

## **Corner Rock--The Phoenix of Park Falls: A Social Justice Action Venture for Project-Based Learners**

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*Abstract:* This action project demonstrates teaching in an alternative educational setting using an interdisciplinary, learner-led experience that engages students in social change. (All student names are pseudonyms.)

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Chitter-chattering as they swing open the glass door, skateboards under arms, and backpacks strapped tight, Jason and Paul quickly greet Sam and Emily with high-fives.

“Hey, whatsup!” Jason and Paul say, nearly simultaneously as they slide into the booth with Sam and Emily, backpacks ditched to the floor in a heap next to the seats.

“We’re just having a Pepsi while we wait for our Littles to get here,” says Emily. “Littles” are Hannah and Josiah, two 8th graders that Sam and Emily tutor in math and reading for 30 minutes every Tuesday and Thursday. Once they finish their session, Sam and Emily treat their Littles to a quick game of checkers and a vanilla ice cream cone from the soft-serve dispenser.

“Cool,” says Jason. “We’re poppin’ in on our way home from school for some foosball and a Mountain Dew. Zek and Brian should be here any minute.” These four boys, regulars at The Phoenix, spend hours each week playing foosball and organizing tournaments for high schoolers and community members as club fundraisers. Part of the group responsible for re-inventing the old Corner Rock Boys’ and Girls’ Club, they furiously protect this much-needed hangout for all their fellow high schoolers, right down to scrubbing the toilets.

They aren’t alone. Next to the booth, Mandy and Jasmine sit on the couch with a hodgepodge of cardboard signs, wide-ruled paper filled with notes, and open computers.

“What do ya think about hiring Jason Fish to DJ the Dance-athon?” asks Mandy as she grabs a red marker from the plastic coffee can serving as a bucket.

“Absolutely,” exclaims Jasmine. “If he’s booked already, we could try John Benetti, the guy who did my brother’s wedding. He just lives across the river. Had really cool music, too.”

“Yeah. Good idea. I’ll call Fish first then Mr. Benetti if I have to. Let’s hurry up with these posters, so we can join the kids in the back building Pompeii. Well, not literally. I guess Mrs. Channing just got back from Italy, and she got to walk on the ancient streets of Pompeii. Can you imagine? She’s helpin’ a group with their model and answering questions about it.”

“Hey look,” says Jasmine. “The BART bus just pulled up to drop off some kids. I wonder if they’re here for the Pompeii model or maybe they’re joinin’ the kids headed out to Wintergreen Park for a hike.” To be continued...

### **Rise of the Phoenix: Introduction**

The Chequamegon School District in northern Wisconsin, consolidated in 2009 (the former Park Falls and Glidden districts), joins two communities located 20 miles apart, in two different counties, and with the Butternut School District right in the middle. Our buses travel through the Butternut district when they go between the Park Falls and Glidden campuses. The Glidden campus has K-3 and middle school (6-8), and the Park Falls campus has 4YK-5, the high school, and Class ACT Charter School. Park Falls and Glidden are small rural communities, with Glidden being the more northerly of the two. Immersed in 858,000 acres of public forest land, hundreds of lakes and waterways, and other recreational opportunities, Park Falls and Glidden are sparsely populated areas of the beautiful Northwoods, with State Highway 13 joining southern Wisconsin to northern Wisconsin and dividing these two communities in half. Park Falls boasts that it has just two stop lights, which arrived only a decade ago. Both communities rely mainly on tourism, although there are local manufacturing and medical facilities, the school

district, and many service-focused employers. According to the U. S. Census Bureau's 2012-2016 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Estimates and Community Facts, Park Falls has an estimated population of 4,056, while Glidden has 494. There are also many smaller communities in outlying areas whose children attend Chequamegon, making bus rides and family transportation sometimes as much as 45 minutes one way.

According to this same survey, the median age in Park Falls is 52.9 with 89% of its residents having received a high school diploma, while Glidden's median age is 45.5, 84% of whom are high school graduates. The median income for Park Falls is reported to be \$41,504 with 14.9% of the population below the poverty level, while Glidden's median income is \$31,000 with 10.7% of the population below the poverty level. Specific to families with children under 18, the U. S. Census reports that 23.5% of Park Falls families live below the poverty line, and for those households headed by females alone, 34.5% live in poverty while raising children. For Glidden families with children under 18, the U. S. Census Bureau reports that 21.1% of all families live below the poverty line, and for those households headed by females alone, 35.3% live in poverty. This means that, while being predominantly middle-aged communities, about one-fourth of both communities' families served by our District (Park Falls 23.4% and Glidden 21.1%) live below the federal poverty line. Also, about one-third of these Park Falls below-poverty families are headed by women alone, also raising children. The same is true of Glidden. This is a significant number of families with limited resources who live in communities with limited resources because of both geography and low income. In the end, these families rely heavily on the school district (and by extension the community) to provide social-emotional and academic support for their children, such as safe gathering places.

