

Cultural Workers and Struggles for Social Justice: Negotiating Transformative Democratic Spaces in Schools

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Teachers' positions in the classroom are uniquely complex. In a globalized world, educators working toward democratic praxis realize they cannot afford to replicate official knowledge (i.e., dominant ideologies), practice, and privilege in ways that legitimize inequalities and injustice (Apple, 2000). Regrettably, teacher educators are encountering harsh opposition when struggling to create democratic spaces in which students are encouraged to be reflective and critically literate participants. The educational institution remains one structure whose function continually serves to silence its participants to different ways of knowing and doing (Apple, 2000; Dlamini, 2002; Freire, 1998a, 1998b; Giroux, 1992). Teachers now, more than ever before, document the difficulties encountered when challenging unjust practices and ideals inside of a system predicated upon historical reproductions of hegemonic knowledge frameworks (e.g., Dlamini, 2002; Maher, 1999). Teachers who dialogue with students and encourage them to think critically about race, gender, class, sexuality and the like are viewed as "troublemakers" and are rebuked or worse, fired for insubordination. Students who question and critically attend to the world are viewed in much the same ways, with deviant labels affixed to their files and applied to their identities lived out in harsh school climates.

Fortunately, there are students and teachers collaboratively struggling to interrupt hegemonic ideological systems and creating meaningful democratic spaces in classrooms. But their voices and experiences, especially of preservice educators, are seldom heard. Teachers preparing to work in American schools are cognizant of the difficulties inherent in the act of teaching youth, but they encounter these realities far too late in their academic training. Although preservice teachers are in a unique

position to appreciate and learn about the rigors of democratic education prior to entry into the field, they remain at the periphery of understanding what it means for teachers to engage in "bringing the outside in" (Apple, 2000, p. xix).

Critical educators have worked to interrupt how teachers conceive of and practice democratic pedagogy within and outside the educational context. For theorists such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, and Elizabeth Moje, the struggles for democracy in education must take place within the global arena, as well as within the classroom. Preservice teachers leave their courses with basic educational theory and pedagogical methods, but they are not prepared for their life as cultural workers. For this reason, this article attends to important pedagogical issues that must be addressed within teacher education programs. I integrate my experiences as both a preservice special educator and graduate assistant in the *Education for Democracy Project* as they pertain to issues central to engaging critical, socially just, and transformative democratic spaces. My goal is twofold: first, to offer a critical discussion of the personal and political struggles encountered by cultural workers as they strive to create socially just democratic spaces in public schools, and, second, to advocate for the purposeful integration of critical literacy practices and democratic principles viewed as central to transformative democratic education.

Negotiating Struggles in Education

Teacher educators have before them awesome responsibilities and potentials for inciting social change in the classroom. Teachers and students are involved in relationships grounded in various power dynamics concerning political, personal, social, and cultural issues. For students to learn about

themselves and the world, with the hope that they will transmit and impact knowledge production within multiple social contexts, connections must be made between the school curriculum and students' lives. Unfortunately, a majority of teacher educators do not enter classrooms where they or the students readily recognize or believe that "their voices and participation are politically powerful resources that can be collectively generated in the interest of social justice, human rights, and economic democracy" (Darder, 2002, p. 106). Caring teachers foster the belief that change is possible and that their work, as well as the work of students, has political, social, and personal importance.

Teachers do more than impart knowledge onto student bodies. They are workers *within* and among diverse cultures. Teachers are cultural workers who have responsibilities to be competent, reflective, and critical educators for the development of students' abilities to learn to "read the word and the world" (Fischman, 1999, p. 557). Cultural workers have a critical awareness of the world and of themselves that is connected to decisions and action within a social context to create social justice (Apple, 2000; Darder, 2002). Teachers invested in cultural work engage students in multiple ways that encourage their development as critical thinkers who strive to understand their relationships to and within spaces of difference (e.g., gendered, classed, and raced) as they negotiate their own personal and social agendas. For Dlamini (2002), teaching involves "challenging belief systems that are part of everyday living"—"an awareness that challenging belief systems is synonymous with challenging ways of living, and challenging invested territories and practices" (p. 64).

