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PUBLIC STORIES OF MATHEMATICS EDUCATORS*

My Intimacy with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

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In [cultural invasion], the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression.

– Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

During my undergraduate studies, there was a course that was required of all freshmen for completion of any degree program. The class was very large and met in an auditorium-styled seating lecture hall. Psychology 101 was considered one of the basics, and it was unavoidable. There was only one professor that taught the course during my first semester, a tenured member of the faculty, with a reputation for being really tough. On the first day of class, he began his lecture with a look at how the world "really" is. He pontificated about which race of people in the class were genetically inclined to do the best, and which ones would struggle, bordering failure. He pointed out who was more inclined to lead fruitful lives, and how many of us would not be at the university by the end of the semester. We heard of how some of our cultures forbade us to excel in certain aspects of life, and who those persons were that would ultimately be successful in whatever they endeavored, adding ever so often quotes and citations from literature that supported these notions. After grunts and sighs grew in the lecture hall, he proclaimed, "This is not my opinion, these are the facts."

* Lou Matthews, in his editorial in *JUME, 2*(1), argued that one of the greatest challenges for mathematics educators has been in defining a *people-centric* mathematics education, claiming that to do so would require that we begin to tell *our* stories in the face of perplexing times in urban education. The "Public Stories of Mathematics Educators" section of *JUME* is a newly created section to provide an intellectual space for K–16 urban mathematics teachers and teacher educators to tell their stories as they reflect on and transform their pedagogical philosophies and practices and, in turn, the *opportunities to learn* for the students they serve.

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> *He then began to read to the class from a storybook, an American childhood classic,* The Little Engine that Could. *Stressing to the class that the small engine was pressing on to deliver toys to the good little boys and girls, he then turned the text around to show the class that the children illustrated in reference were White, blonde-haired, and blue-eyed. Many of the minority students left at this point. Fear of leaving and being perceived as oppositional to his authority, I kept my seat and continued to listen attentively. In a setting of strangers, before any coursework commenced, I thought, "Why was I left out of the story?" Most important of all though, I thought, "I am definitely going to fail this class."*

The aforementioned and what follows is my own, personal story—my counter-story (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), so to speak. I went to every class, and studied especially hard. After the first exam, I made an appointment with the professor to discuss my grade. I was extremely nervous as I approached the closed door and knocked. His voice commanded that I enter, and I pushed open the door to find him outside on a small terrace, smoking a cigar. Before I uttered a word, he said, "Let me guess. You're here about your exam." My voice cracked, "Yes," as he motioned me to enter. He began with explaining how the first exam always identifies the students who are ill-prepared, and alluded to his first day of class lecture. I nodded in agreement, and then pulled the test from my black, mesh *JanSport* book bag to reveal a large, red "A" at the top. Looking stunned, he asked, "Well, what *are* you here for?" I replied, "I'm here to ask that you consider revising your lecture for the first day of class."

As I reflect on the lecture given that first day of class, having been on campus at the university for only a few days, I remember how I had never been in any space like that before. Prior to taking the Psychology course, I had excelled in an environment that deemed me "at-risk" and "underprivileged." I was a product of an urban, lower-classed, minority upbringing, being schooled in centers where there were poor resources, dilapidated conditions, and second-rate educational opportunities. I had ultimately succeeded to become a part of an "elite" class of students at a highly selective, prestigious, private university, and here I was, being reminded that it was a huge mistake.

As I sat there, at an institution of higher learning that statistically reported a total of less than 3% minority students (non-White), being taught in a massive lecture hall on the first day of class that my existence was doomed due to the very nature and forces of oppression, I felt defeated for the first time in my life. Not only having my utter existence compared to one's interpretation of a children's storybook but also having that professor ground his theory in supposed fact, reaffirming himself in the notion that certain minorities were fashioned to "run faster,

jump higher, and be physically stronger," I sat overcome, broken-spirited, and crushed under the fatal blow of oppression.

My psychology professor's "task …to 'fill' the students with the contents of his narration" (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 71) had succeeded, and he had undoubtedly "us[ed] science…as [an] unquestionably powerful instrument for [his] purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order through manipulation and representation" (p. 60). How dare he? This professor had only set his eyes upon this 300-plus class approximately 20 minutes before we were all the buttocks of a classic American children's story, ironically of which was supposed to confirm that hard work and optimism ends in success for all, reifying the American dream. Had I just been *punk'd*? Was this classroom experience some mind trip inflicted by a coy professor of psychology, whose ulterior motive was to simply challenge our thinking and charge us to reason more critically than what we absorbed on the surface? Had this professor been an advocate of Paulo Freire's "problem-posing education" (p. 79), where he would infuse a critical discourse of teaching methodology through intentionality in order to promote communication and embody consciousness in his pedagogy? As I want to believe that his teaching methods were purposefully driven by helping every student in his class to progress toward success, it was sadly not so.

