

SELF, PATTI LAMB, Ph.D. How Can Teachers Teach for Social Justice within the Confines of the No Child Left Behind Era? An Inquiry into Tensions between Classroom Teachers and Mandated Curriculum and Methodologies. (2013)

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The purpose of this study is to observe and explore the increasing tensions between kindergarten through eighth grade classroom teachers and the obstacles that prevent their ability to teach for social justice. Through research and reflection, these obstacles emerge as themes: race; extraneous jobs and responsibilities of teachers; teachers as intellectuals or automatons; standardized testing; affluence, privilege and unwanted populations. Also, the purpose of the research is to discover ways to circumnavigate the oppression teachers bear from the inability of systems, administrators and legislators to take into account student worth beyond a test score.

Careful journaling spanning ten years of classroom work in elementary and middle school grades was the data used in the research. Utilizing journals and various forms of correspondence and note-taking, this investigation demonstrates what is required of classroom teachers and the reaction to more and more demands being made on their time with students.

The research indicated that standardized testing, data collection and the dehumanization of students and deskilling of teachers continues to grow each year exacerbated by less funding and less autonomy of the teacher in the classroom.

Key Words: Praxis, critical pedagogy, conscientization, critical theory, Common Core, No Child Left Behind, standardized testing, high stakes testing, deskilling, ESOL, ESL, autoethnography, Freire, hope, poverty, racism

HOW CAN TEACHERS TEACH FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WITHIN THE CONFINES
OF THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ERA? AN INQUIRY INTO TENSIONS
BETWEEN CLASSROOM TEACHERS AND MANDATED
CURRICULUM AND METHODOLOGIES

by

Patti Lamb Self

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Approved by

H. Svi Shapiro
Committee Chair

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I dedicate this dissertation to all the teachers in elementary and middle schools who don't just read about education but who live it, endure it, love it, and understand the growing difficulties of teaching critically. You are the backbone of this democracy we call the United States. Never give up.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by PATTI LAMB SELF has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School of The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

H. Svi Shapiro

Committee Members

William Hamilton

Glenn Hudak

Leila Villaverde

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is much talk among social theorists about the death of politics and the inability of human beings to imagine a more equitable and just world in order to make it better. I would hope that educators, of all groups would be the most vocal and militant in challenging this assumption by making clear that the heart of any form of inclusive democracy is the assumption that learning should be used to expand the public good, create a culture of questioning, and promote democratic social change. (Giroux, 2004)

Classroom teachers face a barrage of obstacles daily; meetings, paperwork, behavior issues, parents, bureaucratic demands, emails, phone calls, inadequate facilities, insufficient funding and more recently, standardized assessments and “packaged” curriculum. Energetic, creative, compassionate, and scholarly teachers are churned through our educational system at an astonishing rate, chewed up and spit out by the ever-increasing demands of a system and bureaucracy that does not understand – or has forgotten - that education should be about the lifelong joy of learning. Like their adult counterparts, student “success” and ultimate “worth” is measured by a single numerical accounting – adults’ reflected by a bank balance, students’ by a test score. Even more problematic is the lack of critical thinking skills nurtured to connect new knowledge with students’ reality. This disconnect between perceived reality and possible reality creates a gap in the ability for students to analyze their own circumstances and ultimately make future positive change.

I was older when I became a teacher, twenty years after earning undergraduate degrees in other areas. Life experience prior to entering the classroom made me more adept at understanding the value of critical thinking skills. My perspective was that of a single mother and former business owner in somewhat diminished circumstances after an acrimonious divorce. My new career as a teacher came at a time when I was most vulnerable and acutely aware of the importance of common sense and street savvy. Additionally, I had come from a family who succeeded by all standards with little formal education. My grandmother was illiterate, absent from education because she was a “mill girl” at the turn of the century, one of the marginalized poor. She was cheap labor, oppressed by cotton mill owners turning larger profits at the expense of her childhood; yet, she possessed a wealth of knowledge and artistic talent. Because of her, I do not see “empty vessels” (Lightfoot, 2004) devoid of knowledge when I look at children two years behind their grade level or middle school children whom cannot read. Long before I learned about “funds of knowledge” and “family assets” (Gonzalez et al., 1995, pp. 446-7) in my doctoral program, I understood the intelligence and worth of my grandmother and those like her. It is this compassion and understanding the stores of knowledge students possess that lie at the very heart of critical pedagogy and social justice. This is where my understanding of critical pedagogy and social justice began.

My objective as a new teacher was to see my students not only survive the system, but *thrive*; a goal I did not envision achieved through rote learning and standardized testing. As I relive these early teaching experiences through my journals and correspondence, I observe my initial (and complete) lack of theoretical knowledge

and an abundance of desire and frustration all new teachers experience as they struggle to acquire teaching skills. I also see how my understanding of “critical thinking” evolved from problem solving to reflection-based analysis, learning to question and eventually teach my students to question, reflect, and analyze as well.

I became an educator as a “lateral entry” teacher, a person who chooses to pursue teaching as a second career. I completed the state-required course work and earned a teaching license at a time when there was a significant teacher shortage. I entered the classroom ill-prepared for reality. I had not completed a supervised student-teaching internship, nor had I worked as a substitute teacher – in other words, I had never been in charge of a classroom of children, much less been commissioned to actually teach them something. My first job was located at what the district referred to as one of the most “highly impacted” elementary schools in the entire county-wide system. I was so desperate for a job; I did not take the time to investigate exactly what “highly impacted” actually meant. It did not take me long to work out the details. This elementary school was in one of the most urban, low-socioeconomic locations in the county. Because their test scores had been consistently below the federal satisfactory benchmark, state-appointed educator/coaches had been assigned to assist teachers with curriculum and teaching strategies.

Again, being so completely new to this field of work, I took no umbrage at having these unwelcomed guests in my classroom as most of the teachers viewed the state workers; I was just happy to have additional assistance. I filled in for a third grade teacher on maternity leave and taught from February until the school year ended the

following June. In those four months, I learned – in the most experiential way – about culture, class, and race, and how they shape the teaching and learning process. This experience, or “trial by fire,” as I have often referred to it, provided a base from which all my future teaching assignments would be measured. It created a foundation for the way I knew I wanted to teach and interact with my students. Journal entries I made during this short period of time reflect what every new, passionate teacher experiences: a combination of elation and utter despair.

After nine years as a classroom teacher, six simultaneously as a graduate student, I have a unique opportunity in this dissertation to analyze my own intellectual journey and juxtapose glimpses of my daytime practice as a teacher in the classroom with my evening graduate studies saturated in theory. At the time, practice and theory were worlds apart for me and a constant source of frustration as I sought to find a balance between the two, feeling I was torn between the “how it should be done” and “how it actually is done” in the classroom. From this autobiographical stance, I offer readers an opportunity to observe a new teacher with little more than desire and instinct evolve and begin to understand the complexities of students, and the impact teachers can foster based on the pedagogical choices they make and ultimately praxis. Additionally, this is an opportunity to observe lived critical theory – one person’s “conscionization,” (my own) and the wide-spread implications of it as I experience it, create it for my own students, and reflect on it.

Concern

Since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, K-8 schools in the United States have moved farther and farther away from teaching students to think and

learn in a critical way. While the curriculum content may not have dramatically changed, the pedagogy has. Emphasis placed solely on math and reading skills taught by rote learning has sped up the already deteriorating process of simply learning to *think and question*. Educators, in the school system's effort to synchronize quarterly testing, are literally required to be on the same page as the other teachers in their grade and content area. This leaves little room for creative thought, extending lessons and connecting them to students' experiences and interests. Given this bleak analysis of scripted teaching in order to raise test scores and eliminate achievement gaps, it is very difficult to be an agent of change. As a middle grades social studies teacher, I am constantly trying to find ways to interest students in learning, engage them in critical thought and questioning, and at the same time teach in a way that brings cultural relevance to the classroom. Henry Giroux (2006) instructs us to assume the responsibility of connecting our work to larger social issues, "teach students to be resilient against defeat, analyze social problems" and learn how to make a difference as social agents (p. 185).

But how can teachers do this with both hands tied behind our back as a result of the constrictions of our current methodology, policy, and bureaucracy? Tan (2009) would advise "determination, planning and the courage to try" (p. 490). This advice has served me (and my students, I hope) well during my tenure as an elementary and middle school teacher. Educators have to look beyond the standard curriculum to fight systematic oppression. Kumashiro (2008) emphasizes the destructive strength of doing nothing and contends that often times oppression is not what the teacher *does*, but what

they *don't* do (p. 82). Modifying units of study by critically framing the lessons is one way of advocating for social justice in the classroom.

The topic of education is an emotional issue this 2012 presidential election year. Mitt Romney, the likely Republican nominee, recently delivered a speech and allowed that some children in this country currently receive a “third-world education.” As two pundits argued over the progress and shortfalls of prior administrations’ efforts to improve education, one emerged with a hopeful comment: *children learn from people they love*. If there is no relationship between student and teacher, there is no learning. No amount of testing or accountability measures will matter. In other words, we have to start teaching in a holistic, critical fashion that addresses the whole child. Students must learn to think independently and critically assess their own intellectual journey and their social reality in order to improve or make changes in the future. This is why an inquiry about the actual day-to-day classroom is essential. Additionally, questions should be raised about the meaning of “success” for students and teachers.

Obstacles

At the heart of most teachers lies a desire to make the world a better place. The expression “children are our future” may be trite, but true; regardless, this is why teachers teach. We see our students as hope for a more just tomorrow. On the surface, we see a complex, diverse population of children in our classrooms. If asked to identify the “oppressed” populations in any given classroom, one might generally point out the obvious disheveled poor and perhaps those children whose first language is not English. However, from a critical stance I have discovered it is not just the children in the lower

socioeconomic groups who are oppressed. Many of the advantaged middle and upper middle class children are oppressed by the pressure they are under from parents and society. This is a socially competitive game of “one-upsmanship” on the part of parents who seem to be more interested in building an impressive academic resume for their child than nurturing the actual ability to learn and process information and indulge in natural curiosity. The first step to teaching critical pedagogy is to get the students – whoever they may be – young, old, poor, middle class, etc. – to understand their reality in relation to the world, then to discover their possibilities and potential. This is my goal as a teacher, to be a catalyst for this awakening. Students’ worlds open up when they realize they are no longer “peasants,” pawns of society where they have no power or say, but captains - or at the very least - participants, in their own destiny.

Classroom teachers face many challenges in their quest to get the students to see the “big picture.” Among many others, mandatory standardized testing, packaged curriculum, and an uneven distribution of power are three broad categories that require the attention of administrators and legislators.

Standardized Testing

My teaching career and the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) began simultaneously. Prior to analysis, the idea of NCLB appears sound. The law was initiated (or at least promoted) to ensure populations foundering in the educational system are not passed over and moved silently along until virtually illiterate students finally graduate – if they have not already dropped out - and sent off into the world. NCLB legislation implemented levels of accountability, providing a way to test

and measure learning, achievement, and school performance. Schools that measure up are rewarded, schools that do not are punished. Parents whose children attend low-performing schools are notified and can move their children to higher-performing schools. In addition, federal funds are taken away and teachers and administrators can lose their jobs (Salas, 2010, pp. 221-222).

Unfortunately, NCLB assessments have become the tail that wags the dog. Clarity on paper, much like pure theory, does not translate well when the human component is introduced. Children (and teachers) are not black and white commodities that can be measured. The objective to “achieve” (score well) replaced the objective to educate children. Testing determines how entire schools select their curriculum, materials, schedules, faculty, and budgets. Unfortunately, students often base their self-esteem on the scores as well. Salas highlights this when she writes, “A narrow, obsessive focus on standardized tests can dumb down the curriculum and make school a boring, lifeless place for both students and teachers” (p. 222). Teachers are pressured to turn courses into a “memory Olympics,” unable to spend the time required to probe beneath the headlines of history (Bigelow, 2010, p. 173).

Clearly, this is not the vision foundational critical theorists John Dewey or Paulo Freire worked to achieve in education, not only in lack of rich content, but in the social development of the students. Dewey’s vision of education in the United States reflected his pragmatic philosophy. He believed the whole child should be involved in education - head *and* heart - and be active participants in their learning, reaching their full potential under the watchful facilitation of the teacher. Dewey also saw education as a vehicle for

social change. He writes, “to prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities” (Dewey, 1987, p. 6).

Dewey regarded education as way to satisfy life-long curiosity that is never extinguished: education was meant to instill a love of learning, not drill and train workers. I agree with Kohn (2004) when he writes, “Dewey reminded us that the goal of education is more education. To be well educated, then, is to have the desire as well as the means to make sure that learning never ends” (p. 10). Of teachers, Dewey writes, “It is his business to arrange for the kind of experiences which while they do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities” (p. 19).

Dewey encouraged what would later be referred to as critical pedagogy, a concept furthered by Paulo Freire in the 1970s as a way to teach students to question, make connections to their learning from their own experiences, and be able to change their reality. Freire coined the term “banking method,” finally giving a name to the Traditionalists’ methodology of simply drilling unrelated facts into students. The name was a metaphor for the “depositing” of information by the teacher into the students. Not only does this imply that the student is just an empty vessel with no experience to share or relate to, but also this lack of questioning and critically analyzing what they were learning was a detriment to the students’ social development. The way that Freire (1974) describes it, “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (p. 73). The more the students passively receive the

“deposits,” the more they “tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (p.73).

The intersectionality of Dewey’s experiential, child-centered methodology and Freire’s critical pedagogy, learning by doing and constantly questioning, is an ideal framework for educating students. A larger discussion of Dewey, Freire, and other critical theorists will be continued in chapter two.

It is difficult for a person unfamiliar with our current school systems to comprehend just how problematic this competition for scores has become. A list of assessments given to a *kindergarten* class 2008-2009 in Milwaukee public schools clarifies:

- Milwaukee Public Schools’ 5-Year-Old Kindergarten Assessment (completed three times a year)
- On the Mark Reading Verification Assessment (completed three times a year)
- A monthly writing prompt focused on different strands of the Six Traits of Writing
- 28 assessments measuring key early reading and spelling skills
- Chapter pre- and post-tests for all nine math chapters completed
- Three additional assessments for each math chapter completed
- A monthly math prompt
- Four Classroom Assessments Based on Standards (CABS) per social studies chapter (20 total)
- Four CABS assessments per science chapter (20 total) Four CABS assessments per health chapter (20 total)
- Four benchmark assessments beginning in 2010 – 2011 school year
- Marzano vocabulary tests (McMahon, 2010, p. 214)

The demands made on these five-year-olds are unconscionable. There appears to be no concern for the social and emotional development of these children and their natural

wonder and curiosity. Without the opportunity to interact with their classmates in structured and unstructured play, “students are losing out on situations that allow them to learn to problem-solve, share, explore, and deepen their learning” (McMahon, 2010, p. 216). When my son was young, I observed that he often learned through play. This is one reason why I became a teacher, just seeing the excitement in an ah-ha moment. I feel that Dewey (1997) is saying the same thing when he writes:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur? (pp. 48-49)

The effect of NCLB is killing the natural curiosity and wonder of our students the moment they walk into the kindergarten classroom. We are trading their “souls” for test scores. Students need to be excited about what they are learning, and the research strongly suggests that “that’s less likely to happen when students are led to focus on getting A’s” (Kohn, 2004, p. xiii). Additionally, under the federal mandates, grades three and five are so-called “gateway years.” Students in grades three and five are tested at the end of the year under the threat of not being promoted to the next grade if their scores are not high enough. The stress and tension these students are subjected to result in children throwing up before and sometimes during the test. Some children are so anxious; they suffer from insomnia which exacerbates the problem when they literally fall asleep while taking the test. To add insult to injury, these unknowing children will be promoted

regardless of their scores. After all of the hype and tension and angst, all of the children will be promoted. This is why I have 8th grade students in my classroom today who cannot read. It is difficult not to be sarcastic about the title of the legislation that requires these useless standardized tests. The process of moving children through the system in such a fashion gives a whole new meaning to “no child left behind.”

Packaged Curriculum

As in industry, the price of worship at the altar of efficiency is the alienation of the worker from his work – where continuity and wholeness of the enterprise are destroyed for those who engage in it. (Kliebard, 1975, p. 66)

Current methods of “teaching to the test” are detrimental to the future of our students. If the political objective of education in this country is to compete globally, then critical thinking, problem-solving, and a multicultural curriculum should be at the root of the objective, not accumulating bits and pieces of disconnected facts about the world. We need a multicultural curriculum, “one that describes and attempts to explain the world as it really exists; speaks to the diversity of our society and our students; and aims not only to teach important facts, but also to develop citizens who can make the world safer and more just” (Bigelow, 2010, p. 170). Instead, as Au (2011) asserts, the principles of scientific management are applied “within the structure, organization, and curriculum of public schools, much like was done in the early 1900s” (p. 25). Au likens this shift to packaged curriculum, along with the inevitable standardized tests in education, to a business model whereby a more efficient form of production could be

achieved by viewing students as “raw materials,” teachers as “workers” and administrators as “managers” (p. 27).

Lecturer and later Instructor of School Administration, John Franklin Bobbitt was a pioneer of scientific curriculum at the University of Chicago in 1910 (Au, 2011, p. 26). In Au’s (2011) article, he mentioned Bobbitt’s 1912 ‘The Elimination of Waste in Education’ as a means of jump starting his career in the field of curriculum (Kliebard, 2004). As the title suggests, Bobbitt states that education for the sake of education is a waste because it should be based on a factory model of work, as many people felt at that time of the industrial revolution:

...the subjects of study would no longer be the central feature of the curriculum; they became relegated to the status of the means by which objectives...would be achieved. (1912, p. 142)

In other words, curriculum could be broken down into small units of work that could be “standardized, determined in advance, taught in a linear manner, and easily assessed” (Au, 2011, p. 28). This began the top-down management style of education where power was usurped from teachers. This also “greatly affected the relationships of teachers and students to the process of education: it dehumanized their relationship to teaching and students by alienating them from their own creativity and intellectual curiosity” (Kliebard, 1975a, 2011 p 28).

With standardized tests come standardized curriculum and pedagogy, moving the teacher/student relationship even further apart. Many experienced teachers in their complete frustration often ask “what do they need me for?” If I am not valued as an

educator, if our curriculum is scripted and programmed on a strict schedule, why not utilize technology instead of teachers? Why does the state not save astronomical amounts of money on salaries, transportation, and the physical plant of the school, keep students at home and simply broadcast the lessons via cable TV or internet? This teacher resentment is fueled by the failure of legislators and administrators to see and appreciate the value of the individual teacher, the art of teaching, and the skills that can only be honed by years of experience and time with children in the classroom; the *craft* of teaching. This NCLB type of teaching commodifies students, teaching, and education, and, Au explains:

...through this commoditization, standardization enables systems of education to be construed as systems of commerce operating along the logics of capitalist production which require products to be made, assessed, compared, and exchanged on the market. (Brosio, 1994)

Au further argues, “The value of teachers, students, and schools is measured and compared ‘vis-à-vis the tests’ (Au, 2011, p. 38).

Teachers in North Carolina today might be surprised to discover that the highly debated “pay for performance” model now in what was thought to be its infancy stages was actually implemented as early as 1913. Au states that principals and other administrators used test results to weed out the “good” from the “bad” teachers.” Their pay was adjusted according to their “production” success. Also, standards-based curriculum currently used was developed because teachers were not thought capable enough to determine what and how subjects would be taught, something Giroux (2004)

and Shannon (1987, 1989) both refer to as the “deskilling” of teachers. In addition to mandated testing, many teachers (usually in low-performing schools) are required to use pre-packaged scripted curricula specifically aimed at increasing the test scores of low-performing student populations. Generally, they require “no creative input or decision-making on the part of the teachers, literally providing verbal scripts that define and limit what teachers can say as they teach” (Giroux, 2004, p. 32). This is when and where deskilling most often occurs, when teachers are required to “invest the bulk of their time, energy, and resources in a mandated curriculum that is not their own” (Crawford, 2004, p. 206). In the same book, Kanpol notes, “deskilling is at its peak when teachers lack autonomy over teaching and decision making processes” (Crawford, 2004, p. 206).

In the wake of the Federal No Child Left Behind legislation, parents and educators in the United States are currently being introduced to the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Sponsored by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), Common Core was presented in 2009 as an effort to “provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them” (retrieved from www.corestandards.org on September 10, 2012). Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are supposed to “move classroom teaching away from rote memorization and testing, and toward analytical thinking” (Hancock, 2012, p. 1). Ukiah [California] Unified School District Assistant Superintendent Linda Denton explains in the Hancock article:

We’re looking for a deeper understanding, not just memorization. With No Child Left Behind there was so much for kids to memorize. Children are now being

asked to support their answer. It entails more critical thinking. It's not about giving the answer teachers want to hear, but rather explain and support the answer – how you solved it and the thinking process used. (p. 1)

The assistant superintendent, Denton, supports CCSS because, she states, it allows educators to focus on learning and instruction instead of test taking. She states, “This type of teaching looks different than the type of teaching we’re used to” (Hancock, 2012, p.1). Teachers and administrators are being told CCSS allows for more critical thinking and fewer tests; however, the Obama administration steered \$350 million into helping states create new tests (Klein, 2012, p.1). Clearly standardized tests are here to stay.

Additionally, classroom teachers are being told they will have more autonomy with this initiative, but so far teachers are even more restricted to standardized curriculum. The idea, teachers have been told, among other “positives,” is to allow a child from one state who moves across the country to essentially pick right up where she left off in her former classroom. Her social studies and language arts lessons in North Carolina will dovetail with the lesson she will have when she enrolls into her new school in California or Nevada or Maine. We can hear the happy administrator announce “We will all be on the same page!” Certainly an analyst or education consultant over large numbers of school systems and students find this notion ideal. Why would a teacher/parent/student *not* desire such a seamless curriculum?

However, any classroom teacher with over one hundred students on their team will tell you without blinking an eye: this will not work. Children are not all the same. Children do not learn at the same pace or in the same way. They are not machines.

Students are excited about different things at different times. For example, most years teaching the Bill of Rights in 8th grade social studies, the students are enthralled. They love learning about their rights.

Instead of memorizing the first ten amendments, giving a ten-question fill-in-the-blank assessment and moving on, I supplement the curriculum with actual Supreme Court cases and the students, with a partner, have to determine why the case should be heard or not and tell me why. I had my most challenging students – behaviorally, emotionally, and intellectually – working with no interruptions, completely enthralled and engaged in the subject. Needless to say, this lesson required more time than the two days allotted for the subject. Why would I gloss over a subject as important as their rights in order to be on the same page as a student in California learning about the Oregon Trail, barely scratching the surface of any of the subjects we are required to cover? Current issues that affect their lives – gun control and freedom of speech – are subjects critical teachers live for. Pushing a rigid agenda of the curriculum on teachers encourages rote learning and easy-to-grade assessments. It is wrong. (Klein, 2012, p. 1)

Uneven Distribution of Power and Social Capital: Meet the Parents

Studies show that Americans generally believe that responsibility for their accomplishments rests on their individual efforts. Less than one-fifth see race, gender, religion, or class as very important for ‘getting ahead in life. (Lareau, 2003, p. 7)

The population of students at my school formed a binary. Students were commonly described overall as either belonging to the “haves,” advantaged students

within walking distance of the school, and the “have nots,” those bussed from small, crowded apartments and government housing. Lightfoot (2004) refers to the perception of parents and their involvement as “vessels,” with some parents as “full receptacles, overflowing with resources and energy,” and others as “empty vessels who cannot help their children until filled with outside knowledge” (p. 93). This was the scenario at my school.

Lightfoot and others describe the power relations implicit in common conceptions of parental involvement. Lareau (2003) argues that the term “parental involvement” as used by schools “implies middle-class cultural capital in a way that implicitly defines lower income parents as deficient when they do not meet the schools’ expectations” (p. 1987) and creates an “ideal type” of parent (p. 1993), which is linked to both race and class (Lightfoot, p. 96). These privileged “full vessels,” while civil and even polite to the “empty vessels,” took on a patriarchal role, smiling, nodding, eager to donate clothes, books, and supplies yet took on a much more aggressive role when it came to integrating the classroom. The “haves” did not wish to share their capital with the “have nots.” The importance of learning was overshadowed by who their children would be learning *with*. Kohn (2009) asserts, “many parents seem to care a lot more about who is in these classes (namely, their own children and a few others who look like them) than about how they are taught” (p. 571). These parents rejected the knowledge their children could learn from the students who spoke other languages and shared incredibly rich cultures different from their own. The consensus was: we want our kids to get the material, get their “A” and move on to the next grade. Kohn agrees, noting, “The point is not to get an

education but to get ahead – and therefore, from the student/consumer’s point of view, to gain the highest grade with the minimum amount of learning” (p. 573).

The opportunities for all of these students to learn from each other were completely eradicated by the parents in power. Kohn states:

Consider those parents who essentially mortgage their children’s present for the future, sacrificing what might bring meaning or enjoyment – or even produce higher-quality learning – in a ceaseless effort to prepare the children for Harvard. (A process I have come to call “Preparation H”) this bottom line is never far from the minds of such parents, who weigh every decision about what their children do in school, or even after school, against the yardstick of what it might contribute to future success. *They are not raising a child so much as a living resume* [emphasis added by Self]. (2009, p. 573)

More in-depth observations and assessment of this type of parental “involvement” will be addressed in chapter III.

Over the past several years, classrooms across the nation have become more and more diverse. While the faces of the students have changed dramatically, the way we educate them has not. Many public schools in the United States remain the sanctuary of the white middle class. Reluctant to change, administrators and parents fail to embrace the skills and abilities of the immigrant children entering our schools. Opportunities to enrich and benefit both the immigrant students and the children of the middle class majority as a collective unit are missed. Instead of working to erode many of the injustices the immigrant children experience, policies and procedures often reinforce the prejudices and social inequities of the minority students. After two hundred years of shaping a public education system, we still share some of the same concerns as the post-

Revolutionary educators. One of those shared concerns is turning a “multicultural society into a single-culture society dominated by Anglo-American values” (Spring, 2005, p. 72). As educators, we have to find viable ways to finally overcome this persistent desire to assimilate the “other” and embrace them as fellow Americans, benefitting from the experiences, values, and talents they have to share.

Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this research is to observe and better understand the tension between current required methods of teaching and explore how teachers can, in spite of restrictions, teach for social justice. It is also my hope to discover ways to circumnavigate the oppression teachers bear from the inability of systems, administrators, and legislators to take into account student worth beyond a test score.

My own observations and reflections will, I hope, illuminate the struggles experienced daily in the struggle to promote social justice in the classroom. Most importantly, the purpose of this research is to give a scholarly account of real world issues in the classrooms that give hope to other teachers. As the legislative screws are tightened, along with budgets, there is hope and evidence to be found that teachers can teach for social justice. Teachers can form relationships with their students and present the required curriculum in a way that respects the prior knowledge and culture of each child.

Intellectual Frameworks and Theoretical Lenses

I will use a number of influential critical theorists to frame this inquiry, the most prevalent being Paulo Freire. Freire’s famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was

published first in Portuguese in 1968 and in English in 1970. He argues against a “banking concept of education” (p. 72) in favor of a liberatory, dialogical pedagogy designed to raise individuals’ consciousness of oppression and to transform oppressive social structures through “praxis.” The problem-posing method of critical literacy was developed by Freire (1973) and critical pedagogics going back to the Frankfurt School of critical theory in the 1920s.

Freire’s initial literacy program was used with adult students. His method leads students of any “age, experience, or ability level” to begin new learning by use of personal experiences, critical reflection and active participation (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007, p. 204). For Freire literacy was not a means to prepare students for the world of subordinated labor or “careers,” but a preparation for a “self-managed life” (Macrine, 2009, p. ix). In the forward of *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hope and Possibilities*, Aronowitz contends a self-managed life can only be achieved with the fulfillment of three educational goals:

Self-reflection, that is, realizing the famous poetic phrase, “know thyself,” which is an understanding of the world in which they live, in its economic, political and, equally important, its psychological dimensions. Specifically, “critical” pedagogy helps the learner become aware of the forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness. The third goal is to help set the conditions for producing a new life, a new set of arrangements where power has been, at least in tendency, transferred to those who literally make the social world by transforming nature and themselves. (Macrine, 2009, p. ix)

Freire’s critical thinking was not a lesson in test-taking, but “a tool for self-determination and civic engagement (Giroux, 2011, p. 155).” Critical pedagogy offered

an opportunity to read, write, and learn from a position of agency, “to engage in a culture of question that demands far more than competency in rote learning” (Giroux, 2011, p. 155).

Freire’s theories and methods have influenced the way educators, theorists, and intellectuals have approached education for the marginalized in countries around the world. Freire believed educators should learn as much (or more) from the students as the students learned from the teacher. Freire emphasized making students aware of their realities and understanding that everyone has knowledge to contribute, regardless of socioeconomic status or level of education. This awareness or awakening of sorts is one of Freire’s most important theories, that of “conscientization.” This refers to a type of learning focused on perceiving and exposing social and political contradictions. Key to emancipatory education, students begin to understand they are equally as capable and intelligent as those who oppress them. Doré (1997) writes, “Conscientization requires recognition of the structural contradictions that one bears, whether as a result of social class, gender, ethnic group, age, sexual orientation, health, marital status, religion, or any other identity parameter in which oppression can grow” (Dore, 1997, pp. 93 – 110). Freire’s concept of conscientization is considered the first step in the emancipatory journey of education by many critical theorists. I will also draw heavily from Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren. This Freirean framework, in addition to the lens from which I draw my theory, also permeates my methodology. Freire’s key concept was that of “praxis,” the combining of theory and practice followed by self-reflection and analysis.

