

In Lockdown: Where is the Joy of our Youth?

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Remember that literacy is language; without extended language interaction, the young find engaging with literacy filled with difficulties (Shirley Brice Heath, Lecture at UGA, April 1, 2017)

In this essay we focus on several interconnected issues related to youth, community literacy and the arts. The quote from Dr. Heath above, captured at her lecture on April 1 at the University of Georgia, highlights the key ingredients in engaging youth in literacy. Dr. Heath continued on to discuss how embodiment (use of the whole or parts of the body in working around and with visual, verbal and action texts) plays a large role in the cognitive and language development of children. The hand, even, is a haptic resource to support cognitive development that cannot be replaced by digital (i.e. finger) use of computers and screen viewing. So what is the purpose of our short paper? Who are we? Why are we invested in this topic?

We are two people highly invested in education, one of us, a Mexican-American freshman and poet at a high school and one of us, an Irish associate professor engaged in youth participatory action research (YPAR) at the University of Georgia. We have known each other for over three years in the context of our collaborative work in after school art youth programs. Over these years we have spent many hours discussing, embodying and visualizing how schools and communities could better serve the interests and needs of youth, especially in high poverty cities and communities such as Athens, where we both live. Indeed, we wrote a book chapter together two summers ago, discussing how performance and storytelling supported Edgar and his classmates in middle school to become highly engaged and proficient in sharing their life experiences and art work with a large audience in our city (Harman, Johnson, & Chagoya, 2015).

In this essay, we share our thoughts and Edgar's art work that are connected to current academic and social issues facing middle and high school students as a result of high stakes testing; dramatic budget cuts in the arts (which are about to get much worse in the Trump era); and lack of basic community resources like public transportation and youth community centers. We quote from a report by Bridgeland, Dilulio and Johnson (2017) on why almost one third of all students, mostly children of

color, drop out of public high schools in the United States. Calling it an epidemic, the authors state:

There is no single reason why students drop out of high school.

Respondents report different reasons: a lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events. But indications are strong that these barriers to graduation are not insurmountable. (p.iii)

Edgar is a highly intelligent and caring young man who sees a real problem for youth because of community lack of resources: he feels that he and his peers have little or no space or freedom or time to be just adolescents at play; there is no space to foster community relationships and exciting learning opportunities outside the brick walls of school except for the patchwork programs that he, Ruth and others have cobbled together but that are not the solution. Ruth is a professor invested in university and school partnerships who often sees tremendous boredom in the clenched-up bodies and faces of students in the schools she visits when they are faced with studying over and over again for a battery of state and local tests.

Below is a poem created by Edgar that describes how he sees his life as a continual, unexciting loop from *school to home to work; from home to school to work; from work to home*; and from there to work that is underpaid. He also comments on what the poem means to him:



Caged Dreams

Edgar Escutia Chagoya

*I have been caged all my life
Lost my tears, I couldn't cry
Fighting with all my strife
Trying to reach the sky*

*The cool refreshing breeze
Makes me feel at ease
Which they just like to tease
That peace I want to please
Five of us in a cage
With not exactly the best wage
Back in my young age
In great games I used to engage*

*It is the same routine
Always the same scene
I am not afraid to dream
But they seem to disappear*

Edgar's Explanation

In this poem, I was trying to give the image of a bird caged for a long time without much freedom. This bird is trying to reach that freedom but not being able to find the way out. This bird is teased with freedom every time he looks outside. He remembers in younger days when he was free. After having something extremely essential such as this freedom, losing it is horrifying. This bird is forced to engage in the same activities every day without escape. It is hard for him because there is not much that he can do about it. He is afraid to dream as it seems things will never change.

