

3 “There’s a Lot to Know, and We’ll Learn It Together”

Emancipatory Teaching and Learning at Harlem Preparatory School, 1967–1974

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The road that has the bumps and the rocks and the trees with the thorns must have the ripest fruit and that’s the road I must take.

—John Collins, Harlem Prep graduate, Class of 1968¹

John Bell walked proudly across the makeshift stage of the “hot, muggy Harlem community center gymnasium,” dressed sharply in his blue blazer with the gold Harlem Prep logo embroidery, eager to shake the hand of the headmaster and finally receive his high school diploma (“27 dropouts get diplomas and will enter college,” 1968). “I am bringing myself out of the strain of the doing, into the peace of the done,” he expressed to his fellow students who, only a year before, were out on the streets and out of school. “For I have done so much with so little for so long that now I can do anything with nothing at all.” Bell’s maxim echoed loudly. For the next seven years, hundreds of bright, college-going high school youth—almost all of whom were former high school “dropouts”—repeated this same phrase during their days at Harlem Prep, an independent, privately financed, and tuition-free “community school” that existed in New York City from 1967 to 1974 (Campbell, 2015; Mangum & Carpenter, 1971).² Holding classes in an old supermarket in Central Harlem and supported by funds from philanthropists and corporations, the school’s constant lack of resources and diverse population did not hinder it from sending hundreds of non-traditional students to many highly selective colleges nationwide (Gordon, 1972). Yet, despite this powerful display of Black excellence in the culturally significant Harlem neighborhood, as well as renewed scholarly attention to educational urban history and alternative schools, the story of Harlem Prep and its emancipatory strategies have yet to be uncovered. Led by remarkable educators who believed deeply in Black and brown youth, Harlem Prep became a prominent community effort that sought to reach the increasing youth population who desired—and deserved—a second chance at an education (Dowd, 1968).

This chapter specifically explores the teaching and learning that occurred at Harlem Prep, focusing on the pedagogies and philosophies that allowed

teachers of all ages, backgrounds, and experience levels to cultivate inspiration and achievement among marginalized students. What made teachers' pedagogy so emancipatory in the complicated context of the time period? Why were they effective in educating such a diverse population of young adults? How did teachers' educational philosophy qualify as resistance against the status quo? Harlem Prep teachers' ability to engage students was not by chance; certain pedagogical strategies and deeply held beliefs about teaching served as impetuses that led to academic achievement and personal growth among a population of students "previously labeled 'incorrigible and uneducable'" by the public schools in New York City (Hopkins, 1970). Through recounting narratives and anecdotes of former Harlem Prep teachers and alumni, interwoven with archival sources and other primary documents, and following a brief historical overview and contextualization of the school, this chapter details three main components that contributed to effective teaching: (1) the nonhierarchical student-teacher relationships cultivated by teachers; (2) teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogy (in the context of the time period); and (3) the promotion of love for each other and love for self. The chapter concludes with thoughts on the current state of education: What can educators learn from these teachers—and the Harlem Prep experiment more broadly—that can help us all reimagine teaching and learning in the present? As preeminent American historian Eric Foner contends, there is a "usable past" that can inform the present, and after decades of middling school reform, perhaps it has never been more timely to look at our past to both inspire and maybe even provide a blueprint for what powerful teaching could look like today (Foner, 2007).

Setting the Context: A Need for Harlem Prep

The story of Harlem in the 1960s often begins with an all-too-familiar deficit description: a community in a dire educational state. In 1962 and 1963, acclaimed psychologist Dr. Kenneth Clark and his team of researchers created an organization called Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU) to research Harlem's educational achievement. The HARYOU report, as it was known, described a community in a "historic crisis" due to conditions including "school drop-outs, delinquency, and general hopelessness and despair" (Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Inc., 1964, p. 1, 9).³ Specifically, with regard to education, Clark and his team argued: "The basic story of [K–8] academic achievement in Central Harlem is one of inefficiency, inferiority, and massive deterioration. . . . [T]he further students progress in school, the larger the proportion of them who are performing below grade level" (Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Inc., 1964, p. 166). More recently, historians of education have described how other aspects such as teacher and administrator discrimination contributed to these educational conditions (Lewis, 2013; Perrillo, 2004). Perhaps even more pressing for Harlem parents who wanted to see their children succeed

academically was the fact that, rather shockingly, no high schools existed in Central Harlem. Therefore, whereas the HARYOU report’s statistics describe elementary and junior high schools, it similarly painted a broad, bleak portrait of secondary school achievement. “Less than half of Central Harlem’s youth seem destined to complete high school [elsewhere in New York City],” Clark and his team wrote, “and of those that do, most will join the ranks of those with no vocational skills, no developed talents, and, consequently, little or no future” (Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Inc., 1964, p. 188).

Thankfully, Harlem Prep’s early school leaders knew that these characterizations and future prognostications were far from being preordained. Harlem, a neighborhood with a long, rich history of activism, was ripe for the emergence of a school like Harlem Prep that would join the community’s multigenerational activist tradition.⁴ Eventual Headmaster Edward Carpenter, a long-time educator in Harlem who had witnessed students’ untapped potential, wholly knew that students were regularly pushed out of school by a system that failed them. “A high percentage of drop-outs have high intelligence and in many cases high reading abilities,” Carpenter explained, adding that “many have extraordinary leadership capabilities” which are rarely engaged (“Harlem Prep, 1968 [on founding],” 1968, p. 4). Upon hearing about discussions of a new school in Harlem, Bayard Rustin, renowned civil rights leader and chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, declared his support for starting this “new enterprise,” making clear that Harlem Prep would “demonstrate that the dropout—and the black youth—have the same capacity as the white youth” (Finberg, 1967b). At this conceptualization phase, numerous Harlem Prep supporters wrote similar sentiments about how the school would serve as “a new model [of education] for younger children in Harlem” (Finberg, 1967a).

Harlem Prep was established in this context and for these reasons. The New York Urban League (NYUL), under the direction of local civil rights advocate Dr. Eugene Callender, first began contemplating the idea for Harlem Prep as part of Callender’s “Street Academy” program in late spring 1967 to fill the neighborhood void of no schools.⁵ With an estimate of 70,000 dropouts in Harlem—the “human waste is appalling,” declared the NYUL—Callender and his colleagues wrote that Harlem Prep “would represent more than quality education. It would become a symbol of educational hope” (New York Urban League, 1967b). Harlem Prep would indeed become a symbol of hope—if not potential and triumph—as early school leaders sought to demonstrate the hidden brilliance of the community’s young people.

