

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN URBAN SCHOOLING:  
A GUIDE FOR CLASSROOM PRAXIS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores concepts and theories in the tradition of critical pedagogy as they relate to teaching practices in contemporary American urban public schooling.

Objectives for critical pedagogies are discussed and applied to various aspects of teaching and education, including urban schools and school systems as problematical institutions; establishing a healthy classroom climate and learning community; creating a learning partnership with students; posing-problems for study; generating ideas through collaborative dialogue; guiding inquiry and critical thinking; providing ongoing and authentic assessment; and the imperatives of ethical values, ideology, and multiple perspectives in critical teaching praxis. Critical educational scholarship informs teaching and learning in schools to provide liberating opportunities to achieve critical and academic literacies. Theories of liberation, freedom, democracy, justice, power, oppression, transformation, community-building, humanization, authority, dialogue, agency, instructional ideology, social reproduction, standards, curriculum, culture, learning, thinking, questioning, literacy, assessment, and pedagogy are explored from critical perspectives and discussed as they are brought to bear on classroom teaching and learning in urban K-12 schools.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, urban teaching, praxis, inquiry, critical thinking, collaborative learning, liberatory education, urban education

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This work is dedicated to the children of today and tomorrow, and  
to the teachers who guide them.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This work is an attempt to apply some of the essential concepts and tenets in the tradition of *critical pedagogy* and critical educational theory to fundamental aspects of contemporary teaching practice in urban classrooms. Critical pedagogy is a mode of teaching that invests in human possibility. This approach to educational practice is called critical because it challenges institutional norms and traditional approaches to instruction and learning that serve to limit human potential. As a theoretical construct, critical educational scholarship provides teachers with tools to transform classroom learning and instruction into a liberating and invigorating experience for students, as they develop critical capacities to thrive socially and academically as self-determined learners and citizens in school and in the world.

Critical pedagogies have much in common with aspects of progressive schooling, and can be constructed and implemented with many progressive methodologies. John Dewey established foundational theories of democracy, educational experience, and processes of learning, and his work is referenced in the arguments in the following chapters to bridge *critical praxis*<sup>1</sup> with foundational progressive theories in American education. The chapters are organized as a set of considerations involved in classroom teaching that educators encounter in their professional work as "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 1985). Each chapter is a discussion of an aspect of classroom teaching that incorporates critical pedagogical objectives and practical considerations.

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<sup>1</sup> *Praxis* refers to actions and practices informed by theories and knowledge. Freire (1970) advanced the notion that critical thinking and reflection were prerequisites for liberated human praxis.

The arguments that follow are presented in light of the research and ideas of scholars, critical educators, and researchers who have illuminated the field. In addition, I also draw from my own experience as a public school teacher. For nearly twelve years, I have been teaching English literacy classes in high poverty middle and high schools in Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. Inspired by Freire's work and subsequent critical scholars, my own classroom praxis is an attempt to realize the potentials and possibilities within the critical tradition of teaching and thinking as they apply to my own experiences working with students in urban schools. The arguments and considerations presented here are the result of my own research, experiences, and observations teaching and studying urban education, and are therefore subjectively biased and based on my own interpretations. As approaches to teaching are largely determined by individual choices, advancing the effectiveness of particular practices can pose the problem of overlooking other strategies that achieve similar objectives. I hope that the reader will question and challenge the claims made here in order to determine their validity and applicability in their own classrooms or schools. In summary, this work is an attempt to illustrate and discuss;

- a) Orientation and objectives for critical pedagogies;
- b) Factors and conditions in urban schools that impinge on students' abilities to learn and achieve a quality education;
- c) Creating a classroom climate that engages students as human beings in collaboration and community;
- d) Pedagogy as a learning partnership in which participation, dialogue, communication, and understandings are mutually produced and respected;
- e) Problem-posing pedagogical strategies in contemporary urban teaching, and Presenting relevant and appropriate situations to students for studying;



- f) Strategies for generating ideas for conceptual and thematic discovery;
- g) Guiding inquiry and critical thinking;
- h) Organizing activities for students to demonstrate, communicate, and perform understandings for ongoing assessment; and
- i) Ethical values, ideologies, and multiple perspectives as critical imperatives to guide educational planning and pedagogical practices.

## **Origins**

Critical pedagogy was pioneered as a distinct mode of teaching by Paulo Freire during his work as a literacy educator in rural Brazil during the 1960's. He used his knowledge of critical theories as a catalyst to devise an educational program with his adult students that challenged the oppressive, undemocratic societal structure that had stymied their freedom. Literacy was a prerequisite for the right to vote, and the illiterate farmers he taught were suffering from abject material poverty and powerlessness wrought from political disenfranchisement. When a military coup took power, Freire was forced into exile, his highly successful literacy programs were discarded, and his theories banned. It was then that he wrote first, *Education as the Practice of Freedom* in 1968, the first treatise in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, and then *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1969. When the latter work was translated into English in 1970, critical praxis was widely embraced in North America.

These foundational works, and the ongoing body of critical educational scholarship that has been produced since that time, provide educators with theoretical and practical frameworks for critical pedagogies that challenge dominant social and ideological structures that are oppressive, exploitative, unjust, undemocratic, and that contribute to human suffering. By harnessing our sense of what is right and just and

challenging forces that impinge on people's freedom, learning takes on a new meaning. Instead of simply learning facts and skills that are applicable in abstract situations, in a critical approach students learn knowledge and skills that enable them to achieve multiple liberatory purposes, including the ability to make self-determined decisions and the capacity to improve the world in which they live.

Carter G. Woodson (1933) was critical of the traditional school paradigm which he labeled "mis-education," because of its blind insistence on instilling knowledge that was disconnected from the cultural context of African Americans and other groups, and functionally and ideologically detrimental to their interests. As American schooling had retained its monocultural curriculum and segregated character, traditionally-minded institutions balked at progressive thinking, negated cultural differences, and failed to grapple with the immediacies of living. Woodson thought that, "Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better" (p. 29). A motivation to improve life and to transform potentiality into realized possibilities continues to guide critical pedagogical work in classrooms today. Although, students in modern American schools live in a vastly different context than students in the 1930's or the 1960's. In light of the changes that have taken place over the last decades, the challenges people face today are prime concerns in critical pedagogies.

### **Objectives and Obstacles**

As a tradition of theory and educational practices, critical pedagogy is a distinct approach to teaching that is ethically and actively opposed to human oppression and dominating power structures, in all their forms, that limit people from determining their own actions and realizing their full potentials as human beings (Freire, 1970; Apple,

1979; Shor, 1980; Giroux, 1981; Greene, 1988; McLaren, 1998). For classroom teachers, this means examining our own classrooms, schools, and societies through *critical lenses*, in an effort to identify elements that are dehumanizing or oppressive, and to work to transform them. Dominant forces within the spectrum of power arrangements in society, at micro and macro levels, tilt scales of opportunity in favor of particular groups, at the expense of the well-being of those who are oppressed.

*Oppression* is both, "The exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner," and "The feeling of being heavily burdened, mentally or physically, by troubles, adverse conditions, anxiety, etc.," and comes from the Latin word for "pressing down" (Webster's, 1996). When specific groups of people are able to benefit disproportionately in school or in society, at the expense of the interests of a vast majority of people living in the same environment under more burdensome conditions, dominant interests exploit those who are denied the same opportunities to thrive.

When opportunities to grow are denied to children and families of oppressed groups, injustices and inequalities become the *veins* of oppression. Longer work days, lower salaries, lack of health care, intimidating college tuition rates, and the persistent threat of crime and unemployment - these are realities for Americans who struggle under the dominant economic forces that drive American capitalism and the social realities we see today. Inflation, discrimination, and inadequate public education are a few dominant factors that regulate people's ability to decide how to live in freedom. When forces outside of an individual's immediate control dictate how he or she lives, these factors dominate the circumstances that condition existence. In order to be free, one must have the ability to determine his own conditions, and for this reason, factors that dominate the

realm of possibilities need to be recognized as obstacles to freedom in order to be mitigated, transcended, and transformed.

Freire (1970) considered *domination* to be "the fundamental theme of our epoch," implying "its opposite, the theme of *liberation*, as the objective to be achieved" (p. 103). In every realm of reality - physical, social, personal and interpersonal, ideological, cultural, political, educational, institutional, or mundane - *power is an operative theme*. Power operates overtly and subtly and can be appropriated to work for people's benefit or for other reasons. Power in a society can best be understood as the means by which individuals or groups acquire the ends they seek. Whether power is exercised through the control of money, political authority, labor, property, ideology, information and media, or the regulation of possibilities for alternative choices, it can be used to dominate and exploit people to work for the benefit of others at the expense of their own welfare and freedom.

In social life, when power is appropriated through any of these factors, it becomes potential leverage for "pressing down" on subordinate classes, that select groups of people use to dominate social interactions and the power arrangements and dynamics in schools, workplaces, and other public and private spheres in society where power and authority go hand in hand. Critical pedagogy seeks to explore the ways power operates to advantage or disadvantage individuals and groups, both in schools and in society (Apple, 1979; Freire, 1970; Shor, 1980, 1992; Giroux, 1981, 1983, 1988a; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). When structural conditions limit the possibility for people to have self-determined lifestyles, such as educational and economic conditions that prevent groups of people from acquiring an

education, finding work, or supporting themselves and their families, it is logical and necessary for educators to challenge the causes and structural factors that create these conditions.

### **American Values and Critical Objectives**

Critiquing instances in which power is exercised as a form of domination by individuals, groups, and institutions, critical pedagogy adheres to and advances a set of inherent American values. *Democracy, freedom, and justice are prized possessions of American cultural heritage.* Each of the core values is instilled in children from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and memorized and recited in the Pledge of Allegiance. However, a critical survey of American history reveals that democracy, freedom, and justice are values that have been persistently violated and neglected by the denial of rights, opportunities, and freedoms to people who were and are not white, wealthy, male, and heterosexual.

This points to a second meaning of the word *critical*. The critical tradition of social research and teaching is *necessary* and *vital* to counteract forces at work that undermine these core American values. In order for this nation to align its deeds with the creeds proclaimed in the founding documents, light must be brought to bear on examples of democracy, freedom, and justice, as well as instances when these principles are ignored, obstructed, or appropriated by specialized interest groups at the detriment of the majority of citizens, or particular people of oppressed groups. Exposing contradictions that undermine civic and ethical values and working to transform the conditions that sustain them, is at the heart of critical pedagogy.

The increasing wealth gap and income inequality (Pew Research, 2011), corporate influence in government, bailouts for banks but not for struggling citizens, privatization of health care and education, environmental degradation and deregulation, these are all issues of social justice and democratic accountability. The fact that core human values were systematically contradicted in this country through law and public policy, and that movements were needed, initiated, and carried out to counteract them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, demonstrates the significance of the struggles of critically minded and determined citizens who have questioned the status quo and fought for social change.

When educators seek to realize democratic human values in their teaching practice, it should not be considered a radical posture. It is implicitly patriotic and humanistic to seek equal opportunity and justice for all citizens, to insist on a truly representative democracy and responsive democratic discourse that reflects the interests of the democratic citizenry, and to pursue liberation from factors that dominate everyday aspects of life and limit opportunities for developing viable alternatives. Critical pedagogies focus on schooling and classroom practices as a means to preserve and advance democratic and liberatory values that affect people most directly. Embracing *freedom, justice, and democracy* involves bringing attention to *oppression, injustice* and *exploitation* in order to find ways to transform material conditions so that human suffering can be alleviated (Freire, 1973, 1970; Shor, 1980, 1992; Giroux, 1981, 1983, 1988; McLaren, 1998; Fischman et al., 2005; Morrell, 2008).

Using a "language of critique" (Giroux 1988b) to deconstruct complex social, cultural, and political forces empowers students to learn skills and information that

inform the choices and actions that can direct how they live in an increasingly challenging world.

At issue here is the need to develop a form of citizenship in which public language takes as a referent for action the elimination of those ideological and material conditions that promote various forms of subjugation, segregation, brutality, and marginalization, often expressed through social forms embodying racial, class, and sexist interests. (1988a, p. 6)

Public schools and classrooms play multiple roles for children in a society. Besides occupying much of their waking time until they turn eighteen, schools function as institutions for human development, socialization, and education within the academic disciplines and "extra" curricula. But schools do not exist in isolation from society. Politics, culture, power relations, economics, and competing ideologies shape how schools function. What John Dewey (1938) called the "pattern of organization" (p. 18), when organizational norms and institutional practices coalesce in ways that ignore the realities of the students who attend the schools, they serve to support the societal interests of select groups at the expense of what is best for all children in attendance.

As teachers and citizens we need to be cognizant of how schools and schooling are structured in relation to the conditions our students face as they struggle to succeed in accomplishing their goals and determining their own future actions in the world. Critical pedagogy places students' needs, interests, and experiences front and center as an internal logic motivating the schooling process. This necessitates integrating programs and pedagogy with the real needs of children, as opposed to imposing practices that limit children and have not worked, while attempting to enforce student complicity.

### **Urban Realities and Teaching**

Urban educators in the nation's inner-city public schools teach students whose lives are shaped by distinctly different conditions from children who live in rural areas or

suburbanized communities. There are no monolithic descriptors to characterize urban schools, because they are as diverse as the communities and students they serve. However, social factors are magnified by population densities in urban areas, the reality of diverse peoples of different ethnic and cultural groups living in one region, albeit highly segregated, and the effects of socioeconomic impoverishment experienced disproportionately by African Americans and Latinos (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Social realities and cultural factors have a direct bearing on how schools operate. While some urban residents have the privilege of attending selective schools with high rates of success, many children in American cities attend schools that limit their potential in numerous ways (Kozol, 1991; Anyon, 1997, 2005).

Critical pedagogies are uniquely situated to address the needs of urban educators and students in city schools. As a social, cultural, and instructional process, critical teaching looks at society through students' perspectives, and purposefully seeks clarity about the nature of inequalities that diminish possibilities for their success. Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008) point to the importance of identifying injustices as factors that threaten to limit and debilitate urban youth:

Urban critical pedagogy sees the recognition of these conditions of inequality and the desire to overturn those conditions for oneself and for all suffering communities as the starting point and motivator for the urban educator and for the urban student ... making education a weapon to name, analyze, deconstruct, and act upon the unequal conditions in urban schools, urban communities, and other disenfranchised communities across the nation and the world. (p. 12)

Teachers who choose to work in urban schools must understand the realities of the settings in which they practice. Students come to school with a variety of strengths and abilities that are mitigated by forces at work in their immediate lives. Administrative and pedagogical strategies are needed to engage students in activities that facilitate



academic and social skills while recognizing and working to counteract the factors that limit successful outcomes. In one sense, schools need to "heal the wounds imposed by inequalities" in society (Henig et al., 2001, p. 3). This is a complex process and goes to the core of the purpose of education itself. Educators need to know the obstacles their students face and be compelled to bridge pedagogical practice with strategies to overcome challenges and difficulties. This involves teaching not only academic knowledge and skills, but also coping strategies and "emancipatory literacies" (Freire & Macedo, 1987), designed to enable students to recognize and capitalize on their own potentials and embrace possibilities as opportunities to be seized.

Seeking an effective mode of teaching is a necessary step for educators to guide urban learners towards achieving an education that inspires, challenges, and enables them to understand the world and to be successful in it. Using academic skills and knowledge in integration with societal and personal realities is a powerful motivator for urban teachers and students. Traditional approaches to classroom instruction tend to generalize knowledge and isolate learning from students' contexts, as they fail to inspire and engage many children who have become disenchanted with the quality and style of instruction in the inner and outer-city schools they attend. As young members of a society that devalues their chance at educational excellence, students who are disenfranchised from successful school settings must be given opportunities to experience success, and to evaluate how the intricacies of society work in order to see possibilities to set their own goals and realize their highest aspirations. This involves envisioning transformation as both a natural phenomenon in society and an objective that is worthy to pursue.

Henry Giroux (1988a) has argued that transforming society is inherently linked to educational practice.

It is important to link the purpose of schooling, teaching, and pedagogy to analysis and struggles that attempt to rectify those conditions that deprive children of food, clothing, housing, medical care, and education. Educators need to understand the ideological and material conditions that place children at risk both in our schools and in the wider community. Within this context, schools can be better understood as sites of struggle that address the suffering and struggles of the oppressed, and teaching can be linked directly with a political and moral discourse that takes as one of its first consideration the issue of how schools contribute to the oppression of youth and how such conditions can be changed. (pp. 212-213)

Classroom teaching is the one of the essential factors in the struggle to liberate students from the cycle of tribulations and strife so common in today's schools and society.

Critical educational scholarship addresses the many facets of schooling and teaching from a diversity of perspectives. There is no single objective for critical pedagogues, and any attempt to illustrate *a* critical framework, "necessarily incurs the risk of omissions and simplifications" (Keith, 1996, p. 46).

### **Education for Critical Consciousness**

As critical theories and practices in schools are invested in human possibility, which itself is infinitely diverse, perspectives of critical scholars, teachers, and students represent a common mode of thinking which Paulo Freire (1973) referred to as *conscientização*, translated in English as *critical consciousness*. This is a mode of thinking which inclines individuals to inquire about their world and to use information and intuition to inform judgments that guide actions and choices for living. As a frame of mind, critical consciousness enables people to develop awareness, to see beyond false notions and appearances, and to act self-determinedly to integrate our own knowledge, skills, and aspirations with a world we have a stake in creating.

Critically aware and reflective thinking can better equip people to determine the conditions of their own experience with the world and society by illuminating situations that are necessary to understand, elements that demand changes, and choices and possibilities for transformative actions. As reality can be seen as a constant process of change within and among interdependent elements, identifying factors in one's own life that can be controlled and utilized is a prime strategy for critically-conscious citizens. Critical consciousness empowers people to be active agents in the constant transformation of some of the interdependent circumstances that make up their reality.

