

Trouble in Tucson: Using The Hunger Games to Teach Freirean Principles Post HB 2281

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Abstract

This article explores the effects of Arizona's HB 2281 and Tucson Unified School District's purging of its Mexican American Studies program on the utilization of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the public K-12 classroom. As the use of the text becomes more controversial, educators who wish to teach Freirean principles must choose between assigning the text to their students, at the risk of career ending consequences, or seeking out a substitute text that embodies Freire's philosophies. It is suggested that a text popular within current youth culture be assigned in order to help students make personal connections with the content. *The Hunger Games* is presented as an appropriate alternative text due to having themes parallel to those presented in Freire's text. The responsibility of teachers to help students integrate Freirean principles into their everyday lives is also discussed.

Since 1968, the teachings of Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire have influenced political and educational reform by encouraging readers to view the world through a lens of critical consciousness. Influential worldwide, Freire's landmark text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been translated into many languages from its original Portuguese including English, German, Italian, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, and French (Zavada, n.d.). This seminal work, along with his other publications, has placed Freire in a category with the likes of John Dewey as one of the most influential educational scholars of all time (Gottesman, 2010). While some critics of Freire suggest that his ideals are over simplified reflections of reality (Blackburn,

2000), others such as Giroux (1979) contend that Freire, despite his lack of scholarly refinement, has laid the theoretical foundations of liberating education.

LIBERATING EDUCATION

For Freire, the single greatest problem of mankind is now, and has always been, the power struggle between those who wish to humanize themselves (*the oppressed*) and those who seek to dehumanize others (*the oppressors*). Freire (2011) asserts that this power struggle for humanization is often “thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (p.44). In other words, through manipulation, marginalization, and violence, oppressors strip the oppressed of their liberties in order to maintain sociopolitical and economic dominance. This usurped power is held with a tight fist by the oppressors and will proceed until those who have been robbed of their humanity take it upon themselves to seek out liberation (Freire, 2011). Ergo, Freire’s work promotes the stance that political and social liberation must come from the oppressed, for the oppressed.

In this pursuit of humanization, is an embedded sense of hope. Hope is the cornerstone of humanization because it births a vision of a socially just society and spurs the will to fight the good fight against the strong arm of oppression. For many, however, hope is fleeting. Victims of continual violence, repression, and manipulation, hopelessness can spread like a plague among the oppressed until they succumb to the oppressors’ narratives that their position in society is not only acceptable, but part of the natural order. It is for this reason that critically conscious individuals should ally with the oppressed to advocate the gospel of hope. Though allies can support and encourage the oppressed in many ways, one powerful means of instilling hope in future generations is through liberating education. Commenting on this sentiment Glasgow (2001) states,

If we expect students to take social responsibility, they must explore ideas, topics, and viewpoints that not only reinforce but challenge their own. In an increasingly abrasive and polarized American society, social justice education has the potential to prepare citizens who are sophisticated in their understanding of diversity and group interaction, able to critically evaluate social institutions, and committed to working democratically with diverse others. (Glasgow, 2001, p.54)

In other words, if we believe that society is dependent on the next generation to transcend the ills and atrocities created by their predecessors, the principles of liberty, democracy, and social justice must be ingrained in today’s youth (Giroux, 2003).

TROUBLE IN TUCSON

Despite Glasgow's admonition, regarding the necessity of liberating education among youth, the teaching of Freirean principles has not been without opposition. The controversy surrounding Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* recently became a matter of national interest when Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) banned the text from being taught as a violation of Arizona law HB 2281 (Di Leo, 2011).

