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Navigating a Life of Theory: An Autobiography of Privilege, Place and Teaching

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Abstract

Experiences that influence and shape an individual's pedagogical commitments serve as a unique lens to conceptualize professional transformation. This narrative provides an autobiographical account of the author's journey from student to teacher. The article, which is divided into two distinct, but tightly connected narratives, draws on this tradition to examine and develop a more nuanced understanding of those life experiences influencing the author's complex journey as an educator. Each narrative begins with a short autobiographical reflection highlighting significant life moments and histories. Second, critical and post-structuralist theory is interwoven to examine ways the author conceptualizes the significance of the experiences captured in each reflection. Finally, each narrative concludes with discussion focused on how these experiences currently shape the author's work as an educator.

Keywords

Autobiography, Narrative Inquiry, Teacher Education

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Navigating a Life of Theory: An Autobiography of Privilege, Place and Teaching

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Experiences that influence and shape an individual's pedagogical commitments serve as a unique lens to conceptualize professional transformation. This narrative provides an autobiographical account of the author's journey from student to teacher. The article, which is divided into two distinct, but tightly connected narratives, draws on this tradition to examine and develop a more nuanced understanding of those life experiences influencing the author's complex journey as an educator. Each narrative begins with a short autobiographical reflection highlighting significant life moments and histories. Second, critical and post-structuralist theory is interwoven to examine ways the author conceptualizes the significance of the experiences captured in each reflection. Finally, each narrative concludes with discussion focused on how these experiences currently shape the author's work as an educator. Keywords: Autobiography, Narrative Inquiry, Teacher Education

Bringing the Past to the Present

Thinking back to early school experiences, I can distinctly remember those teachers emphasizing certain perspectives as *better suited* or *more appropriate* for situating and explaining the world. In high school social studies and English classes, for example, I vividly recall my efforts to subvert teacher expectations to blindly accept narrow and uncritical explanations of commonly studied topics like public policy, warfare, cultural myths, and social phenomena. Similarly, when introduced to developmental, philosophical, or pedagogical theory in a university-based teacher preparation program, my first instinct was to skeptically assess the cultural norms and historic traditions shaping these ideas. I continuously reflected on two prescient questions: Whose perspectives shaped the materials presented in class? Whose perspectives or experiences were excluded from these materials?

This critical approach was a response to the ways in which many of my education professors typically presented and discussed teaching and learning - as objective, linear, fixed, immutable, static, and easily scalable. For example, it was clear to me that classes with Special Education pre-fixes were not only taught in complete isolation from other classes, but the frameworks used to conceptualize students with exceptional learning needs was approached from a deficit model. Similarly, in social studies methods coursework the instructors, readings, and assignments left the impression that there was in fact a "right" way to teach history. For me, this was highly problematic. As an aspiring social studies teacher, I was strongly attracted to counter-narratives and socially conscious pedagogical practices. The essentialist perspective I continued to encounter from those charged with preparing me for classroom life conflicted with my deeply held constructivist beliefs. Although at the time I could not foresee the ultimate significance of these schooling experiences, it is now clear that this pedagogical resistance has always somehow been a presence within my life.

As a practicing educator, the shadows of these past experiences are continuously present in my work with perspective teachers. This includes, for instance, facilitating opportunities for students to challenge normalized ways of thinking, represent their perspectives in varied and nuanced ways, advocate for inclusive classrooms, adopt

transformative pedagogical approaches that question, critique, and resist efforts to marginalize public school teachers, privatize public education, and standardize children's learning experiences (Jackson, 1986; Kumashiro, 2001; Ravitch, 2011, 2013; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Teacher candidates are not only encouraged to develop differentiated and subjective understandings of what they learn and experience, but I am also conscience of facilitating opportunities for them to critique and reflect on how these experiences impact their lives and lives of those they encounter.

