

**Sociology in Urban High Schools:  
Stimulating Engagement Through Relevant and  
Meaningful Learning<sup>i</sup>**

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## Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Introduction.....</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>High School Level Sociology: A Historical Overview .....</b>         | <b>8</b>  |
| The Formative Years.....  | 8         |
| 1930s-1950s: Relative Increase, Integration, and More Suggestions ..... | 13        |
| 1960's: The Decade of Intense Effort.....                               | 17        |
| 1970's-1990's From Neglect to Revived Interest.....                     | 19        |
| Latest Efforts.....   | 23        |
| Moving Forward After Learning the Past.....                             | 25        |
| <b>Engagement and Urban Students .....</b>                              | <b>29</b> |
| What is Engagement?.....  | 29        |
| Urban High Schools and Engagement .....                                 | 30        |
| Engagement and Achievement.....   | 31        |
| Reasons for Disengagement .....   | 31        |
| Engagement and Learning Sociology.....                                  | 36        |
| <b>Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....</b>                                | <b>38</b> |
| What is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy .....                              | 38        |
| Difficulties of Implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....          | 44        |
| Culturally Relevant Sociology Course? .....                             | 46        |
| <b>The High School Sociology Course .....</b>                           | <b>48</b> |
| The AP Task Force .....   | 48        |
| Recommendations for Urban Modifications .....                           | 52        |
| Culturally Relevant Sociology .....                                     | 56        |
| <b>Conclusion .....</b>   | <b>59</b> |
| <b>References .....</b>   | <b>65</b> |

## **Introduction**

Sociology has broadly been understood as a social science involving the objective study of society through the social lives of people, groups, and societies (American Sociological Association 2011a). While the practice of sociological analysis could be traced far back, it was not until 1875 that academic William Graham Sumner introduced the United States to a formal course entitled “Sociology” that he taught at Yale College (Curtis 1981). Less than twenty years later the University of Chicago established the first official academic department of sociology in the country, and in 1905 the official society of sociologists – the American Sociological Association – was born (American Sociological Association 2011b). Since then the discipline of sociology has made much progress and is now widely offered in higher education institutions nationwide.

At the secondary school level, sociology has not been nearly as highly represented. Moreover, precise national rates and trends of high school sociology have not been usually documented. 30 years ago a national study on the prevalence of sociology courses offered within the public high school curriculum was conducted (Short and Matlock 1982). While Short and Matlock reported that nearly 3/4ths of the principals that responded to their survey claimed to offer at least one course in sociology, they only had a 46% response rate. Nor did they include every state in their sample. In 2005-2006 Michael DeCesare attempted a similar national study, in which, from 598 random schools that responded to his survey, he infers that roughly 38% of high schools nationwide offer a sociology course (DeCesare 2008). While this estimate definitely has some merit, one is still left questioning to what degree we can truly extend this result to be representative of the true and complete picture of high school sociology in our secondary schools.

Along with DeCesare's national study, over the past 12 years there have also been a few empirical studies giving us an idea of the prevalence of high school sociology within particular states. Their results showed that sociology was offered in 68% of public high schools in Connecticut (DeCesare 2005b), 52% in Pennsylvania (DeCesare 2008), and 24% in New York (Lashbrook 2001). Considering the great variation in these numbers, it would be difficult to generalize these numbers toward the rest of the country. Unfortunately, these are the only studies conducted to give us an idea of the situation. While we know that the existence of sociology in public high schools is definitely not universal and varies by states, depending on their educational policies and standards, we are still left with a lot of speculation.

Considering the limited data available, we could conclude that the area of high school sociology has definitely not been one of significant importance to most educators and academics. Nevertheless, one detail the above studies do show us is that sociology predominantly exists as an elective course where it is offered. From this we may suspect that with the increasing development of state standards in core subjects, as well as budgetary difficulties, room for sociology is scarcer as electives are pushed out in many schools attempting to manage these issues. This then leads us to further suspect that it would usually be schools with enough surplus resources that would be willing to make room for a sociology elective course. That said, while we cannot empirically confirm this at the moment, we might be able to suspect that underprivileged urban high schools who are primarily concerned with catching up to core subject standards do not generally offer a course in sociology.

This is unfortunate considering the beneficial potential an experience in a sociology course could provide for young people. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) defines social studies as “the integrated study of social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence...the primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an independent world” (National Committee on Social Studies 2011). Though the NCSS claims to achieve this goal by drawing upon a variety of disciplines such as history, geography, government, political science, sociology, and others, it appears history has dominated the sphere of social studies since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, always having made it difficult for other subjects, including sociology, to be provided its own space within the curriculum (DeCesare 2007a: 100). However, I would suggest that when given its own course in the high school curriculum, sociology can be strongly appropriate and successful in accomplishing the NCSS’ goal of preparing citizens for society. Therefore, the objective of this thesis is broadly to generate consideration for intensifying the efforts toward implementing introductory sociology courses within more high schools, but specifically I believe we should focus on those schools in urban communities that could really benefit the most from the inclusion of a stimulating addition to their curriculum.

I will start by looking at the history of sociology at the high school level to attempt to make some sense of how it has arrived at its current state. When looking at this history, I support the argument that one of the primary issues plaguing high school level sociology has simply been the establishment and power of historians within the social studies curriculum. Another plaguing issue has been the lack of sociologically trained

teachers at the high school level to be able to teach the course at its full potential. Additionally, there has been the disconnect regarding the goal and content of an introductory sociology course between academic sociologists with high school students and teachers. If the latter issues are properly addressed and improved upon, this can empower the efforts to increase the utilization of sociology courses in secondary schools alongside history courses.

A key element I relate to this disagreement on how sociology should be taught is that of engagement. Judging how fundamental academic engagement is to the process of learning and student growth, I suggest that we should consider the potential strength of sociology in serving as engaging material for urban youth due to its direct relevance and ability to explain influential structural forces in their lives. I frame this argument around the practice known as culturally relevant pedagogy, which has been demonstrated to be an effective teaching pedagogy for urban students (Adkins-Coleman 2010; Boyle-Bassie Gay 2000, 2002; Irvine 2003; Ladson Billings 2006). Through combining various examples of cases in which culturally relevant teaching has proven successful, with examples of the experience (and successes) of sociology courses, I will be proposing that the content of an introductory sociology course aligns very harmoniously with the principals of the culturally relevant method, and can make for an engaging educational experience for urban students.

Ultimately I use this essay to recommend that those interested in implementing sociology at the high school level consider a new focus in which the primary efforts are in providing this type of course for urban students. They are a group who we could really benefit from sociological explorations that help explain their environment and position in

society. Granted, all students from all backgrounds could benefit from better sociological understanding, but I am arguing here that this type of relevant and meaningful inquiry placed in an academic context has great potential to attack the issue of classroom disengagement that has plagued urban schools.

### **High School Level Sociology: A Historical Overview**

Along with sociology at the high school level being generally overlooked, not too many people know very much about its history, which dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There have been individuals in the past who have provided some great studies regarding sociology in high school. The sociologist, Michael DeCesare, stands out as the current person at the forefront of such scholarly work. Aside from empirical research of his own, he has done a superb job over the years of pulling together earlier literature and documents to provide us with a more complete picture of high school sociology in our public education system. Drawing from DeCesare's work (2007a; also see 2002-2008), in this section I will put much of his historical findings in chronological order to provide an overview that includes the implementation of and the attention toward high school level sociology from 1911 to the present day.

#### ***The Formative Years***

In the 1911-1912 school year, F.D. McElroy in Hammond, Indiana, and J.D. Bates in Jacksonville, Illinois offered the first ever sociology courses in American public high schools (DeCesare 2007a: 29). In 1913, sociologist, John M. Gillette, was the first academic to write about sociology as a high school subject (30). In his article, published in the *Educational Review*, Gillette writes about McElroy's and Bates' groundbreaking classes, which were implemented as experiments that he organized in partnership with the schools' superintendents (Bate 1915). The courses were tried out as half year

electives (preceded by a half year in economics) for juniors and seniors, and when complete seemed to indicate that such a course was functional in teaching sociology and ethics to high school students. According to Gillette, while the two teachers did not teach the course identically and used different textbooks, both were generally interested in reaching the same goal. What both teachers hoped to provide through their sociology course was for their students to come away with a dual understanding of the scientific principles of sociology and the application of such science for social reform. It is this two fold approach which Gillette would promote as the objective of teaching sociology.

In 1915, high school sociology teacher, W.G. Bate of Minnesota, already began to question the degree of this dual objective (1915). In response to Gillette's experiment, Bate wrote that "formal scientific sociology has no place in the high school course. It is abstract, more difficult of comprehension, and fails to arouse the interest that should be gained by such a course" (332). Bate believed in the value of a sociology course in high schools as a means to teach students social problems and how to attempt to alleviate them. Thus, the scientific content would only get in the way of allowing the students to engage in analysis based on concrete situations kept within the high school age range (see an outline of his course in: Bate 1915: 337-340). This is the beginning of a heavily contested question regarding the objective of teaching sociology to high school students. This disagreement has continually been debated in sociology over the decades. As we will see, the approach to teaching sociology as a citizenry form of education

through exploring social problems has been mostly supported by high school teachers, while the emphasis on teaching sociology as a science will eventually predominantly come from academics.

