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NARRATIVE

What Hood You From? The Common Core in Detroit

DAVID JAGUSCH

On a cold February afternoon, three teenage girls were on their way home after getting out of school on Detroit's west side. The sun hung low in the sky, giving off the illusion that the ice-covered rooftops were in fact as hard as diamonds, disguising the rot and rubble beneath. It was one of those days where your own breath would freeze your nose hairs, your tongue sticking to your lips each time you tried to lick away the chap. These girls were products of the hoods in which they were raised: they could tell a real nigga from a fluke from a mile away; they knew which gangs controlled which blocks, who ran the traps, where to get what they needed when they needed it, and they knew who and who not to trust. If there was one thing that ghetto living had taught them, it was to always be prepared for the unexpected.

But on this day, even they were unprepared for what was about to happen next. Maybe it was the quickness of the attack, or maybe they were simply doing what all teenage girls should be doing on an afternoon with friends—enjoying life, sharing Instagram photos, and updating their Facebook statuses—but before they knew it, they were surrounded. They said a group of boys, boys in their twenties and older, outnumbering and outmuscling them, forced them into a nearby trap house. They fought back, but it wasn't enough. The sun's red glow was an ominous eye watching the crimes that were about to be committed. The girls said they were thrown to the floor, clothes torn, wrists twisted, arms pinned—and then gang raped.

Still, they fought back, until guns were pulled and pointed at their heads, serving as duct tape to silence their screams. The sun sank below the skyline, no longer able to watch, and if you looked to the horizon, I'm sure it seemed as if Hell itself was radiating from beneath the abandoned duplexes and the burnt-out homes of the city. When each had had his turn, the boys let them go, stuffing their guns back into the front of their pants. One of the three became pregnant.

If she aborts, it'll cost her family two months' rent. She still comes to school, but not as often as she used to. She's talented and a hard worker—social, but capable. When she does come to class, she asks for her missing work and does her best to catch up, but the city took a part of her that day, that day walking home from school, that day with her friends, that day those boys left their mark on her. She'll never be able to catch up to that part of her life that was forever taken away.

These are more than just scenarios. This is real life.

Just this morning a group of male students on their way to my school, some of them in my classes, some not, were robbed at gunpoint, surrendering their phones, their money, and their bus cards. Today is the first day the air truly felt like spring. The guns come out when the weather's nice.

Last year, I had a senior who was polite and who stayed out of trouble; he had good grades in most of his classes most of the time, but he went through periods of inactivity as he got caught up with his friends and his life outside of school. He was raised by his uncle, a father to him, a former middle school teacher and current pastor. They'd butt heads at times, especially around parent-teacher conferences when he came in asking what could be done for his nephew/son's grade to be brought up, but there was an underlying sense of respect and camaraderie between the two of them. They were family. His uncle pushed him and pressed him.

I could often see the frustration in his brow, the creases starting at his hairline and rippling all the way down over his eyelids, but on the day he graduated, those creases vanished, except for those around his mouth, his smile impossible to remove. Uncle and nephew, uncle and son, embraced, and I remember seeing tears in his uncle's eyes as he pushed his thumb and index finger under the brim of his glasses to wipe them away. Together they had achieved success. A month and a half later, my student's uncle—pastor, father, and community activist—was murdered. It was 11:30 on a weeknight; his neighbors in the apartment complex in which he and his family lived were having a

party; he knocked on their door and asked them simply if they wouldn't mind turning their music down. Three bullets entered his body, the pores of the cool grey concrete doorstep soaking up the deep red of his blood, becoming warm with the life that left him.

One of my students posted the following meme on Instagram the other day: "A Nigga's never been able to break my heart because my Daddy did that long ago." If that's not pain, I don't know what is.

