STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT
PARTNERS

The Humanities Accelerator Course (HAC) Model: Addressing the Needs of Secondary Students

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Problem Statement

How might we provide a "hard reset[1]" that radically overhauls the 6th- and 9th-grade experience for students so they themselves are centered in their learning? How can we best incorporate culturally responsive pedagogies and research based literacy practices to accelerate the capacities of all students—particularly those who find themselves behind (and far behind) in literacy?

Description of Problem

In the case of public education, there are too many systemwide failures to ensure all students can read, write, and engage in discussion at grade level. A significant portion of this failure is a long history in the United States of schools failing to teach students to read.[2] Not having been taught to read in the early years, students do not magically develop reading skills in later grades. The result is the "Matthew Effect":[3] those lucky enough to have been taught to read in the early grades continue to grow their reading ability, vocabulary, and knowledge base throughout their time in schools while

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[1] Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) I'm Here for the Hard Re-Set: Post Pandemic Pedagogy to Preserve Our Culture, Equity & Excellence in Education, 54:1, 68-78, DOI: 10.1080/10665684.2020.1863883

[2] **Hard Words:** *Why aren't kids being taught to read?* by Emily Hanford
https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2018/09/10/hard-words-why-american-kids-arent-being-taught-to-read

[3] Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy

those denied the opportunity fall further behind the longer they are in school. This failure has a disproportionate impact on students of color.[4]

In today's secondary schools, too few students are able to read grade-level text with any degree of ease or understanding. Secondary teachers will tell you many of their students struggle to read, comprehend, and work with grade-level materials. Assessment data reflects this experience; on the 2019 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Reading Assessment, only 37% of 12th-grade students scored at or above proficiency. This is not just a high school problem—average NAEP reading scores for 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-grade students were all below proficient.[5] The failure to secure reading skills in the early years has meant that a cascading set of problems has accrued to the *students.* Not knowing that the gap is in *opportunity* and not in *ability*, educators separate middle and high school students who are behind in reading from their grade-level courses and place them into intervention programs, tracking, and pull-out support. Students of color and multilingual learners are disproportionately represented in these below-grade-level groups.[6] These pull-out intervention programs have largely failed to produce any accelerated literacy skills for enrolled students.[7] (This failure is largely because such programs try to accelerate students' reading and learning at grade level by giving them below-grade-level materials—a solution that will never solve the problem of being denied the opportunity to read at grade level). Additionally, programs and policies widely used by secondary schools do not provide the social, emotional, and culturally relevant elements students need and deserve.

Proposed Solution

We don't need remedial interventions; we don't need to repeat what has failed for over half a century. We need to abolish what we have succeeded in designing through a decades-long policy of high school tracking: a factory model that segregates students, denies the lowest tracked students access to pathways for emotional, economic, social, and political capital, and undermines democratic collaboration. Schools and their students need what Gloria Ladson-Billings has called a "hard reset." We propose a new way to do 6th and 9th grades with the development of a one-year humanities course aimed at radically overhauling how students experience their entry into middle and high school. It is not a remedial model. It is an acceleration model that offers students a high-quality course anchored in student identity and in developing community, accelerating literacy, and honing criticality. The model is centered on improving the experience and outcomes for students who haven't yet had the opportunity to be literate at grade level. This centering of those students most marginalized is because we know if their experience and outcomes improve, so will everyone else's.[8]

There are two stark differences offered by the Humanities Accelerator Course (HAC) model:

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[4] What the Words Say: *Many kids struggle with reading – and children of color are far less likely to get the help they need* by Emily Hanford https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2020/08/06/what-the-words-say

[5] The Nation's Report Card: Reading Assessment, National Scores, Grades 4, 8, and 12 https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading?grade=12

[6] The Nation's Report Card: Reading Assessment, 2019. National Student Group Scores and Score Gaps, Grades 8 and 12 https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/groups/?grade=12

[7] Baye, A., Neitzel, A., Lake, C., & Slavin, R. (2018). A synthesis of quantitative research on reading programs for secondary students.

[8] The Curb-Cut Effect by Angela Glover Blackwell **https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect**

1. **HAC's intentional, equity-focused structure**. As a course for everybody, not just a subset of the school population, HAC classes cannot be segregated by *any form* of tracking.

2. **HAC's focus on four tenets: identity, community, literacy, and criticality**.Influenced by the work of Dr. Gholdy Muhammad[9], Dr. Zaretta Hammond[10], and Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings[11], the HAC model is designed around a robust set of literacy accelerators that center on honoring student identity and extending it to include being critical members of society. This work is embedded in humanities coursework matched to local and state standards for social studies and English coursework, and is chosen to maximize engagement, reflect cultural relevance, and allow elements of student choice and individualization. Foundational skills support, when needed, will be embedded into these elements rather than pulling students out.

The innovative structure and focus forcefully address growing students' reading skills through engaging and evidence-based means to broaden students' knowledge of self, their belonging in a community and society, their civic rights and responsibilities, and their understanding of human nature.

Design Elements

Course Structure

No Tracking: Critical to the success of the design, implementation, and sustaining of the HAC model is not tracking students in any way. The goal of the HAC model is to provide all students access to and support for rigorous and compelling work. Tracking and segregating students lowers the intellectual and academic content and discourse. It separates and labels students into implicit winners and losers just as they are entering into a new and complex social situation at one of the most difficult junctures of their lives. In any version of the HAC, therefore, the classes must be heterogeneous in structure; students of varying abilities and with different previous experiences in schools must be present in order to create a nourishing and welcoming community for students. Such a structure also takes direct aim at the racist policy of tracking students through high school course assignments. This means tracking students by old records of academic performance or anything else must be discarded and the HAC model must be instituted separate and apart from any tracking (whether *de facto* or *de jure*).

