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COVERT CRITIQUE

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY “UNDER THE RADAR” IN A SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Through personal narrative, I describe my experiences as a technology teacher attempting to enact a critical pedagogy “under the radar” at a suburban middle-school. As part of my story, I offer vignettes that serve as windows into my classroom, detailing the successes and challenges my students and I faced in engaging in critical pedagogy at a school where critical education and investigation were not embraced. Drawing upon the work of Freire (1985; 2006), Giroux (1983; 1997), Apple (2004; 2005), McLaren (1993; 1998), McLaren and Kincheloe (2005), Kincheloe (2004, n.d.) and others, I attempted to develop a critical pedagogy with my students that purposefully set into disequilibrium our commonsensical assumptions of the world and each other, and to hopefully reveal certain political, social, and cultural contradictions in our lives (Freire, 1985). In this approach to teaching and learning, I sought to disrupt and challenge (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2005) the “official” school curriculum. Our pedagogy rejected the objectification of students as simple receivers of information and situated them and the teacher as consumers/producers of knowledge (Freire, 2006). This was made possible by introducing students to basic concepts of critical theory and co-developing with them a distinctive approach to learning that featured critical investigations of

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personal interests and dimensions of their lives both in and out of school. While reactions to our critical pedagogy were varied, during the course of these pedagogical and curricular implementations, many of my students developed a critical reading of the world evidenced in a greater understanding of social injustice and its susceptibility to change brought about by their critically informed action.

Vignette #1: Poop, Profits and 21st Century Skills

I was straightening my room before class when Laura, my department head, appeared in the doorway.

“Kevin, I’ve been asked to give you this DVD. Barry (the technology curriculum leader) thought it would be a good addition to your course.”

“From Poop to Profit\$?” I asked skeptically.

“Yeah. It’s a story of a dairy farmer who was losing money producing milk, so he changed direction and sold manure instead. Now he’s a millionaire. It’s a good story. It’s about entrepreneurialism.”

I became even more suspicious.

“I don’t think...” I started to reply, but Laura cut me off. “Just take it and work it into a lesson. The kids will like it—it’s about poop!” Laura laughed at her little joke just as the bell rang, but the look on my face told her I was still concerned.

I watched the video later that day during my prep-bell. The script, written by Acton Media, frequently mentioned “hard work,” stubbornness, and the farmer’s refusal to receive government subsidies as attributes that led to the farmer’s success. It also described market deregulation as a type of personal freedom and told viewers that irrespective of what decisions are made in a free market, the consumer “wins either way.” Finally, in summarizing the points of the film, the narrator happily declared “It’s called capitalism and it’s that simple” (Scionka, 2007). The ferocity of the neo-liberal discourse felt powerful and emboldened, and was executed with a religious zeal. I began to wonder if Laura had watched the movie, and if so, did she recognize the ideologically charged rhetoric of the narrative. Then I wondered if I taught my students how to critically analyze this video, could they scrutinize the film and identify elements that reveal the interests of its producers? In short, could they become active, critical consumers of curriculum rather than passive recipients? In order to answer these questions, I needed to set a strategy for introducing seventh grade students to the concepts of critical theory and pedagogy.*

* According to its website, the Acton Institute is a research institute concerned with “Integrating Judeo-Christian Truths with Free Market Principles” (www.acton.org/about, 2011).

TELLING MY STORY

My middle school was part of an enormous municipal complex that included an indoor pool with waterslides and a weight-training facility that rivaled some college campuses. It was located in a city that was once a sleepy farm community, but recent economic developments helped it to become one of the most sought-after areas outside of Cincinnati. The school district was large, serving over 10,000 students, with 1773 of those students located in the middle school building where I worked. The average median annual household income for this area was \$87,000 and, according to the district profile, the student body was identified as 80% White, 10% Asian, 4% African-American, 3% Latino, and 3% multiracial. Only 4% of the students received free or reduced lunch.

At the time, the district in which the school was situated was rated as the 5th best school district in Ohio, which was an important distinction for the district administration in terms of its political clout and ability to raise funds through levies*. Much of my school's success was purported to be a result of district-level curriculum management, where various “curriculum leaders” (district-level curriculum managers) were responsible for aligning the school curriculum to state and federal standards. The decisions of these curriculum leaders were reserved as inviolate, infallible, and free from scrutiny or critique. Ranking and performance were essential to the identity of the school, and I intuited that challenging this approach to education with my desire to have students investigate the various discourses embedded within the curriculum or question basic, “commonsense” assumptions about types of oppression, would only exacerbate the problem of dispelling the pedagogical paralysis of our school district.