Currere as a Method on Inquiry

Methodologically, this research reflects a well-established tradition of autobiographical and narrative inquiry within the field of curriculum theory (Munro, 2010; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995); Pinar and Grumet (1976) first used the concept of *currere* in *Toward a Poor Curriculum* to describe one's subjective experience of social, cultural, and institutional structures. This approach involves becoming aware of one's biographical situation, reflecting on past experiences and future possibilities, analyzing the temporal complexity of lived experience, and synthesizing ideas about the self in the biographical and historical present (Pinar et al., 1995). Pinar (1994) proposes the method of *currere* to engage individuals in a self-reflective process about significant educational experiences shaping self-understanding. This process provides a unique framework to reflect on, reconceptualize, and narrate one's autobiography. This method includes four interrelated stages: the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetic (Pinar, 1994).

The regressive encourages reflection on the ways in which specific educational experiences have shaped the development of one's attitudes, beliefs, and action about teaching, learning, and education. The progressive stage provides an opportunity to reflect on how these identified experiences may impact future actions. The analytical stage involves examining present circumstances to identify the impact and significance of past historical moments. The synthetic stage allows for a summative analysis one's current state in light of what was unveiled narrating the other stages (regressive, progressive, and analytical). The synthetic allows for one to visualize, conceptualize, study, and even struggle with the journey of becoming an educator. The ultimate pursuit of this stage is using what is uncovered to transform one's practice to impact the educational setting in which they work.

The following article, which is divided into two distinct, but tightly connected narratives, draws on this tradition to examine and develops a more nuanced understanding of those life experiences influencing the author's complex journey from student to teacher. Each narrative commences with autobiographical reflections that draw attention to important life experiences and perspectives. These brief reflections highlight the author's thinking at a specific moment in history. Second, critical and post-structuralist theory is intertwined to emphasize the significance of the experiences within each reflection. Finally, each narrative concludes with discussion focused of how these experiences shape the author's work as an educator. It is worth noting that these narratives were culled from the author's personal journals that he has and continues to use in his work as an educator. Journaling provides a unique opportunity to capture life experiences as they happen and as a way to reflect on the significance of past events and future goals, ideas, and aspirations. These particular narratives stood out because they were recorded during important moments of change in life and significantly impacted my work as an educator.

Before moving forward, it is important to remind readers that the ideas circulating throughout this article are not meant to represent a singular truth or a set of prescriptive approaches. Rather, it is my hope the ideas presented hold the power to spark meaningful

dialogue about the role of teachers, how we care for students, and how to provide meaningful opportunities for students to become whomever they desire.

All Sorts of Privilege

Growing up, I never paid much attention to how issues of power and privilege shaped my life or the role I played in maintaining and participating in what bell hooks (2003) has conceptualized as “dominator culture.” As a white, heterogeneous, able-bodied, cisgender male from a comfortably middle-class family, I managed to move through school and develop a tight-knit peer group without ever being positioned to consider the significant advantages my privilege offered and afforded. Raised in Charlotte, NC, my schooling was directly influenced by the Supreme Court’s decision to use busing to support school desegregation efforts. The elementary, middle, and high schools I attended were all located in predominately low-income African-American neighborhoods and my “in-school” peer group was diverse. However, these relationships, particularly with non-white students, ended when the bell rang and I headed home to a segregated neighborhood. Consequently, I never inquired into how other kids, especially peers from differing racial, ethnic, and/or economic backgrounds experienced life. My lack of understanding was the result of being raised with the mindset that everyone in the world experienced life the same way I did; simply put, I grew up in a position of tremendous privilege and was never challenged to think otherwise.

Recognition of the various ways privilege permeates my life has provided a unique lens to examine the significance and impact of early life experiences. This reflection does not evoke feelings of guilt, embarrassment, regret, or even a desire for a different upbringing; rather, it serves as a point of departure for thinking about and situating my current commitments as an educator. Acknowledgement of the privilege I was born into and undoubtedly still experience provides opportunities to examine dominant power structures and hegemonies, question marginalizing ideologies, and as Michael Foucault (1983) suggests, “confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, with what one is” (as cited in Jardine, 2005, p. 8). Authentic reflection on one’s privilege holds the potential to transform the ways we live, our thinking, how we engage others, and the types of relationships we establish. This recognition requires a meaningful examination of daily activities and encounters in order to surface the ways in which we may be on the receiving end of advantages that, many times, we cannot initially recognize.

