

2. Expect student resistance, fear, and anxiety. This is good. This is where the growth happens. As one CEO told me this week, “To be forced into [being creative] was sort of scary. . . . I picked people who I knew were more creative than I was to support me.” She doubted her own abilities to work and think in a nontraditional manner, but she came to understand the value of finding a team that could encourage innovation. This justified my entire reason for creating the project.
3. Students need permission to be creative, to be taught *how*

to be creative, and to be taught why creativity is a virtue and a “cultural imperative.” Sadly, students don’t know how to brainstorm effectively, nor do they enjoy having their work critiqued and being forced to work on something with sustained focus, delaying their gratification. This is a function of their age, their busyness as students, and their experience of “doing school.” Again, it’s all the more reason why they should be invited to play. ●

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# Curriculum-in-Action: Cultivating Literacy, Community, and Creativity in Urban Contexts

*Limarys Caraballo, Queens College of the City University of New York, and Meredith Hill, Columbia Secondary School for Math, Science, & Engineering*

*A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of language are dictated by what the language must convey.*

—James Baldwin, 1979

Over 30 years ago, in his essay about the authenticity of Black English, James Baldwin argued that a language is shaped by what it must convey. This notion remains just as relevant today as our contested cultural and technological contexts define and demand an ever-expanding set of language rules, and their complexity urges us to redefine what literacy looks like in classrooms. While recent Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) work backwards from the ultimate goal of college readiness to outline a list of rules for literacy

instruction, embedding Standards-based learning in the context of students’ own experiences and in a greater cultural and global relevance builds active learning toward literacies that transcend classroom walls and incite social action. We argue here that creative liberty with the Standards is a *requirement*, not just an option, of literacy instruction for social justice. If we want to engage students in rules of language that cultivate creativity, community, and authenticity, we must breathe these values into our content and approach to literacies.

In the wake of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) and *Race to the Top* (RTT), where reforms such as the CCSS presume to provide all students with a high-quality education, the growing standardization of curriculum and assessment often magnifies the inequities that such

policies were meant to address (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Tanner, 2013) and exacerbates the disconnect between a predominantly White and monolingual teaching force (Zumwalt & Craig, 2008) and an increasingly diverse, multicultural, and multilingual student population (Aud et al., 2012). In light of these interrelated issues, we consider what it might mean to work toward powerful English curriculum and pedagogies (Morrell & Scherff, 2014) in classrooms and communities by reflecting on some instances in which students’ engagement with social issues has shaped our research and practice and led to authentic investments in multiple literacies. We echo Baldwin’s urgency in challenging ourselves to consider the future of language and literacy education by engaging with content and contexts that create spaces for authentic literacy in order to enact

truly powerful English (Cantrill, et al., 2014; Morrell, 2005). When we consider the profound impact of popular culture, social media, and digital modes in shaping and disseminating the perspectives, voices, and literacies of teachers and students (Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, & Lopez, 2013), we gain renewed conviction in the need to create literacy education that authentically responds to current contexts and engages students in culturally sustaining literacy experiences (Paris, 2012).

Situated in New York City's urban environments, we explore how to engage students in multiple literacies that lead them not only to college readiness, but to the ability to think creatively and actively as citizens in their communities and beyond. Across educational contexts, our work is united in the aim of creating spaces where students can cultivate their own voices and perspectives, drawing upon multiple literacies to become agents of change.

### **Students as Critical Researchers: Literacy, Research, and Activism** (*Limarys*)

As a professor of English education in an urban teacher preparation program in New York City, my work encourages the co-construction of critical knowledges that support multiple identities and literacies. In the educational context described above, there are students whose identities and experiences are excluded from the curriculum, leading to increased disengagement and marginalization among many of the students that these policies are meant to “not leave behind.” For example, Manuel, a Latino middle school student I interviewed for a previous study, summarized his eighth-grade ELA experience as follows: “ELA is usually about writing and like being yourself and like expressing yourself. And I don't feel like we get to express ourselves in there.”

By contrast, collaborative projects with youth, such as those framed by Youth Participatory Action Research

**Y**PAR projects consist of inquiries designed, conducted, reported, and acted upon by the youth who are most affected by the problems they investigate.

(YPAR), have been shown to offer students the rigor demanded by the CCSS via students' critical engagement with issues that are relevant to them and their communities (Morrell, 2004; Rubin & Jones, 2007). YPAR is a critical approach that privileges the firsthand experiences and knowledge production of youth as agents of social change (Fine et al., 2004; Morrell, 2008). Giving students the opportunity to work collaboratively with school and community members, YPAR projects consist of inquiries designed, conducted, reported, and acted upon by the youth who are most affected by the problems they investigate.