Ira Shor (1992) explained:

Critical consciousness, or critical transitivity, allows people to make broad connections between individual experience and social issues, between single problems and the larger social system. The critically conscious individual connects personal and social domains when studying or acting on any problem or subject matter. In education, critically conscious teachers and students synthesize personal and social meanings with a specific theme, text, or issue. (pp. 127-128)

For young people, developing the capacity to make connections between one's own subjective experiences and the realities of the world outside the self requires experience, motivation, and practice. Creating opportunities for students to investigate the world as they develop their own thinking and strategies, is the function of critical teaching praxis. In educational institutions, children must learn skills and knowledge that enable them to succeed in school and in attaining their goals. Orienting pedagogical objectives with critical strategies to provide students with learning experiences that integrate their realities with curriculum and instruction is a necessary step for critical teachers in American cities and schools.

## CHAPTER 2

### URBAN SCHOOLS

Critical pedagogical praxis seeks to liberate students and teachers from the dehumanizing and debilitating cycle that has developed in many public schools in American cities. As critically conscious educators, we have to ask why vast numbers of young people in urban educational systems are failing to be educated. Public school teachers and their students are forced to confront odds that sometimes seem insurmountable. While there are selective examples of city schools where strong academic skills and sufficient content knowledge are learned and students are prepared to succeed in achieving their goals, the majority of students who attend schools in high poverty areas have failed to reach "basic" proficiency (Henig et al., 2001; Gardner & Miranda, 2001). Tragically, disproportionately low percentages of students in urban districts fail to graduate from high school, compared to suburban rates (NCES, 2010; EPERC, 2009).

This systemic failure is most devastating for African American and Latino/Chicano children who together are the majority population in large urban school districts; 79.8% in Philadelphia, 70.7% in New York, 84% in Los Angeles (NCES, 2010), and whose neighborhoods are largely segregated and disenfranchised (Orfield & Lee, 2005) from areas where educational quality has been proven to be a systemic priority in schools. SAT scores and standardized state test results reveal severe disparities in learning outcomes between students in demographic majority schools compared to those where African American and Latino children are a minority (Gardner & Miranda, 2001;

Lipman, 2004). The outcomes of these disparities are of grave concern for urban families and future generations.

### **Reproduction of Social Inequalities**

Michael Apple (1979) argued that the sparse success rates of poor urban youth are a form of "social reproduction" in which unequal outcomes are largely a result of dominating economic societal structures and the classist and racist ideologies that undergird social policies and institutional practices. As those with power and capital in society empower educational systems and particular schools to ensure that some groups of children are enabled to succeed, while unprivileged populations are set up for failure, critical scholars righteously question the status quo. Since schools function in one sense as a means of providing knowledge and skills for working in a competitive labor market, and credentials for social mobility (Labaree, 1997), *restricting the ability of particular groups of citizens to achieve proficiency in school allows for the successful reproduction of social inequalities that oppress families and children in poverty, while benefiting those who begin school with an advanced degree of privilege and political representation.* It is easier for particular sectors of the population to succeed when the competition has less resources and opportunities to prepare.

Ira Shor (2010) has said the system of education in the United States is really a variety of different *systems* depending on the class and color of the students, and the zip code in which they reside. Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008) argue that at a macro-social, structural, and functional level, "Urban schools are not broken; they are doing exactly what they are designed to do" (p. 1). In short, city schools "work" in an unjust society led by dominant interests, because they limit opportunities for urban kids

to succeed as viable participants in a competitive economy as adults. The stakes are high, but the dice are loaded. The inequalities that plague American schooling function as a social farce for millions of urban kids who are denied schools that work for them.

It is not difficult to see or to discover how the conditions in low-performing urban public schools make it nearly impossible for students to learn and to compete with peers from other locales. Schools in low-income neighborhoods, where most of the residents are African Americans and Latinos, have been historically underfunded, understaffed, under-supervised, and systematically allowed to fail through years of neglect (Urban Taskforce Report, 1970; Kozol, 1991; Anyon, 1997, 2005; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). The fact that these injustices have not been entirely rectified by changing funding formulas, allocating necessary resources, and scaling-up research-based programs, suggests that the status quo of inequality that has plagued our nation since its inception has been accepted by many in society, particularly by those who have political power to reconfigure schools and school systems. An honest survey of public school conditions in American cities needs to be one of the key foundations for a political and ideological platform grounded in social justice.

Stark inequalities between districts continue today, as urban schools are sites where classrooms are overcrowded and often out of control; resources such as books, libraries, science equipment, and learning technology are scarce; advanced courses, creative arts classes, extracurricular programs, athletics, and grounds and facilities are woefully lacking and reduced further by increasingly limited budgets; essential partnerships between educators, parents, administrators, and students have deteriorated instead of being cooperative and collaborative; and a small proportion of children are

able to disrupt genuine learning opportunities by harassing classmates and their teachers while defiantly refusing to do class work (Kozol, 1991; Anyon, 1997, 2005; Fine & Weis, 2003; Montero, 1989; Weiner, 1999). In addition, pressure from high-stakes standardized testing is high and the resulting disfigurement of content curricula to prepare for multiple-choice tests has further eroded the quality of public schooling for many kids (McNeil, 2000; Lipman, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Considering the paucity of quality programs and opportunities for genuine advancement, it is should not be surprising that nearly 50% of urban teenagers in the nation's 50 largest cities fail to graduate from high school in four years (Fine & Weis 2003; EPERC, 2009; NCES, 2010). When compared to a national high school graduation rate of 75.6% (NCES, 2010), a potentially troubling statistic by itself, something is clearly amiss. The rates of non-completion are staggering and suggest that the current state of American education demands radical changes.

The fact that millions of children are denied a quality education is a travesty of justice and a glaring statement of inequality that educators and citizens must contend with. This systemic disservice impinges on opportunities for America's young people to achieve viable livelihoods, and as such, presents a threat to their very survival and the collective prosperity of families, communities, and the nation as a whole. Students who do not graduate from high school are more likely to resort to lifestyles that result in sustained unemployment, drug addiction, incarceration, or other precarious fates (Advancement Project, Education Law Center PA, FairTest, The Forum for Education, Juvenile Law Center, & NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2011).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In a joint position paper composed by these organizations, the failed urban school model is referred to as the "school-to-prison pipeline".

## **Changing the System**

As educators, pragmatic thinkers, and compassionate citizens, we have to consider what would be possible if all urban schools were once and for all funded on equal levels with schools in surrounding regions; designed to meet the growing needs of disenfranchised families and children; staffed sufficiently to personalize instruction and target student needs; equipped with facilities and programs to provide more engaging activities; given curricular freedom and creative space to try innovative classes; if they were to be community magnets where parents were welcomed to participate and contribute their voices in decision-making processes or "local-school councils"; and if sufficient alternative schools with appropriate programs were established to work with and accommodate children who persistently violate rules and prevent classrooms from operating constructively.

When 3,500 students protested in Philadelphia in 1967 for changes to make their schools respond to their needs, many of them were beaten by a swarm of newly recruited police officers and 57 people were arrested (Whitehorne, 2002). Now, in the twenty-first century, changing the system is an idea that has nearly been stricken from of our collective consciousness through state-sponsored ideologies and one-sided "accountability" agendas that blame teachers and children for what are in fact systemic inadequacies that have been eroding the nation's social fabric for decades. Current federal and state policies demand student, teacher, and administrative accountability (McNeil, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2006), as public schools and the programs that are needed for them to function are dismantled and replaced with privatized, for-profit



companies and services under the guise of "emergency management" (Levin, 2001; Lipman, 2004).

This scenario is similar to what Naomi Klein (2007) described as *The Shock Doctrine*, a political strategy that enables state and corporate entities to collude to take control of public institutions and strip them of their needed funding and agency in times of emergency. Privatization and "free" market agendas in urban public school systems are perhaps the most definitive structural change that has occurred in city schooling since the changes following the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Whether or not privatized decentralization of city school districts will help students get better test scores is going to be studied and debated as long as privately managed schools operate alongside publicly run sites. But unless *all* schools are improved and renovated, comparisons that glorify privatization efforts cannot be justifiably made.<sup>3</sup>

Federal and state departments of education are expected to be responsible for creating situations in which schools, students, and teachers can work at their fullest potentials. However, to date these bodies have not been held accountable for sustaining equity in funding and resources allotment, or for ensuring that conditions are sufficient for learning in the neediest schools in urban districts. Instead, teachers, administrators, parents, and children are told that *they* are accountable to the state for achieving at high-levels, regardless of the conditions which they are forced to contend with.

Under the federal reform legislation, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), schools are punished, even shut down, for not reaching benchmarked improvements in scores on

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<sup>3</sup> However, a study in Philadelphia conducted by Research for Action found that after the state of Pennsylvania took over the School District of Philadelphia, troubled schools that were targeted for improvement by the district's own Office of Reconstructed Schools out-performed or matched those schools assigned to privately operated Emergency Management (EMO) schools in nearly every category. (Gill, Zimmer, Christman, & Blanc, 2007, pp. 33-41).

standardized math and reading tests. This initiative is highly problematic and injurious to educative efforts for many reasons. The initiative has not been funded adequately, and in order for states and city districts to meet its mandates, money that could be spent on instructional programs and creating more jobs for educators, is spent on standardized testing and data administration (Meier & Wood et. al, 2004). Additionally, the strict benchmarks for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) fail to measure or support research-based strategies for effective and responsive instructional and school-wide practices (Lipman, 2004; Darder, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Current educational legislation is a "set up" (Karp, 2004) for schools to fail and for students in urban districts to fall further behind (McNeil, 2000; Meier & Wood et al., 2004). If no child were to be "left behind" in school, the structural and programmatic changes that would be needed would go far beyond measures like opening smaller, cheaper buildings; drilling for literacy and numeracy assessments; or closing schools strictly in poverty-stricken communities.

This trend in conservative and increasingly in neo-liberal politics, that denigrates schools and whole populations of young people while simultaneously withholding necessary resources, has been a force throughout history, acting against the interests of poor and working-class citizens who have aspired to achieve a worthwhile education in public schools (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Anyon, 1997, 2005). Ira Shor's (1986) work, *Culture Wars*, documents in remarkable detail how a "conservative restoration" systematically undermined American public education from 1969 to 1984. The 1983 federal education report, *A Nation at Risk*, suggested (through a direct letter to children) that schoolchildren were not taking their education seriously enough and were therefore putting the nation in danger of being eclipsed economically by international competitors.

Despite the two decades that have passed since that report, the U.S. government has remained relatively conservative about spending money on public education.

In 1985, the Board of Inquiry Project released a counter-narrative to the Department of Education's findings entitled *Barriers to Excellence*. The crux of the findings was the sharp inequalities and lack of access to a quality education that existed for a majority of American schoolchildren, especially in urban districts.

The report is a thoroughgoing critique of that inequality, detailing discrimination and different treatment along lines of gender, race, class, and culture, together with a sad catalogue of barriers to "children at risk," including inflexible school structures, tracking, testing abuse, narrowness of curriculum and teaching practice, lack of support services, lack of early childcare programs, and lack of democratic governance. ... schools actively impede the educational progress of certain groups of students, children from poor families, children from minority and immigrant groups "who face discriminatory policies and practices." (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 156)

While millions of American children enjoy luxurious campuses, safe and supportive classrooms, resplendent resources, and athletic and extracurricular programs for all students who want to participate, urban schools are largely without the same accommodations. Shor (1986) called attention to the message our society sends to city kids; that they are the subordinate class and must endure unequal and disrespectful treatment in respect to their own opportunities for achieving a high quality education. "They learn that they are the dominated sector of the society. Squalor and indignity in school confirms the message of disempowerment" (p. 168). Internalizing this message can produce a sense of hopelessness for adolescents who are undergoing developmental and identity-forming processes, as they attempt to fulfill the roles they are asked to play in the world. As students see that their schools are not suitable for studying, teachers are more occupied with discipline than instruction, and every day precious opportunities for meaningful activities are lost, a "cycle of frustration" (Gardner & Miranda, 2001) unfolds, and motivation becomes tied to escaping rather than learning.

Disenchanted and demoralized, urban teenagers who give up on school make decisions that condemn them to academic failure, and put them at risk of being unprepared to meet the demands of working and living, which can result in protracted material poverty (if they manage to avoid fates that get them into worse trouble). Dropping out of school, giving up on class work, and directing aggression towards classmates and teachers are ways of acting-out the despair and frustration experienced by those on the inside of a system that oppresses hopes and thwarts abilities. Cornel West (1993) warned of the social and psychological dangers of a reified hopelessness, a phenomenon he referred to as *nihilism*: "The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a coldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others" (p. 23). This is no small concern for urban educators who work in partnership with kids whose lives are constantly challenged with factors that threaten to disempower them.

### **Building Critical Capacities in Schools and Classrooms**

Despite the odds, teachers in urban settings must find ways to locate and inspire hope and to create possibilities for students to succeed developmentally and scholastically. In, *City Schools and the American Dream*, Pedro Noguera (2003) reaffirmed the importance of schools in creating opportunities for young people. He emphasized identifying factors that limit a school's success and making it a mission to work towards countering their forces as a necessary step in turning kids on to school. In his research and work in public schools, Noguera found that "internal capacity" (p. 19)

needs to be developed within buildings and organizations to support students and teachers and to deal with external pressures effectively.

Involving parents, targeting students' needs directly with social and academic support, and establishing collaborative environments with adequate resources and incentives is part of this process. When the school works as a community, as opposed to a battle of factions, this makes teachers' and students' jobs more realizable. Michelle Fine and Lois Weis (2003) found in their research with teachers and kids that when schools and classrooms provide space and time for addressing inequalities, developmental needs, and cultural prerogatives, they have enormous power as sites of transformative thinking. This points to why an active critical pedagogy is an essential approach in urban schools. Critical teaching is a multidimensional set of practices that can inspire children and adolescents to believe in themselves and their power to initiate the changes they envision in their own lives, and to transform realities within their own communities.

The fact that urban youngsters are thoughtful, caring, intelligent, and capable people needs to be reflected in school practices. It is clear is that a significant number of children have little interest in complying with an educational system that ignores their need for responsive programming and engaging instruction and learning activities. When institutional norms of schooling threaten to dominate and dispirit the lives of resilient youth, dissatisfaction, resistance, and unproductive outcomes inevitably result. The failures that so many urban kids experience in school are a testament to the dehumanizing and oppressive conditions under which they are asked to learn, more so than any other factor.

Those who wish to teach in urban schools need to be compassionate, and establish trust and respect as the bases for responsive relationships and classroom interactions. These conditions engender and sustain genuine communication and authentic learning experiences (Haberman, 1991; Byrk, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 1996). As the failures in urban schools are increasingly being blamed on classroom teachers through "accountability" schemes like NCLB, it remains true that the teacher *can be* the most influential factor in the classroom. While it is difficult to achieve success without a supportive administration, counselors for students, school nurses, para-educators, an adequate provision of resources, and alternatives for students who have lost all hope of learning, urban teachers are forced to take on some of these responsibilities themselves as fiscal budgets restrict staffing assignments and other expenditures.

The realities of inopportunity create an imperative for teachers to seize opportunities that are available to listen to students' voices, to value and appreciate their human qualities, and to attempt to understand children's' perspectives on their own terms first. Only then can possibilities emerge for critical scholarship, transformative dialogues, and the undertaking of meaningful guided activities that inspire students to want to learn. A climate of collaboration between classmates and teachers begins with mutual respect and commitment to a process of participatory engagement. Urban classroom and schools have the potential to be liberating sites where students study and socialize together in a critical and constructive atmosphere.

## CHAPTER 3

### CLASSROOM CLIMATE

Before the first word is uttered at the beginning of the school year, much of what will constitute the climate of a classroom is predetermined by the ideas teachers have and the choices they make about the purposes of schooling. To an extent, ideological choices determine what is possible within the classroom environment, and they are not always arbitrary. Pedagogical choices are informed by the teacher's ideas and expectations for what the temporal, physical, and social space of the classroom space should be used for, and they enable and preclude possibilities for activities and interactions. For this reason, critical evaluation of the elements involved in creating a learning environment is essential.

Critical educators must ask fundamental questions about whom they will be teaching and how the classroom and curriculum need to be structured to best support students. Classrooms are social spaces in public institutions and the students we are charged to educate are diverse, unique, knowledgeable, and in possession of strengths, abilities, and aspirations, yet unknown to unfamiliar teachers, that are revealed through deliberative communication and interactive learning activities.

Developing a climate of community and cooperation is essential to fully engage children. In his essay, *The School and Society*, John Dewey (1899) explained, "the development of a spirit of social cooperation and community life" (p. 302) is paramount in establishing a healthy classroom climate;

It has a chance to affiliate itself with life, to become the child's habitat, where he learns through directed living, instead of being only a place to learn lessons having an abstract and remote reference to some possible living to be done in the future. It gets a chance to be a miniature community, an embryonic society. (pp. 302-303)

Dewey was responding to and critiquing the common school model, prevalent in the 19th century (typified by the one-room schoolhouse) in which the teacher stood at the front of the class while students worked on the "3 R's", reading, writing, and arithmetic. Clearly, he saw the classroom as more than just a place for rote drills and silent activity. What he recognized was that the education and life of a child involves developing as a human being, and that there was more to learning than what was in the books. Dewey's (1916) insistence on *humanizing* classroom interactions, by establishing a learning community that reflected democratic life, became one of the main pillars of progressive education, along with integrating schooling with realities and experiences outside of the classroom.

Freire had a different perspective than Dewey that was more critical and reflected the need for revolutionary change in his country. He observed how authoritative and oppressive conditions were challenging his adult students' chances to survive and live out their hopes and dreams. The first lines of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* read,

While the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind's central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern. Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality. (1970, p. 43)

What Freire saw as the central problem were concrete situations that prevented people from being healthy and having the opportunity to improve themselves and their living conditions.

Given the material circumstances in modern schools, "dehumanization" is a real concern for urban educators. The unpleasant realities that students contend with in their lives outside of school are compounded by factors that threaten to negate efforts to "do the right thing" in the classroom. Overcrowding, violence, abuse, punishment, ridicule, and expectations of failure all signify disrespectful treatment of young people in learning



settings. These factors dehumanize the classroom, debilitate healthy development, and deprive children of opportunities to function and progress unimpeded.

