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## Youth as sources of educational equity:

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### Using photographs to help adolescents make sense of school, injustice, and their lives

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**Abstract:** *In the communities in the United States in which this article's investigations took place high school attendance and graduation rates are amongst the lowest in the nation. This article reports on a photographic inquiry into diverse youths' perceptions of the very institution of school, revealing reasons behind the multi-generational school disengagement represented by these graduation and attendance rate statistics. Relying on visually-based mechanisms with which most of today's students are already proficient, the findings presented suggest that arts-based tools can provide previously inaccessible data on school detachment. More importantly, these methods and mechanisms can also supply insights into what young people believe are the injustices they encounter—in their lives and in school—and how they, their teachers, and the other adults in their schools and communities might respond to these inequities.*

(Figure 1)

**“The Monster”**



This is a picture of my father's oxygen machine. He has emphysema and is on 24-hour oxygen. He was in the hospital during part of my senior year. I missed a few days of school because of it. I didn't allow my grades to seriously suffer, but I had to work very hard to keep the situation from distracting me from school too much....My dad can't go up and down the stairs yet, so he's got a hospital bed on the first floor. Our living room is now the bedroom... We don't have any health care, and we can't afford health care...I can pay for the prescriptions once I start working.

—Lindsay

While Lindsay is now a college junior, she was amongst the approximately 50% of students to graduate from the US city high school where two of this article's authors— Kristien and Jim—co-taught English classes and also initiated a photography and literacy project to address youths' perspectives on school. For teachers, teacher educators, and education leaders working in increasingly diverse schools and with young adults in economically impoverished communities, stories like Lindsay's are all too common. The challenges our students face—including the economic, family, and health issues that often keep them and their peers from focusing on school—require us to question the justice by which these youth are served.

Three thousand students drop out (or are “pushed” out) of US schools every day (Children's Defense Fund, 2008; Joftus & Maddox-Dolan, 2003), and this daily phenomenon translates to a disturbing multi-generational disengagement from school amongst these adolescents and their family and community members. While we as teachers long for students to focus on the lessons we teach, books we use, and school in general, these young people face realities and injustices that demand otherwise, compromising that focus. Lindsay's image and writing illustrate

how opportunities like the photography-focused project on which we report offers youth means to identify and respond to these oppressive realities. In part through this project we have sought to become social justice educators who answer the needs of our students and the injustices they face in their most often impoverished communities (Duncan-Andrade, 2005, 2006) and eschew unconscious and ill-conscious forms of oppressive behavior whereby grand assumptions about student attitudes and backgrounds propagate within the classroom walls (King, 1991).

As a result of asking these young adults to consider, represent, describe, and share their perspectives on school, our project has allowed them to better engage with our classes and remain in and consider options beyond high school. More importantly, our analyses of these adolescents' images and writings suggest that the project is allowing youth to *picture* justice and show us—their teachers—how to *practice* it. The question of how to make schools socially just sites might best be answered by young adults themselves, using arts-based tools and processes with which they are already proficient.

### **Contexts**

We first met and worked with the approximately 150 youth who have been involved with our “photovoice” project (“Through Students’ Eyes”) over the past seven years as their English teachers in traditional and English language learner settings, as literacy specialists in their schools, and as university-based teacher educators supporting student teachers in their classrooms. We have now implemented more than a dozen versions of the project in several settings across the United States, inside and outside of our classrooms. Project participants have included African American, Caucasian, Asian American, and Latino/a young women and men, including many whose first language was not English.

We came to “Through Students’ Eyes” (TSE) with both individual and shared histories and motivations. Jim and Kristien wondered about their mostly African American Midwestern city students’ perspectives on school as they witnessed young adults vanishing even *during* their 9th grade years. And Athene, Marriam, Megan, and Anthony eventually speculated about their English language learning students’ points of view on school for similar reasons. The diversity and disenfranchisement of our students and their families are one of many common elements across our urban and ex-urban US settings. The dropout statistics for the English language

learners with whom Marriam and Megan work—with Kristien, Athene, and Anthony assisting in their classes—in our ex-urban east coast US schools are painfully similar to those in urban centers (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006; Greene & Winters, 2006).