A current junior who is in my senior English class, a beautiful young woman whom I've known for the past three years, who could model if she wanted to, and she does want to, is one of the most intelligent students I've come across, and she has a personality that could shatter the armor on the hardest and most sinister of individuals, bringing humor, joy, and comfort to even the tensest of situations. I hate to claim

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favorites, but she's one of mine. She complains about having to do work, but always with a smile and a pleasant little scoff that makes it nearly impossible to be offended. It's her attitude that makes her—she won't even listen to a comment, a statement, or an answer she doesn't like; she'll cut you off mid-sentence and tell you why you're wrong and why she's right. She has an answer for everything, can explain why she feels the way she does, and if you

don't agree with her, you'll be met with an, "Oh well!" and an overwhelming sense that you've been defeated.

When I look her up in the dictionary, I go straight to the word "confidence." I, luckily, have never had a serious disagreement with her, have never had to face her beautiful strength. Sure, we always argue, but it's lighthearted banter, sportive almost, to see who will crack first by turning away laughing and smiling, not willing to show the other that they had won. Recently, we got into it, but this time, it was for real. A sarcastic comment was made, the typical preface to our typical engagements, but it concluded with her packing up her belongings and marching out of my classroom. Later, I found out that her father had been diagnosed with a brain tumor over the weekend. They can't afford the doctor's bills let alone chemo, surgery, and medication. The next day, I hugged her and tried not to cry.

After lunch one day, in one of my senior English classes, a newer student in my class who had only been there maybe two weeks or so, received a call on his cell phone. My first

reaction was to tell him to put it away, that if it was an emergency he needed to step into the hall, to ask my permission, to follow the rules. That was until I noticed the tears flooding down his cheeks, curving around his cheekbones and coming to a point at his chin before soaking the light-grey cotton of his sweatshirt. His brother and his best friend, both students who attended different schools, had just been killed. I took him into the hallway. No one in the class said a word. No one berated him for crying—they all understood. They all had been there at one point or another. A few minutes later, he came back into class, put his hood up, crossed his arms and put his head on his desk, maybe hoping he would wake up and that this was all just a nightmare. After that, he never missed a day of school except for one—the funeral.

One of the best writers I have ever had must retake an entire semester of my class, postponing his graduation date, because he was out of school for so long recovering from surgery, having bullets removed from his abdomen, hip, and leg.

One of the smartest students I have ever had, dedicated in all courses not just those in which she holds interest, a critical thinker always dissecting, analyzing, interpreting, questioning, and applying, is failing my class. She's embarrassed to tell anyone why she misses so much school. At most I see her once a week, but usually it's every other week. Students don't know, but her teachers, we do. Her family is homeless. They stay in shelters around the city, not always able to stay in the same one for an extended period of time, the idea of normalcy on the long list of dreams she has while tossing and turning on her cot at night.

I teach English at an alternative high school on Detroit's west side. Eighty percent of the student body is considered to be "special needs," whether learning disabled, emotionally impaired, or any other label the educational system deems fit to give them. One-hundred percent of students qualify for free breakfast and lunch, which many of them refuse to eat because of its poor quality both in flavor and nutrition. They'd rather eat a few bags of chips and a pop bought from the corner gas station for a few bucks. In the end, it tastes better, and the nutritional values are the same.

Many of my students have children of their own. Many have jobs in order to support themselves and those they live with. Many must wear the same articles of clothing the majority of the week, maybe switching between two shirts and two pairs of pants, because they can't afford to buy an entire week's worth of clothing that adhere to the school dress code. They'd rather take punishment, detentions and

suspensions, for coming to school out of uniform, because that they would rather deal with than facing ridicule from their peers about always wearing the shirt to school each day of the week. Some of the students wear tethers in adherence to their parole.