Unfortunately, after his response in my private meeting with him regarding the first test, after he constantly questioned my upbringing and what my parents had done for a living, I quickly knew that he had not intended to "transform the world" (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 88), but only to inflict his oppressive nature and assert his authority. The result was a sordid dehumanization; something that made me, and the other minority students, feel less than deserving to be amongst the Others. What I now understand of my feelings in that moment is unsettling because what he had successfully done was manipulate the minds of the students in a way that made us question our own identities.

How often do educators, intentionally or unintentionally, socially manipulate students? If the students in my class did not band together, and "cut the umbilical cord of magic and myth which [bound us] to the world of oppression" (Freire, 1970/200, p. 175), we would surely all be persuaded by him and his views—that we were less than human. I agree with Freire that "no one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so" (p. 85); therefore, the audacity of my psychology professor to even remotely preclude our existence was adversarial to the educational opportunities that he was bound to keep as a professor of the university. Dehumanizing others in the name of academia is not only detrimental to a learner's confidence but also it may cause lasting, more serious developmental issues. An educator can either enhance or impede a learner's value of knowledge, and that is the most serious result of oppression.

Like Freire, my position in critical theory and the importance of having an awareness of teaching (mathematics) for social justice is posited in my lived experiences. It happens to occur in the space that Freire most eloquently demands we reside in if we want to "apprehend and comprehend the object of knowledge" (Macedo, 2000, p. 19). As I continue to develop my own personal theory on certain issues of inequity in my mathematics classroom, I am constantly reminded of how I was made to feel in that Psychology course. At the most critical time in my academic development, having been met with the task of transitioning not only academically into a foreign world but also being surrounded by others who looked and sounded different from me, I needed a sense of solidarity.

My professor had obviously enacted the role of the oppressor, and refused us the necessary dialogue to create an effective learning environment. In response to the mutters of disagreement, he continuously used his own authoritarian, oppressive pedagogy and proved that he indeed confused his "authority of knowledge with his…own professional authority, which …he [set] in opposition to the freedom of [his] students" (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 73). Like the others, I would not stand up and walk away from the deliberate, classicistic oppression.

My race, gender, or socioeconomic status would not perpetuate "that certain groups in any society are privileged over others, constituting an oppression that is most forceful when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable" (Crotty, 1998, p. 158). The apparent lack of cohesiveness was present in my classmates' shared cause, but I would not allow the professor to appropriate my freedom of creating dialogue with him about it. In the moment I stepped into his office, I constituted what Freire (1970/2000) has professed as the "dialogical character of education" (p. 93). He states, "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (pp. 92–93). When confronting my oppressor, I not only possessed the liberating feeling of having proved that his theory was wrong about me but also I had engaged him in the act of education as well! Even if he did not agree with my own personal stance, or suggested pedagogical practice for his course in the future, I am inclined to believe that in that instance, I provided a lasting and life-changing perspective for him.

I am immensely baffled by the fact that my past lived experience has been revealed to me, now more than 10 years later, as an act of emancipation. If I had read Freire's (1970/2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* back then, it would have all made perfect sense. I would have recognized that what the professor was saying to me and the class was utter close mindedness, probably a result of his own oppressive upbringing, and I could have been comforted by the proposition that

> if students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will

> never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing. (Macedo, 2000, p. 19)

In some ways, my not-knowing back then serves as my euphoric knowing today. Critical pedagogy and teaching (mathematics) for social justice has unveiled many things for me, but none more lasting than being able to "read the world" with my experiences. In a strange way, my education in the Psychology course has affected the way I have internalized the work of Freire (1970/2000) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I think it is because of how Freire conceptualizes the pedagogy of the oppressed:

> A pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not f*or*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade. (p. 48)

Freire's work is timeless, and I have been truly transformed through it. My teaching practice and philosophy of education continue to be transformed, and with a look at this stance on critical pedagogy and an awareness of teaching mathematics for social justice (see, e.g., Gutstein, 2006), my lived experience has made the text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* exceedingly intimate.

The curriculum that we use in our mathematics classrooms often categorizes the approach to the education of youth as a list of "*Best Practices*," where teachers are expected to follow the script in order to produce the highest quality, most efficient product: the autonomous, self-efficacious being. This type of curriculum model is problematic in that it alienates students that do not identify with the current models, and who are often ill-equipped to assimilate into the "normal," "mainstream" social constructs. Many of the individuals who are struggling with these issues are often students of color, or those who come from urban, minority environments. Venezuela (1999) refers to this curriculum approach to learning as subtractive schooling (as seen through my experience in the Psychology course) and iterates that these policies and practices are designed to divest certain students of their culture and language.

In lieu of this best-practice approach, a critical pedagogical perspective could be useful in breaking the cycle of the one-size-fit-all (Reyes, 1992) recipe for learning. Exercising unconventional teaching practices, as suggested by Freire (1970/2000), where the students enact life in the classroom that resembles their lived experiences could also encourage the oppressed to feel (and become) more empowered. "By encouraging [my students] to question, investigate, and interpret their experience of the world" (Sylvester, 1994, p. 311), my students and I, collectively, have begun to seriously explore pedagogical possibilities that might con-

tribute to transforming existing oppressive and dehumanizing structures within my mathematics classroom into liberating and humanizing structures.

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