While YPAR presents great pedagogical possibilities in general (Camarota & Fine, 2008), giving urban youth access to YPAR experiences is particularly significant. A YPAR framework can work within and across existing affordances and constraints in the discipline of English language arts. Specifically, some of the affordances stem from the fact that English lends itself well to the examination of varied perspectives and the development of literacies; the constraints can often be traced to the ways in which “critical” thinking is taught as a skill, a “neutral” and “higher order” thinking activity devoid of context. However, criticality is never neutral. All curricula have an agenda, and every agenda privileges some interests and marginalizes others. A YPAR framework disrupts some of the normalizing discourses in academic contexts while engaging students in critical praxis.

Since 2012, I have collaborated with Jamila Lyiscott, a doctoral research fellow at The Institute of Urban and Minority Education (IUME) at Teachers College, Columbia University, in developing an after-school research seminar in which students use spoken word, hip-hop, and digital literacies, as well as traditional academic modes (such as PowerPoint presentations and reports, etc.), to present their research and engage others in social action. Along with preservice teacher co-facilitators, students meet weekly during the academic year, then participate in an annual, IUME-sponsored youth summit, *Cyphers for Justice* (CFJ).

Building upon this work, my research focuses on the ways in which a YPAR-based curriculum engages these students' multiple identities and literacies, and how students' experiences as researchers can help preservice teachers to imagine more powerful ELA curricula. Using qualitative methods, I document how students' engagement leads to powerful literacy experiences. The study is grounded in the assumption that identities and literacies are multiple and contextual, and are always being negotiated in particular cultural words. A practice theory approach (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) conceptualizes individuals as actors operating among the cultural forces that inform the construction and positioning of the self in a given context. Examining identities in the context of practice contributes to a nuanced and multifaceted conceptualization of how multiple factors intersect and interact with students' literacy practices (Street, 1984).

The data collected for the study consists of ethnographic field notes; YPAR curriculum materials; student work in the seminar, including images and artifacts of their research and presentations; school documents, demographic data, and student achievement reports; individual interviews with students; and focus group interviews with students. All of the data are analyzed using narrative

methods (Wertz et al., 2011), where written and oral texts are considered units of analysis. As illustrated in the example below, my ongoing analysis suggests 1) that YPAR projects meet and exceed Common Core writing, speaking, and listening standards (CCSS Writing Standards 4–9; Speaking and Listening Standards 2–6) while cultivating cultural literacies and creativity among students, and 2) that engaging in YPAR work informs preservice teachers' conceptions about curriculum and pedagogy as they enter the field.

### **Identities and Literacies-in-Action: Rosalia's Sustainability Project**

As part of the YPAR research seminar, students read about critical social theory and participatory action research methods. We engage in workshops on different rhetorical modes (beyond the typical academic research formats) that students can use to communicate their research and ideas. One eleventh-grade student, Rosalia, had a long-standing interest in issues of environmental sustainability. When we began the seminar, Rosalia expressed frustration about recycling and assumed that such efforts failed in her school and community because people did not care about the environment. In an interview at the end of the semester, she reflects on how the concept of positionality informed her approach to the problem:

The day that we were talking about positionality . . . really helped me a lot because it kinda makes you realize what your position in the problem that you are trying to deal with is, so it makes you think about what you have to do—not what other people have to do to fix the problem, but what *you* have to do.

As Bautista and colleagues explain (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013), positionality is key to conceptualizing problems in education and society; as with research about youth, which is often framed by deficit perspectives, sometimes fram-

ing the problem is the problem itself.

For Rosalia, understanding positionality led to a deeper analysis of the problem and broadened her understanding of the role of literacies in social action. For her presentation at CFJ, Rosalia and her partner presented an empirical research plan that culminated in a social media campaign to increase awareness about sustainability. In addition to their traditionally “academic” PowerPoint presentation, Rosalia also wrote and performed a spoken word poem about how she and others in her community might work together toward sustainable practices. Reflecting her understanding of positionality and its role in enacting change, Rosalia's experiences with YPAR illustrate the interrelatedness of leveraging multiple literacies toward engagement in critical social action.

