Putting Inner City Students First

A Handbook for Urban Educators

Results of the Putting Inner City Students First (PICSF) Study

Centre for Urban Schooling
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

About Putting Inner City Students First (PICSF)

Putting Inner City Students First (PICSF) is a research project connected to the Toronto District School Board's "Model Schools for Inner Cities" program. Coordinated by Kathleen Gallagher and Dominique Rivière at OISE/University of Toronto, *PICSF* produced six case studies that examine important features of the model schools, including:

o   *The classroom as a community;*

o   *The use of 'identity texts' and culturally relevant pedagogies in the schooling experiences of English Language Learners;*

o   *The educational and social needs of Muslim students;*

o   *Teachers' ability to interrupt cycles of marginalization;*

o   *The importance of play and healthy school environments;*

o   *Principals' agency in subverting deficit discourses in inner-city schools.*

What is Urban Education?

Urban Education is a complex term to define. Educators—be they teachers, administrators, or researchers—may use varying descriptors and indicators to define urban education. Below, we have attempted to represent some of the diversity in these conceptualizations as they arose in the PICSF study.

o   *"Sometimes urban education is a euphemism for practices that are meant to redress systemic inequities that children and teachers experience in very material ways..."*   (Dr. Kathleen Gallagher)

o   *"It means looking at what is happening in a community that makes its way into the four walls of the school."*   (Saskia Stille, PhD Candidate)

o   *Urban schools are "both resourced and under-resourced at the same time. So you might be living in a densely populated urban area that has…lots of social services and organizations, but because of your race or ethnicity or social class or even citizenship status, you cannot access any of those really great resources or services."*   (Dr. Dominique Rivière)

o   *Urban education "accounts for the diversity of students living in cities…[and] for the complexity of spaces and living areas that are at once marked by poverty and gentrification."*   (Dr. Caroline Fusco)

Results of PICSF:
What Urban Educators Should Know

Case Study #1:
The Learner, the Teacher, and the Space In-Between
Dr. Kathleen Gallagher

BIG QUESTIONS:
1. What is the relationship between inclusion and achievement?
2. What is a teacher's role in creating a conscious community, and what does this kind of community feel like?

BIG IDEAS:
When teachers begin their career, the demands of the early years can lead them to lose sight of the ways in which their actions and decisions are part of a system on which they *can* and *must* have an impact. Conceptions of community often become an extremely important part of one's pedagogy. In fact, using the metaphor of 'family' might help students understand the need to accept and work through conflict together. However, for the classroom to function as a community hub, or a family, the lives, challenges and interests of students need to be acknowledged in ways that may disrupt the formal curriculum.

ABOUT THIS STUDY:
The teacher in this study allowed her personal identity to emerge through her teaching. She saw her role as one of a community support worker, parental liaison, and student advocate in their larger worlds. Although not 'chosen', her classroom was nonetheless a kind of extended family in which people were accountable to one another.

Case Study #2:
Engaging Literacies: Identity Texts as Catalyst and Medium for Academic Performance
Dr. Jim Cummins and Saskia Stille, PhD Candidate

BIG QUESTION:
1. To what extent can the creation of texts tied to students' identities and engagement with technology tools increase students' literacy engagement and sense of academic accomplishment?

BIG IDEAS:
Curriculum and instruction that recognizes both the value of students' home languages as cognitive tools and the power of technology can fuel students' engagement with literacy. Often students' home languages are not acknowledged in schools as intellectual and cultural resources. When ELL or bilingual students have the opportunity to create 'identity texts,' which showcase their intellectual, linguistic, and artistic talents, their identities are affirmed and their sense of self-efficacy is increased.

ABOUT THIS STUDY:
This case study explored the innovative ways in which students can engage with literacy by utilizing their home language resources, prior knowledge, and digital technology tools (such as *PowerPoint*, *iMovie*, and digital storytelling software) to share their work.

Case Study #3:
A Teacher's Perspective on the Education of Her Muslim Students in the GTA
Dr. Sarfaroz Niyozov

BIG QUESTIONS:
1. How does a teacher in an inner-city, public, elementary school in Toronto understand her work with Muslim students?
2. What challenges does she face in teaching her Muslim students and how does she address these challenges?

