
“HIGH EXPECTATIONS” DISCOURSE AS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF OPPRESSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR URBAN EDUCATION

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Educational discourse, particularly since the advent of recent educational reform initiatives, has become saturated with a discourse of “high expectations.” One can hardly hope to hold a conversation regarding the problems facing American schools without someone innocently remarking that we *of course* need to hold our students to “high expectations.” For example, among the explicit goals of the Common Core is providing the “high standards” that are necessary for students to “have the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life upon graduation from high school, regardless of where they live.”¹

The paradigm constructed by the Common Core and other recent educational reform initiatives that promote the standardization and measurement of knowledge contains a plethora of assumptions for us to interrogate: achievement means the same thing for all students and can be standardized and measured; the goal of education is for all students to get a job to compete in a global economy; there is one objectively identifiable set of knowledge that leads to success in life (rather than multicultural or pluralistic approaches to education, one group gets to decide what constitutes knowledge); and teachers should not decide what works best for their individual students (Latino students in the South Bronx are no different from white students in rural Georgia).

Setting such issues aside, this paper will focus primarily on what I take to be the discourse of “high expectations” and its pervasiveness in contemporary education reform. In her chapter “Denying Relationality: Epistemology and Ethics and Ignorance,” Sarah Lucia Hoagland describes her notion of “relationality” and how it is bound up with an “epistemology of oppression.” On relationality, she notes:

I am interested in the ways our subjectivities are formed through our engagements with each other, both individually and culturally . . . rather than assume engaged cultures to be autonomous units, and their subjects to be separate, one can understand them as *developing through their engagements*.²

¹ “Frequently Asked Questions,” Common Core State Standards Initiative, accessed May 13, 2015, <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/frequently-asked-questions/>.

² Sarah Lucia Hoagland, “Denying Relationality: Epistemology and Ethics and Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), 97, emphasis original.

Hoagland provides us with some useful examples in order to illustrate her concept of relationality. She notes that the Spanish people did not pre-exist as “colonizers” *a priori*. Instead, they became colonizers through their interactions with, and domination over, other cultures.³ Additionally, Cheryl Harris argues, “the assigned political, economic, and social inferiority of blacks necessarily shaped white identity.”⁴ In drawing upon such examples of relationality and the work of Maria Lugones, Hoagland goes on to explicate two sorts of epistemologies: “epistemology from the logic of oppression” and epistemology from the “logic of resistance.” Here, I will be primarily concerned with the former. According to Hoagland, an epistemology from the logic of oppression results through historical, sociopolitical and economic processes where “ignorance is an everyday strategic practice of maintaining power relations by denying epistemic credibility to objects/subjects of knowledge who are marginalized, written subaltern, erased, criminalized . . . and thereby denying relationality.”⁵

Drawing upon this notion of an “epistemology of oppression,” the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I seek to argue that the discourse of “high expectations” propagated by recent educational reform initiatives operates under an epistemology of oppression by denying the agentive subjectivity of teachers and students, with particularly harmful implications for primarily poor, urban students of color and their teachers. Assuming teachers in urban areas have not always had high expectations for their students, and that outside “knowers” can determine what is best for “others,” an epistemology of oppression is reinforced by denying agency and subjectivity to minoritized—primarily urban—communities. In this framework, outsiders (i.e. policy makers and members of the new governance elite) are constructed as “knowers” at the same time that urban students and their teachers are situated as “non-knowers” or the “known about.” I later contrast the *discourse* of high expectations with various conceptions of the *social psychology* of high expectations. For example, while research exists around the ways expectations can influence people’s behaviors, I am instead focused on the framing of educational discourse and the ways it influences dominant understandings of schools, paying particular attention to the case of “high expectations.” Secondly, I argue that educators must abandon the “high expectations” discourse—language that is largely not our own⁶—along

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 276–91. I would expand this to emphasize that respective racial identities *continue* to relationally shape one another.

⁵ Hoagland, “Denying Relationality,” 101.

⁶ I believe there is ample evidence to suggest that contemporary educational language does not have its origins from within the education sphere. Here, I am thinking particularly of Raymond Callahan’s work on the social efficiency era and the various vestiges of Taylor’s managerialism that still cast a shadow—if not engulf entirely—the

with the baggage of assumptions that accompany it in favor of a paradigm where expectations are defined jointly by educators and students from *within* their communities.⁷ As Thomas Popkewitz notes, “to make the naturalness of the present as strange and contingent is a political strategy of change; to make visible internments and enclosures of the commonsense of schooling is to make them contestable.”⁸ Therefore, I believe if we are committed to constructing alternative, *humanizing* paradigms for public education we must first render the commonsensical nonsensical. We must interrogate the taken-for-granted language we use for discussing teaching and learning in order to understand our own assumptions about education and create space for new possibilities.

