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# Introduction: Critical Pedagogy "Under the Radar" and "Off the Grid"

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## INTRODUCTION

### CRITICAL PEDAGOGY "UNDER THE RADAR" AND "OFF THE GRID"

TRICIA M. KRESS, DONNA DEGENNARO,  
& PATRICIA PAUGH

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#### HOPE, FAITH, AND FORTITUDE IN HOSTILE TIMES

*Fall 2010:*

*We (Tricia, Donna, and Pat) are beginning to feel restless as our college is in the throws of devising "measurable standards" and, accordingly, "input-output" measurement schemes in preparation for an upcoming TEAC review that looms one year on the horizon. At times together and at times separately, we sit through many meetings about rubrics, e-portfolios, and espoused best practices, feeling antsy and angst-y, not very different from bored high schoolers texting each other in the back of the classroom. After we leave these faculty brainstorming sessions, we enter into our classrooms where we work with pre-service and in-service teachers and administrators, and we introduce them to critical pedagogy. Our students receive the content and pedagogy with mixed reactions. Some feel quite liberated, perhaps vindicated because this is how they had been teaching all along. Others think criticality is "nice, but impractical," and some consider it counter-productive to helping students meet proficiency on standardized math and reading exams. Whichever the case, there seems to be a common sentiment among many of our students that critical pedagogy would be great in an ideal world, but in the "real world" of schools, it simply can't happen because "there just isn't time" or "it doesn't align with the standards" or "it would be seen as insubordination by the administration."*

The University of Massachusetts, Boston, the institution where the three of us work, is an urban public university with a social justice mission. Tricia is an Assistant Professor of Leadership in Education with expertise in critical pedagogy, cultural sociology, and urban education. Donna is an Assistant Professor of Educational Technology, whose research is grounded in cultural sociology, critical pedagogy, and learning sciences. Pat is an Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction whose research explores issues of critical literacy in partnership with urban teachers. Given the parallels between the university's mission and our areas of interest, we should feel perfectly at home here. After all, the University self-identifies as a "model of excellence for urban public universities," and in its mission statement it describes a commitment to serving urban "places, people, culture and issues" through "complex local, national and global connections." The campus culture is described as "encourage[ing] all to negotiate variant perspectives and values, and to strive for open and frank encounters." Its teacher education programs place a majority of student teaching candidates in local public schools in a nearby high-need urban district. The university's and college of education's missions imply the need to prepare administrators and teachers who nurture academic success in these schools, in an environment where differences in perspectives and values across cultures are respected. Yet, we often find ourselves in the position in which our students' required compliance with the licensure completion criteria directly contradicts our goals to prepare students to be intellectuals and conscious citizens.

Nearly all of our students are teachers and administrators in urban public schools, many of which have been struggling for years with performance measures and are under constant scrutiny by the city and state. In addition, in the state of Massachusetts and the city of Boston (and the surrounding metro area) there is incredible linguistic and cultural diversity and some of the finest educational institutions in the world. And yet, the state and city still wrestle with historically embedded structural racism and ethnocentrism, which are evident in de facto segregation (by neighborhood and within schools) (Noguera, 2010), increasing income disparity (see RadioBoston, 2012 and Loveland, Nakosteen, Vaisanen & Williams, 2008), and an orientation toward staunch monolingualism (Gounari, 2006)\*. Boston, where many of our students live and work, was also a pioneer in the charter school, school choice, and public/private partnership movements, which have ignited extensive public debate over the past few years with the release of films like *Waiting for Superman* and *The Lottery*, as well as corresponding critiques by authors like Dianne Ravitch (2011). For better or worse, Massachusetts is often regarded as being on the cutting edge of school reform, yet recently

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\* Massachusetts is one of only three states in the nation with an English only policy in public schools. For more detailed information about this policy see Nieto, D. (2009). A brief history of bilingual education in the United States. *Perspectives in Urban Education*, 61(1), 61-72.

the reason for this is due to its participation in the standardization of schools, promoted by NCLB and now the Race to the Top. Our challenge as educators of school professionals is to raise awareness of how to “strategically align” (Ramirez, 2008) a mission of social justice with the high academic expectations all students deserve while being mindful of, and when possible, pushing back against of these larger movements that impede critical pedagogies from entering the classroom.