Overview of Harlem Prep: About the Students and School Philosophy

“Prep School in an Armory Begins ‘Revolution’,” enthusiastically printed the *New York Times* a day after the school’s opening. “These kids are

going to destroy a lot of old myths about education,” added Headmaster Edward Carpenter. “Their potential has been grossly underestimated. They have the ability to change the world” (as cited in New York Urban League, 1967a). Harlem Prep opened its doors on October 2, 1967, at the historic 369th Harlem Regiment Armory on Fifth Avenue—previous home of the acclaimed all-Black World War I air force unit—with only 49 students, eight teachers, and three administrators and staff (“Harlem Prep, 1968 [on founding],” 1968). After a successful first year of Black educational achievement, highlighted by the graduation of 35 men and women who would enter colleges all across the country, Harlem Prep quickly grew (“27 drop-outs get diplomas and will enter college,” 1968; E. F. Carpenter, 1973). By the fall of 1968, Harlem Prep had nearly tripled its initial enrollment and relocated to its permanent location, an old supermarket building on 136th Street and 8th Avenue in Central Harlem (Dowd, 1968). Harlem Prep had also separated from the NYUL, becoming its own incorporated school with a separate board of trustees (Spear, 1968). With the financial backing of some of the nation’s largest philanthropes and corporations, as well as the support of the local Harlem community, the Harlem Prep experiment quickly blossomed—albeit with persistent financial troubles—from a small alternative school to a widely recognized community institution.⁶

Harlem Prep’s most unique characteristic was its diverse study body. Although largely Black of low socioeconomic status, and primarily students who had left New York City public schools, students had a range of different religious beliefs, national origins, and prior experiences (Institute for Educational Development, 1973).⁷ Furthermore, “every major philosophy of civil rights [was] represented—militant, middle class conservative, nationalist, and integrationist” (Gordon, 1972). Finally, even those who had been pushed out had left for different reasons, ranging from having prior drug issues, to being both married and unmarried students with children, to being Vietnam War veterans—approximately 10 percent in 1973—who had been drafted to go serve overseas (Gordon, 1972).⁸ Still other students had consciously left school because they felt marginalized for being interested in Black culture and politics, feeling unwelcome in Eurocentric-focused classrooms where “they were continually forced to conform to a system of values which they had no part in forming” (A. M. Carpenter & Rogers, 1971, p. 275). Or, as Anthony Hart, a 19-year-old Harlem Prep student put it, he and many of his peers left education “not because they lacked brains but because they were disgusted with the public school system” (as cited in Bigart, 1968). Ultimately, as educational psychologist Edmund Gordon wrote in a 1972 report of the school, one characteristic that they all shared was that “for most of them, Harlem Prep represents the last or only chance to continue their education” (Gordon, 1972, p. 5).

In turn, headmaster Edward Carpenter constantly argued that the school’s diversity was its primary strength. He conceptualized diversity—racial but also ethnic, religious, and geographic—as the foundation of Harlem Prep’s

philosophy and the best way to prepare students for a multicultural world. “Even the person with the most contrasting point of view is my friend—better yet, my brother,” wrote James Rogers, class of 1969 (Bey-Grecia, 2015; Standard Oil of New Jersey, 1970). Despite having primarily a Black student body and staff who emphasized a Pan-African curriculum, Harlem Prep did not seek to promote any one strand of Black Power ideology that scholars such as (Rickford, 2016) and others have documented in other alternative schools. Whereas alumni today certainly attest to Harlem Prep’s progressiveness—one former administrator claims that students were “very radical”—Carpenter conceptualized the school’s diversity as a strength (Ahdieh, 2016b). “The time was opportune to test the concept of employing a faculty with diverse racial, religious, and political backgrounds,” he wrote, and “prove to students and community that unity in diversity was workable at Harlem Prep” (E. F. Carpenter, 1973, p. 40).

If the student population was unique, so was the school’s physical space. Operating in a repurposed supermarket, the building was primarily one large open room, where classes were separated with blackboards and partitions; one teacher estimates that there were 20 to 25 quasi-cubicles throughout the building that would be organically arranged by students and teachers each day (Campbell, 2015). Clifford Jacobs (2013), Harlem Prep class of 1973, recalls the “very lively atmosphere,” where he would hear multiple classes at the same time. “The openness of the space reflected the openness of the philosophy of the school,” Jacobs describes. “And it wasn’t cellular, and compartmentalized—nothing was.” Headmaster Edward Carpenter agreed: “The physical structure of school enhances the openness of the school and facilitates communication between students, faculty and administration” (as cited in Ward, 1970). Another alumnus remembers that the physical space fostered “the breathe-ability of the life of ideas” (Nile, 2015). Ultimately, Harlem Prep’s innovative open-space learning concept became enmeshed with school identity and teacher pedagogy.

Finally, outside school walls, Edward Carpenter was adamant about involving community members in the institution and welcoming them to use the Harlem Prep space, particularly considering it functioned, in part, as the de facto public school of Central Harlem. The most obvious realization of Carpenter’s vision was through the school’s public graduation outside on the streets of Harlem. As one Harlem Prep alumnus describes today, the graduation was held outdoors because “Ed [Carpenter] felt that we should make the community aware. . . . He wanted to show the community that we’re educating people and they’re graduating and they’re going on to a higher learning center” (Nile, 2015). A memo written from a Carnegie Corporation officer in 1969 that attended the graduation ceremony best illustrates the joyous scene:

They had blocked off 126th Street for the Harlem Prep graduation so that members of the community could come and listen. And listen they

did—old people sitting on the stoops and peering from the windows of the three-floor walk-ups; and crowds of children clinging to the wire fence around the playground. . . . Students spoke—about hope, and love and learning; of how they had been rescued from narcotics and life in the streets.

(Evan, 1969)

Overall, each of these components of the school—its diverse student body, multicultural educational philosophy, and community vision—were important to teachers as they worked with their beloved students each day.

