

Parkway Elementary: Supporting Transformational Learning through the Learning Commons

Feature

by Kathleen M. Budge and William H. Parrett, September 2018

We study and write books about schools and educators who help students who live in poverty beat the odds. We have visited and studied high-poverty, high-performing schools across the United States and in five other countries and have interviewed hundreds of educators to better understand how they disrupt poverty's adverse effect on lives and learning (Budge and Parrett 2018; Parrett and Budge 2012).

We are often asked to share what we have learned with educators, board members, and community stakeholders. In our work with these groups, we sometimes use a video, which depicts students engaged in various types of active, student-centered, place-based learning. Near the end of the video, one of the teachers states that she hopes when students leave the school they do so "believing, given the opportunity, they can make an enormous difference in the world—change the world." We then ask our participants to think about their students who live in poverty and to ask themselves, "Do I believe my students who live in poverty can change the world?"

A Pedagogy of Possibility

Too often educators hold low expectations for students who live in poverty and schooling experiences do not foster in students a belief that they can make a difference in their own lives, let alone the world. As educators, our beliefs about ourselves, our students, and our students' families are "deeply coupled" with our sense of responsibility for student learning. Educators who do not hold high expectations provide less challenging work, assign rigidly structured activities, and are reluctant to embrace and try new instructional strategies (Diamond et al. 2004, 82).

In our latest book, *Disrupting Poverty: Five Powerful Classroom Practices* (2018), we describe the importance of holding high expectations for students who are in poverty and suggest the use of a "pedagogy of possibility." Drawing on four decades of research, we propose ten broad practices, and example strategies, for developing such pedagogy.

1. Teach, model, and provide experiences that develop creative and critical thinking skills (e.g., makerspaces, innovation design protocols, Socratic seminars).
2. Prioritize literacy development (e.g., embracing the reading-writing connection, engaging in word study, focusing on meaning-making, integrating literacy across curriculum).
3. Foster belonging and create a bond between students and schools (e.g., morning meetings, positive behavior supports; intentional and explicit relationship-building, cooperative learning and peer mentoring, culturally relevant curricula).
4. Personalize instruction based on learning needs, interests, and aspirations (e.g., mediating and scaffolding through "think alouds," reciprocal teaching, visual organizers, and sheltered instruction).
5. Actively engage students in learning experiences for authentic, relevant purposes to help them envision their futures and foster hope (e.g., project-based learning, place-based learning, internships and apprenticeships, student goal setting, student-led parent conferences).
6. Use "teacher language" that supports academic learning, develops self-control, and builds community (e.g., fostering a growth mindset, providing feedback focused on ownership of learning, building a sense of agency in students).
7. Teach, model, and practice social and emotional skills (e.g., conflict resolution skills, trauma sensitive strategies, mindfulness, character and citizenship development).
8. Develop executive-functioning skills (e.g., providing memory aids such as mnemonic devices; explicitly teaching brainstorming, forecasting, and planning; using graphic organizers; using semantic mapping; teaching study skills; building "habits of mind").
9. Integrate physical activity, exercise, and movement into teaching and learning (e.g., setting fitness goals, focusing on life-long sports, preserving recess, integrating movement into academic instruction).
10. Develop students' awareness of bias, discrimination, and injustice (e.g., preserving social studies education in the schedule, reading picture books and novels about empowered working-class families and those living in poverty, using anti-bias curricula, engaging in problem-based learning to address local issues) (pp. 135-137).

Many students who live in poverty receive an education designed to perpetuate their socioeconomic status rather than disrupt it (Anyon 1985; Finn 2009; Haberman 1995). Martin Haberman (1991) coined the phrase "pedagogy of poverty" to describe the teaching acts he observed in far too many schools, which can be characterized as teacher-centered, control-oriented, and managerially focused on student tasks of low-cognitive demand. But, it doesn't have to be that way, and in some schools educators know and demonstrate that good teaching for all students is good teaching for students who live in poverty. Parkway Elementary School in Virginia Beach, Virginia, is one

of those schools.