As an adolescent, I was rarely challenged by the adults in my life to consider how hierarchical power structures influence and control access to socially valued resources, knowledge, and opportunities. Consequently, I grew up assuming everyone my age traveled on airplanes, vacationed at the beach in the summer, would one day attend college, and arrived on the first day of school with a backpack full of supplies; I just did not know any better. I have listened to friends and teaching colleagues argue that middle school students are too young, naive, or immature to engage in thoughtful discussions about the presence and impact of power, privilege, and inequity within society; some of these same individuals have even claimed these topics just cause controversy and do not have a primary role in the classroom. I disagree. These issues are always present in our lives and while one may try to ignore these realities do not exist or argue they are not central to the curriculum and the work of teacher, they cannot be pushed to the side.

Unfortunately, my early schooling experiences prohibited formative opportunities to learn about, consider, examine, and challenge normalized ways of thinking and living. I was, implicitly, forced to ignore the various ways “power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning

processes, and everyday lives” (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). Upon birth we are all unknowingly situated into socially constructed identities that privilege certain circumstances and realities over others. Consequently, when one finds themselves in a position of privilege, it is easy to become complicit, either implicitly or explicitly, in reproducing dominant cultural values, or what Peter McLaren (2003) conceptualizes as “social practices and representations that affirm central values, interests and concerns of the social class in control of material and symbolic wealth of society” (p. 75).

Although unaware, compliance to conventional social and cultural norms was central to my schooling experience. When I assumed it was okay to refer to a student from a mixed-race family as a “a cream bro,” I embraced my racial privilege; when I invoked my family’s personal relationship with the principal to gain access to the advanced-level coursework in high school even though I was definitely not deserving, I relied on my class privilege; and when the senior class council, which I was elected to serve on, decided to make its only female participant the secretary, I had unknowingly invoked my gender privilege.

While I now understand these actions to be part of my privilege, at the time, they were not done with malicious intent; nonetheless, the impact was real and harm was carried out. In retrospect, I wish my parents and teachers challenged me to consider what it might mean to experience life from another perspective. I was trained to accept the knowledge taught both inside and outside of school as truth – the only truth. Addressing this specific dynamic, Foucault (1984) posits:

Each society has a regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes functions as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131)

Rather than being encouraged to think how to free myself from assumptions or the values and social practices transmitted to me via the ethos in which I was raised, I actively participated in the reproduction of the ideology, dominant cultural values, and marginalizing practices learned in school, internalized from home and peers, and observed in the media.

As an educator presently immersed in the clinical supervision of pre-service teachers, I take to heart Foucault’s (1984) assertion that as humans we have a responsibility to confront how discursive and non-discursive ideas, expectations, and actions perpetuate stereotypes that marginalize those who are different and turn individuals into objects to be controlled by other. In my role mentoring student teachers, I have resisted the traditional supervisor/intern relationship which is often rooted in a dominant/subordinate structure and relies on curative approaches masked as absolute truths and silver bullets, as well as what McLaren (2003) refers to as “macro objectives” that ignore “connections between [what is being taught] and the norms, values, and structural relationships of the wider society” (p. 71). Instead, my purpose has been to establish supportive relationships based on formative dialogue, shared knowledge and mutual understanding, acknowledgement of differing perspectives, and critical reflection on experience. These practices include allowing teacher candidates to work creatively to identify their vision for student teaching and what they hope to accomplish. Teacher candidates are, for example, provided spaces and forums to openly share their struggles, concerns, goals, questions and desires. Additionally, student teachers are encouraged to not just think critically about their own instructional practice and classroom, but they are also asked to thoughtfully reflect on conditions within the school and how these might, for instance, impact student-teacher relationships, engagement in school activities, and teaching and learning. Student

teachers are also asked to move outside their assigned classroom for observations, interactions, and conversation so they can learn more about their school context and engage with others who may approach the work of teaching differently than the assigned mentor teacher.

hooks (2003) suggests as democratic educators we have to work to find ways to teach and share knowledge in ways that do not reinforce existing structures of domination. Similarly, in describing how educators must challenge the knowledge people have about those who have historically been labeled as different, Kevin Kumashiro (2004) points out that it is the responsibility of teachers to “broaden students understanding of difference,” correct misconceptions, and integrate a “richer diversity of experiences, perspectives, and materials” into the curriculum (p. xxv). Engaging student teachers in discussions about how they might incorporate personal experience as well as anti-oppressive teaching practices into their work as teachers has helped to create an awareness of privilege, inequity, and power relations within the classroom. In these dialogues I do not claim to have “the answers” nor do I prescribe rigid methods or demand teacher candidates to do whatever possible to disrupt school norms; rather, I engage these individuals in caring conversations about how to make sense of their surroundings, listen to and develop understanding of their students, and authentically connect to and thoughtfully consider the school contexts in which they are placed.