HB 2281 was enacted on December 31, 2010 with the intention of eliminating any courses or classes which may promote the overthrow of the United States government, promote resentment toward a class or race of people, are primarily designed for pupils of a particular ethnic group, or promote ethnic solidarity (Horne, 2010). One program that was purged under HB 2281 was a Mexican American Studies (MAS) program within the TUSD whose model was built around the Freirean ideals of critical pedagogy, critically compassionate intellectualism, social problem solving, student-teacher cooperative learning, and humanitarianism (Kowal, 2011; Orozco, 2012). Dr. Martin Arce, director of the MAS program, further extended Freire's influence on the program's pedagogical approach by engaging in the exercises of problemization and tri-dimensionalization of reality as borrowed from Freire's model of instruction (Kowal, 2011). The MAS program, which was founded in Spring of 1998 and offered a multidisciplinary curriculum to elementary, middle, and high school level students within the TUSD, received complaints from members of the Tucson community regarding the manner in which educational instruction was being conducted within the program. As a result, Superintendent of Public Instruction, John Huppenthal, embarked on a curricular investigation to determine whether or not the MAS program was in violation of HB 2281 and its accompanying statutes. On June 15, 2011 Superintendent Huppenthal declared the program to be in violation of the law on the grounds that the curriculum and content of the courses promoted racial resentment, was designed primarily for Mexican American students, and advocated ethnic solidarity that could be considered un-American and deviant (Kowal, 2011; Orozco, 2012). On January 10, 2012 the MAS program was officially suspended and those students enrolled in the MAS program were transferred to other courses (Tucson Unified School District, 2012).

The primary textbook for the MAS program was Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne, who authored HB 2281, greatly opposed the use of Freire's text on the grounds that it promoted Marxist ideals. Horne protested that it is the responsibility of schools to teach that America is a land of opportunity, not oppression (Orozco, 2012). Horne feared that Freire's text would instill a mentality of victimization that could in turn encourage rebellion and resentment among students (Orozco, 2012).

Supporting Horne's stance, Superintendent Huppenthal also denounced the use of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on the grounds that it could ignite a sense of racial elitism that would lead to tensions between Latino students and their White peers (Planas, 2012).

To suggest that Freire promoted racial elitism would be in direct opposition of his teaching because the marginalization of one people group by another can stifle the liberation of both parties. Just as hate begets hate, socially constructing the superiority and dominance of one race over another begets the dehumanization of other races. On the contrary, Freire contends that man's vocation is to humanize, thus for one to interpret *Pedagogy of The Oppressed* as encouraging racial elitism is to ignore a pillar of Freire's philosophical framework. Additionally, it has been argued that since the text does not teach students that they are currently in an oppressed state it cannot be said to promote racial resentment (Lundholm, 2011).

Although students in the MAS program did not define their White peers as oppressors, some in the community did mark Arizona legislators with that title. As a result, members of the Tucson community took it upon themselves to exercise their First Amendment right of protest in support of the program. An organized sit-in, carried out by eighty individuals united against TUSD's decision to end the MAS program, resulted in fifteen people being arrested. Of these fifteen, two were university Ethnic Studies professors, two were community members, eight were former TUSD MAS students (all younger than 26 years old), and three were minors (Otero & Cammarota, 2011). Although the protests failed to reinstate the MAS program, it did encourage people nationwide to explore and discuss Freire's ideals (Otero & Cammarota, 2011).

TO FREIRE OR NOT TO FREIRE?

Di Leo (2011) contends that cultural and critical studies strengthen schools by providing a means of introducing dialogue on race, class, and gender prejudices into the classroom. To prevent students from participating in critical analysis of the world in which they live is both unethical and counter to democratic values. If a teacher shares Di Leo's stance that liberating education is crucial to developing future generations ripe with awareness of social justice, the question then becomes, how can these ideals be taught when one of the topic's seminal texts is deemed controversial to the point of being banned within some American school districts? There are two paths that a teacher can follow to expose their students to the principles discussed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The first option is to utilize Freire's text despite its controversial status. The second option is to teach Freirean principles through a non-banned alternative text.