“HIGH EXPECTATIONS” IN EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSE

I admittedly risk pointing out the obvious by stating that educational reform discourse is steeped in the language of “high expectations.” This language is traceable at least to the beginning of the standards movement.⁹ For example, the infamous report *A Nation at Risk* declared that “excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries every way possible to help students reach them.”¹⁰ Additionally, the report indicated that “we should expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of their talents and abilities.”¹¹ Every subsequent wave of educational reform and policy has assumed a similar mantle, touting high standards and high expectations as among the key components for school success. For most of us (as educational “professionals,” parents, or even as members of the public), the phrase “high expectations” has likely become one of the many slogans that comprise the white noise of educational discourse.

language we continue to use when talking about teaching and learning. Words like “efficiency” and “effectiveness” are tossed around without thought to their various pedagogical implications, for instance.

⁷ Here, I do not wish to imply that local or “insider” knowledge ought to be assumed to be always superior to “outsider” knowledge. This, I believe, can lead to its own host of problems, namely relativistic understandings of knowledge or the valuing of types of belief systems that deserve interrogation (e.g. racism, sexism, Islamophobia, etc.). Instead, I challenge the assumptions bound up in the discourse of “high expectations” policy, that knowledge must *necessarily* be imposed upon communities by outsiders.

⁸ Thomas Popkewitz, *Cosmopolitanism and the Age of School Reform: Science, Education, and Making Society by Making the Child* (New York: Routledge, 2008), xv.

⁹ Raymond Callahan, for example, may even have made the case that the “high expectations” mentality is traceable to the era of social efficiency of the early 20th century, guided by principles of Taylorism. See Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces That Have Shaped the Administration of Public Schools* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962).

¹⁰ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (April 1983).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

At the 2011 Teach for America 20th Anniversary Summit, Arne Duncan delivered a keynote address to a crowd of alumni, corps members, and various supporters and staff. He shared the story of a chronically failing high school that, once converted into a charter school, began producing remarkable results. After over 20 years of failing to adequately serve students in the surrounding community, the converted charter school, according to Duncan, became a success story. He remarked, “same children, same community, same poverty, same violence, far too many of those students growing up in single parent families, actually went to school in the same building . . . but different adults, *different expectations* made all the difference in the world.”¹² Earlier, in a 2009 interview, the then newly appointed Secretary of Education explained how he managed to be so successful in his tenure in the Chicago Public Schools. He remarked that those students who “had adults who really believed in them and had high expectations, they went on to do extraordinarily well. So we need to really raise the bar for all of us and challenge us all to do more, to work harder and to expect more.”¹³

Achieve, a non-profit partner of the National Governor’s Association and Council of Chief State School Officers involved in the development of the Common Core Standards, issues a yearly report on the status of American Education. In their 2014 report, Achieve touted the importance of the Common Core Standards and their role in raising educational standards. The report lamented the state of education prior to the standards noting that:

states’ failure to set end of high school expectations aligned with the expectations of the real world created an “expectations gap” that tripped up high school graduates—limiting employment opportunities, including entry into the military and competitive career pathways, and leading to high rates of remediation at two- and four-year colleges.¹⁴

In 2007, former president George W. Bush issued a statement in New Orleans on the 2nd anniversary of Hurricane Katrina regarding the role of charter schools in the ongoing efforts to rebuild the city’s schools. Bush can be seen congratulating Kathleen Blanco and Paul Vallas, stating, “that’s the essence of the charter school movement . . .they believe in high expectations and measuring.

¹² “Duncan at TFA20,” YouTube Video, 1:40, posted by “Gary Rubinstein,” June 6, 2011, <https://youtu.be/a-N0uVzMG68>.

¹³ “Interview with New Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan,” YouTube video, 6:30, posted by “U.S. Department of Education,” February 20, 2009, https://youtu.be/igmV6L8Y_hE.

¹⁴ Achieve, “Closing the Expectations Gap: 2014 Annual Report on the Alignment of State K–12 Policies and Practice with the Demands of College and Careers,” January 2015, <http://www.achieve.org/publications/closing-expectations-gap-2014>, 3.