To facilitate teacher candidates’ reflection on how the classroom environment perpetuates certain perspectives and reproduces patterns often marginalizing non-white and low-income populations, I ask questions such as which children participate most frequently and why? What assumptions underlie classroom rules and the demand for order and control? How do students select where to sit and with whom to interact? What messages does the curriculum embody? What circumstances, both inside and outside of school, may inhibit academic success? Pushing beginning teachers to think about whose perspectives are represented in the primary source materials they use, consider the gender, race, and ethnicity of the leaders they discuss, and reflect on why certain topics are excluded from the textbook encourages critical thinking about both the challenges and limitations of curriculum development. These types of questions and lines of inquiry typically frame a core set of reflective journals that students develop throughout a semester. These journals draw on a variety of experiences that include university coursework, clinical placements, and personal learning and wonderings.

In *Race and Representation*, hooks (1992) writes “we are always in the process of both remembering the past even as we create new ways to imagine and make the future” (p. 5). I certainly draw on my own past experiences as both student and teacher, and there is no doubt that recent work with preservice teacher has shaped my commitment to develop mentor/mentee relationships that encourages critical reflection and fosters multiple interpretations of reality as well using discourse as a means to examine the need for compassionate and socially-just pedagogical action and thought.

The Lure of a Profession

I didn't grow up wanting to become a teacher. In fact, the only reason I decided to leave a lucrative position with a record label to teach in a North Carolina elementary school was because I lost interest in a profession that survived, in my opinion, by exploiting talented artists. Once I decided to make the transition, a teaching position fortuitously fell into my lap. After a tough first few months, I made the decision to leave teaching at the end of the year to pursue other passions. However, as the school year wore on I became unexpectedly satisfied with the opportunity to support my kid's academic social, and emotional growth. I also began to realize there was something else pulling me towards the teaching profession. It was no longer just about my students; I was changing. This call, or what Paulo Freire (1972) referred

to as “critical consciousness,” was pushing me to seek and explore new understandings and perspectives of the world; it challenged me to question the economic, political, and social conditions underlying the norms and forms of oppression shaping society.

As I ultimately settled into a high school setting, critical inquiry, reflective action, and social justice became central to my teaching practice. Towards the end of my third year as a social studies teacher, the principal asked me to develop and coordinate an academic program aimed at supporting students traditionally underrepresented in higher education. This population typically includes students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students who would be the first in their immediate family to attend college. This opportunity could not have come at a better time; it changed my life. Spending the next four years working with the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program challenged me to think deeply about issues of social justice and how my AVID students experienced and encountered the world. As a result, I was able to acquire new ways to conceptualize how power and privilege influence academic opportunities, how to use school resources to combat inequity, and how to pursue teaching approaches that embrace and encourage students to act upon the world.

Thinking back to my first few years in the classroom, it is safe to say my thoughts and efforts were principally focused on the daily rigors, challenges, and unexpected occurrences beginning teachers typically encounter. As a new teacher it was too hard to think or even plan long-term; my concerns were day-to-day and moment-to-moment. Any interest in curricular or pedagogical issues did not stretch beyond the isolating barriers of my classroom walls. I spent little time thinking about the social or academic equity that tacitly existed in my school. While this limited perspective can partly be attributed to the fact I was a novice educator, I also can't help but speculate this lack of awareness was also a result of my privileged upbringing. For example, I never thought critically about what or how I was teaching, what messages were embedded within the curriculum, why students were assigned to particular classes, which languages were most valued, or how school rules silently targeted certain populations.