If a teacher opts to assign *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, students will be exposed to the principles of critical consciousness; however there may be negative consequences that affect the future of his or her career as an educator. Compared to the volume of publications available on intellectual freedom in the post-secondary setting, there is a lack of literature that explores teacher freedom on the secondary level (Dahlgren, 2009). Despite the shortage of publications, court decisions on the topic provide insight on the ambiguity of teacher freedom in the classroom. Supporting teachers' rights, Justice Abe Fortas in *Tinker v. Des Moines* stated, "Students [n]or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (as cited in Wohl, 2008, p. 1287). At the opposite end of the spectrum in the *Mayer v. Monroe County Community Corp.* decision, Judge Easterbrook asserted,

[T]he school system does not "regulate" teachers' speech as much as it hires that speech. Expression is a teacher's stock in trade, the commodity she sells to her employer in exchange for a salary. A teacher hired to lead a social-studies class can't use it as a platform for a revisionist perspective that Benedict Arnold wasn't really a traitor, when the approved program calls him one; a high-school teacher hired to explicate *Moby-Dick* in a literature class can't use *Cry, The Beloved Country* instead, even if Paton's book better suits the instructor's style and point of view; a math teacher can't decide that calculus is more important than trigonometry and decide to let Hipparchus and Ptolemy slide in favor of Newton and Leibniz (as cited in Wohl, 2008, pp. 1307-1308).

Thus the teacher who chooses to pursue teaching Freire directly must consider the possibility that should administrative action be taken against them, the legal pendulum regarding teacher freedom in the classroom may or may not swing in their favor. If found in violation of appropriate professional conduct, the teacher may be subject to varying degrees of administrative repercussions per their system's guidelines (e.g., suspension or termination). While it is noble to stand for one's convictions, the teacher who openly assigns controversial or banned texts, such as Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, must be ready to accept the consequences that may result from their decision.

A second option for educators who wish to teach Freirean principles, without risking the potential fallout of having students read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is to select an alternative publication that encourages classroom discussions regarding the construction of dominant sociopolitical narratives through a critical lens. A substitute text could potentially come from a variety of genres within the realms of nonfiction or fiction; however the use of a text that is already popular within youth culture would be an avenue for increasing the relevance of the concepts for students. Drawing from a constructivist framework, Brooks and Brooks (1993) suggest that students learn best when they see relevance in content

being taught and are able to make personal connections to it (as cited in White & Walker, 2008, p. 101). When an educator incorporates youth culture into their curriculum, they provide students with the opportunity to “locate themselves in history, find their own voices, and establish convictions and compassion necessary for democratic civic courage” (Freire & Giroux, 1989, pp. viii-ix). The use of texts popular within youth culture as an alternative to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* may not only be effective in making Freirean principles accessible and relevant to students, but also allow content to be derived from the students’ view of the world; thereby creating context for critical consciousness leading to alternative ways of understanding social relations (Freire, 2011; Glasgow, 2001).

Popular texts are often written in a manner that reflects the reality students face on a daily basis such as hunger, pain, trials, and loss (Thomas, 2003). In essence, through these texts students are able to see the narrative of their own lives and struggles. Teachers can lecture about the trials students face in their lives, however unless students make these connections for themselves, they will be unlikely to actively pursue personal and societal change. As Freire (2011) states, “No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed... The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption” (p. 54). Thus the popular text becomes a pathway to emotional connections for students that expedites the process of change (White & Walker, 2008).

THE HUNGER GAMES AS AN ALTERNATIVE TEXT

Although there are many texts that could be chosen to introduce students indirectly to Freirean thought, *The Hunger Games* (2008) is notable because it aligns with multiple insights put forth in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Suzanne Collins’ young adult novel has sold over 26 million copies and has a film adaptation that earned more than \$68 million dollars on its opening day in theaters (Simmons, 2012). One needs only to walk into a local department store to find *Hunger Games* books, fan companion guides, magazines, clothing, jewelry, toys, games, soundtracks, DVDs and other associated merchandise. To say that Collins’ text has become a cultural icon among youth would be a great understatement. Translated into twenty-six different languages, Collins’ novel is embedded in the culture of youth around the world, making it accessible to a myriad of ethnicities and backgrounds (von Mossner & Irsmscher, 2012).