My classes were arranged into seven, 50-minute periods a day, with approximately 25 students per class. The classroom was well stocked with large whiteboards, projectors and a computer for every student. My students were ages 11-13 and my classes were predominately White, with only 3 or 4 students of color in each class. Brand names such as Hollister, Abercrombie & Fitch, Victoria's Secret and Underarmor were prevalent. Students came to school with iPods, iPhones and other gadgets that were contraband in most school settings. However, here, teachers were encouraged to incorporate them into their curricula. In general, the students, like so many middle school kids, were energetic and willing to engage, but they weren't particularly curious. For example, during the introduction to class I mentioned it is important to ask questions, to be skeptical and curious about the world. “Abbey,” one of the more popular students, wrinkled her nose and said, “Why, I don't get it. The world is just... the world.” At this point, many

* Levies are tax contributions that support the day to day operations of the school. Approximately every two to four years, many school districts mount campaigns to garner support from voters to renew, and often expand, school levies.

of the students nodded their heads in agreement and I recognized the majority of these students demonstrated a particular naiveté about the world. They simply perceived the world as a limited-situation (Freire, 2006) that either didn't require change or was impervious to it. If a critical pedagogy was to survive in this environment, it had to be conducted in a way that did not directly challenge the supposed sanctity of the "official curriculum" or the power and position of those to whom its development was entrusted. Thus, any critique of the curriculum had to be conducted as a covert operation.

What follows is my interpretation of how my students and I came to understand our critical pedagogy. I say "our" because this is what worked for us—it arose from the knowledge, practices, and interactions we experienced in class. To illustrate the ways in which we attempted to enact a critical pedagogy, as well as the successes and shortcomings we experienced as we worked to create our own critical disposition for teaching and learning, I provide examples of the course we developed in narrative vignettes. By employing a narrative approach, I illustrate how my students and I collectively interrogated discourses embedded within the official school curricula. In telling my story, I draw upon narrative research and "personal practical knowledge" as a "particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions for the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation" (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 25, 1988). My hope is that this narrative account communicates a "critical excavation" (Alexander, p. 423, 2005) of my pedagogical experiences and provides a "window to the contradictory and shifting nature of hegemonic discourses, which we tend to take for granted as stable monolithic forces" (Chase, p. 659, 2005), particularly within the areas of education and schooling. The combination of classroom vignettes and summary discussions demonstrate how my students and I critically identified, investigated, and reflected upon the ways that social inequalities around race, class, gender and heteronormativity impact our lives, but are often buried under "common sense" ideologies like the "American Dream." What follows illustrates our successes in engaging in critical pedagogy, but it also reveals challenges, such as student resistance and parent pushback. Yet, in what was often an unwelcoming environment, critical pedagogy was possible and worthwhile, even if performed "behind closed doors."

Vignette #2: Collaborate, create, critique

My students and I sat in our seventh grade technology class discussing our options.

"Wait a minute... just what are you saying? We get to decide what we want to study and how we're gonna do it?" Andrew asked. Andrew was a stocky wrestler obsessed with 'getting a good grade.'

“Kind of,” I replied. “We need to set some guidelines. For instance, we have to follow the curriculum provided by the district and the state—but those can be...” I paused, searching for the words.

“More like guidelines than rules?” Tommy asked with a smile, and we all laughed at the joke.

“We’ve talked a lot about being critical and what that means, right?”

The students nodded their heads.

“Can someone summarize that for me?”

A few students raised their hands.

“Yes. Mohammad.”

“It means that you don’t take things for granted. You think about it. You ask questions. You look for evidence and think about what people are saying, why they are saying it and how they say it.”

“Good, and why. Why should we go through all of that trouble?”

“Because,” Mohammad continued, “things might not always be what they seem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, sometimes we might think things are the way they are, because we think that’s just how the world works. But then, when you think about it, when you ask questions, we might find something else. That there are reasons for things being the way they are.”

“And why is that important?”

“Because,” Tommy interjected, “if we understand why things are the way they are, and we don’t like it or think it’s fair, then we can change it.”

DEVELOPING A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

In speaking with my department head and curriculum leader (as demonstrated in Vignette #1), it became apparent to me that discussions of students determining what was worth knowing, how it was to be investigated, and how the learning outcomes were to be assessed were quietly regarded as counter-intuitive to the mission of the school, which stated:

Through the efforts of the school community, we honor our commitment to excellence by continually engaging students in relevant and challenging learning opportunities. Utilizing diversified instruction, we empower students to become lifelong learners who take ownership of and pride in their work.