### **Implications: Creativity and Engagement in Preservice Teacher Education**

In addition to the impact of YPAR on the students in the course, the experiences of preservice teachers who participate in the project are also transformative. According to Jazmine, one of the preservice teachers who co-facilitated a YPAR seminar, the experience informed her ideas about curriculum and made [her] “aware of how important it is to incorporate different literacies into the classroom and to allow students to express what they've learned using different methods” (Interview). The interactions in the YPAR seminar engage students' as well as teachers' multiple identi-

ties and literacies in interrogating, reframing, and constructing academic knowledge(s). In her interview, Jazmine continued:

I see how important it is for students to partake in things that are of interest to them, and for them to participate in their own education by being able to reflect on what they're learning and why . . . [I also see that] how they identify with a teacher has a great impact on their learning, [and recall that] students voiced how there were some teachers they felt simply didn't get it, while there were others who always engaged them and made them want to do well.

Such reframing has a broad impact by building capacity among preservice teachers to draw from critical youth research projects (Kinloch, 2012; McIntyre, 2000) and by developing culturally sustaining (Paris 2012) educational spaces in the interest of equity and social justice. While the YPAR project described above is situated in an after-school context, there are similar sites of possibility for powerful English in classroom-based ELA. Engaging youth in using literacy to become change agents in their worlds is not a separate notion from the English classroom, but can be used in tandem with the CCSS “rules” for literacy skills instruction.

### **Cultivating Literacy and Activism in the Classroom and Community** (*Meredith*)

I began teaching sixth-grade English at Columbia Secondary School for Math, Science, and Engineering (CSS), a screened STEM public school in South Harlem, New York City, in 2007. The students accepted to CSS, who come from four upper-Manhattan districts for middle school and from throughout the city for high school, reflect the diversity of the city in a way that is unique among the city's STEM-focused screened-admissions schools. My initial curriculum was built around themes of identity and social justice, inciting students to consider what their unique voices could bring to our overall understanding of

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English and the world. Around the same time, there was a push in education trends to get students unplugged and outdoors, as spurred by Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* (2008), which warns of the troubles of an impending "Nature Deficit Disorder." The realities of this soon became clear when I brought a group of students to a nearby park and invited them to sit down on the grass for a discussion. Cries of revolt met my enthusiastic invitation as students declared that "sitting on the floor" would get their pants dirty and then grumbled that the bugs were waiting to bite them.

I realized then that my urban students were worlds away from my own barefoot, muddy, nature-exploring childhood and they saw the natural world as some sort of enemy out to get them. Yet our school's curricular offerings, which included expeditionary learning experiences out of the city, excited the students with true curiosity and wonder. Encouraged by their interest and eager to find nature in the city itself, I began a school gar-

den. The garden—and complimentary elective classes that invited students to explore their food system from seed to plate—was a source of true excitement. There, fears of dirt and bugs gave way to a deep love of the mysteries of this space, where the notion that food just came from the grocery store was challenged by seeds planted and lunches harvested.

As a literacy teacher, the garden became a place for writing, too. Pieces ranging from letters to NYC officials advocating for discretionary funding in support of school gardens to *Fresh!* a full-length magazine on food and sustainability (an online edition is available at <http://issuu.com/prof.hill/docs/fresh.2012>) were woven into the garden curriculum. Students who were hesitant writers in English class delved wholeheartedly into compositions on behalf of a project to which they felt deeply attached. Finally, at the end of a particularly invested food and sustainability class, one of my students asked why they couldn't do this kind of writing in my regular English class.

I decided to make a shift in my English curriculum, moving to a new theme of "From the Ground Up." The units that emerged were based in the skills and understandings of the Common Core, while bringing students to delve into urban agriculture and food-systems-related content. In an introductory unit, students read Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks*, a series of short vignettes told from different characters' perspectives that come together to tell the story of a com-

munity garden in Cleveland Heights. As they explored the stories and storytelling of the *Seedfolks* characters, they began to develop their own narrative writing (CCSS Writing Standard 3), first adopting the voices of the book's characters, and later expanding to the development of their own characters. Writing exercises in the garden helped them to brainstorm their own descriptive language and gave them a context for understanding Fleishman's story.

Following this, we read the Young Readers Edition of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan. After considering the problems and possibilities of agriculture and Pollan's argument in the text, students took on roles of real-life stakeholders in a fictional debate about the future of a piece of farmland in make-believe Farmytown, Iowa. Claims and counterclaims were built into lessons about debate technique, and students fervently researched their company to fully understand its values and position. The culminating writing piece was an argumentative essay exploring the future of America's farmland (CCSS Writing Standard 1). After the tensions and dramas that grew out of the classroom debate, the essays were enthusiastic, and students used compelling reasons and evidence to back up claims.

