and analysis. The approaches we and other staff members used to incorporate popular culture in classrooms enacted Giroux's (2001) notion of performative pedagogy. Giroux explained this concept as a mixture of critical pedagogy and cultural studies approaches that emphasize "'the act of doing,' the importance of understanding theory as the grounded basis for 'intervening into contexts and power . . . in order to enable people to act more strategically in ways that may change their context for the better'" (Grossberg, 1996, p. 143, quoted in Giroux, 2001, p. 7).

As teachers and researchers, both of us struggled with the challenges of creating opportunities for students by examining their experiences through critical lenses and co-creating meaning with them. Brett's study involved making rap music as an option class and explored the ways young people articulated their hopes, struggles, successes, and unique skills through music. Diane's work also revealed the struggles and possibilities for creating better futures through critical examinations of community and social issues allowing for engagement in alternative futures. We found through our work that the young people in our studies were willing to accept us for who we were (white, educated, middle class, teachers, and researchers) when we indicated a willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue together. In this, we adhere to the idea that:

The critical pedagogue is always someone who teaches from where the student is, rather than from where the teacher is at. This does not mean that the teacher denies his or her pedagogical intentions or specific expertise, but merely that s/he

respects the myriad expertise of the students that s/he does not share. (Mostern, 1994, quoted in Grossberg, 1994, p. 20)

Our research and practice, respecting the lives and experiences of students, sought to create opportunities for speaking and listening in moments of shared dialogue. Doing popular media in our classrooms provided a nexus of critical engagement in these alternative school environments and clearly is an integral part of Inner City High School and Boyle Street Education Centre programming. In our work, popular media practices form the core of our critical pedagogical approaches, rather than operating as additives to existing courses and curricula. However, we also see our work as useful for teachers wishing to incorporate popular media in the classroom to explore ways of creating meaningful dialogue with young people. Popular media practices offer potential points of re-engagement within schools for developing respectful, relevant, and reciprocal relationships with students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

[1]Permission has been granted to use actual names of the schools.

[2]The former student quoted here was employed as a Youth Worker at ICHS during the time period covered by this study. All the Youth Workers quoted in this study are graduates of ICHS.

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