Methodology

My research originated eleven years ago when I began my first course in education. Having kept journals most of my life, I continued to chronicle my questions, observations, frustrations and occasional success as a new teacher. It was a natural and often cathartic exercise to write down each day's events as they unfolded. Likewise, dialogue with friends and colleagues at the university and at work via email proved productive for finding solutions and solace to some of my classroom quandaries. This type of communication proved to be beneficial and became an invaluable tool during reflection as I assessed what did and did not work in the classroom. Because of the documentation I had gathered over time, it became possible to "observe" myself from a distance, creating a space to review in a more objective manner and reevaluate. This evolved organically to autoethnography.

Working under the interpretivist paradigm, autoethnography will be my primary method of data collection. Autoethnography, according to Marechal (2010), is a "form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing" (p. 43). This type of qualitative research is highly personalized and allows the author/researcher to tell their stories and their lived experiences. This method is a nontraditional form of inquiry and expression, "very unlike the theory-driven, hypothesis-testing research methods that are based on the positivist epistemology" (Elligson & Ellis, 2008, pp. 445-466). My autoethnographic data will include journals, letters, and personal correspondence via email. Instead of a portrait of the "other," Hammersley (1990) asserts, the researcher (I) will construct a portrait of

self (Genzuk, 1999). Additionally, unlike more traditional research, the analysis of data involves interpretation on the part of the researcher. I will identify examples of critical theory and opportunities presented to teach for social justice. Autoethnographic method will provide an honest, realistic, authentic glimpse into the classroom and allow the reader a rare opportunity to “observe” the practice and methods of an elementary and middle school teacher.

As a teacher and learner, autoethnography allows me to close the circle on my own personal praxis, bringing together my learned theory, practice, and finally critical reflection. As a lateral entry teacher, most of the teaching “theory” was absent in my preparation for employment in the classroom. My knowledge of “practice” was one-dimensional lessons learned through lived experience with my own child through a white, middle class lens. To say I was unprepared for teaching in the post-modern, ultra-diverse classroom would be an understatement. Careful documentation of my experiences in the classroom – both as a teacher and a student – provides the raw data to analyze, conceptualize, theorize and critically reflect upon the efforts of a new teacher trying to teach critical literacy skills in a system diametrically opposed to such teaching philosophy and methods.

Second, an autoethnography provides insights into the lived struggles students experience in classrooms today, something about which many students of higher education and those in power who vote on mandates and implement educational policy are unaware. My hope is, by honestly assessing my own journey as an elementary and middle school educator, painful lessons learned about race, socioeconomic divides,

privilege and power might come to light and smooth the path for others entering the profession.

Finally, a well-told story is not only appealing; it can hopefully make the listener more empathetic to the oppressed or the unjustly-treated story teller. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) encourage story-telling as a means of describing the reality of the “other” or the marginalized: “Engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others, and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world (p. 41).” While critical race theorists use storytelling as a method of describing the reality of people of color, I propose storytelling as a viable way to describe the reality of students and teachers as we search for a way to share perspectives. More on this methodology will be stated in the appendix to this dissertation.

Design

In the following chapter, I will provide an epistemological foundation from which my autoethnographical research derives. The explanation and discussion of critical pedagogy, its history and major theorists, most significantly Paulo Freire, is not only the foundation for this inquiry, but acts as the catalyst of the research. Critical pedagogy and critical theorists are not homogenous. While they all hold major tenets collectively under the broad umbrella of democracy and social justice, each represent their own “sub-genre” of critical thought. Several of these sub-genres will be explored as well as historical events where critical pedagogy played a substantive role and continue to give hope and possibility to new generations of teachers. This chapter creates the foundation for the research of this work.

Chapter Three includes my lived experience where my questions and comparisons to critical theorists are mapped. Using personal academic journals, papers, and correspondence as raw data, I map my own praxis, exhibiting frustration with my attempts to successfully combine theory and practice while holding true to the required state and federal mandates. This autoethnographical approach allows me to analyze my shortcomings and successes through the lens of critical theorists as well as the empathetic lens of a classroom teacher. These experiences include issues surrounding scripted curriculum, oppression exhibited from immigrant students as well as the upper-middle classes, abject poverty, issues of race, and lack of adequate funding, among others. This chapter will lay bare the day-to-day struggles classroom teachers face with the hope that from these often uncomfortable experiences comes wisdom and teachable moments for other classroom educators and the members of the academy who teach them.

Chapter four will be a final reflection where the autobiography is analyzed and will reveal areas of interest that could be investigated using the foundational principles of critical pedagogy (i.e. democracy/emancipatory/) discussed in previous chapters. Analysis and “self-interrogation” will follow. An exploration and honest assessment of the teacher’s practice will provide suggestions about ways teaching for social justice may be integrated into the required curriculum and ways to develop students’ critical thinking skills.

Finally, an appendix will provide a more in-depth explanation in regard to the methodology, autoethnography, used for this research.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

If you're unwilling to muster the courage to think critically, then someone will do the thinking for you. (West, 2008, pp. 10-11)

This dissertation provides an opportunity to address the impediments of education from the perspective least examined – the classroom teacher. It is ironic that many graduate-level students in university education departments are expected to assess material through various lenses and perspectives yet one voice is virtually silent. This voice is the very foundation of our educational system, the individual “in the trenches,” the person most affected (besides the students) by the outcomes of academia and legislation: the elementary and middle grades instructor. This inquiry serves, hopefully, to empower these teachers, by illustrating how teaching and learning can be transformed through critical pedagogy. As a nation, we are again at a pivotal point in our history of education. As we eliminate a ten-year federal mandate (No Child Left Behind) with another program to “better educate our children” (Common Core) now, more than ever, students, teachers, and all citizens should be made aware of the necessity of questioning not just *how* or *what* we teach, but *why*. Who ultimately benefits from the curriculum, the choice of text books, the methods of assessment, teacher evaluations and increased use of technology?

Critical pedagogy is much more than a way of teaching. Freire tells us teaching is not about technique, but a way of becoming; a way to revise one's own consciousness. Critical pedagogy is not just about "teachers" and "students." Critical pedagogy is about whole populations, dominant, oppressed – the marginalized "other." Its concepts are much larger than any classroom can hold. Its theories permeate every society where there is a "dominant" and an "other."

This dissertation allows a forum to express my deep concern for an educational system in crisis, an opportunity to chronicle the daily struggles classroom teachers face – many, if not most, having little to do with "education" or "learning." These struggles have everything to do with what the students bring with them to class, and tensions between educators determined to make a positive difference in the lives of the children and the obstacles they face in doing so. These obstacles include challenges of democracy and freedom, challenges of commodification and the construction of a "knowledge industry" (Macedo). In this chapter I intend to lay out a vision of progressive education by looking at key influences and authors of critical theory and critical pedagogy, how these theories came about and how they remain relevant in today's classrooms. How can we as educators address decades-old, systemic societal issues that continue to marginalize, commodify, and disenfranchise many – if not most – of our children? How do critical theorists and pedagogues view a system where over 12 million children live below the poverty line in a country that spends more money on prison construction than on education? Giroux would have us consider: "while the United States ranks first in military technology, military exports, defense expenditures and the number of

millionaires and billionaires, it is ranked 18th among the advanced industrial nations in the gap between rich and poor children” (Giroux, 2007, p 5).

Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008) argue, most teachers, even those with justice and liberation at the heart of their educational program, were educated in a banking model system (p. 25), the antithesis of critical pedagogy to be explained here later. “Nowhere is this barrier more pronounced than for the K-12 educator. Faced with the challenge of preparing for a classroom of youngsters, there is little to fall back on except their training as students, which has most certainly prepared them to reproduce the banking model” (p 25).

Critical pedagogy’s primary focus is to alleviate oppression through the acquisition of empowerment and agency. Historically, critical theorists and pedagogues have engaged in a broad range of traditions addressing a myriad of injustices relating to race, gender, socioeconomic status, culture, and others. Critical pedagogy responds to countless ways of suffering, always keeping social justice as the common core objective. Critical pedagogy, in other words, is not a “one size fits all” entity. It is as multifaceted and complex as the issues it challenges and works to overcome. Understanding the origins and key beliefs of critical pedagogy is imperative to understanding the issues exemplified and specifically addressed in Chapter III.

While the core beliefs of many forms of critical pedagogy are discussed in this paper, the framework of most of these traditions overlap making it difficult if not impossible to “pigeonhole” each theorist or pedagogue to one specific area of concern. The intersectionality of the various traditions of critical pedagogy creates a multilayered

entity within which to work and research. For example, Mary Breuing (2011) addresses the multiple meanings of critical pedagogy, most with an emphasis on democracy. Despite the “multiple and varied meanings of critical pedagogy,” the central purpose is to use education as a means to bring about a more socially just world (p. 14). Breuing identifies Apple, Giroux, and McLaren as critical pedagogues who approach critical praxis from a Marxist perspective that focuses on class. In addition, Breuing explains that Freire identifies the liberatory potential of critical pedagogy while some of Lather’s writing focuses on neo-Marxist theories. Breuing (2008) also explains that:

Pillow (2000) employs a poststructural lens in her approach to critical pedagogy, while Hooks (1994, 2003) and Weiler (2001) adopt a feminist pedagogical perspective and Shor (1996) and Gore (1993) assert the need for the theory of critical pedagogy to move into the realm of praxis. As mentioned above, those participants who mentioned “Democracy” as a central aim of critical pedagogy cited the influence of Dewey on their thinking. (p. 15)

Given the restraints of this research, several, certainly not all, major critical theorists and pedagogues will be examined, taking a look also at the epistemological and moral influences of critical pedagogy. Together, these examples offer a powerful critique of schools and education. Several of the most influential educators in the critical tradition are selected for exploration in this chapter.

First, I explore foundational theorists and their Marxist roots. Early critical theorists believed that Marxism had “underemphasized the importance of cultural and media influences for the persistence of capitalism; that maintaining conditions of ideological hegemony were important for (in fact inseparable from) the legitimacy and smooth working of capitalist economic relations” (Burbules and Berk, 1999, p. 4). Using

advertising methods as an example, Burbules and Berk assert it is a way to increase consumption and present the image of industries driven “only by a desire to serve the needs of their customers” (p. 4). Our educational systems nurture these beliefs through standardized testing and sorting, through tracking, and/or through vocational training. Critical pedagogy and progressive educators questioned the inequalities of power and the “false myths of opportunity and merit for many students and about the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life” (p.5).

Following the historical foundation, this chapter will analyze several “genres” of critical pedagogy, examined thematically into six categories: democracy, social justice, community, knowledge and curriculum, existential, and finally, hope and possibility.

Education in the United State has always been political. This is one of the major tenets of critical pedagogy. Progressive educators like John Dewey worked from the political left and regarded education as life-long quest, an opportunity to instill a love of learning. The goal of education, according to Dewey and other progressives, “is to have the desire as well as the means to make sure that learning never ends” (Kohn, 2004, p. 10). Traditionalists oppose this view. Working from the political conservative right, they hold a more narrowly focused view of education. For example, traditional educator Edward Thorndike was a proponent of an efficient curriculum (Shannon, 2000). In the early 1900’s he considered education’s role as producing a more “efficient society by matching individual talents with social needs” (Spring, 2005, p. 279). Education should be measureable with a rigid beginning and end point; a type of training – very different

from the life-long learning concept of the progressives. Dewey, the leading educational philosopher of the progressive era prior to the industrial union upsurge of the 1930's, "decisively transformed class discourse about education into a discourse of class-leveling" (Aronowitz, 2004, p. 143). Dewey fought to fill the chasm between labor and capital through schooling.

Because of the dialectical objectives and motivations of these two entities, education is perhaps more politically charged today than ever. Mirrored by the polarization of the Democratic and Republican parties, each side – traditionalists and progressives – offer very different opinions and methods of what and how students in this country should be educated.

Sustaining this polarization of pedagogical methods is the increased diversity of our classrooms. The ethnic and religious complexity of our students adds fuel to the methodology debate, forcing educational leaders to choose between liberal, child-centered methodology and a tracked, rigid path. Unfortunately, those in power making crucial political decisions about education do not reflect the same cultural diversity of those they represent. Exacerbated by the "standards movement" (Aronowitz, 2004), these decisions take the form of federal and state laws and mandates with appropriations funneled to private corporations for billions of dollars that will be used to fund testing, textbooks, and test preparation.

As I examine a cross-section of theorists, educators and philosophers who dominate critical pedagogy, a theme emerges. Regardless of the date, the power structure, and the politics, as long as human suffering has been acknowledged by

educators, there have been critical scholars and thinkers to shape a more inclusive, humane landscape in education and view those being educated as more than mere machines. By mapping these events, it is clear that as the world changes, so does critical pedagogy, the forces behind it, and its response.

Marxist Roots

At the very core of critical theory are Marxist roots, sometimes maligned by the misinformed who believe early grades educators are teaching the proletariat to overthrow the bourgeois. In reality, the Marxist influence on critical pedagogy is broadly constructivist and child-centered, emphasizing collaboration and critique instead of mindless absorption of facts to later be regurgitated. This basic concept of Marxism and education is the source of political wrangling over education today just as it was in the 19th century. Marxist thought challenges the way in which the dominant ideology is reproduced through the use of myths (Macedo, 1994), which helps legitimize processes of oppression (Wink, 2005, p. 95). One of the most familiar myths is the idea of a classless America: “We’re all alike and all have equal access to opportunity in this great land.” Wink asserts that myths are used as tools so that the “have-nots will affirm and support the processes that benefit the haves” (p. 95). As an example, Wink notes the way George H. W. Bush campaigned in 1988 on the notion of a classless America while simultaneously fighting for a capital gains tax to benefit the rich and threatened to veto a tax cut for the middle class (Macedo, 1994). The gulf between the social groups continues to widen, although some people would have us think that the gulf is not even there (Wink, 2005, p. 95). Parallels to this example 24 years and three administrations

later in the most recent presidential campaign are many. While the democratic incumbent campaigned for more student assistance in the form of government loans, his Republican opponent simply advised young people to ask their parents for money or seek private loans. Clearly there is a disconnect between conservatives and the reality in which the majority of this country's citizenry live.

Marx believed that education was being used as a vehicle for institutionalizing elite values and for indoctrinating people into unconsciously maintaining these values. Marx's ideas of reproduction are reflected in every classroom with subtle and hidden processes in which social classes are classified and grouped – it is called tracking. Gee (1990) writes:

Schools have historically failed with nonelite populations and have thus replicated the social hierarchy, thereby advantaging the elites in the society. This has ensured that large numbers of lower socio-economic and minority people engage in the lowest level and least satisfying jobs in the society (or no jobs), while being in a position to make a few serious political or economic demands on the elites. Indeed, the fact that they have low literacy skills can be used (by themselves and the elites) as a rationale for them to be in low-level jobs and the elites in higher level ones. (p.31)

Simply said, the Marxist message is: don't be spoon fed by an education system that inevitably reflects those in power. Ask...questions!

...the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.

(<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>)

Marx's fellow collaborator, Friedrich Engels, experienced the industrial revolution first hand and described the lives of the working class as miserable. According to the Marxist website (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>), "work in low rooms where people breathe in more coal fumes and dust than oxygen – and in the majority of cases beginning already at the age of six – is bound to deprive them of all strength and joy in life." Marx and Engels perceived that "without education the working class was condemned to lives of drudgery and death, but that with education they had a chance to create a better life." Marx and Engels viewed education as a vehicle to develop free individuals and "many-sided human beings" (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>). In essence, Marx and Engels argued that social justice is dependent upon economic conditions (Breuing, 2008).

Critical theory is a school of thought that examines and critiques society and culture. It was initially built upon the philosophical work of the Frankfurt School (McLaren and Kincheloe, 2007, p. 57). Herbert Marcuse was one of a group of scholars working at the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. Influenced and profoundly moved by the devastation and suffering of World War I., economic depression, inflation and unemployment, the Frankfurt School of Critical theory saw through the power structures' use of schools to create much needed workers (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 46-47). Students became workers by being "tracked for life" (Wink, 2005, p. 85). "These critical theorists postulated that the schools not only reproduce what skills society needs, but people with the corresponding social and personal demeanor as well"

(p. 85). Herbert Marcuse remained in the United States after leaving Germany prior to World War II and produced most of his life's work during that time. He realized that a reconstruction of the social sciences could eventually lead to "a more egalitarian and democratic social order" (Kincheloe, 2008, p.48). Marcuse appraises not only the idea of tracking students to produce a work force, but as a means of reproducing the status quo, keeping lower socio-economic and minorities at the lower level while elevating elites. "Issues of struggle, power, culture, hegemony, and critical consciousness were important to the members of the Frankfurt School and paramount to critical theorists today" (McLaren and Kincheloe, 2007, p. 225).

Marcuse envisioned human beings as variables to be "manipulated along with materials, time and space to ensure predictable products and profits from material, ideational or social manufacturing" (Shannon, 2000). Marcuse (1941) writes:

The private and public bureaucracy thus emerges on an apparently objective and impersonal ground, provided by the rational specialization of function. For, the more the individual functions are divided, fixated, and synchronized according to objective and impersonal pattern, the less reasonable it is for the individual to withdraw and withstand. (p.151)

Marcuse took a harsh view of consumerism arguing it was a form of "social control." He believed that the system we live in might be considered democratic, but in actuality, our perceptions of freedom are skewed by only a handful of individuals who only allow us certain choices to buy happiness (Marcuse, 1991, p 3). When our desire for more "happiness" (in the form of products) forces us to work more in order to buy more, this perpetual cycle causes us to lose our humanity. We become not much more

than part of a machine. Frankfurt School theorists coined the term “culture industries” (Kellner) to help define the process of the industrialization of mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives which drove the system. “The group analyzed all mass-mediated cultural artifacts within the context of industrial production, in which the products of the culture industries exhibited the same features as other goods of mass production: commodification, standardization, and massification” (Kellner). These features will figure prominently in Chapter III as their relationship to students as “products” and the standardization of curriculum is exemplified from a classroom teacher’s perspective.

Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, brought the power of cultural institutions such as the media, schools, family and the church to the forefront (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 54). “Dominant power in the twentieth century was not always exercised simply by physical force but also through social psychological attempts to win people’s consent to domination” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 54) Gramsci contributed the phrase “ideological hegemony” to describe the influence the ruling class has over what counts as knowledge (Burke, 2000). Hegemony is central to critical pedagogy in an effort to understand power and how dominant power wielders maintain it (Wink, 2000, p. 82). “The key dimension of this process is the manipulation of public opinion to gain consensus” (Wink, 2000, p. 82). Hegemony works best, Wink states, when the public begins to look at dominant ways of seeing the world as simply common sense. Hegemony is not a conspiracy by the ruling class; it is “a natural effect of the way in which what we count as knowledge is socially constructed” (Burke, 2000).

Gramsci believed that hegemony was how societal institutions maintained their power” (Wink, 2000, p. 82). It is imperative that educators recognize and acknowledge the oppressive structures that exist in schools. They are not neutral ideas serving the common good but “ruling class ideas accepted by everyone as if they were for the common good” (Burke, 2000). For example, Wink (2000) cites a commonly-seen example of hegemony: 12 and 13-year-old girls who suddenly begin to do poorly in math and science. “It is not that girls are less intelligent; it is that they are partially supporting the process of believing that boys know more about numbers and problem solving” (p 83). Gramsci redefined how politics bore down on everyday life through the force of its pedagogical practices. Gramsci, like Dewey and other theorists, used the metaphor of the brain as a container to “fill.” This detrimental “pouring” of random facts into student “vessels” proved to be an excellent way to prepare unquestioning students to be unquestioning workers (Biroux, 2011, p. 48). In 1916, Gramsci wrote:

We must break the habit of thinking that culture is encyclopedic knowledge whereby man [sic] is viewed as a mere container in which to pour and conserve empirical data or brute disconnected facts which he will have to subsequently pigeonhole in his brain as in the columns of a dictionary so as to be able to eventually respond to the varied stimuli of the external world. This form of culture is truly harmful, especially to the proletariat. It only serves to create misfits, people who believe themselves superior to the rest of humanity because they have accumulated in the memory a certain quantity of facts and dates which they cough up at every opportunity to almost raise a barrier between themselves and others. (Giroux, 2011, p. 55)

Gramsci believed rote learning had no place in education, a concept later made famously familiar to educators by Paulo Freire and remains to this day a sticking point in the controversy of how to educate our children. Gramsci, like Freire and Marcuse, did

not view learners as automatons, Gramsci firmly believed in the fundamental socialist principle of educating the whole person, rather than the “traditional concern with education specialists, technocrats, and other professional experts” (Giroux, 2011, p. 62).

Nearly 100 years ago during the “progressive era,” laws were being passed to curb the “excessive behaviors of business” the Meat Inspection Act, the Hepburn Act to regulate the railroads, and the Mann-Elkins Act placing telephone and telegraph companies under the jurisdiction of the Interstate Commerce Commission (Shannon, 2000). Industrialists encouraged all social institutions to adopt business principles of economy and technology. This included the education of school personnel, the planning and organization of schools, and the expectations of the public since that time (Apple, 2000; Giroux, 1983). This efficiency movement was essentially the birth of standardized testing as we know it today: reading and writing in the most efficient way with testable curriculum – a factory model of learning.

The theme of rejecting education as a form of production – students as products, teachers as managers, runs consistently through educational debates, past and present. The humanizing of education, the teaching of critical thought and recognition of self-power to combat oppression on every level is where critical pedagogy begins and ends. Curriculum efficiency, rote learning, and standardized tests all work against this notion of students as individuals, freedom of choice and democracy and participation in creating a better society.

Critical Pedagogy and Democracy

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience. (Dewey, 1916, p. 87)

Democracy is a central aim of critical pedagogy. Throughout the long list of sub-genres of critical pedagogy, democracy remains a constant. John Dewey is one of the most read contributors to thinking about education and democracy and offers “the ideal bridge from theories of knowledge, to democratic theory and onwards to education theory” (Kelly, 1995, p. 87). Dewey was an important influence on the development of critical social theory (Leonardo, 2004, p. 12). Responding to the mechanized education movement of the Industrial Revolution, Dewey opposed classifying students for different curricular tracks, readying workers for life on an assembly line. He observed that many theorists and scholars regarded knowledge as “self-contained” and complete in itself (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 33-34). He opposed this traditional, conservative methodology and became famous for his exposition of “learning by doing” (Mondale & Patton, 2001, p. 67). Many private schools at that time were created to experiment with his methods.

Dewey preached that in order for learning to be effective and create new knowledge, students must connect the information to their own prior experiences thus deepening the connection with this new knowledge. Dewey sought to provide experiences for the students by creating a community within the school, and in doing so; students were not just learning about democracy, they were participants. He encouraged educating the whole child. Historian Larry Cuban (2001) explains, “John Dewey believed that if schools were anchored in the whole child, in the social, intellectual,

emotional, and physical development of a child, teaching would be different – and learning would be different and schools would be very different, hospitable places for children” (p. 77). Dewey opposed rote learning and “tracking” students, a practice eschewed by critical theorists yet woven through the fabric of critical pedagogy from beginning to present. He valued the child as a whole person and the life experiences they brought with them to school. He used their reality not as a *reason* to learn, but as a *catalyst* for learning. Dewey was already using many of the major foundations of critical pedagogy – it just hadn’t been named yet.

Dewey’s methods are still relevant to critical pedagogy today, if not more so than they were at the turn of the prior century. Critical pedagogue Joe Kincheloe (2008) posits, “To overcome the reductionism that has plagued teaching and allowed for its technicalization and hyperrationalization, critical educators must take Dewey’s insights into account” (p. 34). The insights he refers to is teaching the whole person, keeping the needs of the child at the center of education’s purpose, not education’s purpose fulfilling the needs of industry.

During the 1970’s and 1980’s in the United States, the “New Left Scholars” began to focus on critical pedagogy. Giroux (1981) began to formulate a critical pedagogy that “synthesized the more progressive elements of John Dewey’s philosophy and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School” (Breuing, 2011, p. 4). Giroux, Roger Simon, Michael Apple, and Peter McLaren focused on examining and better understanding the role that schools play in “transmitting certain messages about political, social, and economic life believing that a revolutionary critical pedagogy will allow

educators to realize the possibilities of democratic social values within their classroom” (Breuing, pp. 4-5).

One of the largest problems facing the United States in general and education in particular is how to build a school system that is just and fair and caring and nurturing as well as democratic to its large clientele. These are the major issues within which critical social theory conceptualizes its work. (Kanpol, 2012, p. 2)

Barry Kanpol believes critical pedagogy is the challenging of any or all forms of “alienation, oppression and subordination – no matter from what identity position one is coming from” (Kanpol, 2012, p. 2). Regardless of social class, teachers who challenge oppressive ideologies are acting from a critical pedagogical position. As students in the United States continue to be “schooled” as opposed to “educated,” (simply put, the former preparing students for the market economy, the latter preparing students for life), excessive competition, tracking and differentiated social class divisions will continue. Kanpol refers to this as “survival of the fittest mentality” (Kanpol, 2012, p. 2). Critical pedagogy roots itself in the belief that every citizen deserves an education, but because of the market mentality Kanpol writes, school systems often forget the reasons for attending school in the first place, “nurture, care, community, citizenship preparation, in short, a broad education” (p. 2). Kanpol, like Dewey, believes students should learn about democracy as a participant, not a passive rote learner in civics class. While civics, history, and social studies classes are the logical vehicle for learning about democracy, critical pedagogy holds that “democratic principles must become a way of life in all subject areas and all extra-curricular content – be they pedagogically demonstrated in math, science, and other content areas” (p. 2).

Kanpol cites examples of teachers and students in all subject areas creating class rules, behavior limits, consequences, even forms of testing. Educators working toward a more democratic education can negotiate curriculum with administrators and students and work within school rules “to create a just and fair system.” This is an optimistic and hopeful suggestion on the part of Kanpol as teachers and administrators today are held accountable on state and federal levels held for ransom for state and federal dollars. This hostage situation teachers and some administrators find themselves in regarding requirements of state and federal government requirements in exchange for dollars is exemplified in the following chapter.

Kanpol, who responds to Kozol’s (2005) abysmal and near hopeless accounts of urban schools, understands the enormous task he is offering as a challenge to move inner-city education in the direction of “possibility and democratic change.” (p. 84). Understanding the “whole” child is about the “in-depth structural comprehension of race, class, and gender as related to hegemonic ideological constructions of value structures – socially defined criteria for what counts as male, female, success, competition, nurture, machoness, cooperation, esteem, respect, tolerance, and so on” (p. 88).

Democracy can be negotiated, Kanpol asserts, when learning includes a curriculum that takes into account a child’s “interests and identity within those socially negotiated value frameworks” (p.88). Without that, an autocratic position is assumed by teachers, dictated by the state-mandated curriculum and based on fear and disrespect.

This doesn’t suggest throwing state-mandated curriculums into the garbage can, but does suggest considering understanding and disseminating the curriculums

from within an understanding of multiple realities, identities, subjectivities, races, classes and genders. (p. 88)

Only then, he writes, will students learn in the inner city (Kanpol & Yeo, 1995, pp. 77-90).

A student of Paulo Freire, Antonia Darder (2002) extols love as a central tenet of the practice of critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 30). Known as a radical educator in the critical pedagogical tradition (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 97), Darder's work focuses on cultural and global issues in education including identity, popular culture, Latino and Latina studies, and social justice theory. As with most critical theorists, her scholarship overlaps and intertwines with several traditions, it is Darder's emphasis on democracy examined here.

Darder draws from Gramsci's belief that true democracy does not use education to move the worker-citizen from unskilled to skilled. Instead, democracy "relies on education to position every citizen to govern" (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 30). Darder argues that critical pedagogues must be more attentive to facilitating this preparation in their classrooms and that the challenge for educators is to "delve rigorously into those specific theoretical issues that are fundamental to the establishment of a culturally democratic foundation for a critical bicultural pedagogy in the classroom" (Darder, 1997, p. 331). This process, she insists, is not intended to aid teachers to prepare a cookie cutter, one-size-fits-all curriculum for the classroom. In reality, critical pedagogy requires teachers to collaborate with students, colleagues, and the larger school community (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 30). This action is essential for

educators to “move beyond the boundaries of prescribed educational practice” (p. 350) to develop classroom pedagogy that serves students’ specific needs (cultural, linguistic, social, political, and economic). Darder insists the goal of democratic education can be accomplished by educators with a “critical commitment to act on behalf of freedom and social justice that serve as a model for their students to discover their own personal power, social transformative potential, and spirit of hope” (p. 350).

Darder recognizes the threat of consumerism and how it relates to schools and democracy. “Democracy too has become principally tied to the creation of conditions of free consumer choice in an unfettered market” (p. 350). In the same way education and its democratizing purpose is lost to market-driven educational solutions such as the privatization of education which, Darder states, is one of the most dangerous threats facing public schools today. Through the rhetoric of “consumer choice” prevalent in the privatization debate, capitalism articulates a:

...classless, homogenous society of consumers, all existing with a common, transcendent culture exposing the hidden values, beliefs and practices of a political economy that greedily seeks maximum returns on capital, with little concern for human life or the sustainability of the planet, is key to rethinking democratic schooling. Teachers cannot disregard the manner in which transnational capital whips around the world placing a neck hold on the economies of developing nations. (Darder, 2002, p. 12)

Critical Pedagogy and Social Justice

Henry Giroux is a founding theorist of critical pedagogy in the United States. His scholarship and scope of sub-genres of critical pedagogy are vast. While holding true to the historical foundations of critical pedagogy, he is a contemporary theorist and

champion of youth. He has pioneered work in public pedagogy, cultural studies, youth studies, higher education, media studies, and critical theory (Giroux, 2011, p. 1). He argues that youth serve as a “scapegoat for many social problems and that they are commodified by our corporate culture.” (Hudson, 2011, p. 1) Like many critical theorists, Giroux aligns much of his work with that of Paulo Freire. He believes educators have to understand their students and the contexts of their home life, value that scaffolding, and help the student understand that value. Giroux uses critical pedagogy to “examine the various ways in which classrooms too often function as modes of social, political, and cultural reproduction, particularly when the goals of education are defined through the promise of economic growth, job training, and mathematical utility” (Giroux, 2011, p. 5).