The Hunger Games takes place in a dystopian North America, referred to as Panem, in which citizens are organized into 12 Districts that are ruled by the oppressive and dictatorial President Snow in The Capitol. As punishment for a failed rebellion against the government decades earlier, each district must annually offer up two children to barbarically fight to the death in a televised event until only one remains alive. Katniss Everdeen, the heroine of the book, volunteers to take

her young sister's place in the annual games when she is selected by lottery to battle in the arena. Unknowingly, Katniss inspires the oppressed Districts to once again rise up and attempt to overthrow their oppressors in The Capitol; a theme that is introduced in *The Hunger Games* and continued in subsequent novels *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mocking Jay* (2010).

While some have criticized *The Hunger Games* as being too sophisticated and violent for young audiences, it has become "all the rage" among today's youth (Lewis, 2012). Although the plot of the book may be too heavy for the very young to digest, Collins' text would be well suited for the secondary classroom because it was inspired by historical atrocities, abuses of power, and societal ills that are commonly incorporated into standardized curriculum (Blasingame & Collins, 2009).

The teacher who is well versed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* will quickly recognize parallels between the two texts. Many elements from Freire's book are present in *The Hunger Games*; so much so that the two works could be considered complementary. While Simmons (2012) maps out a plethora of social justice elements explored in Collins' series and offers numerous examples of how the oppression experienced in Katniss Everdeen's fictional universe parallel those in the modern world, she does not offer a direct comparison between Collins' and Freire's texts. Contributing to the extant literature on using Collin's novel as a means of teaching social justice in the secondary level classroom, below I will explore several examples from *The Hunger Games* that typify descriptions of the Oppressor-Oppressed relationship as discussed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

OPPRESSOR-OPPRESSED RELATIONSHIPS IN THE HUNGER GAMES

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire provides numerous descriptions of the relationship between oppressors (those who seek to de-humanize) and the oppressed (those who seek to be humanized). In Collin's text, The Capitol and its inhabitants are representative of the oppressors and the 12 Districts are symbolic of the oppressed. Although President Snow's government, which is headquartered in The Capitol, is most directly responsible for carrying out de-humanizing acts against the Districts, the citizens living within its borders fulfill Freire's premise that, "large sectors of the oppressed form an urban proletariat" that "lacks revolutionary consciousness and consider themselves privileged" (Freire, 2011, p.148). Though also living under dictatorial control by President Snow, citizens of The Capitol have been manipulated by the indulgent lifestyles granted to them by the government, to the extent that they generally lack awareness of or concern for the treatment of those in the Districts. In one notable exchange, Peeta, one of the children drafted to fight in the annual Hunger Games, is flabbergasted that while

families in The Districts suffer excruciating famine, citizens of The Capitol are so gluttonous that they take vomit inducing pills in order to eat larger amounts of food.

The irony of widespread starvation among citizens is that The Districts provide agriculture and industry for all of Panem. Each of the 12 Districts specialize in the production of a specific good or service (e.g., District 12 produces coal, District 7 produces lumber, District 9 produces grain, District 11 produces agriculture). Though men, women, and children in The Districts perform back-breaking labor to produce goods and services, they are paid in meager, and often infrequent, rations. Since Panem has a highly centralized economy, all products and means of production are owned by The Capitol. As a result, citizens of The Capitol enjoy the decadence and wealth associated with being the nation's economic epicenter while most citizens in The Districts live in poverty and squalor.

Aligning with Freire's (2011) stance that oppressors are often dependent on the oppressed for their own survival, the previous section showed that in *The Hunger Games*, The Districts are the source of The Capitol's wealth. Should the Districts strike or attempt to overthrow their oppressors, The Capitol would rapidly implode. It is for this reason The Capitol does all it can to stifle any rebellion by The Districts. Throughout Collins' text The Capitol uses several techniques to maintain control over The Districts. As discussed below, many of these strategies (e.g., abuse of science and technology and psychological manipulation) align with descriptions of actions taken by oppressors to maintain dominance over the oppressed in *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*.