Parkway Elementary

Parkway Elementary serves approximately 450 students, most of whom reside in a Section 8 government housing development. All of the students qualify for the free and reduced-priced meal program and 15% received special education services or accommodations through 504 plans.

When Bill and I visited Parkway, we met Krista Barton-Arnold, the school's principal, and library media specialist Kristin Hildum. One of our first stops on the school tour was the Learning Commons. It was immediately evident the transformed learning commons reflected the kind of pedagogy being promoted and supported in the school. Spaces were created for students to self-direct their learning; posters and bulletin boards communicated messages of high expectations, optimism, and hope; and books everywhere reflected the racial and ethnic background of the students. For example, a "Hopes and Dreams" wall contained students' personal hopes and dreams with regards to reading and learning, as well as pennants from higher institutions of learning, many attended by teachers and staff.

Beginning in 2016, Hildum and Barton-Arnold seized the opportunity to transform many aspects of the school library into a learning commons to better meet the needs of the students, patrons, and programs in the school. For guidance they turned to the American Library Association and the exemplary model of Elements of a Learning Environment to support the district's focus on transformational learning. Specifically, they focused on four areas: (1) accessibility, ownership, and engagement of the collection; (2) collaboration, personalization, inquiry, and flexibility in instruction; (3) creation, opportunity, inquiry, and engagement through stations; and (4) developing a reading identity in students.

Accessibility, Ownership, and Engagement of the Collection

Hildum said, "To engage the at-risk learner they must first be invited to the table." This requires educators to level the playing field. Hildum explained,

If reading is challenging for students, then the traditional library holds little value or interest to them. However, a Learning Commons with a diverse, high-interest collection of materials that reflect characters and experiences relatable to students and that are easily accessible through technology that is current, streamlined, and appealing entices apprehensive students to consider their place as readers and learners in this environment.

Hildum led the effort to eliminate more than 5,000 outdated, obsolete, or irrelevant materials from the school's collection using a "windows and mirrors analogy." To do this she and her colleagues asked questions such as: "Do students see themselves in the collection? Do they feel a connection to the experiences reflected in the stories and nonfiction material? Do they see other cultures, experiences, and opportunities to which they otherwise would not have access?"

They also surveyed the youngest students to determine their favorite types or topics of books and then retitled their "Easy" section as the "Everyone" section, reorganizing it by the student-selected topics. Additionally, they set up a self check-in station, installed three iPad catalog kiosks, and instituted an open library system where groups of students can come to the learning commons at their personal point of need.

Collaboration, Personalization, Inquiry, and Flexibility in Instruction

With Barton-Arnold's leadership, the school has restructured in a variety of ways to support transformational learning. As the library media specialist, Hildum serves a key role as the project/inquiry based learning coach who leads the GRIT (Gifted, Resource, Information Technology) team. Teachers from each grade level meet bi-weekly with the GRIT team to develop and implement project-based learning units. The goal is to "engage students in personalized, civic-minded, global, authentic and rigorous activities based on appropriate curriculum," explained Hildum.

One unit centered on collaboration with Operation Smile, the worldwide organization founded and headquartered in Virginia Beach. Students learned more about their world, other countries and cultures, the organization's purpose, and how they could contribute to the global vision. Throughout the year, students visited the learning commons in small groups, individually, as a class, and even as a grade level to learn, investigate, and turn learning into action by creating products to donate to the patients assisted by the organization. Our focus on collaboration, developing student agency, paired with a flexible space made this life-changing partnership possible.

Teachers have the opportunity to discuss their program and facility needs through collaborative meetings with the GRIT team. In addition, the school's leadership team, of which the Hildum is a member, meets weekly to address students' needs and a variety of improvement efforts. Hildum described these meetings as providing "an excellent ongoing discussion on the transition of our learning commons and the GRIT collaboration/instructional program."

Hildum was also able to purchase dry-erase interlocking, mobile tables. These tables enable easy transition of the learning commons space from quads to combinations accommodating from four to eighteen students seated at one table to twenty-eight pairs of students. "In one day we often transition at least four times to accommodate different learning scenarios," said Hildum.