### **Purpose and Importance**

While my research did not include current support our communities offer these families, I will, however, focus this action project on the adolescents of these marginalized families and participation in their community (Witt, 2017). In addition, through Freirian-style dialoging, this project will educate citizens and students in marginalization factors such as stereotypes and lack of awareness of unwelcoming

actions toward teenagers and the teenagers' unawareness of the ramifications of their unwelcome public behavior (Freire, Ramos, & Macedo, 2016).

Engaging Class ACT students in this project will take them “outside of the classroom and into activist spaces ... to engage their immediate needs for social change through political action that is not regulated by school-based interests” (Bishop, 2017, p. 377). It will explore, for community members and officials as well as student-learners, a destructive contradiction prevalent in our communities: “All our young people leave after graduation and never return. How can we get them to come back or to stay?” The adolescents say, “There are no places to hang out. This town is boring, and they don't like us. I can't wait to get out of here.”

According to Freire's emancipatory pedagogy, teaching and learning are relevant, critical, and transformative so that learners are empowered to overcome irrationality, domination, and oppression. To do this, teachers implement an inquiry-based (problem-focused) approach to learning that engages learners in their world and incorporates their lived experiences in such a way that they have the courage to “change the social order” (McLaren, 2017, p. 72). In addition, teachers not only treat difference as human variation, as Anderson (2017) suggests, but they also call upon the learners to draw from their lived experiences in order to address diverse perspectives in solving problems or attacking oppression and domination (p. 479). In the end, learners are creative, innovative people who collectively challenge dominant culture rather than mindlessly follow the status quo of “churn[ed] out workers” (McLaren, 2017, p. 69).

Applied to this particular project, students will create a problem-posing question similar to this one, which will drive their work: **How can we [the adolescents and Class ACT] create a collaborative plan with the City of Park Falls and its community to open a boys and girls club similar to The Corner Rock, which will improve the relationships between adults and teenagers while also giving kids a safe place to hang out?**

## Research and Methodology

The narrative opening this paper illustrates the activities and conversations guests might observe after just a few minutes in The Phoenix. To make these images a reality, a team of Class ACT learners will begin dialoguing about their personal experiences:

- how they use their free time;
- where they go to socialize;
- whether they “hung out” at The Corner Rock or another boys and girls club and what they liked or disliked about it;
- conflicts with law enforcement, business owners, or residents;
- criminal activity such as loitering, curfew violations, skateboarding on sidewalks, or destruction of property;
- how they define civic responsibility, social justice, equality and inequality;
- critical awareness as it relates to the responsibility citizens have to work together for the benefit of all groups of people; and
- any other concerns, questions, or responses they may brainstorm.

This introductory approach is advocated by Freire and noted in the “Introduction to part five” of *The Critical Pedagogy Reader* (2017), which says that, when people use dialogue to understand and incorporate each other’s experiences, they have the “capacity to read the world critically” and can effectively navigate the uneven “relations of power, which structurally reproduce inequalities and social exclusions within schools and society” (p. 367). The power structure of the City of Park Falls Government and Law Enforcement has socially excluded an already-marginalized group of people (predominantly below-poverty, single-parented teenagers) by failing to partner with the school or other civic organizations to host a community center so that *all* of the community realizes the benefit of a productive social gathering place for young people. Perhaps an even more egregious error is to assign blame to the teenagers for local criminality, which further alienates them.

Because this learning group (“The Phoenix Team” or “the Team”) “does school” using project-based learning (a form of problem-posing education supported by Freire), they

will end this project having educated themselves in areas such as civic responsibility; governmental structure; capitalism and socialism; healthy community attributes; and communication principles, addressing social studies and English standards. Before any dialogue specific to a new club can be addressed with the public or city officials, The Phoenix Team will do extensive research, which includes brainstorming lists of questions or topics, or what they think they know and what they know they don't know, surrounding the introductory dialogue and generative theme. Just as Horton and Freire (1990) indicated, the learning environment should be one that "share[s] ... it by doing it and not by talking about it," which in this case means that the Team is in charge, making decisions about how to proceed with conducting research in the areas they've identified as new knowledge (p. 153, p. 164). Always present will be their lived experiences from which they filter their research (See Appendix A for Task List for Youth Center which students created collaboratively).