Although the language of mission statement acknowledges student empowerment—when combined with a narrowly prescribed curriculum and an emphasis on test-results and state-rankings—words like excellence and empowerment existed as code for accountability and economic success, the ideological hallmarks of what the majority of the community and district administration regarded as “good education.” In short, educational considerations such as critical literacy and civic engagement were co-opted by social, political, economic and cultural interests at the district level that shaped the aims, goals and practices of schooling. In short, student empowerment was strictly defined through academic achievement, teacher recognition, scholarships and other awards—even at the middle school level. These highly sought after artifacts of schooling were understood as indicators for future economic success. This was the purpose of schooling here. If students could achieve economic success, then the assumption was everything else would fall into place. Thus, parents, students and other stakeholders became oriented to a specific understanding of a repurposed education, one that limited understandings of social justice, inclusion and, among other considerations, made “free-market ideology coterminous with democracy” (Giroux, H. & Giroux, S., 2008).

In seeking to disrupt this curricular discourse, I investigated varied, and often disparate, philosophical/ideological orientations to critical pedagogy. These differences highlight the interdisciplinary nature of critical pedagogy and its ability to be used as a helpful tool in transforming education from multiple perspectives and in multiple ways (Carr, 2009; Kincheloe, 2004). More important, they emphasize the need for students and teachers to identify their own orientation to, and understanding of, critical pedagogy (Breuing, 2011). I purposefully use the phrase “*a* critical pedagogy” in emphasizing that I did not attempt to authenticate or legitimize our efforts by seeking to identify a founding source or universal ideal. I was not looking to apply *the* critical pedagogy “formula” or “template.” Instead, I focused on the goals of critical theory and critical pedagogy in the hope that the means through which we attempted to achieve these goals could be designed and developed in consideration of our personal experiences and in respect to our specific learning environment.

For example, my students and I discussed Freire’s concept of the “banking model of education” (Freire, 2006), and how this contrasted with the existing curriculum. I felt the students and I were aligned to a discourse of schooling that placed me, the teacher, squarely at the center of the learning experience. I knew that in order for us to genuinely engage in a critical pedagogy, I must become unrooted as the singular knowledge-authority in the classroom. We talked about sharing power and authority (hooks, 1994; Shor, 1996), particularly in regard to what the students would study and how. For some students who were supremely concerned with grades and scores, this was a terrifying concept. For others, especially those completely disinterested in “good grades,” it was a liberating possibility.

Throughout the following week we collectively designed our guidelines. Rachel, a student who loved school, read the introduction to the class: “In this class, we will learn about critical thinking and critique. We will use technology and a critical perspective to try and better understand our world by conducting group research projects on a topic of our choice from the following categories: Culture, civics, economy, health and environment.” The students were required to brainstorm on a topic and then write a proposal for their study. Students’ findings would be presented in video and audio podcasts. The students and I decided I would grade their work using the school’s benchmarks for the seventh grade technology curriculum*. In addition, the students would informally evaluate each other’s claims, evidence and arguments included in their reports. They also decided to have a “question and answer” session after each presentation to discuss new ideas and alternative conclusions. Once the guidelines were set, the students organized themselves into groups and began brainstorming. When the proposals were due, I took them home to read over the weekend. I was surprised and encouraged by what I read. “Our audio podcast is a discussion about ‘gay rights.’ The reason we chose gay rights is because my brother is gay and he isn’t allowed to get married.” Another proposal read, “Our video podcast is a critique of boys’ behavior on Xbox Live. The reason why we chose this topic is because, as girls who play video games, we believe boys discriminate against girls online.” Another read, “Our video podcast is a critique of how Muslims are represented on TV. The reason why we chose this topic is because we have Muslim students in our class and they are nothing like what people see on TV.”

These thoughtful and, at this school, controversial topics were representative of the students’ everyday lives. Many students were curious about these ideas, but could not find the answers they sought because the topics were viewed as “off-limits” or outside the scope of the school curriculum. As I thought about what Monday might bring, I was both excited and nervous. I believed that what we were doing was the right approach to take, but I was unsure as to how it would take shape as we put our ideas into action. The following vignette illustrates how embedded the district norms were for many students, as well as how a critical discussion began to reveal unconsidered assumptions and consequences within those norms.