Giroux points an accusing finger at corporate America (Disney, among others), and conservative, right-wing politicians. “There is no question about it,” states Christopher Robbins in the forward of *The Giroux Reader*, “Giroux’s theory and practice are left-oriented, but he is not unreflectively or unreflexively left – in theory or practice” (Robbins, 2006, p. xiv).

Giroux calls the economic, political and cultural situation of United States’ youth, “intolerable and obscene” (Giroux, 2006, p. 255). As an example, Giroux points to the 2000 presidential campaign when President Bush insisted that ‘the biggest percentage of our budget should go to children’s education.’ He then passed a 2002 budget in which 40 times more money went for tax cuts for the wealthiest one percent of the population rather than for education” (Giroux, 2006, p. 255). As a middle school teacher, it is

reassuring to read the words of an iconic scholar and author who understands the treacherous landscape educators tread on a daily basis. It gives hope to those of us who feel powerless to have Giroux speak for us and so eloquently state our frustrations and concerns:

Instead of providing a decent education to poor young people, American society offers them the growing potential of being incarcerated, buttressed by the fact that the United States is one of the few countries in the world that sentences minors to death and spends three times more on each incarcerated citizen than on each public school pupil. Instead of guaranteeing them food, decent health care, and shelter, we serve them more standardized tests; instead of providing them with a vibrant public sphere we offer them a commercialized culture in which consumerism is the only obligation of citizenship. But in the hard currency of human suffering, children pay a heavy price in one of the richest democracies in the world. (Giroux, 2006, p. 255)

Giroux describes pedagogy as part of “an always unfinished project intent on developing a meaningful life for all students” (Giroux, 2011, p.6). Far from instilling propaganda in students, Giroux argues, critical pedagogy begins with “the assumption that knowledge and power should always be subject to debate, held accountable, and critically engaged” (Giroux, 2006, p. 185).

The Freire Project (<http://www.freireproject.org>) regards Giroux’s work in the late 1970’s and 1980’s as the impetus for the concept of critical pedagogy as we know it today. Giroux’s passion revolves around “the struggle for a critical democracy both in the United States and the world at large” (The Freire Project, retrieved 11/26/12). He refers to this as critical or “radical democracy” as it involves the effort to expand the possibility for “social justice, freedom, and egalitarian social relations in the educational, economic, political and cultural domains.” Giroux’s form of critical pedagogy uses both

critique and possibility in the struggle to expose the forces that undermine education for a critical democracy.

Giroux embraced what many consider the best of twentieth-century educational scholarship – including the progressivism of John Dewey, “the transgressive pedagogy of Paulo Freire, and the insights of William Pinar and the curriculum conceptualists – to transcend the notion that power is merely the distribution of political and economic resources” (The Freire Project, retrieved 11/26/12).

Giroux accuses the political policy-makers of treating young people – especially those of color, as a “generation of suspects” where American society invests more to imprison them than adequately educate them. He also questions our society which justifies housing poor students in schools that are “unsafe, decaying, and with little or no extracurricular activities” (Giroux, 2012, p. 22) while simultaneously spending five times more annually in many suburban schools.

What message, he asks, does this send to our children? “What message is being sent to young people when in a state such as New York more Blacks entered prison just for drug offenses than graduated from the state's massive university system with undergraduate, masters, and doctoral degrees combined in the 1990s” (Giroux, 2007, p.1)

Giroux makes class a central category of analysis and holds the notion that schools “cannot be analyzed outside the socio-economic context in which they operate,” and have “helped to expose schools as sorting and tracking institutions that treat and teach [working-class students and students of color] in ways vastly different from their middle and upper-class counterparts” (Hudson, 1999, p.2).

Critical theorist Peter McLaren addresses the issues facing inner-city children, students in poverty and the broadening lines between the classes. McLaren took on these issues as a teacher working with inner-city children in Canada. He published his teaching diary and began a national debate about the state of inner-city schools (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 86). His work has profoundly influenced my study of critical pedagogy, allowing me unspoken permission to use my own teaching journals and correspondence to illustrate the day to day struggles of teachers.

Like Wink (2005), McLaren argues against the myth of the United States being “classless,” where “every student will, more or less, reap the academic rewards of his or her own initiative, regardless of sex, religion, or family background” (McLaren, 2004, p. 175). He calls this “hollow rhetoric” and points out one of the greatest predictors of academic success are socioeconomic status. “In other words,” he posits, “although we profess to believe in equal opportunity for rich and poor alike, the fact remains that an individual’s social class and race at birth have a greater influence on social class later in life than do any other factors – including intelligence and merit” (p. 175). Simply said, children get as many chances for success in school as his or her family has “dollars and privileged social status.”

McLaren insists while it is probably true that schools cannot remake society, they must find a better way of making themselves vital places for all students – “places where students can be empowered to gain a sense of control over their destinies rather than feel trapped by their class position” (p. 176). Freire could not have said it any better – we as critical teachers are charged with much more than teaching children to read and write.

We are duty-bound to teach them to realize what oppresses them, their own worth, and how their realities can be changed for the better. This is critical pedagogy (p. 176).

McLaren charges critical educators to understand the democratic social values in their classrooms and “embrace their possibilities” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 86). As an inner-city teacher, McLaren realized his students had to be taught on their own terms first, and then “taught to critically transcend those terms in the interest of empowering themselves and others” (p. 178). Only then, he states, did he begin to be effective, when he dignified their experiences as worth of inquiry.

Developing liberating classroom conditions, McLaren asserts, requires teachers to engage in an ongoing analysis of the relationship between power, knowledge, and curriculum (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 32). This includes a framework that requires educators to analyze social reproduction, to “explore how schools perpetuate or reproduce the social relationships and attitudes needed to sustain the existing dominant economic and class relations of the larger society” (McLaren, 2004, p. 89). As educators discover conditions for social reproduction they must be critically self-reflective, “raising their own awareness of how they are sometimes complicit in over-valuing certain ways of talking, acting, and dressing and certain language practices and values” (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 33). According to McLaren:

No emancipatory pedagogy will ever be built out of theories of behavior which view students as lazy, defiant, lacking in ambition, or genetically inferior. A much more penetrating solution is to try to understand the structures of mediation in the socio-cultural world that form student resistance. (2004, p. 93)

Antonia Darder (2008) agrees with McLaren when she refers to certain struggling students and class structures that render members of disenfranchised groups “disposable” (p.13). In public schools the ideology of disposability is evident, she posits, in the mania of high-stakes standardized testing, where “tests acknowledged to be flawed are used to make inaccurate and inappropriate decisions about the fate of millions of students across the nation” (p. 13). Retention rates are higher for African American, Latino, and other children from poor families. And of all students who are retained, 50 percent are more likely to not graduate from high school. “Hence, early in their lives these children are officially classified and tracked, rendering them members of a disposable and expendable class” (p. 13).

Darder claims there is no question that in today’s world, no authentic form of democratic life is possible for the future without a revolutionary praxis of hope that works both for the “transformation of social consciousness on one hand and the reconstruction of social structures on the other” (p. 30).

Community – Cooperation, Not Competition

David Purpel (1989) argues that we:

...thirst for true community, for a broader context to individually struggle and authentically share our joys, confessions, and heartbreaks. However, when we got to school we are taught mostly to learn to be alone, to compete, to achieve, to succeed. (2004, p. 47)

The problem with the lack of community in schools is not so much an issue with students; the problem usually lies squarely with the parents. Alfie Kohn tells us that we live in a culture that is “remarkably unfriendly toward children” (1998, p. 572), a

shocking statement to most. He points out that many Americans promote the belief that children are our greatest natural resource evidenced by the amount of material goods we lavish on them, but in reality, he states, this is a false illusion exemplified by our “hostility to other people’s children and our unwillingness to support them” (p. 572). In simpler terms, children as a whole cannot be cited as our nation’s greatest resource when individuals only care about their own offspring and their ranking in the school hierarchy. Kohn cites David Labaree of Michigan State University who argues that schooling these days is not seen as a way to create democratic citizens or even capable workers, but “serves more as a credentialing mechanism” (p. 572). Labaree writes, “The point is not to get an education but to get ahead – and therefore, from the student/consumer’s point of view, to gain the highest grade with the minimum amount of learning” (p. 573).

Understandably, parents want the best for their children, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Parents want their children to be challenged and engaged and are naturally defensive of anything that jeopardizes that. But, Kohn states, “Wanting to make sure that only *their* children, or an arbitrarily limited group of similar children, receive the best possible education is not legitimate and should not be honored” (Kohn, 1998).

Competition in schools is encouraged from the top down. The Federal Government makes no attempt to cleverly disguise this fact. Their most recent funding for “high achieving schools” is entitled “Race to the Top.” It doesn’t get much more competitive-sounding than that. Schools “racing to the top” are graded on several criteria; the most scrutinized being standardized test scores. Standardized tests, as most critical theorists concur, are not much more than a reward system that promotes

“swashbuckling competition between peers, stereotypes based on one’s personal achievement, gender bias, basing one’s worth on achievement, gifted programs, honor roll societies, stickers, university entrance exams, school cheating systems and merit systems that promote individual antagonism” (Kanpol, 1998, p, 1). Purpel agrees. He views grading and standardized tests as techniques for promoting particular “social, moral, and political goals” (2004, p. 25) in addition to cut throat competition.

Maxine Greene (1994) cites the work of Colonel Frances Parker at the Cook County Normal School as an example of freeing children from “competitive environments and compulsions.” Parker’s work at the end of the 19th century encouraged the arts and “spontaneous activities; he encouraged shared work. He believed that if democratized, the school could become “the one central means by which the great problem of human liberty is to be worked out” (Greene, 1994, p. 433).

Finally, Kanpol allows the current “teach to the test” methods are just one more way schools become socialization mechanisms and not the caring communities they have the potential to be.

Grades, pop quizzes, fear of their results, cheating systems, reward structures that filter an immediate gratification logic, strict accountability models for teachers, demeaning stereotyping, sterile teaching methodologies, rote learning, forgetting information the next day or simply after a test, and the like, place the student and teacher in the awful predicament of using schooling as a socialization mechanism that loses sight of the many reasons for attending schools in the first place - nurture, care, community, citizenship preparation - in short, a broad education. (Kanpol, 1998, p.1)

Education in this postmodern world requires, perhaps more than ever, the teaching of independent and critical thinking in order to achieve the sense of community

we all need, individually and collectively. Relationships between people and countries require understanding and a willingness to appreciate the human contributions and attributes the other possesses.

Knowledge and Curriculum

Curriculum, from the learner's standpoint, ordinarily represents little more than an arrangement of subjects, a structure of socially prescribed knowledge, or a complex system of meanings which may or may not fall within his grasp. Rarely does it signify possibility for him as an existing person, mainly concerned with making sense of his own life – world. (Greene, 1971, p. 127)

An overwhelming number of critical theorists – if not all - agree that pre-packaged, one-size-fits-all curriculum doesn't belong anywhere near classrooms promoting social justice and critical thought. Currently, it seems the *craft* of teaching, the heart and soul of education and educators, is to be replaced by pre-packaged curriculum. The concept is not new, however, with the increasing pressure of standardized testing and the much-needed pumped-up scores to justify the cost of the test materials and the materials to prepare for them. Testing is big business. School systems no longer trust teachers to know their curriculum but even more disturbing, schools can't allow teachers the luxury of getting to know and understand their students as individuals. In the mechanized world of schooling, the only thing that matters, it seems, is the bottom line: test scores.

Almost two decades ago, Michael Apple addressed this issue and its residual effects, the deskilling of teachers. Apple explains:

Skills that teachers used to need, that were deemed essential to the craft of working with children—such as curriculum deliberation and planning, designing teaching and curricular strategies for specific groups and individuals based on intimate knowledge of these people—are no longer necessary. With the large-scale influx of pre-packaged material, planning is separated from execution. The planning is done at the level of the production of both the rules for use of the material and the material itself. The execution is carried out by the teacher. (Apple, 1995, pp. 132–133)

Packaged curriculum is easier to teach than teacher-created lessons. It is less time-consuming. There is much less preparation when all of the teachers in the grade level content areas are teaching the same lesson on the same day. Tests are synchronized within the grade level so essentially the message to the students is: ready or not, kids, the test is on Friday so we don't fall behind schedule. Additionally, none of the core subjects are linked or integrated which render valuable connections and opportunities to learn problem-solving extinct. The most disturbing issue with packaged curriculum is the complete lack of individuality involved in learning. There is no accounting for what subjects appeal to the students – a valuable starting point for most lessons – and a vital opportunity to create lessons which teach more than facts, but creativity, sharing, working as a community, and integrating individual prior experiences into the work of active learning.

In many school systems, not all yet, the value of the teacher is tied to legislated accountability measures and a monetary reward. Given their underpaid status, teachers will naturally gravitate to the more hopeful schools, the schools where the probability of “showing growth” and receiving a bonus check is greater: the more affluent schools. Simply said, if this is the case, this means the best, most highly qualified teachers will

work with students who are already advantaged by virtue of birth and socioeconomic status. The students who need more than a standardized template for success, the students who most require their innate intelligence and lived experience to be valued, will remain in schools with frustrated teachers with cookie cutter curriculums and no authority to differentiate instruction and teach in a holistic fashion. These are the teachers who feel devalued, deskilled, and powerless because they understand success is not an empirical measurement that can be reduced to a single plus or minus number on a data sheet. This reductionism is referred to by David Purpel (1989) as a kind of “quality control mechanism borrowed crudely and inappropriately from certain industrial settings” (pp. 48-49).

Teachers can no longer teach the love of learning when forced to subject students to analyze a few paragraphs of text that hold no interest to them and no connection to their experience. The reality and interest of the student is completely removed from the teaching equation. On the other hand, teachers should not abandon basic curriculum requirements such as writing, sentence structure, or essential mathematical foundations. Lisa Delpit (2006) educator and author, promotes critical theory in that she encourages teachers to get to know their students, learn about their cultures, and, as Freire would advise, appreciate and value what they bring to class with them in terms of intelligence and experience. Delpit, however, claims that it is racist to not teach students of color the skills that they need to get into and succeed in college. She critiques “open and progressive’ education that does not teach students how to write a sentence.” In her early teaching years, Delpit taught in Philadelphia. Her attempts to implement a student-

empowering pedagogy resulted in her students of color lagging behind their white and wealthy counterparts attending school in the suburbs. Her students did not improve until she decided explicitly to teach them the skills that they needed to access and navigate the culture of power. From her research, Delpit has surmised that “ many white progressive educators think they are freeing students of color from a racist educational system by allowing them to express themselves without learning to read, write, or speak Standard English” (p. 48). Delpit argues that these students will not be able to enter the mainstream of society without these skills (Duncan-Andrade, & Morrell, 2008, pp. 47-48).

Delpit’s argument simply requires educators, administrators, and legislators to use a measure of common sense and faith in teachers who have made a career choice to help nurture and educate children, regardless of the lack of empirical evidence to support their successes and failures. The billions of dollars spent on test preparation and testing could be redirected to smaller class size, more individualized and personalized learning, and updated texts in a wider variety of mediums for learning.

Jonathan Kozol gives a poignant yet accurate account of tests in a letter published in his 2007 publication, *Letters to a Young Teacher*:

Tests, as every educator knows, do not teach reading, writing, or the other basic elements of subject matter; only good hard-working teacher do and only if they work under conditions that respect their own intelligence and do not try to rob them of their own identities by forcing the un-lexicon of “systems experts” down their throats. Teachers have to find the will to counteract this madness. At very least, they ought to make it clear to every child in their room that high-stakes testing is, at best, a miserable game we’re forced to play but that our judgment of our students’ intellect and character and ultimate potential will have no

connection with the numbers tabulated by a person who is not an educator, and has never met them, working in a test-score factory 1,000 or 3,000 miles away. (Kozol, 2007, pp. 129-130)

The “miserable game we are forced to play” is heartbreaking work for teachers and students, especially those marginalized by race, socioeconomic status, or the lack of opportunity to speak English as a first language. Only through recognizing the many different perspectives and vantage points can teachers begin to open up the space for the “pursuit of freedom” (Greene, 1988, p. 128). Greene asserts that “no accounting, disciplinary or otherwise, can ever be finished or complete. There is always more. There is always possibility” (p. 128). Clear examples of this dire need to open spaces for freedom and instill the love of learning for a lifetime will be examined in Chapter 3.

Existential, Self-knowing, Freedom/Emancipation/Search for Self

Talk of the free world today is intertwined with talk of economic competitiveness, technology, and power. Talk of personal freedom refers to self-dependence and self-determination; it has little to do with connectedness or being together in community. (Greene, 1988, p.1)

As schools continue to focus on preparing students to serve the nation’s goal of economic competitiveness, Maxine Greene (1988), among others, reminds us to create a space where learners can discover, question and make meaning of their world (p. 12). As with most critical theorists, Greene’s “genre” of critical pedagogy and critical philosophy easily overlap, blurring the line between creating community and searching for ways to emancipate through education. She challenges educators to follow suit:

This is what we shall look for as we move: freedom developed by human beings who have acted to make a space for themselves in the presence of others, human beings become challengers “ready for alternatives, alternatives that include caring and community. And we shall seek as we go, implications for emancipatory education conducted by and for those willing to take responsibility for themselves and for each other. We want to discover how to open spaces for persons in their plurality, spaces where they can become different, where they can grow. (Greene, 1988, p. 56)

Greene refers to freedom as negative and positive. Negative freedom is freedom *from*; positive freedom is freedom *to*. She associates “negative freedom” (p. 16) with masculinity, a certain machismo, the inability to show weakness, an enormously painful way of life, full of worry and anxiety centered on the “self.” It is easy to draw a parallel from this concept to her unhappy family growing up. She describes her father as controlling and work obsessed and her mother as very unhappy, hiring people to take care of the children, filling her life with consumerism, shopping, playing bridge. Both her parents’ lives seemed centered around themselves and not their family (Beardsley, 2010, p. 1).

Greene achieved her own positive freedom in education. She asserts positive freedom as engaging with others, caring for others and putting the community at the center of your freedom. Freedom cannot be associated with autonomy. Education is making meaning, being with and for others, not just your autonomous self. Perhaps the root of these philosophies stemmed from a constant struggle of being Jewish in a Protestant world, being a woman in a man’s world, or both. For example, Greene’s own path to higher education was determined solely by the availability of classes offered between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., a timetable necessary for her to take her

daughter to day care in order for her to continue her education. This experience underscores her attention and recognition of women who still lack the community and family support to find their own road to freedom and possibilities.

If these women were able to join with others who share a ‘common lot,’ and demand provision of day care so that they could go to work or return to school, if she were able to organize others to set up a storefront school in an empty building, she might find herself moving with those others toward a different life situation; she would herself become different; she would begin to grow. (1988, p.72)

Greene experienced negative freedom as an adult during her graduate work and her early years after receiving her PhD. She describes being the only woman in many of the departments as lonely, the men making no concessions for her, continuing to meet in “men-only” venues, in smoke-filled, barroom atmospheres. Greene, however, centered her life on her family and career. The men she worked with in an equal capacity centered their lives around their careers only, for the most part, another example of her “negative” versus “positive” ideas of freedom.

Greene’s hard-earned freedom and recognition was achieved partly from her ability to imagine the unimaginable. She imagined herself as a philosopher, educator, mother, wife, friend and colleague at a time when women were mostly viewed only as wives and mothers. She insists educators must understand this ability to imagine in order to educate in more socially just ways. “Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called ‘other’ over the years” (1995, p. 3). Not only must we utilize imagination to empathize with the “other,” she insists that imagining things being

otherwise is the first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed (p. 22) or, as Purpel notes the “possibility of possibility” (1989, p. 139). Only through imagination can we begin to empathize with the other. She insists we must look, for instance, beyond the images of the hurricane survivor, the Somali child, the homeless woman on the corner, “but also of the silent or fidgety or the hopeless child in the classroom,” and *imagine* what it must be like to be them.

Imagination, Greene asserts, is a difficult concept for many. For instance, Greene notes the inability of male senators to grasp what was happening during Anita Hill’s testimony during the Clarence Thomas hearings (1995, p. 37). Imagination must be implemented not only by the powerful to empathize, but also by the *powerless* in order to believe in the possibilities. Children, she insists, must be shown the excitement of imagination, conceptualizing new things and seeing possibility. “What worries me about schools, are children go to school, they don’t see the point. It’s boring, you know, it’s dull...” But if you can make them see there is a point, if they can imagine possibility for their own lives or their community, she insists, success can be achieved (Beardsley, 2010, p. 1).

Like Greene, Paulo Freire understood the necessity of visualizing the possibilities as a first step to freedom. Freire is the father of critical pedagogy as we experience it currently. Born into a middle class family in Brazil, his family’s fortunes reversed with the economic crisis in 1929. He found himself sharing the plight of the “wretched of the earth” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 30). He vowed at age eleven to dedicate his life to the struggle against hunger “so that other children would not have to know the agony he was

then experiencing” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 30). He too, like Maxine Greene, led the charge for emancipation through education, helping entire populations throw off their chains – figuratively and literally – through education.

Both Dewey (1916) and Freire (1985, 1998) believed that the ultimate goal of education was to attain a socially just and democratic citizenry. Education was thus aimed at helping marginalized individuals and groups to use education as a means to bring about liberatory social change (Breuing, 2008, p. 13).

The Highlander School & Myles Horton

Marx and Dewey responded to injustices during the industrial revolution primarily in urban, manufacturing areas. Myles Horton responded in the rural south of the United States. Horton and Freire’s theories of education were very similar. Myles Horton was hugely influential as a critical teacher to the rural poor. His core methodologies were the same as many of the prior critical theorists: acknowledge the value each student brings to the table; listen; learn from the student; see their possibilities and, most importantly, encourage the student to visualize and imagine their *own* potential.

The post-depression years of the 1930’s were especially difficult for the poor in mining and textile industries in the southeast. Having been displaced from farms and rural areas, workers moved in droves to the textile mills, mines and factories as part of the “development” of the rural South (Horton and Freire, 1990, p. xvii). In response to the exploitation of the poor, Myles Horton, a Tennessee native, opened The Highlander School in Tennessee and began programs to educate these displaced people. The design

of the programs “promoted the ideas of an exchange of information as opposed to the traditional teacher-students relationship” (p. xx). This allowed everyone – including the teacher, to learn from the classes.

Horton’s core objective was freedom and held the radical democratic belief that it was the “right of all people to achieve that freedom through self-emancipation” (Horton and Freire, 1990, p. xxx). The people Highlander served were the exploited poor. They had escaped their failed farms for a serfdom controlled by industrialists who owned their homes and paid in script to the company store where workers had no choice but to purchase necessities at inflated prices. The Highlander School was a place where neighbors could meet and learn to help themselves and help each other. Education developed naturally from the people themselves. The students were working toward an education that would free them from assistance by learning to navigate daily problems, organizing, and by “showing power and strength” (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 38). Horton was historically viewed as a socialist and an organizer and in some cases, a communist, but he always viewed himself first as an educator. The people who would come to learn at The Highlander School were not interested in building a new social order, “they wanted food and jobs” (Horton, 1998, p. 46). As with the African slaves and other oppressed populations, they first had to understand their reality by questioning. Education in this sense was a way to draw a response to “the deeper beliefs about the very nature of what it means to be human, to dream, and to name and struggle for a particular future and way of life” (Freire, 1985, p. xvi). The students at Highlander, by way of Horton’s vision of education, received the guidance they needed to navigate the

system in order to successfully change their own circumstances. Like Freire, he didn't just teach them to read, he taught them how to understand the reasons for their oppressed state.

The lessons learned at The Highlander School were not well-received by the power elite mining industry. Armed with new-found confidence and knowledge, striking minors attempting to break free from the company store mentality were met with deadly force. Miners and their wives and children were cold and starving. These people needed an education with action at its core, a way to "push the boundaries" of their restricted lives (Horton, 1998, page xx). This education was dangerous business. Horton's emphasis was to form strategies to confront the system "without being destroyed," however, he insisted that until people took some risk to gain some independence from the system, they were not free to learn or act (Horton, 1998, p. xxi). As students work to become part of the decision-making process, they "discover that learning about democracy involves working to replace, transform, and rebuild society to allow for equal participation" (Horton, 1998, p. xxi).

Helen Lewis, who pens the preface to Horton's (1998) *The Long Haul*, sums up the emancipatory education at Highlander best:

Real liberation is achieved through popular participation. Participation in turn is realized through an educational practice that itself is both liberatory and participatory, that simultaneously creates a new society and involves the people themselves in the creation of their own knowledge. Not abstract...but grown from their struggles to link theory and practice in their own lives. (p. xxx)

The Highlander School continued to function as a bastion of emancipatory education through the 1950's and 1960's civil rights movement providing training for movement leaders including Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Having met Horton during his junior year at Morehouse College, King asked if Horton would set up an educational program for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Highlander was able to play a role in developing educators because they were also asked to oversee the training of volunteers by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). They trained the people who ran the Citizenship Schools and the voter registration drives, the "noncharismatic people" (Horton, 1998, p. 127). That was when Horton learned, as he had in earlier industrial union period, that "educational work during social movement periods provides the best opportunity for multiplying democratic leadership (p. 127). The lessons taught at Highlander still inspire the famous as well as the lesser-known "noncharismatic." Education is the first step to freedom.

Hope and Possibility

We can model hope rather than despair. Each of us (especially educators) has a responsibility to ourselves and to our fellows, to search for a faith that not only sustains us individually, but also brings light rather than darkness to those who learn from us. (Purpel, 1989, p. 258)

The idea that hope alone will transform the world...is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. The attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. (Freire, 1996, p. 8)

We live in a world of constant change and great turbulence. The complexities of modernity are burdensome. Technologies are created and constantly updated and we are required to adapt. Frustration and anxiety are byproducts of the frantic pace we are challenged with and cause some to reach a breaking point, sometimes resulting in horrific acts of violence. We live in a time when humanity is anything but static and in order to thrive, hope must be embraced. Without hope, we become stunted, immobilized, unable or unwilling to change. Hope is what allows parents return their children to classrooms where weeks earlier a massacre took place. Hope is the catalyst that pushes the immigrant and refugee to pack up their families and few possessions and leave everything they have ever known to enter a new, difficult and foreign world.

Hope is possibility. It makes it possible to stand up and live life, not shrivel behind a wall of defeat. Hope is what Freire, Horton, Greene, Hooks, Giroux and all the other critical thinkers offer humanity – hope, change, a chance to “become” and to continue to “become,” never satisfied to be “just a mother” or “just a farmer,” “just a mill worker,” or “just a statistic” in whatever marginalized, oppressed situation we find ourselves.

Hope is not completion. Hope makes it possible to never be finished – and never want to be finished, an endless curiosity to be offered to students so they too can search and strive and learn and grow and offer hope to others.

Richard Rorty (1999) asserts hope for social justice is the only basis for a “worthwhile life” (p. 204). Critical Pedagogy is pedagogy of hope, for without hope, there could be no action, no imagining a better life, and no catalyst to awaken the

consciousness of the student. Hope, like social justice and democracy, is a foundational component of critical pedagogy. One of the tasks of progressive educators, according to Freire, is to “unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be” (p. 9). Without hope, the struggle is almost impossible, suicidal, in fact. (p. 9). Freire calls for an education in hope. It is so important for our existence, “that we must take every care not to experience it in a mistaken form, and thereby allow it to slip toward hopelessness and despair” (p. 9).

Bell Hooks understood Freire’s words and took up the cause to establish hope in the classroom, a location, she refers to as a “field of possibility” (1994, p 207). Hooks, an African American woman born into a working class family in the south, was unsatisfied with the women’s movement of the 1970’s. She viewed the women’s movement primarily as a vehicle for middle and upper-middle class white women (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 83). Many women of color were repelled by the movement, bewildered at the lack of interconnectedness. Hooks worked with a number of other black women to “help refocus white feminist attention” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 83). Hooks maintained that “feminism must be more than a call for equal rights for women. In the contemporary context it must be able to identify and eradicate the ideology of domination that expresses itself along the axis of race, class, sexuality, Colonialism, and gender” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 83). Hooks created the space to incorporate the black perspective into the cause.

Hugely influenced by Freirean thought, her theories have made a “profound impact on the development of critical pedagogy” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 83). Kincheloe (2008) posits Hooks’ kinship with Freire came out of her respect for his over-all concern

for the disenfranchised, more so than the middle class feminists at that time. Hooks states after first reading Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), she had finally found "someone who understood that learning could be liberatory" (Hooks, 1994, p. 6). She also made a connection with Freire's work that she had not made with feminist writers and thinkers at the time. "I felt myself included in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In the United States we do not talk enough about the way in which class shapes our perspective on reality" (p. 6).