Part of their research will be about how citizens participate in democracy, including marginalized groups such as teenagers. In discussing the basic principles of capitalism, The Phoenix Team can explore the contradiction that "'individuals' were to ... reap the rewards of their hard work," yet if "everyone ... could succeed," then why was "failure to succeed ... taken to be a sign of poor character?" (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 98). The research and dialogue about this key contradiction of capitalism will lead them to Dewey, who said that the individual "is not a preformed creation but, rather, a socially formed product ... thus the quality of individual lives depends on the quality of relationships in associated living" (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 98). As I intervene in their discussions to ask questions and build connections between them and these concepts, in particular as an individual and the product of the community and/or society in which one lives, they will realize that their "seats at the table" are imperative because the community is also responsible for molding them into what Dewey called "socially formed product[s]" or people (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 98).

As further support, The Phoenix Team will study key concepts of socialism. In particular, they will discover a connection between Dewey and a principle of socialism, that is, "members of a democratic community [who] participate in that community"

(Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 104). Noddings & Brooks (2017) describe this as a community that cares for each other: “We do not ‘let the failures fail’ and only the successful thrive” (p. 104). The Team can use this principle to show community leaders that they should want to invest in seeing teenagers grow and that their growth not only makes the teenagers healthy but demonstrates a healthy, thriving community. Dewey supported this point when he specifically noted that a healthy community interacts with various groups and that “a *community* is formed by the shared aims and activities of its participating groups. If a group pulls away and considers only its own needs and interests, the community to which it might belong is disrupted” (Noddings & Brooks, 2017, p. 105). This forms the basis of the Team’s reasons for seeking common dialogue and language with city officials and community leaders to include teenagers in community growth discussions. In addition, The Phoenix Team will reflect on its own interactions with community groups and change them if necessary.

Once the structural components of civics research is completed, The Phoenix Team will work in a more local civics nature pertaining to city ordinances, parks and recreation funding, partnerships with other organizations such as churches, and actual property locations and ownership. This research phase will include the team educating itself on how and where The Phoenix will open its doors in Park Falls, including any governmental rules that may regulate it. In addition, the Team will plan and conduct three site visits to boys and girls clubs in our region to learn how they are structured and why they are successful (See Appendix B for student-generated Youth Center Site Visit Comparison & Reflection).



October 31, 2017. Class ACT: The Phoenix Team visits [Boys and Girls Club of Wausau](#)

Lastly, they will plan three local property site visits to assess the feasibility of these locations for The Phoenix: One is the old Corner Rock building on Highway 13, and the other two are downtown, vacant (blighted) buildings. The two buildings downtown are the last to be renovated in a revitalization project that incorporated new infrastructure. It is possible the City may seek a partner to renovate one of these buildings, and The Phoenix Team could collaborate with other school teams and disciplines to design and renovate the space. As noted in the “Introduction to part eight” of *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, one of the legacies of Freire’s work is that this type of collaboration among community groups creates “solidarity and kinship within communities” (p. 562).

It is further stated that “an array of untold possibilities can emerge as children, youth, and adults create opportunities together to grapple with meaningful issues and identify solutions that make sense in their world” (p. 562).



November 15, 2017: Youth Center Team meets with Mayor Leitl

Chequamegon School District and Class ACT continuously search for positive ways to communicate and collaborate with our communities, and a project such as The Phoenix will improve relationships and dismantle barriers more quickly than any newsletter or public meeting. An example of one such school-community venture that proves this can be successful is Emily Pilloton’s 2009-2010 work in Bertie County, North Carolina, the poorest and most rural county in that state. Pilloton’s [TED Talk](#) (2010) shows how she and her team taught design within a public school; however, they took design thinking outside the brick and mortar school and applied it to community development projects. Design *became* education as the students built projects in the community such as

renovating old buildings. By redesigning *for* education, she created the conditions to make changes in education that brought low-performing students from apathy to pride for their community and their work as a whole. Her TED Talk will serve as a visual image of what can be done when a community rethinks Education and Community. It could be used near the beginning of The Phoenix project, so students can visualize results, or it could be used as evidence that “this has been done before.” Additionally, students could contact Pilloton’s non-profit organization for more expert advice to proceed with their own project.