In my first teaching position I mainly interacted with a group of white, upper class students who were overly appreciative, hardworking, respectful, and extremely diligent. In my subsequent job with a private civic education organization, I had numerous opportunities to teach students of all ages from extremely diverse racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. During this time, I began to observe social behaviors absent from prior teaching experiences. Why did students self-segregate themselves when situated in large groups? Why did our inquiries into issues like affirmative action, welfare, and the reduction of African-American incarceration rates become so heated? Why did these contentious discussions continuously break down on what I perceived as racial, economic and class divisions? With more experience, I was able to facilitate meaningful discussions and encourage students to talk honestly about their experiences inside and outside of school. As a result, I was exposed to narratives that forced me to question, and ultimately depart from previously held understandings about how my students understood, encountered, and experienced the world.

As I gained further teaching experience and became more comfortable and confident in the classroom, I decided to move in a different direction. I spent the better half of the next seven years teaching in urban school environments in Washington, DC, Boston, and in Northern Virginia. During this time, I started to hear the voices of those I never bothered to hear; I began see layers of society I had never noticed; and the language I used to talk about pedagogy, school culture, and curriculum began to sound different. My teaching evolved into a form of activism.

This professional transformation really began to take hold during my tenure as a high school social studies teacher. In this environment I found myself resisting the status quo and questioning the widely accepted values and truths that supported both school norms and the

attitude, “this is just the way life is; change is just slow - it will eventually happen.” I started to embrace the writings of activists like Cornell West, Howard Zinn, Michael Eric Dyson, Noam Chomsky, Ralph Nader, Mother Jones, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King who, in their own ways, all demand that we must not fail to question the intentions and actions of those in positions of power and privilege. I began not only exploring the idea of the mandated curriculum as partial and limited knowledge, but to also question the deeply rooted beliefs and actions of my teaching colleagues, the prescriptive expectations of administrators, and the presence of dominant culture values that permeated school life in so many ways. I was quickly being considered a bit of a radical by some colleagues. My ideas were, for the most part, dismissed as overly progressive, excessively liberal, or simply a result of youthful idealism and exuberance that would one day “die down and eventually disappear.”

In addition to trying to discuss issues of academic and social inequity in department and faculty meetings, I began to incorporate social justice into my teaching and create a classroom environment encouraging students to freely express their opinions, explore the multi-dimensionality of their identities and reflect on how racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual discrimination permeated society. During the years I spent in this school, I typically taught two Advanced Placement (AP) government classes and three standard-level, team-taught, inclusion focused 9th grade world history classes. The world history classes were always the largest classes, the most difficult to teach, and populated with kids that other teachers often told me could care less about school, personal success, or pursuing post-secondary education; “good luck” was what I frequently heard. Nonetheless, I quickly found a comfortable home teaching, mentoring, and at times, acting as a surrogate parent to many of these students. These students were not discipline problems as I was warned and few of them were labeled as gifted and talented or receiving academic support services from the school. Consequently, many of these students garnered little direct attention from teachers, counselors, school specialists, or administrators. They were, in an odd way, “caught in the middle.”

During this time of critical reflection into my own identity, social norms, and the deeply rooted inequities I believed were crippling education, I was introduced to Jonathan Kozol’s (1992/2012) *Savage Inequalities*. His haunting revelations became a catalyst and source of knowledge. I could professionally identify with his narratives of poverty, lost opportunity, and systematic inequity detailed throughout the book. While the school where I worked was in many ways quite different than the schools detailed by Kozol, there were also many glaring similarities. Many of the students I encountered in my world history classes did not have access to social, political, or economic capital, lacked a sense of personal agency, and had little exposure to the type of preparation and resources necessary to access higher education. As a result, these students had limited opportunities after high school and were in positions of academic disadvantage. The school was doing very little to address this, and in my view, was actively supporting an environment built upon structures, processes, expectations, norms, ideologies, and curricula reinforcing a tacit system of hegemony and a culture of reproduction providing advantage for some while disadvantaging others.