Vignette #3: Challenging Assumptions

Jake and Christian were inseparable. They each had short-cut blonde hair and braces,

* In addition to the Ohio state technology curriculum, our school adopted elements from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. This group is a national organization that “advocates for 21st century readiness for every student” as they “compete in a global economy that demands innovation” (www.p21.org/about-us).

and they worked together on everything we did in class. Today's discussion was no different.

"Wait," Jake said, obviously trying to make sense of what had just heard. "Thomas Edison didn't invent the lightbulb?"

"That's not what I said," I replied smiling, "I said he wasn't the only one working on the lightbulb. In fact, there were others who were doing a better job than Edison."

"Like who?" Stacey asked, genuinely interested.

"Well, like Lewis Latimer for example" I replied. "He was a successful African-American inventor and his lightbulb burned brighter and longer than Edison's at the time, but he's not in our book. Why do you guys think that is the case?"

Rachel raised her hand, "Maybe Edison had more money." A number of students started chatting, obviously agreeing with Rachel's response.

"Ok," I said, writing 'Money' on the board, "but that's only one possible answer—and it's an answer that asks another question, "do you know what the other question might be?"

The students looked around at each other not sure of the follow-up question.

"What about 'why did Edison have more money?'" came one response, or "how did he get that money?"

"Those are good questions," I responded, "and will lead us to more questions, but right now, can you think of any other reasons why Lewis Latimer isn't in our textbook?"

"Because he didn't succeed!" Jake replied. He and Christian seemed slightly frustrated that we weren't moving on to another topic.

"Well, he did have a better product at the time" I said.

"It's because he was black."

The class suddenly got very quiet. Tommy, the only African-American student in the room suddenly had the attention of the entire class. He wasn't angry. He seemed slightly bemused that the class wasn't grasping what was, to him, the obvious.

"But why would that make a difference?" I asked, and Tommy was the first to respond.

"Black people have done a lot. We talk about it in my family all the time. There were black doctors, black inventors, black writers. Everybody thinks black people were just slaves and singers or whatever, but we have done a lot, it just never gets talked about."

I was watching the students react to Tommy's input. Many nodded their head. It made sense to them. Others seemed genuinely surprised, as if they had never considered the possibility that their assumptions of African-Americans were somehow insufficient—that their knowledge of the history of African-Americans was incomplete.

“It’s racism” Tommy replied, shrugging his shoulders.

At this point, some of the students were getting uncomfortable. Jake and Christian had completely disengaged from the conversation and made no more contributions to the discussion. I had noticed in observing my students in class, the hallways, or at lunch, that they had very few discussions of race. I had asked other teachers if they had discussions of race in class, and they said they tried to “avoid those conversations if possible,” yet here I was with my students staring the subject straight in the face.

“Rachel,” I asked, “will you close the door please?”

CHALLENGING THE INSTITUTION

As schools serve as powerful institutions that produce and reproduce knowledge and culture in society (Apple, 2004; 2005), those who support critical pedagogy see schools as prime locations for the transformation of societal structures and their attendant discursive practices that place limitations on students’ perceptions of reality and obfuscate multiple mechanisms and forms of oppression (Kincheloe, n.d.; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2005). This is a key characteristic of critical pedagogy—the efforts associated with this approach to education are not focused in attacking and eliminating socially unjust circumstances from society, but rather, in transforming society as a whole. The goal is not an excision of unjust practices and worldviews, but the creation of a reality in which these practices and perspectives cannot exist (Freire, 2006; Giroux, 1983).

Advocates of critical pedagogy argue, among other positions, that people should “understand the nature of oppression in modern society” and how their “ascribed characteristics (e.g., race, class, gender) and their culture impact on that oppression” (Sleeter & Grant, 2003, p. 190). This understanding of multiple forms of oppression, and the varied components of social life which intersect it, is dependent upon the development of political literacy. Freire describes the importance of political literacy in terms of understanding the world as a transformable reality.

A political illiterate—regardless of whether she or he knows how to read and write—is one who... has a naive outlook on social reality, which for this one is a given, that is, social reality is a *fait accompli* rather than something that’s still in the making. (Freire, 1985, p. 103)