After learners evaluate the three proposed buildings and decide which will best serve guests and the community as a whole, they will design the physical site and the guidelines, expectations, or “business model” of The Phoenix based on research, including discussions with many interested parties and the site visits to successful boys and girls clubs. These tentative plans and drawings should solidify their goals and objectives for a healthy teen center. As research during the STEM design process of The Phoenix, the team will investigate the three often-named reasons for unequal representation of women in STEM professions as noted by Noddings & Brooks (2017): “a lack of early encouragement and role models, perceived lack of aptitude and consequent lack of preparation, and stereotype threat” (p. 70). In particular, the Team will study our District’s ACT standardized mathematics scores against the national or state scores in mathematics to analyze the relationship between gender and scores. They will also review enrollment data for our STEAM courses for the same relationship. As this data analysis is constructed, I anticipate that The Phoenix Team will participate in lively discussions about inequality, equality, gender stereotypes, and solutions to concerns that may arise from this data. It should be noted that, while all of this data is available to the public and to staff, I am unaware of anyone analyzing it in this way. The Team’s analysis of gender and mathematics may not only impact The Phoenix Team’s design thinking and construction, but the analysis may impact our new STEAM and engineering programs in very positive ways. Finally, The Phoenix Team should reflect on their gender equality/inequality participation and take action to make improvements if they determine they unintentionally have unequal representation in their own team.

With their research mostly completed, including anticipated community positions, goals, and objectives, learners are well prepared for explicit and intentional dialogue with city officials and residents. Dialoguing with these additional groups will undoubtedly lead to additional questions and revisions to plans. All of this is essential to design thinking and critical consciousness. Freire (1970/2016) explains that, while people are empowered through emancipatory pedagogy, emancipatory pedagogy must also include critical consciousness, and literacy involves consciousness. To create consciousness, teachers (and students) begin with the problem-posed method (p. 109). This problem should be something that, as a group, they feel needs resolution. For example, Park Falls lost its boys and girls club called Corner Rock. Now, teenagers are struggling to find an appropriate place to socialize. Freire says that, to be successful, the group must consist of “people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (p. 90). The Phoenix Team’s “transformative vision of education and society” will lead to reflection and action, not just by them but by community leaders, too (Darder, Torres, & Baltodano, 2017, p. 368).

Through emancipatory pedagogy and critical consciousness, learners experience a transformation that empowers them to collaborate more frequently and positively with their community, ultimately participating in democracy rather than remaining marginalized citizens.

## **Outcomes**

This is an ambitious, complex, multi-year action project that is entirely emancipatory; however, Class ACT’s learning community is experienced and ambitious. With regard to The Phoenix Project, the Team makes decisions collectively; approaches challenges as opportunities for reflection and action; collaborates effectively at many levels within numerous power structures; and is accountable to each other, themselves, and many adults with whom they will work. They achieve common goals and visions together, and in so doing, they reflect on how they are oppressed and engage in seeking freedom from it (Freire et al., 1970/2016, p. 48). Their freedom means the community is also liberated as the oppressor, and Park Falls can be that healthy community that Dewey illustrated

(Freire et al., 1970/2016, p. 44). These teenagers regain their humanity, and they do it through interdisciplinary knowledge that immerses them in academic and social-emotional learning through community development building.

What greater outcome could there be than teenagers who no longer feel marginalized by their communities and instead feel welcomed. They will recognize how oppression can swallow them with their own inaction, and they will know how empowerment feels when they take action. They will have planned and acted on their own education, all while earning high school credit and valuable employability skills. For me, I see Jason, Paul, Sam, Emily, Hannah, Josiah, Zek, Brian, Mandy, and Jasmine. I see the powerful, educated citizens they've become and "the road they made by walking," leads straight to The Phoenix.

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## Appendix A. Task List for Youth Center

These tasks align with the Action Project Paper and are generated by The Phoenix Team. Paragraph numbers coincide with the “Research and Methodology” section of the paper. Students were responsible for critical reading of these paragraphs and detailing the suggested tasks of each. They were encouraged to add tasks that should be considered where relevant.

### Standards: (9th - 11th grades)

1. *English Language Arts: 9-12* | Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.11-12.7
2. *English Language Arts: 9-12* | Key Ideas and Details RI.11-12.1
3. *English Language Arts: 9-12* | Production and Distribution of Writing W.11-12.5
4. *English Language Arts: 9-12* | Research to Build & Present Knowledge W.11-12.7
5. *Social Studies* | Advocates/Lobbyists : SS.C.12.9, SS.C.12.11
6. *Social Studies* | Local political topic : SS.C.12.10
7. *Social Studies* | Local government structure: SS.C.12.1
  - Critical reading of informational text (journal article)
  - Writing: Note taking, reflection, business plan, business communications, research writing (multiple sources)
  - Oral: Collaboration & discussion with peers, formal and informal presentations
  - Artifact collection as evidence of learning