In *Race in the Schoolyard*, Amanda Lewis (2006) articulates the significance and immediacy of this deep-seated dilemma. “Schools do not produce children as racial subjects—they produce racial disparities in life outcomes” (Lewis, 2006, p. 188). Highlighting inequity and deep patterns of class structure, Annette Lareau (2003) argues “social group membership structures life opportunities” (p. 256). As I paid closer attention, I began to notice that a wide “opportunity gap” had quietly taken root within the school’s culture (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Darling-Hammond describes this gap as “the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources—expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources—that support learning at home and school” (p. 28) Those students who were situated on the post-secondary

education pathway, which provided direct access to a rigorous curriculum, academic and social support, an academically successful peer group, and higher expectations, were receiving one form of education while others in the school were being provided with a much inferior schooling experience.

When teachers and counselors decide to place certain students in AP or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes and relegate others to the classes that are primarily geared towards passing standardized tests, they are making a decision that has social, economic, and political implications. Because attainment of a college degree clearly plays a factor in future economic opportunities and status, placing a student in a class not geared to supporting a pathway to post-secondary education is a decision that cannot be taken lightly. While most of the kids I had in my 10th grade AP Government classes were moving onto some form of post-high school education, very few of those enrolled in my standard level 9th grade world history classes believed they were moving in this same direction. While the pursuit of higher education certainly requires determination and hard work, it also requires access to culturally valued knowledge, experiences, resources, and support that many low-income and non-white children do not get at home, from their peer group, or from teachers. For example, many of the students I worked with did not have parents or other family members who were college attendees or graduates. Hence, the topic of higher education, which is consistently present in many middle and upper-class households, was not a norm for my students.

Public school institutions are constructed in ways that inherently limits opportunities for certain populations of students. Although it may not be purposeful or malicious, it is widespread. To confront this growing problem within my school, a colleague and I implemented the AVID program (Swanson, 1980) in the high school where we worked. This program explicitly provides students with access to the resources, experiences, support, knowledge, and operational language necessary to not only navigate institutional barriers, but to also assist them in the process of planning and preparing for college. The program also facilitates the building of collaborative relationships between students and teachers, creates spaces for students to be complex subjects and “active creator[s] of meaning” (Crotty, 1998, p. 204). Additionally, there was an implicit recognition among teachers working in our AVID program that “individuals are constituted by power relations, power being the ultimate principle of social reality” (Sarup, as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 204). Hence, the underlying philosophy of this program not only requires teachers to take on the role of a mentor and facilitate a school-based form of “concerted cultivation” (Lareau, 2003), but it also takes into account the relationship between education, power, access to academically rigorous coursework, and future opportunities.

My experience leading this program dramatically altered the ways in which I understood equity, opportunity, and power relations within a school community. While this intellectual and emotional awakening fostered a deeper connection to my mission as an educator, it also provided answers to why many of my students, who were intellectually curious and multi-talented, moved from class-to-class and grade-to-grade with little purpose or guidance and talked little about post-high school plans or expectations. I began to pay closer attention to this disconcerting reality. My efforts to engage the most challenging students began to wane. Similarly, the attention I paid to students who routinely dug into class assignments, thoughtfully contributed to group discussions, and never seemed to be a distraction also started to dissipate. Up to this point in my teaching career my gaze was drawn towards adolescents I naively perceived needed me most – students whose problems were frequently made public and those whose academic abilities openly flourished. Consequently, my classroom gaze had become obstructed.

I became absorbed with the lives and experiences of those who joined our AVID program. These were students who habitually situated themselves on the outskirts of the room,

spoke very little during class, seemed academically unsure of themselves, and were provided little guidance about why they were in school, what types of opportunities were available at school, and what roads education could possibly lead them down. There was Ahmed, Yeksson, Luis, Emma, Monique, Bianca, Marcus, and a plethora of other amazing human beings. These students did not talk regularly about the possibility of higher education, rarely considered trying out for school plays, participating in sports, or running for student council and often, were dealing with difficult family circumstances. These students, often from low-income and non-white backgrounds, were “caught in the middle” and deserved better...much better.