### ***Humans Being***

Recognizing the need for a classroom climate that is free of factors that destabilize development and diminish possibility, teachers have the power to create learning experiences that are liberating, inclusionary, and that provide hope for even the most dispirited child. Allowing children to express their human qualities in a supportive atmosphere supplements the other factors that affect development. Humor, abundant questions, civil disagreements, and passionate conversations are all part of the climate of a classroom that reflects how human beings really live. By creating a space of sanctuary, where students explore the issues that concern them most, and where they discover their own capabilities through trial and error, dialogue, critical thinking, and collaborative problem solving, teachers offer children a place to be themselves while they learn academic knowledge and skills.

The classroom climate needs to confirm the identities of students rather than deny them, and the inequities and challenges that students face cannot be treated as if they were invisible or unrelated to school life (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995a; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Students can tell what teachers think of them and they respond accordingly. Subjugating and alienating young people with various forms of authoritarianism limits potentials for interactions that facilitate the development of fundamentally human qualities.

A humanizing classroom is a space where students can speak and move freely, participate in discussions, and have opportunities to work in various social groupings on a

variety of learning tasks. Flexible arrangement of workspaces and organization of activities encourages collaboration, dialogue, and healthy social interactions (Giroux, 1981). Communication and collaborative problem-solving, mobility, and flexibility are innate lessons in differentiated working group situations. Giving students opportunities to work with alternating partners and groups also gives teachers opportunities to circulate around the classroom and assess students as they are in the process of working and thinking together or on individual tasks.

Personalization and humanization become inextricably tied to ongoing assessment that informs and facilitates further instruction and activities. Because a differentiated and democratic setting allows for multiple formats and styles of interpersonal interaction, teachers can become familiar with children, and understand and embrace their different qualities, strengths, and idiosyncrasies that reflect their profound diversity. Such considerations are all essential for establishing an atmosphere that is responsive to students' social and learning needs. When these social accommodations are in place, and adequate light, air circulation, and temperature regulation are maintained, it is possible for students to be comfortable and to thrive as they pursue their own goals and those that teachers have for them.

### **Deconstructing The Factory Model**

As a setting for socialization, classrooms that prohibit the requisite conditions for humanization simulate "the production line... where a manager issues instructions to the workers who follow along and repeat the same mechanized processes" (Shor, 1980 p. 103). Linda McNeil's (1983) research in urban schools led her to the conclusion that,

The primary purpose of free public education in an industrial society is to sort students for positions of labor and management, and to stratify their access to knowledge to make

them into docile and productive workers in an economy where they can expect to see the products of their labor appropriated into the profit structure of others. The structure of schooling into a credentializing system that supersedes instruction conforms to the individualized, alienating workplace with its external rewards. (p. 119)

McNeil observed the limited learning that was happening in the classes she observed, and recognized a clear stratification that was occurring as African American and Latino children in public schools were being positioned to assume subordinate positions in the economy. Her critique (1983, 2000) is based on the implementation of standardized curricula and management style pedagogies, more concerned with running schools like businesses do with clients, than with genuine teaching and learning through explorations of the humanities and sciences. While it is easy to assume that skills and knowledge learned in classrooms in 2012 will be useful in a future labor market when students graduate, limiting interactions to standardized drills is a capitulation to the undue expectations of a corporate-dominated economy that has been radically deindustrialized (Wilson, 1997)

While it is necessary to equip young people with skills and knowledge that will prepare them for any field they wish to pursue, the way these skills are taught matters. McNeil's point that "non-white" students are guided into subordinate positions is both a critique of inadequate schooling and a warning of the perils of a reproductive social and educational system that selectively predetermines who management and labor will be in the future. The cause for this scenario is in part, that the qualities of urban schools and classrooms do not provide learners with the types of experiences that enable them to do complex tasks or to work with others to solve problems. The qualities that sustain people's ability to thrive in the world and at work require more than obedience, complicity, and the blind performance of rote, individualized, mechanical tasks.

*Creativity, collaboration, self-determination, and critical thinking are essential for living and working democratically in public and private spheres.* A business or factory model that precludes these possibilities can only lead to the reproduction of failures for countless children, especially as both public and private sectors have reduced their payrolls and disemployed able workers.

David Labaree (1997) delineated factory-inspired and undifferentiated instructional practices as common molds in a "batch production" model designed for *social efficiency*, that was adopted in the common school era when industrialization was gaining steam. He saw this model as distinct from "craft production" that characterized responsive educational work tailored to the particular and individualized needs of students. His argument, that the "social efficiency" model succeeded in defining the "grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) as the prevailing modern educational paradigm, is supported by the fact that today, students continue to spend their entire school days in straight rows of desks, working individually on tasks that are often unrelated to their own lives, producing products to be graded by a teacher-inspector who may or may not suggest corrections, responding to the orders of the classroom boss who functions as a manager (in the shadow of the schoolmaster), with the hope of profiting from rewards and credentials that will translate to grades in the near term and economic success in the future. And this is the "positive" expression of the factory model. Social promotion and vast underachievement are also formidable byproducts of this process.

The worst expression of the factory metaphor can be extended to include sweatshop conditions in "third world" countries, if one considers how teachers in urban classrooms are often members of a different socioeconomic class than most of their

students, and can deny students the right to use the bathroom, prohibit talking, prevent questions or comments that challenge their authority, and negate and humiliate children for less than satisfactory work, often by “making an example” out of them. This may seem like a pessimistic outlook, but for kids in schools, the way teachers behave can be a decisive factor in determining how they participate, what they learn, and to what degree they develop their skills and abilities as they do their work.

The climate in a classroom is largely determined by the teacher's ideas and attitude about children and learning, and the actions that follow. Some children tolerate oppressive treatment because they are convinced that in the end, the credentials they receive will be worth it. Others quit. From students' perspectives, the climate created by the teacher is a catalyzing force in motivating or inhibiting the effort and energy required for students to work and learn at their fullest potentials. Mass production models that deny qualitative substance threaten to hinder genuine motivation and inhibit learning in contemporary urban schools.

Educators who operate classrooms like production lines, without critically evaluating the realities that students face, can benefit their students by reconsidering how the classroom can be a site that is collaborative, equitable, and inspiring, and how it can be structured to include all members to contribute their talents and efforts. Thwarting impulses to resort to traditional, but commonly ineffective practices, requires what Ira Shor (1992) termed a "desocializing" from industrial ideologies of instruction, and guiding learning activities that serve to achieve more than "abstract and remote" purposes. Critical pedagogies attempt to fulfill objectives that are set by learners themselves, and this often means rethinking schooling and its relation to real life.

## Freedom in Learning and Life

By providing students opportunities to develop their own humanity, while they work to solve relevant problems and acquire knowledge and skills in the various content areas, educators can direct a process in which students learn to integrate themselves with the complex dimensions of reality as it exists today. The climate of the classroom must simulate the real world and attend to the progressive changes that have taken place over the last 150 years. This includes exploring multiple cultural perspectives, utilizing technology and new sources of information, understanding and critiquing civic and economic systems, and recognizing pertinent elements of social reality that impact human experience every day in this country and abroad. Freire (1970) emphasized the distinction between *integrating* oneself with the world and *adapting* to it. This is the fundamental objective in critical pedagogy, for learners to become familiar with the complexities of their world in order to be able to make conscious decisions and undergo deliberate actions that effect the changes they would like to see:

*Integration* with one's context, as distinguished from *adaptation*, is a distinctively human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality. To the extent that man loses his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his decisions are no longer his own because they result from external prescriptions, he is no longer integrated. Rather, he has adapted. He has "adjusted." Unpliant men, with a revolutionary spirit, are often termed "maladjusted."

The integrated person is person as *Subject*. In contrast, the adaptive person is person as *object*... Adaptation is behavior symptomatic of his dehumanization. (Freire, 1973, p. 4)

The *Practice of Freedom* Freire described entails both understanding reality and making choices with the benefit of the information acquired from critical inquiries and an integrated attitude and awareness. The way teachers structure their classrooms is crucial in regard to whether students will learn practical skills and be able to make purposeful choices that enable them to both understand the processes unfolding in their lives and to

realize their dreams. Societal conditions that ultimately limit freedom to decide how to live pose problems for critical thought and activity, as they can delimit alternatives. A critical-liberatory perspective involves seeing oneself as the subject of thought and action and not simply an object of a predetermined or “prescribed” set of circumstances. Exercises in perspectival analysis are a part of a fundamental set of practices in critical educational theory and pedagogies.

The way a classroom operates to embrace the subjective experiences of its members can have a dramatic effect on how students learn to function throughout school and in society. Adapting to the supposed proclivities of a corporate-industrial paradigm, in which individual choice and creativity are foregone in lieu of a command and control structure, no room is available for people to decide for themselves how things should be. When given the opportunity, people can invent what is possible and transcend what was once thought to be impossible. The strictly corporatized and industrial education paradigm limits even itself by setting narrow limits on what Jerome Bruner (1962) described as the “enterprises of the mind.” As the demand for industrial labor has shrunk over years of deindustrialization and corporate outsourcing, teaching only basic or rote literacy and numeracy skills will not prepare students for working collaboratively across settings with different skills, or to create jobs or viable occupations for themselves in the future. Absent a "reindustrialization" of some kind, in which anyone who wanted to work could find a job (including those with strong educational backgrounds), students must learn multiple, interdisciplinary, and collaborative skills to enable them to take advantage of the resources they have and that they can locate. To transcend the uncertainties in the current economic and societal structures, young people must learn

individual skills and how to think and work together to achieve mutually beneficial purposes.

Teachers need to create classroom spaces that empower students to take hold of knowledge for their own benefit, by creating opportunities for young people to engage as complete human beings who establish objectives and work to achieve them. In his book *Empowering Education*, Ira Shor (1992) explained that society is made by people working together, and that educational goals must reflect the realities of society by "developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change" (p. 15). Precisely because society limits opportunities for urban youngsters to thrive and succeed in school and in the economy, urban educators are in the position to create learning environments that challenge and attempt to counteract the oppressive forces that put their students at risk.

Counteracting factors that marginalize, oppress, and exclude people requires creating space and activities for students to make self-determined choices that lead to rewarding outcomes. Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008) observed that when critical teachers establish classrooms where students want to succeed, that they are making a "double investment." As students are motivated to set expectations for themselves and to work to achieve them, they can develop a critical and transformative frame of thinking. When applied to their local environment, the habits of critical thinking students learn in class can apply to changing aspects of their own communities, instead of "seeing them as places to escape" (p. 7). These are critical objectives, in both senses of the word - asking what is important to know, and deciding what actions are necessary to take to shape one's reality.



Seeing ourselves as part of a larger, connected reality in which we play a role, and determining how to benefit both ourselves and our immediate surroundings, can be a motivating and empowering process. When teachers make conscious decisions to operate learning settings to integrate students' experiences and thinking with relevant topics, instructional support, engaging activities, and forms of knowledge that represent common goals, a climate of deliberate and rigorous study can form within a context of mutually humanizing and collaborative relationships, and through critical and dialogical problem-posing pedagogies.

## CHAPTER 4

### CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: BUILDING A LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

The word *pedagogy* is derived from the Greek word *paidagōgia*, the office and occupation of a child's tutor who provides direction and guides activities through which students learn knowledge, disciplinary skills, and habits of thinking and working that contribute to their full development as educated human beings. When professional educators critically evaluate the elements that constitute their work, by asking essential questions, it becomes clear that teaching is more than simply dictating and presenting information to students. Questions guide thinking, and when directed to one's own practice, inquiry presents opportunities for tailoring pedagogy to the particular students in the classroom, to individual preferences and teaching styles, and to the subjects of the disciplinary field one chooses to teach.

Critical inquiry facilitates innovate and responsive practices that enable both high standards of learning and students' aspirations to be incorporated in the process. *Who* are the students in the classroom? *What* kinds of experiences and information are relevant and important for them to have? *Where* do ideas about instructional practice and subject matter come from and where will learning lead? *Why* do certain practices and modes of communication motivate students to work at their full potential while others do not? *When* will the knowledge and skills students acquire be able to be put to use? *How* can a teacher conduct a learning setting so that the various needs of students are met in regard to achieving valuable academic, civic, and social skills that prepare them for the complexities of learning, working, and living in today's society?

In a critically reflective practice, questions like these stimulate purposeful and critical research and observations that enrich the ideas teachers have about their work, informing judgments that are embodied in praxis. There are infinite answers to questions about students, learning, and teaching, as there are infinite questions one can ask. Investment in persistent professional reflection is rewarded by the garnering of fresh perspectives and the achievement of differentiated outcomes which reflect the diversity of qualities, ideas, and abilities children possess, and that are inherent in human experience.

Critical teachers share an interest in realizing the possibilities that exist working with children who are constantly inventing themselves as they try to integrate their own subjective interests with a world that has been created by other people. This is challenging work. Critical teaching is an investment in human potential and as such, it cannot be a static formula that will suit every teacher, class of students, or subject, because every learning situation is different and no two people are exactly alike. However, critical teachers and educational scholars share common purposes. The research and literature addressing critical issues in teaching informs pedagogical practice in ways that enable students and teachers to thrive as unique communities of "empowered" learners (Shor, 1992).

Several foundational teaching strategies that characterize critical pedagogies are discussed in the following sections. Each strategy involves including students as active participants in collaboration with the teacher and fellow classmates, using a variety of relevant materials. The six strategies discussed here address students' affective, social

and communicative, cultural, associative, cognitive, creative, and developmental needs.

Respective to these considerations, critical teachers employ differentiated approaches to:

- Establish a learning partnership with students;
- Open dialogue, communication, and reciprocal modes of understanding;
- Pose problems to be investigated through collaborative study;
- Facilitate a process in which students generate and communicate ideas;
- Guide inquiry and critical thinking; and
- Organize activities for students to integrate, demonstrate, and communicate knowledge and skills in multiple and authentic modes for ongoing assessment.

Methods for critical teaching include; sharing authority and delegating responsibility for learning, communicating through dialogue, presenting relevant learning problems, guiding inquiry, facilitating activities for critical thinking, developing opportunities for students to demonstrate new knowledge and skills, and providing ongoing assessment. These are all fundamental techniques in a critical approach. Whereas critical analysis is often an endnote in educational activities, in a critical pedagogy, a reflective, contemplative, and analytical attitude of mind is always brought to bear on subjects encountered in the curriculum and through classroom discourse.

As students develop knowledge, skills, and critical judgment, they are able to relate more immediately to the world as the objective context in which their subjective experiences take place. Through a process of developing critical consciousness, the mind can be set upon uncovering information that reveals both truths about the world and one's subjective situation that enable an individual to act with the benefit of clarity and self-assumed choices. If a child is not able to relate to the subject or the teacher as part of his

or her world, the process can be alienating as affective and cognitive processes become disconnected from reality.

### **Establishing Relationships**

Teaching children begins with establishing trustful and respectful relationships. The quality of instruction and learning is largely determined by the types of interactions teachers and students share. It is not an exaggeration to say, *learning only takes place when students want to know more than they already do*. Curiosity can be stifled when the classroom discourse does not permit human interactions. Without curiosity the mind ceases to ask questions and is unprepared to acquire new information. In a sense, a question is actually a cognitive opening, a gateway through which further information is sought and acquired through interrogative and associative thinking. But on a psychosocial level, asking questions puts an individual in a position that can be perceived as "vulnerable," because it requires acknowledging to others that one might not know something. Because children and adolescents can be conscious of their self-images, students must be able to trust that their teacher will not ridicule or rebuke them, and that classmates will not either.

Mutual respect is crucial to establishing a collaborative learning partnership. Etymologically, "respect" originates from Latin, *specere* and literally means *to look - again*, implying that what one sees is worthy of attention and consideration (hooks 1994). Investigating students' thought processes and ideas is a method to open lines of communication and to build mutual respect. Teachers must learn what students know and want to know, and also respect their feelings. This makes it possible to respond by guiding instruction accordingly, creating what can be considered a *learning partnership*.

Developing caring and respectful relationships is an ethical practice that precedes the activities involved in teaching and learning. Describing the type of relationships necessary for learning, Freire (1998) explained:

The climate of respect that is born of just, serious, humble, and generous relationships, in which both the authority of the teacher and the freedom of the students are ethically grounded, is what converts pedagogical space into authentic educational experience. (p. 86)

Freedom is the foundational objective in Freire's work and liberatory theories. Here it refers to creative space that students and teachers have to be themselves and to work collaboratively by choice and willful effort, by *committing to a project of mutual learning and intellectual partnership* that benefits all who participate. McFadden and Munns (2002) argued that pedagogies *are* relationships that are "culturally produced" in classrooms, and that they determine the types of engagement students will undergo with material and subjects that teachers present to them.

The classroom must be a place students can identify with emotionally and affectively, in order to not alienate children. This is not just a "feel-good" sentiment. In *The Disciplined Mind*, developmental psychologist Howard Gardner (1999), who has pioneered theories of multiple intelligences and disciplined learning approaches, explained how emotional qualities are intrinsic to learning:

Students are more likely to learn, remember, and make subsequent use of those experiences with respect to which they [have] strong – and, one hopes, positive – emotional reactions. ... Any portrait of human nature that ignores motivation and emotion proves of limited use in facilitating human learning and pedagogy. ... Cognitivists have proposed various models of how emotions can structure, guide, and influence mental representations. All point to a simple truth: if one wants something to be attended to, mastered, and subsequently used, one must be sure to wrap it in a context that engages the emotions. Conversely, experiences devoid of emotional impact are likely to be weakly engaging and soon forgotten, leaving nary a mental representation behind. (p. 77)

When working with young people who are learning to live in the world, ignoring how emotions mediate relationships between knowledge and motivation can limit how well

students will engage with the subject and their classmates, as well as the teacher as the instructional leader. By integrating content material with students' affective experiences, acting as an instructional guide who is aware of and responsive to students as individual people with unique identities and a wide range of needs and abilities in the process of development, it is possible to create a climate that invokes intrinsic motivation for students to learn and progressively advance through school.