It is to this consistently high rate and these examples of young people being pushed out of school to which our project has responded (Balfantz & Legters, 2004; NCES, 2009). All of our students come from families and communities that for one reason or another have not yet recognized the value of school. Sometimes these youth are the products of multiple generations of high school “dropouts” (or “pushouts”) or they have recently moved to the United States and do not yet know English and may consequently struggle with academics (Anyon, 2005; Ozer, Wolf & Kong, 2008).

While we have worked collaboratively on this project over the years and across multiple sites and schools, our efforts began as the result of an October 2000 crisis in the Cleveland schools where Jim and Kristien then worked. On a fall school day the gymnasium roof at one of the city’s high schools collapsed, injuring three students and stunning the entire region. The building was less than 20 years old and, as a result of this event, all of the district’s schools were evaluated for structural integrity and eventually a \$100 million bond issue was passed to support building renovation.

This structural collapse both sickened and inspired Jim and Kristien, eventually engendering the “photovoice” project (“Through Students’ Eyes”) around which we have been united. This project has been inspired by perhaps the most existential question we as educators might ask: why—even when the buildings around them and so much in their communities so clearly communicate to students that these institutions and youths’ education are such afterthoughts—do these young people even bother to show up for school? Thus, over the past ten years, we have wondered with our students what school means to them and what supports and impedes their attendance and engagement with it.

Our work with these youth has accomplished a number of important goals. Our students have engaged more deeply with school because they are being *asked* rather than told about its value. These young adults have written in more detail than ever before in our classes because they are composing about topics that matter to them and that are based on images they have taken of things that are significant

to them. Furthermore, our students have shown up for school more consistently than we had previously encountered. These young people have shared not just ideas about what school means to them but also information about some of the oppressive factors that they face and what solutions to these injustices might entail. We have seen the power of these arts-based methods for engaging our students and helping them to explore and respond to these injustices, and we have witnessed how arts-focused exchanges with other youth can help them all appreciate school and work toward a more just world.

### **Project and research methods**

While we immediately recognized that these arts-based inquiries about schools' purposes, supports, and impediments could serve as the basis for compelling curricular and research projects in our middle and high school classes, we knew that we could not simply ask our students to answer questions about school's purposes, supports, and obstacles orally or in writing. These youth already struggled to read and write, so we feared that using traditional language arts media would further disengage them. And we also knew that these young adults "got" images in ways that schools rarely appreciated (Chicola & Smith, 2006; Cohen & Rosenzweig, 2005).

Our project was also supported by the fact that missing in most discussions of what makes an effective—and socially just—teacher or school for diverse and disenfranchised students are the voices of youth themselves (Beuschel, 2008; Bridgeland, DiIulio & Morison, 2006; Doda & Knowles, 2008; Marquez-Zenkov & Harmon, 2007; Murrell, 2006). A growing body of literature on young adults' points of view on school suggests that arts-based tools provide insights about adolescents' perspectives that language-centered methods cannot (Cook-Sather, 2009; Erickson, et al, 2007; Ewald, 2001; Rubin 2010) and are useful for engaging students in the deconstruction of repressive school realities (Eldsen-Clifton, 2006; Raggl & Schratz, 2004; Schratz & Loffler-Anzbock, 2004). And youth living in intensified conditions might be the best informants for how school structures can become more just (Ayala & Galletta, 2009; Easton & Condon, 2009).

Informed by these studies, we appealed to broader notions of literacy and our own experiences as arts advocates and photographers for methods that would allow youth to illustrate their perceptions of school. Current concepts of literacy suggest that schools should rely more on "texts" with which diverse students are proficient,

including visual and digital media (Alvermann, 2004; Christenbury, Bomer & Smagorinsky, 2009; Kist, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). These visually-based tools have proven to be highly engaging for seemingly illiterate and detached youth (Morrell, 2007; Streng, et al, 2004; Van Horn, 2008; Williams, 2008) and capable of providing often-inaccessible information about adolescents' perspectives (Kellett, 2009; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009). These insights into diverse youths' literacies evoked the curricular and research tools with which we conducted this project and study.