One primary aim of AVID is to expose students, many of whom will likely be the first in their family to attend college, to the knowledge and operational language permeating school life. Students learn how to effectively communicate with teachers and administrators, prepare for academically rigorous coursework, and actively participate in the college search process. Terminology like GPA, extracurricular, elective, note taking, SAT, FAFSA, class change form, drop/add, AP/IB, and honor society become part of our vocabulary. For many AVID students, these concepts are unfamiliar; however, for those from middle and upper-class households these ideas are likely reiterated outside of school and in social groups. Understanding the knowledge and language dominating school discourse is a tool that provides advantage, status, and access.

While there were definitely certain understandings that AVID explicitly teaches, the program did not aim to standardize students’ experiences by forcing them to prescribe to one way of thinking or acting; rather, we engaged each student where they were situated and created spaces for them explore personal interests, engage in meaningful decision-making, and develop a sense of personal agency. The program explicitly supported students in developing access to a network of support mechanisms that helped to create a path to both academic success and post-secondary education.

My experience directing and teaching in this program transformed my perspective about the both the purpose and consequences of schooling. Many students slowly progress through school without a tangible understanding of either the ultimate purpose of schooling or the impact education has on future social and economic outcomes. Additionally, the academic identity of many children is shaped by daily struggles instead of long-term aspirations and a well-crafted understanding of the various choices available after high school. As a result, many of these students do not understand the possibilities of higher education, how one gets there, how to plan for it, or even how to apply. Schools are not politically, socially, or economically neutral places. When children from lower income or non-white families enter into these spaces unprepared to deal with dominate culture expectations and assumptions, it places them at clear disadvantage. This situation leads to rigid tracking practices, quietly aids in the establishment of institutionalized academic barriers, and exemplifies how schools provide opportunity and success for some, but serve as a mechanism of constraint for others. AVID serves those students who would otherwise fall through the cracks and continue to wander from grade to grade and class to class without a well-grounded understanding of why they are in school. Children arrive at school with different socially acquired resources and generally leave with differentiated rewards. In an effort to address this dilemma, our AVID program taught students how to access and utilize cultural capital so that they will have the ability to prepare for life after high school. As a result, our students become keenly aware of opportunities inside and outside of school and gained a deeper perspective of the relationship between education, future opportunities, and social and economic mobility.

Looking Forward with the Past in Mind

While these transformative experiences took place at different times in my life, they each deeply influence and shape current practices and professional commitments.

First, while reflection on my position of privilege as a white, middle-class, able-bodied heterosexual male provides insight about the impact of personal schooling experiences, it also illuminates how these experiences guide my current work with preservice teachers. In these relationships I have made an explicit choice to use critical discourse to encourage teacher candidate to consider how dominate culture norms and values impact the classrooms in which they work. This includes encouraging resistance to the status quo while at the same time facilitating critical reflection and action focused on shifting instructional practices. Contemplating the need for this direct approach, hooks (2003) posits:

While it is a truism that every citizen of this nation, white or colored, is born into a racist society that attempts to socialize us from the moment of birth to accept the tenets of white supremacy, it is equally true that we can resist this socialization. (p. 56)

My work with novice educators creates valuable opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue about how to adopt practices that re-center education on issues of social justice and participate in what Kumashiro (2004) refers to as a “social movement against oppression” (p. xxiv).

Second, my extensive teaching experience has provided perspective on the differentiated ways school environments shape by social, political, and economic circumstances as well as student outcomes, particularly those related to matriculation to and persistence in higher education. While I cannot claim to fully understand all ways one’s experiences are shaped by these dynamics, I believe teachers have a moral responsibility to challenge those systems and practices that seek to objectify, control, standardize and marginalize particular individuals and groups. Additionally, I believe we must take seriously the premise that individuals possess the agency to act upon the world in ways that resist dominate cultural norms and values and challenge the systemic forces shaping childrens’ lives.

Finally, my experience developing and coordinating the AVID program opened my eyes to how schools can cause social and academic harm to students of color. I also learned how school resources can be used to create opportunities for students to empower themselves and develop a sense of agency to pursue academic opportunities that may have previously seemed unattainable. While it is common for AVID teachers to mistakenly appropriate the program and perceive it as a cure, this approach was resisted in my setting. Rather than assuming teachers had the power to “save” students, we provided students with opportunities to blaze their own path. There were no rigidly defined destinations – each student was urged to determine their own direction and they were fully supported in this endeavor.

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