The term “oppression” is often vaguely referred to in educational discussions, and this has often been addressed in critiques of Freire’s work. However, it does exist in subtle and varied ways. Here, I refer to oppression in both broad and specific terms. In broad terms, I use it to describe situations in which students lose, or are refused, their positions as possessors of knowledge and those who are capable of thinking about and creating new ways of knowing, as well as utilizing those

dimensions of their humanity in perceiving and analyzing the circumstances of their lives. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2006) revealed the ease with which education can serve as a tool of this type of oppression through his explanation of the “banking model of education.” In this example, Freire differentiates between a Subject—“those who know and act”—and an Object —“those who are known and acted upon” (Freire, 2006, p. 36). He then makes apparent the role of the teacher, imbued with authoritarian power and knowledge, who deposits this knowledge into the passive, unquestioning minds of the students. Teaching then is “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 2006, p. 72). In this scenario, the teacher exists as the ultimate knowledge-authority and students are reduced to unthinking objects robbed of the opportunity to not only question and reflect upon the content they have received, but also of the circumstances in which they received it. Freire refuted this type of education by demanding that teachers and students embrace a critical approach to learning—a dialogical process of problematizing the reality of the lives of students and teachers, and posing questions that seek to unveil the social, cultural, economic, and political contradictions present in their lives (Freire, 1985; Lather, 1992).

Students are often underestimated in terms of the forms of oppression to which they are exposed, and my seventh grade students were no exception. In addition to having their subjectivity as knowing and thinking humans under constant attack from an authoritarian, commodified, and commercialized educational system (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Porfilio & Carr, 2010; Porfilio & Yu, 2006), many students often quietly withstand forms of oppression manifested through how factors such as their socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and race were interpreted, or even ignored, at school. In many cases, these facets of students’ lives come into direct conflict with discourses embedded within school curricula, and as a result, students’ identities were challenged, described as deficient or simply disregarded through an implicit approval of the continued marginalization of the students. For example, while the administration at my school was vocal in supporting diversity, efforts to celebrate and promote diversity were severely limited. Although many teachers attempted to overcome this deficiency, a large number seemed unaware of the problem and were reticent to address it. The concept of diversity was also restricted largely to discussions of race and ethnicity, with occasional discussions of gender, but sexual orientation was avoided. Student-based LGBT groups were vigorously opposed by a large portion of the community*, and the heteronormative health curriculum only discussed homo-

* In addition to our community possessing a large number of Tea-party sympathizers and COAST members, an organization that “exists to limit the rate of taxes and spending at the federal, state, and local level” (<http://coast-usa.blogspot.com>), it also exhibited a peculiar and vociferous brand of evangelical Christianity that actively campaigned against discussions of homosexuality in schools.

sexuality in reference to HIV/AIDS—framing it as a choice of risky behavior that could result in disease or death.

In this environment, students were not equipped with the tools necessary to deconstruct discourses used to render them invisible or deviant. In shaping our own approach to teaching and learning via a critical pedagogy specific to our identities, experiences, and mutual goals, we intended to investigate circumstances arising from our own lives and interactions with family, friends, and classmates (Gabel, 2002). For example, Kelsey was regarded by her fellow students as “one of the Emo* kids.” She was quiet and kind, but rarely participated in our class discussions. However, as the students brainstormed on the topics of their research projects, Kelsey argued for a research project on gay marriage. Through their group deliberations, and later in discussions with the entire class, Kelsey revealed that she had a gay brother. I was concerned how this might affect her already marginalized status with the other students, and we talked about her choice to bring that part of her personal life into the classroom. “I just felt like it needed to be said. Everywhere I go, in health class, church, wherever, all I hear is about how being gay is a choice, that it’s wrong, that it’s not ‘natural,’ and every time I hear those things I think about my brother. It makes him sound like a freak or a pervert or something, and he’s not. He’s just... gay”.

Kelsey’s decision to incorporate aspects of her personal life was a risk, but she was convinced that it was a necessary risk. I agreed. As her group worked on their project, I noticed many instances where students “reached out” in support of Kelsey and her brother. Her decision to make learning a personal endeavor created a bond between the students and gave purpose to their work. The results could have been calamitous. As an “Emo” student from one of the less-advantaged families in the district, Kelsey could have relegated herself to further marginalization and disdain, but to the credit of her and the members of her group, their willingness to engage in a critical pedagogy created an opportunity to learn from each other and see one another from a different perspective.