It’s what I call challenging the soft bigotry of low expectations.”¹⁵ This infamous phrase caught significant traction, and has even been taken up by many educational scholars. For example, Jacqueline Grennon Brooks, Andrea Libresco, and Irene Plonczak have argued against No Child Left Behind, but on the ground that it creates a “soft bigotry of low expectations” for *teachers*.¹⁶ Additionally, former presidential candidate Jeb Bush recently addressed Georgia lawmakers, commenting that U.S. schools must hold all children to high expectations if we want them to succeed in a “career landscape that is changing at ‘warp speed.’”¹⁷

Such examples may not seem inherently problematic in the abstract. In fact, there is a substantial body of research surrounding the social psychology of expectations. Shelley Correll and Cecilia Ridgeway note that, broadly, “expectation states theory began as an effort to explain some of the most striking findings of Robert F. Bales’ (1950) influential early studies of interpersonal behavior in small groups.”¹⁸ Later studies have built upon such understandings of expectations. For example, the Pygmalion effect—or Rosenthal effect—is the psychological principal claiming that higher expectations increase performance. Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson first studied the Pygmalion effect in detail in their 1969 research of teacher expectations. In their research teachers were told—of a group of students that were actually academically equivalent—that some students were “bloomers” or high achievers. The study revealed that the teachers demonstrated having higher expectations for the “bloomers,” which

¹⁵ “hurricane katrina two year anniversary 29 august 2007,” YouTube video, 9:15, from a speech televised by FOX News on August 29, 2007, posted by “wesawthat...” October 23, 2012, <https://youtu.be/IrNF86fNGQ8>. George W. Bush’s lead speech writer Michael Gerson has been credited with coining the phrase “soft bigotry of low expectations.” Additionally, Kristen Buras’s scathing indictment of the Recovery School District and its ill-effects on African American children and families based on a decade of research, and the recent passing of the 10th anniversary of the storm, make this example a particularly hair-raising moment of political theatre. See Kristen Buras, *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁶ See Jacqueline Grennon Books, Andrea S. Libresco, and Irene Plonczak, “Spaces of Liberty: Battling the New Soft Bigotry of NCLB,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 88, no. 10 (2007): 749–56; and Eric J. Smith, “Challenging Students through Our Expectations,” *School Administrator* 71, no. 8 (2014): 13–14.

¹⁷ Kathleen Foody, “Bush Says All Students Must Be Held to High Expectations,” *Athens Banner-Herald*, March 20, 2015, <http://onlineathens.com/general-assembly/2015-03-19/bush-says-all-students-must-be-held-high-expectations>. Comments by Arne Duncan, President Obama and former President George W. Bush all indicate that the discourse of “high expectations” is certainly bipartisan, if not ubiquitous.

¹⁸ Shelley J. Correll and Cecilia L. Ridgeway, “Expectation States Theory,” in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. John Delamater (New York: Springer, 2006), 30.

increased their academic achievement.¹⁹ Many scholars today accept the Pygmalion effect and draw upon the work of Rosenthal and Jacobson to better understand teacher expectations and student achievement.²⁰ Recent work in this area has found that, “when members of the group, for whatever reason, anticipate that a specific individual will make more valuable contributions, they will likely defer more to this individual and give her or him more opportunities to participate.”²¹ Correll and Ridgeway note that, on the contrary, the individual with lower performance expectations “will be given fewer opportunities to perform, will speak less and in a more hesitant fashion, will frequently have his or her contributions ignored or poorly evaluated, and will be more influenced when disagreements occur.”²² Such research on the social psychology of expectation theory has significant implications for classroom teachers, and should certainly be considered as teachers critically reflect on their practice. The social psychology of expectations, however, is distinct from and should not be conflated with the *discourse* of high expectations. It is one thing to highlight the importance of expectations as it pertains to individuals’ social psychology, and draw attention to the need to examine how such expectations come to be formed and maintained. It is another, however, to wield a discourse of “high expectations” in order to cover over, or draw attention away from, some of the root causes of problems our public schools face. It is to this issue that I now turn.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE “HIGH EXPECTATIONS” DISCOURSE: IMPLICATIONS FOR URBAN EDUCATION

As Rebecca Rogers has highlighted, “discourses both construct and represent the social world and thus can be referred to as constitutive, dialectical, and dialogic. Discourse is never just an artifact but a set of consumptive, productive, distributive, and reproductive processes that exist in relation to the social world.”²³ So far, I have highlighted some large touchstone examples of the “high expectations” discourse that I see currently constructing the language we

¹⁹ See Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils’ Intellectual Development* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Press, 1968).