Paragraph #	Tasks	Dates Completed	By Whom?
	PHASE ONE of project		
Paragraph 1	Discussions: personal experience with the Corner Rock; what did we like and dislike; if not the Corner Rock where else did we go to “hang out;” conflicts with the law, businesses, etc.; <b>structure of city government.</b>	1/03/18 1/03/18 1/05/18 READ; Taken notes	
Paragraph 2	Doing project-based learning to learn civic and social skills, and do plenty of research. <b>Learning capitalism and socialism.</b> Communication principles. <b>Healthy community attributes.</b> Brainstorming lists of questions and topics. What we know and don’t know and make decisions about how to proceed with research	Ongoing 1/05/18 Article 1/09/18 Read & notes	

Paragraph 3	We need to show the community leaders that we do need some teen groups the lead so they know how the teens are affected in this community for they may not know themselves in this day and age. We need the groups not only for their health and entertainment but for them to stay out of trouble with the police and community members. Study key concepts of socialism.	Ongoing	
Paragraph 4	We need to look at potential buildings and find out information and fundraising. We need to look for a partner to help fundraising and renovating or looking for a building downtown. We need to consider visiting a third youth center different from the boys and girls club and the YMCA because those two were too much alike (the Chippewa YMCA which is different than most Y's).		
Paragraph 5	Analyze the STEAM gender inequality research Analyze math scores and compare/gather data to analyze relationship between gender and scores Evaluate the buildings and decide which will best serve our needs		
Paragraph 6	Design physical site Business plan (expectations, guidelines, etc.). Analyze ACT scores & gender equity; stereotypes; relationship to our team		
Paragraph 7	Dialogue with city officials, partners, etc. regarding business plan Ask additional questions Revise plans, designs Design PHASE 2 of project (2018-19)		

## Appendix B.

### Student-Generated Youth Center Site Visit Comparison & Reflection

Name	Boys and Girls Club	YMCA
Student 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● No soda/energy drinks; vending starts at 2:00</li> <li>● Track students, make sure they have numbers and sign in and out of activities</li> <li>● Age limit with designated hours (HS 7-9 &amp; MS 4-7)</li> <li>● Buses drop kids off</li> </ul>	N/A
Student 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Designated activity rooms</li> <li>● Game room in entrance/great room</li> <li>● Small gym for team games</li> <li>● Meeting room for student leadership, guest speakers</li> <li>● Meals/snacks 2xs/wk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Very small area</li> <li>● TV/Video game</li> <li>● 18' climbing wall</li> <li>● Pool access</li> <li>● Parents must be members of Y</li> <li>● Open 3-8 weekdays</li> </ul>
Student 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hands-on activities like art &amp; music</li> <li>● Board games, team games</li> <li>● Homework room with tutors; earned 1 point/per 15 min of work; top 10 at end of month pizza party</li> <li>● Staff talks to teachers for homework help</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Rock wall</li> <li>● Computer/homework room</li> <li>● Very small area</li> <li>● Hang out for kids while parents at the Y</li> </ul>
Student 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Absolutely loved the structure but yet not too strict</li> <li>● Games (pool, ping pong, carpet ball in the lobby)</li> <li>● Gym in the back</li> <li>● Small kitchen (lots of regulations if do food)</li> <li>● Cubbies for backpacks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Not much hands-on or active area</li> <li>● Good place to study</li> <li>● Small place for socializing after school</li> </ul>
Student 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Vending machines</li> <li>● Lounge area</li> <li>● Art room</li> <li>● Air hockey table</li> <li>● Ping pong</li> <li>● Gym</li> <li>● Skate park in the basement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Rock climbing wall (should we? CAN we?)</li> <li>● Computer lab</li> <li>● Staff not kid-friendly</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Carpet ball/miscellaneous games</li> <li>● This one was the one we should try to strive to be like.</li> </ul>	
Student 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Game room in front of the building</li> <li>● Staff add new ideas all the time</li> <li>● Liked the gym because it lets kids get off energy and get active</li> <li>● Skate park great but may be liability issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Not much hands-on</li> <li>● Staff not kid-friendly</li> </ul>
Student 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Optimistic look; like living in a recreational vehicle</li> <li>● Always updating and thriving on being better</li> <li>● Had adult supervision; every room staffed</li> <li>● Cost \$20/calendar yr; \$45/Family; scholarships available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Racquetball and pool as part of Y</li> <li>● Depressing and underwhelming</li> </ul>
Student 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pool table</li> <li>● Ping pong</li> <li>● Basketball</li> <li>● Carpet ball</li> <li>● Skate park</li> <li>● I like how kids can leave an activity they don't like and go to something else</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pool</li> <li>● Rock wall</li> <li>● Racquetball</li> <li>● Lounge area</li> <li>● Computer lab</li> <li>● Not as intriguing as Boys and Girls Club</li> </ul>