As for the American Sociological Association (ASA), it made its first reach into high school sociology in 1913 when attempting to influence the revision of the social studies curriculum by appointing the Committee on Sociology in the Training of Teachers (Rhoades 1981). The committee consisted of John Gillette and among others. However, by this time the American Historical Association (AHA) along with the National Education Association (NEA) had already settled on the nature of the social studies curriculum and it eventually became evident that there would be no real plans of making significant changes to it. In fact, education scholar, Thomas Switzer wrote in 1986 that the social studies curriculum had changed very little since then (Switzer 1986). As DeCesare points out, “the sociologists arrived on the scene fairly late” (87). This late arrival has arguably been one of the lasting obstacles that has hindered the implementation of sociology in high schools to this day. Nevertheless, the committee held a session at the NEA’s 1914 meeting and prompted the NEA to investigate “the place of sociology in normal schools” (Rhoades 1981: 9). By 1918 the investigation was delegated to the U.S. Bureau of Education and the Committee on Sociology in the Training of Teachers had ended.

This committee was replaced with a new one – the Committee on the Teaching

of Sociology in the Grade and High Schools of America. Their 1919 report recommended the inclusion of social and economic aspects throughout all courses, a general social science course for high school seniors emphasizing sociology and economics, and the addition of sociology courses in teacher training (Rhoades 1981: 9). In 1921 the committee made a second report generally making the same recommendations. Lee W. Grier points out how these first committees did not propose individual courses in sociology, but just recommended more sociological content to be included throughout the curriculum. She also notes the fact that these committees and reports did not seem to have much actual impact in schools, but at the very least kept the ASA aware of high school level sociology (DeCesare, 2007a: 87-88).

Regardless of whatever impact the previously mentioned efforts may have had, reports indicated that sociology courses saw a rise in high schools through the 1920's. Various numbers were given regarding the prevalence of high school sociology nationwide, such as one report suggesting 25% of schools offering it in 1921-1922, and another report from the same year claiming over fifty thousand students having taken it that year (32). More numbers were given throughout the 1920s, and while none were identical, they remained in a similar ballpark (33). Whatever the actual numbers may have been, it seemed evident to sociologists that the existence of their discipline was increasing in this decade and they felt that this rising trend should continue (Bain 1926).

In 1930 John West conducted the first doctoral dissertation on high school

sociology, noting that, indeed, there was increasing interest of and implementation in sociology at the secondary level (DeCesare 2007a: 34). He also mentioned his observation that the majority of high school sociology courses focused on social problems rather than basic sociological principles. Again, while many teachers practiced the social problems approach in an effort to mold social reforming citizens, academic sociologists such as Read Bain were strongly opposed to this, insisting the high school sociology student should be:

*“taught the facts of societal phenomena, the methods of defining and investigating them, and, most important of all, the fact that social phenomena can be understood and controlled only by the same methods and points of view that have given us our understanding and control of physical phenomena. This approach will do more to ‘broaden the pupils vision’ and make them ‘better citizens’ than will emphasis on social problems...socialism...altruism...radicalism and the rest”*  
(1926: 537).

Bain based this on his study of high schools in Washington D.C. and also assessed that a large part of this problem was due to the fact that most of the sociology teachers did not have the education or training to be able to teach actual sociological methods and theory. All of this he felt was damaging students and the discipline.

Another debate occurring in the 1920’s was that over what social studies should consist of. By 1922 several social studies and social science committees, within economics, government, and sociology, agreed that history had a monopoly over the

current social studies curriculum that needed to be loosened. History attempted to protect its turf, and, according to Hazel Hertzberg, by 1924 high schools nationwide were divided into thirds – approximately 1/3 embraced the emphasis of history, another third embraced the emerging disciplines, while a final third attempted to compromise between the camps (Hertzberg 1981).

These events generally set the stage for the remainder of the narrative of high school sociology. With the implementation of secondary school sociology courses came disagreement over how and for what reason the course should be taught within the classroom. Furthermore, there were the issues, such as that of history (the subject) having the wide representation and leaving less room for others in the social studies field, as well as the problem of predominantly non-sociology majors teaching the courses. On an organizational level, the ASA made efforts to get involved in promoting sociology for high school students, but had difficulty actually making a significant change. While sociologists saw the necessity of its discipline having a role in the high school social studies field, in practice, not everyone seemed to share this belief. As we will see these are the starts of trends and discussions that will continue over time.

### ***1930's-1950's: Relative Increase, Integration, and More Suggestions***

The 1930's saw the continued rise of sociology in public high schools (DeCesare 2007a: 36). In 1931 and 1936, Leonard Kercher conducted a study of sociology in

Michigan high schools (1938). For 1931 he found that 27% of the 130 responding schools offered a course in sociology, while 46% reported to be teaching sociological content within other social studies courses. Out of the responding schools in 1936, the former percentage rose to 41% (a 14% increase) and the latter decreased to 39% (424). One of the other things he found was that the majority, roughly 58% of the courses emphasized social problems, or “problem courses”; while theory *and* problems was the focus in about 31% of courses; and few emphasized theory alone (427)

If using Michigan as a general representative of the national picture, this study supported the claim that most teachers were teaching sociology as a social problems course, and while it did not suggest that sociology was becoming mainstream content in the high schools, the increase it indicated suggested at the time that it would only keep growing (in retrospect this does not seem to have ended up happening). This could have been related to the national report released by the Commission on the Social Studies in 1934, which recommended integrating sociological material into the curriculum (DeCesare, 2007a: 28). Though it did not suggest that sociology should have its own course, it mentioned sociology more than any earlier committee report had before, and, according to DeCesare, to this day it is the furthest any national curriculum committee would ever go in pushing for a separate sociology course (28).

As far as the American Sociological Association (ASA) goes, there did not seem to be much activity on their end regarding high school sociology from 1934 until

1943 when it appointed the Committee on Sociology in the Secondary Schools that lasted for 2 years (88-90). Like the Commission on the Social Studies, this ASA committee did not advocate for an exclusive sociology course, but rather just recommended sociology units be incorporated into existing social studies courses. According to Grier's study of high school sociology, she claimed that in the mid 1940's sociology was being offered in only about 13% of high schools in the country (DeCesare 2007a: 38). This trailed behind social studies courses such as civics, government, problems of democracy, economics, and history.

In 1945 the ASA Committee on the Teaching of Sociology in Public Schools was formed to evaluate the role sociology was playing in high schools at the time and to establish a relationship with the historian dominated NCSS. When their study was complete some of the things the committee recommended to the ASA was for the organization to make more efforts in: getting sociologists who understood the interdependence of institutions involved in influencing the curriculum; cooperating with the NCSS; being involved in local curriculum committees; providing more teacher training in sociology; and offering a "Family and Social Relationships" course for high school seniors (90). According to DeCesare, aside from establishing the Committee on Relationships within the NCSS in 1951, the ASA did not seem to go forward with any of the 1945 committee's recommendations. 1961 would be the next time a committee was formed to specifically study the role of sociology in secondary schools.

The 1950's came to an end with the ASA forming the Liaison Committee of Sociology in Education, which lasted from 1955-1959. Ultimately the demise of the Committee came with disagreement amongst its members over what their primary objective should be (91). Most felt they should be a committee encouraging the research of the sociology *of* education, while others felt they should be focusing on the sociology being taught *in* public education. The committee eventually dismembered and by the end of the 1950's high school level sociology was not a main priority for the ASA or sociologists in general.

The numbers are interesting regarding the prevalence of sociology in high schools. While there is variation and range among different studies between 1930-1950, what remains certain is that sociology was never a common course offered nationwide. Within the academy, scholarly literature regarding high school sociology was scarce (91). This is despite the fact that the general discipline of sociology had seen a rise over the decades (Rhoades 1981; see also American Sociological Association 2008a, which shows the substantial rise of sociology majors from 1966-2006). The ASA seemed to express some interest in promoting its discipline in secondary education (at least by incorporating sociological elements to the already established social studies courses), but ultimately what is seen is a lot of recommendations, without so much actual implementation. And as DeCesare highlights, there was still no consensus amongst sociologists over what the nature of high school sociology should be – there were still some sociologists who

supported the teacher perspective on teaching social problems for the sake of molding good citizens, while others continued to insist on the teaching of sociology from a more scientifically sophisticated perspective. Thus, this lack of established direction, along with the issue of having a lack of properly trained sociology teachers at the secondary level, and the lack of room existing in the social studies curriculum, continued with very little improvement since the field's foundational years. One sociologist, Stanley Grupp, argued that the ASA's lack of productivity was also to blame (1961). Consequently, the ASA started the 1960's with some major action.