²⁰ See, for example, Christine Rubie-Davies, Elizabeth R. Peterson, Chris G. Sibley and Robert Rosenthal, “A Teacher Expectation Intervention: Modeling the Practices of High Expectation Teachers,” *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 40, no. 1 (2015): 72–85; Barbara Romain, “How Can We Help Our Children Succeed? Insights From the Psychological Literature,” *Education* 131, no. 2 (2010): 315–18; and Christine Rubie-Davies, Rhona S. Weinstein, Francis L. Huang, Anne Gregory, Philip A. Cowan, and Carolyn P. Cowan, “Successive Teacher Expectation Effects Across the Early School Years,” *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 35, no. 3 (2014): 181–91.

²¹ Correll and Ridgeway, “Expectation States Theory,” 31.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Rebecca Rogers, “Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis in Educational Research,” in *An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis in Education*, ed. Rebecca Rogers (New York: Routledge, 2011), 6.

use to frame our conversations about schools. In doing so, I risk perpetuating what Terri Seddon warns us against. She reminds us:

Subaltern groups are identified as subject to policy discourse and therefore perform policy effects. The binary construction of the powerful-powerless is lined up with the binary of policy use-policy effect. The effect of the analytical frame is to confirm a story about the power of the powerful and, in the process, fail to properly unpack agency and the space for challenge within policy discourses.²⁴

Despite the agency that individual actors and communities may have and the resistance that does occur, I think we must take seriously the degree to which the hegemonic policy discourse shapes—and even limits the possibilities of—local resistance. The recent parent hunger strike in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) may be one such example. Gaining national attention, at least one dozen parents staged a hunger strike—ultimately lasting four weeks—in an attempt to transform Walter H. Dyett High School into a “green” school, geared toward the STEM subjects despite efforts by CPS to proceed with plans to make Dyett an arts school.²⁵ Jeannie Oakes even came out in support of the parent coalition, citing the plan as commendable due to the fact that it is “evidence based” and includes plans to provide “positive discipline practices,” “more teacher training,” and “expanded programs that help disadvantaged students overcome challenges like poverty and poor nutrition.”²⁶ While I avidly support and admire the dedication and conviction of the parents engaged in challenging CPS and its apparent refusal to acknowledge the needs of Walter H. Dyett and the surrounding community, I hesitate to cast their actions as genuine resistance to the hegemonic policy discourse, which is itself framed by an epistemology of oppression. For example, the local coalition plan to have the high school geared toward STEM subjects (particularly technology), “global leadership,” and a focus on “evidence based” practices all reveal the degree to which the local movement is itself framed by the dominant policy discourse that touts global competitiveness and all-things-STEM as the hallmarks of legitimacy. It perhaps even reveals the degree to which local community knowledge is itself constructed by outsider epistemologies that are oppressive.

²⁴ Terri Seddon, “Knowledge Economy: Policy Discourse and Cultural Resource,” in *Re-Reading Education Policies: A Handbook Studying the Policy Agenda of the 21st Century*, eds. Maarten Simons, Mark Olssen, and Michael A. Peters (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), 260.

²⁵ Lyndsey Layton, “In Chicago, Hunger Strikers Fight for a High School,” *The Washington Post*, August 26, 2015.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

As evidenced by the examples I've provided, I argue that we have reason to believe that the prevailing discourse of "high expectations"²⁷ functions in Hoagland's conception as an "epistemology of oppression" that has particularly troubling implications for urban schoolchildren and their teachers. The imposition of the Common Core and the influence of the new governance elite in reshaping the landscape of cities through charter school reform,²⁸ as we've observed in New Orleans, Chicago, Detroit, and so forth, positioned against a backdrop of discourse and policy that casts urban schools as deficient and in need of rescue from those outside the communities, perpetuate an epistemology of oppression; outsiders are the "knowers," and local communities are the "known about" or "non-knowers." Furthermore, this linguistic strategy seemingly diverts attention away from root causes of urban school "failure," such as inadequate financial investment in public schools.

In urban centers, strategic austerity policies continue to unload the remaining financial burdens of the 2008 crisis onto local municipalities, most notably cutting public school funding while incentivizing charter takeover.²⁹ As Pauline Lipman reminds us, "urban school districts are struggling with lack of resources, poverty, loss of community institutions, persistent racial inequality, and the effects of a legacy of inequity."³⁰ Moreover, Lipman notes,

cities across the U.S. are slashing school budgets, laying off teachers, and closing schools to plug budget deficits—even as they continue taxation policies that protect corporate profits and profits from financial transactions while providing tax subsidies to corporations . . . As education policies intersect with austerity politics, their impact on cities, and specifically low-income communities of color, reaches beyond schools.³¹

Public schools are financially strangled and dragged into the competitive market while being told if they try harder, raise the bar, and have high expectations, anything is possible. Despite Duncan's advice that teachers and schools simply need to "do more, work harder and expect more," this hardly seems sufficient for combating ongoing austerity policies and economic inequality, and borderlines

²⁷ Here my argument extends to encompass various slogans such as "college and career readiness," "no excuses," "raising the bar," etc.