To be a critical cultural worker, then, means that one must be willing to challenge, to be aware, to live with critical consciousness, and to be challenged by others (Dlamini, 2002). As I reach the end of my own formal education program and conclude my student teaching experiences, the culmination of my work has strengthened my dedication to bridging both theory and practice to create authentic spaces for students to learn about themselves, to engage

difference, and to challenge the world. My analysis is but one lens to better understand the multiple lived experiences teachers bring to the learning arena. It is imperative that critical reflections of teaching open us up to meaning-making in socially just ways so more teachers may speak to the obstacles to democratic educational practices.

I am always searching to understand how to negotiate Freire's provocation to create critical liberatory learning spaces within politically conservative institutions. My praxis is predicated on the critical inquiry of issues pertaining to democratic and socially just education, as well as multiple social and cultural influences on students who have been historically situated on the periphery of educational discourse. As a graduate assistant in the *Education for Democracy Project*, I have come to better understand my role as a cultural worker with my personal and professional experiences. I have been afforded the opportunities to interact with and learn from Kenyan, South African, and American educators invested in critical pedagogy and democratic processes. Participants in the project brought to their work the desire to bring to light critical and indigenous tools for use by educators who are dedicated to being fundamental cultural workers within democratic spaces. Emerging from the *Education for Democracy Project* are ideas and strategies for creating democratic classrooms, ideas informed by the very real struggles experienced by practicing educators.

Examining the concept of teachers as cultural workers responsible for invoking a critical democratic praxis with students and working for social justice is one that often counters traditional academic frameworks explored by preservice teachers. One of the foremost barriers to the creation of democratic spaces is the inherent conventional structure of education. Formal schooling can be a hostile environment for people who do not align themselves with conservative political agendas. Being able to claim democratic spaces in the American educational context is in danger. Apple (2000) has reinforced such assertions, arguing that the production, reproduction, and

dissemination of knowledge touted as the responsibility of the nation's education sector results in teachers being held responsible for the apparent failures of the current political and educational climate. For example, educators are currently expressing considerable struggles in relation to increased administrative regulation over curriculum, assessment, and teacher work. The preparation of youth for democratic citizenship has become even more challenging in that public schools remain underfunded, understaffed, overpopulated, and resistant to forms of critical pedagogy rooted in democracy and social justice that challenge the status quo.

Another issue of contention is positioning schools as primary sites for the idealized task of preparing students "for critical citizenship in a multicultural democracy" (Morrell, 2002, p. 76). Although the global landscape is socially, pedagogically, and culturally diverse, teachers who pursue the craft of creating diversified democratic spaces for students are confronted with the overwhelming tasks of negotiating rhetoric intended for delegitimizing counter-hegemonic pedagogies (Apple, 2000; Darder, 2002; Giroux, 1992; Morrell, 2002). Teachers are required to institute state and federal policies concerning standardized testing, to appropriate dominant discourses within the curriculum, and to employ quantifiable measures of academic achievement. Yet, all the while they are expected to assist students in becoming *critical* citizens. The very act of teaching has become so regimented and steeped in dominant ideologies that democratic goals are unobtainable because they are antithetical to present educational policies and practices. The social, political, and personal challenges facing preservice teachers, dedicated to being what Paulo Freire has called 'cultural workers,' are monumental. For these very reasons, understanding teachers as cultural workers is integral to opening-up conversations about how we may create democratic spaces grounded in socially just practices, open dialogue, and meaningful critical inquiry.

Antonia Darder (2002) wrote of Paulo Freire's lifelong work and his dedication to transforming educational contexts into socially just pedagogical spaces where there exists a

"coherently democratic authority" (Freire, 1998a, p. 87). Freire (1998a) spoke of the dialogical opportunities present in the *act* of teaching when one operates as a socially responsive cultural worker. Coherently democratic authority is founded on the freedom of teachers and students to challenge, doubt, and hope within the classroom (Freire, 1998). From this vantage point, the classroom is a site where genuine relationships between students and teachers are possible, and where authentic learning experiences foster the development of individuals who are capable of critically challenging dominant knowledge systems and making responsible choices. Such authority is possible within a democratic classroom, where teachers and students "are accorded authoritative voices and opportunities to find themselves" (Gale & Densmore, 2000, p. 148).