Many have bedbugs. They crawl through their hair, under their clothes, off of their bodies and into the carpets of the classrooms. Roaches have been seen coming out of student backpacks. Mice scurry through the school's vents, popping up through holes by electrical outlets on the floor, getting into teachers' filing cabinets, chewing through their papers and supplies, leaving behind urine and feces and fur, but the administration has offered us complimentary plastic bins to put our lunches in, so I suppose that counts for something. Fruit flies swarm the classrooms, no one knowing where it is they come from. Even the teachers who refuse to allow food into their rooms, constantly emptying their trash cans and disinfecting their desks and table tops, can't get rid of them. Fleas jump from the carpet, leaving red itchy bite marks on students' ankles and calves.

The population of my school is smaller than the majority of the "normal" high schools in Detroit, but compared to those schools, we have the most fights. Some are in the building, some at the corner bus stop, some in the middle of the street. The students are angry. They're looking for release. It's not always that they're angry at each other, but simply bumping into someone in the hall will be catalyst enough to set that anger off. After everything I just told you, wouldn't you be angry about coming to school too?

I haven't even yet mentioned the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the intended focus of this article. So what do these stories have to do with the implementation of the CCSS in my classroom, in my district, to my students, in the city of Detroit where I live and work? The answer is everything. If you think that you can teach the students of Metro Detroit, the students of Rochester and Troy, the students of Hartland and Brighton, or the students up north in Manistique and beyond—if you think all these populations of students can be taught in the same way, that the CCSS can be transferred from one setting to the next regardless of social, economic, and personal variables that these students carry with them each and every day, and that these differences can be ignored—then, in the words of my student who has never let herself lose an argument: "Uh-uh, honey, you ain't nothin' but wrong."

Why It's Not the Same: The Common Core in Not-So-Common Locations

Students cannot receive the same type of education from location to location if they cannot access their education in identical ways. Accessibility, on multiple levels, is a key issue when teaching in an urban setting such as Detroit. Problem number one: there are no school buses in Detroit. Instead, students are expected to take the city bus, Detroit's only form of mass transportation—if transportation is even the correct terminology, considering that the system is notoriously unreliable. They are given bus cards that allow them to ride the buses for free. However, delays are commonplace. The majority of students at my school catch multiple buses in order to make it to school, some of them living on completely opposite sides of the city.

On good days, which are few and far between, when the buses are running on time, it takes some students two to three hours to get to school. They must be getting on the bus at 5:00 in the morning to make it to school by the 8:00 start time. As a result, my first hour is basically non-existent. Of my roster of 35 students, I average one student who actually makes it to school on time and seven to eight students who make it by the end of class. In Rochester Community Schools, a district where I taught middle school for two years, this would be unheard of. In a suburban school district that could afford bussing, it was unusual for me to have two students absent in one class period, let alone 30.

From this standpoint, comparing the two districts where I have taught, less than thirty miles apart, it's impossible to say that the CCSS can be taught in the same fashion. This isn't to say that the underlying content of the standards changes: the strands and skills are the same, but what works in one community absolutely will not in another. There's a push for collaboration, for example, in the language of the CCSS. But how does collaboration work when there are not enough students in class to form groups? My lessons must differ from those I would teach in a school where the students are there every day. Re-teaching is vital component to all education, but to my daily lesson plans it occurs at a much higher frequency, because every single day there are students in my classroom who were not there the day before and have no idea what was taught or accomplished previously.

This is not an exaggeration. Every single day. Most times it's nearly impossible to have lessons carrying over from one day to the next. In a classroom of 35 students, I may see 20 of them one day, another 20 the next, a completely different

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combination of 20 the day after, and then all 35 the day after that. In our alternative setting, where we face the highest level of behavioral problems and truancy, we are supposed to have only 18 students per class, but we find ourselves with classes of 40-plus.