We also sought to understand how our basic assumptions regarding each other and our social lives contributed to our complicity in the reproduction of various forms of oppression (Sleeter & Grant, 2003; Stinson, et al, n.d.). For example, in talking with my students and listening to their conversations, I quickly learned that many of them relied on basic racial assumptions that were mobilized through their discussions with one another. I asked the students if we could talk about these assumptions. During our time together, we differentiated between racism, prejudice and discrimination. We talked about race as a social construction, and the institution of racism and the privilege it affords White Americans. In

* “Emo” is a genre of alternative/rock music that emphasizes expressive lyrics regarding love, loss and feelings of isolation and being misunderstood. My students stereotypically described “emo kids” as “kids who wear skinny jeans and Converse, and let their hair hang over their eyes.”

this discussion, students started to realize how these assumptions were constantly promoted in their day-to-day experiences. One example came from Emma, an outgoing and well-liked sports fanatic, “I have a friend on the softball team who’s black, and people say stuff to her like, ‘are you hoping to get a softball scholarship?’ but they never ask me that question. It’s like they assume that, because she’s black, she has to get a scholarship to go to college, but the truth is, her grades are as good as mine.”

This was an important moment for the class. Emma’s story resonated with other students who shared similar stories. A few days later, Abbey and Rachel and their friends visited my class during lunch, and I asked them about the experience. “I feel like we discovered a secret,” Rachel said. “An important one,” added Abbey. “Like, it was something that we should have known, but nobody told us.” Acknowledging various forms of oppression and our relationship to them provides us with the potential to reveal the contradictions in our lives that, when left unnoticed, serve to occlude the changeable reality of oppression. This concept relates directly to Freire’s concept of conscientization, where people learn to “perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1985, p. 67).

Vignette #4: Hard work and the American Dream

The credits for From Poop to Profit\$ began to scroll across the screen. The students were busily writing down their thoughts on their worksheets. Instead of a study guide where students were to identify vocabulary words like “free-market” and “capitalism,” I asked the students to try and identify facts from persuasive language. It was a lesson we had been involved in for some time, and I felt that the students were ready to analyze the narrative of the film.

“Ok class, what do you think is the main theme of the video?” A number of students raised their hands.

“Yes. Mohammad.”

“Innovation is important to success.”

“Good, and what was an example of innovation from the video? Markys?”

“The farmer started selling poop.” The class and I laughed. It was fun to say “poop” as part of the official curriculum.

We continued talking about the “official message” of the video, and when I felt that we had a good understanding of those concepts, I asked them about other messages that were included in the narrative.

“What else did the narrator say? What kinds of things were said that were difficult to prove or were not supported by evidence?”

Andrew raised his hand. "In America, if you work hard, you'll succeed."

"Very good." I responded. "Is it really that simple?"

"It was for that farmer" said, Jake. "He almost lost everything, but he didn't go on welfare or anything. He just worked harder, changed his product, and now he's a millionaire."

"Alright, does anyone else have a response?" I asked the class.

"I disagree," said Rachel, who uncharacteristically responded without raising her hand. "The farmer may have worked hard, but that doesn't mean that's all he had to do. There were other things that helped him."

"Like what?" Asked Christian.

Emma interjected. "The farmer was white and a man. It may be easier for him to get things because of that. People might be more willing to sell him cows, or hay, or give him a loan because he was white. Also, from our last group research project, we found out that historically, more men work in jobs like construction and farming than women, and that men typically get paid more and promoted more often than women. So there are two advantages right there."

"Plus," Tommy joined in, "the video said it was a family farm. So that means he inherited it from his dad."

"Yeah, but so? That's not wrong." Jake responded.

"No," Tommy replied, "but it means that he didn't have to buy the farm, the cows, or the equipment. That means that he would have more money to spend on something else."

The conversation continued for a while until I asked "What is the American dream? The video said people who work hard can achieve the 'American dream?'"

The students shrugged their shoulders, so I asked them to go to the Internet for a quick search. The students replied with "a house," "financial security," and a "comfortable living," and "freedom."

"What does it mean to 'work hard?'" The class fell quiet.

"I think it means you're committed," replied Jake. "You don't give up."

"I think it means that you do a good job," said Mohammad.

"It means that sometimes you have to 'pay your dues,'" said Andrew. "Sometimes you have to do something you don't like and hope that it will pay off."

"Do farmers work hard?" I asked. The students all nodded their heads.

"What about cashiers at Walmart. Do they work hard?"

“Pshh... no!” Replied Jake. “They just stand there. Besides, who shops at stupid Walmart anyway?” Most of the kids laugh, but the few not wearing brand names like Abercrombie & Fitch remain quiet.

“I think most of the cashiers are committed” replied Emma. “They go to work every day and stay for their entire shift. Most cashiers do a good job. They have to deal with a lot of people, sometimes a lot of people who aren’t very nice. They have to handle money and stuff, and that can be stressful, and I think that most of them—if they had a choice—would do something else, but the question is, if a person ‘works hard’ at Walmart, will they achieve the ‘American Dream?’”