We utilized "photo elicitation" techniques (Harper, 2005; Pole, 2004; Rose, 2006) with approximately 150 diverse, urban high and middle school students to explore their perspectives on curricula, teachers' pedagogies, and school in general. Our students in each of these settings were economically homogenous groups, but they came from our major Midwestern city's and ex-urban Atlantic coast community's most racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods. We provided participants with digital "point and shoot" cameras and instructed them in the basics of camera operation. These young people worked with us—during in-class, after-school, and summer sessions—bi-weekly for approximately four months to a year, using the photo elicitation process to address three questions with images and reflections:

- 1) What is the purpose of school?
- 2) What helps you to be successful in school?
- 3) What gets in the way of your school success?

Each youth was asked to shoot 25-50 images prior to each of approximately ten project meetings in each site. From more than 10,000 pictures, project participants eventually selected approximately 400 photos as illustrations of these responses and discussed these in 1:1 and small group sessions. Young adults reflected on images based on their own and adult volunteers' insights into the relevance of pictures to the project questions, as well as evaluations of photographs' quality and participants' interest. While Jim and other of these adults had training as photojournalists, most of us were merely committed to engaging youth with this process and to helping them make sense of their school experiences.

We discussed images with participants as a part of the elicitation process—asking questions like "Why did you take this picture?" and "What do you like about this photograph?" We then transcribed youths' initial oral reactions to images

and helped them to edit their reflections on the photos that intrigued them most or that they felt best answered the project questions. Eventually, these young people described these 400 or so images in paragraph-length writings (Zenkov, 2009).

To make sense of this project and these youths' images and writings, we have engaged in an ongoing reflection and data analysis process. For the findings of this article we analyzed the content of these pairs of photographs and writings separately, documenting prevalent and outlying visual and descriptive themes (Creswell, 1998; Harper, 2005; Kress, 2006; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). We then re-considered these topics, looking for what these young adults believed represented injustice in their schools and communities, as well as suggestions about the teacher knowledge and practices and the school structures and curricula that youth believed would be solutions to these injustices.

## Findings

In these images and reflections our students highlighted numerous examples of the inequities they encountered in their lives and school experiences, but they also revealed qualities of teachers and schools committed to serving diverse adolescents and challenging these oppressive realities. These young people depicted school structures that might guide educators toward equity in our classrooms, schools, and communities, and they appreciated alternative methods for *seeing* students' ideas about teachers' roles and practices—including the very processes through which we had guided them with our project. In our analysis of their photographs and reflections it became evident that they viewed as *synonymous* the challenges of and solutions to injustice and to their general school success.

We have organized these findings under two themes—with related sets of obstacles to justice and equity and solutions to these challenges—that we have identified through these arts-based methods and across these settings: 1) the difficulties of seeing and living adult realities; 2) the challenge of focusing on school success amidst paradoxical networks of support. These are inequities and responses to these injustices that these *youth* have identified; we are cautious to note that *we* are not suggesting a deficit perspective on these young people, their families, or their communities. Here we describe and illustrate these themes with participants' images and writings.

**Seeing and living adult realities**

While youth in these urban and ex-urban settings often are *capable* of taking on adult duties and navigating worlds usually reserved for their parents and adult family members, they appreciate that these are tasks and levels of responsibility they should not *have* to assume. *Choosing* to take on such tasks is one thing; being *required* to for the sake of one's own well-being or the well-being of one's younger siblings or adult family members is a justice issue. These young adults have articulated and illustrated through our project how they would like not to be *obligated* to do so and how they would like to be able to focus on more traditional young adult life tasks. Most importantly, they have suggested ways that their schools and teachers might help them to deal with both these issues and with the structures of their lives that make such adult responsibilities the norm.

The youth in our project described not only how they are responsible for the health and health care of their family members—like Lindsay, often worrying about and working to pay for her father's prescriptions—but they provide regular child care for the children of their parents, older siblings, and community members. These young adults spend untold after school and weekend hours taking care of the youngest in their families and neighborhoods, missing out on time for homework, extra-curricular activities, and relaxation with friends. As well, these adolescents often provide this support *during* school hours, so that their adult family members can earn incomes just to sustain their households.