²⁸ See, for example, Kenneth Saltman, *The Failure of Corporate School Reform* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012); and Wayne Au and Joseph J. Ferrare, eds., *Mapping Corporate Education Reform: Power and Policy Networks in the Neoliberal State* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

²⁹ See Pauline Lipman, "Economic Crisis, Accountability, and the State's Coercive Assault on Public Education in the USA," *Journal of Education Policy* 28, no. 5 (2013): 557–73.

³⁰ Pauline Lipman, "Urban Education Policy under Obama," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2015), 58.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

on offensive in light of such structural challenges. Unfortunately, if not ironically, such policies themselves contribute to the desperate conditions in urban public schools, not a lack of “high expectations” among teachers for their students.

Even well-intentioned educators and reformers perpetuate an epistemology of oppression against urban communities by internalizing a discourse that reinforces the notion that urban educational progress will result from the directives of outside knowers. We do not even have to resort to the oft-cited example of TFA’s literal importation of “outside talent” to highlight this point;³² nearly every educator who appeals to notions of “high achievement” is referring to metrics of achievement that are defined and measured by outsiders, illustrating that many educators themselves are victimized by a policy discourse that casts them as not capable or trustworthy of developing a legitimate educational program. However, the internalization of a discourse among teachers, which touts “high expectations” as the sole solution to challenges that extend far beyond the classroom, supports a false narrative of meritocracy and often assumes that such expectations did not exist in students’ communities and schools all along. Furthermore, for those students who are chronically “behind” due to years of underfunded and overcrowded classrooms, high rates of teacher turnover, and issues of poverty, “high” expectations can often be pedagogically *inappropriate* expectations. For example, expecting a recently arrived high school student with minimal English skills to be able to meet all of the mandated expectations for graduation without room for *tailored and appropriate* expectations does little to support the educational process.

While many teachers and educational researchers both implicitly and explicitly operate under the guiding principle of the Pygmalion effect—that high expectations lead to increased performance—this seems more a matter of teacher education than a guiding principle for education policy. Surely, if teachers encourage and support their students, develop meaningful relationships with them, and express genuine belief in their abilities, students are more likely to believe in themselves and take an interest in school. However, we cannot say that the inverse is true: that poor academic performance—where performance is problematically measured by standardized test scores—can be attributed to *low* expectations. This seems to be a primary and erroneous assumption among current architects of educational policy; that if teachers of chronically “underperforming” students simply raise their expectations, which are defined by outsiders—assuming they hadn’t been holding students to high expectations all along—we might address the achievement gap.³³ Such assumptions operate

³² See, for example, Priya G. La Londe, T. Jameson Brewer, and Christopher A. Lubienski, “Teach for America and Teach for All: Creating an Intermediary Organization Network for Global Education Reform,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 23, no. 47 (2015).

³³ Gloria Ladson-Billings, of course, debunks this argument by calling on schools to address the “education debt.” See Gloria Ladson-Billings, “From the Achievement Gap

under an epistemology of oppression by denying teachers their agency to construct appropriate expectations from within their communities, while also codifying in policy an insultingly obvious point—that teachers should have high expectations for their students. Such expectations frame and guide the schooling process without regard to local needs and knowledge. Furthermore, this discourse serves to distract from systematic disinvestment in urban schools by offering increased expectations as a panacea for urban schoolchildren hoping to overcome structural inequities.

My point is not to argue against “expectations” in the abstract, or to reject the idea of holding students to high expectations wholesale. Instead, I seek to interrogate the basic assumptions hidden beneath the everyday language we use to discuss teaching and learning. As Seddon reminds us, “capacities for action are framed by the prevailing order of discourse.”³⁴ I’ve argued that the prevailing order of discourse of high expectations is so insidious that it shapes epistemologies of what it means to teach and to learn, and shapes the discourse surrounding who *knows*. As policy makers frame urban students as in need of high expectations, they simultaneously assert themselves as the “knowers,” while necessarily casting marginalized students and their teachers as the “known about.” Without substantive social, economic, and ethical shifts, the discourse of “high expectations” is at best a generation of platitudes, and at worst, a grossly disingenuous pep talk. We cannot promote authentic educational experiences without authentic structural change, and we cannot promote structural change until we change the way we talk—and therefore think—about education.

to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools,” *Educational Researcher* vol. 35, no. 7 (2006): 3–12.

³⁴ Seddon, “Knowledge Economy,” 261.