Bored in her graduate classes, Hooks credits the banking system of education (memorizing information to later be regurgitated), as the cause. "[It] did not interest me. I wanted to become a critical thinker" (Hooks, 1994, p. 5). It is this experience that leads Hooks to speak directly to classroom teachers imploring them, through critical theory, to "create an atmosphere of open expression that is the mark of an emancipatory education" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 84). Hook's discussions of critical pedagogy focus heavily on the importance of confronting social class in the classroom (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 35). Having grown up in a working class family, she became painfully aware of classism in education as an undergraduate at Stanford University (Hooks, 1994, pp. 177-178). Hooks believes educators should employ a critical pedagogy that confronts class and other forms of inequality. She has taken the lessons of Freire's work with economically poor adult farmers and "mapped it onto places of privilege in the United States" (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, p. 35). She espouses hope that radical change is still possible. Her work has undergone intense scrutiny and received a good deal of negative feedback (Hooks, 1989, p. 103). The reason for some of this negative

feedback had to do with where her pedagogical efforts were carried out, places of extreme privilege, including Duke University and Yale University (p. 103). Hook's insistence that students with class privilege must also be educated with critical pedagogical strategies sets her work apart from most discussions of critical pedagogy. Her work and genre of critical pedagogy includes a critical hope that "the world can be a place opposed to domination and oppression and that critical education can trigger all people, privileged and oppressed, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others" (1994, p. 250). To effectively revolutionize the academy, she charges the following: "that radical people must work together; that appropriate curricula and pedagogy must be developed, and that space must be created to prepare for change" (Davidson and Yancy, 2009, p. 74).

Kanpol (1998) asserts hope lies in asking and answering the following question, then, subsequently taking action: To what end do I teach? "When I can truly answer that question, the critical pedagogue will realize that teaching is more than about transmitting the basics of schooling, but really about the vitality of education for citizenship, democracy and the hope that this can be passed on to future generations" (p. 1). Agreeing with Hooks, Kanpol goes on to say teachers cannot always circumvent the required industrial style of teaching, but "we CAN challenge it where necessary." As long as educators are willing to make that challenge, to oppose domination and oppression and at all times keep the best interest of their students in the forefront, there *is* hope for change.

Civil War in El Salvador

While no one specific critical pedagogue or theorist is responsible for the popular education movement in El Salvador, it is important to include a relatively recent example of the emancipatory power of critical pedagogy and its more tangible possibilities. Education became an important tool of Latin American movements for social and political change and is vital to address in this dissertation. The civil war in El Salvador between 1980 and 1992 emphasized the power of learning and its necessity as a first step to revolution (Hammond, 1998, p. 15). The work of Horton and Freire and other foundational theorists and educators, however, is obvious in regard to adult education, awakening the possibilities of the oppressed, appreciation of the innate intelligence of the population, and the freedom acquired literally and intellectually through education.

The campesinos, or rural poor who became guerilla fighters, lacked schooling which prevented them from acquiring skills and seeking opportunities; it also contributed to “widely held stereotypes that dismiss them as inferior” (Hammond, 1998, p. 11 -12). Education (literacy) was essential for understanding their reality, the world, for personal development, and for performing organizational tasks (p. 50). People saw education as a tool for struggle and emancipation, not “something to be pursued for its own sake” (p. 51). During this twelve year war, communities organized popular education in zones controlled by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). It was a crucial factor in the Salvadoran war developing the political consciousness of the campesinos who “became the insurgency’s base, and it contributed to the outcome, which, while not a complete victory, was a substantial political and military success (Hammond, 1998, p. 5).

The FMLN worked to educate its mostly illiterate or barely literate troops. Education was vital to cultivate the skills needed to organize, pick up arms and fight, and “to put into practice the ideology that proclaimed that all people are capable of learning and are entitled to the opportunity” (p. 53). Learning specific skills, according to the theory of popular education, “must be part of the integral development of human capacities; education forms the whole person.” This was an armed conflict that required the concepts of critical pedagogy to first free the minds of the campesinos, and then educate them to fight effectively for social justice.

Education’s role encompassed the whole of the insurgent’s being. It involved learning to read and write, express oneself, work successfully with others, and to solve real problems. Prior to the war, most of the campesinos had never attended school. Schools were either too far to attend or it was necessary for them to work in the fields as soon as they were old enough in order to feed their families. Also, many parents saw no need to educate them. Combatants who were fortunate enough to have been educated were mobilized as teachers: “some from urban areas had had access to secondary education, and a few had been professional teachers or university students” (p. 53). Essentially, anyone who could read and write, were pressed into service. Literacy was vital to their cause in order for guerilla fighters to learn to function as paramedics and radio operators, comprehending field manuals in order to use the only weapons at their disposal – most of which were outdated.

Education awakened the inner strength and determination of the campesinos to fight and establish basic literacy for combatants to train and learn the skills necessary to

carry on the fight. Also, without education, an entire generation of Salvadorans would have emerged from the war illiterate. Leftist teachers had been eliminated or serving in vital roles as educators to the troops; their husbands, sons and daughters were taking up arms and becoming guerilla fighters. The remaining few adults and children found themselves in refugee camps. Someone had to teach the small children how to read and write, so the children who had mastered literacy stepped up and began to teach. Children as young as 10, 11, and 12 were teaching the youngest to read and write and prepare for a future outside the camps.

The importance of education was finally realized in the rural areas. The campesinos understood education was imperative for the future of their children and insisted on providing it first in the refugee camps and later by making it a priority in their communities after the war.

In 1992 they returned, united, to what was left of their villages and began to rebuild. As they reorganized their lives, education continued to be a top priority. Without the children and education, there would be no future. Requests and later demands to the government for education funds went unanswered. If the government would not supply teachers or funding, again, the burden of educating their youth fell on those former “child-teachers” from the camps. And once again, they rose to the challenge and worked not only to educate, but to rebuild schools in their communities.

The former “child-teachers” were supported by the community, continued teaching and became certified and finally recognized by the government. Some, after 10 or 12 years of teaching service, received their first paycheck. Their reality no longer

required simple facts to memorize and standardized tests based purely on the government-issued curriculum. They needed an education that brought their world to the forefront. Agriculture, literature, math and language were taught, all in a way that directly related to their daily lives.

This last example of critical pedagogy as an emancipatory tool is a personal one. Having spent a few weeks in El Salvador as part of a cohort of teachers in 2007, I saw first-hand the liberating power of education and its long-reaching effects. I saw a small village of proud people who, prior to the war, had no use for education of any kind. They had no vision, no imagination of future possibilities. Freire (1970) would call them “peasants,” a people whose fatalism was so ingrained; they could not imagine having the intellectual ability or wherewithal to function alone “The peasant begins to get courage to overcome his dependence when he realizes that he is dependent. Until then, he goes along with the boss and says, ‘What can I do? I’m only a peasant’” (Freire, 1970, p. 61). Freire goes on to say that peasants feel inferior to “the boss” because the boss seems to be the only one who “knows things and is able to run things” (p. 63). After the war, these campesinos were no longer “peasants.” They were still economically poor, but they were emancipated. Hope led them to participate in a revolution and the liberating value of education and its necessity for a successful future. Finally, they envisioned themselves as “bosses” instead of “peasants” and could actively participate in changing their circumstances.

Conclusion

From its inception, critical pedagogy's primary focus has been to alleviate oppression through the acquisition of empowerment and agency. The literature supports this as exemplified by the philosophical work of Marcuse and The Frankfurt School; Gramsci's theory of hegemony; the democratic foundations of Dewey; Freire and Horton's fight for civil rights and freedom; Giroux and McLaren's focus on the rights and abuses of youth and our "classless society"; Kanpol and Kozol's critique of classism; Hooks' feminist view from the black perspective; Greene's existentialist philosophy. This is only a small sampling of educators, authors, philosophers and theorists who have worked for innumerable forms of social justice through hope and critical pedagogy. All of the issues addressed in this dissertation and many others are experienced every day by classroom teachers. For them, these issues are not theories or philosophies or representations to discuss or debate, they are very real, tangible entities, children whose gaze must be met and whose questions must be answered.

Critical pedagogy is primarily about connecting theory and practice. Kincheloe (2008, p. 120) asserts, unfortunately, that theory is often viewed as the domain of the university and practice "the province of elementary and secondary schools" (p. 120). Critical teachers, however, add the "complex combination of theory and practice resulting in informed action" (p. 120). This combination results in the notion of "praxis." Praxis begins when theory and practice are joined together and critically reflected upon, regardless of the grade level or age of the student. Freire (1970) informs us praxis is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p 51)

Writing this dissertation is my praxis. In this chapter I researched the theory and theorists of critical pedagogy. Practice, interacting with students, administrators, parents, etc. is another component and the bulk of what the classroom experiences. Chapter III chronicles the practice of teachers and in doing so completes another component of praxis: reflection. The research from this chapter will be applied to the autoethnographical account in Chapter III where the tensions between teachers and the obstacles they face, are examined. These obstacles include top-down management issues, packaged curriculum, racism, elitism, standardized testing, pay for performance, homelessness, hunger, and physical abuse – innumerable impediments teachers face daily. These obstacles are not taken into consideration when the “worth” of the teacher is calculated at the end of the year on a spreadsheet, a final accounting of standardized test scores compressed into a single “plus” or “minus” indicating the success or failure of the teacher. For these reasons, these issues must be addressed, examined, and critiqued in order to be evaluated through the lens of critical pedagogy in the hope of working toward social justice.

Like the ever-changing injustices we face in life, social justice and critical pedagogy must offer fluid responses, continue to change and offer new solutions.

CHAPTER III

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFELCTIVE PROCESS: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

It takes courage to interrogate yourself. (Cornel West, 2008, p 9)

I look to teaching as an act of friendship, an act of love that occurs in contexts of care and trust. I believe this is how I developed my ethic of teaching, of caring deeply about what it means to encounter the student as a person, as a whole being that has a history, a story of how they too arrived at this pedagogical moment. (Warren, 2011)

Teacher educators must be willing to explore the patterns, the connections and the disconnections of their lives, and, like any good researcher, turn it into data and analyze it. Then, they must share their findings in narrative form. For example, they must be able to interpret their lived experiences through the educational theory presented to their students. It is no coincidence K – 12 teachers lament the discernible disconnect between theory and practice. During their training no one ever modeled for them how the theory they studied is actually connected to what they experienced as students, or what their students will experience every day. (Generett, 2009, p.87)

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. It attempts to present a creative and frank depiction of the struggles teachers currently face in classrooms, impediments that continuously keep educators from teaching in a critical fashion and in ways that support and promote social justice. Additionally, this chapter attempts to chart the researcher's own growth, the process of becoming a critical educator through theory and practice, questioning the methods of pedagogy and use of certain types of curriculum.

Freire (1974) states we relate to our world in a critical way by apprehending the objective data of our reality “through reflection – not by reflex, as do animals...they reach back to yesterday, recognize today, and come upon tomorrow” (p.3). The process of this reflection allows the researcher (me) to become the researched and to actively participate in my own observation and analysis. As part of the autoethnographic process, the methodology (which I have described the nature of more fully in the appendix of the dissertation) was not approached in a positivistic fashion; this process did not involve experimental or manipulated methods, nor was there the required positivistic distance to objectively prove or refute a hypothesis. The data derived from journals, reflective class assignments, letters, memos and electronic mail extending over a ten-year period. This process involved intense reflection and consideration of the material during which a number of recurrent analytic themes emerged. This would ultimately allow the researcher to name the experiences in order to more completely understand and relay the meanings of the ‘raw’ textual materials. Freire would refer to these “named experiences” as generative themes. Freire’s generative themes, according to Peterson (2003), can develop from writing, reading, and reflecting. They can generate discussion, study, and project work. These more salient themes would then become thematic categories for the reflection portion of my autobiographical methodology.

I chose to type out all of my original journal entries, emails, letters, reflection pieces, etc. in order to avoid highlighting and annotating on the original material. The process of typing the material, literally looking and repeating every word of the text, was a first step in the review. After printing off hundreds of pages of text, I began the work

of determining data relevant to the research - impediments teachers navigate in order to teach in a critical way and supporting social justice teaching. As both observer of classroom practices and a participant in the teaching process, I was now ready to reanalyze and locate similarities that materialized. Using various colors of highlighter markers, I began to revisit the newly printed pages and look for repeated text, repeated concerns, and repeated questions. Working within the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, several themes were illuminated. I chose five as the most important and relative to the research: race, extraneous jobs and responsibilities of teachers; teachers as intellectuals or automatons; standardized testing; affluence privilege and unwanted populations. In order to promote multiple understandings, the themes were elaborated in the form of narratives. These narratives were not placed in chronological order nor were they placed in order of importance.

Preface

The comments and opinions used in this process were often written during or shortly after the “heat of the moment,” language and misspellings were intentionally left intact. My passion and frustration at the time of writing most of these entries is exacerbated by my lack of knowledge and theory and an overwhelming feeling of helplessness. This realization became obvious as I began to select specific experiences to include in the analysis. However, knowing more about theory, philosophy, and why and how certain events occur in schools did not make the experience of analyzing the data less painful. The same frustration and anger surfaced just as they did when the journal accounts were written. I did feel less helpless during reflection.

My intent is to lay bare the elementary and middle school classroom experience from the teacher's point of view in its most natural and personal form. My purpose is reiterated from my research statement in chapter one:

The purpose of this research is to observe and better understand the tension between current required methods of teaching and explore how teachers can, in spite of restrictions, teach for social justice. It is also my hope to discover ways to circumnavigate the oppression teachers bear from the inability of systems, administrators and legislators to take into account student worth beyond a test score.

Race: Middle Class White Women Out to Save the World, sort of

I, like most new teachers, had only one perspective when it came to children: my own. White. Middle class. Female. I did not have the critical awareness to know or understand at the time where these students were coming from – literally and figuratively. This was my first taste of critical pedagogy. I came into the classroom feeling sorry, ready to “save” these children, educate them, fill them with knowledge that will get them out of their horrible lives and away from their horrible parents. It didn't take long for me to realize, although I could not articulate it at the time, these kids were extremely intelligent and savvy. They were only eight years old and sized me up in about two minutes after entering the classroom. What I didn't know was, although their experiences were very different from mine, they contained a wealth of knowledge. They didn't need me to “fill them,” as Freire (1970) warned against (p. 73). I needed to take the time to learn about, appreciate and respect their realities. In the end, I learned so much more from them than they did from me.

December 25, 2008

How can a woman teach a class entirely comprised of African American children and not have the good sense to know that being called a “white cracker” was an insult?

I had such a difficult time being as “hard” as I needed to be. I was used to my own son, also a third grader at the time, and I can have him in a puddle on the floor with a LOOK. If I raised my voice, I don’t know what he’d have done as an 8-year-old. (Because I’d busted his butt a few times when he was little and he knew I meant business.) So here I am, in this classroom with no student teaching experience with 14 of the most wonderful children, all of color and all from the surrounding neighborhood. Some children, I remember one in particular, lived in a boarding house room with his mom and the boyfriend dujour. At the time, I didn’t even know what a boarding house was! Many, if not most, had a parent in jail or prison. Essentially, they were raising themselves. So here I go, the dreaded “middle class white woman” in there to do my thing. Disaster.

I spoke in a very soft voice, as I would my own child, asking them to do things, not telling them. “OK, it’s time to put this away and get started on your morning work. Let’s get busy.” essentially trying to coax them. Let me tell you. It. Did. Not. Work. Love and compassion and yes, I admit, feeling sorry for these kids wasn’t getting the job done.

Finally one morning, I stood up like an army sergeant after they’d finished their breakfast (in the classroom) and barked my orders: “Clean up. Here’s the trash can. Sit down. Get your morning work out and get busy!” Like magic, they did what I’d asked (or rather demanded). I felt like I was being rude or mean, but eventually I realized in this particular case, these children needed straightforward direction. Some of those boys I rode hard. I demanded and I expected, I didn’t ask. I felt so guilty sometimes for raising my voice or holding them accountable....sending them to see the principal or calling home. But this was the MOST incredible thing. These big, tough, wide-open, loud and hard to handle boys would come up to me at the end of every day and hug me and say, “I love you Ms. Self.” And I would hug them and say “I love you too, baby.” They’d get on the bus and we’d start all over again the next day: GET IN YOUR SEAT! GET OUT YOUR WORK!

This first post exemplifies characteristics of a first-year teacher’s experience in the classroom, nervous about their maiden voyage into educating small children, but confident about their preparation. Hours and hours of college classes and hard work and

desire to “give back” however, had not prepared me for the cultural misunderstandings. I understood there were cultural differences and generally what they entailed, I just didn’t understand their significance in the classroom. Essentially, I had been taught to educate robots. If all the children had been the same intellectually, listened attentively, and followed directions, my training to teach them would have been exemplary. Unfortunately, educational theory alone would do me no good in that first school. I had much more to learn than the students I was in charge of. There was infinitely more to learn about race and culture, but mostly, I had infinitely more to learn about myself and my biases.

It took several years of teaching, innumerable discussions and graduate classes to even begin to see and understand my own intrinsic biases. With the exception of the usual extremist group members, few people would readily and publicly admit they are racist or prejudiced, overtly cruel or demeaning to cultures and races unlike their own. Many well-intentioned people are convinced - and spend a good amount of time convincing others - that they do not have a racist or privileged bone in their body. They sponsored a child in Ethiopia; they went on a church service trip for a week to El Salvador; and they have “black friends” or “gay friends” or (even better) both! Unfortunately, kind acts and the absence of abuse toward other races and cultures do not give an accurate assessment of ones’ true positionality on race and otherness. In fact, Kumashiro (2002) explains, “a lot takes place in our classrooms, teacher education programs and research communities that, despite our good intentions, actually contribute to oppression” (p. 69). Only the well-examined self, inclusive of critical questioning and

analysis of history from many perspectives, allows an accurate accounting of an individual's own power, privilege, and prejudices.

January 27, 2009

I thought our country had come a long way toward integration, diversification and tolerance. I wasn't racist. I embraced any child who needed help in any way, regardless of color. That's what I told myself. But at bus duty, I would shake my head at the absurdity of middle school boys trying to run to their bus, hobbled, holding on to their pants so they wouldn't fall off as they crab-walked to their ride. I would get annoyed at constantly having to tell black students to sit up, stand up, pull your pants up! Equally annoying were the parents that I could rarely get in touch with, and when I did manage to make contact, came to school to let me know how I had singled their child out because he or she was black.

The reassessment of my feelings toward racism and how I viewed "others" from a white, heterosexual point of view began my first semester in the PhD program. I was so disturbed after a class discussion one night; I sat down and wrote an email to my sister, reflecting on the class, the discussion, its occupants and my own questions:

Wed. October 14, 2008

Just walked in from class.....

I've got Barack Obama on the radio in the background. This is significant because I just came from, without a doubt, the most uncomfortable classes I have ever attended. The question at hand was; why do we have such a difficult time (white people) with the discussion of race?

I've been kinda quiet lately in class because I've figured out that I really don't know a lot about a lot. Better to be silent and mysterious than open your mouth and remove all doubt that you are an idiot. I'll do better next semester. ANYway, some of the (white) people said some things and then one of the (black) women that has been wonderful to me very helpful and supportive, gets all teary and says: after being in this program (she's in her last class or two before her dissertation) it makes me completely lose hope to see people shut down when asked this question. (white people) If we cannot have this discussion in this class when we are supposed to be the agents of change in this area, where, (WHERE) can we have it? If we can't have it here, I see no hope. And I am very sad.

Hmmmm. Well, some of the (white) people began to address her concern. I'm still locked up tight as a clam. I have so MUCH to say, so MANY questions I've wanted to ask for years, I can't even organize my thoughts to begin. The discussion (between black and white) continued in a very civil manner.

THEN, after not calling on me all night, after this huge elephant has been tiptoed around all evening about us (white people) shutting down, Dr. S looks at ME (I'm looking at my fingernails or lack thereof...) and is talking (I'm looking at the tiny erasure residue on my notebook paper) and asking (ME????? He's not talking to ME, IS HE???????) what my thoughts are...what my experience is....and lots of other questions I can't remember because my brain froze up and malfunctioned....ground to a screeching halt.

I'm looking up far enough to see his belt buckle....can't ignore that he's right freakin' in front of me now....and I made some unintelligible sounds....not exactly grunts, but a lot of "ummmms...." And "ahhhssss" "well...." "Uhhhhhhh, I....just....well....yeah, I think about race every day....um...." and I kinda faded out. Thank GOD I didn't blurt out "I like black people" or "I really don't see any difference between black and white....what? There are BLACK people in this room? Oh! God! I hadn't noticed!"

If I have ever prayed for a large hole to open up and swallow me, it was tonight. I'm sitting there thinking everyone in the room is going to think I'm a redneck, racist idiot with the hick accent and no comprehension of the black experience. The fact that I couldn't even articulate a coherent sentence, much less a THOUGHT after the statement about "shutting down."

The truth is now out: Patti Self is a redneck, racist idiot who does not belong in this program.

I just couldn't get into a discussion about:

- The dichotomy of the black/white experience. I hear kids on the bus call out "nigger" to each other and that's not supposed to be offensive, yet when I taught 4th grade, I had a white kid call a black kid a nigger and I jumped over a table to get to him and practically levitated him out of his chair with my eyes, I was so mad.
- I don't understand why (that same year) we got initial test results back prior to the EOG's being given and our (black) (female) principal literally said in a meeting to the whole faculty to "get the black kids on the carpet and review, review, review!" I, (white) (female) was offended by that.
- I don't understand why I'm supposed to have compassion for the "oppressed" black population when I, for eleven years, have been one of the divorced oppressed. There are statistics to back it up: a woman's income decreases significantly after divorce while the man's increases. I don't understand

where the compassion for MY oppression, a (white) woman, divorced with a child who took significant pay cuts and lowered standard of living to do the right thing and raise my child the way I thought it was supposed to be done.

- I don't understand being considered "racist" or "judgmental" or "out of touch" after the times (against your advice!) have gone to the houses of these children, raised money for them to go on field trips, bought fuel oil out of my own pocket and delivered it to people who had no heat and no money to buy it with; bought clothes, soap, shampoo, Christmas gifts, set up and decorated Christmas trees in their houses, tutored them for free while I was working a second job to pay for my own child's \$30 an hour tutoring.
- I don't understand when I reprimand (sternly, I admit) a white boy for misbehaving, acting inappropriately, being disrespectful yet when I reprimand a black boy for the same thing, I "don't understand the culture." I could go on and on.

I want to KNOW, I want someone to EXPLAIN to me what the problem is, but it seems anytime a white person even ASKS, we are considered so out of touch and the answer seems so obvious, that the eye rolling begins and we are either criticized or dismissed. Well...I guess that was more than you wanted to know.

Early into my teaching profession, my understanding of "privilege" was still underdeveloped. I confused "affluence" and "privilege" and used them almost interchangeably. I was still under the impression that privilege was another word for "wealth." I immediately got my defenses up when I was referred to as "privileged" in some of my classes. It was a few years later that someone finally explained "privilege" in a way that I understand. A few years into my graduate work, a fellow student, approximately my age, female and African American simply asked: "When was the last time you were getting dressed in the morning, readying for your day and you had to think about your race? If you have never had to consciously think about your race, while you dress, when you shop, while you drive, you are privileged." Educators, especially those who address adult students, must be careful with the language they use. To address a group of teachers and refer to the "privilege" most of them have because they are white is

a recipe for disaster. One must understand the usage of the word “privilege” before it can be used to help others understand their ownership or lack of it.

December 29, 2008

How exhausting it must be to have to gauge yourself all the time, to measure every word and gesture (as a black male). I compared this lack of “safe space” to a news summary I saw about the presidential primary, specifically comparing Hillary Clinton, running as a presidential candidate and Sara Palin as John McCain’s running mate for the presidency. The media saw Clinton as too hard, harsh, stoic, not humorous enough, mannish. Later, when she did become minimally emotional, she was viewed as weak, too soft, and too feminine. Palin was immediately seen as too feminine, not tough enough not smart enough and referred to as “Caribou Barbie.” I thought black men must have a constant dialogue going on inside their head wondering if they are showing ENOUGH emotion, TOO MUCH emotion; are they tough enough, sensitive enough, etc. Comparing the female in a power situation to the black male really helped me understand more about the pressures, the “lack of space” to just BE.

While developing my awareness of my own racism, I began to grow tired of the almost daily reminder of the “achievement gap” between white students and students of color. The accusing tone of the articles, editorials and negative test score data teachers were subjected to in faculty meetings made it sound like we purposely tried to fail the students of color, ignoring them, and intentionally setting them up for failure. The causes resulting in the manifestation of an achievement gap, drop-out rates, incarceration rates and early death, are many. In addition to white, middle class educators with no awareness of culture, absentee fathers; few role models; the hegemonic portrayal of black men in popular culture and the media; materialism; are just a few of the causes. African American children, especially the males, struggle in our current system of education in the United States. Having taught children of color in grades three through eight, I had, or at least thought I had, a pretty good idea of the differences these children and I, a middle-

class, white woman shared. I knew their experience in school would not be the same as my experience, I was not that naïve, but I failed to understand the behavioral difficulties my colleagues and I all seemed to share with our black, male students.

I never considered myself racist, yet I grew resentful of the constant harangue of administrators regarding the achievement gap of the black, male students in my school district. The local newspaper reported almost daily about this widening chasm between white and black students; of school board members of color alluding to racism within the system; and the handwringing of the superintendent to get the scores up and the suspension rates of the same population down. One opinion piece accused the local Board of Education of “chasing its tail – running full speed and going nowhere” (Davenport, 2008) board members, teachers and parents will spend innumerable hours looking for solutions through the usual channels of sensitivity training workshops and finger-pointing, meanwhile, “the status quo continues: Slouching in the back row of classes countywide, illiterate black males learn little or nothing, create tumult and disorder, get suspended and in many cases, drop out of school” (B-1).

I resented the accusations of African American parents who, when I disciplined their child or did not “give” a grade they felt their child deserved, accused me of prejudice and “targeting” their child. Many of my experiences within the school system made me angry. Why, I wondered, would the parents of these children not raise their kids, the solution I thought to be most effective? My frustration was evident in a post I wrote to a classmate:

December 21, 2008

* Every child can learn

* The children who have at least one parent at home to lay down rules and see that they're followed and encourage learning and the importance of reading and education generally do not end up in any sort of suspension or behavioral mess.

* I have taught a number of African American children who had support and encouragement at home and shone as bright as or brighter than any of the white kids.

I don't want children of color to "become white." I want the parents of children of every color to wake up and raise their children. Period.

After considerable study and discussion on the topic, still clinging to my belief that all African American boys needed to become successful in school was good parenting, I read a simple question in one of our texts that struck me. Dr. Leila Villaverde (2008) asked, "How does one convince students who have benefited from a traditional system of education that it does not serve all students equally?" I realized then that the "student" Dr. Villaverde was writing about was *ME*. The sting I felt when a friend and colleague responded to my arrogant posting was an awakening. She pointed out to me quite clearly that I was missing the point entirely – the bias, the systematic institutionalized racism and obstacles that prevent parents of color from doing as "good" a "job" as those with race, gender, and class privilege. This widening gap in achievement cannot be resolved by external means i.e. money, workshops, quick fix-it solutions as part of continuing education. The cause of this disparity began four hundred years ago and has been bred into young black men for generations.

Nationwide, about twice as many African American children as white children live in single-parent homes. One in four black men between the ages of 20 and 29 are

either in prison, in jail, or on probation or parole. The lack of black role models for these African American boys is devastating. Just trying to find one can be a lesson in itself:

December 29, 2008

When I was teaching 4th grade, I had a black, male student with some pretty significant anger issues. Mom was in prison; dad had abandoned that first family and started another one in another city in North Carolina. The father had attempted to include him into the “new” family, but it did not work. Too much anger. Too many issues. He was sent back to Greensboro to be raised by his (also angry) grandmother. This child was the same age as my son. I would pick him up to go to school events; recruited a parent volunteer to help him with a science project (which he won in his category!) and generally tried to take him under my wing as much as possible. The behavior/issues/anger did not really subside. I thought maybe having a male adult in his life would be beneficial, so I started looking. And looking. And looking. All I wanted was for a MAN to show up and eat lunch with him one day a week. That’s it. How hard could this be? Long story short, the only person I could find was the father of one of our teachers. God bless him. White. Retired. Played golf most of the time. Even my naïve, new-teaching, ignorant self at the time knew this probably wasn’t going to do a whole lot for this child....what the heck did they have in common? Did it have an impact? I don’t know. It’s one of those things you can’t measure. I would like to think that this child on some level realized I cared enough to find someone, and that this man cared enough to show up every week. But who knows? How do we even go about creating a pool of black, adult male mentors if not teachers? And then I feel guilty because it sounds like I’m not appreciative of this man who DID take the time to show up every week. It’s not his fault he had nothing in common with this student. Perhaps as we try to recruit more male teachers, black or otherwise, we could recruit black males on campuses in every department to volunteer as a mentor. Just seeing a black male in college is huge for some of these kids.

How do we address race in the classroom? I have found discussions about race in my 8th grade classes much easier than in a room full of adults. Am I completely naïve to think that maybe, just maybe the county has turned some corner in some places and kids are just kids? As a critical educator, is it not my responsibility to address issues of race, make lessons relevant to the various colors and persuasions in my charge, and at least

offer an open dialogue? Adding a black or brown face into a child's elementary reader does not create social justice. I understand now, a few years after that email how wrong it is to say: "I don't see color. I see everyone the same." God, I hope that's not true! I WANT to see the difference, I want to understand the cultural diversity, and I want to learn more about people who don't look like me. But is holding the standards the same across the board fair and equitable? And if not, how can teachers differentiate lessons based on experience and learning style of the child if we all have to "be on the same page" day after day with our curriculum?