Developing motivating and inspiring relationships requires showing enthusiasm for student generated thinking, maintaining focus and concentration on subjects that are relevant, being interested in students' ideas and contributions, noticing when students are disinterested or confused and revamping practices to "scaffold" their needs, and demonstrating an attitude of curiosity and investigation into the possibilities that present themselves through collaborative study. Signals and gestures that indicate respect are important. Establishing eye contact and listening to students' voices with serious consideration and attention conveys an attitude of genuine interest and respect for what they have to say. Often students decry past experiences with teachers who never listened to them, interpreting their inattentiveness to a lack of caring.

Teachers have enormous power to bring attention to desirable behaviors by making a point to acknowledge and affirm actions that contribute to learning and extending respect. Praising students when they ask thoughtful questions and offer critical observations is a way to convey expectations without explicitly stating them. A simple statement like, "I'm happy that you are thinking about this so carefully," is an affirmation that the student matters and that his contributions are valuable in the classroom context. When students realize that the responsibility for thinking and participating is shared, and

not the sole propriety of the teacher, relationships can be authentic and reflect the best qualities students possess. Creativity, rigorous thinking, sincere effort to understand difficult subjects, purposeful question forming and inquiries, cooperative and compassionate capacities, and a self-determined pursuit of knowledge are all characteristics of learning partnerships grounded in mutual respect and critical objectives.

### **Participation**

Mutual participation is a primary goal for collaborative classrooms, and it can be achieved when students are motivated to take part in the learning process as co-contributors in practice. Ira Shor (1992) suggested that openness, humor, and concerned thinking about society and its debates are ways to invite students to participate, but that teachers must be prepared for conflicting opinions and make room for students to “negotiate their positions” (p.25), in order to maintain healthy and productive relationships. Providing constant opportunities for communication solidifies students’ roles as co-contributors who share responsibility for the quality of their experiences.

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey (1916) explained the importance of communication in progressive classrooms because, “It modifies the disposition of both the parties who partake in it. ... The ulterior significance of every mode of human association lies in the contribution which it makes to the improvement of the quality of experience” ( p. 9). Of course the quality of experience is a highly subjective idea, but communication that is caring, constructive, and collectively shared, helps students feel that they belong in the class and that they play a role in developing the aims and progress of each session. With respect to facilitating participatory experiences, humanizing relationships, and motivating students to communicate authentically while learning and



working with content and materials, critical pedagogy is founded in Freire's method (1970) of dialogue and *problem-posing education*, which emerged from his critique of the dominant mode of traditional teaching which he referred to as the *banking education*.

### **Communication and the Limits and Pitfalls of "Banking"**

Freire (1973) saw that true communication can only take place when a "horizontal relationship" exists between people "A with B", and that this signifies two parties in dialogue who both seek to understand one another. Contradictorily, when anti-dialogue is imposed, a "vertical relationship" develops, "<sup>A</sup> over B" and authentic communication is no longer possible because there is no reciprocation of understanding, perhaps the most important ingredient for learning to occur (pp. 45-46). Pedantic and authoritarian postures put the teacher in the position of talking down to young people. This degrades them and limits how well they value the substance of the messages being communicated. Affective flight is not an unusual response to dominating, one-way communication. Freire saw this as the fundamental contradiction in traditional forms of education. When teachers project ignorance onto students who they see as knowing little or nothing about their subject, the foundation of the teacher-student relationship is based on disrespect.

Freire described the *banking model* as pure "narration," in which information is told to students and they are supposed to act as "receptacles" to be filled with the "deposits" that they are expected to memorize (1973, pp. 71-72). Providing answers to questions that students have not yet considered negates them as human beings who know how to think and how to be curious, but are denied opportunities to be included in communication and inquiry. This style of teaching also fails to integrate students with

the subject matter because it alienates them from the context of knowledge, as subjects are presented as being outside of the domain of living.

By treating students as disempowered *objects* of a dehumanized classroom discourse and curriculum, relationships are dominated by the teacher (as narrator), subjects are imposed as external to students' actual lives, and the effects of an educational system that has historically marginalized urban children continue to bear down on kids. This social and instructional format makes humanizing and collaborative learning partnerships become impossible. Freire (1970) centered his theoretical critique around this basic contradiction. If educators are to create mutually humanizing and cooperative classrooms, students must be *Subjects* in dialogue with classmates and the teacher. Employing anti-dialogical techniques, especially in an economic and educational system that already limits people's opportunities, is a contradiction, and an act of further oppression embodied in *banking practices*:

Banking education maintains and even stimulates the contradiction through the following attitudes and practices, which mirror oppressive society as a whole:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen - meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the actions of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students.
- (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are the mere objects. (p. 73)

This set of circumstances characterizes a purely teacher-dominated pedagogical approach. Students are looked over, talked over, and worked over, in order to make way for teachers' choices and decisions as they appropriate their authority and take over every aspect of classroom activity.

It is hard to imagine that teachers who rely on the banking-model intend to oppress their students or to make them feel any less human. However, from a child's perspective, approaches that rely solely on lecturing, direct instruction, rote drilling, and more recently, test-preparation modules, leave little room for student input other than to respond to teacher initiated prompts and answer questions in books or on worksheets, or on quizzes and tests. Given the unsettling conditions that some urban students already face in their schools and daily surroundings, teacher-dominated approaches that deny students opportunities to act as human beings, further diminish their interest in learning or working at their full potential. This is especially true for students who are years behind in reading abilities, numeracy, and academic literacies, for whom being asked to work and operate as automated machines only produces more frustration. Ironically, direct instruction programs have been a consistent approach in many poor schools and districts where students demonstrate low-proficiencies (Haberman, 1991), despite putting "their learning habits to sleep" (Shor, 1992, p. 104). By holding struggling students accountable for achieving academic benchmarks within this alienating approach, schools ask young people to adapt to the demands of a system that actively negates their humanity and neglects their holistic learning needs.

Martin Haberman, who has conducted research in urban classrooms all across the country since the 1960's, discovered that the banking model is alive and well, and that it is so prevalent that it is generally accepted as "the basic urban style" of teaching. He termed this approach the *Pedagogy of Poverty* (1991), affirming the contradiction that students in historically neglected schools are treated pejoratively and blamed for their own failure, because they have failed to accommodate or adjust to a system that

precludes their chances of learning. He found that teachers who attempt to "get by" using this anti-dialogical approach, limited their role as educators to the following practices:

- giving information
- asking questions
- making assignments
- monitoring seatwork
- reviewing assignments
- giving tests
- reviewing tests
- assigning homework
- reviewing homework
- settling disputes
- punishing noncompliance
- marking papers
- giving grades
- keeping records
- conducting parent conferences
- attending staff meetings
- carrying out assorted school duties (p. 291)

The fact that these behaviors might seem like a sufficient set of instructional routines on the surface, reinforces the notion that they have largely been accepted as the "grammar" of twentieth-century teaching. Teachers who limit themselves to the roles identified here might believe that they are following a standard, unspoken, or professional protocol. But Dr. Haberman's extensive research revealed that alone, the basic teaching practices in this model are not effective, because students tend to lack necessary motivation and fail to achieve even basic skills and content knowledge. The interventional function of critical theories is evident here, as traditional ideas are melded with modern perspectives in critical teaching praxis. Schools which struggle with whole populations of kids scoring below-basic on math and reading tests (Henig et al., 2001), are the same sites where teachers are found to rely on the limiting yet seductive routines in the pedagogy of poverty.

Mundane and listless routines limit what is possible to achieve, as teachers treat students as learning objects or machines - a human calculator, talking map, typewriter, voice recorder with playback, or a programmable computational database with predetermined algorithms and periodic updates. By not attending to the critical factors that motivate children to participate cognitively and emotionally, limiting classroom

activities to these practices dispirits children by isolating them from crucial interactions that stimulate curiosity, motivation and authentic learning.

In fact, the style of interaction in the impoverished approach Haberman described, *limits* what teachers can do. Whereas, "teachers who begin their careers intending to be helpers, models, guides, stimulators, and caring sources of encouragement transform themselves into directive authoritarians in order to function in urban schools" (1991, p. 291). Subsequently, insisting that students adapt to a formalized or debased style of interaction, much of the energy teachers expend is focused on forcing compliance and discipline, as students resist efforts that threaten to undermine their humanity and capabilities to reason and communicate in partnership. Despite resistance, many teachers persist in advancing anti-dialogic methods because they see no other option. As a result, students are blamed for their own failure, and the assumptions and judgments unsuccessful teachers use as ideological scaffolding enable them to continue working ineffectually and unproductively (Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Noguera, 2003).

### **Resistance and Authority**

Resistance to dehumanization is a natural response and signifies young people exercising self-determined choices and *their authority* to preserve their dignity and freedom. In dysfunctional classroom learning climates, students regularly choose to ignore teachers' directions rather than submit to what they perceive to be disrespect or maltreatment. Henry Giroux (1983) described student resistance in this regard as evidence of individual, cultural, and collective agency at work, representing young people's "indignation" and freedom to decide how to make their circumstances work for them:

Resistance in this case redefines the causes and meaning of oppositional behavior by arguing that it has little to do with the logic of deviance, individual pathology, learned helplessness (and, of course, genetic explanations), and a great deal to do, though not exhaustively, with the logic of moral and political indignation. (p. 107)

In this light, student resistance is an expression of young people's democratic and political voice. If teachers ignore youth culture and voices, it is often at their own professional peril. Caustic classroom climates fueled by negatively charged indignation, expressed through vocal and active resistance, are not constructive for the mutual benefit of any member of a learning group. Acrimony and its accompanying stresses present limits for what students are able to accomplish, as they must affectively filter the effects of negatively expressed aggression and battles for authority that play out between teachers and students. When students argue and fight amongst themselves, internecine strife is a form of "horizontal violence" (Freire, 1970, p. 62), in that the energy that is exerted is not forwardly directed, instead it consumes friends, company, and ambition. Critical interventions to reduce student resistance are only possible when children are respected and treated as capable and intelligent human beings, and given opportunities to participate and contribute as such, in meaningful dialogue and collaborative activities.

Channeling youthful energy and righteous indignation into study and practice requires a commitment to the positive expression of "counter-hegemonic" practices inherent in critical pedagogies (Giroux, 1981; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993; McLaren, 1998). By establishing a learning partnership that identifies common goals and mutual recognition of human interests, in an effort to work against the factors that oppress young people, teachers can join students in their struggle to resist the dominant forces in their lives in positive ways that enable their unlimited potentials to be transformed into realities.

## Management and Control

Critical educators understand the limits that the traditional authoritarian paradigm creates in a classroom. Whereas involving students as active members and contributors to dialogue and learning is essential in critical pedagogies, there is a preponderance of "management and control" ideologies at work in schools and teacher preparation programs (Apple, 1979; McNeil, 1983; Giroux, 1985, 1988b; McLaren, 1998; Morrell, 2008; Shor, 1992). In this quasi-corporate paradigm, information and knowledge are managed by the teacher through the curriculum and lesson plans, and an attempt is made to control student behaviors in order for them to acquire the knowledge that is selected.

This arrangement is intrinsic to "classroom management" strategies that define desirable behavior without addressing instructional content or style, and "accountability" schemes that prepackage curricula and assess students through benchmark testing to see how much they picked up. Henry Giroux (1985) decried the failure of this approach for only focusing on preselected facts and knowledge and ignoring student experience:

Its distinctiveness, its disjunctions, its lived quality are all dissolved in an ideology of control and management. A major problem with this perspective is that the celebration of such knowledge does not guarantee that students will have any interest in the pedagogical practices it produces, especially since such knowledge appears to have little connection to the everyday experiences of the students themselves. (p. 26)

In order to quiet student resistance, pedagogies driven solely by management and control restrict acceptable behavior to the demands of completing "prescribed" (Freire, 1970) tasks (often in the form of standardized materials from corporate publishers), and punish non-compliance with low grades and discipline referrals. *Classroom management approaches* are generally, "more focused on behavior modification than authentic learning via authentic participation in meaningful practice" (Morrell, 2008, p. 203).

When students do not automatically acquiesce to having their every move controlled in such cases, they are subject to be labeled as behavior problems. As student records are increasingly computerized, documented "mis-behaviors" can have lasting effects on students' reputations throughout school. Behavioral models of instruction are directly related to a traditional institutional norm, and its inherent contradictions, that Ira Shor identified, by which students are taught that, "unilateral authority is the normal way things are done in society. They are introduced in school to the reality of management holding dominant, unelected power. At the same time, they are told that they live in freedom and democracy" (1992, p. 19). Shor warned that instead of education being *an activity that kids do*, under management and control conditions, they are the objects of an educational system that is being *done to them*.

It is not difficult to see how managing and controlling 25-30 children in a classroom is a difficult arrangement to sustain with only one teacher who attempts to dominate every second of students' time, without providing interesting or inspiring activities for them to work on. What students do learn under this rubric is how to acquiesce to or resist the authority of managers who demands that they operate strictly under their control. It is difficult to believe that students will learn self-determined work habits or develop their individual talents to their full potentials, when the classroom is controlled to exclude their input and "silence" their voices (Fine & Weis, 2003).

In this scenario students do not learn or develop *agency*, the necessary attitude, sense of initiative, and capacity by which an individual or group assumes responsibility for making decisions and taking action, and the empowerment that results from embracing the liberty to make choices and act in light of both individual and collective



interest (Freire, 1973, Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987; McLaren, 1998). By limiting children's freedom to decide how to engage information and activities, they learn that the choices that are made and that are going to be important are not their own (Shor, 1980; Greene, 1988). Also, by acting as if all knowledge is already known, and students just have to "get it," the realm of inquiry is located outside the child's context, or "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978). When sites of quandaries are distant and inaccessible to young people, connections and associations must be established to be able to "scaffold" their knowledge as new understandings are constructed.

In addition to the ineffectiveness of the pedagogical practices Martin Haberman observed, he uncovered something startling. He saw that once institutional norms in urban schools began to focus on disciplining teachers for not being able to manage or "control" their classes (failing to enforce student compliance), students caught on to "the game." As a result, teachers are held as "hostages" in the sense that students only comply with *certain* requirements while maintaining freedom to do whatever they please. When students know that all they have to do is resist teacher-centered approaches by disrupting the process whenever possible, non-compliance becomes a recurring pattern until teachers "back off." This is an inversion of the contradiction Freire posited, as this type of student power is not at all empowering within the scope of their educational development. Unfortunately, when teachers in this scenario "back off" or go-easy, it usually means giving less challenging assignments like simplified worksheets, permitting disrespect and inattentiveness (heads down on desks/talking over others), and adopting perfunctory tasks to fill time before the class ends. "Savvy" teachers, who habitually rely

on the limited practices Haberman observed, *know* the game and play along in order to make it to the end of the year without overexerting themselves. Teachers who are naïve to this game of control are likely to believe that students can't handle the work, that they don't know how to learn, and that there is still hope if they simply try different materials or rearrange the desks or seating assignments. In either case, the process of "dumbing-down" (McNeil, 1983) instruction to elicit students' compliance is one of the lamentable results of relying solely on traditional teacher-dominated, behavioristic methods.

There are many reasons why students reject teaching methods that alienate and belittle them. But in the end, students know when they feel disrespected and when they are asked to acquiesce to mediocre drills, inauthentic activities, or what they perceive to be forms of "cultural invasion" (Freire, 1970, p. 95). As resilient individuals with rich social and cultural experience, they have learned how to turn unbecoming situations around in order to maintain a degree of control and self-respect, even if this means "sabotaging" classes (Shor, 1980).

Haberman's studies have profound implications for urban educational practice and the teaching profession as a whole. In his later work, *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (1995), he highlighted some of the practices successful urban teachers use that enable them to build transformative relationships with students that focus on establishing and achieving critical learning objectives.

### **Responsive Practice and Humanizing Relations**

A teacher who critically approaches his or her practice is driven by a constant state of inquiry as to how the real needs of students can be met. Reflective, honest appraisals point to answers that progressively inform craftsmanship. "Batch" processing

mechanizes teaching, leaving it devoid of dialogue, critical inquiry, and dynamic understandings between teachers and students. Attempts to supplant humanizing practices with the issuing of orders to be followed, block active cognition in lieu of rote practices that have traditionally failed. Assigning work and giving grades without critical engagement and necessary support is not sustainable in contemporary urban settings and it wastes precious time and resources while turning young people off to school (Darling-Hammond, 2006). If teachers don't support students in progress, as they are working with each other and on engaging learning activities, classroom practice becomes mere supervision, instead of teaching.

Critical praxis is possible only when teachers respond to students as human beings, and tailor their instructional practices to the qualities, efforts, intelligences, abilities, and potentialities that *all* students possess. Through "mutual humanization" (Freire, 1970), teachers learn from children who also learn from each other and the teacher. Without this dynamic, establishing a "community of learners" (Shor, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 1994) is a dream to be wished for, or an illusion that one is convinced is true. Modes of teaching that are critical, and cognitively and affectively guided, facilitate interactions *between* people, recognizing that communication and community are based on establishing commonalities and working through conflicts.

### **Dialogue and Mutual Authority**

In order to resolve the contradiction imposed by banking methods, Freire (1973) maintained that *dialogue is the method and communication is the mode through which learning takes place*. Classroom dialogue that is disciplined, critically conscious, and focused on subjects, themes, and problems that are part of the many spheres of

knowledge that students encounter in school and in the world, can act as a procedural key for unlocking perceptions, ideas, and resistance to schooling. Real dialogue facilitates understanding and expressions between teachers and students and among groups of classmates that would otherwise be unspoken (unvoiced) in traditional methodologies. The balance of input generated through dialogue is reciprocal (Means & Knapp, 1991) because all parties contribute and benefit from one another's ideas. When students are caught up in what they are doing, dialogue is natural, spontaneous, free and open, and can be guided by teacher input, academic standards, and through various group exercises that stimulate critical thinking and problem-solving. Using student thinking as the basis for generating dialogue is a fundamental aspect of critical practice because it changes the power dynamic, which has traditionally upheld that teachers maintain authority at all times and at all costs.