EMBRACING & RESISTING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

In the discussion that followed, students began to interrogate and defend the reality of the “American Dream.” Some students were willing to consider a new perspective. “Maybe the whole ‘hard work’ and ‘American Dream’ thing doesn’t really exist—it’s just... talk” Rachel posited. Other students seemed less-inclined to question the representation of opportunity and equality that they had come to know. These students, many of whom had family serving in the armed forces, felt it was unpatriotic to challenge the “American Dream.” This was the nature of many of our conversations. The students were far from like-minded and many of our conversations never reached consensus, but they did provide us with opportunities to discuss and reflect upon new readings of the world (Freire, 1987).

Students’ reactions to this critical pedagogy varied as much as the students themselves. Some students embraced this approach to learning, others tentatively engaged in our work in class, not quite sure of what the results might be, and some simply resisted the idea. As the students gave presentations on their research projects, I could identify those who were taking a critical pedagogy to heart. Their projects exceeded our work in the classroom and spilled into their everyday lives. For example, the project investigating gender and online video gameplay led to an intimate classroom discussion. For many of the boys in class, listening to the girls candidly discuss their online play was an emotional experience, and they commented about how they had not considered the actual impact their online behavior was having in the “real world.”

When the students presented their project on gay marriage, they told the class how they had collected and analyzed opposing perspectives on the issue and attempted to separate claims founded on evidence from persuasive rhetoric in the hopes of revealing the political interests at play. They also interviewed friends and family members, both straight and gay, regarding their views. Their final presentation was a video of interviews they conducted and the findings of their analysis. They then went one step further:

“We realized that a lot of what was being said just didn’t make sense.” Abbey’s voice played over images her group had collected from the Internet. “So we decided that, as part of our project, we would create an awareness campaign at school to make sure people saw both sides of the story.”

The scene cuts to Abbey and her group discussing her idea with the principal.

“We met with the principal and showed her the posters we made. For example, one poster says, ‘Gay marriage is an attack on the American family.’ Then, at the bottom, we wrote some facts that showed that gay people have been in America for a long time, and that they have made important contributions to American society.”

The scene changes to display images of prominent gay Americans.

“In fact, we show that gay people have had more ‘attacks’ than the ‘American family.’ At the bottom of the poster it says, ‘What’s more likely—gay marriage will destroy the American family, or that acknowledging people’s civil right to marry who they love will strengthen America?’”

The next scene shows the students sitting on the lawn outside of the principal’s office. Their posters lay on the grass beside them.

Abbey’s voice continued, “Unfortunately, we weren’t allowed to post our signs on school grounds.”

After the video I asked Abbey’s group to tell us one important lesson they had learned from the project. Rachel was quick to respond.

“I learned that even when you try to do the right thing, people will try to stop you.”

“And why is that?”

“Probably because they don’t understand or they’re afraid that they’ll get into trouble.”

“And did you think that you were going to get into trouble?”

“Kind of,” she replied, “but that was ok?”

“Why was it ok?” I asked, and she smiled as she responded, “Because I think that means we were on the right track.”

For the project on racial discrimination, the students conducted interviews with fellow students and teachers regarding instances of discrimination they experienced at school. The students then transcribed the interviews and sought to iden-

tify recurring themes and significant episodes of racial discrimination. For their final project, the students created a video detailing the various accounts of racial discrimination they had learned about through their interviews. They read portions of their interviews as they displayed various images of the school, historical figures of the Civil Rights Movement, and icons of discrimination and abuse from the 19th century to the Civil Rights Era. The students complemented these ethnographic vignettes with information regarding the concept of race as a social construction and its real-world effects on the lives of their friends and families. The students then submitted the film to the principal and district diversity council in the hopes of demonstrating that racial discrimination still happens, even in a top-ranked public school in the suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio.

These are only a few examples of the work undertaken by students that I felt contributed to them seeing the world as a far more complicated reality, but a reality that was still susceptible to change. Many students went above and beyond the requirements of the class because they felt that what they were doing was important, and that their efforts might have larger consequences outside of their schoolwork. However, while those students embraced our attempt at a critical pedagogy, others simply resisted it. I knew that this would be a challenge for many, and so I needed to ensure that students who did not want, or did not understand how, to engage in a critical pedagogy could still pass the class. The grading criteria were aligned to the technology standards of the school and state curriculum. As a result, some of the students did only what was necessary to get a passing grade and avoided delving into deeper considerations of the topics at hand. Still other students were opposed to a change in how they understood school to operate. More important, they were opposed to adopting a critical perspective and resisted (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007) many of the topics that their group members wanted to research.