Teaching and Learning at Harlem Prep

George “Sandy” Campbell was in his early 20s, sporting a large afro and an infectious spirit, when he first walked through the double doors to go teach at Harlem Prep. Sandy, as he was affectionately known by his students and colleagues, had not finished college, had no teaching experience, nor did he even plan on being a teacher—in fact, his foray into education was by semi-random chance. His father, a contractor, was doing renovations on the school and met Headmaster Carpenter, and with Campbell admittedly “floundering” professionally, encouraged him to interview for a teaching job there. After first resisting this surprising suggestion—“I don’t know anything about teaching,” he told his father—he indeed went for an interview with a few of the administrators. Later that afternoon, he was hired. Sandy Campbell would go on to teach a variety of English classes at Harlem Prep for most of its existence, such as courses like “Being and Nonbeing” that allowed students to question their existence through literature, becoming one of the most popular teachers at the school with an innate ability to connect with the young adults in his class (Campbell, 2015).

Conversely, there were certainly older and more experienced teachers such as Dr. Yosef ben-Jochannon, or “Dr. Ben.” Carrying himself with an aura of self-confidence and speaking in a thick Caribbean accent with his Marcus Garvey UNIA button clipped to his shirt, Dr. Ben developed a sort of cult status inside Harlem Prep for his knowledge on ancient African history and his outspokenness about the fact that Africa—not Europe—was the birthplace of civilization. In his early 50s when he started teaching at Harlem Prep, ben-Jochannon had already “emerged as a prominent figure in Harlem, pushing his anticolonial message to its limit,” wrote the *New York Times*, filling local auditoriums and gathering a following as a self-trained Afro-centric scholar (Kestenbaum, 2015). At the Prep, students were not even sure if he held an actual doctorate, but as one alumnus says today, “We didn’t care”—his one-on-one attention, infusion of African culture into all subjects, his passion for knowledge, and flamboyant personality inspired students all the same (Bey-Grecia, 2015).

Campbell and ben-Jochannon were just two of many examples of the eclectic teaching force assembled at Harlem Prep. Teachers were of all ethnicities and religions (purposely sought out by Headmaster Carpenter), including White, Latino/a, Middle Eastern, and Black teachers, along with those of all faiths and from outside the United States. For example, there were White teachers such as John Czerniejewski, a math teacher with a college degree, who was so committed to helping students that he would go onto street corners himself and recruit young people into Harlem Prep (Rothman, 2016). There were many inspiring Black teachers, such as George Simmonds, who was known for speaking about African history on Harlem street corners. Although Simmonds most likely did not have a high college diploma, he was a “powerful” educator and did a “marvelous job” infusing Black history into students’ lives (Ahdieh, 2016b; Bey-Grecia, 2015; Hopson, 2015). Hussein Ahdieh, an Iranian and follower of the Bahá’í faith who immigrated to the United States in his late teenage years, also taught for a period of time at Harlem Prep before becoming an administrator and earning his Ph.D. Young Black women, too, such as Naledi Raspberry, Carolyn Humphries, and Bari Haskins-Jackson, individuals who sought to make a difference in their communities—Humphries was one of the first Harlem Prep graduates—found their way to Harlem Prep as dedicated educators. Finally, three White Catholic nuns from Manhattanville College, dressed in full habit attire, also held a large presence in the school educating students on various subjects. Carpenter indeed tried to “reflect the diversity of the world through the teachers,” and encouraged teachers to include their array of prior experiences in their pedagogy (Lassen, 1971). As previously noted, teachers had various levels of expertise, with credentials ranging from those with advanced degrees to, more commonly, those with little to no teaching experience, including recent Harlem Prep alumni.

Still, despite their differences, these teachers all had one trait in common: they were passionate about working with students and possessed a “sincere belief that every youngster could learn” (E. F. Carpenter, 1973, pp. 35–46). One alumnus explains today that Harlem Prep teachers “were really committed,” and that they “were really fascinated by coming together and developing the whole concept at Harlem Prep, and pioneering and looking at education with a different approach” (Cappas, 2016). Moreover, because Harlem Prep could not compete in terms of public school salaries from the board of education, Carpenter sought out teachers who were more concerned with “serving students” than earning high salaries. Carpenter referred to them as “educational servants,” and that “their behavior gave credence to the name.” He wrote further about how they “displayed humility, patience, compassion, and leadership when needed. It was the teachers who broke through the walls of suspicion set up by the students, and demonstrated to them that the beginning of love was but the absence of hate” (E. F. Carpenter, 1973, p. 44). These qualities undergirded the three

subsequent pedagogical strategies that they employed in their individual classroom spaces.

Breaking Down the Teacher–Student Hierarchy

“As I taught, I learned,” professed English teacher Sandy Campbell, and “as students learned, they taught *me*” (S. Campbell, personal communication, 2010).⁹ The first essential element that contributed toward student success—if not buy-in and trust in their teachers—was blurring the hierarchy between student and teacher. Teachers at Harlem Prep recognized that teachers and students could learn from each other and worked hard to engage students differently than they had (unsuccessfully) been engaged before in their prior schooling experiences. For instance, one student who had struggled immensely at his previous schools and now attended Harlem Prep explained that learning at this institution was the first time in education that he ever could

recall teachers actually being more like mentors. I mean, they all controlled their class, but letting you participate as an equal with them. And not trying to run the class so much as open things up for discussion, open your mind up and collaborate more so than teach.

(Hopson, 2015)

Another alumnus perhaps summarizes this student-teacher relationship best when describing a discussion about Paulo Freire’s (1968/2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

The student is not some empty vessel and the teacher is just going to fill that empty vessel with information. The teacher is also learning from the student—there is a relationship, there is an exchange there, and I think that was part of the philosophy of Harlem Prep where you could challenge your teacher and your teacher would challenge you, and somehow you both learned.

(Jacobs, 2013)

In terms of breaking down traditional hierarchies of intelligence—of whose knowledge had more value—Campbell (2015) concurs when he explains that “I never really taught, I facilitated” and that “there was never a sense of ‘I’m the teacher so I know,’ it was more a matter of ‘there’s a lot to know, and we’ll learn it together.’” Another student agrees: “There wasn’t a hierarchy. . . . [T]here were no egos floating around the place” (Cappas, 2016).