This environment is (or at least feels) inhospitable to critical pedagogies. We empathize with our students because we know what it is like to feel marginalized within our professional environments, and we understand our students’ hesitation to change their pedagogy or teach against the grain when they are already overworked and feel hyper-surveilled. But we also have witnessed amazing critical work going on in these very same spaces. For example, Tricia has worked in an after school program with Boston youth who attended a “failing school” by state performance standards, but were conducting sophisticated critical ethnographic research, complete with theoretical frameworks garnered from the works of Bourdieu, Sewell and Foucault (Kress, 2011a, Kress 2011b). Donna continues her work in after school spaces in Boston, the Dominican Republic, and now Guatemala, where youth are active participants in directing their learning by choosing topics in order to begin examining the social, political, and economic realities of their worlds. Pat has worked closely in Boston and Springfield, MA with elementary school teachers who challenge prescriptive mandates with critical literacy curriculum. In these classrooms children are invited to participate in their own learning, with the goal that they will realize full democratic participation in society (Paugh, Carey, King-Jackson & Russell, 2007; Paugh, Abbate-Vaughn & Rose, in press). Despite what many say is possible or impossible within this climate, critical pedagogies are happening “under the radar,” undetected during the school day when the teacher’s door is closed (as in Pat’s work), and “off the grid” in out of school spaces that offer more freedom and autonomy for teachers and students to engage in critical work (as in Tricia’s and Donna’s work). This edition is the result of our desire to share examples of critical pedagogies that are currently going on, not just being theorized about, in schools and in the larger community.

We recognize that the phrases “under the radar” and “off the grid” connote a militaristic feel which some of our readers may find distasteful; thus they deserve a bit of discussion, particularly given the present time of perpetual war around the globe. As we put forth this edition, we do not take these terms and their connotations lightly. In fact, we believe that what is happening in public schools in the U.S. and around the world, especially in institutions populated by minoritized students, also constitutes a battle, the outcome of which may have dire consequences. We are not alone in our beliefs; there are many scholars who have expressed similar concerns (e.g., HarvardEducation, 2010; Morrell & Noguera,

2011). For some students the education they receive (or don't) may very well have life or death consequences. For example, as the demand for unskilled labor in the U.S. is declining, young men who drop out of high school have a greater chance of being incarcerated than those who don't (Dillon, 2009). Furthermore, according to Meara, Richards and Cutler (2000), "In 2000, life expectancy for a twenty-five-year-old with a high school diploma or less was fifty years. For a person with some college, life expectancy was nearly fifty-seven years" (p. 353). For Black men, the numbers were significantly lower at 42 years and 50 years respectively. Ten years later, these numbers still hold. U.S. Surgeon General Regina Benjamin in a radio interview in 2011 stated, "The United States' death rate is two-and-a-half times higher for those who do not receive a high school education." According to Layton (2012), the rate of high school graduates in the U.S. is rising, but the difference in degree completion between ethnic groups remains severe, with Latino and Black students graduating at significantly lower rates than White and Asian students\*. Despite the rhetoric about the standardization and high stakes testing push of NCLB and Race to the Top helping our students who are most in need, inequities in educational attainment, and the resulting life consequences, still mimic previous historical trends.

Greunewald (2003) explains, "current educational discourses seek to standardize the experience of students from diverse geographical and cultural places so that they may compete in the global economy" (p. 7). However, proponents of critical "place-based" pedagogies, argue that these unidimensional "learn to earn" policies (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000, p. 4) limit students' access to exploring the range of meanings inherent in the relationships between their local situations and those in the larger world. The result actually creates barriers to accessing the types of understandings and education students need to productively participate in the public domains of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With this in mind, our institutions of learning are indeed social battlegrounds, and we do not suggest that educators enter into critical pedagogy haphazardly. Rather, we propose that teaching critically in any environment (hostile or amiable) involves tactic and strategy. It involves knowing when, where, and how to be critical. It involves picking the right battles, carving out spaces for dialogue, and engaging in tough conversations. In *The Revolution of Hope*, Frankfurt School theorist Erich Fromm (1968), whose work informed Paulo Freire's conceptualization of critical pedagogy, proposed that social change that brings about greater harmony and aliveness in people is born from hope, faith, and fortitude. "Hope," he wrote, "is *paradoxical*. It is neither passive waiting nor is it forcing unrealistic circumstances that cannot occur" (p. 9). To have faith in others is to trust in them and their humanity, and fortitude is "the capacity to

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\* According to Layton (2012), "graduation rates vary by race, with 91.8 percent of Asian students, 82 percent of whites, 65.9 percent of Hispanics and 63.5 percent of blacks graduating on time."

say ‘no’ when the world wants to hear ‘yes’” (p. 15). This edition highlights the work of scholar-practitioners who demonstrate hope as they bring about change in their corners of the world, whether in the classroom with the door closed or outside of traditional school structures. It features educators who have faith in themselves and the students with whom they work. It encourages us to be critical educator-activists who bravely say “no” when it seems the world wants to hear “yes” to deficient views of students and teachers, made manifest in high-stakes testing and hyper-standardization.