There is no consistency and no predictability. This lack of routine hinders everything that happens in my classroom. My lessons often become disjointed. Repetition is a necessity, yet also an annoyance for those students who do make it to school every day. Having to listen to their teacher constantly repeat what was done the day before, the entire week

extended piece of text? In Rochester, they have classroom sets upon sets of books that students can read in class and take home. The families can also afford to go out and buy additional texts—say an outside reading book—if the teacher requires. Not DPS and not my students. Those fifteen dollars to buy a book is enough to put gas in the tank and get someone to and from work for the week. We don't even have a library in our school, so forget about classroom sets of books that students can take home with them. And here we come to another accessibility issue that proves why the CCSS cannot be taught identically from location to location and

A High School in Detroit, Now and Then

Image by Detroiturbex

previous, frustrates those who *were* there: come on, let's move on already! It becomes easier to create lessons that do not carry over from day to day and can be taught in isolation.

For an English teacher especially, this can become difficult. I attempt to teach my students anything from thematic units to rules of grammar to essay writing to research methodology. But forget teaching an entire novel. While the CCSS advocates using short texts to teach skills, is it not still necessary to teach students, no matter what career path they choose, to be able to *read* and therefore analyze, interpret, identify—insert whatever CCSS skill you wish here—an

how educational theory and policy has failed in Detroit Public Schools: access to materials.

It's simple. I cannot teach the same content from one location to the next if access to resources is not equitable. The CCSS prescribe that students should be able to analyze and interpret a subject from multiple mediums of presentation, such as print, audio, and visual, a skill that I very much agree with. This skill ties directly into the push for teachers, no matter the subject area, to incorporate as much technology as possible into the daily routine of the classroom, because our world is now a digital one where students must know how to

apply skills in a multitude of formats, no longer just with pen and paper. My school doesn't even have enough of the supplies deemed "standard" (irony, right?), and this is especially true of the technology the district wants our students to be fluent with. If I can't get enough writing utensils and paper, then I know there's no chance of getting books, working audio and visual equipment, and computers with up-to-date software. We do have laptop carts that can be wheeled from one room to another if a teacher wants to use them; however, after one use, no teacher ever desires to see them again.

That is the downside of technology in impoverished schools. While it's supposed to make education more engaging, meaningful, and relevant to the world our students live in, when it is faulty, it becomes a loaded gun cocked and aimed at the heart of each and every one of my students. By the time each student is able to login to their aging laptop, hoping that the network isn't down, assuming that the wireless is functioning, and waiting for the Windows updates to install before and after shutdown, (whether or not the battery hasn't gone out or the track-pad is still working is a completely separate set of worries), the bell has rung and class is over. I do have a Smart Board, just like the teachers in Rochester and Hartland, but it's nothing more than a glorified projector if the computer it's connected to is so out of date its software won't allow me to play videos or listen to audio clips.

I would tell Detroit Public Schools to put their money where their mouth is, but there's no money to be had. Where has it all gone? Each year teachers in our district take another pay cut, lose more benefits, or have to contribute more from their own earnings as funds are allocated elsewhere. Where *elsewhere* is remains a mystery, but it is sure as hell not our students. It's a failure on the part of those who control education, the bureaucrats and administrators at central offices across the country, who claim students are receiving an equal education, an education that is preparing students for the workplace of the digital age, yet they are not providing the equipment necessary for such a learning experience. My students are commanded to become expert pilots when they don't even have a current flight manual or a functioning simulator to train them how to take off.

The language of the CCSS must change from location to location, be it rural, suburban, or urban, therefore nullifying the assumption that effective teaching may be transplanted from one school district to the next. My choice of texts, especially, is completely different now than those I chose to use while teaching in Rochester. While the CCSS *does* allow teachers to use a range of texts to

teach the same skill, we are analyzing the definition of what it means to teach effectively, and it is faulty to presume that one can simply teach the same way from location to location, even if the same strands and skills are theoretically being covered, because this implies that the texts too remain the same from school to school.