In the vignettes, Jake and Christian were representations of the students who resisted engaging in a critical reading of their world. These young men were not a problem in class. They behaved appropriately and completed the assignments, but they felt that our critical pedagogy directly challenged how they had come to know their world. Both of the boys were white, Christian, and middle class. During group deliberations on what topic was to be studied for their research projects, they would invariably suggest a topic centered on sports or video games. This wasn't a problem, but they didn't want to think critically about these topics. When students offered suggestions including gay rights, sexism, or racial discrimination, the boys would fall silent and their participation would wane.

After a while, the boys began to vocally challenge what we were doing in class. For example, during a discussion on racial and cultural stereotypes, the boys energetically defended how Muslims were being represented in news media. They scoffed at the idea that media outlets were involved in perpetuating discourses

espousing particular political ideologies, and that these discourses have real political ramifications.

“But they blew up the two towers!” Christian once yelled incredulously in class. “They’re all terrorists. You only see stuff on the news because they’re actually doing that stuff!”

I believe that prior to this class, many students would have agreed and those who didn’t would have remained silent. However, now that the students had engaged in a critical pedagogy, things changed.

“According to our research,” Andrew responded, “there are more than two billion Muslims in the world, but there are only approximately 12,000 members of Al-qaida. That means that the majority of them are not terrorists.”

The conversation continued, and each objection made by Christian and Jake was met with a counter from students who provided reasoned responses based on evidence from their research projects.

Overwhelmed, Jake responded. “You guys sound like a bunch of traitors.”

During the semester that I had these boys in class, it was obvious from our discussions that they were talking about our critical pedagogy at home and it was not well-received. “My dad says you’re a Commie,” Jake laughingly said to me one day. I laughed with him. It was important for me to stay positive with my students, to not reduce what we were trying to achieve in class to ideological confrontations. As the facilitator of our learning experiences, I had to respect the students’ knowledge and beliefs. I had to hope that through critical investigations they would perceive a clearer vision of the world and the power relations within it, and I also had to acknowledge that I was a learner as well. How could I honestly tell my students to be critical if I always assumed my position was correct and didn’t interrogate my own understandings as well?

These two boys were not the only students who resisted our critical pedagogy, but unlike other students who would vacillate from resistance to curiosity and sometimes a willingness to engage, Jake and Christian were absolute in their resolve to resist being, as their father would write in an email to the principal, “indoctrinated by their liberal teacher.” Eventually, the principal and I met multiple times regarding other phone calls and emails she received from parents who were concerned that I was promoting homosexuality, Islam, and a left-wing political agenda in the classroom, and that our discussions of race and discrimination would only “kick up dust” and cause more racial tension at the school.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

From my experiences as a teacher, I have come to believe that many students are relegated to a perpetual state of arrested development. In primary school, students are told they are preparing for middle school, in middle school, they are told they are preparing for high school. In high school, they are told they are preparing for college. When I asked my students what college prepares them for, they simply replied “a job.” Apart from adopting more lofty educational goals such as citizenship, ethics (Nikolakaki, 2011), and a “self-examined life” that is worth living (to paraphrase Socrates), where in this perpetual state of educational preparation do schools make explicit the immediate relevancy of students’ academic activities to their current life circumstances? Indeed, it seems a rare occurrence for many students to feel that their education will benefit them in their present, rather than future, lives. More important, it is even more of a rare occurrence for students to receive meaningful answers, or even a forum in which to ask questions as to why this is the case (Porfilio & Watz, 2008).

Our course was intended to help students think philosophically about the topics that directly affect them, to identify ideological interests that mystify their world, and to assist them in developing a “sense of civic commitment and a belief that they have the capacity to work with others to improve society” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2002). It was a curriculum that was meant to inform current and future political action. These are lofty goals that I feel serve a broader purpose than simply preparing students for college and a life-sentence of consumerism in the global economy. The current climate of public education can make the mainstreaming of these goals seem like an educational impossibility. However, this may not always be the case. Critical pedagogy is fueled by the hope that such practices will emerge from “under the radar” as a critical perspective is recognized as a necessary condition for learning, personal emancipation, and meaningful civic interaction. While the organization of public education may currently oppose this position, critical investigations can continue to survive “behind closed doors” as teachers and students engage each other through the incorporation of theory, practice, and the careful consideration of their social circumstances in the development of their own critical pedagogy.

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