### ***1960's: The Decade of Intense Effort***

In 1961 Grupp published a study in which he accused the ASA of neglect and advocated for the association to address the lack of students being offered high school sociology, the lack of adequate high school sociology teachers, and the lack of adequate high school sociology textbooks (Grupp 1961). What followed was the ASA's most intensive effort at high school reform to date – the Committee on the Social Studies Curriculum of American Secondary Schools (SRSS; initially named Sociological Resources for Secondary Schools). The SRSS was part of an emerging movement in education called the New Social Studies (NSS) movement. Rather than create curriculum change through national committee recommendations, the NSS consisted of several projects from different disciplines that created and marketed curricula to be implemented

in secondary schools (In 1961 Grupp published a study in which he accused the ASA of neglect and advocated for the association to address the lack of students being offered high school sociology, the lack of adequate high school sociology teachers, and the lack of adequate high school sociology textbooks (DeCesare 2007a: 101). The movement stressed the importance of academic disciplines and inquiry learning. Thus, with its awarded grant of over \$220,000 from the National Science Foundation, the SRSS created different sociology course materials, such as short paperbacks to be used in high school courses.

Along with the course materials, the SRSS also created a one semester high school sociology course entitled *Inquiries in Sociology*, which was taught in 1967-1968 to 16 classes by the teachers who helped develop it, then implemented in 222 schools the following year nationwide. Switzer and Wilson (1969) evaluated the initial trial classes and raised the issue of “teacher incompetence” as a critical problem (349). They did not accuse the teachers of being generally incompetent, but only in their lack of genuine sociology training. This relates to the model of the course and the expectations for teaching it, for when reading Switzer and Wilson’s description it is evident that the course is based on the scientific sociological approach. Switzer and Wilson are very clear in their support of the course revolving around students learning the proper experimental methods for inductive analysis of data. Therefore, they support teaching sociology as a science, rather than just going over social problems and current events and having

“spongy exchanges of personal feelings” (348) and what they felt could be “discussing titillating topics in ignorance” (349). This emphasis on the scientific aspect of sociology drove all of the SRSS operations, which made sense considering their large fund came from the National Science Foundation. It also made sense that the majority of the teachers who did not have a background in sociology would be considered incompetent in teaching the course using the academic theories and models of scientific sociological analysis.

### ***1970's-1990's: From Neglect to Revived Interest***

Overall, *Inquiries in Sociology* was considered a success based on the high level of students who found it interesting (DeCesare 2007a: 102). However, in retrospect, David Smith argued that by 1970 most schools had dropped the curriculum and that the SRSS project, which ended in 1971 did not ultimately have a lasting impact (102). As to the reason for this downfall, Smith pointed to the mismanagement of funds, academics dominating the relationship with school teachers in developing the project, and thus, the over emphasis on science in teaching sociology. To this day the ASA has yet to exert an effort at high school reform that matches what they attempted with the SRSS. Despite its demise the positive evaluations still leave us with optimism over the ability of sociological content to engage high school students.

Along with the moves the SRSS was making, the 1960's also saw more

sociologists taking some notice of high school sociology. According to DeCesare, though the 1960's was a decade in which sociologists in the academy came to a consensus on teaching sociology as a science, it was also the only decade in which they debated in print about the worthiness of a secondary level sociology course (105). On one end, the argument was being made for the importance of young people in secondary school to learn sociological concepts (Page 1963). On the other end the argument was being made that sociology should not be further implemented because teachers would undermine the discipline with their incompetence of the subject (Reisman 1963). And in the middle the compromise was suggested that efforts should not focus on a separate course, but rather on incorporating sociological concepts in the already established social studies courses (Simon 1965 in DeCesare 2007a: 106).

After the SRSS and the public debating, the 1970's saw very little attention from the ASA toward secondary schooling. Kathleen Piker-King found that this distant relationship was relatively worst among sociology than several other disciplines, such as economics, geography, political science, and psychology to name a few (1982). Nevertheless, according to Switzer, in 1972-1973 about 6% of high school students took a sociology course and in 1981-1982 14% did (1986). There's no real explanation for the increase, though overall, this is still quite a low number. Interestingly, Short and Matlock's national survey from 1982 found that nearly 75% of the principals that responded to their survey claimed to offer at least one course in sociology (1982). It's

important to note, however, that this was based off of a 46% response rate, and 254 principals who responded to their survey from 42 states (316). It is possible that a large portion, perhaps most, of the principals who did not bother responding did not offer a sociology course. This is just a speculation, but it is based off of the fact that in all of the studies that have been conducted regarding high schools offering sociology there has never been such a high number reported.

Still, a couple of Short and Matlock's other findings from their 1982 study were much more similar to what others had been discovering – that most students found the course interesting and that only one out of every five of its teachers had a degree in sociology. In 1986 they conducted a study of high schools in Texas, while Dean Dorn conducted a study of schools in Sacramento and both found the same results that a low number of high school sociology teachers had even a college minor in the discipline. The latter also found that research methods were not usually taught. Therefore, after the 1960's the following decades did not have any significant shifts to progress high school sociology. On the bright side, students who did take the course still found it interesting, but it was still a generally overlooked subject being instructed by teachers who were not ideally knowledgeable in sociology. Also, DeCesare points out that teachers were still teaching the subject from the unsystematic, social problems approach (DeCesare 2007a: 45-47). Perhaps because the ASA and academic sociologists were no longer directly involved the way they were in the 1960's, teachers did not have to adhere to the science

approach, which mainly was stressed by the academics with the SRSS. However, in 1989 the ASA was back in the picture and set up a new task force

As mentioned earlier, in 1982, Piker-King wrote about the ASA's lack of high school involvement relative to other disciplines. Carla Howery followed up with a similar critique at a NCSS panel in 1984 (DeCesare 2007a: 109). By 1989 the Task Force on Sociology in the Elementary and Secondary Schools was formed. Through this the 1990's saw a report demonstrating that many states had no standard requirements for high school teachers to be eligible to teach sociology; workshops to try to better train teachers in sociology teaching skills; ASA publishing's including a guidebook for workshop organizers on teaching high school sociology, as well as a book on how to teach research methods in high school; and the executive officer of the ASA expressing in the *Footnotes* newsletter the importance of high school sociology for building an appreciation among students for the concepts and methods of science (109-111). In 1998 the task force came to a sudden end. There's no literature evaluating the impact of aforementioned efforts, however, by 1998 the ASA Council had passed three motions: "(1) to be certified to teach sociology, secondary school teachers must have at least nine credit hours of coursework in sociology; (2) that ASA should initiate discussion of an Advanced Placement (AP) exam with the College Board; and (3) that the Committee should develop course standards for the twelfth grade elective" (111).

According to DeCesare, it is unclear if any progress has been made regarding the

first motion, and regarding the third, the course standards were created (with a scientific emphasis) but it is unknown how much if any influence this had (112). As for the second motion, this ultimately led to an AP task force in 2001 led by Caroline Hodges Persell that created a high school AP sociology course curriculum (Persell 2004). Though by 2004 the College Board ended up rejecting the course, without providing any explanation why, its development was a significant accomplishment, and led to the implementation of full yearlong sociology honors courses in 4 Chicago high schools and 1 in Princeton, New Jersey (Howery 2004). I will go more into this project in a later section, but will make one final note here that it kept to the academic tradition of remaining loyal to the scientific aspect of teaching sociology (American Sociological Association 2008b).

Thus, the decades following the intensive 1960's, showed some activity in the 1990's, but ultimately consisted of much of the same elements that have generally made up the history of high school sociology. Some studies were conducted and some efforts were made, but ultimately sociology remained under the general high school radar. Lastly, I will discuss some of the most recent activities, and as we will see, not too much has changed.

### ***Latest Efforts***

Finally, I turn to the most recent studies that have contributed to our understanding of high school sociology over the past 14 years. In 1998 Janice Rienert et

al. looked at sociology teachers in North Carolina (Rienerth 1998), Kathryn Dennick-Brecht completed her doctoral dissertation in 2000 on high school sociology courses in Pennsylvania (DeCesare 2008), Jeff Lashbrook studied high school sociology courses and teachers of New York in 2001 (Lashbrook 2001), and Michael DeCesare looked at the same, but from Connecticut in 2001 (DeCesare 2005b). As mentioned in the introduction, these state level studies from about ten years ago showed that each state offered high school sociology at a different rate: 68% in Connecticut, 52% in Pennsylvania, and 24% in New York. Where all of these studies were related was in reporting that the teachers lacked expertise to teach sociology. Furthermore, the studies generally showed that both the students and teachers showed interest in the course, and that research methods and theory were not largely emphasized. In 2005-2006 DeCesare conducted a national survey that suggests high school sociology exists in 38.5% of public schools, and tends to exist more in the northern part of the country and less in the southern and western parts (2008). Also, as mentioned in the introduction, it is difficult to determine to what degree this finding taken from a sample can be assumed to represent the accurate percentage of high school sociology courses nationwide, but it does give us a decent idea. The survey also showed that sociology tends to exist in larger rather than smaller schools. Short and Matlock had the same finding regarding school size (1982). DeCesare figures this is because larger schools have more room for additional elective courses. This national survey is the last empirical study that has been conducted on high

school sociology to this day.

***Moving Forward After Learning the Past:***

I feel it is important to go over this history to provide a picture of a story that is not normally ever told. In order to avoid excessive details that repeat the same general ideas and topics, I did not include all of the activities and details that have existed in regard to high school sociology. Still, what we see here are many of the significant contributions and reoccurring themes that make up the story of high school sociology. What is fascinating is that the same issues that exist in this era, have existed ever since the formative years. Additionally, the same positive note, that students and teachers do find the subject interesting to learn and teach, is one that has a long history as well. But despite this, as sociology still remains an underrepresented elective subject, we find that its obstacles today have existed for decades.