This idea of co-facilitation was key in teachers’ abilities to connect with students. Sandy Campbell (2015) explains that over his nearly six years teaching at Harlem Prep, his fellow faculty members did not see themselves as merely teachers but as “facilitators of the learning process.” Bari

Haskins-Jackson (2017), who was younger than many of her pupils, would agree: “There wasn’t so much of a distinction of ‘I’m the teacher and you’re the student.’ There was a very informal way [that] we interacted. . . . There wasn’t necessarily that heavy divider line.”

What did this look like in practice? Campbell describes how teachers at Harlem Prep understood that there was no one-size-fits-all approach to working with students, and within each lesson, there were shared concepts and ideas that every student, regardless of their perspective, could “key-in on” and/or interpret in different ways while still teaching the same content skills (Haskins-Jackson, 2017). Alberto Cappas, part of the first graduating class in 1967, described how this happened on a daily basis through close “one-on-one attention” from teachers. “If I had a lot of questions, I would have one of the instructors or professors just sit down and really talk to me,” Cappas (2016) remembers. Instruction was “hands-on,” in the sense that teachers were not just providing information but often worked side by side with students—both literally and intellectually—to make sure they learned the material.

Another way this played out in the classroom was through teachers’ careful navigation between students’ varying answers and thoughts with seemingly expert precision. Sandy Campbell and Ann Carpenter, the headmaster’s wife and an administrator who oversaw instruction and curriculum (and also taught a popular creative writing seminar), suggests that students were never wrong—“you could be mistaken,” explains Campbell, “but there was such an embrace there, that if no one agreed with your opinion, that was fine. . . . You didn’t have to walk away feeling you were wrong” (S. Campbell & A. Carpenter, personal communication, 2010). There was a balance between making sure students learned material accurately but in a way that did not connote hierarchy. “It was the purpose of the teachers to be enablers, not persuaders,” wrote Headmaster Edward Carpenter in 1972, as the school was most concerned with “the ability of a faculty member to accept a student without imposing his own personal value system” (E. F. Carpenter, 1973, p. 80, 38). Ann Carpenter further points out that students were “not lacking in intellectual abilities. . . . They were looking for someone to ratify their being, to give them that support on an emotional level” (A. Carpenter, personal communication, 2010). This ratification of self and embrace of students’ thoughts occurred because “students and teachers began to relate to one another as human beings,” according to Headmaster Carpenter. “There was encouragement for the teacher dedicated to humanizing relations in the classroom” (E. F. Carpenter, 1973, pp. 20–21).

Perhaps owing to the blurred lines of hierarchy, classes were often described as being “informal,” and as Carpenter explained, “one important characteristic for successful teaching at Harlem Prep was the ability to be flexible” (“Why Harlem Prep?” 1972). With movable partitions that created different class setups each day, guest speakers who frequently visited the school, and current events that percolated through curriculum, teachers

welcomed the spontaneity that typified the Harlem Prep experience. For instance, math teachers would casually take students to the pools halls to teach lessons—“those weren’t the types of things that were going on traditionally,” explains Bari Haskins-Jackson (2017)—and the husband-and-wife pair of photography teachers once used picture books to help encourage a student who had trouble reading.

Other examples that required malleability on the part of teachers is when they “sometimes let students teach” (“Why Harlem Prep?,” 1972). Surviving documents depict formal programs that were established that purposely trained students to act as teachers in their fields of expertise, such as Harlem Prep’s “Student-Teach-Student” program (“Progress report for Ford Foundation,” 1972). In this program, students would serve as teachers to “help tutor fellow students who are having difficulties in various subjects,” which led to “everyone involved in the program develop[ing] respect for one another” (“Progress report for Ford Foundation,” 1972, pp. 2–3). This program reflected Harlem Prep’s larger philosophy—it flipped the script of traditional power structures in the classrooms and pushed back against the education norms of stratified knowledge and expertise.

Finally, Harlem Prep alumni collectively explain how it was common for teachers and students to be social outside of official school time, frequently interacting late into the evenings after school, hanging out on weekends, or even visiting faculty’s homes (Campbell, 2015; Haskins-Jackson, 2017; Jacobs, 2013). This was aided by the fact that many teachers were often of similar age of current students. To be sure, such close relationships between teachers and students might perhaps be seen as troublesome in today’s society, but these novel relationships at Harlem Prep reflected the school’s anti-hierarchical and familial model. Ultimately, Harlem Prep administrators believed in “restructuring and redeveloping all levels of the traditional conceived secondary school programs,” and this novel way of imagining the teacher-student relationship was certainly central to their vision and, most importantly, to the growth and achievement of the young people each day (Hopkins, 1970).

Teacher Pedagogy and Curricular Relevance

Second, more tangible pedagogical strategies—combined with the diverse course selection—were also essential in teachers’ abilities to engage students. Alumni today tell stories of how teachers always grounded their pedagogy in the lives of students, aided by the fact that many (but not all) of them had grown up in similar circumstances or were alumni themselves. Conversely, teachers who were not from Harlem—teachers like John Czerniejewski—would make special efforts to both immerse themselves in the neighborhood and listen attentively to students’ experiences. “They teach the student to relate the subject matter to his life in a way that is relevant to him as an individual,” wrote outside observer and renowned educational psychologist Dr.

Edmund Gordon of Columbia University’s Teachers College in his assessment of the school (Gordon, 1972, p. 10). Essentially, Harlem Prep teachers crafted lessons and shaped subject matter around the needs of the student because “whatever the word ‘relevant’ meant to the student, the [teaching] staff of Harlem Prep had to bring about a change in attitude so that learning could take on the quality of joy” (E. F. Carpenter, 1973, p. 48).

Today, this approach is often commonly known as Culturally Relevant (or Responsive) Pedagogy (CRP), popularized by seminal scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and many others (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2009). As Gay (2010) explains, CRP relies on “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students,” which caters “to and through the strengths of students” (p. 31). Teachers at Harlem Prep sought out the same goals during the late 1960s and early 1970s before these strategies were codified in the academy. However, unlike CRP today, these strategies were employed by noncredentialed faculty and in a noisy, open-space classroom in one of the country’s most politically charged moments.¹⁰ Thus, this tumultuous time period placed an emphasis on the necessity for teachers to structure lessons around current events and politics of the era.