The poem describes Edgar's frustrations at not being able to just hop on a bus downtown to attend the local arts cinema or theater, browse in the university library, share his dreams with others he meets on the way, skateboard or play tennis in a lively youth center. In other words, he misses the spontaneity of life, the ability to frequent spaces he feels like frequenting and learning from. His community literacy development and youthful sense of excitement are stunted by lack of access and space to revel in his interests, in experiential inquiry and maker spaces that support his using his body, his hands, his relationships with others to engage in art, engineering, problem solving; to engage with others in collaborative and authentic visualization and implementation of solutions to problems in our city and state. For example, 400 children are homeless in Athens and many more go hungry to bed. Public buses service the privileged areas of town but are nowhere to be seen in more distant areas where Edgar and his friends live.

In the drawing below, Edgar's image delineates the trajectory of his often dull and uneventful life as an adolescent with only three places he frequents most days, most of the time: *School to Work to Home; Home to Work to School; School to Work to Home; Home to School to Work*. On any walks he takes from his home he trudges along roads with speeding

cars and no sidewalks, no coffee shops or community centers, no spontaneous meetings with others. Alone he moves through these spaces, knowing that there will be seldom a change in his routine: *School to Work to Home*.



Edgar says:

In this image, I was trying to express the three-part routine that includes school, work, home. It is a cycle that seems unbendable. In the pictures, there are two meandering roads showing the difficulty to move into each space even if they are almost next to each other. The person hiking shows the lack of transportation for some people and the difficulty to get to a certain destination in some cases. People hiking to find way out of this unfinishable cycle.

On the other hand, Ruth grew up in a fishing village near Dublin (Ireland). Public buses and trains are seen as a public necessity for all. University tuition is paid for by the state. Health insurance is available to all. Even though she had four siblings and so there was not a lot of change to spare, she spent her adolescence running up and down the hills, jumping on a bus or train to head to the city or a friend's house, and even at a very young age, meeting her friends for bike rides, movies and other playful activities. After long days being hemmed in by the nuns at her convent school or being hemmed in by a very strict father at home, Ruth was able to play free and wild among the heather, the cliffs, the city museums; to just feel free in the wilds.

Dr. Heath talked about the importance of embodiment, of engagement, of enlistment in supporting literacy among youth. To feel joy and investment in school, young people need to feel they can apply their learning to authentic contexts, to their development of autonomy in moving around their communities and towns, to their joy and frustration in building strong relationships inside, outside, and beyond school. Why are children punished for being young with the lack of public transportation, of community parks, of community maker spaces for art and inquiry

engagement, of minimum and below minimum wages for low socio economic families? With caged dreams, some of Edgar's friends will drop out of school by 10th grade.

Edgar and Ruth know through their experiences with after school art and inquiry programs that they provide a glimpse of a blue sky, a glimpse of a different way of relating and moving outside the triangle of Home-School-Work; but even those glimpses of blue sky funded by 21st century federal money will mostly likely be taken away with Trump's projected budget¹. At the moment 1.6 million children benefit from 21st century funding for after school programs, which includes transportation. His team also propose cutting public transportation by 13 per cent and the target again will be local public service that serves primarily communities of low economic status.

Why are we punishing the young? Why have we locked up the dreams and playfulness of youth? Do Republicans and indeed Democrats politicians with their very comfortable homes and lives ever visualize the lives of our wonderful youth whose parents work two to three jobs to just

¹ See https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/trump-budget-casualty-afterschool-programs-for-16-million-kids-most-are-poor/2017/03/16/78802430-0a6f-11e7-b77c-0047d15a24e0_story.html?utm_term=.2bf0a6402297

subexist at the poverty threshold? Do they ever step in the shoes of those who aspire to so much when young but who feel marooned, minoritized, caged?

References

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Edgar Escutia Chagoya is a Mexican immigrant from Moroleon, Guanajuato and a student in Cedar Shoals high school. He is a young activist strongly involved in his community. He has participated in a vast amount of youth programs regarding education and activism, trying to help the voices of the youth community to be heard by those in power.

Ruth Harman is an Irish immigrant and an associate professor in the Language and Literacy Department at the University of Georgia. Her research and teaching focus on how best to support the literacy and language development of multilingual learners in K-12 classrooms, especially in the current climate of high stakes school reform and anti-immigration discourses.