## OVERVIEW OF THE EDITION

The articles in this edition offer hope, faith, and fortitude by providing explicit evidence of educational practices that validate the experiences of non-dominant communities and challenge oppressive, hegemonic ideologies and social structures. Such practices achieve a critical pedagogy where community members develop agency to renegotiate power arrangements and change circumstances of marginalization. As a collection, these articles demonstrate that critical pedagogy can and does happen in multiple places and with various populations, despite the present inhospitable climate.

### *Infiltrating the Grid and Reorganizing from Within (by Patricia Paugh)*

In the articles by Scorza, Mirra, and Morrell and by Britt and Rudolph, the authors share evidence of four school related settings, two in the U.S. and two in Australia, where students are repositioned as agents within a curriculum that challenges their learning and their agency. My own work with U.S. urban schools at the elementary level mirrors the problems, challenges, and solutions posed by these authors which result from asking, “How does critical pedagogy support curriculum where democratic participation is a valued goal?” while also asking, “How can critical pedagogy embrace high academic expectations for communities of students who have not had access to challenging curriculum?” What was compelling in these two articles, and where they inform teachers in today’s schools, is that this work was accomplished within the school day. It is attractive and often only possible to pursue critical work outside of schooling—in afterschool or community oriented settings. But to explore these questions with teachers and students, within schools under pressures to conform to current neo-liberal accountability pressures, is important work. Students spend such a large percentage of their time literally and figuratively within the “walls” of schooling; discovering how to “infiltrate the grid” as well as operate without is what these two articles offer.

Scorza et al. worked with high school youth in urban settings. Two programs involve students from groups who are traditionally written off as failures within current school cultures. Both programs develop communities of practice focused

on urban youth empowerment as researchers. One of the programs specifically focused on African American males. The key to effective change was respecting students enough to place them in positions of power and teaching them the tools of researching social conditions, while also challenging them to full academic learning. Students read powerful social theory as part of their school curriculum, engaged in research within their communities and then presented this research to adult professional audiences. Students' reflections, shared in the chapter, demonstrate powerful uses of critical forms of literacy, that is, reading and writing to effect social change.

Britt and Rudolph share research and teaching in two elementary level schools that draw from Reggio Emilio and Rudolph Steiner, both educational philosophers who respect student participation in planning and enacting curriculum. The authors utilize a framework which "trusts children to think" to demonstrate an example of building on children's perspectives to create conditions inclusive of diverse learners. As in the Scorza et al. chapter, educators address social and academic learning simultaneously. In the authors' words, they explore the "murky spaces" between "outcomes based" curriculum and allowing for productive "uncertainty" that accompanies emergent project based curriculum. Britt and Rudolph then use the reflections of students and parents as evidence of what is possible when educators create new "lines of flight" that "reterritorialize" schools to infiltrate the grid in order to reorganize it from within.

### *Social Justice and Democratic Participation in the Urban Classroom and Beyond (by Tricia Kress)*

The next three articles (Schultz, McSurley & Salguero; Simmons, Carpenter, Ricks, Walker, Davis & Parks; and Adams & Gupta) address teaching and learning for democratic participation and social justice in formal and informal urban education settings. In each piece, we see into the lifeworlds of teachers and students as they seek to make learning relevant and meaningful for students who have been historically marginalized in U.S. institutions of education. In these articles, we encounter the stories of urban educators and youth engaging in social justice work inside and outside the classroom. The authors provide us with insights into questions such as, "How do teachers of urban youth from disenfranchised communities teach for social justice?" "How do these teachers negotiate rigid structures, subvert administrative oppression and renegotiate power in the classroom?" and "How do youth and teachers understand themselves as social actors inside and outside of school?" In the findings, we are presented with visions of possibility and change as the teachers exploit and subvert oppressive top-down mandates, while the youth build confident identities around science outside of school, which they utilize to change oppressive learning environments inside of schools.