Can't we just....Teach? Extraneous Jobs and Responsibilities of Teachers

[S]chools are called upon to "fix" all of society's issues-teen pregnancy, poverty, etc. However, schools should be a place of educating the mind so that we can all benefit from creating a more informed and engaged citizenry. We are not the "repair" people. We are the molders, the creators, etc. Also, as Heifetz and Linsky (2001) remind us, we are often trying to apply technical solutions, i.e. fixing, to metaphysical and metacognitive problems that are not so easily solved. Education is an art. (S. Fletcher, discussion posting, January 13, 2009)

I have often stated that only twenty-five percent of my job as a teacher is about teaching – if that. I used to visit my son's elementary school classroom prior to my entrance into the world of education and wonder why his teacher couldn't take just a moment to have a quick conversation. If she wasn't up front giving a lesson, why couldn't she just chat for one moment since I'd taken the time away from my job to visit?

The answer is: as a teacher, you can never take your eye off the ball, or in this instance, the classroom. As the teacher, you are constantly checking and rechecking to ensure students are not only on task, sharing, working well together, but for those very

subtle hints and clues that something or someone is going to blow up and take the rest of your instructional time to neutralize. After some time in my own classroom, I understood the “thousand yard gaze” teachers soon adopt and are not even aware of at the time. Preparing teachers for the classroom experience is an infinite process. Much like parenting, there is no manual, no “last chapter” to refer to for advice or to see how the story actually ends. This is especially true for lateral entry teachers, which I was.

“Lateral entry” was introduced when the teacher shortage in North Carolina reached a critical pitch. Adults who had already established a career elsewhere could enter education licensing programs at various colleges and fulfill the education class requirements to become a classroom teacher. There are short cuts to getting a lateral entry teaching license, one of which is student teaching. Student teaching is probably the most valuable component of preparing a person to successfully take a classroom full of children and not quit before Thanksgiving. The experiential, hands-on education of seeing all the work that has absolutely nothing to do with “teaching” has to be seen first-hand; it simply cannot be communicated accurately from a secondary source and proves to be the most frustrating part of the job for professionals who have worked in “civilian” jobs outside the education system.

I didn’t realize the value of this next particular journal entry written my first full year teaching until this reflection process. My frustration with the behavior of one child is evident. The amount of time I spent in various situations with this child, on the phone with his mother, conferencing with seasoned teachers and administrators and counselors, validates my argument that we must teach the whole child. He was only one of 30

children and certainly not the only student with heartbreaking circumstances. One had lost her mother to HIV AIDS the previous year when she was eight, one was homeless. Another little boy's father, I learned while grading his writing assignment was in prison, and one child's older brother died of a lung disease that year. I have often wondered – would it be better to know all of the circumstances of these children prior to teaching them, taking a chance that our natural sympathetic nature might allow us to lower our expectations, or would it be better, as is usually the case, to find out about socio-economic factors one earth-shattering blow at a time?

One of the most compelling problems facing education the in United States today, according to Kanpol (2012), as evidenced in Chapter 2, is how to go about building a school system that is “just and fair and caring and nurturing as well as democratic to its large clientele” (p. 2). The following entries clarify Kanpol's point with journal entries about a student named “Jack” whom I taught my first full year as a classroom teacher. How could I provide the love and nurturing he needed and fulfill my endlessly long list of duties to the other students?

Meet “Jack.”

September 5, 2003

Met with Jack's mom today.

Jack's mom tells me right off the bat that he has been kicked out of three schools. (I knew this was his fourth but I wrongly assumed the parents kept moving him voluntarily, trying to find the answers they actually wanted to hear.)

She also told me:

- She and Jack's dad separated about a month – six weeks ago.
- She and the children (Jack and younger sister, five years old) moved to another house

- She made the decision to leave the father when he became extremely verbally abusive to Jack, constantly telling him he was stupid and to stop whining and just work.

She told me when Jack visits his father on the weekends, his father refuses to give him his prescription medicine for his ADHD.

OK. Work with me here. It's my first class. The first group of 9-year-olds in my charge – that require my service to teach them enough to get to the 5th grade. I'm thinking I need a PhD. Help!

So – in order to keep Jack focused – I pull him away from his group for independent work – so both he and his fellow group-mates can work. I kneel down to him and get him started on the task at hand – especially writing – the bane of his existence.

“Jack, you're supposed to write about your best friend or favorite person....”
Then the excuses start.

“I don't know how to spell...., I don't know how to do this....”
I get a dictionary and help him look up words. “Yes. You CAN do it. See?”

His mother told me she had done all of his writing for him – she actually said she had been his “scribe” and his “secretary.” She thought if she could just get him to verbalize the answers, she would offset a lot of frustration and eventual anger by just writing down the answers.

It's time to stop that. And I asked her to stop. I told her to help him look up words, but not to write for him.

Who the hell am I to recommend anything to anybody?

September 9, 2003

Jack's mother said a doctor had recommended an “incentive program.” She asked that I send home a card with Jack if he'd had a “good day,” meaning I wasn't tempted to strangle him. After four days, I think today's the day. (If I send a card home verifying good behavior, he earns additional time on his mom's computer – something he lives for!) Anyway, today might just be Jack's day. I have encouraged him all day –telling him how hard he is working, how good he is. He really is trying. I'm wondering, too, about his medication. He is either over-medicated and he sleeps for hours or he's under-medicated and bounces off the wall. Today he has found a happy medium.

Examples:

- He came into the room this morning and didn't yell out to anyone or start any problems
- He put his book bag up like he was supposed to do and got everything he needed for the day out. (a first!)
- Then, miraculously, he followed the next set of daily directions: he read the instructions on the board (instead of yelling out "I don't know what to do! What are we supposed to DO?")
- He sat down at his desk and wonder of all wonders, DID HIS MORNING WORK without question or complaint, filed it correctly in the "morning work" file and proceeded to the next morning routine.
- He went over to my reading area. (Lots of book shelves, carpet, pillows, cushions) He selected a book and had a seat on the floor. A few minutes later I had some complaints about him disturbing people, but I relocated him, told him how well he was doing and he got it together.

I swear I think I'm going to call his mother and find out exactly what she did the 12 hours before he came to school!

September 23, 2003

Jack's progress took a big turn backward today. Long story short, his behavior – talking out, wandering around, not following directions, etc., was so distracting to his fellow classmates; I moved his desk apart from the group and set him up alone. I felt badly about doing that, but the other students and I just couldn't take it anymore. Remarkably, he settled down and began to work.

In the meantime, my only other "behavior problem" returned from a two-day suspension. (Another journal subject!) After encouraging, cajoling, begging and finally almost (almost!) yelling, I asked him to get his work and go to another teacher's room. He flatly refused. After a phone call to the office and a trip down the hall to retrieve my mentor (who had this particular student last year) we managed to get the student out of the room and down to the principal's office.

Whew! It's not even 8:30 a.m. and I'm already tired.

I go back to Jack who has mercifully continued to stay put. A couple of hours later my formerly-suspended bad boy is back from the office. He looks contrite. His desk is dangerously too close to Jack's. (I didn't know that at the time.)

Within 30 minutes, Jack is irritable again. I'm not sure why. Within an hour it is time to line up for lunch and Jack is very loudly whining:

“LEAVE ME ALONE, ANTOINE! QUIT BOTHERING ME! STOP!” (etc. etc.)

Every time I look that way, Antoine looks like he’s sitting up straight, looking ahead with a puzzled, “what in the world is Jack talking about?” expression on his face.

Finally, I glimpse at just the right moment and see Antoine giving Jack the evil eye and whispering something.

I called the class to line up for lunch. Jack slams his lunch box down on his desk, throws his chair about a foot away from the desk and has a 100%, complete and total meltdown. In between sobs and screams I only understood, “Antoine” and “stop.”

His episode was so loud, and the chair toss created so much commotion, another teacher walking down the hall stuck her head in and said she’d take my class for me while I sorted things out with Jack.

I let him cry for a while, got some tissues, and sat down right in front of him, eye to eye.

“Jack, what in the world was that about?”

He finally pulled himself somewhat together and told me that Antoine kept staring at him and whispering all kinds of things about his mother to him, torturing him. Then he burst into tears and said Antoine should not be in this class! He should not be in this school! He should be kicked out!

(Hmmm. This is Jack’s 4th school in as many years....I think he might not be giving an original speech here.)

I told him that Antoine’s behavior was beyond the pale and that he made me cry sometimes, but throwing chairs and screaming was not anyway to handle the problem.

We talked for about 20 minutes. Finally, we both agreed a possible solution might be to move Antoine out of whisper range.

I moved him to the very front of the room; about six inches from where I stand in front of the class.

(This is about the 6th relocation for each of these boys. I’m running out of neighbors for them to try out.)

I explained to Jack that he has a responsibility to do the right thing, follow the rules and to let me know by raising his hand if another student is annoying or distracting him. I also told him that the whole class could not be fitted for horn-rimmed sun glasses so there was nothing I could do about the “evil eye” or other dirty looks. And then we went to lunch. It was 11:55. Whew!

Because I was a first-year teacher, I had other teachers on the hall keeping an eye out for me. We can all agree that spending time with individual students, having long talks and spending time together is part of critical pedagogy and getting to know the student for who they are and what they bring to the table, however, it is an extremely rare event for another teacher to have the time to volunteer to take a class for you. In order to have this chat with Jack, someone had to afford me the time and opportunity. Teachers cannot simply ignore the 29 or 30 other children in the class to focus solely on one. This was very much the issue I experienced in graduate classes with adult students in education programs critiquing the teaching methods of example elementary and middle school teachers. Most – if any – had never taught at this level and had absolutely no idea the constraints these teachers work under. This is where theory and practice butt heads. Teachers would all love to give as much individual attention to our students as they need, but it is simply not possible. This is one of many reasons teachers are upset about fewer teachers and larger classes that come with budget cuts. If teachers are charged with covering increasing mandatory curriculum, when can we possibly continue to inquire about students’ hospitalized parent, the death of a pet, the incarceration of a sibling and the thousand other ways we make a connection with the student and show we genuinely care?

September 30, 2003

I feel so bad about my lack of patience with Jack after reading about ADHD in our text. I came in this morning promising myself to be cheerful, positive, supportive and patient with Jack.

I had a substitute in my room yesterday – maybe the change in routine just threw everybody’s equilibrium off, but it seemed the whole class was off the hook – Jack especially.

He came in dressed head to toe in camouflage. (Prepared to do battle, perhaps?) Many outbursts and failures to follow directions later, we lined up to go to lunch.

[Jack ended up in trouble and in silent lunch which he refused to go to and refused to eat. He wanted to have a “discussion” about it afterward.]

I just held my hands up and told him to go away. I was too angry to discuss it with him.

Later, after the busses came, I called his mother. Got the answering machine. I explained the situation. (Before Jack announced that his evil teacher had kept him from lunch) I said I didn’t think the card-reward system was working.

God help me.

The following post is summarized. Jack was removed from P.E. and his language “word work” classes.

October 8, 2003

I spoke to the language specialist who is a 40-year teacher – she’s seen and done it all. She was just shaking her head over Jack. She said he wouldn’t follow directions, wouldn’t work at all, talked out in his loud, inappropriate way. I said I was glad it wasn’t just me having problems. Unfortunately, when I see experienced teachers struggling with Jack, it validates me. I’m not to blame. I’m not a failure as a teacher.

Unfortunately for the teacher who has him day in and day out (ME!) you start to dislike the child.

That scares. Me.

As I read these posts, after writing endlessly about critical pedagogy and how we have to get to know the child and meet them where they are when they come to us, my frustration grows. I am feeling now, in retrospect, what I want theorists and people in

higher education to feel: the frustration with the system. It's not that we, the teachers, want to turn students into robots with all of our rules and procedures, it's about the only way you can survive without total anarchy or at least chaos. My heart breaks when I read about some of these students. I don't write about the ones who did a great job, were talented, smart and outgoing. I write about the kids whose behavior and issues at home kept me awake at night. The fact that I can remember their names after 10 years and few others is a testament to that. It is impossible to give these individual children the time and attention they so desperately need because we have at least 30 others to attend to.

October 17, 2003

Jack's mother met me at 7:30 a.m. for my first "parent-teacher conference." She and I had spoken many times prior – in person and on the phone. What impresses me is her seemingly tenacious manor – and she never gets defensive, but she does give out one more piece of the puzzle each time we meet. (Makes me wonder why I haven't gotten the whole picture to begin with!)

This session, she revealed Jack had been kicked out of the X School (a private school for ADD – ADHD kids) for, as she put it, "scaring the other children." He would get so angry he would turn over desks. He's thrown a chair or two in my room, but I didn't give a lot of credence to it.

She also said he has many physical problems. (She'd never mentioned this before.)

This poor child.

What can be done to help Jack?

October 22, 2003

You'll never, never, never believe what Jack has managed to do. First let me say that I have observed Jack and realize he cannot accept a "thumbs-up/thumbs-down" prognosis every day. I discussed this at length with a veteran teacher. She offered some great advice and offered assistance.

[The veteran teacher and I devised yet another form of positive reinforcement after evaluating our successes and failures with our other attempts to come up with a reward system.]

OK. Plan in place.

This went fairly smoothly for a couple of days –

And then...

I don't know if his meds got forgotten, too little given, no food given with it or what, but another student was antagonistic toward him. (Reportedly called Jack's mother a "bitch.")

Jack did the right thing and came to me. We were in a transition during class; everyone was up, walking around and talking. I was aggravated and said "If you two were in your seats, not talking like I asked, we would not be having this problem, would we? Sit down and stop talking!"

Now, in retrospect, I understand that when Jack is antagonized (i.e. punishment like silent lunch another child needling him – like Antoine the day Jack had a meltdown.) He cannot move on or accept it and/or let it go until it is resolved to his satisfaction.

I did not resolve this conflict to his satisfaction.

This child who supposedly called Jack's mother a bitch happens to be black. Jack is white. Having said that, I'll get to the crux of this.

I was speaking to another teacher with my back to Jack – still at his desk – apart from all the other children. As I was speaking to this teacher about reading groups, I was holding a magnet in one hand and a glue gun in the other. I thought I heard what I heard, but a part of my brain said, "No. No way."

Then I heard it loud and clear from Jack's very distinctive voice: "Blake, your mom's a nigger!"

To this day, I do not know how I had the self-control to not snatch him up out of his chair and beat him. Instead, I threw down the magnet and glue gun so hard, they broke. I was in his face in about ½ second. I don't even remember what I said, I just remember saying

"Get. Up. NOW!" Through gritted teeth.

For once, he didn't argue. He didn't say a word. It was like my eyes were some sort of tractor beam physically pulling him up out of his chair.

I don't know if the other child heard what Jack said. If he did, my hat's off to him for not responding –gratefully. That child is a good 6 inches taller than Jack and about 40 pounds heavier. It could have been really ugly.

The next day, Jack didn't come to school. I was relieved. I'd had it. I just didn't think I could take him anymore.

November 4 -6, 2003

Jack came back to school.

I have to admit – I could barely look at him.

After the whole “N-word” episode she took him back to his psychiatrist and he prescribed aderol. The lowest dose possible.

It’s a miracle. I now have a smiling child who has asked to re-join the group – who no longer wants to be alone – who reads, talks, listens, explains, asks questions and participates. It’s a miracle.

After 10 years of classroom teaching in elementary and middle grades, I am not a proponent of drug therapy. It is often misdiagnosed and abused. However, there are circumstances and children whose lives are changed for the better, their transformations so astounding, that I cannot argue with the diagnosis. Jack was this child. Over the years, another observation I have made is the adaptability and resilience of the “other students,” the students who come into school from a healthy breakfast and a good night’s sleep, homework done and organized, ready to get down to the business of learning. One would think these students would demand equality (if Jack can screw up repeatedly, why can’t I or why can’t I spend time in another teacher’s room?) or at least be disrupted or disturbed by students with physical, mental, and/or emotional issues, but they innately take it all in, do a mental shrug and move on. The most astounding observation is when a student like Jack does something so normal but so unexpected, they immediately recognize it and reward it.

Why are children so adaptable and teachers are not?

The following post is an example of how things in a classroom change in the blink of an eye and how taking the time to find out the things that trigger a child like Jack – trigger him to do good things, things he is interested in, and bad triggers. In hindsight, I

see how I was somehow unknowingly aligned with critical pedagogy in that as frustrated as I got, I was still trying very hard to find the good, to find something I could connect to and with this child.

Jack had wanted me to read a book he'd found about ghost stories. It was just after Halloween time and we hadn't had an opportunity yet, so he asked if he could read to the class. This was huge. Jack read to the class? How on earth would that turn out? How would the other students receive him? Jack proudly stood up at the front of the class, held the book like a true story teller and began.

November 10, 2003

After I saw it was going well and no riots were going to break out, I got really absorbed in my paper grading in the back of the room

Everything went fine. Then I heard him say, just like I do to the class about 100 times a day, "Now guys, this is where the story gets interesting." He's holding the book flat in front of him confidently addressing class. All he needed was a pair of reading glasses on the end of his nose to complete the "teacher" picture. I loved it. Good for him! When he finished and quietly closed the book, the class applauded!

Printed off the "good group, especially Jack" email from last week gathered up two good reports from his special teacher and gave them to Jack. I hugged him and told him to give them to his mother tonight.

November 14, 2003

I guess I might as well get used to extreme ups and down in this teaching business. Jack continued his glorious climb to normalcy until Thursday.

Thursday we were back to the "old Jack," the one that walks around the room talking loudly, doesn't follow any directions, questions every directive, plays with everyone else's things on their desk and generally drives everyone insane. He made a complete reversal from Mon – Wed.

I sent a disciplinary form home to his mother detailing his horrendous behavior and my concern regarding his meds. I just couldn't fathom the day – to- night change.

I was absent on Friday. Monday, no signed note back from Jack's mom. Monday was hell.

Tuesday was not only hell, it was (note the date for posterity)

THE WORST DAY OF MY SHORT TEACHING CAREER.

[This post continues on to describe a number of students having problems. I was juggling behavior and emotional issues as well as teaching. Jack was back to being Jack. Ultimately, I ended up giving him a punishment and he went off the deep end.]

My hands were shaking when I walked out of the room and down the hall to my 30-year veteran teacher/friend/mentor.

I must have looked like a female version of Charles Manson when she came to the door. My hands in front of me in a desperate, pleading pose –

“You have GOT to get Jack. You have GOT to get him out of my room.”

She said (in a quiet, calm voice people use on animals to calm them down) “have him come down here. I’ll take him.”

OK.

Tromp back down the hall.

“Jack. Get up and go to Mrs. P’s room.”

“Why?”

“Jack. Please get up and go to Mrs. P’s room. Now.”

“No. Why? No. I’m not going to.”

About that time Mrs. P came in, told me to take my crew to lunch so I did. Jack was hers for the rest of the day.

At the end of the day, my friend and Jack met with me to reflect on the day’s events. Oddly enough, his story and mine in the Venn Diagrams of the world did not even touch my version. Neither story overlapped even a smidgen.

Called his mother – left a long message on her machine.

Wednesday, October 19, 2003

Jack's back. Signed note in hand and letter from mom. Said nothing had changed. Not his meds, nothing. She had undermined my authority on one point so I was starting a new day at a disadvantage.

When he started up during leveled reading time, I just said – everybody get in your seat. Get a book. Do not talk.

I took my cell phone out into the hall and called his mother at work. I had a 20-minute conversation with her. She swore nothing had happened. Nothing with the meds had changed that he had developed a “tolerance” for the medication. (In less than 2 weeks? Is that possible?)

Essentially she said if Jack gets suspended she'll lose her job BUT, she realized I had to do what I had to do and if that included sending him to the office and ultimately getting suspended, so be it.

I'm back to square one.

Damn!

It is important to include numerous posts about “Jack” for a couple of reasons.

First, I wasn't the audience to understand the volume and intensity of my encounters with him. Also, it was my intent to give the reader an idea of the humanness of the situation.

Teachers. Are. Human. We get angry. We lose our patience. We love our children; however, some are more likeable than others. Another reason for including these posts was to show the power – and helplessness of classroom teachers. We are powerless to make so many changes. We can't make a child take his medicines on the weekend. We can't make a child behave a certain way or respond, or learn, or, hopefully, learn to love learning. On the other hand, we wield great, frightening power, in this case over a recently single working mother of two children, one of whom was in great need. A teacher should never have to decide what is “best” for a child at the expense of the parent's ability to put food on the table, but at the end of the day, in its very simplest

form, this was exactly the conundrum I faced. Being a single working mother afforded me more empathy toward my students' home situations and allowed me a wider lens in which to view the broader context. Isn't the heart of critical education having patience and providing a place where children above all feel safe, wanted, even loved? David Purpel reminds us children go to school and want to share their "joys, confessions, and heartbreaks" (p.47). Unfortunately, often, because of the demands of the teacher's time and many other factors, students arrive at school and are taught mostly to "learn, to be alone, to compete, to achieve, to succeed" (p. 47).

In addition to behavioral challenges, teachers are responsible for the health and welfare of their students. There are still "school nurses" like when I was a child, the difference is, a school nurse today often serves anywhere between three and five different schools with scheduled hours one or two days per week. Incredulously, teachers and office workers are responsible for handing out prescribed medications and in some circumstances, which I was involved, calculating the correct insulin dosage for daily injections.

Wednesday, September 15, 2007

Got a kid today from another team – he is so allergic to peanuts; he has to sit separate from other kids at lunch. We had to have a team meeting to explain how his allergy is life-threatening. We can't have any candy or food of any kind with peanuts in it or manufactured in a place where other peanut products are made.

Robin and I had to meet with the parent and the nurse – learn how to use an "epi-pen," learn about the warning signs of an attack and what to do if there is one. All I could think about sitting across from that mother was, there but for the grace of God go I – what in the world would I do if I thought Bob [my child] could die on any given day from something as benign as an accidental encounter with something containing peanuts!?

I feel guilty when I think: that's just one more damned thing we as teachers have to be responsible for.

I already have a kid who is diabetic. He has to go check his blood every day before lunch to determine his glucose level. Again. Life and death. That particular child has behavior issues. I'm wondering – is he really going to the office before lunch? Is he really checking his glucose like he's supposed to?

There is so much of this “teaching” job that has nothing to do with teaching. I just want to teach.

When I went back to night school to get my teaching license in 2001, one of my first assignments was to interview an elementary school teacher about the profession. I was to report back on what they liked and what they didn't like, what they would change, keep, etc. I purposely went to a school I'd never been to and spoke with a teacher I'd never met. She told me she wished she could *teach*. She said teachers were “psychiatrists, nurses, referees, social workers, mothers, fathers” and a host of other titles. Juggling all of these roles, she said, was overwhelming – fulfilling – but often overwhelming. She was right. We can't “fix” all of society's issues and be all things to all children.

Teachers as Intellectuals or...Automatons. Canned Curriculum and Scripted Lessons

Six years ago, in 2007, after only four years in the classroom, I was already scared and dismayed at the prospect of not having the freedom to construct and formulate my own lessons. Why had I gone to the trouble and expense to get a teaching license if I was unable to use what I considered my best asset in the classroom: creativity and the ability to connect with the students? Working collaboratively with my teaching partner, we dovetailed my social studies and reading lessons with her science and math, fashioning

lessons that were connected and using skills across the curriculum interchangeably. We didn't know it at the time, but we were deep in critical pedagogy and inherently knew this method of combining what we collectively knew about our students and collaborating on the curriculum was the right way to work with these kids.

Michael Apple (1995), as referenced in Chapter 2, addressed the issue of deskilling teachers, taking away the opportunity to work collaboratively with teachers of other subjects and its possible effects. He explains:

Skills that teachers used to need, that were deemed essential to the craft of working with children—such as curriculum deliberation and planning, designing teaching and curricular strategies for specific groups and individuals based on intimate knowledge of these people—are no longer necessary. With the large-scale influx of pre-packaged material, planning is separated from execution. The planning is done at the level of the production of both the rules for use of the material and the material itself. The execution is carried out by the teacher. (pp. 132–133)

Friday, September 14, 2007

We (L. Arts teachers) had our planning meeting yesterday. There was practically a revolt. We have a new “program” we’re supposed to follow every day in L. Arts. In short, it is soul-less, heartless and meaningless. Some parts are good. The daily grammar – although it should have been taught years ago – is good. A little drop every day adds up to a bucketful at the end of the year. What the county has done is spent God-KNOWS how much money on this program that teaches language arts in fragmented, fits and starts. We hop around from context clues to sequencing and back. We spend 2 ½ class periods writing a glorified summary called a “memory map.”

I miss MY thematic units. I miss my novels. I miss reading and figuring out what strange words might mean based on the way they sound rolling off your tongue and the words around them.

How will I teach Haiku this spring – outside on the ground staring at the clouds if I’m required to be on page 261, paragraph 3, sentence 2??

I hate this cookie-cutter approach to teaching. Has the profession gotten so bad that the pool of teachers is so diminished, jaded and non-caring that they (we) have to be given step-by-step-how-to-lessons – for dummies?

Parker Palmer tells us teachers teach who they are. I embraced the concept. He gave me permission to teach in a way that exhibited who I was and made me comfortable in my own skin in front of a classroom. I could not fake enthusiasm for a pedagogy I did not feel passionate about. How sad that after only four years I was already feeling like I was circling the drain as a teacher. This post expresses my despair:

Sunday, September 16, 2007

I'm sitting here doing homework and I just want to go to bed with a good book. Which leads me to this question:

Why am I doing this? Why am I missing the better part of my son's first football game of the season to be in class? Why am I not relaxing on a Sunday evening instead of doing homework? Why am I furthering my education in education when in 10 years they'll just hire robots to do it for free?

As with most things having to do with teaching and children, I would always find a bright side. One of the most important people who kept me going when I was so down on myself and where I perceived the destination of my profession wasn't my principal and it wasn't a professor, it was one of the custodians. After school, I would work at my desk, grading papers in the aftermath of another crazy day. Chairs were askew, paper and pencil shavings littered the floor, and projects-in-progress would be here and there. "Mr. Mac" would come in with his broom and very quietly serve as counselor, confidant, and shrink.

Saturday, September 22, 2007

OK. I've decided to stop being so negative about "the system" and concentrate on what's really important - the kids. I love the kids.

I was just sitting at my desk shaking my head as I graded papers (summaries we had worked all week on). Mr. Mac came in with his broom. I forget exactly what his statement/question was, but to paraphrase, it was something like "don't have a clue" or "got some rough edges" or something to that effect. In other words, he could tell by my expression and motions that I was not too happy with the results.

I just nodded and grunted something in agreement. He kept sweeping and said, (and I remember this word-for-word!) "They need you. Yes, they do. They need you, Miss Self."

I put my pen down and suddenly, instead of being so frustrated and aggravated at having spent so much time on a valuable skill that would not be tested, that I would never get a bonus or even a handshake for (WRITING!) had not amounted to as much progress as I would have liked to have seen. But then it was ok. Mr. Mac was right. They need me. Not an altogether bad feeling. ☺

For teachers whose students fared well on standardized tests in spite of rejecting the mandated scripted curriculum, the slightly threatening meetings and emails from administrators to implement them was an affront – to our intelligence, our competency, and our desire to teach critically. I struggled with how I could create an accurate measure of their "improvement" in lieu of a bubble-in, standardized assessment.

Wednesday, September 26, 2007

We got our scores "scores" (meaning...what exactly, I don't know....) today during our grade level meeting. I don't know what any other language arts teachers' looked like, but I think mine were good – real good if I understand them correctly – anywhere between a 4% and 6.5% increase –

So – this brings me to the purpose of this journal – if I am teaching children successfully (i.e. the scores reflect an increase) and I'm doing it in a way that is engaging and (hopefully) fun and in a way that gives the students a desire to read –

Do I really need to follow the prescriptive cookie cutter solution the state has mandated? I really want to see the difference in A: teaching in a manner I feel is

conducive to enjoying lifelong learning or B: the “state” way – quick-fix method. Now my question is – how do I accurately do this?

Friday, October 26, 2007

.....I do not question the intelligence of this year’s “crop” as I refer to my classes. They are smart. My biggest concern this year for my students is their complete inability to think.

I want these kids to stop accepting everything and every bit of information at face value. I want them to question and understand the “**why**.”

As the students worked in their groups, I monitored constantly asking “why.”

Why is X your import and Y your export – why – How does your climate affect your culture, dress, sports?

The students continued to work on their assigned projects and I continued to ask them “why” about every decision they made and every effect that trickled down from it. And then, like magic, I began to hear what I’d been waiting for all year – the students questioning one another, asking why other students made the choices they had made and the positive effects or negative consequences those choices yielded. I was elated.

October 26, 2007

Finally – on October 26 there was an “AH HA!” moment in my class. One kid made a connection and then another and another.

They (some) were thinking critically for the first time. [in my class]

It was a baby step, but I’ll take it.

This particular year, as part of a team at school, I got to visit a “sister” middle school in the county with similar enrollment and demographics. This was the only time such an opportunity was presented, which is unfortunate. Critical observation and

reflection is not valued for teachers probably because it requires time and money. It was beneficial to observe other teachers' successes and struggles.

Tuesday, October 20, 2007

It was great to see how other middle school teachers go about their work.

In regard to the action research and observations of my own class, I found a few things interesting and worthy of question:

- Only one of the five or six classes I visited had desks in any sort of pairing or grouping.
- All but one class was situated in rows
- All the language arts and math classes were on target with the pacing guide provided by the county
- One eighth grade math class had boys with behaviors that were distracting to me as just an observer so I know the students were distracted.

As I sat there and watched the one boy refusing to work, refusing to pick up a pencil or calculator, only choosing to sing "Silent Night," I wondered if we took this one kid aside and worked with him one-on-one, would he work?

When you are on the "outside" looking "in," the view is much different. When you're up there teaching 30 kids and one is distracting the whole show, you look at that kid as a liability – he is just a distraction.

As an observer you start thinking about the possibilities – you have the time and the luxury (i.e. lack of responsibility) to sit and ask yourself why? Why is this kid behaving this way?