Students such as Clifford Jacobs vividly describe how the events of the era seeped into classroom discussion:

Everything [at Harlem Prep] spoke to the times, and in addition to draft cards being burned, women were burning their bras, the whole women’s liberation [movement] was coming into full effect. The world was aflame, the world was alive. . . . My friends and I, we all felt a part of that. It wasn’t something that was removed from us, it was something that affected us directly, and I think the curriculum at Harlem Prep, the class discussions, all those things related to what was happening in the world. There was this sense of that everything was relevant, that this was a living, breathing, curriculum.

(Jacobs, 2013)

This idea of a “living, breathing, curriculum” that Jacobs refers to can, in part, be specifically attributed to the teachers—they purposely sought to immerse themselves not only in current events but, most importantly, in students’ lives. Lesson plans would often include discussion about real-life issues pertinent to students from “the streets,” as they put it, such as issues of public housing in Harlem or drug-related events (Lassen, 1971).

For example, teacher Raymond Crawford understood that he needed to make explicit links to the everyday. “I taught math,” Crawford recalls, and “I felt it was my responsibility to make a connection with kids, to let them know that math wasn’t some way out subject, that you could actually use math to figure out things in life, and it shouldn’t be a subject that could not be used at all” (R. Crawford, personal communication, 2010). Naledi

Raspberry, a young English and drama teacher at Harlem Prep, reportedly encouraged students to create a class play depicting their lives while also frequently taking students to the nearby National Black Theater (Ahdieh, 2016a). Without any mandated curriculum or standards to meet other than their own, Harlem Prep faculty were free to cater class curriculum in ways that were relevant to students, one of many factors that led class discussions to be “filled with electricity” (“Why Harlem Prep?” 1972). “We talked about anything and everything [related to current events],” affirms instructor Bari Haskins-Jackson. “We had to be aware of all of those things that were going on around us, because there were things that were happening and they were happening in everyone’s lives” (Haskins-Jackson, 2017).

This relevance, of course, also centered on making sure curriculum did not only relate to students’ lived experiences but to their identities as Black men and women. “Every attempt is made to enrich the young Afro-American to create for him a sense of pride in his African heritage,” asserted Dr. Ben to the *New York Amsterdam News*, “showing his ancestors all the way from antiquity to 1966” (as cited in Willis, 1968). Not only did history teachers like Dr. Ben and George Simmonds—a student fondly remembers how the latter would often take students to the historic Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture—stress the countless achievements of Black people of the world, but math and English teachers also exposed students to notable Black figures in those fields, too (Grinage & Grinage-Bartley, 2017). Teachers like Gaywood McGuire and Duane Jones would expose students to great Black mathematicians and introduce students to iconic thinkers such as James Baldwin and Malcolm X, respectively (Collier, 1968; Willis, 1968).

Most of all, teachers worked to promote students’ agency, helping them chart their own educational paths in both a macro and micro sense. For instance, students had mostly free reign in choosing their classes; outside a required English and mathematics course (ranging from algebra to calculus), students could choose from a variety of elective-like courses such as African history that suited their interests and individual needs (Institute for Educational Development, 1973; Ward, 1970, p. 10). “The students had input,” explains one alumnus. “We could request and suggest what courses would be interesting for us [and courses] for the teachers to teach in” (Nile, 2015). A sampling of courses in 1972 included: Latin America—A Continent in Turmoil; Black Theater in the 1900s; Creative Writing Workshop; Filmmaking; Sculpture; African History; Community Legal Problems; History of Revolution and Social Change; The Third World in International Affairs; Cultural Anthropology; and Human Anatomy (“Why Harlem Prep?” 1972). Of course, classes changed frequently from year to year, and these present only a taste of the eclectic nature of the courses that were taught, each providing “some type of relevance to the [student] population” (Haskins-Jackson, 2017).

In a micro sense, this autonomy also occurred inside the blackboard-partitioned class spaces. The only remaining video documentary of the school explicitly narrates how teachers frequently let students have large say in what was going to be taught. For instance, this included teachers providing lists of books for students to choose from and then giving them autonomy to choose which titles they preferred to read. In other instances, teachers and students collaboratively designed syllabi, and students would often interject between lesson plans with new topics or questions for unplanned discussion. Although teachers would “define the course” and expectations remained high, together, teachers and students would “work out what they hope[d] to accomplish” throughout the course (Lassen, 1971). These goals might have ranged from speaking more fluently, to being able to critically assess pieces of information, to just becoming more knowledgeable about a specific subject for later college study. There was a continual fusion of providing relevant courses and enacting relevant pedagogy that would assuage students’ academic curiosities and broader life goals.

Promoting a Revolutionary Love

Harlem Prep teachers’ pedagogy was ultimately sustained by a more ethereal, if not more amorphous, trait critical to the school’s success: love. Although hard to describe but easy to feel, faculty taught with a love that made their lessons more powerful and their actions more meaningful—they practiced education, as Paulo Freire theorized, as *being* an act of love (Darder, 2017). Despite the racial and economic divisions of the era that encircled students every day, Harlem Prep teachers spoke to points of connection between each other. Love served as an essential undercurrent that redirected students’ justified anger from previous educational experiences into personal growth and academic excellence (A. M. Carpenter & Rogers, 1971, p. 281). In practice, love was typically promoted through two avenues: a love for each other and a love for self (the latter, as students forced out of the public school system, often was the most absent). Contemporary education scholars Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell refer to this notion in the classroom as “revolutionary love”: “a love that is strong enough to bring about radical change in individual students, classrooms, school systems, and the larger society that controls them” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 187). Yet, they ask, “What is revolutionary love?” and “how is it practiced in the context of education?” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 187). For Harlem Prep teachers, they believed that there was a certain “kind of love” that manifested each day at the school, where everyone was “all tied to one another on a universal basis by a strong silver thread of love” (Bey-Grecia, 2015; E. Carpenter, 1969).