Units previously woven into the identity theme (centered around Ann Jaramillo's *La Linea*, and Naomi Shihab Nye's *Habibi*) found their way into "From the Ground Up," too. We considered how farming and the econ-

## 2015 Call for CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership

This award is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Please nominate an exceptional leader who has had an impact on the profession through one or more of the following: 1) work that has focused on exceptional teaching and/or leadership practices (e.g., building an effective department, grade level, or building team; developing curricula or processes for practicing English language arts educators; or mentoring); 2) contributions to the profession through involvement at both the local and national levels; 3) publications that have had a major impact. Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter, the nominee's curriculum vita, and no more than three additional letters of support from various colleagues. Send by **February 1, 2015, to: Rebecca Sipe, 8140 Huron River Drive, Dexter, MI 48130**. Or email submission to **Rebecca.sipe@emich.edu** (Subject: CEL Exemplary Leader).

omy play a central role in immigration patterns, particularly in current events, and explored how current and historical conflicts are often the result of a shortage of natural resources. Expository writing characterized both of these units (CCSS Writing Standard 2) as students furthered their ability to embed text-based sources to their sixth-grade essays.

As all of this played out in the English classroom, students exercised their power as urban gardeners, too. Their enthusiasm for the garden convinced me to culminate the year with a new adventure for the English classroom: students tested their research skills and reflective writing in the process of raising pullets, or baby chickens. Unlike the classic incubator project, which tends to conclude once the chickens are hatched and promptly returned to a nearby farm, we fostered baby chickens for a NYC compost organization and returned them when they were old enough to join their existing flock. The level of my students' inspiration far surpassed my expectations as all 96 of my students fell in love with the tiny birds. They wrote poems and stories on our class blog and chose pieces to publish and share live as part of a chicken exhibition they organized in partnership with the sponsoring organization. As our six chicks grew, so did students' writing.

While I'm not sure that my urban students emerged with a future eye to farm life, I feel confident that they at least gained some perspective. As a STEM school aiming to raise future leaders in a world thirsting for environmental technology, it only makes sense to add ecological literacy to the technological literacies so rampant among this generation's interests (Orr, 2005; Stone & Center for Ecological Literacy, 2009; Duailibi, 2006). In the process of learning to analyze a text and write an argument, they picked up some tools for taking action in their world, too. This resonates with the tenets of the Center for Ecoliteracy, who advocate that stu-

**S**tudents need to see the technological power of humanity, but also the humility of human limits.

dents' learning is maximized when the work and their actions have authentic meaning (Stone & Center for Ecological Literacy, 2009). The garden provides an outlet through which the social justice they experience in the classroom can take root in students' own worlds.

Though some might argue that engaging youth in agriculture feels backwards when we are racing to get the newest iPads and SmartBoards into students' hands, I believe that cultivating truly aware global citizens requires a balance. Students need to see the technological power of humanity, but also the humility of human limits. The literacy classroom presents a space for students to reflect on both ends and forge a connection to both the possibilities of technological progress and the need for ecological care. Learning becomes grounded in relevance, as students not only learn to be critical readers and writers, but to do so in a context that connects them to the issues in their world.

### **Toward a Curriculum-in-Action Stance**

Creating spaces in which students may develop their perspectives on key social issues while cultivating multiple literacies promotes critical curricular and pedagogical stances. Building on, and certainly beyond, the CCSS and other accountability measures, such stances disrupt dominant understandings of what it takes to achieve academically and encourage the co-construction of critical knowl-

edges and pedagogies that recognize and sustain the multiple identities and literacies of all students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2014), particularly those who have been historically marginalized. Future directions for our work include continuing to engage students' as well as teachers' multiple identities and literacies in interrogating, reframing, and constructing academic knowledge(s), and to explore how we might continue to work together in participatory and collaborative ways in which students as well as teachers find spaces to reflect on their own narratives of identity and experience, as well as social issues, within and beyond the English curriculum. ●

**Join the conversation:** <http://qc-cuny.academia.edu/LimarysCaraballo>; @LimarysC

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## February 2015 *ELQ* Call for Manuscripts: Leading through Change

In his motivational parable *Who Moved My Cheese: An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life*, Spencer Johnson (1998, Putman) writes that “change happens when the pain of holding on becomes greater than the fear of letting go,” a statement that can apply to both institutions and individuals. What has changed lately in your ELA classrooms, departments, and school cultures? What have you, colleagues, and students feared letting go? How have we coached ourselves, our colleagues, and our students through changes over which we have no control? What intentional changes have we made? We also welcome manuscripts addressing changes brought about by PARCC, new teacher evaluation systems, curriculum revisions, CCSS, and more. Email manuscripts or share as a document in Google Drive: [abramselq@gmail.com](mailto:abramselq@gmail.com). **Deadline: October 15, 2014.**