Sharing authority (Shor, 1980, 1992; Kincheloe, 2008) is the essence of establishing real dialogue, because those involved are free to direct their own thinking and construct knowledge from their own perspectives while maintaining others' right to do the same. Shor (1992) observed that, "Until students experience lively participation, mutual authority, and meaningful work, they will display depressed skills and knowledge, as well as negative emotions. Teachers will be measuring and reacting to an artificially low picture of student abilities" (p. 21). Commonly resulting in a "performance strike" (p. 92), when students refuse to do work, authoritarian teaching styles limit freedom of speech and liberated thinking and are oppressive, despite the teacher's intentions. The power to express ideas is unparalleled as a creative force in human nature, and attempts to stifle this natural impulse in children can be considered violent affronts to the creative

spirit. As a violation of personal space and room to grow, and as an attempt to prevent young people from establishing understanding within relationships, the real and "symbolic" violence of authoritarianism effects the affective and emotional, cognitive, and spiritual health of children and limits their capacities (Bourdieu in Giroux, 1985).

Antiauthoritarian relationships nurture creativity and invite students to participate in democratic, empowering, and conceptually enriching learning experiences (Shor, 1992; Freire, 1992). This is not to say that teachers should relinquish their authority as instructional leaders, but it is imperative that the authority to speak, think, and act, be shared. This enables students to "generate their own meanings and visions" (Giroux 1981, p. 84). The notion of achieving "sameness" is an idea from science fiction. In reality, the diversity among people is what makes groups collectively stronger. This is also not to say that learners should not arrive at shared understandings. Working as a team creates an atmosphere in which all members benefit from the various talents, abilities, and unique contributions of all, while at the same time ensuring that individuals advance concomitantly with the progress of the group. This is not a dream, in fact it is the basis for successful organizational strategies in many different forums.

Because dialogic teaching practices are a mutual exercise, the responsibility for participating is shared. Mutual participation demands that students pay attention and stay involved in activities. Recognizing that each child has something valuable to contribute is a motivating factor for students who lack confidence or have low self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1996). As activities are driven by student input, participation becomes the norm. This means that teachers must facilitate dialogue by posing problems, asking questions, and planning and structuring activities that require students to talk to one

another as they think and work. Creating questions for students about the topics and themes in class is part of the process of critical inquiry that enables rethinking, reviewing, and responding from multiple perspectives that enlighten quests for understandings.

### **Journey into the Unknown: Embracing *the Hypothetical***

Posing knowledge as a question to which answers are "yet to be known" changes the terrain of social and intellectual pursuits. Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (1962) advanced the idea that the mode of discourse in teaching is one of the essential factors for enabling student creativity and understanding through discovery. He contrasted the traditional *expository mode* with progressive styles that assume a *hypothetical mode*. "In the hypothetical mode the teacher and the student are in a more cooperative position with respect to what in linguistics would be called 'speaker's decisions.' The student is not a bench-bound listener, but is taking a part in the formulation" (p. 83). Bruner emphasized the role learners have in determining meanings and deciding among alternative interpretations as they evaluate information. Critical pedagogical theory rejects the strict narrative, expository tendencies of banking pedagogies because in addition to objectifying students, they inhibit critical thinking and stifle the imagination.

The hypothetical aspect of criticality guides critical-consciousness by illuminating what is possible within a set of circumstances. As one considers the constitutive elements involved in a concrete situation, ideas and concepts emerge that guide rational understandings. By posing hypothetical ideas in relation to a "given" scenario, opportunities arise to evaluate and reevaluate the circumstances and assess particular variables selected in part by the value or gravity they hold in the situation. As choices are

made about what is important to know and to investigate, ideas about the meaning and relative relationship of elements reflect the value of the different variables chosen to guide inquiry, and determinations about how they interact. When the direct and contextual variables in a situation are seen as functionally interdependent with one another, alternative perspectives and ideas can become evident that recognize, elaborate, extend, expand on, and transcend what has already been established as true.

The suspension of certainty, the hypothetical, is an essential quality of scientific and rational thinking. As what is known informs judgments about what is possible, analyses that consider what is unknown can transform knowledge and experiences by exploring what has not yet been thought of or attempted by specific people or in a general sense. Hypothetical thinking explores openings and possibilities, tentatively, applying what is known within situational contexts and informational constructs to find what is possible within what is "there," and "whose developments would confirm, refute, or modify the guiding conjecture" (Dewey, 1916, p.143). This characterizes all critical thinking that is creative and innovative. Progressive scientific thinking and revolutionary ideas in all realms of society have developed from hypothetical, investigatory constructs.

When information conveyed through spoken communication or any format of media is considered to be static and concrete, varying perspectives and considerations are necessarily avoided in exposition, in order to solidify the validity of the person or the source conveying the message. This is the cause and basis of "critique" in the critical tradition of social and educational theory. That those with power and voice would refuse to consider perspectives other than their own, is unequivocally insufficient as a basis for objective validity, and therefore subject to formal and subjective critique (Freire, 1970;

Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981, 1983, 1988c). In this sense, by avoiding subjectivity and shared authority for constructing knowledge and understanding, "banking education" leaves little room for validating students' ideas and considering multiple perspectives on issues and topics under investigation in the classroom.

There are perhaps countless reasons that teachers resort to banking styles. It is unlikely that every teacher who dominates classroom interactions wishes to be an authoritarian. Linda McNeil (1983) found in her research that a strictly teacher-dominated discourse can be a form of "defensive teaching" in which the teacher believes she must continue on with a one-sided narrative in order to get through lessons or units without debates, dialogue, or too much attention to what students are thinking, thus avoiding the risk of not covering a prescribed curriculum or losing authority to dictate the pace of instruction. The teachers she observed were working in public magnet schools, and were forced to respond to standardized practices and curricula that had been authoritatively mandated and monitored for compliance.

In this case, authoritative practice was a response to institutional demands, countenanced by a commitment to externally controlled, prescriptive practices. These require teachers to function as what Giroux (1985) called "'clerks" of the empire" (p. 27), the political and social nexus of an ideologically imperialistic, Eurocentric, corporate and profit-driven economy and culture, that marginalizes human beings, while driving much of official policy in education and other spheres of life inside and outside of the United States. Scholars have attributed such authoritarian teaching styles to systemic reforms that mandate standardization of curricula, teaching behaviors, and assessments (Apple, 1983; Giroux, 1985; Shor, 1986; McNeil, 2000; Darder, 2005; Janesick, 2007).



No matter what the reasons are for assuming dominating postures and routines, hypothetical thinking can be perceived as dangerous for authoritarian teachers. Questions that ask, "What if...?", "Could it be that...?", "Why...?", or "Is it possible ....?", all pose a threat to the teacher's ability to control conversations and the direction the class takes. Even "worse," hypothetical questions present a risk of destabilizing the conditions a person relies on to maintain their ego-concept, which holds on to a belief that having all the answers is necessary in order to justify being in charge. Not knowing all the answers is a vulnerable position for one who believes oneself to be the sole expositor and proprietor of knowledge in the classroom. Some authoritarian teachers actually punish or humiliate students for asking critical questions, presenting hypothetical ideas, or disagreeing with the official decrees and ideological platform of the centralized and standardized American educational "regime." Dialogue that is open to the hypothetical engenders commitment to the process of mutual understanding, and consequently results in advancing concrete knowledge that relates directly to the ideas students have about academic subjects, themselves, and the expanses of reality that surround them.

Critical teachers thrive on not knowing. Although academic content and subjects are grounded in concrete knowledge, critical praxis requires reflecting on what is known while simultaneously seeking answers to questions that are still unclear and solutions to problems that require further exploration, and more than one answer to solve. In those moments, where further information is sought through the deliberate posing of questions, hypothetical ideas, and genuine investigation of material, thinking is at its fullest, and creative energy circulates while students hone in on the possibilities that fill voids of knowledge.

What students do not yet know can be found by surveying available evidence and materials, and forming hypotheses about its meaning. Presenting real subjects as an experiential continuum, in which concrete knowledge is known and an extent is still unknown, suffuses learning and communication with wonder and the prospect of discovery. Recognizing the limits of what we know holds the potential for exposing possibilities for new knowledge to be found. This is not to say that all knowledge is on the "frontier," or that students have to reinvent the disciplines. Rather, becoming aware of what else is there that could be discovered about the topics under study, creates heightened interest and motivates a genuine search for answers. Here, it becomes clear that hypothetical thinking is the productive aspect of critical thinking as tentative ideas and concrete understandings are synthesized through a process of logical deduction and judgment. Of course, this requires the receptive element of thinking which is guided by the purposeful asking of questions and inquiring into the subjects and learning materials available in which ideas and meanings are embedded.

"Problematizing" reality (Shor, 1980), through dialogue and deliberation with students, presents opportunities for the emergence of new modes of thinking and forms of knowledge that inform living and learning. Synthesizing concrete knowledge with hypothetical thinking also infuses critically-conscious awareness with the challenge to broaden one's perspective, in order to maximize the potential to meet individual and collective objectives. When all members of a learning community are provided opportunities to conceptualize knowledge as their own possession, what students learn can have an immediate impact on the decisions and actions that shape their future.

## CHAPTER 5

### PROBLEM-POSING

Dialogical problem-posing is the foundation of critical instructional praxis. Integrating students with reality through dialogue and problem-posing techniques involves presenting topics and content materials as problems to be investigated and solved. This approach recognizes that reality and knowledge are dynamic and living. It rejects notions that all knowledge is already known, and that education is simply a matter of picking through pieces to understand subjects. Freire (1970) described *problem-posing education* as a deliberate process in which, "people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 83). A participatory climate driven by critically-conscious problem solving and explorations of relevant subjects enables learners to play a part in the ongoing transformation of their experiences in the classroom and beyond. In this section, an instructional process is proposed, grounded in Paulo Freire's fundamental strategies, that incorporates practical and critical techniques in contemporary K-12 schooling.

This process contains aspects of progressive, constructivist, literacy-building, problem-solving, and critical thinking techniques, but is distinctly critical of normative practices. As a guide for planning and implementing activities, this process is designed to accomplish the following purposes; to activate dialogue; to delegate responsibility for learning; to make learning relevant; to incorporate students' background knowledge and experiences and link classroom activities to the reality of the world - past, present and future; to connect thinking and understanding to disciplinary knowledge bases and

recognized learning standards and objectives; to develop conceptual and skill-based literacies; to share authority of knowledge construction and production; to motivate question forming and critical thinking; to explore multiple perspectives; to facilitate creative problem-solving through collaborative study and the use of a variety of learning materials, media, and technologies; and, to provide opportunities for students to negotiate their own identities with the complexities of living.

The techniques in this approach can be used in any content-area. They are designed to be flexible and recursive so the methods are not necessarily a lock-step process. Student input and teachers' discretion as to what materials to use and how to structure activities will vary respective to the situations under study, their level of interest and experience, and other variables that determine where emphasis needs to be focused. Critical consciousness is a characteristic of each technique and an intended developmental outcome. Each strategy described in the following sections overlaps with the others, so that at times they may seem indistinguishable from one another, but they are presented in order to provide structure for discussion, and perhaps lesson planning, that enables both concrete and critical understanding of subjects and situational content.

When these methods are convened in the order presented, an instructional cycle develops as original problems and situations lead to new discoveries and point to other relevant problem-situations that can then be investigated. Whether occurring in rapid momentary unison, rigorous procedural study, ad hoc or ad infinitum, four fundamental techniques in this problem-posing approach include:

- a) Presenting a situation in an appropriate format to be problematized with students;
- b) Facilitating dialogue with students to collaboratively generate, identify, and document ideas, key words, essential concepts, and relevant themes;

- c) Guiding inquiry and critical thinking through various activities and materials; and
- d) Providing students opportunities to communicate understandings with the support of ongoing assessment.

These four strategies incorporate various techniques and methods in themselves and allow room for teachers to determine their own decisions and directions in planning and implementation. A discussion of each strategy is included in this and the following chapters. Various considerations arise with regard to teaching young people in urban American schools, and these discussions are an attempt to integrate critical approaches with considerations related to contemporary K-12 teaching.

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## PRESENTING SITUATIONS FOR STUDY

### **Selecting and Locating Relevant Situations, Problems, and Curricular Topics**

Critical teachers view reality as multidimensional and living, as humans both create their realities and are mediated by them. Posing real situations as problems to be explored establishes an authentic context for classroom knowledge and the subjects within academic content areas. Recognizing the human quality of knowledge validates multiple perspectives and enables students to identify themselves as part of the context in which knowledge is situated. The academic disciplines taught in schools are the result of human endeavors to explain the manifold dimensions of reality that have driven human exploration and discovery for millennia, and they contain branches within themselves. Mathematics, history, the sciences and humanities, language, culture, artisanry and craftsmanship are all traditions that represent the ways human beings have understood, responded to, and created the human dimensions of the world we see today.

By looking for *situations to be investigated* within historical eras, events, countries and global regions, cultures, human discoveries and creations, art and literature, politics, dilemmas, conflicts, human relations, social structures, environments and ecologies, organized institutions, or any subject that people have encountered in history or the present, *endless possibilities exist for identifying relevant subject-topics to use for instructional purposes*. Drawing from the multitudinous dimensions of reality represented in the disciplines and from the myriad aspects of the world enables teachers to choose a range of relevant topics that will foster student interest and motivate participation, while teaching relevant knowledge that is applicable in their lives. Creative appropriation of curricular elements also harnesses teachers' own curiosity and creativity as they decide how to teach their subjects.

Locating appropriate situations is not a random approach to thinking, learning, or curricular planning, and does not imply pulling topics out of a hat. Understanding the world involves utilizing various forms of knowledge and thinking. Teachers must demonstrate social sense and knowledge of human-child development, while appropriating the types of disciplinary thinking that have historically driven the pursuit of knowledge that has shaped the field they are teaching. In this sense, critical problem-posing involves identifying situations that are both relevant and interesting to students, and significant in shaping the field of study being pursued. By surveying and incorporating student knowledge, interests, aspirations and experiences in the curriculum, ideas for addressing critical needs arise and present possibilities for creative planning. At the same time, by consulting curriculum guides, state and national standards for excellence, textbooks, literary materials, alternative resources and media, the world wide

web, and one's personal knowledge and experience within the discipline, it is possible to develop an array of important themes and topical situations to be integrated in instruction as part of a rigorous, creative, and critical instructional program.

Assessing what students know and what they ought to know is a way to guide planning. By considering students' knowledge and experiences as relevant for selecting situations, curricular topics that are emotionally and intellectually captivating make school learning come alive, while simultaneously accomplishing recognized objectives. Humanity is a living and historical drama rife with comedies and tragedies and laden with struggles and conflicts that have defined cultures and civilizations throughout history. Tapping into the triumphs and tribulations in the human saga and involving young people as actors and participants in history can motivate them to challenge and further define themselves as they seek to fulfill their goals.

Real life situations are complex and involve many aspects that students can identify and reflect on as they investigate from multiple perspectives. Posing situations as problems for classroom investigation positions learners as "co-investigators" (Freire, 1970) and living participants in history. A situation can be conceived to be a case to be uncovered, with problems to be solved, clues to be found, information to be researched, techniques to be mastered, and understandings to be discovered as truths are sought. As students perceive that they are part of a larger tradition of human inquiry, knowledge, and experience, they can also decide how they envision their picture of reality as they determine meanings and form understandings that shape how they live and work.

In an American urban context, working with children and teenagers, a culturally relevant and critical problem-posing approach requires teachers to utilize situations and

practical configurations that are suited to students and their academic and developmental progress. Student experiences are connected to stories, events, people, people's histories, cultural studies, conflicts, technologies, current issues, and themes in everyday life and throughout history. These subjects are accessible through interdisciplinary fields of study and relate to the way people live.

The breadth of established school content-areas, language arts, social studies, history, science, mathematics, technology, and art and design, provides a wide array of subjects containing an unlimited amount of situations that are suitable for classroom study and critical investigatory inquiry. Selecting situations that identify the key problems that have historically driven human thinking, struggles, and experiences is a critical imperative for studying reality and societies in transformation. Just as conflicts drive the plot of narratives in fiction or film, human conflicts, natural and social dilemmas, challenges, and cultural relationships have been catalyzing factors in the history and development of human civilization. *Power, culture, and economy* are *root concepts* that can be used to analyze and explain *conflicts* and *struggles* that have defined cultures and civilizations, especially when they are viewed through sociological lenses such as *race, class, privilege, agency, and hegemony*.

It is imperative that critical teachers appropriate the power of confronting real problems that drive thinking and invigorating intellectual activity in the classroom. Incorporating dilemmas that students are working through with similar situations in the academic subjects is an invaluable attribute in critical praxis. As the connection between learning and living becomes clearer, students and teachers find that they already possess attributes that enable them to think like scientists, mathematicians, and scholars.



Children think critically about many aspects of their lives as they make choices every day. Finding avenues to channel youthful energy into the critical evaluation of subjects in school challenges students to go beyond surface content and false impressions that obscure the depth and relevance of the subjects they are asked to master.

Critical teachers have the unique role of developing techniques for designing learning experiences that deal with problems that inspire students to want to participate, and that delve into aspects of life in which they are already participating. Evaluating everyday life with an eye to illuminating what is "taken for granted" (Shor, 1980), is a first step towards identifying our own experience in relation to the circumstances we encounter every day. Routines, daily behavior, habits, stereotypes and assumptions, explanations for phenomena, and "commonsense" knowledge are all subjects that can reveal how each of us thinks and lives in relation to the world. Students must understand that they live in a world in which their own realities occur within the context of other realities that are both concrete and subject to change, and that in fact, reality is always in a process of constantly transforming.

When students find that their present experiences are subject to the effects of dynamics and forces that are occurring all around them, they can see some of these as important problems to be considered, and begin to develop their own strategies and objectives for navigating life's terrains. Broad contextual changes have occurred because of the conflicts and struggles of people in modern times to achieve critical objectives. Locating relevant aspects of life that are perhaps beyond students' awareness is an art that requires practice and a genuine interest in looking beyond the surface of what is outlined in textbooks, curriculum guides, and state learning standards. Just as one enjoys the

colors of the leaves of a tree in Autumn, the branches, trunks, roots and the myriad life forms that inhabit the ecological setting are equally as important when one considers the forest.