There are three issues that stand out as obstacles, and one as an additional limitation to its potential: (1) Sociology's late arrival into a social studies curriculum heavily dominated by history, and with a large number of other disciplines also desiring for some room in the schools; (2) Secondary schools do not have an abundance of sociology degree holding teachers, nor do they even have many requirements, if any, for people to teach high school sociology. Thus, when the subject does exist in high schools, it is many times taught by people who have had very little educational training in the

actual discipline of sociology. This leads to the third problem, regarding how the subject should be taught. Perhaps, because of a combination of the second issue just mentioned, along with the fact that teaching sociology as a science makes it more dry, teachers have always tended to teach sociology as a form of citizen education by simply exploring social problems. As has been shown, whenever the sociology academy, including the ASA, has been involved they have always valued the systematic and scientific approach to teaching sociology objectively. Sociologists have seen this as the correct form of teaching sociology over the less disciplined and perhaps more subjective model of looking at different problems in society. Therefore, issue (3) is the disconnect that has existed between academic sociologists and high school teachers regarding how sociology should be taught.

DeCesare makes these three issues clear in his work. A more recent critique has been that the discipline of sociology has yet to conform to the standards based trend in secondary education, and efforts are needed to establish an official set of curriculum standards for high school sociology (Andriot 2007). These are all valid issues that need to be addressed, however, I feel the need to include one other area that deserves more attention: the lack of focus on how sociology can specifically improve a particularly plaguing issue in our secondary school system - academic disengagement among urban high school students. Sociologists have been primarily concerned with having young people develop an appreciation for the scientific sophistication of their discipline, instead

of concentrating their efforts on how they can use their discipline as a tool that most effectively tailors to the intellectual curiosities of students. Making the course interesting for students seems to have been more of the concern of teachers, which is part of the reason why they deemphasized the systematic academic approach. At the same time, there is a reason for the systematic analysis of social phenomena, and if not careful, it is true that teachers could be providing students with a subjective and value laden course that is not sociologically ideal. Therefore, I suggest that compromise can easily be made between both sides, in which sociology is taught in an objective and intellectually challenging manner that remains interesting for students without being excessively scientifically centered.

The first step, though, is to acknowledge the problem we want to address. My suggestion is that this problem be academic engagement and the loss of motivation among students to genuinely learn in their classrooms. Furthermore, we should attack academic engagement where it is a most prominent issue –urban schools. In making efforts of implementing high school sociology, these efforts have rarely attempted to specifically target the most underrepresented and needy groups. Therefore, I am proposing a new way to frame the way we pitch high school sociology. The reason it would be in the interest of a principal to include a sociology course in his or her school is because it is socially relevant content has the potential to intellectually engage those students who have generally felt disconnected from the majority of their academic

courses. This should be the angle from which sociology attempts to enter the schools, with an eye on those schools that are in most desperate need of finding a way to engage their students.

The following section discusses the issue of engagement and urban students. Addressing that problem first, we can then tackle issues 1-3 that were just discussed.

## Engagement and Urban Students

### *What is Engagement?*

Being theoretically concerned about the importance of student engagement in high school is not something new. It has been documented that a disconcerting amount of students have felt disengagement with their high school experience, particularly in the classroom (Marks 2000). Before delving further into this concept, it is useful to point out the multifaceted nature of engagement. Fredricks et al. (2004) break down the way the concept of engagement has been used in academic literature and describe 3 forms of engagement which do have some overlap but are, nevertheless, distinct from each other: *Behavioral engagement* draws on the idea of participation; it includes a willingness to become involved in academic and social or extracurricular activities. *Emotional engagement* encompasses positive and negative reactions to teacher, classmates, academics, and school and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work. *Cognitive engagement* draws on the idea of investment; it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills. It is necessary to point out these different forms of engagement due to the fact that some students can be engaged or disengaged in just one, two, or all three of the aforementioned types. While there is value to a student exhibiting at least one or two of these forms of engagement, it is argued that ideal learning occurs when students are engaged in all three forms.

Within this paper, when referring to engagement the term will be used to broadly encompass all of these elements of engagement – behavioral, emotional, and cognitive -

which at high levels all three essentially make up students who genuinely are interested in and feel connected to their course and, thus, put forth the effort to fulfill the course's expectations.

### ***Urban High Schools and Engagement***

As for the category of *urban* students, I am using the term as it is suggested by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004): "However 'urban' is defined, urban students disproportionately come from families with incomes below the poverty line, attend schools where a high percentage of students are poor, live in socially and economically distressed neighborhoods, and are from a racial or ethnic minority group (21). Furthermore, using the concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu, when focusing on urban schools and its students, I am focusing on those student populations who come from urban environments from which they have generally inherited economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) that does not provide them with the same societal resources and privileges as those from a higher socio economic status. In effect, these are the students generally referred to as *underprivileged*, *low SES*, and/or *minority*.

While we should be concerned with facilitating more genuine engagement for students from all demographic backgrounds, it is useful for us to turn our attention toward groups that seem to be suffering most from school disengagement. Looking at the differences in levels of engagement among students from different backgrounds and grade levels some studies have claimed that minority high school students from low-income backgrounds in particular tend to be disengaged in class (Nussbaum and Steele 2007; Rumberger 1987; Steinberg 1996 ). For this reason, while I acknowledge that

student engagement is a widespread issue, I am particularly concerned with addressing this issue in secondary schools located in marginalized urban communities with high concentrations of poverty, where this problem of engagement is considered to be greatest. “Students from high poverty urban high schools are more likely than others to become disaffected and drop out, and the social and economic consequences of disengagement for them are severe” (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine 2004, 14).

### ***Engagement and Achievement***

This is important to address because of the strong connection between academic engagement and academic achievement. It makes perfect sense when Lleras (2008a: 4) points out that empirical evidence shows that students who are more attentive in class, avoid disruptive behaviors, spend more time on and complete homework, and have higher cognitive gains (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Farkas 1996; Farkas Grove, Sheehan and Shaun 1990). It is difficult to argue with this claim that if a student is attentive in, and engaged with, the academic experience in the classroom, the higher the chances that the student will meet the expectations of that class. Therefore, studies about engagement generally show that students who are more engaged in class simply perform better, learn more, retain more, and enjoy the academic experience more than those who are not (Carbonaro 2005; Lleras 2008b; Rosenbaum 2001).

### ***Reasons for Disengagement***

Considering this connection, the question, then, has to be raised: What are the reasons for so many urban students being disengaged in class? By first

understanding *why* certain students are disengaged, we can then begin to formulate ideas on *how* to better engage them, and thus, raise their achievement. The following are some theories that have responded to this question and are particularly applicable to urban students.

*1. Personal Relevance and Meaning:*

A strong explanation for one possible reason for urban high school disengagement is that the instructional material is perceived by students as meaningless, irrelevant, and/or boring (Fallis and Opotow 2003; Finn 1993; Newmann 1996; Sedlak et al. 1986; Shernoff et al. 2003). The logic behind this is that if students are not able to connect to the class in a way in which they understand the reason the material is personally meaningful or relevant to their lives, they have trouble finding interest in the class and building the motivation to exert effort in it. This is one of the challenges of teaching high school students, for teachers are expected to get adolescents to master academic concepts that many times seem to have no relevance to the students outside of the classroom. Specifically regarding the humanities, this can be an issue for urban high school students to find their class personally meaningful when the canon through which the material is presented comes from a heavily Eurocentric perspective (Ravitch 2003).

Fred M. Newmann has been promoting "authentic intellectual work," which is an instructional framework that addresses the lack of meaning and relevance in classrooms. It can be applied using any school subject, and essentially calls for high-level, in depth understanding that leads to personally useful skills and/or knowledge beyond formal education, rather than superficial memorization for the predominant sake of demonstrating competence to a teacher (Newmann 1996). Students are more likely to

become engaged with authentic academic work that intellectually involves them in a process of meaningful inquiry about real life problems that extend beyond the classroom (Newmann, Wehledge, & Lamborn 1992). Thus, the more the class content is "authentic" the more it is believed to be effective in genuinely engaging students, and vice versa.

## *2. School/Teacher Expectations:*

The expectations set for students arguably establish the ability the students are perceived to be able to perform. If the school and/or teachers perceive the students with low expectations, it can follow that students will perceive themselves with those same low expectations, and learn accordingly at those levels. This can be problematic in many urban schools where it is suggested that teachers can enter and/or develop low expectations of their minority students, which in turn reduces their students' academic self-image, motivation, engagement, and effort (Farkas 1996; Farkas et al. 1990). Studies show that if made clear and consistently, high expectations support students' academic self-esteem and engagement (Eccles et al. 1983; Gambone et al. 2004; Klem and Connell 2009; Lee and Smith 1999; Linnenbrink and Pintrich 2002).

The mention of clarity and consistency is important, for it is imperative for high expectations to be set through fully understandable and coherent goals, as well as with a well structured, supportive, caring and considerate environment for the particular students who are to meet those expectations (ibid.). Students are most likely to be academically engaged and inviting to the process of seizing academic challenges when those classroom elements are properly put in place.