My assumptions were – he was lost in the curriculum to the point where it would be ludicrous to ask a question – even if he knew enough to formulate a question. Maybe after years of slowly, year by year getting farther and farther behind he finds himself listening to a virtual foreign language and pretending not to care is the only way to deal with hit.

Solution? A warm, caring, one-on-one teacher to pull this poor lost lamb aside and help him fulfill his true potential and find a successful future.

Yeah. Right.

Problem is, some of his shortcomings can be blamed on "the system" but the majority of the responsibility lies squarely on his shoulders – and even in a perfect world where warm, caring, non-judgmental teachers and one-on-one tutors appear out of thin air, free of charge, why should this kid be rewarded with that?

Am I Jaded? I understand the need to acquire knowledge in a sequential order – each year building on the other, but why do we continue to move these kids up the

ladder when they have not gotten the most minimal learning required to take the next step?

Looking at this post, I see where my total frustration with “the academy” came in. If I were observing from a teacher training program or from the ELC department, I could easily be judgmental about this classroom. What – no group work? No collaboration? No hands-on work? What – ignoring a student in the back of the room who clearly is in need of attention on so many levels? The reality is administrators and bureaucrats expect – demand – to see growth over a large group of students. Yes, teachers after cajoling, demanding, and begging, finally *do* see these kids whose deficits are so great as a liabilities, an entity that drags down their scores at the end of the year as well as their compassion and patience, a sad commentary all the way around.

Wednesday, November 28, 2007

Receiving a “4” on the EOG certainly does not ensure a student will be able to make connections with all he or she has learned and be successful in college – or more importantly – life.

Is there a “perfect” way to do this, to teach to a “whole student?” As with most things, yes, in theory, but in theory only. In practice it’s about how the students learn the content – arriving at answers to their own questions.

I feel like I am standing on the very top of an iceberg – there are so many more questions to answer, so much more experience to gain and record and so much more of my own research to do.

I continued to struggle with the theory I was learning, I knew it was right, yet I did not understand how the two could possibly come together to implement the best teaching had to offer. Kincheloe (2008) agrees. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kincheloe asserts that theory is often viewed as the domain of the university and practice

as “the province of elementary and secondary schools” (p. 120). I was struggling to be a critical teacher, one who combined the two in order to address the whole child. In my situation, there was an additional component, the state and the required curriculum.

Monday, January 14, 2008

I started my day with a conference at 7:30 a.m. GREAT kid – could spin off into oblivion if we don’t put a lid on him. Anyway, Mom – raising 3 kids – alone – working 2 jobs – 12 -14 or more hours a day. Anyway, I know what it’s like to be on the clock, so I suggested a 7:30 (yawn) meeting.

Yeah – and I have class tonight until 7:30 at least AND Bob has a wrestling match.

I need another me!!

Critical pedagogy is not just about passionate teaching, it is about *compassionate* teaching, reaching into and trying to understand the students’ reality. As a single mother who had worked two and three jobs simultaneously while going to school, I had all the empathy in the world for parents whose lives were not encompassed within the nine – to – five worlds of the middle class. It was painful to hear some teachers say, “Well, if they really cared about their kid, they’d be here at open house” or “they know what my hours are, they can make an appointment just like I have to when I go to the dentist or doctor!” The implication that a parent who has to choose between a job to survive and an open house between the hours of three and five p.m. doesn’t care about their child was surprisingly prevalent. And unfortunate.

Friday, March 7, 2008

My principal did an observation of me today. At first I was nervous because we were not using Springboard [the required scripted curriculum] but it all turned out great.

The beauty of creating your own lessons is the flexibility you have. You know your kids and you know what they need and how much to expect. [There is no differentiation at all in springboard. Everybody does the same lesson.]

I split the class into two groups. I had taken about 14 German words out of the book (there is a glossary in the back – no one had discovered it yet!) I had the words laminated individually on cards and the English translation on separate cards. At my signal, the “word” people had to find the correct match to their “English translation” person.

Afterward, I asked how they went about figuring the words out. Some of the German words looked or sounded similar to the English version. Sometimes it was just dumb luck.

Then I gave a mini lesson on how good readers don’t just stop when they come to a word they don’t know. The root can be the same as another word and look and sound similar to a word they do know. If you keep reading, the context usually gives you an idea of what the words probably means. I told them they had done so well determining the meanings of Germans words; they will be able to do great things reading in English.

There was more, but bottom line: the principal loved it and ever mentioned SpringBoard.

At the time, I did not realize the value of using other languages in the classroom.

I do not speak a foreign language, but I have been very fortunate to have many ESL students in my classes and am always willing to learn some words in their native language. Now, after more years in the classroom and graduate school, I understand the use of unfamiliar language in the classroom as academically sound, but it allows the native English speakers an opportunity to feel empathy for their ESL classmates. A year after this journal entry, I would be met with great resistance from parents who did not see the value of exposing their children to other languages and insisted that I stop.

Standardized Testing: Scripted Instructions and Number Two Pencils

There are a number of reasons standardized testing is a hotly contested subject between those who educate and those who legislate. Besides the manufacturing model it emulates, as stated in earlier chapters, it breeds a long list of negative outcomes: the lowering of standards to ensure higher test scores, children becoming physically ill because of the stress, and school administrators indicted for racketeering and theft because of their alleged involvement with falsifying standardized tests, to name a few. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required that all students in Grades 3 through 8 be tested in reading and math. Schools must show adequate yearly progress or be penalized in a number of ways. Schools can lose funding, be forced to restructure, and/or provide parents with the option of transferring their student to other, high-performing schools. In short, the EOG's (end of grade tests) are a big deal.

Antonia Darder (2008) refers to certain struggling students from disenfranchised groups as “disposable” (p.13). These groups become evident in the flood of high-stakes standardized testing, where “tests acknowledged to be flawed are used to make inaccurate and inappropriate decisions about the fate of millions of students across the nation” (p. 13). As examined in Chapter 2, retention rates are higher for African American, Latino, and other children from poor families. Of all the students who are retained, 50 percent are more likely to not graduate from high school. “Hence, early in their lives these children are officially classified and tracked, rendering them members of a disposable and expendable class” (p. 13).

In 2009, teachers received an email outlining changes from the State Board of Education. The ESL students, who in the past were required to take the end of grade tests after three years of school in the U.S., were now required to take the federally mandated tests after one year. The following post is an email I sent to fellow teachers outlining the effects of standardized testing and one of our most vulnerable populations, the English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

**Email from Patti Self to fellow teachers regarding the ESL students
Sent October 27, 2009**

On Friday, I finished up the story from our third grade reader that we'd been working on all week (after an entire six weeks without text books). The vocabulary words had been gone over with them by me, their tutors and their partners daily. We had read the story, drawn the definitions of most of the new words and then created our own invitations to a make-believe feast, each child listing foods from their own cultures.

The story was not long, a traditional African folktale. I wanted to read the story in total, in one sitting so they could hear it in a fluid voice, not chopped up in pieces day by day. I began to read when Ra raised his hand.

“Miss Self. Can I read?”

I couldn't believe it! Usually they'll do anything to avoid the spotlight when it comes to their language skills.

Then another hand and another hand went up. Tho, who just started reading this year, raised his hand to volunteer.

I almost had to leave the room to get myself together. It was the most amazing thing. Not that they **could** do it, but that they **wanted** to do it and were willing to step out on the ledge and take a chance of making a mistake; of being ridiculed. But they did. They sure did. And no one said a word while they were reading aloud to the class.

So, after luxuriating in that memory all week-end, I am reminded this morning that we have Benchmark testing.

Benchmark testing is like a mini-end-of-grade test. It's on the grade level of the child, [their assigned grade level, not their actual achieved reading level] it is a standardized test with a booklet, a bubble-in answer sheet, and is scored by a computer. Benchmarks are given every quarter to see where the students are, what they need help with, etc. Most of the time we haven't taught what they are testing during that specific quarter so it's moot – in my opinion anyway.

It never once occurred to me that these kids would have to take it...most of them just started to learn to read last year. I went to the library first thing to pick up my testing materials and saw that none of my kids were being pulled out (removed from the room) for testing of another sort or to not be tested at all (with the exception of the two Chinese brothers I have. They have not been in the United States for a year yet, so they're not required to take the test.) Hmm. I emailed the testing coordinator only to have my fears confirmed; these kids have to take this test, a standardized reading test on a seventh-grade level.

Let that sink in for a minute.

They are being asked to take a 14-page test written and designed specifically for children who have been in a U.S. school for seven years...only they've been in a U.S. school anywhere between 1 and 3 years....oh, and they didn't have the benefit of knowing English when they got here.

My point is: after seeing the amount of confidence and pride these kids had on Friday, reading aloud to their peers, warts and mispronounced words and all, I had to hand them a 14-page test that most of them will have no clue how to read or what to do. I told them repeatedly as I distributed them: just do your best. Do what you can do. Some of you will be able to read this, but most of you will not. It doesn't mean a thing. It isn't for a grade. Don't worry one bit if you don't know any answers or have trouble reading.

One step forward, two back.

If you could see the look of concentration on their faces right now as they take this thing, you'd cry.

This has got to change.

ESL children who have no English speaking or writing skills whatsoever when they enter this country, generally improve two to three grade levels their first year. That is an enormous amount of growth. Those increases sound great for first and second grade

–aged children, but what the State Board of Education didn't take into consideration were the older children who are being schooled in English for the first time. After one year of English instruction, an ESL student entering the 7th grade reading on a third grade level would be considered a huge success. Having achieved three grade levels of improvement in one year is remarkable – unfortunately, this child is a 7th grader. He will not be tested on the 3rd grade reading level; he will be tested on 7th grade reading material after only one year of instruction. The same holds true for all grade levels, including high school.

Teachers and school systems are held accountable for the achievement of students which is measured solely by the end of grade standardized tests. Teachers' cumulative achievement scores over time are supposed to serve as a type of professional report card. "Good teachers" and "bad" teachers are easily sorted by the bottom line: how many of their kids passed and how many kids failed under their instruction. The Department of Public Instruction has failed to realize the playing field is not level. Naturally, well-funded suburban schools educating a strong middle class will show high achievement which, until the recent economic crisis and budget reductions, resulted in a bonus check for the teachers. Urban schools and schools with large populations of ESLs and low socioeconomic status do not show high growth and achievement – even if huge strides were made and the students grew two and three grade levels. Students and teachers should be held accountable and results measured, however, "no single test is sufficiently valid, reliable, or meaningful that it can be treated as a marker for academic success" (Kohn, 2004). A more holistic measure of growth and achievement must be developed, a measurement that does not automatically assume the test-taker has grown up in an

English-speaking household. Currently, the state-mandated Common Core Curriculum will supposedly take into account a “learning curve” for students, allowing this first year’s scores to “not count” because of the increased rigor of the curriculum. Also, according to reports, teachers will be evaluated on the growth of the student, not their score alone. This has yet to be seen or confirmed by this researcher.

The repercussions for the school systems and teachers failing to make adequate growth pale in comparison to the repercussions the students feel – especially the ESLs. Studies show that the minimum length of time it takes to reach grade-level performance in a second language is 4 years – if the student had at least 4 years of primary language schooling in their first language (Collier, Thomas, 2001). Very few of our ESLs come to us literate in their first language, most having been raised in refugee camps with limited or no available schooling. “Using standardized test scores as a basis for major decisions could potentially be detrimental to ESLs and to the schools that serve them” (Coltrane, 2002). With so much at stake – funding, grade-level promotion, teacher bonuses, not to mention the self-esteem of thousands of ESL children, why then would these children be required to test after one year of instruction? Senator Paul Wellstone from Minnesota was right when he said making students accountable for test scores works well on a bumper sticker and, he added, it allows many politicians to look good by saying that they will not tolerate failure. But it represents a hollow promise. Far from improving education, high-stakes testing marks a major retreat from “fairness, from accuracy, from quality, and from equity” (Kohn, 2004).

November, 2009

Last year during the end of grade testing one of my best and brightest young men became strangely quiet. I was shocked when the test scores came back and “Christian” had made a “2” on his reading exam. That was impossible. I spoke with my teaching partner about it and realized later how surreal that conversation must have sounded to a bystander, out of context. The conversation had more numerals than words.

“Christian is not a 2! He can’t be. He’s a 4 in math right? Well, there has to be some explanation. He’s in my class with all the 3’s and 4’s, there’s just no way he’s a 2.” When the students were given the results of their EOG scores, Christian’s face fell. He had been in the advanced class of 4’s all year, and now he was going to have to be remediated for two weeks with the 1’s and 2’s (failing scores), and take the exam again. Everyone was going to know he was no longer a 4. He was humiliated. Later that day, his dad came to school to talk to my teaching partner and me. He told us Christian’s mom had been diagnosed with cancer the week prior. Christian, the baby of four children, had turned inside himself and was not handling the news well at all. We were right. Christian was not “a 2.” He was a 12-year-old boy whose mom had cancer. The state of North Carolina will label him a 2, but anyone who knows Christian knows who he really is and his true worth. They know the whole child. Since then, I have made it a point not to refer to any child as an EOG number.

The general public, and even educators not involved in the standardized testing game played in the K-8 arena, have no concept of the stress standardized testing places on the students and the teachers. At the end of the school year in 2009, I had come to a point where I could barely control my contempt. I took my considerable frustration out in an email to friends trying to explain the enormity of the current situation I found myself in:

June 4, 2009

While all the talk has been about teachers losing jobs, getting pay cuts, getting bad raps about being upset about losing jobs and receiving pay cuts, I am going to indulge myself here for just a bit. For just a few sweet moments, I am going to wallow in it. I’m hoping it will have some cathartic affect.

- While abiding by the federal No child left Behind act, the mandatory testing occurred last week. Apparently, there was a lot of “renorming” of the test.

That's statistics-speak for: screwing around with the test because too many kids did too well on it the last time they took it. It's also North Carolina legislature speak for: we don't have any money and refuse to pay you teachers one more red cent so screw you if your kids do really, really well. We're not paying for performance this year. We'll make sure we're no paying by "renorming" the test"

- What people don't understand, including one of my best friends who asked, "what is SO stressful about giving a bunch of kids a test?" is, we're not just giving a test. This is a test with proctors and state reps who come in to be sure the test is being administered correctly and to the letter of the law. If one kid talks during the test; if one kid decides to flip back to another portion of the test and work on it for a while instead of the test they're supposed to be taking; if one teacher points to the wrong thing or speaks to the wrong kid; if one teacher doesn't send the right child to the right room at the right time with the right modifications (read aloud; mark in book; extra time, etc.) then a "misadministration" is called and the entire grade level and in some cases, the entire school has to retake the test. This means time, money and more stress. The class that creates a "misadministration" is shunned for years.
 - The stress the kids feel is palpable. Some kids, as young as third grade, throw up before, during and/or after the test. No pressure there, right? And what is so ironic is...so what if they pass or not? They will be passed on anyway. And after a while, they know that, so why try at all?
 - This test is a snapshot. It is one moment in time. A portion of one of the 180 days we spend together. And their futures are determined by that moment.
 - So in the infinite wisdom of the test-administrating –powers-that-be, kids were given the EOG last week. Those who failed it were required to be "remediated." You know, because if you didn't learn what you needed to learn to pass the exam in 170 days, you should be able to in an addition 7, right? Much rescheduling, rearranging groups of kids, much planning of lessons for kids you don't even know for 7 days.
 - So for a week and a half, all the kids know there are no more grades, the testing is essentially over, there is no incentive to follow any rules, pay attention, follow any directions. Anything goes. In the meantime, the teachers are responsible for "remediating" the failures. Next week for three days, kids will retest.
 - The kids are coming out of their skin. The teachers are all signing up for 12-step programs because we simply cannot take it anymore. Trying to "remediate" a classroom of kids who KNOW none of this testing means anything, who haven't listened or cared for 170 days and could basically give a shit, is like trying to put a cat in a bucket of water.

- I am in hell, as are my colleagues. We are required to babysit these children for 7 more days. Seven. More. Days. No grades. No books.
- Perhaps this is one reason we're a little bent out of shape for being the state's first money-saving choice by cutting our pay, even a little bit. But then, I could be wrong. What do I know anyway?

I found out later that the county where I taught was one of few, if not the only county that retests. In other words, all of the students that “failed” the end of grade test with a “one” or a “two” were then “remediated,” subjected to cram sessions for several days, and then tested again in hopes of improving the school's overall scores. Testing became the tail that wagged the dog; everything having to do with schooling was written, designed, and implemented around test scores. It still does.

Kozol (2007), as referenced in Chapter 2, sympathizes:

Tests, as every educator knows, do not teach reading, writing, or the other basic elements of subject matter; only good hard-working teacher do and only if they work under conditions that respect their own intelligence and do not try to rob them of their own identities by forcing the un-lexicon of “systems experts” down their throats. Teachers have to find the will to counteract this madness. At very least, they ought to make it clear to every child in their room that high-stakes testing is, at best, a miserable game we're forced to play but that our judgment of our students' intellect and character and ultimate potential will have no connection with the numbers tabulated by a person who is not an educator, and has never met them, working in a test-score factory 1,000 or 3,000 miles away. (pp. 129-130)

Affluence, Privilege and Unwanted Populations

...citizens need to be multi-literate in ways that not only allow them access to new information and media-based technologies, but also enable them to be border crossers capable of engaging , learning from, understanding, and being tolerant of and responsible to matters of difference and otherness. (Giroux, 2006)

The 2009 – 2010 school year was my seventh year as a teacher in the school system. I was getting comfortable as a sixth grade social studies and language arts teacher in one of the best middle schools in the county, finally beginning to lose that “new teacher” feel and becoming confident with the profession as a whole. There was a lot of shuffling teachers around that year. Budget cuts made it necessary to shift teachers into different grade levels and in some cases, different subject areas. I was asked to move from sixth to seventh grade language arts and social studies. I happily accepted. Grade level and curriculum would not be the only changes I would experience that year. I discovered during the “welcome back” open house that I had been assigned two very distinct populations to teach. I had been placed on a team with one other teacher (she would teach science and math; I was in charge of social studies and language arts). The two of us would head up a team of 53 students. Twenty-four of the students were considered “strong accelerated learners.” These are the students who performed well in the classroom and, more importantly, excelled as test-takers, scoring in the top 10 to 20 percent on end of grade tests. They were generally referred to as “the AL’s” or as one of their parents explained to me, “the cream of the crop.”

The rest of the team was comprised of students whose first language was not English, or “ESLs” (English as a second language). Prior to this year, the ESLs had been spread out among all the homerooms in the grade level, each teacher receiving one or two in each of their classes. This year all of the 7th grade ESL’s would be placed on one team, mine. Some of the students spoke and read English fairly well. Most, however, spoke or read little or no English at all. As a class, their English proficiency ranged from

non-existent to about a 5th grade level. My teaching partner and I struggled to pronounce the names of these children that first night at open house and were too naïve to even imagine the challenges this diametrically opposed combination of students would lead us through during the school year. I consider that 2009-2010 school year as the best and most difficult of my teaching career to date. It is also the year I learned the most.

The majority of my ESL students were refugees, children whose parents were fortunate enough to escape the political and/or economic turmoil in their homeland. Four of my children were from Myanmar, (formerly Burma) who came to the United States after spending several years in a refugee camp in Thailand. Conditions in the camps were incomprehensible. Stealing was a way to survive. It took time and patience to eliminate that particular survival strategy among a few of my Burmese boys. Three students were from China, escaping a communist regime that disallowed practically all personal freedoms. Several students were from Africa - Nigeria, Liberia, and the Darfur region.

The families of these students escaped civil war, starvation, and refugee camps. These children were witnesses to atrocities the rest of us could not imagine. My Montagnard children harbored memories of leaving home in the middle of the night, terrified of being captured. The Vietnamese government essentially considered them traitors. They escaped execution by fleeing to refugee camps in Cambodia. The small country of El Salvador was represented by a beautiful girl born shortly after the end of that country's bloody civil war. A few children were from Mexico, refugees in their own way, many with parents living in the U.S. illegally. In post-modern America, it is difficult to comprehend the vast numbers of human beings who have to flee their

homelands in order to survive. One of the unhappiest characteristics of this era is to have produced more refugees, immigrants, displaced persons and exiles than ever before in history. It was, however, one of the happiest occasions for me to have these refugees, immigrants and displaced persons become part of my teaching experience and my life. Together, we formed our own little UN. Encouraged to speak their own language, French, Spanish, Taiwanese, Burmese, Arabic, and Mandarin Chinese could be heard at any given time in my classroom; however, communication was the least of their difficulties.

My school was an anomaly. Geographically, it was located in the most expensive real estate in the county. The campus is beautiful and completely surrounded by half-million-dollar-plus homes. About half of the students come from the neighborhood; many of them walk or ride their bike to class. The other half was made up of ESLs and “opt-out-kids,” students from another middle school falling victim to end of grade test scores. Because their school failed to meet adequate yearly progress for three consecutive years, parents “opted out” and sent their student to a school that did perform well, in this case, my school. In the simplest terms, the school was almost equally divided between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” There were many parent volunteers from the neighborhood. Their children had gone through elementary school together, belonged to the same swim clubs and traveling soccer teams. Over the years a strong sense of competition had developed between these families. The need to know how their neighbor’s children’s achievements compared to their own was undeniable.

These parents, due to their socioeconomic level, education, and career status, held considerable “cultural capital,” or economic and political power to make the rules work in their favor (Lareau, 2003). Because of the strong neighborhood ties, these parents en masse were a formidable force. If one parent took issue with the content or method of teaching, they received support from their friends and neighbors increasing the cultural capital exponentially. This could create a tidal wave that few single individuals could successfully navigate.

Our “team” of 53 kids evolved into two separate entities, the ESL’s and the ALs, each taught homogeneously in all four core classes, never combined for instruction or any other reason. I came up with a program integrating the two during a 30-minute slot of time prior to lunch every day. Because of the schedule, students changed classes at noon then went to lunch at 12:30. The remaining hour of the 90-minute class continued when we returned from lunch. The transition time, bathroom time and settling in time during that 30 minutes left very little, if any, productive instructional time. This would be the perfect slot for what I called the “Partners Program.” I paired every ESL student with an AL student. Each pair signed a contract stating they understood this was a “peer-peer” endeavor, not a “smart kid - dumb kid” pairing. They were to share knowledge with each other. The partners were both held accountable for keeping their collective work folders up to date. Each day of the week had a prescribed task: read aloud, vocabulary work, math, free choice, and Fridays were “share your culture” and game days. Partners made notes in their folders about what they had worked on each day.

The program could not have been more successful. AL kids were enthralled that their ESL partner spoke not two languages but three and sometimes four. Vocabulary days could be spent working on their weekly vocabulary lists or they could learn new words in a different language. Many times the ESL children helped the ALs with math. Fridays were the best. We learned an intricate jump-rope game from the Vietnamese girls. My boy from Darfur brought photos of his family, something he had never shared in the year I'd had him previously. The Burmese children taught us to make beautiful animals and flowers out of regular notebook paper or fancy colored tissue paper. My teaching partner called me a genius. The kids loved it and were getting to know each other as peers and they were learning. Additionally, 7th grade social studies curriculum includes the study of Asia and Africa. Most of my ESL children were from those two continents. I couldn't wait to shamelessly exploit their first-hand knowledge to teach the rest of us.

The Partners Program did well until November. Already beginning to hear rumbling and complaints about my teaching style, I should not have been surprised when some of the AL parents got together and decided this was not what they had in mind for instruction for their children. One disgruntled parent managed to garner the support of the other AL parents. Incorrectly viewed as a one-way-exchange, 30-minute tutoring session, the Partner's Program couldn't survive the wave of resistance. One particular AL child struggled with math but was in the AL class because of her superior reading and comprehension skill. The following email was written to my partner from the student's

parent in regard to her daughter's struggle with math and the need for tutoring. It was forwarded to me:

Date Forwarded: October 4, 2009

Subject: Tutoring.

I have a call in to Academic Development for tutoring... \$\$ pretty expensive. However she cannot afford to get behind. I cannot believe that we have children that can't speak English in our very own classrooms, and our children have to help them. Then when our children need the help it's not there.

This parent's view of the school as their own is disturbing. "...in our very own classrooms..." Whose classroom? Only the AL kids from the neighborhood? I understand parents want the best for their children, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Parents want their children to be challenged and engaged and are naturally defensive of anything that jeopardizes that. But, Kohn states:

Wanting to make sure that only their children, or an arbitrarily limited group of similar children, receive the best possible education is not legitimate and should not be honored. (Kohn, 1998)

The misunderstanding about the purpose of the program continued. I was surprised that a fellow educator took the same stand. A parent who was also an elementary school teacher sent this email to my principal:

Email to principal from AL parent

Sent: Forwarded to me November 3, 2009

I have sent Ms. Self an email on this subject but I also wanted to get your opinion as an educator about the merits of the tutoring program Ms. Self has established on her team. From what I understand the students in the Strong AL class are tutoring the students in the lower class on a daily basis for thirty minutes. That

means 2 1/2 hours each week my daughter and her classmates are working with other students on reading instead of receiving science and social studies instruction. As an educator I am fully aware of the needs of the lower performing students; however, my daughter's educational needs also need to be met. Myself, as well as many other parents, are very concerned about this program. I have discussed this issue with colleagues and everyone has the same feeling that I do. Quite simply, this program is appropriate. Please let me know your thoughts on this matter.

[The sender, I presume, intended to state that the program is **inappropriate.**]

Kohn (1998), referenced in the previous chapter, informs us that we live in a culture that is "remarkably unfriendly toward children" (p.572). He points out that many Americans promote the belief that children are our greatest natural resource evidenced by the amount of material goods we lavish on them, but in reality, he states, this is a false illusion exemplified by our "hostility to other people's children and our unwillingness to support them" (p. 572). If any one of the concerned parents and colleagues had visited a session of the Partner's Program, they would have had a very different viewpoint. Sadly, after pleading my case, no one came to visit or observe. I was told to end it. My frustration is clear in an email to a professor and friend:

November 9, 2009

Re: meeting with principal – program is axed

First, let me say this "meeting" with my principal this morning was preceded by my staying with my mother in the hospital for 2 days and a night and then driving back to Greensboro, and then working on a paper 'til 11 p.m. last night.

Met w/the principal who in the nicest, kindest way told me my Partner's Program was axed.

It's just not dignified to cry in front of your boss. Really. It's not. Even if you're a girl and she's a girl. Bad. Just bad. But I did.

A lot.

Somewhere in there I snuffled something about sleep deprivation and Republican assholes. It was all kinda smushed together in an unintelligible mish-mash of vowels and snot.

I've regrouped. I'm coming up with a "plan B." Don't know what it's going to be yet, but the Partner's Program WILL survive.

.....I've thrown away the tissues. I'm finishing this paper appropriately about cultural capital and social capital and I'm going to take my Basset hound eyes in there tomorrow and continue the good fight. I will not be taken down by a bunch of Young Republicans.

That's all I got.

The next day I had scheduled a parent-teacher conference with one of the outspoken AL parents. She briefly mentioned her relief that the Partner's Program had ended and continued with her concerns about my teaching style. The powerful neighborhood parents had been busy. My email explains my revelation: The ESLs had virtually no power and very little cultural capital to support their children compared to the AL parents whose influence affected my teaching style and pedagogy.

Date: November 10, 2009

Subject: Grrrrr!!

I had a parent conference with a parent who has not been vocal about not supporting the program, [**Referring to the Partner's Program**] but her disapproval came out during the conference. Her child did not understand why he could not use a dictionary to look up one of the vocabulary words he was helping his partner with during the Partner's Program. I wanted to say to her: you dumb ass. These ESL kids barely understand basic English. Throw in a definition from the Oxford Dictionary and you may as well speak in tongues. I had asked the AL kids to discuss the words, act them out if necessary, give examples, draw the definitions with their partners, but NOT to use the dictionaries. God forbid these AL kids be asked to THINK CRITICALLY.

First, Laura, she was there to tell me, among other things, that her son HATED the book *Girl Named Disaster*. (A novel I wrote a grant for to purchase a class set. It incorporated the geography, language, and culture of the African people we were also studying in social studies at the time.) She wanted to know what the point was of having the kids spend so much time learning “African words” that just “slow them down, make it difficult to read, and that they will NEVER use.” The most disturbing thing she had to say was, “where are the worksheets?” Where are the study guides? Where are the review sheets so they will know exactly what to study for? I just sat there speechless for about 5 seconds....seemed like 5 minutes. Then it hit me. THIS IS WHY THESE KIDS CAN’T FIND THEIR ASS WITH BOTH HANDS. THEY HAVE NEVER BEEN TAUGHT TO THINK. THEIR ENTIRE ACADEMIC CAREER HAS CONSISTED OF A SET OF VERY SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS WHICH THEY FOLLOW TO THE LETTER....GIVING NO MORE AND NO LESS. THERE IS NO THOUGHT PROCESS GOING ON. INFO IN – INFO OUT.

The parent with pedagogical concerns ultimately achieved her objective by demanding worksheets and study guides. Kohn (1998) was right.

The parents who prefer worksheets and lectures can use their clout to reverse or forestall a move toward more learner-centered classrooms.

I learned first-hand how interactions between administrators, parents, and teachers are based on the distribution of power and social capital. Education level, class and status are directly related to the ability of parents to influence the actions and decisions of school personnel.

McLaren (2004), referred to in Chapter 2, points out one of the greatest predictors of academic success is socioeconomic status.

...although we profess to believe in equal opportunity for rich and poor alike, the fact remains that an individual’s social class and race at birth have a greater influence on social class later in life than do any other factors – including intelligence and merit. (p. 175)

Simply said, children get as many chances for success in school as his or her family has “dollars and privileged social status.”