Creation, Opportunity, Inquiry, and Engagement through Learning Common Stations

Stations provide students with opportunities to engage in transformational learning experiences. Teachers are provided with passes to send students at any time to use the stations, which include:

- *Information Station*: Students research a topic of choice, use the station to answer the posed question, or enter the "Where in the World" contest.
- *Minecraft Station*: A limited number of licenses were purchased for fourth and fifth grade classes to use. Minecraft challenges are offered as well as opportunities for students to develop their own challenges for others to attempt.
- *Makerspace*: The highly successful makerspace is located just outside the learning commons doors and consists of rotating STEM activities implemented through VBO-embedded design briefs.
- *Creation Station*: Students watch instructional videos to create a craft project or design their own.
- *Puzzle Place*: Students complete a variety of puzzles and puzzle activities, including those offered through the Osmo iPad platform.
- *Comfortable Reading Corner*: Currently a reading "dugout" structure.

Additionally, fourth and fifth grade students are able to check out Playaway self-contained audio devices. "The students love them and can access appropriate, high-quality reading material that may be beyond their current reading level," Hildum explained.

At Parkway, students are empowered and engaged through choice and voice. As Hildum describes, "Throughout the transformation [of the learning commons] we have solicited input from students. Our fifth graders complete an exit survey to share their ideas to improve our current program and space." The most recent survey indicated students would like more quiet reading space, access to the adjacent courtyard, and more buddy reading opportunities. These suggestions will be integrated into the next phase of changes.

Promoting Student Agency through Reading Identity—"A Reading Selfie"

Hildum and the school's reading specialist developed a set of activities to support students in taking a "reading selfie." This activity asks students to reflect on who they are as independent readers and articulate this position. Hildum described the process, saying, "Student resources were developed to help them during the selection process. These resources did not focus on level or reading ability, but rather interest and format." She elaborated,

The staff were first trained on the concept of reading identity and asked to consider their personal reading stories... Teachers were then asked to evaluate sets of reading materials based on their personal philosophies and place these texts on a continuum based on this perceived value. These materials included comic books, magazines, classic novels, graphic novels, Playaway audio devices, picture books, and nonfiction texts. The result was an excellent discussion and an impactful altering of perceptions about value. Many teachers saw (for the first time) the danger of imposing their values on their students with regard to independent reading material selection.

Throughout the year students are videotaped as they revisit their reading identity and note shifts or changes in what they selected from the library collection and why. Hildum explained, "This activity allowed students to pause and consider their processes, making for a deeper metacognitive approach to selection and independent reading."

Beyond the Transformed Learning Commons

Along with the transformed learning commons, Principal Barton-Arnold has encouraged, supported, and led targeted innovations, all of which are contributing to a pedagogy of possibility for Parkway students. Innovations include a DREAM Lab to which students go on a personalized and flexible schedule to develop the 5Cs of transformational learning (critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, and citizenship). She has also made key changes in the physical environment, including an extensive installation of LED lighting, and repurposing hallways as learning spaces. For instance, a short side hallway is now dedicated to two stationary bikes on which students who need to burn some energy and/or take a break from class can "read and ride," and a space in a hall near the front office is dedicated as a "Joy Space." Students use a pass to go to there during the "rotations" portion of their class schedule. Sometimes students have a particular goal (i.e., to write a thank you card for someone) and other times they simply want to use the coloring books, read the quotes, or enjoy a peaceful space. Teachers and staff have also been afforded multiple opportunities for professional learning on topics ranging from responsive classrooms to poverty.

By emphasizing social emotional learning, instructional improvements, and changes in the learning environment, Barton-Arnold is leading transformational learning in adults and children alike. At Parkway, educators see through poverty to the possibilities in their students. They know if students are provided a rich pedagogy that builds soft and hard skills and helps students envision various possibilities for their own futures, the school is on the right track for helping students to not only make a difference in their own lives, but also in the lives of others.

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