In these ways, our students are learning not just about the economics of child care and the ways in which people earning near the minimum wage are overwhelmed by work and life duties. They are also coming to understand the very adult realities of how to provide child care; they are not offered much training in how to give such care—there just isn't time—but they are expected to feed, change, and provide daily health care for children who are often just a few years younger than them:



(Figure 2)

**“Xavier”**



My little cousin Xavier is like a little adult, he has the soul of an old man in the body of a toddler....Me, I'm the babysitter; I have the responsibility of keeping him safe and happy until his parents are ready to get him. This is a job that takes patience and...work, but what I get out of it in the end makes it worth it. Monday, he destroys the living room. Tuesday, I realize, no feeding him sugar before naptime. By Friday we're working together like clockwork.

Mistakes are made to learn from them,

if I didn't make mistakes what would I learn? Mistakes, no matter how bad they may seem at the time, help me to succeed in school because I constantly learn.

—Amber

Yet, even while these youth are *seeing* and *living* these adult realities, they often remain positive about what they are gaining from these duties.

These young women and men also learn a great deal about the realities of maintaining a home, including the costs involved in doing so. While some might argue that understanding such lessons will help young people later in life because they will understand the economic realities of this world, too often these youth instead learn the fear of perpetually being moved from place to place and of being ever-so-close to being homeless:

(Figure 3)

**“Mobile Home”**



This picture... represents the purpose of school for me: I don't want to grow up to be a homeless person. I want to set a strong and stable foundation for my family and live in a nice wonderful home, that's safe for me and my family.

[T]he way I'm going to start building that foundation is to finish school and go to college. —Eon

Bryon echoed Eon's awareness of homelessness and transience, emphasizing both the difficulties such fears and frequent moves present for his ability to concentrate on school and, again, the positive lessons such challenges represent:

**“Moving”**

Moving is not one of the greatest things in the world but sometimes change is good. When I moved is when I started going to high school. Getting to school resulted in a problem of being late and missing out on new things to learn....School and life is like a jungle where when you are moved from one place to another you must adapt and you experience something new....Moving is all about growing up and maturing using all of what you have learned in school. —Bryon

Even while these young people are witnessing and being called on to take on these adult duties, they have repeatedly revealed how positively they view these duties: they *care* about their families and consider many of their parents' responsibilities to be *family* ones. They have also shared specific ideas for how to

*address* these inequities. Many of their solutions revolve around alternative notions and examples of mentors and how schools and teachers might make space for formalizing new models of mentoring programs, involving both the adults in their lives and these youth themselves as guides.

While teachers and school leaders might make negative assumptions about the roles these adults are playing in young people's lives, the young women and men in our project count on even the adults who are expecting them to take on these mature duties, and who have failed to find their own worldly success, as ideals who can motivate them to pursue financial and personal achievements. Participants in our project suggested that their teachers might bring these family and community members into their classrooms and even make the identification of constructive role models—including those adults who might appear to be expecting our young adults to grow up too quickly—a part of the school curricula. Using an image of his brother, Marcus spoke to the ways in which even a high school dropout could motivate him to achieve in school:

**“Leader”**

This is a picture of my brother and he taught me everything I need to know about school and life....[W]hen it comes down to school and my books, he constantly stays on me and teaches me to do the same for my younger brother....[H]e's the only person that's really been there for me. He got his GED, but he really wants to see me get my diploma....I think kids need role models because they need someone to set the standard on what they could be doing. My brother sets the standard by providing for his girlfriend, my mom, my little brother and me.

—Marcus

Too often we as teachers are looking for models that represent success in *conventional* ways, rather than understanding that these young adults can appreciate constructive lessons in the complexity of mentors' lives. Thus, the injustice of taking on these adult duties might be answered with teachers and schools who encourage these adults to play formal mentoring roles in these youths' lives: many of these adult family members are painfully aware of the fact that they are asking their children—our students—to play these adult roles and, yet, they have few opportunities to guide youth toward making the constructive life choices they must if they want to avoid condemning their own children to this same fate.

The second—and perhaps more compelling—solution to the challenge represented by too many adult duties that youth in our project suggested involved them taking on even a greater responsibility: they wanted to play a formal role in developing these mentor programs themselves. They repeatedly explained that a part of the school curriculum should be the creation and implementation of mentoring programs—specifically for their peers who were facing these excessive adult responsibilities, frequent moves, and other concerns. These young women and men knew that they could both recognize and respond to the issues their peers were encountering, and that schools should make a space for them to design and realize such programs, via credit-bearing classes through which young adults developed multi-media mentoring materials and even led discussions to support their classmates.