Part of this love was the mutual respect that teachers promoted among fellow classmates. Florence Carpenter, the school nurse as well as a health and biology teacher at Harlem Prep for many years, recognized this reciprocal love as an essential dynamic of the school. Carpenter explains that at its core, Harlem Prep worked because of “the warmth and the willingness of everyone there—faculty and students—for us to support each other and help each other when we needed help.” She adds, “I think that was really what Harlem Prep spoke to” (F. Carpenter, personal communication, 2010).¹¹ Aissatou Bey-Grecia, Harlem Prep class of 1971, also describes in earnest how this love manifested at the school, in part, through administrators and teachers’ ability to foster “an atmosphere of respect,” even despite disagreements, no matter the class setting. Bey-Grecia (2015) explains:

It didn’t matter if I was a smarter mathematician or if somebody else was a smarter mathematician, or I was a better dancer. . . . Everybody brought their own thing to the party. And you had to respect what that was, whether it be different or whatever. You know, the Five Percenters, the Nation of Islam, whoever it is, you have to learn to respect that even if you didn’t agree.¹²

To clarify, respect should not be conflated with love. Yet, what this former student describes is that the love students, teachers, and administrators all possessed morphed into a deeply entrenched reverence for each other despite apparent differences. Bey-Grecia (2015) describes how 25 years later, the students who made up the Five Percenters at Harlem Prep—a group that she “had some pretty intense disagreements about in our time”—protected her during a situation of need because of the Harlem Prep connection. She concluded that because of their time together, “we’re family forever” and that she “love[s] all of them” still today. In this way, by cultivating a family like atmosphere, the class spaces operated not just as academic thresholds but as spaces undergirded by love.

Sherry Kilgore, class of 1971, affirms this beautiful school element. Kilgore (2017) not only “fell in love [with] the caring-ness of the teachers and the administration” but with “the way students looked out for each other” inside and outside school walls. Through a pedagogical emphasis on group projects and collaborative learning, combined with a philosophical belief in unity—after all, the school’s African motto “Moja Logo” meaning “unity and brotherhood” was painted on the walls—teachers led students to feel a deep sense of pride when their fellow classmates met success. For instance, student Sterling Nile took inspiration from his classmates, pointing out that “if he could do it, I could do it . . . and [the teachers] teach you that.” Seeing other students succeed gave him “confidence and hope” that he—someone who had doubted his intellectual ability prior to attending Harlem Prep—“could rise to the occasion” and achieve something special

(Nile, 2015). “I thought you were supposed to beat out the guy next to you. Here you feel guilty if a brother has a problem and you don’t help,” asserted Damian Carpenter at the time (as cited in “How to turn on the turned off,” 1971). Albert Cappas (2016) further explains that he “learned from all the students” and that “we all taught each other. . . . [W]e all contributed to our individual growth.” Inserting Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s definition here makes sense; there was a revolutionary love that was contagious and helped spark camaraderie within classrooms. Ultimately, there was a “love of everybody for what they were doing,” particularly teachers, remembers another alumnus, and this love was essential in generating an intimate level of trust that only grew each day (Hopson, 2015).

Perhaps the most striking way that teachers utilized love at Harlem Prep was the way in which they helped students love themselves. Multiple students today credit Harlem Prep not just for their academic preparation and subsequent college enrollment but for instilling an internal belief in their abilities that had been stripped away by prior experiences in education. “People think of the dropout as a loser,” expressed student Anthony Hart to the *New York Times* in 1968, explaining that at his previous school “teachers have no interest in students” (as cited in Bigart, 1968). “Everything was phony. . . . It was like a prison,” said another student to *Newsweek* about her prior school (“I can do anything,” 1968). Such deficit feelings were certainly internalized by students and hampered their motivation to learn, whereas Harlem Prep sought to reverse such notions. Sandy Campbell today explains that

so many of the students came there looking for that environment that embraced them, looking for self-acceptance, and found the kind of family that sent them away, from Harlem Prep. They’d be seeing their community and their country as a family for the first time.

(S. Campbell, personal communication, 2010)

Teachers like Campbell recognized that a familial atmosphere, steeped in self-love and self-belief, was necessary for helping students grow and discover themselves—and ultimately reach their full potential in ways that could not occur at their previous institutions.

“Conscious efforts to build student morale are evident everywhere, for every teacher seems at some point in the lesson to build an esprit,” observed Joshua Smith, a program officer at the Ford Foundation, on his maiden visit to the school in 1970 (Smith, 1970). How were teachers able to help students build this self-confidence? According to Headmaster Edward Carpenter, it was through love—and lots of it. “Teachers have got to have it, right here,” said Mr. Carpenter, placing a chubby hand over his heart,” wrote the *New York Times* in 1968 (as cited in Bigart, 1968). “We love every student who walks through that door,” and Harlem Prep staff “take

the students as we get them, treat them with respect and love and trust.” As a result, Carpenter argued, students then “develop a feeling of respect for themselves, their community, and their fellowman” (“From Harlem to Harvard,” 1969). This promotion of self-love was emphasized in classroom instruction; for example, English teacher Duane Jones worked to “build more self-esteem in his ‘dropout’ or ‘forceout’ students by using writings of black novelists” to help students recognize their own capabilities. Campbell and Ann Carpenter recall instances when parents would wander into school, “almost in a state of awe,” wanting to see how Harlem Prep was able to transform their son or daughter into a confident learner (S. Campbell and A. Carpenter, personal communication, 2010). Periodical accounts suggest that students always knew that teachers at Harlem Prep loved them unconditionally and “believed that they could learn”—a belief that went a long way in promoting their personal achievements (Willis, 1968, p. 6). Notably, both present-day conversations with alumni as well as contemporary documents of the era largely agree with these assessments; both sources are littered with references of teachers building students’ “self-confidence” through active displays of love (Ahdieh & Chapman, 2016; A. M. Carpenter & Rogers, 1971).¹³

Furthermore, these examples hint at how the promotion of revolutionary love, specifically, can not only be a catalyst for personal change but perhaps even empower students to pursue larger social change in the way that Duncan-Andrade and Morrell argue for. “You develop a consciousness,” contends Alberto (Cappas, 2016) today about Harlem Prep. “You wake up and realize there are problems in the world, in society,” and with the help of teachers, “you make that connection.” Cappas and others credit Harlem Prep for developing in them both the internal belief to become active citizens *and* a love for others that inspires them to create positive change in their communities. Although Harlem Prep purposely tried to avoid promoting any particular political ideology, many graduates went on later to become activists at their respective colleges or, just as importantly, dynamic citizens who sought neighborhood uplift in their communities (Bey-Grecia, 2015; Cappas, 2016).¹⁴

Ultimately, with Carpenter at the helm, teachers recognized that previous high school transcripts of their students “did not tell of the hopes, aspirations, and true potential. . . . [T]hey merely defined their assumed limitations” (E. F. Carpenter, 1973, p. 49). Thankfully, teachers did not subscribe to these limitations and used love as the foundation to help students move beyond their internalized assumptions made by others—from the board of education, from the media, from White society—about their abilities. “We don’t do anything anyone else doesn’t do,” concluded Carpenter, perhaps a bit modestly. “We just do it with love” (“How to turn on the turned off,” 1971). And, it is perhaps a testament to this enduring love that many teachers and students still remain close friends today, almost 50 years later.