Freire (2011) contends that oppressors use, "science and technology as unquestionably powerful instruments for their purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order" (p. 60). In *The Hunger Games*, The Capitol uses numerous technologies to suppress rebellion in The Districts; the two most notable of which are genetically engineered animals called Jabberjays and Tracker-jackers. Jabberjays, were designed to serve as winged recording devices that fly through The Districts spying on citizens, recording their conversations, and reporting findings back to The Capitol. With the assistance of the Jabberjays, The Capitol could eradicate any of The Districts' plans for revolution prior to enactment. While Jabberjays are intended to be tools of espionage, Tracker-jackers, genetically modified wasps, are violent tools of war. These weaponized insects are highly deadly and, like a heat seeking missile, lock on to a target; pursuing them until they are stung. In Collins' text, Tracker-jacker stings are said to "raise a lump the size of a plum on contact" (2008, p. 185), kill many after a single venom injection, and cause survivors to go insane from horrific hallucinations.

While some of the techniques for controlling The Districts utilize science and technology (e.g., Jabberjays and Tracker-jackers) or are cruel and unusual (e.g., chopping out the tongues of protestors and forcing them to become personal ser-

vants in The Capitol), other approaches seek to alter the citizens' view of the world through mental manipulation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2011) speaks of such actions as oppressors' desire for conquest over the oppressed. Through "mythicizing the world" (p.139), oppressors attempt to convince the oppressed that their treatment is not only acceptable, but part of the natural order. In other words, the oppressors utilize psychological techniques (e.g., brainwashing and propaganda) in hopes of eliminating the oppressed's view of themselves as dehumanized. Freire (2011), suggests that this can occur in multiple ways such as banking methods of education (p. 72) and "inoculating individuals with the bourgeois appetite for personal success" (p. 149).

The banking method of education ignores the higher order thinking skills and critical reasoning of the oppressed and instead "makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (p.72). Through this pedagogical strategy, the oppressed forfeit active participation in the learning process and become inactive receivers of information. It is by this technique that oppressors can undertake the process of brainwashing the oppressed by sculpting a dominant narrative reflecting their own goals and intentions. In Panem, this manipulation is displayed through the propaganda distributed to The Districts about the Hunger Games and the previous rebellion. Throughout their lives, citizens of Panem are socialized to the precept that the Hunger Games are a reminder of darker and more turbulent times before The Capitol achieved peace and unity by seizing absolute control over Panem. Each year at The Reaping, the event at which two children from each District are selected by lottery to fight in the Hunger Games, propaganda scripts are read aloud by community leaders to remind The Districts that the annual games are not only intended to preserve peace in Panem but are also, "a time for repentance and a time for thanks" (Collins, 2008, p.19). While some, such as Katniss, refuse to accept the premise that the Hunger Games should be celebrated, others, called Careers, consider participation to be such an honor that they dedicate their entire lives to preparing for battle in the arena.

Why would young men and women devote themselves to learning how to kill their peers? While some are motivated by the desire to honor their Districts through their efforts in the arena, most Careers wish to compete in the Hunger Games in hopes of receiving the fame and fortune generously awarded to victors by The Capitol. Freire (2011) states that oppressors will often manipulate the oppressed with the myth that they can ascend their current position and become a bourgeoisie. In a similar fashion, President Snow successfully appeals to some citizens' carnal desires by showering victors with riches, sending them on luxurious tours of Panem, promising ample rations for their families, and bestowing them with celebrity that surpasses the greatest of rock stars. However, as Freire (2011) states, "In order to have the continued opportunity to express their generosity, the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well" (p.44). Thus, in order for President

Snow to show generosity to one victor, 23 adolescents must die. Despite the odds, there are still those each year who desire to enter the Hunger Games in order to have a chance of going from rags to riches. A quote by President Snow in the film adaptation of *The Hunger Games* expresses this point directly, “Hope. It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous.” (Ross et al., 2012). In essence, President Snow appeals to citizens’ hope for a better life and uses it to subdue opposition to the Games; thereby manipulating citizens of The Districts for the entertainment of the masses.