### *3. Perception of Discrimination:*

Related to the idea of low expectation effect on student engagement, there is also the more directly antagonistic issue of perceived discrimination felt by certain students. When studying the achievement gap and the low academic behavior of urban students of color, some studies have turned their attention to the perception of students who personally feel negatively discriminated against in school (Kenny et al. 2003; Seaton 2010; Smalls et al. 2007). These studies have found a relationship between students of color who perceive to be racially discriminated against at school and also demonstrate low levels of academic engagement and achievement. Studies such as those previously mentioned regarding low expectations are some indication to validate that these students perceptions are not completely fabricated. However, regardless of how much these perceptions derive from external (ie, actual discrimination from a teacher) or internal (ie, self-victimization) origins, the significance is that the perceptions even exist.

In light of these findings it is suggested that it is important to further examine students of colors' beliefs around the meaning of their racial group and how their perceived identity within this group is formed and influences their academic engagement and achievement (Seaton 2010; Smalls et al. 2007). That, and, of course, providing better training for teachers who serve minority students on how to create a more welcoming learning environment by avoiding intentional or unintentional discrimination and condescence toward particular groups of students.

### *4. History of Failure:*

Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu became well known for their oppositional

theory regarding educational performance among African American students. In it they claimed that many black students who are academically capable, become unmotivated and do not put forth the necessary effort in meeting school expectations out of an ambivalence they feel toward being high achieving students, which they perceive as “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). This theory has received much attention, including disagreement, over the decades. A particularly convincing alternative theory has been that African American students do not have a fear from equating positive school performance with acting white, but rather a fear of failure. Meaning, it is poor performance early in the schooling process (which could be influenced by various cultural and structural factors in and out of the classroom) that has a major discouraging influence in their counterproductive schooling behavior as adolescents (Harris 2006; Tyson 2002). From this it is suggested that perhaps many African American students disengage from school as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from further feelings of shame and failure they may have experienced from the previous negative feedback they had received in their primary schooling years.

Ideally, this calls for making improvements in providing African American students, as well as other underprivileged students, with more early intervention resources to better prepare them for academic success as soon as they enter school. However, this is not to say that once students experience academic failure early on that they are absolutely doomed to permanent academic disengagement through the rest of their formal schooling years. It could still be possible to intervene later and put a wrench in this cyclical process of failure and disengagement.

### *Engagement and Learning Sociology*

Taking into account the aforementioned review of urban classroom engagement, I believe that a course in sociology with a culturally relevant framework has great potential to address the issues of engagement in urban classrooms. When proposing the implementation of a sociology course for urban students this paper will ultimately address a degree of all three - behavioral, emotional, and cognitive - forms of engagement as they relate to engagement within a classroom. Through having a class they find personally authentic, meaningful, empathetic of their origins, and intellectually challenging, I am arguing that this course will at the very least increase students' willingness to become involved in the course's prepared academic activities (behavioral engagement), will enable a positive reaction from students toward this specific class, the classmates within it, and the instructor teaching it (emotional engagement), and will be willing to exert the extra effort to comprehend complex sociological ideas and frames of thought (cognitive). Being in a class that consists of societal topics that urban students can speak on from personal experience and interest could enable them to disregard their past academic experiences and become encouraged to have a new positive attitude about genuinely learning in a classroom.

It is imperative to keep in mind that many of the reasons for urban student disengagement stems from reasons far beyond the school (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine 2004). The institution of education does not exist in a vacuum and therefore we have to recognize that various elements in society contribute to the development of the adolescents who enter classrooms. Despite these factors existing both outside of the classroom and school, it is encouraging to know that there have been case

study examples of urban classrooms overcoming such barriers and effectively engaging students with meaningful learning (see various examples in Knapp and others 1995). Moreover, what I believe makes a sociology course so unique and valuable is that it allows for the exploration of these factors within the actual classroom. Rather than only academics discussing amongst each other the influences of high poverty neighborhoods on students, for example, in a sociology course the students themselves can explore not only the academic theories and explanations regarding a topic like the sociology of poverty or inequality, but also bring their own personal insight to the table. Such sociological themes can be especially relevant and interesting for urban students to choose to intellectually engage in.

In the next sections I will make my claim more clear by describing the teaching method known as culturally relevant pedagogy, which has proven to help elicit engagement out of urban students. Additionally, I will demonstrate what a high school sociology course generally looks like and how it agreeably coexists with the culturally relevant framework.

## **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

### ***What is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?***

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a teaching method that takes into account the cultural backgrounds of the students in a classroom. It is not simply including popular culture in the curriculum, acknowledging cultural holidays, and code switching speech with students. Nor is it a static routine that is formulaically carried out identically in all classrooms. It is rooted in the idea that learning styles can culturally vary, thus, teachers can enhance their students' motivation, engagement and achievement by utilizing knowledge of their cultural backgrounds and translating this knowledge into their instructional practice (Irvine 2010). As the person who popularized the term, Gloria Ladson Billings, describes it, it is a “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using culturally referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (1994: 17-18).

Ladson Billings finds that successful teachers in urban schools who have utilized culturally relevant methods are always conscious of their students developing cultural competence; their students developing a critical consciousness through which they question the social order; and their students reaching high levels of academic success (1994; 1995: 160-163). The following will elaborate on these three tenets that make up culturally relevant pedagogy:

*Developing Cultural Competence* – Part of providing students with the tools to reach high levels of learning, comes from teachers utilizing their students' cultures as vehicles for

learning. Building on students' prior knowledge and cultural experiences is not only helpful for students to make connections for understanding, but also encourages students to maintain pride and cultural integrity. Furthermore, the goal of this is also to provide students with the tools to draw from their own cultural gifts to better navigate access to the dominant and/or wider culture.

Ladson Billings provides examples of teachers who successfully taught lessons about literature or poetry by incorporating music that students listened to, or teaching certain skills, such as research methods, by creating projects involving their own communities. Boutte and Hill discuss the high engagement shown by African American students in investigating the local barbershop or having elements from church brought into the classroom (2006). Understanding the prevalence and cultural centrality of the barbershop for African American males, Hill (the teacher and also co-author of the study) had students conduct qualitative field research of their community's barbershop, which aside from gaining various research skills, helped students learn how such a place in their own backyard is filled with depths of knowledge, history, and culture. Ultimately, the students soaked in the pride and appreciation for male and black culture that exists in the barbershop. This was done with elementary school students. One could only imagine how much more complex and thoughtful a similar academic experience could be for high school students.

Boutte and Hill also describe a high school teacher who was highly effective in getting students to understand and detect concepts, such as, personification, theme, perspective, and context. To do this, the teacher drew on his knowledge of the students regularly attending church and read the required readings, such as works by Emily

Dickinson and James Weldon, but in a church-like, animated, call and response manner, and even wore a minister gown. This lively form of instruction engaged students to the point that they even pleaded with the teacher to wear the gown and recite the readings themselves. At the end of the lesson, students wrote their analysis of the readings and the literary devices within them.

Essentially what all these teachers are doing is teaching all the same skills that students are expected to learn in school, but incorporating elements from where the students come from to more effectively reach them. Moreover, they are validating the backgrounds and experiences the students bring, rather than leading students to believe that their culture and community customs has no place in an academic setting.

*Developing Critical Consciousness* – Along with choosing academic success and developing cultural competence, culturally relevant teachers make sure their students, “develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson Billings 1995: 162). This aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy is similar to critical theory pedagogy and Paulo Freire’s concept of *conscientization*, which encourages profound questioning of one’s social environment, exploring social and political injustices, and ultimately being an agent of change against such injustices (Freire 2005). Ladson Billings stresses that culturally relevant pedagogy is not for the benefit of individual empowerment, but, rather, is aimed at collective empowerment, by facilitating students’ abilities to better understand how their world is socially constructed in order for them to be better equipped to improve it.

In order to do this, teachers put students directly in the center of lessons by probing students to research, critique and act. One example of this would be a class that Ladson Billings documents, which critiqued the quality of their textbooks, compared this to the text books in the wealthier schools in their county, then wrote letters to their local newspaper editors expressing their grievances regarding this disparity (1995: 162). Other studies, such as Hill's, look at the historical (to current) racial and class divisions that lead to tensions in Detroit communities, and the potential for schools and classrooms to directly and critically confront these tensions (2009). Osbourne indicates examples of students learning critical consciousness to understand oppressive racial, class, or gender structures, such as an inner city class that by "legitimizing student subjectivities and exposing them to wider objectivities, racial discord faded and interracial respect developed" (1996: 304). Moreover, these students "began to take control of their own learning, and content mastery exceeded teacher expectations" (304). These students were not given some type of applied activist assignment, but just being exposed to knowledge and discussions regarding oppression enabling myths is a major first step for individual and, ultimately, collective progress.

*Expect high academic success:* Teachers that Ladson Billings observed, and whom she considers to be successful culturally relevant instructors, demand, reinforce, and elicit high expectations of their students. Despite social inequalities that can be believed to influence what students bring to the classroom, these teachers provide the necessary tools for achievement and hold high standards for all their students. Teachers practicing culturally relevant pedagogy set rigorous learning goals, engage students in critical

thinking, hold high expectations and long-term objectives, and use real life examples to help students understand difficult concepts. Ladson Billings saw that by teachers attending to their students' needs and scaffolding goals, their students ended up choosing academic success themselves rather than being coerced into it (1995).