Placing Harlem Prep and Student Achievement in Perspective

By the time Harlem Prep was absorbed by the board of education in 1974, it had graduated and sent to college—and perhaps fulfilled the dreams of—more than 700 students.¹⁵ The teachers at Harlem Prep certainly played a seminal role in this accomplishment, and their stories of resistance against the commonly held narrative that “dropout” students, and Black and brown students more specifically, could not learn (and or did not want to) should be known. Furthermore, whereas the number of Harlem Prep students who ultimately graduated from college is unknown, by one rough estimate, Harlem Prep graduates dropped out of institutions of higher learning at a lower rate than the national average.¹⁶

Regardless, it remains important to also recognize that despite the fostering of close teacher-student relationships, pedagogical relevance, and love and respect that permeated through the schools—too often referred to as “soft,” if not immeasurable, qualities to policymakers today—Harlem Prep teachers cared deeply about making sure students learned the necessary skills and content knowledge for future success in higher education and in life. Alumni today describe how classwork was rigorous and challenging; teachers wanted “the students to develop a strong educational foundation, and that was their goal” (Cappas, 2016; Grinage & Grinage-Bartley, 2017). “You got what you earned” asserts Frank Berger (2016), a 1969 graduate, and students were treated like adults and not like kids. Berger explains further that there was no social promotion occurring at Harlem Prep and that students took their learning seriously. “You just weren’t there unless you loved it,” asserts another alumnus (Hopson, 2015).

Notably, as many scholars of present-day urban education argue, building student confidence and self-empowerment is essential but so too is making sure students learn the necessary skills for later social mobility (Delpit, 2006; Morrell, 2004). At Harlem Prep, teachers reconciled in their pedagogical philosophy that love, care, respect, and academic rigor could go hand in hand and, in fact, reinforce each other—they could, and should, happen simultaneously. Teacher Florence Carpenter proposed that although “the intelligence belonged to the students and the individuals who came there, I guess what we were there [for], was to allow them to express it” (F. Carpenter, personal communication, 2010) and challenge students to reach “their highest potential,” in the words of Black educational historian Vanessa Siddle (Walker, 1996). The latter seemingly occurred, and the fact that hundreds of students previously without a college future would go on to attend universities in all parts of the country, from large state institutions to Ivy League colleges, validated the efforts of Harlem Prep teachers and staff.

Today, the life success of students is hard to accurately quantify—success, to be sure, is relative to each individual, and Harlem Prep graduates most

certainly have a wide-range of lived experiences. Still, for every Harlem Prep graduate who unfortunately continued to face a life of adversity after graduation, there are also students like Peter Hopson, class of 1971, who at one point in his adolescence faced a dim future inside Rikers Island prison but would later turn his life around. “I feel very strongly that the Prep sort of saved me [and] my life,” Hopson (2015) confidently declares today. “I think [Harlem Prep] was a gift, now that we look back, because it really—we weren’t bad kids but it saved us,” agrees Ajuba Grinage-Bartley and Penny Grinage (2017), 1972 and 1974 graduates, respectively. Albert Cappas (2016), too, who admits that he “would still be in the streets looking for work” without the college prospects afforded by Harlem Prep, declares that the school “left an imprint, every day I think of Harlem Prep—it doesn’t leave my mind.”

Harlem Prep and Teachers Today

Once Harlem Prep lost its independent status, Sandy Campbell left the school to earn his bachelor’s degree and continue his own education.¹⁷ Through a stroke of good fortune and his own test mastery, Campbell successfully enrolled in Harvard University to complete his undergraduate degree (and eventually earn a master’s of education) after partial stints at Fordham University and Long Island University prior to teaching at Harlem Prep. Campbell would then permanently enter the field of education, teaching at a variety of places and in different capacities over the next 40 years, only recently retiring as a literacy coach in New York City, where he spent the last 18 years training teachers (Campbell, 2015). However, despite four decades in education, Sandy Campbell still refers to his initial stint at the Prep as some of the most formative years of his life, both professionally and personally. Harlem Prep jump-started a “whole life of growing and learning,” Campbell recalls upon reflection. “[I was] looking to find my way—and I did, and all of them found their way [too],” referring to his students who have remained his lifelong friends (S. Campbell, personal communication, 2010).

For educators today, Campbell’s story—and that of other Harlem Prep teachers both known and unknown—can hopefully serve as inspiration, if not practical guidance. Campbell and his colleagues approached their teaching posts with a beautiful humility and deeply instilled humanity, both traits that kindled their success in engaging Harlem Prep’s nontraditional learners. Present-day teachers would be wise to take note; the uniqueness of the 1960s and 1970s notwithstanding, unfortunately, students of Color today still continue to largely underperform in schools all across the country and experience many of the same economic and educational challenges (Aud, Fox, & Kewal-Ramani, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Furthermore, in a society where students and teachers increasingly differ among racial and cultural lines, it is timely to consider alternative strategies—to be reminded

of what worked in the past—to approach the ‘teaching and learning’ inside classrooms (Goldenberg, 2014). At Harlem Prep, three of the key strategies that teachers employed included breaking down the traditional hierarchical barriers between teachers and students, crafting lesson plans and strategies that were relevant to students’ lives, and promoting love of each other and love of self in dialogue and in action.