Through narrative inquiry, Schultz et al. present author McSurley's experience "teaching in the cracks" in an urban school by using a Social Action Curriculum Project (SACP) to engage students in "both democratic processes and experiential learning while also meeting [mandated] standards and benchmarks." SCAP is problem-based learning in which students identify an issue in their community and then work toward an action plan that could potentially resolve the issue. To make the curriculum align with the mandated standards, the teacher allows students to participate in designing the curriculum and then maps the curriculum backwards to match the mandated standards. The article shows how teachers can find a point of entry into topics that are immediately relevant to students and how students can learn to engage in democratic participation through experience, despite an unwelcoming standardized climate.

Simmons et al. use phenomenology to share the experiences of African American male teachers using hip hop in their classrooms in two urban schools (1 high school, 1 K-8). The authors convey how the teachers in the study felt caught between doing what they felt was right and what the administration said was right. All of the teachers expressed a desire to teach in order to give back to their communities, continue in the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement, and work towards social justice. Using hip hop was a means of not only teaching literacy, academic content, and critical thinking, but also, in the tradition of hip hop as resistance, of defying administrative pressures towards conformity and raising students' social consciousness in an effort to "prepare their African American students in their urban classrooms for 'survival in the real world.'"

In Adams and Gupta, we turn our attention to the perspectives of high school and college-aged New York City youth who are employed as "Explainers" at the New York Hall of Science (NYHS). As co-researchers with the authors, the youth Explainers video recorded a series of cogenerative dialogues (group conversations) in which they discussed their identity development around science in their role as Explainers (teachers of visitors) at the NYHS. Through their descriptions, the youth demonstrate the ways in which science in school can be alienating and disconnected from their lives; whereas, at NYHS, the youth are invested in science through teaching others, and they see "the work of the Explainers as an endeavor, a contribution to society." In this context, we see the potential of youth who typically find themselves on the periphery in the classroom as they build confident, hybrid science identities that open new ways of envisioning themselves in the present and future.

### *Engaging Youth as Critical Change Agents (by Donna DeGennaro)*

The chapters by Smith and Guerrero, Gastambide, and Fernandez take place in very different contexts (Smith's work took place in a suburban middle school in the U.S. behind closed doors; while Guerrero et al.'s work is in a high school in



Canada and takes place in the media spotlight); yet both articles provide insight into how the authors engage youth as active agents in critical education. Specifically, they illustrate the successes and challenges of working with youth to craft sophisticated, rigorous, and relevant learning designs that are often difficult to implement in standards based education settings. In each case, the researchers made connections to the current curricular expectations as outlined by U.S. (in Smith) or Canadian (in Guerrero et al.) standards, including required content and/or skills such as problem solving and personal research. Working within these structures was possible, yet there were still challenges in terms of parental, administrative and/or public understanding of the process. While we typically think of authority figures as creating most of the tensions in successful implementation of critical pedagogies, the authors also share the conflicts that emerged in students', as well as in their own, participation. The overarching messages that emerge from the two pieces are: there is no one definition of critical pedagogy or its practice; as critical educators, we must be mindful of ourselves in relation to those with whom we work; and we must be careful not to impose our own agenda while doing this work. Through a narrative approach punctuated by reflective vignettes, Smith provides his readers with a window into his daily practices as a technology teacher in a suburban middle school. This piece is unique in this collection because it shows what happens when critical pedagogy is introduced in a context where standardization is fully embraced because the students perform well under this model, and their high test scores are a badge of honor for the school district. Smith's article shows his work with suburban (mostly White and privileged) students as they are encouraged to critically unpack issues that are taboo in this context, including racism, classism, and heteronormativity. He reveals, from the teacher's perspective, the successes and challenges of teaching critically "behind closed doors" in a hostile environment, and offers hope that, while certainly difficult, critical pedagogy in these types of contexts is not only possible but very necessary.

Guerrero, et al. present an interesting counter-case in this edition by asking, "What happens when critical pedagogy is *not* kept under the radar and off the grid and instead takes center stage in the public eye?" This work provides a window into how the authors (high school teachers and university faculty) collaborated to endeavor into a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project with high school aged Latina/o youth in Toronto, Canada. Particularly impactful in this piece are the struggles that emerged as a result of critical pedagogy being in the public eye. The authors note the challenges that public scrutiny brings to the critical learning environment when outsiders and the media perpetuate raced, classed and gendered stereotypes despite the teachers' and students' attempts to create liberating, democratic learning environments.

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