### **Informational Formats and Media**

A situation suitable for problem-posing and investigation can be presented in many different forms through dialogue or various formats of media. A topic written on the board, a photograph, painting, drawing, chart, statistic, fact, quote, statement, question, writing prompt, problem, chapter title, book cover, song title, concept, issue, current or historical event, scenario, conflict, or phenomenon (natural, scientific, social, hypothetical), are all situations that can be introduced to students as problem-constructs in preparation for engaging increasingly complex investigations.

While the examples above are helpful for introducing units and lessons, more involved sources can also be treated as situations with literate students using multiple formats of media. In this case, media can be understood as a material source of information that mediates the relationship between people and reality, such as a text, or a visual, audio, or multiple format source. The media source is literally - *in the middle* - acting as a coded representation between the reality itself and the individual who interprets and subjects it to analysis. When a situation is embedded in a lengthier reading passage, a magazine or news article, a book, a chapter or section, an interview, essay, letter; or in a videography, song, photography collection, set of data, or any other more robust and complex format of information, giving students ample time to read or interpret the material alone or in groups is necessary to be able to discuss the contents thoroughly.

Dialogue is an essential strategy for generating thinking about designated learning situations. However, talking is only one of the five essential skills of literacy and not the only skill students need to exercise. Reading, writing, listening, and thinking are equally as important as speaking. Incorporating all five skills in instructional activities is a necessary component for holistic literacy and skill development. But, dialogue is the key to the activation and social communication of ideas that involve the other skills. Posing a topic and discussing it with students precedes more involved reading, writing, and thinking by requiring students to recall background knowledge and construct concrete conceptualizations that can be referenced and utilized in further activities.

### **Cultural Knowledge and Relevant Curricula**

A critical approach to education embraces cultural knowledge and people's voices in the wealth of resources available for study (Freire, 1973; Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1988; Macedo, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Gordon, 1995; Nieto, 1999; Kincheloe, 2008). Within each discipline, subject-specific learning objectives have been established to guide the inclusion of important topics in lessons and curricular units. Learning national, state, district, and school-based standards for content and skill objectives is part of the process of critically evaluating what to teach, as critical teaching objectives can not neglect standardized learning objectives. However, critical analysis and consideration is needed to inform a "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a) in an integrated and authentic approach. In a critically informed and relevant instructional program, it is fundamentally necessary to assess and address what is missing from dominant narratives and centralized sources of information, as students' cultures are often omitted or tokenized in books, literature collections, texts, materials, stories,

informational and ideological constructs in curricula, and in the scripted social contexts students encounter in these sources.

"Banking education," as a set of "prescriptive" practices (Freire, 1973), usually depends on a centralized depository of knowledge in the form of "cultural literacy" frameworks, "core" curricula, or standardized canons and materials published by corporate conglomerates. In these "banks" of knowledge, relevant histories, cultural perspectives and experiences, stories, and significant ideas, facts, and events that are essential for students to understand are missing from the contents and standards. The glaring omissions of the histories and ongoing struggles of indigenous peoples, marginalized groups, and poor and working class citizens in history are unacceptable oversights in traditional curricula and schooling.

Many urban children and their families are living members of groups that have been excluded from predominant historical narratives in school curricula. This is one of the reasons *culturally-relevant and critical pedagogies are necessities in urban teaching*. Numerous scholars have exposed and criticized curricular trends in American schooling that celebrate narratives of those who dominate society, while excluding other real peoples' histories and cultural contexts (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Anyon, 1983; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Giroux, 1988a; Macedo, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Gordon, 1995; Nieto, 1999; Loewen, 2007). Celebrating a "cultural literacy" that reflects only a Westernized canonical context, supports the existing social order of inequality and oppression, by ignoring cultures and conflicts in favor of adopting a "false consensus" (Apple, 1979) based on elitist Westernized norms, and American hegemony. A cultural diversity perspective framed in adopting "sameness" within human differences and social

realities, mutes cultural voices and prohibits diverging political conversations or conflicts from being considered.

In an attempt to enforce the hegemonic notions they advance, culturally-exclusive curriculum planners override what should be students' and communities choices about what they will read and talk about in school. Just as students' voices need to be heard and magnified in the classroom, the voices of those who have been written out of canonical traditions must also be heard and witnessed as essential to understanding human civilization and paths to liberation for oppressed people of all cultures. The "hidden curriculum" (Apple 1979; Giroux, 1981) that excludes differing cultural discourses and authentic voices in classrooms and curricula, only validates the experiences of dominant groups. Hegemony is a hidden device in American education because of what is not said or spoken about. Becoming aware of real instances and knowledge forms that are "counter-hegemonic" (Giroux, 1981; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993; McLaren, 1998) is necessary in urban pedagogies to establish relevant and critical perspectives that can enable the repossession of cultural ground in school and content curricula.

Critical teachers have the responsibility of researching cultural "stores of knowledge" (Lee & Slaughterhouse-Defoe, 1995) and being aware of "cultural referents" (Ladson-Billings, 1994) as they relate to students' cultures and the curriculum, to make the classroom a site where students' identities are affirmed and their voices validated (Macedo, 1994; McLaren & Dantley, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999; Morrell, 2008). The technique of presenting relevant situations to be investigated is a way for teachers to critically evaluate their own field of knowledge and to delve further into the areas that matter most for students to understand.

This does not always mean we have to totally reeducate ourselves, but as teachers, we must examine our own perspectives, assumptions, and discrete knowledge to acknowledge what we may not know that could benefit our understanding of the connections between the subjects being studied and our students' subjective experiences. By investing effort and insight to illuminate areas of interest that demand further research, teachers can learn more about the subjects under investigation and find ways to make learning real and relevant for young people, while bridging cultural borders.

Learning is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching. Reflection and research can bring attention to questions and topics that connect students' backgrounds and experiences with classroom content and the curriculum. One way to do this is to research the city and communities where students live, and to become familiar with the various cultural histories and legacies as they relate to young people in modern schools. By situating subjects and content in the physical, cultural, social, economic, and historical contexts students inhabit and know, learning becomes a relevant and critical part of life and holistic human development.

### **Student Experience**

When students can express aspects of their own experience as they relate to academic content and problematized situations, they see themselves as an essential part of the educational process. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey (1916) asserted that, "The best type of teaching bears in mind the desirability of affecting this interconnection. It puts the student in the habitual attitude of finding points of contact and mutual bearings" (p. 157). His progressive ideas about the importance of student reflection and experience in democratic teaching methods emphasized:

- That the pupil have a genuine situation of experience;
- That there be a continuous activity in which he is inserted for its own sake;
- That a genuine problem develop within this situation as a stimulus to thought;
- That he posses the information and make the observations needed to deal with it;
- That suggested solutions occur to him which he shall be responsible for developing in an orderly way; and
- That he have opportunity and occasion to test his ideas by application, to make their meaning clear and to discover for himself their validity. (p. 157)

Dewey believed that students should have real experiences as opposed to traditional lecturn and bench style activities, and that this meant working with genuine problems in order to develop ideas and strategies for solving them. He envisioned a new type of education that brought in elements of the world students inhabited into classroom study, to provide a "continuity of experience" between classroom activities and real life. In

*Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) added:

A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth. Above all, they should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile.

Traditional education did not have to face this problem; it could systematically dodge this responsibility. The school environment of desks, blackboards, a small school yard, was supposed to suffice. There was no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources. A system of education based upon the necessary connection of education with experience must, on the contrary, if faithful to its principle, take these things constantly into account. (p. 40)

When teachers familiarize themselves with the realities and experiences students have outside of school, it benefits both the learning partnerships that develop in the classroom and the authenticity of purpose that motivates the effort of each member of the learning community.

Critically evaluating ways to contextualize subjects in a curriculum so that they are relevant and accessible to students is an essential strategy in any content-area and in any school setting. Robert Moses (2001), who was deeply involved in the struggle for

freedom and civil rights during the 1960's, explained in his book, *Radical Equations*, that the urban context is a rich setting for developing mathematical problems and thinking that students can work on as they learn algebra, geometry, and arithmetic.

Transportation, work, consumer habits, finances, music, navigation, spatial mapping, architecture and engineering, utility systems, measurements, time, and calculations of all sorts are all daily aspects of city life. Bringing these out in classroom learning activities gives students a responsibility to use their experiences, thoughts, observations, and ideas as the substance of collaborative problem solving that incorporates them into the process as contributing participants. Students have much to say when given the opportunity for their voices to be heard. The inclusionary aspect of collaborative problem solving benefits all students, because even those who choose to remain quiet benefit from the constructive format and from the knowledge and reasoning demonstrated by all who participate from diverse angles and perspectives.

Traditionalistic educators might mistake student-centered and critical approaches as lacking depth and rigor, assuming that they fail to attend to the requisite knowledge and skills that compose the academic disciplines. If dialogue and activities were to be limited only to recreation and entertainment, such criticism might be accurate. But when one critically assesses the complexity of the realities students experience, it is clear that history, culture, language, and scientific and mathematical dynamics all play profound roles in their lives. Brining attention to how these aspects of students' lives relate to curricular topics and the extant context of a total reality, is a powerful strategy for breathing new life into traditional school subjects.



For the dialogical, problem-posing teacher-student, the program content of education is neither a gift, nor an imposition - bits of information to be deposited in the students - but rather the organized, systematized, and developed "re-presentation" to individuals of the things about which they want to know more. (Freire, 1970, p. 93)

Through dialogue, Freire was able to find out what was on his students' minds, and he used their concerns and observations as indicators for guiding instruction. When students are free to declare what they want to know and are given opportunities to locate information themselves with available technology and resources, habits of inquiry and discovery can take root. By treating the curriculum as a series of situations to be studied and investigated, the classroom becomes a field of inquiry and discovery, challenging students to see learning as something that is useful and exciting and can be driven by their own questions and efforts, and with the support of their classmates and teachers.

### **Exploring Reality**

Critical thinking, interactive dialogue, multiple perspectives, logical and analogical understanding, informed judgments, self-perception, transcendental and transformational modes of consciousness are all possible within collaborative learning experiences and a critical problem-posing approach. As a rich nexus of possibilities, problem-posing and critically guided inquiry contribute to transforming what students know and how they are able to use their knowledge to inform their choices and activities. Integration with the world is only possible when it is able to be understood, and teachers have a critical role in designing activities that make this possible. Because of the current conditions that stifle learning in urban schools, and the fact that school knowledge fails to interest a significant number of children, students will not necessarily take on the responsibility of deciphering complex aspects of reality themselves.

Given the current context of urban deindustrialization, high levels of unemployment, rising costs of living with inflation and persistent poverty, and the education required in a "specialized" economy, the challenges people face today can be daunting. In critical approaches, students' subjective experiences need to be investigated to discern what is real to them, to investigate the challenges they and their families face, and in order to develop strategies to transform the conditions that threaten their livelihoods. The situations Freire used in his early literacy programs were related to life in the farmlands of Brazil (presented as drawings), and his strategy focused purposefully on incorporating subjects that his students could relate to as elements of their own experience, such as working in the fields, hunting for food, and other aspects of their culture. Freire (1973) understood that his students were marginalized from the progress and development that was going on in their country and that in order for them to intervene in that reality and improve their lives, they had to be able to understand that they played an active role in deciding what to do and how they could determine their living conditions.

The goal of "unveiling" reality is central in Freire's work. Teaching students to develop critical-consciousness involves teaching critical thinking techniques, but there is more to it. Critical educational theory has its roots in Frankfurt School critical theory which questions socialization within social structures where people struggle with dominant forms of power as they are exerted through culture, economic systems and structures, and institutional norms and practices (Giroux, 1981,1983; Fischman et al., 2005)

Critical pedagogical theory in education focuses on factors in school institutions that prevent individuals from determining their own choices and outcomes, thereby

infringing on their ability to develop holistic identities. Albert Scherr (2005) identified "mutual recognition" as a prerequisite for critical educational practice as "subjectivity, self-esteem, self-awareness, and self-determination are not inherent qualities of human individuals but outcomes of social coexistence" (p. 147). Through dialogue and socialized interactions, complex realities in students' lives and in the world become subjects of mutual bearing and common interest. Identifying collective struggles, common experiences, and shared challenges builds strategies for coping with and transcending difficulties through personal, social, and material transformations.

### **Limit Situations**

An essential aspect of a Freirian critical pedagogy involves uncovering obstacles that limit people's ability to be self-determined learners and liberated members of society. Freire (1970) called these "limit situations" because they were obstacles that limited humanization and freedom. In urban classrooms, uncovering social structures and institutional norms that function as obstacles to human potential is important work that helps explain why historical struggles for freedom and self-determination have not yet been completed. A problem-posing method and critical analyses of social conditions, cultural forces, and material realities, can reveal factors that threaten the survival and success of contemporary Americans, young and old. Freedom, justice, and democracy sound good on paper. But when millions of Americans are out of work, have lost their homes, lack health care coverage, and continue to lose their political voices as corporations and special interests exert their control over national politics, it is necessary to consider whether the country has abandoned its democratic values, and where this would lead.

There are numerous factors that act as limits in urban American settings that interfere with people's ability to develop to their fullest potentials. The demands of working, injustices that plague poor and non-white citizens, and the oligarchic tendencies in national government directly impact people's daily lives. Interferences outside of people's immediate control include *racism, classism, sexism, discriminatory social and legal policies and practices, racial and economic segregation, isolation and disintegration of labor markets, white privilege, and cultural chauvinism*, all of which impinge on people's livelihoods. The chances of getting a good education or a well-paying job are obstructed for many citizens who are not members of privileged groups.

Urban areas also pose challenges of heightened degrees of violence, police harassment and brutality, debilitating school practices and conditions, joblessness, poverty, lack of health care, criminalization of youth, and other factors that interfere with young people's ability to live comfortably with a sense of justice and relative freedom and happiness. Also, as the prison industrial complex grows (Fischman, 2005; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005), authority and law enforcement are tied to economic interests as private institutions have financial incentives to incarcerate children and adults. At the same time, private and corporate enterprises that threaten to limit or block opportunities for urban residents to thrive (through monopolized competition and mediocre services) have made their way into public school systems and the public sector at large (Giroux, 1988c; Shor, 1980, 1992; McLaren, 1998; Chomsky, 2000; Suoranta, 2005).

Urban families and children know what is real to them, and when asked to describe experiences striving to realize their aspirations, many of the challenging aspects of urban contexts are identified among the many challenges people know and struggle

with day in and day out. Urban teachers must create space for questioning the problematical constructs that society poses for modern city dwellers and citizens of all backgrounds.

### **Keeping it Real and Inspiring Hope**

Assessing the realities urban families and children contend with is essential in critical education, in the interest of *keeping it real*. As urban students living in poverty experience many of the uncomfortable conditions within social circumstances that result from the factors and situations named above, addressing them is an ethical, political, social, and educational necessity. However, it is not ethical to present a pedagogy of despair, or a political platform that imposes views on students as if they were their own. To address these inequalities ethically, students must be empowered to name what they experience and investigate the situations they identify as the substance of classroom inquiry and study. Preaching politics to students without providing opportunities for them to name their own experiences and determine their own beliefs is part of the same tactics at work in "banking" ideologies that inhibit creative response. In addition, telling students about their own experience, without considering their perspectives or observations, is ignorant for obvious reasons. Freire (1970) initiated dialogue in order for students to "name" their world and to establish an understanding of his students' "thematic universe" (p. 96). Through this process, he was able to garner themes and ideas for activities and relevant problem-situations to address critical imperatives with his students.

Only when students are invited to explain how they experience and perceive their world in relation to topics and themes brought out in the classroom, can inquiry truly

remain relative to their situation. Being cognizant of "environing conditions" (Dewey, 1938), that involve students' own perceptions and experiences, positions them to determine how they identify themselves in relation to social realities (Shor, 1980, 1992; Kincheloe, 2005, 2008). In fact, students' realities can only be validated as "real" when students voice their own perspectives and explore connections themselves. Respecting student voices and addressing their concerns as valid and relevant to classroom dialogue enables them to explore and *unveil* reality on their own terms through dialogue, inquiry, and guided activities.

Identifying and embracing themes of hope, possibility, and freedom, as students learn to realize their potential agency, is also necessary for motivating young people to want to participate in the learning process (Freire, 1973, 1970, 1992; Greene, 1988). Encouragement, praise, and positive motivation are essential aspects of a critical "pedagogy of hope" (Freire, 1992). Practicing and developing skills and knowledge to determine one's own outcomes is a crucial task for people working within a system that challenges their very survival. Urban educators have the responsibility of providing opportunities for critical studies of relevant topics and for generating and sustaining a spirit of optimism and curiosity in light of the extraordinary possibilities that exist in the world. Bridging students' aspirations and experiential knowledge with new learning situations is a skill that requires practice and a bit of courage. As oppressive circumstances are identified and named, they can begin to be understood as obstacles to be dealt with.

[Students] ... must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action. (Freire, 1970, p. 49)

Infinite potential exists for human thought and actions that enable people to transcend limits that are placed upon them. The transformation of reality begins with a transformation of perception and purpose, and the development of agency to pursue constructive goals. When people identify their own potentials to act and to think for themselves in critically-conscious ways, new possibilities emerge. Guiding activities that illuminate and activate these potentials in students is a core function of critical teaching.

Recognizing limits as obstacles to be transcended and transformed, is a form of hopeful realism. Whether an educator chooses to accept the validity of dehumanizing and oppressive aspects of urban life depends on his or her orientation and perspectives. Those who live outside cities and teach in city schools have the ability to ignore these uncomfortable realities and can exercise their privilege to not address them, or to acquiesce to "blame the victim" ideologies. Critical educational and sociological perspectives recognize that blaming poor people for the condition of institutions that disserve them is an exploitative ideology that projects faulty notions of causality into rational explanations for social circumstances. False assumptions are an impediment to teaching as much as they are an impediment to learning.