Teacher educators also must negotiate the classroom space as an environment for making possible democratic dialogue and action. Culturally responsive teachers are necessary to sustaining democratic practices and creating a space where difference is valued and made legitimate. Cultural workers become the purveyors of liberal democratic ideals such as freedom, choice, and autonomy, although the teacher is, in reality, constrained by the same hegemonic ideals as the students (Arnot & Dillabough, 1999). If pedagogy is, as Arnot and Dillabough (1999) described, "a form of deconstructive practice" (p. 177), then culturally significant educators must begin to take issues of gender, race, class, and democracy seriously—both within the classroom and within the larger social context. Socially just classrooms are environments where all issues and ideas must be contemplated with intent. Dlamini (2002) emphasized the importance of instructors who are not resistant to new ideas, but rather are responsive to and prepared for multiple discourses concerning contemporary pedagogical issues important to our students, such as capitalism, race and gender relations, sexuality education, critiques of popular culture, and alternative forms of meaning-making.

The lesson plans developed by Kenyan and South African teachers have highlighted

additional dilemmas teachers negotiate when presented with teaching practices. Through the production of progressive curricula informed by the intersections of indigenous knowledge and national academic frameworks, the interconnectedness of educational and sociocultural spheres was addressed. Recognizing the need to infuse indigenous culture and knowledge into curricula, participating educators made central issues pertinent to the lives of their students such as human and individual rights, building community, and gender equality. The course materials developed took essential community issues from the margins and placed them at the center of pedagogical discussions and curriculum design. The work of Kenyan and South African teachers throughout the *Education for Democracy Project* set forth the need for all teacher educators to (de)construct their praxis in favor of creating spaces for the infusion of globally significant issues.

Transformative potential for social justice exists within schools and transcends its borders as teachers and learners “understand themselves as political beings [who] can and will change the course of history” (Darder, 2002, p. 119). Democratic teaching requires that one be willing to engage in personal and political struggles for social justice on an everyday basis and within many different sociocultural spheres. Freire has maintained that an essential element of meaningful and deliberate teaching for social justice is the educator’s knowledge of her/himself as a cultural worker (Darder, 2002). Teachers have a responsibility to know themselves and to be socially responsible and self-critical (Apple, 2000; Freire, 1998a, 1998b; Giroux, 1992). In other words, one must engage in the process of understanding from where she/he comes, of where she/he stands politically, and where she/he intends to go in her/his life as a social, cultural, and political being. Unfortunately, preservice and inservice teachers approach this task too lightly. Consequently, when challenged to position her/himself, the teacher often responds with resistance, rather than appreciation for student expressions of critical inquiry (Dlamini, 2002).

Being able to position one’s self within and outside of schools is perhaps one of the greatest challenges for teachers. As Apple (2000) has noted, the “struggle for democracy in education does not only take place ‘out there’” (p. 12). Essentially, everything we do has implications for our praxis. In Giroux’s (1992) words, “how we undertake dialogue with others who speak from different histories, locations, and experiences” (p. 244) is undoubtedly a hallmark of a democratic space where teachers validate students’ lived experiences and believe in their power to be self-determined individuals. Giroux (1992) has urged educators to locate themselves and their visions inside of “the language of history and possibility” (p. 247). Cultural workers must “question public forms, address social injustices, and break the tyranny of the present” (Giroux, 1992, p. 248) through dialoguing with others in cultural spheres such as the classroom. To educate is to cultivate hope and dialogical freedom in a collective environment where students are agents of their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Apple, 2000; Darder, 2002; Giroux, 1992). Freire (1998a) promoted freedom and upheld the power of education as the organization of citizens who come together to incite radical change onto a social system. As a practice of freedom and social justice, education is the coming together of individuals to critically engage and question personal and political realities (Apple, 2000).

Critically Literate Learners in the Classroom

Educators are accountable for engaging *all* students in learning how to be active participants in a world where they have the power to “define themselves and give meaning to their world” (Darder, 2002, p. 119). Educators and researchers dedicated to creating a democratic praxis strive to keep critical literacy at the center of their work because of the multiple ways of knowing that are made possible (Apple, 2000; Giroux, 1992; Moje, 2000). Critical literacy, by definition, is a social, cultural, and political practice whereby one goes beyond traditional reading and writing practices to construct meaningful discourses, analyze texts,

participate in social change, and create personal conceptions of the self (Hagood, 2002; Landis, 2003; McGregor, 2000). One participates in critical literacy through literacy practices—the “values, beliefs, and actions that people bring to reading and writing” (Moje, 2000, p. 656)—which become integral tools for making meaning off of the page. Critically literate students and teachers in democratic spaces voice resistance and difference, challenge assumptions and inequalities, and make personal connections between the curriculum and their lives in the world. For this reason, critical literacy is important to a democratic praxis. Critical consciousness, difference, and voice in the classroom are tools to spur larger sociocultural changes for the creation of socially just contexts within which to live (Apple, 2000; Dlamini, 2002; Hagood, 2002; Moje, 2000; Morrell, 2002).