For my students who were raped, those who were shot, those dealing with a dying parent because they cannot afford to pay his medical bills, those who share a bedbug-infested mattress with their little brothers and sisters, those who ride the bus for two-and-a-half hours in minus twenty degree weather to sit in a classroom all day where the heat and water don't work (so forget a warm lunch and being able to go to the bathroom), who then go to work the night shift after riding the bus another two and a half hours back after standing along the side of the road for two hours in nothing more than a sweatshirt and pair of jeans, these students will more often than not be unable to get the same meaning out of the same text used to teach in the suburbs, purchased by a school or by parents who didn't need to worry about paying that month's DTE bill.

This isn't to say you cannot find similar problems in other locations—even in the suburbs. It is not my wish to discredit any one individual's social, personal, or economic situations. The fact is that poverty is everywhere. Sickness is everywhere. Tragedy and loss are everywhere. While in Rochester, I had to deal with certain issues that became integrated into the language of my classroom that do not show up as frequently with my students in Detroit. For example, in Rochester, suicide was a concern that needed to be addressed much more often. Again, this isn't to say that suicide isn't a concern in my school in Detroit; it was simply a matter of frequency—the more a topic presents itself, the more it becomes an integral part of the language of the classroom. An effective teacher must pull from the culture and everyday occurrences of the lives of his/her students. This is yet another reason why what works in one location will not necessarily work in the next.

In some districts, because of culture and socioeconomics, it would be deemed highly inappropriate for me to discuss matters such as rape or even sex in general, the pushing of drugs, or gang violence. So while the strategy remains the same—using texts that pull from what students know in order to get them engaged in the learning process—this is not to be confused with turning teaching into a cut-and-paste job that can be applied and replicated from one student to the next, let alone from one district to the next. As educators,

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we are all bakers attempting to create a product that is savory and delicious to eat. Some of us will make cookies, some will make cakes, and others éclairs. But bakers cannot assume that just because they are experts at making decadent pecan caramel pies that they also are experts at making red velvet cupcakes with a buttercream frost.

Let's Start with the Basics

It is ignorance to assume that any two individuals experience life in duplicate ways. Maybe it's getting shot, maybe it's getting raped, maybe it's getting made fun of at school so much you want to end your own life, maybe it's your parents getting divorced, or maybe it's becoming homeless and having to spend each night in a different shelter, getting your food from soup kitchens. Maybe it's an abusive parent, maybe it's having a child of your own, or maybe it's having to spend more hours a day at work than at school in order to help pay for that week's groceries so that your little brother and sister don't have to go to bed hungry. Maybe you have to sell drugs and in turn begin doing drugs to numb yourself from the loneliness, neglect, and overall depression that life causes you to feel. Maybe it's so you can feel something at all.

Regardless of what the situation may present an individual with, the point is clear—education will shatter upon students like a vessel without lightship if the basic needs of the students are not met. If there is one thing I hope my narrative displays, it's that even in Detroit, no two students face identical challenges. Each one of them is unique and therefore the education they receive must also be unique. While location is vital, it's not everything in that the individual must be taken into account, the location being only one of many factors that play a part in what may be coined as “effective” in relation to pedagogy and methodology.

The CCSS will fail if the conjecture continues amongst theorists, proponents, educators, and administrators alike, that an effective education in one location is equal to an effective education somewhere else. The content, the standards, the strands, the overall skills are the same, but one cannot discredit the societal and personal variants that alter our perceptions and receptions of academic processes.

It cannot be presumed that if uprooted, effective teaching can flourish among different educational conditions. We are all of the same earth, but we all grow in different types of soil.

David Jagusch is currently a high school English teacher at an alternative high school in the Detroit Public School system. Before making his way to the high school level, David taught middle school, both seventh and eighth grade language arts, as well as volunteering teaching primary school in one of the largest slums in the world—Kibera—located in Nairobi, Kenya. While in Kibera, he wanted to share his passion for poetry and music, founding the music education program “Kibera Sings” in multiple locations throughout the slum. David lives in Detroit where he spends much of his time outside of school writing about the lives and experiences of those within the city.