### **Paradoxes of support**

While the youth in our project have been cautious not to blame the adults in their lives for the situations in which these young adults find themselves they were clear that they find it an injustice that they are rarely supported by family members, friends, teachers, or communities that know and care about their academic engagement and achievement. The young women and men in our project were wise enough to know that their peers who do attend and achieve in school are provided with many more types of support from their teachers and adult family and community members.

These youth shared how their family members often present very conflicting relationships to school—they almost *simultaneously* distract them from and support their achievement. Kayla's image and description of her father's role in her life speaks to this complexity and to her desire for a parent who could offer a simpler and more consistently supportive perspective:

(Figure 4)

**“What, Kayla, What Do You Want?”**



My father is always telling us about how he wishes he would have graduated from high school. My dad quit school because of his experience in [our] school district. Before that he attended schools in Pennsylvania and that showed him

what it's like to be in a better and more organized school district, so it was very hard for him [here]. When he finally made friends, busing took them away. Both of his parents were taken by the time he was 12, so when his friends were taken too he had no one to turn to for advice or dependency. That's why he dropped out....My dad has had to work multiple jobs for long hours to make ends meet. My dad is a strong person, but he is also tired and withered. I don't want the same thing to happen to me.

—Kayla

Paralleling their concerns about their parents' adult family members struggles to support them with school were the roles these youths' teachers often played. Maria's image and writing illustrate the complexity of these relationships powerfully:

**“He's too nice”**

This is a picture of my homeroom teacher. He looks dorky and everything but he's so nice. My homeroom takes a lot of advantage of him. When it's homeroom everyone comes in talking, yelling, [and] screaming. Everyone comes and talks on the phone, and come and go when they please. He never tells them anything. I don't think he ever will. He's too nice.

—Maria

While many of the young adults in our project were forgiving of teachers who were inconsistent in their support of students' engagement and achievement—as these teachers too often assumed the worst about these young people and their reasons for failing to show up for or find success in school—they knew that they deserved better than teachers who were afraid of students or who failed to call on them or their peers to follow the basic rules of school.

One solution to the injustice of this lack of support and to these adult family members' and teachers' inability to present a well-informed and unconditional advocacy for youths' academic engagement and achievement was for these adults to be open to and even supportive of alternative individuals and networks of support. These individuals and organizations might include both formal and informal roles and structures, from organizations such as “Big Brother/Big Sisters” to the athletic teams on which these young adults were members. Tanaija illustrated and described the ways these people and groups play these supportive roles with a reflection accompanying an image of the Cleveland Browns' season-opening football game:

### “The Game”

During this game, there was a mixture of wet and cold. It was like the weather was playing a game itself over the game on the field. It would rain and then the sun would come out. Then the clouds would come over the field and it would rain again. I joined Naval JROTC because I only had one other choice and that was art class. I'm happy I joined JROTC because it's like a family away from home. I'm surrounded by people who love and care for me. The sergeant major is showing us the path of the right way....He says we should be a mover and shaker and go into college, work full time, or be in the military. In this picture the weather is like other students who are trying to steer you the wrong way. The sergeant major is the light showing the way. My JROTC family protects me from the darkness like the lights in the stadium protects the fans and the players from the darkness. —Tanaija

These youth are calling on their families, teachers, and peers to be aware of the types of support they *are* receiving and that they would like to be able to appeal to with greater frequency. Even when some of the seemingly most logical supports for their school achievement are distracting these young people, they can find alternative individuals and networks if we give them the time and space to do so.

## Conclusion

As teachers and teacher educators working with diverse youth and communities in the US, we are troubled by educational systems that marginalize students and fail to address the achievement gaps between these young adults and their most often Whiter and wealthier counterparts. Clearly, disengagement from school is a justice issue—one we have been attempting to address through the photography-focused project that we have directed for seven years in schools in major cities and ex-urban areas in the US. Through this project, we have also learned that our students encounter numerous other injustices, including the difficulties of living adult realities, of concentrating on school amidst inconsistent networks of support, and of working with teachers and other adults who make grand assumptions about their lives and connections to school.