Studies, such as, Fairbrother's research on students of color at at-risk alternative schools, found that students appreciated the caring and small classroom environment of the school, but they were not prepared for more challenging academic work, nor academically achieving relatively highly (2008). Despite the comforting environment and the students gaining graduation credits, the academic expectations were low and the work was remedial. This goes against one of the fundamental principles of culturally relevant pedagogy, which is better exemplified by some teachers who had transformative influences on low achieving high school students in Oakland, CA (Lee 1999). Lee interviewed students and found that teachers were able to change their academic attitudes and raise their achievement by incorporating interactive learning, developing close relationships with the students, and providing a challenging course work. Archer-Banks and Behar-Hornstein had similar findings in their interviews with African American female high school students (2012). The following is an excerpt from a student that Archer-Banks and Behar-Hornstein interviewed:

*"You know the teachers that are interested in making sure that African American girls succeed. They always tell you that you can do it and that you shouldn't listen to the negative stuff that people say about us...One teacher would take books to class about successful African American women to let us know that we can do anything we set our minds on...[Other] teachers go out of their way to make sure that you understand everything that they teach in class" (209).*

This suggests that students of color are aware of the generalized low assumptions society has of their academic abilities, and respond to teachers who not only believe in their potential for high performance, but that are genuine in their supportive efforts to assist students in learning and attaining academic success. Werkema and Case reiterate this multifaceted process, when discussing how raising expectations and incorporating advanced classes, such as calculus, to a school is one crucial step in raising the achievement in low performing schools (2005). The other equally important components are all the resources and instructional quality that accompany this rise in expectations.

*Addressing our Four Reasons for Disengagement:* As we can see, successful implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy can overcome the factors of disengagement mentioned in the previous section. Students are provided with lessons consisting of relevant and meaningful content from which to gain academic skills. Furthermore, being a culturally relevant teacher means one is inherently opposed to discriminating against and/or having low expectations of students of color or low SES who are traditionally seen as low academic performers. Ultimately, as seen, when practiced genuinely, a culturally relevant classroom can elicit confidence and motivation from low performing students to break the cycle of disengagement that they may have accumulatively developed from an early age.

The Mexican American studies program within the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona, is another good example of this. The Mexican American studies curriculum explicitly utilized the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy while serving a large Mexican American high school population, but was controversially banned in

2011 for violating a 2010 state law banning classes designed for a particular ethnic group that promote the overthrow of the U.S. government (Palos 2011). An official audit of the program was conducted in 2011 and did not find evidence that students were being prompted to overthrow the government (National Academic Educational Partners 2011). More importantly the audit reported students using “higher-order and critical thinking skills,” as well as observing that, “every classroom demonstrated all students actively engaged...and collaborating across various sociocultural backgrounds and academic abilities” (19). It also concluded that the program was closing the achievement gap.

There are various more works that re-emphasize the importance and benefits of preparing teachers to create culturally relevant classrooms (eg. Adkins-Coleman 2010; Boyle-Bassie 2005; Brown 2004; Gay 2000, 2002; Howard 2003; Irvine 2003; Weinstein et al. 2004), however the point here is to get a general understanding of what culturally relevant pedagogy consists of and ways it has demonstrated to be effective in engaging urban students.

### ***Difficulties of Implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy***

One thing that can be noticed from the review of culturally relevant pedagogy is the vital responsibility that is placed on the teacher. In her more recent writings Ladson Billings attempts to make clear that culturally relevant pedagogy is not so much a classroom prescription, but rather a framework from which teachers always lesson plan and instruct (2006). She emphasizes that she does not intend to outline what a culturally relevant class should look like, but is more so attempting to stress how a culturally relevant teacher should always be conscious of academic success, cultural competence,

and sociopolitical consciousness in her practice. Thus, if the teacher is not adequately prepared for this style of teaching, it makes logical sense that the high quality results it has potential to produce will not follow.

Young touches on this in her recent study of an urban school's administrators and teachers struggling to successfully implement culturally relevant pedagogy into their curriculum (2010). Young found that the barriers to the successful implementation were the teachers own biases and low levels of racial/social consciousness, as well as the schools structural make up that made culturally relevant content difficult. Teachers revealed their limitations when expressing lower expectations of the students and their lack of genuinely building on the students' backgrounds when determining what knowledge students should learn. Furthermore, the administration enabled this by being insistent on expecting high achievement by all, but did not encourage critical questioning of the status quo. Instead they continued to emphasize standardized high stakes testing as the ultimate measure of achievement, which only made it more difficult for teachers to be culturally relevant in their lesson plans, when trying to cover the type of material to prepare for the standardized test. Morrison et al. discusses similar issues when describing the disconnect between the constructive pedagogical nature of culturally relevant teaching and our traditionally embedded educational style of a teacher providing direct transmission of knowledge to students (2008). The teachers from Morrison et al., similar to those from Young's study, reported feeling overwhelmed and limited in time in trying to include culturally relevant material in their lesson plans while still needing to transmit standardized test-relevant knowledge to the students. Even the teacher mentioned earlier, who successfully taught classic literature to African American high school students

through a church-like sermon, expressed having difficulty trying to continually come up with new ways to connect topics that are “most remote to them” (Boutte and Hill 2006: 325).

### ***Culturally Relevant Sociology Course?***

Thus it looks like the issues we have are teacher education and the objectives and content of our traditional classroom curriculums. As has been recommended by nearly every proponent of culturally relevant pedagogy, teacher education programs need to contribute by providing future teachers with better preparation for being culturally relevant pedagogues. This imperative is also pertinent to instructors teaching sociology as a high school elective - especially when it is taught in a classroom that includes students from different cultures and marginalized backgrounds. However, even after teachers are successfully trained, it would be beneficial for both teachers and students if schools provided better opportunities for more relevant and socially critical academic content to be offered to urban students.

In regard to this, I believe a course in sociology is unique and provides some special characteristics that make it a lot easier to be a culturally relevant pedagogue without so many impediments. In the next section I will go over what a high school sociology course looks like. When looking at such a course it will become evident that there are some strong harmonious links between the nature of culturally relevant pedagogy and the sociology discipline. While teachers felt overwhelmed trying to interject culturally conscious material to a curriculum that emphasizes other traditional goals, this would not be a problem for a sociology instructor teaching a course that

emphasizes the rigorous exploration of culture and examination of the status quo. The following section will elaborate.

## **The High School Sociology Course**

### ***The AP Task Force***

In 2001 the elected Council of the ASA headed by Caroline Hodges Persell launched a Task Force with the goal of creating a curriculum for an advanced placement (AP) high school sociology course that could also serve as a model for introductory sociology courses in colleges and universities (Persell 2004). According the Task Force, the goal of this course was to “enhance students’ understanding of the social world, increase their motivation and interest in studying the social world scientifically, help them in their postsecondary education and work experiences, with the long-term goal of creating individual and societal benefits” (American Sociological Association 2008c). In 2004 it was explained that the College Board did not intend on granting AP status to the sociology course in the near future, without any further reasoning why (Howery 2004).

Nevertheless, the curriculum and all of its resources that had already been developed was used to introduce a yearlong honors course in high schools. The curriculum was circulated amongst colleagues of task force members, presented at the 2002 ASA Annual Meeting, and piloted throughout the country, including pilots in high schools in New York; Chicago, Illinois; Princeton, New Jersey, and Greenfield, Wisconsin (Keesler et al. 2008)

In addition to the course, the Task Force also developed a website through which teachers, students, and anyone else interested can find a detailed course outline, lesson plans, and links to various additional resources that could be used to compliment the

various objectives of the course (American Sociological Association 2008a). After reading the outline, all of the unit objectives, goals, lessons, and the resources provided, the Task Force looks to have put together a very impressive, well structured course that covers some ideal sociological ground. With this they already set the stage for what a sociology class should generally look like. I will show here a brief sketch of what they created, and will follow it up with suggestions for some changes that could be made to make the class more applicable to an urban classroom open to all students, rather than just those who are “honors” students. The following excerpt is the purpose, goals, and unit outline of the curriculum (American Sociological Association 2008a. See this reference for more in depth details of the curriculum):

*Purpose:*

*The College-Level Sociology course is designed to introduce students to the sociological study of society. Sociology focuses on the systematic understanding of social interaction, social organization, social institutions, and social change. Major themes in sociological thinking include the interplay between the individual and society, how society is both stable and changing, the causes and consequences of social inequality, and the social construction of human life. Understanding sociology helps discover and explain social patterns and see how such patterns change over time and in different settings. By making vivid the social basis of everyday life, sociology also develops critical thinking by revealing the social structures and processes that shape diverse forms of human life.*

*Overall Goals:*

- *Show the relevance and reality of structural factors in social life*
- *Place an issue in a larger context (identify systemic elements; identify stakeholders; list unintended consequences)*
- *Describe, explain, and predict aspects of social problems*
- *Debunk individualistic explanations of behavior and identify social patterns*
- *Recognize the difference between dispositional and sociological explanations*
- *Recognize the difference between empirical and normative statements*
- *Identify and offer explanations for social inequality*