The obstacles to success that urban children face are not easily dismissible. Considering how many obstacles are in place for urban youth to achieve a college education is one way of looking at the immediate inequalities in place in this country (Carlson cited in Lankshear, 1993; Henig et al., 2001; Fine & Weiss, 2003; Morrell, 2008). The average household wealth of families according to racial demographics is another lens through which to view the disparate structure of opportunity and freedom in the United States. "White" households have an average wealth 20 times that of African

American or Latinos (Pew Research, 2011). Despite the fact that alternative routes through higher education have been developed, the prerequisite skills and knowledge that enable individuals to thrive in educational settings are determined in public K-12 schools.

Ignoring how debilitating factors influence the opportunities of students attending city schools is unconscionable. Joyce King (1991) described "dysconscious racism" as an "uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given, [and] ... that tacitly accepts dominant White norms and privileges" (p. 135). King might have specified, "middle and upper class White norms and privileges," but her message is abundantly clear for teachers who work with children in city schools. By ignoring social, political, and historical forces that have discriminatorily acted against and disadvantaged African Americans, Chicanos and Latinos, and socioeconomically underprivileged citizens of all backgrounds, educators can make the mistake of willfully neglecting the factors that have shaped history, and that children continue to struggle with in their lives.

### **Myths and Contradictions**

Myths that limit historical vision are partly responsible for creating false states of consciousness that obscure clarity of causal relationships in society. As ideas that form the basis of people's thinking but cannot be reasonably proven to be true, mythical notions and "commonsense assumptions" (Apple 1979; Giroux, 1981), threaten the ability to reason and form valid judgments (Bruner, 1962; Freire 1970; Shor, 1980).

Freire (1973) warned,

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of modern man is his domination by the force of these myths and his manipulation by organized advertising, ideological or otherwise. Gradually, without even realizing the loss, he relinquishes his capacity for choice; he is expelled from the orbit of decisions. (p. 6)



Myths such as the willful self-segregation of non-white communities; the purity and justness of the law as it has been applied through American history; the idea of government “of the people, by the people, and for the people”; “equal opportunity” for quality education, housing, and employment; democracy and representation in a political arena dominated by special interests; and beliefs about the genetic discrimination of human races; these are all powerful ideas that permeate collective consciousness in the United States of America. These myths themselves can be posed as problems to investigate in critical and disciplinary study.

Looking for clear contradictions that bring awareness to the insubstantiality of the claims made by social myths is of profound importance in penetrating the truth as to how society works and the role and individual has in determining his or her own outcomes (Freire, 1970; Apple, 1979; Shor, 1980; Giroux, 1981). By identifying the limits of truth behind mythical ideas, individuals begin to see the power of their own intellectual agency. For instance, Ira Shor (1980) argued that, “The imposing and dehumanizing presence of state and corporation in daily life contradicts the national mystification of democracy. Raising awareness of this contradictory announcement and denial of freedom is of strategic importance” (p. 71). Evaluating one's own perspectives in light of what is conventionally assumed to be true is an essential part of developing an authentic and critical mode of educational practice.

Within this process, as students evaluate aspects of their own experiences through critical analyses, they can begin to see where their aspirations and interests are in conflict with realities that confront them. Freire (1973) emphasized the importance of exposing *contradictions* that act as “limit situations,” threatening to restrict people's freedom to

make conscious choices about how they live and progress through the complexities of reality. He observed that there are themes that correlate with people living in particular time periods, that represent their aspirations in contradiction with the realities they have to struggle with to survive:

If men are unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality, they are carried along in the wake of change. They see that the times are changing, but they are submerged in that change and so cannot discern its dramatic significance, ... a society beginning to move from one epoch to another requires the development of an especially flexible, critical spirit. Lacking such a spirit, men cannot perceive the marked contradictions which occur in society as emerging values in search of affirmation and fulfillment clash with earlier values seeking self-preservation. ...

Contradictions increase between the ways of being, understanding, behaving, and valuing which belong to yesterday and other ways of perceiving and valuing which announce the future. ... This shock between a *yesterday* which is losing relevance but still seeking to survive, and a *tomorrow* which is gaining substance, characterizes the phase of transition as a time of announcement and a time of decision. Only, however, to the degree that the choices result from a critical perception of the contradictions are they real and capable of being transformed in action. Choice is illusory to the degree it represents the expectations of others. (1973, p. 7)

Freire was talking about revolutionary change, as old societal habits and oppressive modes of discrimination and domination were being revealed, outmoded, and transformed as new forms of democracy and social justice emerged through defiant struggles. A profound revelation in itself, that those who experience oppression share a common theme and a common struggle, his revolutionary theories position disempowered people to uncover the contradictions in contemporary realities and social paradigms. Conservative alliances that restrict power and privilege to "white" males and those with capital and equity, take precedence over human rights and social justice, and need to be critically examined. The word *equity* is in itself a contradictory concept, as it means both impartial and fair treatment of people, and the economic property that individuals own that differentiates social classes.

Contradictions in urban America that act as limit-situations can be starting points for critical inquiry. The exercise of reconsidering societal contradictions with students through thematic inquiry and a critical problem-posing approach, familiarizes young people with the challenges they face, by enabling them to recognize the contradictions as limits that need to be understood in order to be transcended and transformed. Empowering young people to rethink and to devise strategies to overcome disadvantages is a "commitment to the future" (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). Issues such as equal opportunity for employment in light of social inequalities, and the quality and demands of living are all important for critical inquiry and study. It is clear that contradictions like these dramatically affect urban American citizens especially, but they also directly impact the majority of Americans who are not part of the wealthiest class of people.

Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo (1987) made an interesting observation of a potent contradiction in American society that flips commonsense notions of "minority" status upside-down:

When you use "minority" in the U.S. context to refer to the majority of people who are not part of the dominant class, you alter its semantic value. When you refer to "minority" you are in fact talking about the "majority" who find themselves outside the sphere of political and economic dominance. (pp. 124-125)

The fact that the word "minority" is still used to describe ethnic groups who are not Anglo-Saxon, or who pass as being "white," reveals the devastating effectiveness of ideological hegemony in American society. That the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" has grown dramatically since the 1960's (Apple, 1979; Chomsky, 2000; Lipman, 2004; Pew Research, 2011), reveals a system of inequality that pervades and continues to delimit opportunities and potential for a majority of Americans to thrive in this country. Despite the effect this growing disparity has on the majority of Americans,

this issue has not been a popular news item, except when large protests are conducted.

As students are led through years of schooling, being taught that they live in "one nation, indivisible, with freedom and justice for all," educators need to question whether the facts match up to the conventional rhetoric, and challenge notions of equality and justice that neglect to attend to real social inequalities, discriminatory structures and practices, and oppressive conditions that dominate American life and pervade societies, cultures, and living ecologies across the globe.

Another fundamental contradiction that extends into every aspect of sociocultural logic is the fact that despite decades of anthropological and scientific studies that deny the existence of human "races" (AAA, 1998; Gordon, 2005; Lipman, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Pollock, 2006; Smedley, 2007), people of all hues are still referred to as "black" and "white." The political racialization of the American people was based on slave-laws that effectively demarcated African Americans from European Americans in order to create and maintain an indentured class (Allen, 1997; Smedley, 2007). The ideological structure that resulted from racializing laws and policies, dominates our collective consciousness and has become commonsense, to the point that questioning whether a brown-skinned person is "black", or a light-skinned person is "white" can be considered irrelevant and absurd. But when a teacher stands in front of a whiteboard, writing in black ink, or when a human hand is held over black or white paper, the contradiction becomes abundantly clear, as white and black are not really colors of skin.

The contradiction between conventional nomenclature and reality is glaringly obvious. How have people been socialized to rely so heavily on racialized concepts to classify themselves and people of different ethnic, cultural, and geographical

backgrounds? When one considers who benefits from divisive racialization, a conquest of the consciousness of the people in a civilization, clues can be found by looking at who has and has had power, privilege, and property rights, and how these have been used and maintained throughout history. Analyzing what it means to be "raced," and how people are classified according to racialized notions, reveals disparities and oppressive realities that "non-white" people have been burdened with as white privilege has been economically and hegemonically maintained (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Pollock, 2006). Critical analyses also require strategies for finding possibilities for transcending racialized thought and cultural and social practices.

Analytic exercises are useful as evaluative tools for identifying how power works in society to obfuscate inequity and maintain capital equity in the hands of a dominant elite class. Power can be used to manipulate people's thoughts, to deny their capacity to reason, to socialize citizens into complacency within an unjust system, and to create social structures that do not allow people to enjoy the basic liberties of living in freedom. Social order is a desirable goal, but when it depends on the exploitation, suffering, and depressed quality of life for a significant population of people, it needs to be reexamined. *Myths* and *contradictions* are useful analytical tools for investigating and challenging the nature of human beings in society and the obstacles people face. Students know some of the challenges society holds for them and they look to teachers for experiences that can mitigate the difficulties and circumstances they are up against.

Critical educators do not deny their students opportunities to analyze and discuss issues that matter to them. They also do not deny themselves the responsibility for studying the ecologies and dynamics of the communities and areas in which they work,

and the cultural histories of their students. Critically minded teachers use the situations inherent in reality as starting points and problems for investigation. This does not signify instituting a pedagogy of hopelessness and blaming all one's problems on "the system" or population of people. However, it does involve an honest appraisal and investigative research into the realities students contend with in their lives, and an awareness of who holds power in society. By making "the connection between individual sensation and reflection and social conditions" (Scherr, 2005, p. 148), students are in the position to understand the world they inhabit and seek ways to make life better for themselves and others. Social disadvantages are not necessarily determinants (Apple, 1979; Shor, 1980; Giroux, 1981, 1983; Scherr, 2005), but they can have a massive impact on children and families who struggle to overcome them to survive, let alone thrive, in a society that has historically limited opportunities.

In *Ghetto Schooling*, Jean Anyon (1997) presented a remarkable report of *A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*, and the systematic discrimination and policy making that has made life in inner cities disproportionately challenging for African Americans and residential populations. Anyon referenced sociologists and historians in her discussion of discriminatory federal housing and lending policies, "redlining" mortgage and lending practices that targeted "blacks" and ghettoized neighborhoods, unequal school funding, labor discrimination, corporate and industrial "dispossession" (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) of cities and urban populations, the reduction of tax rates for corporations, loss of jobs in urban centers, and the resulting conditions of poverty for urban residents in the 20th century until today.

Oppressive and discriminatory historical realities have posed limits for opportunities and improvement for generations of citizens. When teachers overlook or fail to contend with historical and present day realities, treating them as non-factors in the overall picture of their students' developmental context, this only serves to further disadvantage young people's potential to overcome the obstacles.

For classroom learning to empower students to be able to succeed in school and in their lives on the outside, they need to both understand the situations they confront and see alternatives to the factors that negate them. Since children are not necessarily aware of the causes of the conditions they experience, it is especially important that they be involved in this critical process in order to understand that the challenges they face are not the result of their own inadequacies.

### **Transforming Reality**

Freire's problem-posing techniques were designed to elicit themes and situations that preoccupied his students and to subject them to reflection and critical analyses. He also encouraged and facilitated experiences with his adult students to develop strategies for transforming the situations under which they were being exploited. In contemporary American schooling, transforming reality is not a reasonable demand to put on any single individual, especially a child who is growing up and learning fundamental skills. It is also not possible for teachers or students to lower the price of food, create jobs, or to provide health care to every American. By creating a community of learners, posing real problems as the focus of investigation, and organizing activities for applying relevant disciplinary knowledge and skills, educators can help students build foundations for critical literacies and strategies for liberating action to develop. By becoming critically

informed, information becomes available for planning and making choices for purposive pursuits, despite the powerful effects of challenging forces that infringe on people's freedom and livelihood on a personal and social level. When oppressive forces become debilitating, individuals and groups must have the capacity to act to generate new directions for action.

Seizing power over one's life is not as simple as it may sound, because there are any number of mitigating forces depending on one's situation. In America, power to decide how to live one's life is largely related to finding employment that will sustain livelihood. This is difficult for many urban residents, and often people have to create their own opportunities to make money to survive. One has to mitigate those forces that are present and imposed from the outside, while maintaining the fortitude and intellectual clarity to learn necessary knowledge and skills, and to act when times are right. This requires seizing opportunities to learn from whatever sources are available, in order to acquire skills and knowledge that are practical for survival and useful for achieving individual and collective objectives.

Millions of Americans and global citizens live under the constant threat of insolvency and powerlessness in the face of economic forces beyond their control. Teachers need to strategize ways to counteract threatening forces and ameliorate notions that convince students that acquiring an education is not worth the effort. Focusing on situations that demonstrate hope and successful struggle to transform oppressive realities is part of this process. When students see that the challenges before them have been encountered by others, alternative perspectives and possibilities for action can be



recognized through observing the ways their predecessors have overcome the challenges they faced.

Critical teaching is multidimensional and because it involves human relationships, communication, thinking, reality, academic knowledge and skills, and the free pursuit of information for a wide range of purposes, possibilities for practice are infinite. Finding situations that relate to students' interests and experiences, and that reflect their aspirations requires a determined effort and a gaze beyond standardized curricula and "prescribed" topics and units (McNeil, 2000). Finding reasons to be optimistic inspires hope for students and teachers who are pessimistic about the potential schooling offers.

One source of optimism is the creativity and resourcefulness of young people who manage to succeed in school despite the interferences that surround them. Looking at the world from a child's perspective can spark a renewed promise of hope and strength, and can facilitate awareness of the challenges ahead. Locating themes and situations that students encounter in their lives and incorporating them into a relevant curriculum and problematizing process requires dialogue, inquiry and active learning projects. As students actively pursue and uncover relevant knowledge, they can discover necessary and *emancipatory knowledge*,<sup>4</sup> and practice critical skills for navigating their lives successfully. People can only make choices that they know are available to them, and this requires understanding the multiple contexts and dimensions of reality one inhabits. Finding ways to integrate content-area curricula with students' knowledge and experiences in real life is an essential critical practice. Whether students generate themes

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<sup>4</sup> Peter McLaren (1998) explained Jurgen Habermas's concept, "Emancipatory knowledge helps us understand how social relationships are distorted and manipulated by relations of power and privilege. It also aims at creating the conditions under which irrationality, domination, and oppression can be overcome and transformed through deliberative, collective action. In short, it creates the foundation for social justice, equality, and empowerment" (p. 175).

for study, or relevant themes are brought out of the curriculum and teachers' choices, finding points of contact and lines of inquiry that connect students understandings across contexts is a technique that can extend curiosity and stimulate students to generate new ideas and visions.

## CHAPTER 6

### GENERATING IDEAS

Generating ideas that relate to the problem-situation under study is part of the critical problem-posing process discussed in these chapters. When presenting an idea or a situation within a text or other medium, giving students time to study the situation themselves by reading, observing, reflecting, thinking, talking, and writing about their ideas and interpretations of the subject, the teacher is free to assess immediate reactions and responses as students read or "decode" the situation at hand. These responses are helpful for assessing what children know, what they are unclear about, and where instruction should lead. Allowing time to interpret meanings and information presents both freedom to engage the subject as the child pleases, and room to develop ideas, questions, and associated knowledge that is useful for the investigation. Preliminary questions can guide inquiry. Asking students what they know, what they think, or how they feel about the topic is a way to begin dialogue. Bell hooks (2010) suggested that when teachers ask questions, in this case related to a situation presented for study, that they use "active silence," wherein time is taken for students to contemplate and generate thoughts. This adds to the depth of their reflections and the quality of ensuing dialogue.

#### **Dialogue and Written Communication - Words as Ideas**

Freire emphasized the importance of dialogue throughout the problem-posing process because it is a method that links thinking and communication with in-depth analysis. He wrote, "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (1970, p. 88). He meant this quite literally as a process where

students would talk about what they saw within the situations they were evaluating relative to their own experiences. Naming and generating ideas can be done collaboratively, as a whole class, in groups or partners, and can either be done verbally or by writing ideas on paper and then sharing. Observations, ideas, facts, and concepts are all communicated through words, and these words are the content of communication related to the situation being studied. In fact, a word is a concept by itself, in the sense that it is an idea coded in phonemic and phonetic symbols. When words are treated as ideas, language and communication become the medium for intellectual exchange and meetings of the minds. To recognize the power of ideas is the essence of all intellectual activity.

Writing students' words and ideas on the board for all class members to see is a key aspect of this process. Freire (1973) called the words students contributed "generative words" as they were in fact generated by students in the process of reflection. As Freire would ask questions like, "what other themes or subjects could we discuss besides these?" (1970, p. 123), students would reply, and many of their responses were written up on the board for everyone to see, immediately "re-presented" to the group as a new problem.

When students are presented with a situation - a photograph, the cover of a book, a headline or a news story, the title of a chapter or other reading selection, a quote, a concept, current issue, statistic, etc. - expressing observations, ideas, and bits of information that they know and associate with the situation is a natural and logical progression. However, this process can only occur in the classroom if the teacher initiates it. Naming and generating ideas can take place before and after students have

read a complete passage or selection of text, or seen or listened to another source of information. These ideational connections are the symbolic manifestations of cognitive and creative processes that illuminate the way students understand the subjects they are presented. They are the currency, of sorts, for exploratory dialogue and reinforcement of prior knowledge. In my own literacy classes, students are asked to explain what they know about relevant topical situations. As they call out ideas, I write the key words and phrases on the board, connecting ideas as topics and sub-topics, ask them to clarify how they relate to the subject and to each other, and suggest new ideas to challenge them to continue thinking and talking to me and to one another. The process can be loud and messy, but it is always possible to get a significant portion of students' ideas on the board and to allow them to dialogue and debate amongst themselves without creating unnecessary chaos or commotion.

*By writing students' ideas on the board for re-presentation, all participants can see them, and can write the words down in their own notebooks.* In addition to developing habits of disciplined studying, the benefits of this simple exercise are immeasurable. Producing a *collaboratively generated idea bank* creates mutual ownership of knowledge as well as a shared set of concepts that act as conceptual scaffolding for the construction of understanding and "mental representations" underway.

The difference between looking at ideas in text and writing them down is no small matter. The process of recording words requires perceiving them, decoding their meaning, and then creating them oneself on paper, as they are perceived again. Conceptual, linguistic, and textual literacies are all reinforced in this process. As students' ideas become the subject of dialogue and investigation, they see that their

thoughts are worth talking about and that their ideas count. As concrete ideas, themes, and new meanings emerge, they are produced by students themselves and therefore hold a different, more intrinsic value than those that students have not generated.