Coming full circle, today’s public discourse on education still frustratingly echoes the narrative of the 1960s and 1970s—a narrative that characterizes students of Color in deficit terms, degrades teacher abilities, and dampens motivation of both teachers and students (Hansel & Pondiscio, 2016; Kumashiro, 2012). This chapter exploring Harlem Prep’s unknown story is one small attempt to offer a historical counter-narrative about how teachers can—and have—affected the lives of students through powerful, emancipatory teaching. After all, as one alumnus proclaims, it was the teachers that were the “key” to students’ success at Harlem Prep (Cappas, 2016). In reflecting about Harlem Prep’s history, Edward Carpenter’s poignant words in December 1972 upon the threat of closure still remain true today: “How a school has been able to graduate 467 students [later over 700], all of whom were dropouts, and place them into college with skills sufficient to enable most of them to survive is a story that should be told” (as cited in Howe, 1972). However, more than 40 years later, this story has still yet to be. By focusing on the teachers and their interactions with students, this Harlem Prep story—one of many that can be told about this remarkable institution—can perhaps provide practical guidance and meaningful inspiration for educators to help reimagine their role in classrooms all across the country today.

Chapter Discussion Questions

1. How can a teacher’s choice to reframe their role as teacher be understood as an act of agency? Examples from the text to explore include the following:
 - a. Change in terminology from “teacher” to “facilitator”
 - b. Not a “knowledge dispenser” but a knowledge facilitator and co-learner
 - c. “Students could be mistaken but never wrong”
 - d. Teachers were “enablers not persuaders”
 - e. “Humanizing relations in the classroom” and “ratification of self and embrace of students’ thoughts”
2. How can the pedagogies discussed throughout this chapter inform resistance to current education policy and the ways in which education (teaching and learning) are conceptualized today?
3. How does love as a radical act of resistance attempt to break down a neoliberal ideology and philosophy of education?

Notes

- 1 Personal communication in a 1968 Harlem Prep yearbook, shared with author by Alberto Cappas, Harlem Prep alumnus.
- 2 The term “dropouts” is problematic and highly deficit oriented. Carpenter, more accurately, referred to these students as “forceouts” or “early school-leavers,” which is in line with the research of contemporary educational scholars who describe students being inequitably “pushed out” of their high schools.
- 3 This report includes statistics about enrollment, dropout and graduation rates, and information about grade-level proficiency in various subjects.
- 4 Although beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to recognize Harlem’s long history of rich educational activism—of which Harlem Prep can certainly be seen as a part. For example, see Biondi (2006), who describes, in part, activism against school segregation in the 1950s. Similarly, see Ransby (2005), who describes the life of activist Ella Baker and her fight for better schools in Harlem. For examples of activism in higher education in Harlem, see Biondi (2014) and Bradley (2009).
- 5 The “Street Academy” program had three parts: one, recruit students off the street into storefront academies; two, place students who progress into an “academy of transition” with a more structured curriculum; and three, have students then progress into a college preparatory school, like Harlem Prep. However, once Harlem Prep disassociated from the NYUL by spring 1968, it no longer served as an official street academy school.
- 6 For an overview of the many supporters of the school that ranged from left-leaning Black activists to White owned corporations, see (Goldenberg, 2016). Harlem Prep built a notable community coalition of supporters that deserves analysis beyond the scope of this chapter.
- 7 The exact percentage of dropouts varied over time, but this report estimated that approximately 80–90 percent of students were dropouts, which includes students with a “general diploma.”
- 8 There were Harlem Prep students, albeit a minority, that were Latino/a, White and of higher socioeconomic status that were not high school dropouts or had purposely left their prior schools to attend Harlem Prep. As the school gained in reputation, it is possible that high-achieving transfer students, and descendants of public figures such as Sammy Davis, Jr. and Duke Ellington, for instance, attended Harlem Prep in larger numbers. Student selection was both an informal and formal process that was a mix of meeting ability-level requirements (i.e., in math and reading) and personal characteristics such as career goals and motivation (“From Harlem to Harvard,” 1969).
- 9 A video interview of Sandy Campbell, Ann Carpenter, Florence Carpenter, and Raymond Crawford, interviewed by Casey Carpenter and recorded by Clifford Jacobs, ca. 2010. This video was provided to author by C. Jacobs and used with permission.
- 10 Notably, although beyond the scope of this chapter, Harlem Prep thus provides atypical examples of CRP in an informal, in-school educational environment over a seven-year longitudinal period—as opposed to CRP research in traditional classroom settings or during out-of-school time in shorter studies.
- 11 Florence Carpenter was only related in name to Headmaster Edward Carpenter through the marriage of a mutual cousin.
- 12 The so-called Five Percenters were an offshoot group of the Nation of Islam who believed in the notion that only 5 percent of the world actually know the “truth”—a truth that certain Black men were gods (broadly and incompletely explained), among many tenets. For a fuller and perhaps more fair representation, see Knight (2008).

- 13 Ahdieh and Chapman (2016) is a recently self-published memoir by Ahdieh, who was an administrator at Harlem Prep, and in the book, he frequently discusses this type of morale building at the school.
- 14 Cappas (2016) explains that he and many of his peers were involved in the rise of ethnic studies program and Black and Latino student unions during this era—both of which were common occurrences of the time. Bey-Grecia (2015) explains that the love she encountered at Harlem Prep inspired her to have that same love for her community—Harlem—where she has raised her children and given back to all her life.
- 15 By the mid-1970s, the national political landscape changed, and by summer of 1973, Harlem Prep was in dire financial straits. With no choice but to close or merge with the New York City Board of Education, Harlem Prep chose the latter. Despite being placed under the Board of Education’s Alternative School division, Harlem Prep gradually ceased to be the same institution and eventually closed due to declining enrollment in 1982 (Anker, 1973; Browne, 1982; Prial, 1974).
- 16 Although Headmaster Edward Carpenter admitted that Harlem Prep’s “follow-up program” was “inadequate,” he recorded that of the 466 graduates from 1967 to 1972, 20 had been confirmed to drop out of school. As Carpenter wrote at the time, “This rate is lower than the national average for leaving institutions of higher learning” (E. F. Carpenter, 1973, p. 123).
- 17 Although some teachers of course stayed, unfortunately, the school’s merger with the board of education signified the end of a meaningful chapter in many of Harlem Prep’s teachers’ professional lives. Because most Harlem Prep teachers did not have certified teaching credentials, they were forced to either obtain one or leave the profession to meet the demands of the board of education—unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, many chose the latter option (“A progress report,” 1975).

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