- *Analyze labor force issues*
- *Perform a content analysis of texts or news to identify possible sources of bias*
- *Critique the media*
- *Transform a topic of interest into a researchable, sociological question*
- *Describe the elements of the scientific method in the social sciences*
- *Understand basic elements of an ethical code of conduct for social scientists*
- *Unpack the “causal nexus”, e.g., correlation, time order, elimination of alternative explanations*
- *Interpret descriptive statistics*
- *Evaluate the methodological processes and limits of research (e.g., bias, generalizability)*
- *Critically assess web sites and electronic resources*
- *Set up a data table properly and read and interpret a table correctly*
- *Distinguish levels of analysis*
- *Posit intervening factors and spurious relationships in social life*
- *Show awareness of probabilities and contingencies*
- *Recognize that counterfactual anecdotes do not invalidate sociology*
- *Understand the intersection of biography and history*
- *Take the role of the other*
- *Describe various career trajectories for sociologists at different degree levels; where sociologists work and what they do*
- *Position personal life choices and chances in a demographic context*
- *Compare and contrast one’s own context with those in other parts of the U.S. and the world*
- *Describe the tension between generalization and stereotyping; social forces and determinism*
- *Appreciate the role of human agency in social change*

*Units:*

- I The Sociological Perspective*
- II. Research Methods*

*III. Culture*

*IV. Socialization*

*V. Social Organization*

*VI. Social Inequalities*

*VII. Deviance and Conformity*

*VIII. Social Institutions*

*IX. Social Change*

The above excerpt provides us with a great and valuable set of goals for young people to meet. With that we see what the Task Force had in mind when developing the curriculum. We then see the list of nine units that are covered in the course. As a whole, while the academic emphasis on “systematic” analysis is clear, there seems to be an attempt to balance this with some citizen education also, as is evident in the final course goal that is listed. Overall, this looks encouraging that it would make for a stimulating and thought-provoking course for high school students. Moreover, it has the dimensions for an intellectually invigorating course that could harmoniously be intertwined with the philosophies of culturally relevant pedagogy. Units, such as “Social Inequalities” and “Culture” cover topics related to issues, such, as race and gender relations that students could identify with while explore in new and profound ways they never had before. Goals such as, “show the relevance and reality of structural factors in social life”; “critique the media”; “take the role of the other,” to list a few, are strongly conducive to meaningful and relevant material from which to plan lessons. They also enable the development of a critical consciousness that trains students on how to ask questions about their environment. Furthermore, units, such as “The Sociological Perspective,” which consists of learning sociological framework theories (ie, structural functionalism, conflict theory, etc.), and goals regarding being able to distinguish between normative and empirical statements, and between dispositional and sociological explanations, are more examples

of providing material that not only could instill valuable lessons in young people, but also cultivate the development of mature intellectual ability. Ultimately, teachers could not hold low expectations of their students if they genuinely hope to impart the lessons of this curriculum on to their students.

Another thing that is encouraging about this curriculum is that, in theory, at least, it was developed not only with a focus on being “cognitively engaging for students” through sociological principles, but also on being “more responsive to urban youth” (Keesler et al. 2008: 345). This is a wonderful recognition by the Task Force, and just its acknowledgement says a lot. However, when I look through the course materials I do not really see how exactly they have attempted to do this. This leads me to some recommendations I would make in making the curriculum better suited for a wider audience of students.

### ***Recommendations for Urban Modifications***

The first recommendation involves some of the content and structure of the curriculum, and does not necessarily have to do with only urban youth, but includes youth in general. While I support the inclusion of theory and scientific methods as a means to provide the students with a truly genuine sociological imagination, I still find it important to keep in mind who the audience is and what the past has shown us. As has been shown over several decades, students generally find the scientific methods and theory aspects of the course to be the least interesting and difficult to grasp, and a strong emphasis on these elements has not been well received by them or their teachers (DeCesare 2007a; Greene 2007). As a result, teachers tend to give scant attention to these

areas. Academic sociologists still see the imperative value of students learning these elements, in order to actually remain sociologically grounded when exploring such complex issues. Having both a background in academic sociology and high school teaching, I see the validity in both arguments.

What I would recommend is for “Research Methods” to be moved down to the final unit of the course. The reasoning behind this is that I find it crucial to start the course by getting students excited about what they will be learning. This may not be as important with “honors” students whose academic background suggests that they are more likely to put forth effort in a classroom regardless of the material. However, if this course were to be provided for urban students, beyond those with honors recognition, this is a much more critical crowd to work with. As discussed in the previous section on engagement, many of these students already have low motivation to become academically involved in their classes, and, thus, need to be drawn in immediately to convince them that the course is something worth engaging in. When the first two units consist of the least attractive content for young people, this could lead to a negative first impression that could have a lasting effect.

Nevertheless, students should still learn the research method principles, and while some of it could be sprinkled throughout the year, the bulk of it could best be introduced at the end with two benefits. The first being that students at that point of the year should have a better developed sociological mind frame to approach the scientific rigor of research methods with more competence and confidence. The second benefit is that this could be made more interesting and active by being accompanied by a final research project for students to carry out in their community to end the course with. Again, having

a better developed sociological perspective at this point in the year would make the project more sophisticated than if it were carried out at the beginning of the year. This is just one idea, but the point is that while the scientific methods should be taught, this is something that students could learn more of if they choose to pursue the social sciences in their future. As high school students, they should have a basic understanding of these rules and methods, but not be drilled with them to the point of losing interest; for keeping them intellectually interested should remain the top priority of the course.

As for theory, which is taught within the “Sociological Perspectives” unit, I think it is important to establish an understanding of these frameworks, including: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interaction. These theories will be relevant throughout much of the topics the course covers and, therefore, are important to teach early. There are also exchange-rational choice and feminist theory, which students should have knowledge of. How to go about presenting such concepts to students is something that would take some thoughtful creativity amongst educators. One idea, is to, again, reorganize the order of the current outline and introduce these frameworks as they become relevant throughout the rest of the units, rather than trying to cram understanding of them all at the beginning of the course. Doing it this way could be less overwhelming for the students.

These are the only two areas that I feel the need to recommend structural reconsideration, only because they are the two areas that are both important to include in the course, but especially challenging to teach. They, therefore, require additional attention, especially if they are going to be taught to students who do not have a history of strong academic effort and success. This does not mean these students should not be

held to the same standards of learning the material of these sections, nor that it should be watered down for them, but just that this material could use additional consideration regarding structure and content. This leads to my second recommendation, which is that the course should be explicitly developed from a culturally relevant perspective, and the resources used should reflect this.

When teaching complex sociological frameworks, such as conflict and functional theories, as well as all of the other topics of the course, it is important that they be tailored to the students receiving the material. As discussed in the previous section on culturally relevant pedagogy, this is a heavy task that depends significantly on a teacher's attitude and knowledge. However, as far as this curriculum goes, the foundation is already set for strong culturally relevant content. Sociology as a subject is inherently relevant to all people and, as we can see from the outline, the topics it covers allows the opportunity for students to explore issues in their personal environment that are meaningful to their everyday lives. This is perhaps the reason students who have studied sociology have generally expressed finding the course interesting (DeCesare 2007a). If this curriculum is taught to urban students, the themes are already set, but it is the material with which those themes are filled that will make the course truly culturally relevant. Therefore, there would not be one curriculum that is universally used, but various ones that are tailored to different student populations, while still maintaining a similar essential structure and meeting the same course goals.

I bring this up due to the fact that when looking at the course resources and materials on the Task Force's website, it does not necessarily strike me as being responsive to urban youth (American Sociological Association 2008d). For example, it

provides films such as the PBS documentary, *Merchants of Cool*, for helping students understand agents of socialization, particularly peer groups and the mass media; as well as Michael Moore's 1989 documentary, *Roger and Me*, to help discuss social inequalities. The former film predominantly looks at white suburban youth while the latter's portrayal of Flint, Michigan does not exactly represent what an urban community of color looks like today. These are just two examples, but the point is that a truly culturally relevant sociology course that is responsive to urban youth should use resources that better resemble the background of urban students. For example, media that touches on the same issues as *Merchants of Cool* and *Roger and Me*, but that urban students could better identify with. The fact that all of these resources are provided for teachers is wonderful and a great accomplishment for the progression of high school sociology. Nevertheless, if the Task Force truly intends to be responsive to urban youth, more effort needs to be made in providing urban teachers with better culturally appropriate resources and lesson plan ideas that best suit their classrooms.

### ***Culturally Relative Sociology***

After analyzing culturally relevant pedagogy and the goals and content of the sociology curriculum, we can see how the two complement each other very harmoniously. Sociology is an intellectually challenging course that encourages one to question structures, relations, norms, beliefs, traditions, and so forth, to come to a more in depth understanding of culture and how one's environment operates. This type of questioning of the social order and status quo goes perfectly with culturally relevant pedagogy's element of critical consciousness. The study of the social world allows for

plenty of opportunity for the inclusion of cultural material that is relevant to students. And genuinely exploring these type of questions sociologically and objectively requires a mature cognitive and intellectual ability. Thus, the content of this course is ripe for a pedagogy that consists of developing critical consciousness, cultural competence, and high academic expectations. Furthermore, students from all backgrounds inherently bring to sociology their own cultural capital, which is fully validated in such a course. This helps make the course conducive to constructivist learning, especially if there is no high stakes standardized exam that preoccupies how a teacher organizes the lessons. One sociology professor discussing the importance of teaching sociology to young people to develop their sociological imagination says: “Teaching for critical awareness, teaching for relevancy, and teaching for success, are all bound up together” (Mayer 1986: 256). She makes no explicit reference to culturally relevant pedagogy (considering the year), but the language and ideas she uses when talking about sociology reiterate the common ground it has with culturally relevant pedagogy.