On the other hand, parents of the ESL students, because of their culture, would never question the authority of the teacher or administration out of respect. In many cases, parents are undocumented and purposely remain mute even when confrontation is justified, for instance when their child has been unfairly treated or bullied. I have often wondered how long the AL parents would have tolerated a lack of basic materials, such as text books, for their children.

I had never taught 7th grade social studies and language arts and spent time over the summer researching the curriculum for my new grade, becoming familiar with the text books, writing lesson plans and researching related field trip possibilities. I was prepared to walk into class the first week for my AL group. I assumed I could modify my instruction to fit the ESL group and would work with the curriculum facilitator to get any additional materials they would need. I immediately scheduled a time to meet with the curriculum facilitator to get up to speed. I took the 7th grade literature book and social studies book with me to her office and told her I needed her help with the ESL class. She sat down and looked over the plans I had and the text books and essentially told me I had what I needed. She told me about some web sites used for emergent readers, gave me permission to reserve the computer lab one hour a week for the rest of the year and arranged for a paid tutor to help out two hours a week. There were several volunteer tutors who would come to work one-on-one with my ESLs, so all I needed to do was to prepare a schedule.

I absorbed all of this and redirected my questions to the text book issue. I explained that I needed reading materials and social studies materials on their reading levels, somewhere between kindergarten and 5th grade. Repeatedly I was told: you teach 7th grade. You have all of your 7th grade materials. That's all we have. Each time I approached the need for materials on an elementary level, she would say, "but you teach 7th grade!" Finally I just gave up.

I used what I had been given. The stories in the literature book were all on compact disc (CD), so I would have them listen to the CD and read along with it in their book. Many times I would read to them, stopping to ask questions along the way. The vocabulary highlighted in the book to be tested was ridiculously difficult for new readers, so I developed my own list of spelling and vocabulary. I did the same thing with social studies. I made flashcards with vocabulary words, read the text aloud, and made do. This approach failed miserably. The seventh grade materials were so far above their reading levels, they couldn't follow along. I began to have serious behavior issues. My classroom turned into a zoo. I had to get some leveled readers and get organized somehow. There is no formal "program" for how to teach ESL children in a regular classroom, so I had no reference to what I really needed, but it didn't take a genius to figure out that new readers need new-reader books. You don't give 7th grade books to kids in first grade. I did find general information about establishing classes for newly arrived ESLs. Under "Common Features of Newcomer Programs" was listed the "must haves." In addition to "experienced teachers" and "instructional strategies for literacy

development,” they listed “appropriate materials.” I considered text books appropriate materials, therefore, a “must have.”

As a former elementary teacher familiar with tight budgets, I remembered how we had squirreled away old textbooks. There were textbooks from the 1970’s in the elementary classroom closets where I had first begun my teaching career. Teachers never throw anything away. The “retired” reader I had been given was from a major publisher and I felt sure that most, if not all, of the elementary schools in the county had used it at some point. I had a plan.

Letter to 67 elementary schools in Guilford County via email

Date: October 14, 2009

Subject: I need your books!

Good morning!

I am a seventh grade teacher at Mendenhall Middle School. We have a large ESL population and unfortunately, with budget cuts, we lost one of our two ESL teachers. This year, one of my “regular” classes consists of all the ESL children in the 7th grade. (Or I should say, are of 7th grade age) Some of the students have been in this country longer than others. Two of my children just arrived from China and elected not to go to the Newcomers School. I think you see my problem.

I have only 7th grade materials for language arts and social studies. None of these children read on a 7th grade level. Their current abilities range from kindergarten to 5th grade. They are extremely intelligent and hard-working, but in order to give them a solid foundation, I have to teach them on their current reading level.

This is where YOU come in. I have located a third-grade reader that has been “retired.” (The information is below) I need about 20 of these readers. If you could find it in your heart (and your principal’s permission) to take a quick look in a storage closet, book room, or wherever old books go to in your school, I would appreciate it more than you can imagine. It’s a Scott Foresman reader. It’s brown with a lion and a cat on the front.

If you just have ONE you could give me, I'll happily come pick it up. I'll take whatever you have. Thanks so much!

Patti Self
7th grade language arts and social studies

In two weeks, I had 30 student editions, a teacher's edition and all the supporting, reproducible workbooks and it didn't cost the county a dime. God bless teachers. In the following weeks, I wrote two grants, receiving about \$200 from the PTA and submitted a grant request to Donorschoose.org for two sets of leveled readers in grade levels K through 2 at a cost of \$480. I emailed every friend I had listed on my personal email account and received about \$300 in donations. That money went to buy additional workbooks, high-interest, used books on second and third grade level, and board games, Scrabble, Risk, playing cards, and Monopoly.

The Partner's Program was never revived. There simply were not enough hours in the day to do all the differentiation necessary for the lessons I wrote for the ESL's in addition to creating challenging lessons for the AL's. It was a huge disappointment. I continued to focus on teaching the way I inherently felt was just – critically, combining social studies and language arts allowing the students to read, reflect, and construct their own meanings in spite of the demand for worksheets and study guides from the AL parents.

Conclusion

Social justice is not a subject that can be taught separately as a single class in our public schools. Oppression and racism is a systemic problem, so educators have to address it *through the system*. In order for students to create change for themselves and

others, they must become “solid academically and critically” (Tan, p 487). We must develop a solid foundation for academic competencies and the critical skills to analyze society and learn how to make it more democratic and socially just. As a public middle school teacher, I sympathize with all the things educators lack in the classroom - most of all the lack of time, however, the extra effort and courage it takes to tease out these underlying themes and opportunities to critically analyze history is well worth the investment.

Reading and selecting specific accounts over ten years of documentation was painful, humorous, exhilarating, and finally liberating. The most recent posts were the most frustrating because I felt as though I should have been better equipped to handle some of the injustices I experienced in my classroom. Initially, I was afraid to look back on years and years of almost constant questioning, indecision, frustration, and angst, however, to my relief, there were enough successes, thrilling and proud moments to offset the negative. There is great value in this type of research. It reveals concepts that cannot be accessed directly in positivistic research.

The process of reflection in education is invaluable. Evaluating the success and failures of lessons used in the classroom can augment not only the teacher’s immediate determination of what works and what doesn’t with their students. A well thought-out evaluation over a lengthy amount of time can legitimize arguments for changing the pedagogical rational as well as curriculum. The issues addressed in this chapter represent only five of the impediments teachers face, roadblocks and detriments to teaching in a critical, homeopathic fashion found to benefit the whole child: race, extraneous jobs and

responsibilities, scripted lessons and canned curriculum, standardized testing and affluent and privileged populations.

The majority of new teachers who graduate from colleges and universities across the country continue to be white, middle class females. Many begin their careers in socioeconomic circumstances completely foreign to their lived experience. New teachers need an understanding of what racism and privilege really mean, the ongoing systemic implications of racism and how to explore, appreciate and embrace the differences they will inevitably experience in classrooms today.

Teaching from scripted lessons and “canned curriculum” is more disturbing and more difficult to overcome now than ever since 48 of our states have elected to participate in a common curriculum. Teachers can no longer simply decide to defy the curriculum plan provided by the school system and defend their decision with “good scores.” Today, Common Core dictates the curriculum, the pedagogy, and – most importantly – the testing. I was justified with my acceptable scores to continue educating students in the critical way I was comfortable with and choosing my own curriculum. Currently, at least in the middle school where I was employed, every teacher in the department is required to use the same materials, the same methodology, be on the same page at the same time regardless of the students’ abilities and needs removing any hope of augmenting lessons with outside curriculum, and valuable extended lessons where critical thought and consideration could be introduced.

Standardized testing impedes learning and dehumanizes students. Assuming it began as a measurement for assessing student learning, its new role in American

education is to measure teacher's pay. Standardized testing encourages cheating – not so much on the part of the students, but by teachers and administrators desperate to show growth to keep federal and state dollars flowing and in some cases, to augment their own paycheck. Testing is a statistician's dream and a child's nightmare. Better ways must be introduced to assess students.

Finally, the powerful, often conservative elite populations in our democratic public education system, have every right to voice their opinions about curriculum and pedagogy implemented in their children's classrooms, however, theirs should not be the only voice heard. The collective face of our classrooms in most areas of our county today has changed considerably in the past few years. The increased diversity teachers engage in each new school year should be a joy, not a burden. Our ESL populations should have the same voice, if not playing field, as the more elite populations. Teachers should have access to a variety of methods, pedagogy and curriculum to form more egalitarian classrooms, classrooms where knowledge is an equally shared endeavor between students.

The following chapter addresses these concerns further and includes a final reflection of direct understandings revealed during the reflection process. Highlighted will be an analysis of themes that emerged from Chapter 3 and how they relate to the theory addressed in the prior chapters. Difficulties and possibilities for change will be addressed as well as an agenda for progressive change in education.

CHAPTER IV

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

...the practice is the horizon, the aim of the theory. Therefore the educationalist lives the instigating dialectic between his or her daily life – the **lived** school and the **projected** school – which attempts to inspire a **new** school. (Gadotti, 1996, p. 7)

This chapter begins with a review of critical theory and the basic foundations of critical pedagogy and its creators, including the influences of politics. It also serves to illuminate the connection between theory and the lived practice experienced by the researcher in Chapter III. A reflection and critique of difficulties encountered by the researcher and most classroom teachers will include politics, wealth and privilege, standardized testing, bureaucracy, and the deskilling of teachers. These stumbling blocks make it nearly impossible for educators to follow in the footsteps of critical theorists and become agents of change. Teachers who hope to achieve and maintain this philosophy of social justice in today's classroom, especially in the current hyper-politicized climate, often find themselves mired down in these all-too-common issues.

To achieve “praxis,” one must embrace and participate in theory, practice, reflection, and finally action. This chapter concludes the researcher's personal praxis with a hopeful call to action by educators, legislators, theorists, and citizenry as a whole. This action is an agenda for progressive change in education and includes funding,

representation, education, less data analysis, charter schools, curriculum and instruction, the need for role models and a declaration of war on poverty. These are only a few suggestions the researcher and the reader can work toward and inspire a “new school,” one that embraces sociocultural diversity and social justice.

Theory

The primary focus of critical pedagogy is to alleviate oppression through the acquisition of empowerment and agency. Critical theorists and pedagogues have engaged in a broad range of traditions that address an ever growing list of injustices relating to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and culture. Critical theory is a school of thought that examines and critiques society and culture. Initially built upon the philosophical work of the Frankfurt School, critical pedagogy emerged from political and educational theorists who recognized those outside the status quo, the marginalized “other,” those with no voice and little hope. Critical thinkers have challenged, questioned, argued and fought to create a more equitable space for those who do not fit the white, Christian, English-speaking “Eurocentric Ideal.” Historically, this critical and progressive school of thought emerged and continues to emanate from the political left. On the other hand, conservative educators and legislators embrace a more industrial, mechanical approach to society and education as a whole. Traditionalist educator Edward Thorndike’s vision for American children in the early twentieth century was much like conservative legislator’s vision today, a mechanized, measureable, checklist to fill jobs.

Politics

Recently the entire United States has watched as thousands of teachers, administrators, students, parents and taxpayers from all over the state of North Carolina have picketed and protested outside the State House in Raleigh. These peaceful yet prolific protests clearly show the public outcry of what is perceived as the evisceration of our public education system by the state's first Republican House majority since Reconstruction. Among other elements directly affecting the quality of education, the North Carolina State legislature eliminated approximately 10,000 education positions from teachers, teacher assistants and support personnel including guidance counselors and psychologists and denied a pay increase for the remaining educators. In addition to eliminating career status for teachers, beginning in the 2014-2015 school year, educators will receive no additional pay for advanced degrees. The most puzzling change requires each school district to identify the top 25% of effective teachers without providing any criteria on how to accomplish this ranking.

Individuals who choose to teach children and remain in the profession for a number of years are nurturers. Commanded to care and teach 30+ students per class, these professionals know and understand that every student is an individual with his or her own strengths, knowledge, experience and "otherness." Many of the children live in circumstances that are outside what might be considered "the norm." These children's lives intersect daily with hunger, homelessness, drug abuse, physical abuse, absent parents, loss of mothers and siblings, and in many cases the victims of their mother's drug use while they developed in the womb, their needs cast aside before they are even

born. They, for the rest of their lives, will pay the price for their mother's addictions, many struggling not only to learn, but to retain new knowledge and meanings from one day to the next.

Critical theory from its core requires educators to get to know the student as a person, not a commodity, know about their home life, discover the knowledge they bring with them to class, and celebrate not only what they are but the potential for what they can become. When teachers automatically assume each student in their class is equal and can be taught equally, treated equally and have equal expectations, learning for the "othered" becomes almost non-existent. The heart-wrenching fact is teachers are forced to give up their nurturing inclinations and required to view students as commodities while they assume the role of management. The impact of The No Child Left Behind Act and Common Core initiative, both direct results of Federal and State legislation, cut the heart out of teaching and learning, and in doing so, eliminates opportunities to teach for social justice. Obviously, budget-cutting by decreasing the teacher work force increases the number of students in each class further alienating teacher from student.

The critical pedagogue teaches in a holistic manner, another major tenet of critical pedagogy: educating the whole child and nurturing the desire for more learning. John Dewey paved the way for experiential learning in this country at a time when rote memorization and standardized methods of teaching were the rule. He envisioned an education system that readied students for life, not just the life they might experience on an assembly line. He opposed traditional, conservative methodology and was known for his mantra, *learn by doing*. Dewey explained that in order for learning to be effective and

create new knowledge students had to contextualize and connect information to their own prior experiences thus deepening the connection with new knowledge. Dewey believed if schools addressed the whole child, the social, intellectual, emotional, and physical development of the child, teaching would be very different from the militarized, standardized traditional methods of the time. He valued the students and the life experiences they brought with them to schools and put the needs of the children first, not the needs of industry and capitalism.

Expanding on the pedagogy of Dewey and the Frankfurt School, Paulo Freire introduced his idea of conscientization, or the awakening of students to their realities, their oppressors, their own self-worth, and ultimately methods of overcoming oppression through education. Paulo Freire influenced entire populations with his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). He defied rote memorization methods as conservative, traditional spoon feeding and exposed it famously as a “banking concept of education” whereby students simply accepted knowledge unquestionably from the all-knowing teacher. He endorsed a liberatory, dialogical pedagogy designed to raise the consciousness of the oppressed and to transform oppressive social structures through “praxis.” He began this transformation through the education of students of all ages and ability levels by first learning about the students, their personal experiences and life narratives. Freire believed educators should learn as much from the students as the students learned from the teacher. Students were made aware of their realities and began to understand that everyone has significant knowledge to share regardless of their socioeconomic status or level of education. Students begin to understand they are equally as capable and

intelligent as those who oppress them. Conscientization is considered the first step in the emancipatory journey of education by many critical theorists.

Critical theorists and pedagogues continue to expand and build upon the foundations of critical thought. Henry Giroux agrees with his predecessors that pedagogy should be a part of an unfinished education intent on developing a “meaningful life for all students (Giroux, 2011, p. 6).” He also believes, far from instilling propaganda in students, that critical pedagogy begins with “the assumption that knowledge and power should always be subject to debate, held accountable, and critically engaged (Giroux, 2006, p. 185)” In making a meaningful life, Giroux, like Freire, stresses the importance of educators to understand their students and the contexts of their lives and assist the student in valuing the knowledge they bring to the classroom. Giroux uses critical pedagogy to examine the ways in which classrooms can function as modes of social, political, and cultural reproduction, especially when the dominant goals of education are defined through the promise of “economic growth, job training, and mathematical utility” (Giroux, 2011, p. 5). Giroux more recently addresses what he refers to as the “deskilling” of teachers. He asserts teachers have been reduced to “the keepers of methods, implementers of adult culture and removed from assuming autonomy from their classrooms” (Tristan, 2013, p. 1).

Giroux asserts,

Conservatives want public schools and colleges to focus on “practical” methods in order to prepare teachers for an “outcome - based” education system, which is code for pedagogical methods that are as anti-intellectual as they are politically conservative. This is pedagogy useful for creating number crunchers and for downgrading teachers to supervising the administration of standardized tests, but

not much more. Reducing pedagogy to the teaching methods of data-driven performance indicators that allegedly measure scholastic ability and improve student achievement is nothing short of scandalous. (Tristan, 2013, p. 1)

From Theory to Practice

As I have tried to make clear in this dissertation, critical pedagogy scaffolds my research in Chapter 3. The journal entries from this prior chapter exemplify the fact that classroom teachers who work toward social justice and aspire to be agents of change are practically immobilized by social and political expectations, mandates and additional restraints. Wealth and privilege, standardized testing, and the deskilling of teachers constitute a large portion of the restraints educators face each year in our public school system.

Wealth and Privilege

My doctoral studies included classes regarding school cultures, power structures of public schools, and teaching for social justice. These particular classes coincided with my documented experiences teaching ESL (English as a second language) and AL (Accelerated Learners) students the same school year. A critique of this documented segment of time in the previous chapter leaves me no doubt that each of these experiences, the simultaneous role of teacher *and* learner, exacerbated the significance of the other, magnifying the potential each had for devastation on my part. I was literally living (practice) what I was learning (theory), an unusual opportunity; a powerful and painful journey that pitted the powerless and the powerful. As my journal entries indicate, it was almost more than I could bear.

One of my greatest struggles was observing the hypocrisy of the AL parents and students. Most were members of organizations promoting Christian athletes, Scouting, and honor societies, but most of the students seemed to use these organizations as ways of separating themselves from the populations with less cultural capital. I understand now, based on conversations I had with the AL students, that they were comfortable with the marginalized as long as they were participating in a food drive, collecting used clothing, or as one student asserted, “teaching them to speak English” as if they alone were responsible for doing so. After much introspection and reflection, I finally understood that they saw these “less fortunate” ESL populations as vacant and empty with no possibility for a reciprocal learning opportunity or gift-giving for themselves. As long as they could choose when to give generously and contribute to filling the empty containers and, coincidentally, be rewarded publicly for their efforts, they and their parents were happy to participate. The issues (and demise of my Partner’s Program) began when the AL parents were asked to allow their children to be equals, to receive knowledge from the ESL students, not just give when it was convenient.

The combined interaction between the AL students and the ESL students ended after approximately two months. Both groups of children asked when they would be working together again and I was incapable of giving an honest answer: the parents of the AL children refused to allow it. I kept making excuses to the ESL students, never wanting them to know the truth. After the Partner’s Program was eliminated, I, incorrectly, thought if I cared and nurtured the ESL children more, I could make up for the rejection they had experienced from their AL classmates. Ultimately, I succeeded

only in further alienating the two parties and their parents to a greater degree. The rest of the year I was held under more scrutiny by the AL parents who perceived me as “doing less for their children than the ESL students.” This was a very difficult concept for me to embrace. As stated in my journal, the AL children had all the books and supplies, extracurricular activities, clubs, organizations, and sports they could possibly manage, yet I had to reach out to teachers across the county to collect enough out-of-print text books to teach the ESL students with, essentially losing more than six weeks of instruction while doing so. I could only wonder how the AL parents would have reacted if their children had not been afforded the correct text book on their child’s grade level from day one. How could I be an agent of change, a critical teacher when the playing field was so incredibly uneven?

Standardized Testing and Bureaucracy

The ESL’s obviously require an incredible amount of differentiation and modification to the required curriculum. Additionally, theirs was not the only marginalized “other” who suffered a lack of social justice during my observations. Text books and curriculum are based on “grade level” ability, assuming all students are “on grade level.” When students are not on grade level or have not achieved the skills expected at their current grade, regardless of their circumstances (ESL, socioeconomic and cultural differences) it takes additional time and effort to modify the required curriculum and the pedagogy to accomplish the desired end – a passing score at the end of the year. Teachers perceive this extra time and effort as additional pressure they must endure as they work to bring the “normal” or “regular” students successfully through the

mandated curriculum. In other words, any children who were not on grade level, struggling for any number of social and economic reasons, were naturally viewed by teachers as an albatross around their neck. Harshly said, but this mindset is understandable if the *only* objective is to have all passing scores at the end of the school year. This is part of the most compelling argument for the negative reaction to teach ESL students and others lagging behind their grade level. The so-called achievement scores are the basis for the “grading system” the state legislature recently passed. The school’s “grade” will be based on two factors: Eighty percent of the schools’ grade will come from the actual scores from standardized testing. The additional 20% will come from the measured “growth” of the students. This is a doubly unfair accounting for the ESL students and teachers who have worked mightily to bring their students up to grade level.

ESL students show enormous growth each year, as a rule. They “grow” (show an increase in reading comprehension) two, three, and in some cases four grade levels in one year. In comparison, “standard” students, those who grew up in the United States with English as a first language, are expected to show at least one grade level of growth each year. This is problematic for a number of reasons, but now, with the new legislation, it becomes even more difficult. An ESL student new to the United States, might have attended, in some cases, a special introductory school their first year in this country that included intensive language instruction, lessons about this country’s customs, etiquette, etc. This student would then be placed in the grade level appropriate to their *age* where they will be forced to use materials that are only for the grade level they are placed in, not

the grade level they currently read at. Already, one of the first “rules” of critical pedagogy is cast aside: start where the student currently is. Begin teaching at the level the student comes to you at. In spite of the absence of appropriate, leveled text books and materials and obvious language barriers, it is not unusual for these students to show several years of growth in one year. This is a reason to celebrate if achievement is measured by growth; however, as stated earlier, 80% of the school’s “grade” is figured using scores alone, not growth. Simply put, if a non-English speaking student in their second year of school in the North Carolina is placed, according to their age, into the seventh grade and their reading level at the time is on a kindergarten level, they will take the end of year assessment and, for example, end the academic year with a third-grade reading score.

That is a huge amount of growth, much more than a great majority of their classmates. However, the data will show the student is significantly below the seventh grade expected end of year score reflecting a failing grade. This in turn is a detriment to the teacher, the school, the district and the state. If teachers hoping to make a living wage wish to increase their pay someday based on performance, who will rush to help these children and other populations destined to score below the mandated passing grade? The system is set up for the white middle class, Eurocentric Ideal students to succeed because teachers hoping to show passing scores will flock to the white, middle class, Eurocentric Ideal schools where hope and possibility for advancement exist. That population, according to the new legislation, could technically show little or no growth but pass the end of year standardized tests and get an excellent “grade.” However, schools with large

ESL populations or large numbers of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds who show growth but still don't "pass" according to grade level will still be considered "failing schools." There are no pay increases or bonuses for failing schools with failing populations. How can our most vulnerable students be so blatantly set up for failure? This is what happens when students become faceless test scores and schools and teachers are judged, rewarded and/or punished by evidence on a spread sheet. And in critical fashion, we must ask: who benefits from this arrangement?

In retrospect, as I assess my own experience with the ESL students and the adversity with their counterparts' parents, I realize the mistakes I made and my responsibility for the failure of my Partner's Program. I did not do enough preparation to make my Partner's Program succeed. Instead of announcing the program to the parents, having both populations of students sign "contracts" agreeing to a unilateral exchange of ideas, customs, traditions and language, I should have included the parents from the beginning. There was a lot of information lost in translation from the privileged AL students to their parents about what exactly the program I had introduced involved and their role in the exchange. The parents were given the impression that their children were tutoring the ESL students when in fact; some of the ESL children were helping the AL students with their math. While the AL students helped quiz the ESL children with their vocabulary and other language-based subjects, the ESL children were teaching the AL's words in French, Vietnamese, Swahili, Arabic and other languages. I should have invited the parents and the administrators into the classroom to witness the exchange of knowledge occurring. Some days the exchange was more prevalent toward the ESL

children, and other days, the AL students received more than they gave, but overall, I believe both sides of the exchange were benefitted.

The Partner's Program was an organic experiment, something critical pedagogy encourages, a constant, fluid, changing way of teaching. I had an overall plan for how it would work with specific tasks for students to do four days each week for the 30-minute allotted time. On Fridays the students were allowed to play games together selected from my inventory of cards, board games, and flashcards or games. I highly encouraged the ESL students to share their customary games with the AL's, which they did to the enjoyment of all concerned. I improvised, changed, rearranged, and modified as needed, but the objective was never made clear to the AL parents. They felt their students were being used for free tutoring service to the ESL children, 2.5 hours per week of instructional time taken away from their children in order to assist "the others." This was not to be tolerated.

This type of interaction between the powerful and the powerless could not be considered currently for a number of reasons. The scheduling of classes does not provide the time needed for such an activity. The standardized curriculum does not allow for any creative additions by the teacher. The testing environment is so intense and rigidly structured that the intertwining of classes or any improvisation at all on the teacher's part would not be possible. Lesson plans are to be created virtually in stone for entire departments submitted one week in advance, and the teachers of each department are expected to literally be on the same page with the same objectives and the same assessments at the same time every day of the week. It is a slow strangulation for

teachers who seek ways to level playing fields and benefit both the economically blessed as well as the marginalized. Also, it goes against the grain of critical pedagogy in that there is no time or opportunity for reflection, time for the teacher to look back and determine successes and failures and needed changes in the pedagogy.

The Deskilling of Teachers

Common Core Curriculum continues in the traditions of No Child Left Behind in that it suffocates opportunities for empowering marginalized students. Teachers are forced to follow rigid standards and do not have an opportunity to freely augment the curriculum with additional enrichment activities and content as they personally see appropriate. Mandatory planning within departments essentially shuts down any improvisational, teachable moments that so often occur within the classroom.

Additionally, as any teacher knows, no two classes are alike. A well-planned lesson in one class might be a complete failure in another class depending upon the participants.

W.E.B. DuBois said students learn more from *who we are* than from what we teach. And, as stated earlier, Parker Palmer encourages teachers to just be themselves. How can teachers connect with their students and open up new worlds to them through only one lens, the lens of someone else's scripted curriculum? Assuming teachers find the time to discover the positive triggers that spark interest in the student, how can that discovery be expanded upon if our curriculum and pedagogy is mechanized, or at least assembled and agreed upon by all of the teachers in a department whose experiences are more than likely very different from one another? Personally, like a majority of teachers I assume, I am a person deeply concerned about children, what they learn and how they

learn. Learning should be fun. I am also a person from a rural area of the country with experiences few, if any, of my students have ever shared. Because of my enthusiasm for my rural, Appalachian upbringing and interests, I transferred that enthusiasm into my teaching, sparking interest in a number of areas and concentrations. I taught the required curriculum, I just chose to teach it in a way I felt most comfortable. In doing so, not only did the students greatly expand their vocabulary and learn the mechanics of language arts, they learned about other ways of living and curriculum outside of my language arts designation. For example, I chose a novel about a boy being raised in New York City in over-crowded conditions who ran away to the woods to live alone. Aside from numerous themes to discuss, the opportunity to delve into language, math and science was unavoidable.

The author described some of the landscape as having “upholstered rocks.” Practically impossible to describe, I brought large rocks thick with fresh, green moss from my parent’s home to pass around the room so the students could touch and feel what “upholstered” really meant. As the boy began to learn more about his surroundings, he began to describe various species of trees. In response, I raided my father’s woodpile and took logs to class, each cut in equal diameter and length – oak, pine, and poplar. I had the students pass them around, smell them, feel the different types of bark and note the growth rings. Why, I asked, if these logs were all approximately the same size some felt heavier than others? This led to a discussion about density, slow growth forests, and the ability to tell the age and the history of the climate as the tree grew. I invited a forest ranger to come to class and take the students out into the wooded area on the school

campus and show them how to identify different types of trees and take borings so they could approximate the age of the trees without having to cut them down.

These lessons originated because of the person I was. I was completely comfortable and confident teaching in this manner. While this particular method worked very well for me, it most certainly would not work for a teacher raised in an urban area who knew nothing about forests. However, I have complete confidence that my fellow teachers can implement and integrate their own true selves, interests and experiences into their lessons and incorporate Dewey's "learn by doing" philosophy – and successfully teach the same concepts.

Teachers need to be trusted to teach. That means having faith and allowing them permission to bring their own experiences into the classroom, allowing spontaneous bursts of questions, answers, and discussion to occur. Critical pedagogy demands and children deserve to love learning. Memorization and the fragmented study of small, disconnected parts of literature is not a way to achieve this. Constricted curriculum cannot be "customized" for students whose interests vary and make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to make connections and meaning.

Critical pedagogy is dialogical, an exchange of knowledge and meaning. This concept is not complex, in fact, it is just common sense. It begins with a dialog. If you are going to have a conversation with someone it cannot be a one-sided monolog. Questions are asked, you discover things you might have in common with the other person but additionally, you learn new and different things that person knows and has experienced. That's what critical teachers do – they have a "conversation" with their

students. A dialog. Without this dialog, a two-part conversation with both parties participating, you end up with a single talking head, which in many cases is what we find in the classroom.

Agenda for Progressive Change in Education

The time for educators to embrace the tenets of critical pedagogy and fight for a more just, egalitarian space for children is now. It is unfortunate but true that the two components most-needed to begin progressive educational change and an opportunity to teach for social justice is time and money. That acknowledged, this agenda has viable suggestions within the immediate realm of possibility.

Fund Us

Aside from the obvious disregard and devalued status for the profession as whole, politically motivated changes to the funding in education affect the abilities and opportunities of teachers determined to teach according to the basic ideals of critical pedagogy. The North Carolina State Legislature passed a budget this summer of 2013 that, among other cuts, reduces target educational funding:

- It cuts textbook funding by \$77.4 million dollars
- It cuts classroom supply funding by \$45.7 million
- It cuts limited English proficiency funding by \$6 million.

(<http://neatoday.org/2013/08/06/fighting-budget-cuts-north-carolina-educators-dig-in-for-the-long-haul/>)

These cuts do not include the aforementioned additional reductions to the education budget in the way of salaries for teachers, teacher and support staff jobs, and

additional pay for advanced degrees. I cannot imagine a business model anywhere in the world where a person would voluntarily apply for a position with such bleak “incentives.” Fortunately, teachers for the most part are not, and have never been “in it for the money.” Teachers teach because they care and are concerned about children and the future of education and this country.