BIG IDEAS:
Teachers would do well to understand Muslim students' complexity and diversity by exploring the meanings of their names, their styles, behaviours, and the countries and cultures they come from. Teachers should not shy away from discussing religious and cultural issues in the classroom, but in doing so, should seek out non-romanticized, critical, and diversified perspectives and resources to bring to class.

ABOUT THIS STUDY:
Students in this study enjoyed talking about cultures, God, religion. The teacher used students' prior knowledge as a basis for developing their overall literacy skills, and channeled class discussions to ensure they learn cognitive skills such as language and comprehension, and social skills such as appreciation and respect. She did not uncritically celebrate everything her students believed or expressed, but used what they brought to class as a jumping off point for critical engagement with sensitive issues such as religion, citizenship, and empathy.

Case Study #4:
Performing Policy: Critical Multicultural Education in a Diverse Classroom
Dr. Dominique Rivière

BIG QUESTIONS:
1. How does a schoolteacher place the identities and experiences of marginalized students at the centre of their curriculum and pedagogy?
2. What are the important and transferable features of this teacher's practices and approaches to multicultural education that can be used in diverse classrooms?

BIG IDEAS:
Designing curriculum that links to students' ethnocultural identities creates spaces for their other identities to emerge. Students have multiple identities, and multiple reasons for choosing one to be more important than the others. Therefore, teaching practices that assume that the identities that society sees as the most significant (e.g. race/ethnicity, religion, gender) are the same ones that students see as most significant are problematic: they don't take into account students' own understandings, interpretations, and expressions of their multiple identities.

ABOUT THIS STUDY:
This case study looks at a teacher's practices in a Junior-level classroom for students with "exceptional needs," in order to highlight the aspects of teaching and learning that might be transferable to "regular" diverse classroom contexts.

Case Study #5:
PLAY (Place, Activity, Youth): Geographies of a Model School
Dr. Caroline Fusco

BIG QUESTIONS:
1. What role do healthy school and physical activity (PA) initiatives play in student success in a model school?
2. Is there a correlation between physical health, school health, and the social health of the neighbourhood?

BIG IDEAS:
When health is broadly defined (i.e., emotional, social, physical) and highly valued in school, it can impact positively on student success. School-community partnerships can also be enhanced if inclusive PA opportunities are provided, especially for newcomer families. Finally, teachers must be careful not to moralize around family choices when advocating for healthy food for students. Well-intentioned values about healthy eating may inadvertently marginalize families that are unable to provide healthy options for their children.

ABOUT THIS STUDY:
In this model school, teachers were able to use students' PA experiences to support other classroom activities, because the physical and social health of the school environment supported students' achievements.

Case Study #6:
Principals and Parents: Connections and Disjunctures
Dr. Joseph Flessa

BIG QUESTION:
According to principals, what are the purposes of parent and community involvement?

BIG IDEAS:
Principals are often key conduits to parental engagement – as a teacher, it is important to combat deficit perspectives of students' home lives by connecting meaningfully not only with parents, but with your principal as well. Get to know his/her vision for the school to better understand your role in connecting with parents/communities.

ABOUT THIS STUDY:
This study sought to discover how principals learn about and make connections with the parents and communities they serve.

Critical Questions for Urban Educators

Have you ever thought about your *own* definition of urban education? If you had to define it, what might you say? How are urban schools different from other schools? Is there a difference between "urban" schools and "inner-city" schools?

How can the results of this research apply to your daily teaching practice?

Often, urban schools are viewed from the perspective of deficits and deficiencies. What are some of the assets of urban schools?

How can you as a teacher be an ally to your students in urban schools?

What are some strategies used in the TDSB model schools initiative that can be applied to *any* school?

For more details about PICSF, including case study methodologies and additional findings, please visit:

http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca/Research/ Putting_Inner_City_Students_First/index. html.

CUS Centre for Urban Schooling
Centre de la Scolarité Urbaine

**Dept. of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West, 10th Floor
Toronto, ON   M5S 1V6**

**Phone: 416-978-0146
Email:** cusinquiries@utoronto.ca
Web: http://cus.oise.utoronto.ca