Though the Task Force intends this to be used with advanced level students, I think it would be extremely beneficial for those “lower tracked” students to experience this type of course. A sociology course could make a powerful educational contribution to urban youth if it not only improved on its cultural relevance to them, but if it also made itself more accessible to students who do not have a history of strong academic performance. This can provide them a course that involves various elements they can relate to and engage in, while being held to high intellectual standards. However, this is only if the instructor works with their needs. Thus, providing teachers with resources to assist them in meeting these student needs would be ideal. Ultimately, these

recommendations I am making are not ones that could be met by sociologists, but rather, by educators and teachers who have pedagogical expertise with urban youth - especially low performing ones. Therefore, the ASA could truly enhance the reach of this course by collaborating with these types of educators to help provide high school sociology teachers with better tools for working with urban youth.

I do not mean these suggestions to be interpreted as an attack on the curriculum the Task Force developed. It makes for an exciting course with great potential to interest students and foster their ability to academically question their environment. I only make my recommendations in an attempt to expand the reach of such a promising course to those underserved students who are in crucial need of its benefits. If attention were directed toward the academically unmotivated urban youth students, this course could be pedagogically tailored to innovatively engage them in a way other classes have not been able to do. In the next section I will conclude this essay by running through some final evidence that supports the argument that a high school sociology course is conducive to student engagement, as well as the additional overall value that sociology could bring to the high school curriculum and its students. I will close by reiterating the next steps the ASA should take in order to best direct the potential of sociology today.

## Conclusion

A sociologist could likely tell you various reasons why learning sociology is important. If we turn to some of the literature we can see some evidence of how sociology has had a positive effect on young people. Keesler et al. performed the only assessment of the Task Force's college level introductory sociology course (2008). Because it was not granted AP status, it was instead implemented as an honors course in some high schools, as well as in some undergraduate sociology college departments. Keesler et al. assessed the results of this curriculum on undergraduates who took the course at Michigan State University in the spring of 2006 (the majority of the students were White and non sociology majors). By the end of the semester she found that the course improved students' critical thinking skills, and that the students found it intellectually stimulating. Additionally the students appreciated the way they felt the sociological perspective was useful for them in all of their other classes, as well as in their every day life. While there has not been a study of the effect of this specific curriculum on the high school classes it has been implemented in, it is promising to at least know that the young people assessed received it positively and gained from it the way they did. It speaks to the nature of the course.

Some other positive results that have been reported at the college level have been an increased awareness of the social factors that contribute to inequality outside of individual causes, as well as development of research methods for better understanding class, race, gender, and social stratification (Calderon and Farrell 1996; Garoutte and

Bobbitt-Zeher 2011; Mirsa 1997). An interesting study that observed the impact of two sociology courses taught in prisons found very positive results in which the inmates (students) demonstrated a development of critical thinking skills and sociological imagination to analyze their social worlds and the influence culture and structural oppression can have on individuals (Parrota and Thompson 2011). In responding to their thoughts on the class students said things like: “The sociological imaginations allows you to look beyond a limited understanding,” and, “I know this class was to learn about social interactions, but it gave me a better understanding of myself.” (175). Also, a student thanked one of the teachers saying, “I miss you and your teaching. You brought a sense of normalcy to an abnormal environment for me and I appreciate that” (175). The appreciation that students have for being guided through a sociological exploration of their environments indicates the value this type of learning has for people. While the earlier examples came from college students, which are still significant to our focus, this last one comes from a group of marginalized, largely urban, citizens. To a degree we could make some connections from the way these students received the class, to the way marginalized urban high school students would receive it.

At the high school level there are some reports that describe the impact of sociology courses on students. From DeCesare’s research on sociology courses in Connecticut, instructors who taught sociology responded that they felt the course’s strengths is in its relevance to the students everyday lives, as well as in its ability to help students reduce their own feelings of prejudice and understand the relationships between culture and the individual. (2007a: 59). Furthermore, teachers gave reasons they felt the course is unique within the general curriculum because it covers various topics in the

social world that no other subject directly teaches, yet at the same time “provides excellent background for many other subjects” (59). One thing, I think is worthy to point out, is that the majority of these teachers do not have a background in sociology, so they do not necessarily have an initial disposition to appreciate the course. Therefore, it could be concluded their praise for the course is more objectively based on their experience teaching it. As for the students themselves, in various studies they have expressed finding the course interesting (DeCesare 2007a; Dennick-Brecht 2000; Lashbrook 2001). This last point is extremely significant, in that it helps assure us that high school aged students do take interest, and are, thus, more likely to be academically engaged in a sociology course.

Before ending this essay with my final recommendations moving forward, I would like to show some quotes that have been recorded of sociology teachers over time. The first one comes from a sociology teacher in a rural high school in Ohio in 1920:

*“Pupils discovered that, collectively, they had a great store of valuable information”*

*“For the first time in their lives they became well acquainted with their own social problems.”*

*“They gained confidence is [sic] their own power to do things.”*

*“Emerging from the schools with this preparation, they can enter more fully into the life of their community and the larger commonwealth of which it is a part.” (Buroker 1920: 152).*

Over 40 years later a teacher in Nashville, TN who taught an all black high school sociology class in the 1960’s said the following:

*“I think this was one of the most significant things that has happened in the lives of the students who were exposed to the course. They began to see themselves in society in a way they had not been able to picture themselves before.”*

*“The Negro child probably has the worst problem with his self image of any child in (our) society...And this, in part, helped to account for the extreme interest in how you acquire your idea of yourself, and the importance of it in early development.” (Switzer and Wilson 1969: 350).*

Finally, fast-forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the Connecticut teachers continuing to sing praises of the sociology course:

*“May be the only opportunity students have to have honest dialogue on norms of behavior – socialization.”*

*“The course was an awakening and opportunity as a forum for students to make sense of their world...no other field comes close in a high school curriculum.” (DeCesare 2007a: 59).*

I present these sets of quotes because I feel they are powerful in that they come straight from the people in the classrooms. Their opinions are based off of their direct experiences in watching students engage in sociological inquiry. Moreover, they demonstrate that, despite having lacked widespread secondary school prevalence, when existent, sociology has had a positive influence on students no matter their background or time era. The quote from the all black class is especially pertinent to this essay, and reaffirms the encouraging impact a sociology course can have on marginalized students. Considering this, though we do not know with absolute certainty, it is unfortunate that most urban high school students are likely not having the opportunity to share in such an academic experience.

A sociology course, especially a culturally relevant pedagogically tailored one for urban students, may have potential for academic benefits worthy of acknowledgement – including it being well aligned with principles in the current Common Core standards,

which emphasize researching questions, analyzing non fiction literature, and critical thinking (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010). This is definitely something to be optimistic about, but ultimately I would argue that the gift of learning sociology goes far beyond a classroom and school standards. As has been shown throughout this paper, gaining a deeper and more thoughtful understanding of the mechanisms of the social world, is an enduring ability applicable all through life. I believe students can recognize and appreciate that, and for that reason will choose to become engaged in a sociology course. It goes back to one of the central goals of social studies which is to prepare young people to “make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an independent world” (National Committee on Social Studies 2011).

With all that said, the problem of actually getting sociology courses inside of any high school still remains. Great recommendations have already recently been made regarding the several things sociology needs to do to become more prevalent in secondary schools (Andriot 2010; DeCesare 2002, 2007a; DeCesare and Lashbrook 2004). The purpose of this essay is to include urban students to the discourse of high school sociology. I would recommend that the ASA focus more efforts in providing sociology courses for urban students, and ensuring that it is accessible to all levels of students – from the high achieving to the low. This would need to be accompanied by the ASA partnering with folks who specialize in culturally relevant practice. The culturally relevant pedagogues could help in tailoring the curriculum for urban youth as well as training teachers on cultural relevancy. While there continues to be a struggle in

increasing the prevalence of sociology to a more widespread level, I think the discipline could at least make a meaningful contribution in the lives of underprivileged students who have not generally had the most positive academic experience in school.

In 1955, Bruce Watson lamented all the students who, “will not go on to college but who will go through life without having their perspective broadened and deepened by the sociological point of view if it is not introduced to them before their high school days are over” (DeCesare 2007: 20). This is a fear still worthy of concern over fifty-five years later. The way I see it, if we are going to make efforts at providing students with the sociological point of view, lets try and provide it for those students who can really benefit from better making sense of why society has tended to usually leave them with the short end of the stick. Especially if some or many of these students do not end up in college. We can continue theorizing and making explanations for urban life and inequalities from the ivory towers, but I suggest we invite those actually experiencing urban life to join the discussion. What they can contribute and take out of such discussions can be invaluable and beneficial for all.

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