

## Introducing Pre-Texts to Boston Public Schools (BPS) Teachers

**When:** August 26, 27, 29, 2019

**Where:** Boston Teachers Union, 180 Mt Vernon St, Dorchester, MA

*“One day, perhaps, unimaginable generations hence, we will evolve into the knowledge that human beings are more important than real estate and will permit this knowledge to become the ruling principle of our lives.” ~ James Baldwin, *Nothing Personal* (1964)*



Cultural Agents partnered with Boston Public Schools (BPS) to introduce Pre-Texts in elementary and middle school classrooms at the Perry School in South Boston and the Adams School in East Boston. This study—an evaluation of a school-based intervention designed to boost student engagement and literacy using Pre-Texts, an integrated arts-based pedagogy—aims to showcase one pathway for addressing cumulative adversity among urban youth.

This research is conducted as part of a multi-year study of “Multidimensional Inequality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Project on Race, Class and Cumulative Adversity” (a.k.a., The Cumulative Adversity Project), based at the Hutchins Center for African and African-American Research at Harvard University. The Cumulative Adversity Project, led by Harvard University Professor William Julius Wilson, conducts collaborative and concurrent research studies that seek to “yield a broader understanding of poverty and inequality in America, and evidence-based policy recommendations to address it.” The motivation for this overarching initiative is predicated on the fact that the tangle of adversities that are commonly referred to as “poverty” or “disadvantage” often remains opaque or largely misunderstood for the majority of Americans. In order to broaden awareness and understanding, the initiative focuses on a number of concurrent research and demonstration projects that seek to evidence the interlocking processes that perpetuate and prolong disadvantage, especially racial inequality. As such, a focus on academic attainment and school engagement offers a unique opportunity to address an important predictor of persistent poverty.

Operationally, the Cumulative Adversity Project employs a broad framework, whereby a number of unique but inter-related initiatives are implemented concurrently. Similarly, the Project prioritizes the integration of numerous research perspectives and theoretical considerations to allow for a sophisticated and multifaceted analysis of contemporary urban life, one that informs and extends our understanding of cumulative disadvantage and ways to combat it. This study serves as an independent but integral component of the larger initiative.



Over three sessions on August 26th, 27th and 29th, 2019, Boston Public School teachers and principals from the Perry School and the Adams School received 15 hours of initial training in the Pre-Texts methodology. During the training, they read and responded to texts, made art, and planned, reflected on, and discussed the implementation of the practices in the classroom with their students.

In true Pre-Texts style, the first of the sessions started with the creation of beautiful and colorful *cartonera* style cardboard book covers while listening to an excerpt of the text *Nothing Personal* by James Baldwin read by a volunteer reader—this is a tradition from the tobacco factories across Latin America. We then asked questions of the text (ranging from questions on the language, the content, the intent and more). Next, we delved deeper into the text through a fun round of charades, miming parts of the text in groups while others read closely to find the lines being brought to life. Building on the Pre-Texts protocol, the participants then became the facilitators and designed their own lessons and proposed activities to do with the group, which continued in the subsequent sessions.

In the second session, we listened as a volunteer reader read the first chapter of *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, a text that many of the teachers often teach in their classrooms. The new facilitators proposed activities ranging from spoken word and poetry to building with cardboard and making posters with collage and found objects to making rhythm and beats to go with themes found in the text. As always, our activities and sessions ended with a reflection to the question, 'what did we do?' where it was important for each person in the circle to speak *once* before speaking for a second time.

In the third and final session, participants worked in groups or individually to brainstorm how they would incorporate Pre-Texts into their curricular units. They designed sample lesson plans and shared their ideas with the larger group.

Participating teachers will continue to receive weekly support throughout the school year by meetings with certified Pre-Texts coaches. In exchange, participating teachers will be integrating Pre-Texts curriculum activities into their classroom instruction each week. The weekly check-ins with Pre-Texts coaches will be opportunities for participants to receive continued training, reflect on implementation and plan for continued implementation.