All of us were frustrated enough with our students' lack of engagement and success that we had virtually nothing to lose by calling on them to inquire about school's purposes, supports, and impediments. And we believed that *asking* our students just might empower them—while using some core literacy skills—so that they might actually find new reasons to show up for and care about our classes. Rather than *telling* youth why our classes, assignments, or school should matter, we have learned that we might better engage them with these assignments and our very institutions if we *ask* them to show us, their classmates, and the broader public what they believe about school—in ways beyond what existing research methods, teacher roles, and pedagogies allow. Our students are the best—and the most often ignored—sources for information that might help us understand how to serve them.

In addition to the findings we have shared above, we consistently encountered youths' laments about the assumptions that they perceived their teachers and other adults making about their relationships to classes and the very institution of school. Both these young adults and their families had too frequently been served by teachers who *demand*ed that they engage with and appreciate school, rather than listen to their concerns about this irrelevance or recognize that school had not been important to them. And unlike many teachers' assumptions, these young people were most often just *reluctant* to participate in school, rather than *resistant* to doing so. The value these youth see for school is not so evident that they will tolerate our inconsistent expectations, our assumptions about their abilities or inabilities in our classes, or our failure to "ask first" rather than take for granted what we know about *why* students are or are not engaging in school.

One answer to this compounded perception might be teachers who allow adolescents to reflect on the relevance of school. Engaging adolescents in these discussions of the importance of school could result not only in teachers and young adults themselves knowing more about students' relationships to school but also serve as authentic literacy opportunities (i.e., chances to read and write about subjects about which youth care *beyond* school). We now know that teachers committed to equity recognize that young adults need these explicit considerations of school and these dialogues with peers and teachers to be given elements of our pedagogies and curricula.

Through the image-focused elicitation processes we have utilized, we have also learned a great deal about our students' identities and preferred methods as writers. The use of youths' photographs shifts the spotlight of the writing drafting process to an external object on which young adults feel safe focusing. Furthermore, the many 1:1 writing conferences in which we have engaged our students seem to eliminate youths' concern about public writing failures. We now try to make space to be *surprised* by young adults' abilities as writers, and we encourage students to remain open to surprising *themselves* with their writing aptitudes.

Finally, our project points to the inquiries in which we are engaging young adults not as *leading* to the best examples of equity in our schools, but as perhaps *the* best example of such equity. By considering the images and ideas of these disengaged adolescents our project is moving debates about social justice-oriented teachers and schools into the arena of youth and empowering them to share their perspectives using the tools of the arts. Our project suggests that we should be *asking* these young people about what *is* valuable in our classes and school, calling on them to articulate this worth, and then paying attention to what they highlight *and* what they criticize. Ultimately, these student-centered, arts-based processes might help to ensure that no school subject matter exists without explicit connections to the highest ideals of justice. Such methods are urgently needed if our schools are to serve as sites of equitable learning *and* learning about equity.



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Education has to deliver for every child, which requires effective monitoring to ensure that all children are in school and that they are learning what they need to know. That is why the UIS, which is the official data source for SDG 4, is developing new indicators on equitable education and learning outcomes. UIS global education database. Population-based indicators, such as out-of-school children and enrolment rates, have been revised for all years using the 2017 Revision of World Population Prospects of the United Nations Population Division. Focus on SDG 4: new indicators and more data available. As social media use is rising among adolescents, the issue of whether this use leads to positive or negative outcomes warrants greater understanding. This article critically reviews the literature related to this important topic. Specifically, we examine how social media use affects social connectedness in terms of three elements of adolescent development: sense of belonging, psychosocial wellbeing, and identity development and processes. Peer group membership and a sense of belonging: Their relationship to adolescent behavior problems. *Adolescence*, 42 (166), 241-263. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17849935>. Nurullah, A.S. (2009). The cell phone as an agent of social change. Youth as sources of educational equity: Using photographs to help adolescents make sense of school, injustice, and their lives. Zenkov. Hate on the rise after Trump's election. *New Yorker*. Okeowo. Reading photographs to write with meaning and purpose, grades 4-12. L. Van Horn. Textbook reignites Mexican American studies flap in Texas. As schools across the country begin to place Ethnic Studies courses on their master schedules, the lack of preparation and education to support effective Ethnic Studies teaching has emerged as a problem. Therefore, the central questions addressed in this paper are: What is Ethnic Studies pedagogy? and What are its implications for hiring and preparing K-12 teachers?