Multiple Class Periods (or sustained minutes): The HAC model is structured with the luxury of time, covering two core subjects to substantially increase time and attention to student needs. A team of ELA, History-Social Studies, ESL, SPED, and paraprofessional teachers would team or co-teach a group of multi-ability students for this extended block of time. Assuming a three-period course, the first two periods can be carved out of time already allocated to ELA and social studies courses. The table below represents the distribution of time and work over this multiple class period.

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[9] Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy.* Scholastic Inc.
[10] Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students.* Corwin, a SAGE company.
[11] Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

English Language Arts	History-Social Studies	Third Period
Course materials and instruction focused on building identity, community, literacy, content knowledge, and criticality through a focus on grade-level humanities content.		*Extend humanities course materials and instruction to build identity, community, and content knowledge, and to give opportunity to build research and needed reading/language skills.*

The third period—personalized for each student in the class—must be carved out of existing time (reading periods, intervention periods, study hall, or electives).

The multiple subject and sustained length of the course will:

- Increase teacher support to allow students to study core academic content in depth, strengthen their ability to communicate and work with others, and receive the targeted interventions required.
- Allow teachers and students to develop the strong relationships that are so important as students enter this next stage of their academic life. Students will be in the company of peers and adults who come to know them well, opening the door to authentic relationships and extending opportunities for learning in a coherent, deep way.

Course Tenets

The four tenets described below represent essential elements of the Humanities Accelerator Course model to which instructional practices and materials must be aligned. They are interdependent and will have multiple points of crossover.

Identity	The first of the four core tenets of this course is identity, which Dr. Muhammad names as being composed of "who we are, who others say we are (in both positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be."[12] The instructional materials and practices honor that identity is intersectional, layered, and evolving. The instructional materials and practices make clear that academic frustrations are not due to any lack of student ability, and they support students to identify themselves as successful learners. The course creates space for students to affirm, cultivate, challenge, and develop their own identities such that they become capable readers, writers, and speakers who can confidently negotiate the world.
Community	The second of the four core tenets of this course is the idea of establishing an authentic learning community in which all students feel a sense of welcome, belonging, and psychological safety. In the context of this course, community includes the relationships, classroom environment, and practices that together serve to promote individual and collective learning and growth. Community must be intentionally and explicitly developed to strengthen student understanding of their identity and identities of others, cultivate criticality, and build literacy knowledge and skill.

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[12] Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literature.* Scholastic. p. 67

Literacy	The third of the four core tenets of this course is the idea that literacy is a life skill, and all students are capable and deserving of developing reading, writing, and speaking that will serve them throughout their whole lives. Students will learn to read to ask and answer questions about texts, both what is on the page and what is omitted. Students will develop their lens for understanding and questioning whose stories are told—and whose stories are not told. Equally important is building knowledge through study of topics grounded in both state social studies standards and student identities and interests. As a result, students will strengthen their understanding of their identity and identities of others, cultivate criticality, and foster community. In the context of this course, literacy is defined as reading, writing, and speaking at grade level, with sufficient, individualized, and personalized support designed around each student's individual needs.
Criticality	The final core tenet of this course is the idea of criticality, which is defined as reading texts (including print, visual, etc.) with an understanding of how power, oppression, racism, and equity impact society. Content and tasks of the course are oriented towards a critical lens, providing the structure and space for students to engage authentically in work that identifies and interrogates power and privilege in service of anti-oppression and anti-racism. Students will engage as socio-politically conscious members of their communities, with the power, skills, intellect, and curiosity to actively engage in issues, groups, topics, etc. that matter to them in a way that makes the world more just, liberated, and joyful.

(For a more detailed description of these Literacy Accelerators, see Appendix A.)

Humanities Topics

The content of the course—the humanities topics and units students move through—must serve dual purposes. The first is plain: to meet required state social studies content standards where the HAC is adopted. The second is more dynamic and complicated: to stimulate student interest by connecting literacy and social studies learning inside of school to the course tenets. In this way, the course has the opportunity to be something different for students than previous work, making the content and course readings tools of empowerment and relevancy rather than marginalization and irrelevancy. Students in the course will explore content that provides access to an expansive diversity of experiences, including authors who speak with voices like their own. In short, such a course must offer multiple text types and topics to embrace and center a diversity of experiences and identities. In this way, selected course topics will be geared to local choice and student interest. In places where curriculum is already in place, this will require an audit or analysis of existing materials in order to adapt or modify as needed to meet course requirements. The HAC Unit Analysis Template can help facilitate this process.

The personalized learning block in the third period allows students to choose subtopics that matter to them, further engaging students in the work of the course and empowering students to become active members of their school and larger communities. This personalization element is also where additional foundational skills support will be provided to those students who need it. Every student will have an independent learning block so no one will know who is reading at an 11th-grade level

and who is reading at a 4th-grade level. All students will be getting what they need in the context of what all are studying. The [Third Period Framework](#) can support developing this block of time.

Important Enabling Conditions

In order for this multi-credit humanities course to take hold and become an accepted and valued part of the school ecosystem, schools interested in piloting this model should have a solid commitment to several important enabling conditions, including:

- **Motivated school leadership** that believes all students deserve to and can learn at a college- and career-ready level.
- **Well-trained and energized teachers** who believe that students can close their literacy gaps, and show it through what they say and do.
- **Political backing at the school and district level** to create school schedules that allow for multiple class periods while maintaining students' pathways to college.
- **Initial monetary outlays** for modifying, purchasing, or creating suitable materials, and for recruiting and training teachers, including coaching in the science of reading.

For educators seeking guidance on how to implement a HAC model, the [Notes on Implementation](#) might be helpful.

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