Not all, however, are willing to allow themselves to be objectified through such psychological manipulation. For example, though Katniss arises from the arena as a victor, it was neither a desire to represent District 12 nor the allure of fame and fortune that sent her to fight in the Hunger Games. Rather, it was out of love for her sister that the heroine volunteers to sacrifice herself. Once in the arena, Katniss displays kindness and humanity to many of her would be assailants by protecting and caring for them; even within the context of a battle to the death. Unknowingly, it is her selfless actions and unwillingness to be manipulated by The Capitol that inspire The Districts to rise up and seek out liberation from their oppressors throughout the rest of Collins’ trilogy.

Although the preceding discussion was not an all-inclusive summary of the numerous parallels between the two texts, the descriptions provided above contain several examples of the ways in which *The Hunger Games* embody concepts from Freire’s text. Due to the manifestation of these principles in Collins’ novel, it is the stance of this author that *The Hunger Games* would serve well as an alternate text for introducing secondary level students to Freirean thought.

CONCLUSION

In wake of the events in Tucson, teachers who wish to teach Freirean principles must choose between assigning his text directly and risk suffering career ending consequences or selecting a replacement text to use in its place. As an alternative means of teaching principles found in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this article has proposed substituting Freire’s text with another book, such as *The Hunger Games*, that is popular within youth culture. The choice to utilize texts popular among youth is a strategic curriculum decision by the teacher meant to build connections between students, their understanding of the world, and intended content. White and Walker (2008) argue that schools need to integrate youth culture into the classroom to increase students’ perception of school as being relevant to their lives. This integration is not an endeavor taken on simply for entertainment purposes, but rather as a “powerful tool for teaching and learning” (White & Walker, 2008, p.94). Whether a teacher uses *The Hunger Games* to teach Freirean principles, *Family Guy* to illustrate ethnic stereotypes, or rap lyrics

to portray minority perceptions of urban hardships, students must understand that there is purpose beyond mere entertainment for incorporating popular culture in the classroom. Teachers must provide opportunities for student dialogue that promotes social justice through popular culture (White & Walker, 2008).

The text through which a teacher introduces critical consciousness does not in and of itself provide liberation, but rather serves as a platform for critical topics to manifest themselves within the classroom. For liberating education to occur, the educator must serve their students in two capacities. First, the teacher must create a classroom environment that encourages students to question societal norms, bring attention to injustices, and openly discuss content as it relates to the multifaceted world in which they live. This duty emphasizes the teacher's responsibility in creating an atmosphere for dialogue to occur among students in their classroom. Liberating education requires students feel that they, with their peers, are the architects of solutions to social injustice (Freire, 2011).

Second, the teacher must serve as a revolutionary leader for their students. The primary responsibility of revolutionary leaders is to help students understand ways in which they are oppressed or oppressing others. The educator who encourages students to recognize oppression in their lives should not themselves become oppressors who rely solely on a teacher-to-student transfer of knowledge in the classroom. Rather, revolutionary teachers and their students should collaboratively construct solutions to societal problems. A cooperative partnership encourages students to move beyond mere passive contemplation to active participation in their development of critical consciousness (Freire, 2011). To develop cooperative partnerships, revolutionary leaders must seek to build positive bonds of trust with their students. Dialogue between students and teachers is critical to the success of a classroom because without open communication, critically liberating education cannot occur (Freire, 2011). As proposed in this paper, the use of popular texts can assist the teacher in achieving these goals.

As a concluding thought, liberation does not occur in a vacuum. Teachers must encourage students to take social justice from the classroom to the outside world. If students do not integrate critical consciousness into their relationships outside of school, Freirean insights become no more transformative than rote memorization of a Shakespearean sonnet or the Pythagorean Theorem. Thus, students need to be aware that the liberation of society does not occur naturally, but rather is dependent on each individual's choice to pursue the establishment of a more just world (Nurenberg, 2011).

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