When No Child Left Behind was implemented about a dozen years ago and more recently the Common Core initiatives, it would appear that state and federal lawmakers were determined to standardize the curriculum across the country and assess the successes and failures of schools through standardized testing. What lawmakers failed to take into consideration is the non-standard funding for schools. For example, the state of New York spent the most per pupil in 2011, over \$19,000 per student compared to North Carolina’s approximate \$8,000 and, at the lowest rung of the ladder, Utah averaging about \$6,000 per student. Taking into consideration cost of living differences and large gaps in the amount of property taxes paid, it is still very difficult to calculate how a school in Utah or North Carolina can compete with a school in a wealthy suburb in New York. State legislators and the federal government might do well to take a look at these financial structures and redirect funding for schools. Could property taxes be assessed, collected and averaged out among the schools in the state to create more equal funding at least state-wide? This could alleviate some of the pressure of the poorest schools and perhaps provide incentives for teachers willing to work in more difficult areas. Incentives (bonuses) based partially on longevity could be considered as well as the actual growth of the students.

The trickle-down effect of this severe funding crunch makes the already difficult job of teaching critically almost impossible. Teachers, already stretched to the limit with overcrowded classrooms, will have to contend with more students and fewer ways to manage them. How can an educator teaching four classes of language arts create any sort of personal relationship with 120 students? We might manage with great difficulty but only if there are no ESL students, no students with behavior issues, and no children behind their grade level. However, in the real world, perhaps only one of those four classes of 30 will actually all be on grade level and, as students and their families are human; there will always be personal and behavioral issues to contend with.

At the very least, funding must be provided to lower class sizes and hire additional personnel to handle the “extraneous jobs” teachers are all expected to do in addition to teach: collect money for class photos and fund raisers, coordinate field trips which includes scheduling busses, hiring drivers, calculating gas costs and costs to the students, printing permission forms, collecting the forms and money; making copies, etc.

According to the Common Core website (www.corestandards.org):

It was an historical event when the Common Core State Standards in mathematics and reading were released in June 2010. Launched by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core Standards project brought together experts in both reading and math to develop a set of standards that would be, in what became a mantra, both “higher and fewer in number” than existing state standards. The standards are voluntary—states choose whether to participate—but for the first time most American students will study a uniform curriculum through at least the eighth grade. A draft of the experts’ work circulated for several months, and, based on input from other experts and the general public, the standards were finalized. In September 2010, two consortia were awarded federal grants totaling \$330 million to develop annual assessments aligned with the Common Core standards, and as of December 2010, 43 states and the District of Columbia have signed on to those

efforts. The tests are due to be given for the first time in the 2014–2015 school year. (<http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards>)

Represent Us

Legislators need to see and hear teachers in a setting other than in a picket line outside the State House. We need teachers to represent teachers. The state of North Carolina does not allow a true “union” for teachers, however, teachers can elect to join and participate in the NCAE, North Carolina Association of Educators. Part of our annual dues (over \$300 per year) goes to lobby for teachers. Obviously, this has not been a successful mode for making change. Teachers need a more vocal, vibrant representation, something all of us yearn for but rarely, if ever, participate in. Getting involved with the representation we currently have is a start. Writing, calling, and emailing local representatives at the state and federal level on a consistent basis, urging additional voices from other teachers, parents, and taxpayers would also be a viable option. Access to numerous forms of social media make getting involved on a grass-roots level for political change more achievable than ever.

Teachers could also use the Rev. Al Sharpton’s example of progressive change by inviting legislators to visit classrooms for at least one day, more if possible. Over the summer Sharpton invited mayoral candidates in New York City to spend the night in one of the high-rises managed by the New York City Housing Authority. The objective was experiential learning: let the people who have the power to change the circumstances spend time where change needs to be made. This is how affluent lawmakers can begin to understand the disparity. This experiential tactic for the New York City Housing

Authority dwellers and the teachers and students of North Carolina can be a much more successful and motivating way to instigate change. Get the legislators and the educators together in the classroom for at least one whole day to get a glimpse of how real education happens, its joys and its difficulties.

Educate Us

Schools of higher education who “teach the teachers” need to prepare students for the cultural diversity of students. Too much emphasis is placed on the mechanics of teaching and not the nurturing. For example, classroom management is most likely the number one challenge first-year teachers experience. For many teachers, classroom management always remains an issue. It took many years of classroom teaching for me to realize that the key to classroom management lies squarely in understanding the culture, traditions, practices, discipline or lack of discipline from the students’ home. The cultural diversity piece of my teacher education came during graduate work, years after I had struggled to manage and discipline my students effectively. I do not propose that undergraduate students can learn the nuances of every possible culture they might interact with as a teacher, however, colleges and universities need to prepare future teachers for change. The white, middle class, English-only, Christian majority mentality is struggling to remain the majority. Teaching to “the majority” no longer works, if it ever did. Proof of a shrinking middle class and increases in immigrant populations and students of poverty are found in news outlets and classrooms across the nation.

In addition to understanding diversity, epiphanies about my biases and prejudices would never have occurred without additional time in higher education and critical

questioning. The journaling I did over the years and used in this dissertation were cathartic, but would not have served any other purpose had they not been reread, evaluated, and reflected upon to recognize emerging themes that could be acted upon. I discovered ways in which I could have handled things differently with my class, their parents and my administrators. Only time and additional education for teachers can provide this vital process.

Finally, it is unjustifiable that teachers should not receive additional pay for earning advanced degrees. Not only should there be a pay increase, the state should provide the opportunity to earn additional designations and degrees through cohorts at local universities and pay for them with certain stipulations. This encourages teachers who might otherwise not have the opportunity to add to their education and their ability to teach. An undeniably expensive suggestion, however, additional education is an investment that should have a high rate of return personally and financially. As role models for lifelong learning, how absurdly ironic is it that legislators do not see the value in assisting teachers in furthering their own educations by funding tuition or higher pay to offset the costs? If we are truly critical pedagogues, we will find ways to continue our “lifelong learning,” but support is often necessary.

Don't Segregate Us...Again. Charter School Issues

Reassess the value of charter schools. If these schools are private, for-profit and allowed to hire teachers without certification or in some instances no degrees at all, they are options for another type of “white flight” on the part of the white middle class who cannot afford traditional private school but wish to remove themselves from the

democracy of traditional public schooling. It would appear if charter schools continue to grow in numbers, we will soon have segregated schools again. The core foundation of critical pedagogy is democracy, social justice and equality. Politicians cannot turn their backs on the already marginalized students whose parents cannot afford transportation to and from charter schools. Opting to pay private organizations to create new schools while the poor are left in the crumbling classrooms of the underfunded public school system is a travesty to providing equal – not separate but equal – schooling.

The backbone of the American education system is democracy, set up to benefit all of our citizenry – those who need help and those who can reach out to assist, benefitting us all in the end. Like the elite clubs and organizations mentioned earlier in this dissertation, charter schools represent one more way for the powerful to “escape” and set themselves apart from what they perceive as the marginalized, less-than, “others” who can potentially hold them back from their own projected successes. The American classroom should represent everything that is good in this country - the children - the most malleable of our citizens, literally the future.

Education should be an opportunity to learn more than letters and numbers; it should be an opportunity rich in cultures and traditions, races, and religions. As our world grows smaller and our methods of communicating draw us nearer to each other, we should embrace these differences and learn from each other for the common good. Removing support from these invaluable opportunities and redirecting it to charter schools for a few speaks volumes about the politics of many charter school supporters. Most disagree with “handouts” for the poor, but in reality have no moral hesitation in

accepting handouts to separate themselves and their children from the democratic education that best serves the majority.

Deskilling Teachers and Dehumanizing Students. Less Data, Please.

The deskilling of teachers and the dehumanizing of students begins in kindergarten with an absurd amount of required “standards” to reach – meaning a simultaneous amount of testing to quantify the learning. Five-year-olds’ “work” should be to learn cooperation through play, especially at this young age before they possibly become judgmental or prejudiced. If legislators today truly want to address global issues, then we must teach our children how to interact with each other and expose them to children unlike themselves, rich, poor, marginalized, foreign, non-English speaking and people of different races, colors and religions. They must learn trust and empathy, lessons that cannot be assessed and measured on a standardized test.

As I return to my journal entries and read pages and pages of struggles I had with the behavior of certain students, the anger they brought with them to school and their rejection of new ideas, the feeling that I wasn’t “teaching” the students anything during these difficult periods pours over me in waves. I feel an incredible amount of guilt having spent so much “instructional time” sorting out behavior issues, broken pencils and broken hearts. I assumed nothing had been learned by the child creating the disturbance, and also the children who were on task observing these struggles and bouts of tension and anxiety; “down periods” that had nothing to do with the curriculum. I realize now, I was teaching the class a lot. I was teaching them (I hope) sympathy, love, patience, how to get along with others, how to take responsibility for themselves and sometimes others.

These types of lessons cannot be shown as data. We are not working with numbers. As the world becomes smaller and more mechanized, we need to learn now, perhaps more than ever, to put a human face on the “data” our educational system holds so dear. The dehumanizing of students is a very dangerous precedent to set in education.

Dehumanizing is what makes it possible for pilots to drop bombs and kill hundreds or thousands of people in a single pass because the pilots cannot see the face of the enemy. A less dramatic example is the dehumanizing of children who use social media, making it easy for them to say, do, and distribute words and actions they would never consider doing face to face. Social media provides a false veil of anonymity that lends an equally false sense of protection. Even the famous Milgram experiment at Yale University in 1962 supports this theory. In short, 93% of participants in Milgram’s study would inflict the greatest amount of pain on another subject in the study if the other subject was not visible and whose agonizing responses could not be heard. When all of the participants were in the same room together and participants were required to force the subject’s hand onto a shock plate inflicting pain, the rate of obedience dropped to approximately 30%. While this study was about obedience, it can be construed that inflicting pain on another human being is much easier when the victim receiving the pain cannot be seen or heard – they are faceless, dehumanized, making the choice to be cruel or humane much easier to make (Milgram,1963).

We as critical educators have to lift this veil of anonymity; we must reveal the faces of the students and return humanity to education. We must learn not to just tolerate

the other, but to respect the other. Now is the time to focus on true global education where we seek out knowledge and experience from those who are different.

Curriculum and Instruction

Common Core curriculum includes the words “critical thinking” quite often, however, the standards the curriculum is asking the students to think critically about isn’t connected in any way to many or most of the students. For instance, the first required unit in language arts this school year for 8th grade English language arts is about writing a research paper. Excellent! Students need to understand how to research, organize and cite text prior to entering high school. Teachers in the 8th grade language arts department will meet for many hours to decide what will be researched and how. Would it not be more beneficial for the language arts teachers to work collaboratively with the science or social studies teachers to find out what the students will be studying during this same period of time in order to reinforce the learning in social studies or science and also in order for the teacher to get to know the class well enough to discover their interests within specific themes? Learning to write a random research paper is just that – random. Teachers should be given the required state standards to cover throughout the year and allowed to work collaboratively with other departments to develop units of study applicable to our own teaching style and to maximize understanding.

Additionally, teachers should be allowed to augment required curriculum. There should be a wealth of information to draw from, information not necessarily found in the required text books, but available for easy access on topics that empower marginalized students. Instead of the constant, negative interpretation of immigrants, African

Americans, and other marginalized populations’, there should also be a strong, positive example of immigrants, African Americans and marginalized “others” who contributed greatly to the building of this country. There should be numerous opportunities to engage in true critical thought about how and why various historical events occurred in this country and even, perhaps, why they are not mentioned in the texts. For example, students should feel proud to learn about Mexican Americans who first challenged the Supreme Court in the first “separate but equal” decision, Africans who originally brought the concept of vaccination to this country, and Native American, African American, and Inuit explorers who made important discoveries alongside their Caucasian coworkers. A bank of information filled with empowering victories of people who resemble the students when they look in the mirror would be a step toward their own pride and validation. A fiery class discussion about any of these topics would surely develop into excellent topics for research papers students would be anxious and motivated to find out more about while simultaneously strengthening the their own sense of worth and value.

Additionally, resources could be compiled on various grade levels for teachers to pick and choose and coordinate curriculum for their ESL students. There is no need for another scripted, stringent curriculum specifically for ESL students. If teachers have access to textbooks and resources on all reading levels, they can match up themes and expository texts to the required, appropriate reading level for their students fighting to catch up with their fellow students.

Give Us Role Models

Children in the margins need role models. Teachers and people in higher education who teach future teachers should work toward finding a way to recruit role models for marginalized students. The majority of school teachers today are still white, middle class women. There is an enormous shortage of fathers and father figures at home and in our schools. Incentives should be addressed to help recruit more male, teachers of color into our schools.

Another way students could benefit through role models is to rework the system of “honor societies” to honor and acknowledge the hard work and extracurricular activities of the marginalized students. This would give their peers someone to look up to as well. Many of our children’s parents both work more than one job and have no opportunity or financial means to spend hours and hours each week driving their children from one club, sport, or organization to another. These children, especially the immigrant children, are more often than not placed in adult roles where they run the household, cook and take care of younger siblings. Most translate for their parents as they look for work, for congregations at their places of worship, at doctor’s appointments and in some cases court settings. These children are doing the work that “honor societies” require, however, they are not recognized because the work the students do is not a child-oriented organization with certificates of completion. Why should a child who cooks breakfast and dinner for her family every day not get “credit” for it when a child from a privileged background receives accolades for working two days a week at a food pantry or soup kitchen for a semester? The privileged are not the only students

applying for college in the future and not the only applicants who need “extracurricular activities” listed on their application.

War on Poverty

Peter McLaren brings socioeconomic issues to the forefront of critical theory. He points out one of the greatest predictors of academic success relates directly to the financial status of the parents. Our educational system may profess to believe in equal opportunity regardless of color, race, and other socioeconomic indicators, the fact remains, that a student’s race and social class at birth “have a greater influence on social class later in life than do any other factors – including intelligence and merit” (McLaren, 2004, p, 175).

A recent study in Philadelphia found that exposure to crack cocaine in the womb is not as detrimental to a child’s health and IQ as being raised in poverty. According to the researcher, poverty is a more powerful influence on the outcome of inner-city children than gestational exposure to this highly-addictive drug. Jeff Canada’s highly publicized Harlem Children’s Zone schools in New York, educating first the pregnant parents prior to the birth of their child, has proven successful in meeting the problem squarely where the problem lies: not with teachers, not with the education system, but with the parents and their particular socioeconomic situation. Funding for parent education and research for models to replicate Canada’s idea of starting to educate pre-birth would perhaps be more successful than creating another cycle of expensive workbooks and one-size-fits-all curriculum for teachers and students to suffer through.

How we can eliminate, or at least alleviate poverty in this country is a question as old as the country itself. It is disturbing that state and federal government does not blink an eye at funding increasingly more prisons, each prisoner costing approximately twice the country's average amount paid per student, yet cuts education funding to the bare bones. It would seem if more money were spent on the front end of this problem of education, providing funds for day care and pre-schools, the government would be required to spend much less on the back end, prisons.

Teachers are front and center to be blamed for unacceptable education in this country. In response to the failing schools, low test scores, and loss of competitive ground with other first-world countries, teachers bear the brunt of the criticism. As government employees, we are held legislatively accountable for bringing test scores up. Since this didn't happen fast enough, No Child Left Behind was initiated along with mandatory testing. With testing came packaged curriculum and teaching to the test. Millions of dollars were spent on the tests themselves, test materials, test preparation, and test coordinators. When it appeared that students in 2014 would not all be "on grade level," teachers autonomy was yanked out from under them and mandated curriculum and "common" lessons were introduced. Again, hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on Common Core training, lessons, tests, computer programs, etc.

The problem is societal and until the government understands that the critical question is, who benefits?

We all would.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to observe and better understand the tension between current required methods of teaching and explore how teachers can, in spite of restrictions, teach for social justice. It is also my hope to discover ways to circumnavigate the oppression teachers bear from the inability of systems, administrators and legislators to take into account student worth beyond a test score.

My own observations and reflections will, I hope, illuminate the obstacles experienced daily in the struggle to promote social justice in the classroom. Most importantly, the purpose of this research is to give a scholarly account of real world issues in the classrooms that give hope to other teachers. As the legislative screws are tightened, along with budgets, there is hope and evidence to be found that teachers can teach for social justice. Teachers can form relationships with their students and present the required curriculum in a way that respects the prior knowledge and culture of each child.

I want to facilitate critical thinking in the classroom in spite of No Child Left Behind mandates and work toward giving hope to classroom teachers who realize this disconnect between learning facts and learning how to live in this world. In spite of the bureaucracy, I want to contribute to other struggling classroom teachers, support them, and continue to reinforce Freire's words:

The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves. (Horton and Freire, 1990, chapter 3)

Only by embracing critical pedagogy can educators in the United States continue to truly educate students. We must resist any way possible to avoid the mechanical, common, one-size-fits-all curriculum and instruction methods and remain artists, not automatons. Through this inquiry, I hope, at least, teachers holding true to their convictions no longer feel alone in the struggle.

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APPENDIX A

METHODOLOGY

My autoethnography made salient the importance of reflective practice in teaching – or the ability to identify and scrutinize the underlying assumptions on the way we teach. It demonstrated how intelligent reflection led me to view my practice as a teacher through a different set of lenses, transforming me into a learner (Brookfield, 1995, pp. xii-xiii).

Concern

The concerns addressed in Chapter one of this dissertation were the inability of current K-8 students to think and question in a critical fashion. Also a concern was the impossibility of teachers to be agents of change given the restrictions of current legislative mandates in the public school sector. The purpose of the research was to observe and better understand the tension between required curriculum and pedagogy and teaching for social justice. Additionally, the purpose of this research was to identify impediments educators must negotiate every day in classrooms across the country.

An inquiry was necessary to disclose not only the impediments preventing teachers from teaching for social justice, but to serve as a voice for the marginalized students as well as teachers who also have little or no voice. Observations and documentation of these concerns would assist the researcher toward an understanding of ways educators might circumvent obstacles, teach critically, and find their voice. A scholarly account of real world issues was necessary.

In order to accurately portray the strong emotion, struggle, frustration, and joy and, more importantly, evoke a similar response from the reader, the research would

require a type of autobiographical accounting. I, as researcher, would also be teacher and learner as I observed myself in this role. I would observe my practice, my students and their interactions, feedback from colleagues, and my own responses through self-reflection. This autobiographical method in Chapter III focused on the experiences of one teacher over a period of 10 years in three North Carolina elementary and middle schools.

Context

The data used in this research was recorded over a 10-year period of time beginning the spring of 2004. Three schools were included in the reflections, two elementary schools and one middle school. All three schools were located in Guilford County, North Carolina. The names of the schools were not submitted in order to protect the reputation of the teachers and administrators.

School A

The researcher taught as a long-term substitute in a third-grade class from February 2004 until June 2004, completing her K-6 teaching Praxis exam during this period. The researcher taught language arts, math, science, social studies, and health. Fairview Elementary School served grades kindergarten through fifth grade students. The race mix during the 2003-2004 school year was 69.7% African American, 7.2% American Indian, 8.1% Asian, 6.3% Hispanic, and 7.5% white.

With a total of 528 students, 95.1 % of the students received free or reduced lunch. The students ranged in ages from five to 11 years.

There were two administrators, principal and vice principal. The academic breakdown of teachers was approximately 3 exceptional children teachers, one technology teacher, one music teacher, one art teacher and two physical education teachers. Grades kindergarten through fourth grade each had four teachers. Fifth grade had three teachers. There were six assistant teachers.

Chronologically the first of three school locations included in the data, this school was located in the most urban setting, located within blocks of the downtown area. Chain-linked fence surrounded the play areas, all of which were either concrete or asphalt surfaces.

School B

The researcher taught full time for two years beginning fall 2004 and ending spring 2006. The experiences reflected upon in the autobiographical research occurred during the 2004-2005 school year in a fourth-grade class. The researcher taught language arts, social studies, science, math, and health. Lindley Elementary served kindergarten through fifth grade students and was designated as a school with additional facilities for hearing impaired students. The race mix during the 2004-2005 school year was 16.9% Hispanic, 4.3 % Asian, 43.7% African American, and 33.7% white. With a total of 350 students, 68.6% received free or reduced lunch. Students ranged in age from five to 11 years.

There was 1 administrator, a principal. The academic discipline breakdown of teachers was approximately 4 kindergarten teachers. Grades one through five each had 3 teachers. There was one physical education teacher, 1 art teacher, 1 media specialist and 2 music teachers. There were 9 exceptional children teachers, 7 hearing facilitators, and 12 assistant teachers.

This school was located in an older neighborhood near the downtown area. The school was a brick structure, built in 1920 and had recently been renovated, was situated on eight acres of open, wooded land.

School C

The researcher taught full time for a period of seven years, teaching grades six, seven, and eight. Subjects taught were English language arts and social studies or a combination of the two. Mendenhall Middle School serves grades six, seven, and eight. The race mix during the 2009-2010 school year, when most of the reflections were recorded, was American Indian .6%, Asian 7.2%, African American 42.8%, and white 44.8% with a total of 929 students, 40.8 receiving free or reduced lunch. The students ranged from 11 to 15 years of age.

The school had three administrators, 1 principal and 2 vice principals each responsible for a specific grade level in terms of disciplinary action and oversight of curriculum. The academic discipline breakdown was 8 sixth grade teachers, 10 seventh grade teachers, and 11 eighth grade teachers. Additionally, there was 1 ESL teacher (English as a second language), 9 exceptional children teachers, 2 fine arts teachers, 2

foreign language teachers, 1 guided studies teacher, 3 music teachers, 3 physical education teachers, and 3 workforce development teachers.

This school was located entirely within an upscale neighborhood situated on approximately 8 to 10 acres of wooded area. Additionally, there was a football, soccer and baseball field, a rarity at middle school locations.

Research Methodology

Autoethnography is used in a variety of disciplines typically including anthropology, sociology, and education (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography entails writing about oneself as a researcher-practitioner, but is not the same as autobiography in the literary sense. It is critical enquiry that is embedded in theory and practice (McIlveen, 2008). The first book-length reports, modeled after the writing of ethnologists and anthropologists, were Smith and Geoffrey's (1968) *The Complexities of an Urban Classroom*, and Jackson's (1968) *Life in Classrooms* (Erickson, 2011, p. 53). Autoethnography was a logical choice of methodology for the researcher. It would provide a sense of self and would be grounded in experience and observation.

Autoethnography, according to Marechal (2010), is a "form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing" (p.43). This type of qualitative research is highly personalized and allows the author/researcher to tell their stories and lived experiences. This method is a nontraditional form of inquiry and expression, "very unlike the theory-driven, hypothesis-testing research methods that are based on the positivist epistemology" (Elligson & Ellis, 2008).

Often criticized and challenged by quantitative researchers, both quantitative *and* qualitative researchers must agree that research is an extension of researchers' lives. Most social scientists have been taught to "guard against subjectivity (self-driven perspectives) and to separate self from research activities, it is an impossible task" (Mizzi, 2010, p. 2). Scholarship is "inextricably connected to self – personal interest, experience, and familiarity" (p.2). Researchers do not exist in a vacuum. We live connected to "social networks that include friends and relatives, partners and children, coworkers and students, and we work in universities and research facilities. Consequently, when we conduct and write research, we implicate others in our work" (Vidich & Bensmann, 1958).

Ellis & Bochner (2000) flatly claim there is not even any pretense of objectivity in autoethnography. "The researcher's own experience becomes the object of investigation, as she is fully committed to and immersed in the groups she studies" (p. 741). Autoethnography is a method that acknowledges and accommodates "subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011)

Scholars realize that different kinds of people possess different assumptions about the world – a variety of ways of:

...speaking, writing, valuing and believing – and that conventional ways of doing and thinking about research were narrow, limiting, and parochial. These differences can originate from race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, class, education, or religion. For the most part, those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a white, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upperclass, Christian, able-bodied perspective. Following these conventions, a researcher not only disregards other ways of knowing but

also implies that other ways necessarily are unsatisfactory and invalid. Autoethnography, on the other hand, expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research; this approach also helps us understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived, to be influence interpretations of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic. (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011)

The researcher's autoethnographic data in this research included journals, letters, and personal correspondence via email. Instead of a portrait of the "other," Hammersley asserts, the researcher (I) will construct a portrait of self. Additionally, unlike more traditional research, the analysis of data involves interpretation on the part of the researcher (Genzuk, 1999). The researcher used examples of critical theory and revealed opportunities to teach for social justice. Autoethnographic method provides an honest, realistic, authentic glimpse into the classroom and allows the reader a rare opportunity to "observe" the practice and methods of elementary and middle school teacher. Additionally, "good" autoethnography must be emotionally engaging, as well as "critically self-reflexive of one's sociopolitical interactivity" (Spry, 2001, p 706).

As a teacher and learner, autoethnography allowed the researcher to close the circle on her own personal praxis, bringing together learned theory, practice, and finally critical reflection. Careful documentation of experiences in the classroom – both as a teacher and a student – provided the raw data to analyze, conceptualize, theorize and critically reflect upon the efforts of a new teacher trying to teach critical literacy skills in a system diametrically opposed to such teaching philosophy and methods. Usually, the autoethnographer does not participate through these classroom experiences with the sole purposed of publishing (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989, Freeman, 2004), rather, "these

experiences are assembled using hindsight” (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989, Freeman, 2004).

Autoethnography provides insights into the lived struggles of students experienced in elementary and middle school classrooms today, something many students of higher education and those in power who vote on mandates and implement educational policy are unaware. By honestly assessing the researcher’s journey as an elementary and middle school educator, painful lessons were learned about race, socioeconomic divides, privilege and power might come to light and smooth the path for others entering the profession. Self-reflexive critique upon one’s positionality as researcher will hopefully inspire readers to “reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Goodall, 1998). It is the researcher’s hope that if the reader is inspired to reflect upon his or her own life experience, they will also be inspired to act upon their findings. Autoethnographers, according to Stacy Holman Jones (2005), view research and writing as socially just acts, “the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764).

The subject in this dissertation was the researcher, a 50-year-old mother of one with ten years of teaching experience. Aforementioned in Chapter I, the researcher had worked as a newspaper reporter, business manager, and other careers prior to teaching. Initially, teaching was chosen to better accommodate a young son and the responsibilities of single motherhood. The career change to education became a conduit for activism. Subjects taught by the researcher are language arts, social studies, math, science, and

health. The researcher's education includes a B.A. in horsemanship, a B.A. in print communications, and MED in curriculum and instruction.

She has kept a journal for most of her life, professionally and personally.

Reflective Process (Chapter III.)

As referred to earlier, the raw data for this inquiry was compiled over a ten-year period, spanning the career of a teacher facing an initial classroom of students prior to having teacher accreditation and licensing to a tenured educator struggling for autonomy and the opportunity to continue teaching in a way that best served her students.

Examining approximately a dozen journals and hundreds of pages of letters, emails, and memos was an act of love and courage. To critique the career of an anonymous professional would be difficult; to critique one's own body of work is excruciating. Because the data was recorded almost entirely in the heat of the moment, the opinions, emotions, frustration, and concern was completely at the surface, very real and very honest. To relive many of the journal entries was almost impossible. Suddenly understanding the potential impact the teacher may have had on any one of the individuals mentioned in these accounts is overwhelming and appropriate for questioning: was the right decision made? Was the right advice given? Did the researcher love too much and expect too little or was it the other way around? Could certain programs have been salvaged? Was the researcher too demanding of some and not enough of others?

Choosing specific narratives to extricate was also difficult. After sifting through an entire career, most of the information had to be placed by the wayside in order to keep

the research at a manageable and reasonable length. As the researcher studied the body of work, decisions regarding which material would be included became apparent as specific themes organically emerged. “Thematic analysis,” (Ellis, 2004, p. 196) was implemented whereby stories were treated as data to arrive at themes that “illuminate the content and hold within or across stories. The emphasis then is on the abstract analysis rather than the stories themselves” (p. 196). Themes regarding race, extraneous jobs and responsibilities of teachers, teachers as intellectuals, standardized testing, and affluence and privilege were finalized.

After the themes were established, the most salient examples were then applied. Framed in critical theory, a critique of the data within the set framework brought forth obvious issues and obstacles classroom teachers experience every day. The journaling and other reflective forms chosen for further critique were examined and interrogated to construct answers to questions presented in the research.

A temporal distance provided space between the researcher and the data facilitating a more objective evaluation. The researcher sought validity not only for the themes determined and evaluations, but in the way they were presented as autoethnography. Richardson’s (2000) criteria for “good autoethnography” proved a good measure for the researcher:

- How did the author come to write this text? How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text?
- Impact. Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action?
- Expresses a reality. Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? (p.15-16)

After satisfactorily meeting these criteria in the narrative, the findings were established.

Findings

The research revealed an increasing amount of pressure and difficulty within the public education system with one government program , Common Core, replacing another, No Child Left Behind. Also revealed was a political shift to historically traditional, conservative methods of education as seen in the most recent legislative actions in the state of North Carolina, cutting funding for education while demanding mechanized standards to be upheld. A lack of support for teachers and their lack of voice politically and professionally were also revealed.

Finally, the research revealed an unwavering hope among critical theorists and pedagogues who will remain true to their belief that the whole child, head and heart, must be nurtured and attended to, professionals with high expectations for their students. The researcher arrived at a greater understanding of how classroom teachers can, with great difficulty, manage to teach critically, teach for social justice, and continue to find ways to connect the work of education to larger social issues. Teachers can continue to teach the love of learning.