A significant component of a transformative democratic classroom is engaging in learning *with* students using the tools of critical literacy. Technologies, curricula, the individual classroom environments, and pedagogical practices are some of the very tools impacting the lived experiences of each and every learner. As Moje (2000) has made clear, “Who people are, and who they are allowed to be, is shaped in part by the ways they use literacy” (p. 653). Literacy must be understood beyond the literal sense of the word. According to Moje (2000) and Morrell (2002), youth, in and out of the classroom, learn how to use different forms of literacy, regardless of whether they are academic literacies (e.g., textbooks) or social literacies (e.g., popular culture). Students learn how to use academic and social tools for “shaping their social worlds, their thoughts, and their identities to claim space, construct an identity, and take a social position in their worlds” (Moje, 2000, p. 653). In other words, critically literate youth are able to interpret and live beyond the conventional written word to make “one’s self present for human agency, democratic community, and transformative social action” (Giroux, 1992, p. 245).

Teacher preparation programs are exceptionally important in determining the pedagogical tools employed in classrooms.

Being aware that our students implement critical literacy and subjectivity in their daily lives reinforces the notion that educators must go beyond thinking of students as only consumers of the world (Hagood, 2002). Students are also very active constructors of meaning and identity. Because of this, Hagood (2002) stressed the importance of carefully attending to how teachers learn to teach and respond to students within the classroom. Through interactions, teachers have positive and negative influence in the development of how students view the world. The close links between teacher preparation and teacher-centered practices highlights the negative repercussions associated with how often educators misunderstand students and identify them through categorizations (e.g., black, disabled, white, poor, rich). Such practices are dangerous to our praxis and to students’ development as public beings.

My experiences with two important components of democracy, namely *voice* and *difference*, have made it possible for me to take issue with the ways preservice teachers are encouraged during their student teaching rotations to assimilate to traditional ideals of who and what a teacher is to be. Very little time is given to explorations of student voice within teacher preparation programs in higher education and even less is afforded to the importance of indigenous knowledge. I find more preservice teachers engaging in limited, conservative discourse rather than confronting dominant paradigms (e.g., questioning gendered discourse, contesting standardized curricula). Although this is not surprising, it is disturbing to see so many young educators rely on teaching methods considered “safe”, appropriate, and conservative in the classroom. In other words, they are more likely to reproduce knowledge rather than contest teaching methods and explore multiple ways of knowing.

Teacher preparation programs continue to reinforce conservative methodologies and very often this includes assumptions pertaining to difference (e.g., race, class, gender). Professors and cooperating teachers in accordance with hegemonic ideologies of sameness are likely to

be found coaching student teachers in dress, lifestyles, and teaching styles. Rather than encourage difference and support alternative teaching strategies, professors and cooperating teachers consciously support the practices that serve to undermine democratic pedagogy. How are we supposed to be progressive educators if we continue to receive repressive teacher training that supports a system invested in maintaining inequality and traditional notions of who and what teachers are to be? As preservice teachers, if we do not question and contest the rhetoric, we are doomed to reproduce that which we are taught. Being critically literate cultural workers invested in principles of social justice requires us to take responsibility for our education, to support all forms of difference, to address inequalities and marginalization, and to be agents of equality in all spheres of life. It is imperative for teachers to be reflective and professional practitioners in the field, where the theoretical is infused into the *act* of teaching with dedication to a transformative praxis.

Through work in the *Education for Democracy Project*, I more fully understand how traditional curricula and school contexts hold little value for students who remain at the periphery of the materials. Because diverse students are left unrepresented and unable to personally identify with dominant knowledge frameworks, curriculum must contain indigenous knowledge and be made socially and politically relevant for connecting materials, students, and sociopolitical contexts (Semali, 1999). Taking a critical approach to educating students requires of cultural workers resilience and practices rooted in students' lived experiences. Thus, indigenous knowledge and social justice must intersect to inform a democratic education that involves students and teachers in "the mutual construction of meaningful knowledge and practice" (Semali, 1999, p. 110).

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