In addition to strengthening skills, integrating what students have to say as the substance of dialogue and investigation positions their voices as the dominant interest in the classroom. This is a way to validate their authority over their own lives and to challenge institutional norms and the "silencing" effect traditional practices have on young people, especially those of oppressed groups, and their ability to think through complex situations in school (Giroux, 1981; Greene, 1988; Macedo, 1994; Shor, 1980, 1992; McNeil, 2000; Fine & Weis, 2003; Fischman et al., 2005). While a teacher needs to have a voice in providing content knowledge and contextual information, it cannot be used to dominate or exclude what students think and say (Shor, 1980). Silencing and negating students is both "disempowering" (Shor, 1992) and oppressive, and a sure-fire way to evoke disinterest and resistance. Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) argued that,

If the objective of education is to empower students intellectually and, to some extent emotionally, their voice must receive validation. This entails *both* a critical stance towards their already acquired voice, obtained from the contradictory sources of mass culture and peer interaction, as well as an effort to enrich this voice with historical and critical dimension. (p. 66)

The value of subjecting learning situations to reflective thought and participatory inquiry and discussion is evident in the rich conversations and genuine inquiries that are produced in the process. Not only do students engage fully with subjects and situational learning problems and constructs, they also learn social skills and critical thinking by doing the socializing and the deliberating in session.

As students naturally have varying ideas and diverging perspectives, the process of dialogue enables weighed considerations, competing assertions and claims,

negotiations and compromises, revisions and corrections, and countless rhetorical strategies that develop according to the demands of the discussion. As students develop their own voices, they can gain confidence in speaking up and speaking out, despite the potential that others may disagree with them. As students deliberate and dialogue about the subjects they bring up, they learn from one another and from what the teacher contributes. As content materials are consulted, shared understandings and mutual agreements are both firmed up and reassessed.

This does not mean everyone in a learning group always has to agree. The airing of ideas and the sharing of different perspectives and considerations has the benefit of filling in multiple voids of knowledge and challenging the range of "multiple intelligences" (Gardner, 1999) all students possess. In addition to stimulating holistic thinking and learning skills, Giroux (1988a) illustrated the importance of recognizing and accepting differences as a necessary component of democratic classrooms and societies:

Student voice must be rooted in a pedagogy that allows students to speak and to appreciate the nature of difference as part of both a democratic tolerance and a fundamental condition for critical dialogue and the development of forms of solidarity rooted in the principles of trust, sharing, and a commitment to improving the quality of human life. (p. 166)

As sites for childhood education, schools and classrooms that reflect human life respect the many differences that make us human. Learning and socializing are not separate processes. Providing students opportunities to consider and validate multiple perspectives as they articulate their thoughts in a respectful and constructive climate, enormous potential is available for students to generate healthy associations with school and learning, as well as a sense of social propriety that allows them to view knowledge as a form of personal and collective power. When creative thinking and cooperative efforts

are joined to accomplish critical and constructive objectives, it is possible to accomplish much more than it is with rote tasks or individualized assignments.

### **Mutual Ownership of Knowledge and Literacy Development**

The simple strategy of using students' words and ideas as the subject of instruction and dialogue instills an active sense of ownership of knowledge and the process of generating ideas. When this process is open and accessible to every child, building a foundation of essential concepts and a linguistic vocabulary lexicon that is useful across content-areas and situational contexts, becomes an inherent part of daily lessons and activities. Asking students to contribute to the learning process at this stage is extremely important, because here they decide what interests, energy, and effort they will invest in thinking and learning about the subject. As all students are asked to weigh in on the topic, words and ideas that help to explain and elaborate the situation in question are all relevant, and can be evaluated as new problems to explore.

When students share ideas that are off topic, misguided, or factually incorrect, the dialogic format in this stage allows opportunities to discuss misinterpretations, fallacies, and points which are unclear. Often students will clarify things to, for, and with each other, without the teacher needing to speak. This can also be an opportunity for teachers to model and praise respectful deliberation and disagreement, and constructive argumentation. Through discussion, talking and thinking combine to hone in on the essential elements of the situation through collaborative inquiry. Of course, the teacher is also a participant in the discussion, and can add important ideas in words, phrases, or complete sentences to the idea bank as a trusted contributor to the collective knowledge of the group. As more ideas are generated relative to the situation at hand, themes can be



uncovered to guide further inquiry and study. However, it is usually helpful to wait until students have generated as complete a collection as possible before intervening, as this conveys their responsibility for being the agents of action who must lead investigations.

Everyone in the class benefits from this exercise because students are thinking, reading, and writing, as they learn from each other and the teacher, to build a concrete understanding of the situation as it is presented and as it relates to their knowledge and experience. Documenting students' words for public view is especially beneficial for children with low literacy proficiencies, because they see words that they hear and know put into writing, and then write them on their own. The conceptual, aural-linguistic, and textual-linguistic skills that are exercised in this process, combined with the affective, social, and cognitive components of a critical pedagogy, make this an indispensable strategy in urban classrooms and other educational settings.

Freire and Macedo (1987) proposed that literacy-building involves "reading the word and the world," and requires students to connect their thinking to realistic contexts represented in textualized form. This cycle of audio/visual/textual reception and subsequent written/oral/cognitive production is an exercise for reinforcing critical understandings needed to establish concrete ideational foundations. Key concepts can be seen as pillars of knowledge in that they support the architecture and facilitate the construction of complex mental representations. Conceptual foundations are the basis of accessible knowledge that is available for associative thinking and higher-order reasoning, enabled by critical consciousness. As students connect the ideas being discussed, with the teacher's help, they develop conceptual literacies that functionalize concrete understandings as they appear to be applicable in problem-solving activities.

A rigorous and inclusive process of collaborative idea generation and documentation can, in discreet ways, help struggling students as they are able to acquire skills and much needed information without anyone becoming aware of what they had not known. This is of powerful moment for children who have had experiences of failure in school and who have negative "self-efficacy beliefs" (Bandura, 1996) that limit their confidence and motivation. Self-doubt and learned-helplessness can eclipse a child's brightness. It is common for low-performing kids to remark on how smart they are when they share ideas that are validated, written on the board, and incorporated into discussion by a supportive teacher. When intelligent children are surprised to find that they do possess intelligence, it is a statement that speaks more to the experiences they have had that have convinced them otherwise, more than anything else. *Students with low self-confidence and negative self-efficacy beliefs benefit in immeasurable ways when their ideas become the focus of discussion with peers in a mutually respectful forum.* Usually, students will debate one another, explain and clarify their thinking, and make adjustments to their arguments if they are allowed to carry on with authentic democratic discourse.

When the process ebbs and flows with the thoughts and observations students are generating and deliberating, it is working. If the process stalls, or the climate becomes untenable, the teacher can intervene by asking 5WH questions (*who, what, where, why, when, how*) to stimulate further thinking. As students generate more specific ideas, concepts, keywords, phrases, tentative and declarative statements, they can all be added to the idea bank. Documenting students' words and magnifying their voices in dialogue is a key factor to empower them as thinkers, problem solvers, and partners in learning. As students in my classes weigh in on classroom topics and the situations in the materials

presented, they take discussions in directions that would never have occurred to me when planning the lessons. Their abundant participation and passionate engagement with important and relevant problems, ideas, and issues has suggested to me that Freire's practices are right at home in twenty-first century American schools. The fact that the students in my English classes have made significant gains in their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills<sup>5</sup>, is a testament to their determined participation and the relevance and cogency of the theories and strategies developed by critical practitioners, that have informed what we do and how classes unfold.

In his book, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Ira Shor (1980) described his work with community college students in New York, where mutual participation and shared authority are essential components for building a "community of literacy":

It is not necessary for each member to participate in exactly the same way. But is absolutely essential in this process for the opportunity to be available, constantly, for any member to express his or her ideas in whatever form they see fit, and for group members to respect the authority that each of us possesses over our own thoughts and words, our internal and external voice. (p. 103)

As students share their observations and perspectives, this is a way to bring students of all levels on the same page, as concrete understandings are rendered and diverse interpretations flourish respective to the individuals in class who are participating.

As critical "co-investigators," students deconstruct the problem-situations through dialogue in which thoughts, experiences, reactions, observations, themes, and concrete knowledge are "named." Because Paulo Freire's students began their studies completely illiterate, they were learning how the phonemic structure of their language was

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<sup>5</sup> Each year my students take a required set of tests to measure their proficiencies in reading, writing, listening, and speaking English as a Second Language. They also undergo several other formal, diagnostic reading assessments, and my own evaluations of their writing and communicative skills.

phonetically constituted in writing.<sup>6</sup> But there was more going on than that. By using the words and ideas that students generated as the subject for dialogue, inquiry, and further investigation, the students literally became subjects of the process. The process of *decoding* is conjoined with a process of *recoding*, as subjective thinking generates self-created objective knowledge. In the contemporary American context, students have much to say about situations that are presented to them, and as they see their own ideas documented on the class board and discussed in a respectful forum, they are motivated to elaborate the rationale behind their reasoning, and voice their perspectives through which they relate to the subject. Students can also write their ideas on the board themselves, using various graphic-organizing techniques and formats for *concept-mapping*. This is an excellent way to start talking about, developing, and organizing curricular topics and vocabulary, and to collect a sample of what students know in order to plan activities that expand on their prior knowledge and current understandings.

### **"Naming the World"**

Freire (1970) believed that "naming the world" is to reflect on it, creating one's own impression, and to make claims as to what the subject in question means within one's own experience. This opens the door for direct actions based on discoveries and realizations that are relevant to improving how one lives. Naming phenomena allows learners to begin to transform aspects of their world by indicating perceptions and realities that are in contradiction. As beliefs are related to attitudes and decisions about behavior, creatively naming what one perceives enables him to make choices and

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<sup>6</sup> Freire used the phonetic structure of the words he recorded to generate other words that his students knew, to teach them the written language. Ex. Bat-tle: Ba- Bat, Bag, Ball; -tle - little, turtle, subtle. This would apply in contemporary settings working with pre-literate students and those with emerging literacies.

decisions in light of new information and determinations. This is what Freire (1973) meant by "integration," as an individual perceives himself and the reality surrounding him in relation to the subjects discussed and studied in class, and uses the knowledge attained from critical examinations to make self-determined judgments and choices that enable the achievement of consciously conceived, realizable goals. By developing an increasingly broadened understanding about how reality worked, Freire's students could integrate their own aspirations and needs into a framing of how they believed that their living context *should* work, and began to initiative the transformations they sought.

Dialogic communication was the essential format for this process to unfold:

If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another... (Freire, 1970, p. 88)

Instead of being asked to digest a packaged set of concepts, ideas, and facts, naming and generating concepts and ideas both inspires learners to involve themselves cognitively in the quest for understanding, and captures a set of *key words* and concepts that *unlock perceptions and information for understanding*. Through guided exercises, the teacher's voice is equally as important as students, and with discretion, can be helpful in facilitating productive dialogue and pointing to major ideas and items that are essential for building concrete mental representations of the important elements embedded in the situational context. I have found that when I allow students to carry on much of the dialogue among themselves, that they ask me more questions and rely on me to clarify, mediate, and explain more than when I have tried to begin by telling them what I think.

As dialogue and discussion develops, it is important to remember that education in primary and secondary classrooms is more than *speaking* words. As students contemplate problems and situations, they must have opportunities to write down their thoughts, notes, observations, reflections, interpretations, experiences, recollections, connections, stories, or any other ideational matter. As they are asked to write for different purposes, students practice making concrete determinations and interdisciplinary associations, exploring related concepts, and thinking within and between multiple contexts, as they utilize and build essential vocabularies. When students are asked to share and discuss what they write with classmates, either publicly or to a partner, they are building communication skills, developing capacities for understanding others, sharpening listening skills, and practicing collaborative thinking and multiple cognitive skills. As students write and share what they are thinking about in exercises and activities with their classmates and peers, what might otherwise be considered by children to be boring school subjects, can become inspiring and enjoyable opportunities that motivate authentic participation and real efforts to acquire new understandings.

### **Themes**

As dialogue, written reflections, and initial inquiries bring students into the practice of investigating situations as the subject of a lesson or activity, identifying themes and essential concepts becomes important for reinforcing the results of the investigation. As unifying ideas, themes help students synthesize information and connect it with other ideas. The more students participate in the elaboration of ideas, the more relevant the class becomes to them. Freire (1973) emphasized using student-

generated themes as the basis for identifying what they perceive, in order to guide activities and instruction appropriately. As young people practice their freedom to generate their own ideas, they develop critical, creative, and interpretive skills, and share in broadening their conceptual knowledge and vocabulary.

Themes can be thought of as discoveries or revelations, key concepts and issues, and can relate to findings within the subject matter and materials students are working with, themes that relate to their own experiences as people, or that are part of the world they know that may or may not directly implicate them. Themes are in fact the conceptual products of evaluations and syntheses that require consideration of multiple ideas in order to make connections, clarify meanings, to identify ideas that apply throughout the situation at hand, and to arrive at understandings that transcend the immediate subject and circumstances to relate to other situations that are related.

When the concepts and elements that have been identified and discovered in investigations are connected to oneself, society, and informational media that people consume, associative and relational thinking is practicable. As subjects are investigated and discussed, the teacher is able to help students identify themes that illuminate the situation being discussed, and which apply across multiple contexts. Modeling this process enables students to learn similar associative habits of thinking and provides them space and freedom to interject their own observations. The concept of exploring a "thematic universe" in collaboration with learners becomes at once captivating and entirely feasible for every participant in this dialogical forum.

Teachers play a crucial role in synthesizing students' ideas, content knowledge, key concepts that are named and investigated, and information that relates to the situation

that isn't known to students or included in the materials they are using. Ira Shor (1992) described, "reflexive teaching, where the teacher poses questions, listens carefully, and re-presents to students what they have said for further reflection" (p.54). Spotlighting observations and realizations that help explain the situations under investigation, the teacher starts with student input; requires learners to think further, to reread passages of text, or look more closely at the available sources of information; and provides necessary information, connections, clarifications, and extensions that inform the investigation. Drawing out themes is a starting point for beginning new investigatory activities.

As a pioneer of critical pedagogy, Freire facilitated experiences in which his learners participated fully in ways that reflected their own stake in the process. By investigating students' "thematic universe," and integrating the aspirations of the members of the learning setting with the material and topics they study, a "practice of freedom" is possible which can transcend the boundaries of what students have previously experienced in school. Students seize opportunities to discuss, share, and contribute their own experiences in relation to the situational subjects and problems under study, and to generate their own themes and ideas that integrate truths they know with possibilities for new ideas. As prevalent ideas were *discussed* in the Brazilian *culture circles*, and *written* and *studied* in textual form, student-participants learned to read in spectacularly short time. Freire's literacy students also learned essential knowledge that enabled them to begin to transform how they lived and viewed themselves in relation to their personal and collective agency. As a mode of thematic discovery and collaborative thinking, this process is perfectly applicable in contemporary educational settings with students of all different ages and backgrounds.



## CHAPTER 7

### GUIDING INQUIRY AND CRITICAL THINKING

Inquiry is perhaps the most effective means of facilitating discovery and learning in K-12 classrooms. Guiding inquiry activates students' curiosities and puts young people in a purposeful mode of asking questions to discover new information. Critical teachers can use guided inquiry as a strategy using many different methods, all designed for the purposes of posing questions that clarify and advance understandings; requiring students to decode textual and media materials; and establishing lines of questioning in extended and meaningful directions to apply acquired information in new ways. Because questions drive thinking, it is particularly important for educators to *guide* inquiries that will evoke the modes of thinking that enable students to develop proficiencies in school subjects and that extend to inform their lives beyond school walls. The inquiries and dialogic methods designed to guide the generation of ideas described in the previous chapter are preliminary and meant to establish prior knowledge and convey necessary key concepts in order for students to understand and make connections with the new material being studied. To acquire in-depth understandings, inquiry must go beyond surface impressions and prior knowledge, and beyond conventional or "commonsense" ideas students have as thinking advances in disciplined, critical, and creative dimensions.

The key to getting inquiry started is to have students reflect on the subjects and situations they encounter in order to identify what they know, what there is to know, and what else they would like to find out. John Dewey (1916) saw the need to present subjects as the objects of reflection in order to generate curiosity:

Where there is reflection, there is suspense.... Since the situation in which thinking occurs is a doubtful one, thinking is a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of

investigating. *Acquiring* is always secondary, and instrumental to the act of *inquiring*. It is seeking, a quest, for something that is not at hand. We sometimes talk as if “original research” were a peculiar prerogative of scientists or at least of advanced students. But all thinking is research, and all research is native, original, with him who carries it on, even if everybody else in the world already is sure of what he is still looking for. (p. 142)

By inquiring, the search for knowledge is initiated. Of course, the essential 5WH questions - *who, what, where, why, when, and how* - are the catalysts for any inquiry designed to establish concrete and evidential knowledge when researching a situation. The Socratic method has been used for ages and can be extended to illuminate deeper meanings and more complex understandings through analyses by cycling through 5WH questions. Sometimes an inquiry-based "thought experiment" can generate a significant amount of knowledge about a subject in a collaborative learning exercise.

Understanding *what* is happening and what *integral and constitutive parts* make up the *whole situation*, *who* is involved, *where* the subject occurs, and *when* things take place, are all essential pieces of information needed to be able to explain a situation and to determine the circumstances in which it exists. When these concrete factors are known, it is then possible to determine *how* things work, *how* the elements involved *interact* with each other to create the situation as it is known, and *how* particular elements are influenced by outside factors. *Why* questions interrogate the reasons for who is involved, what happens (to and with what), where, when, and how it all works.. Asking, "Why?" is a way to clarify logic, reasons and rationales, processes, relationships, conflicts, values, and any other explanation of phenomena that can enrich understandings. For this reason it might be the most useful word in the classroom. Just as professional journalists investigate situations by asking series of questions and consulting multiple sources to report the news, students must learn how to uncover information and be able to explain why things are the way they are and why situations occur.

As the process of inquiry develops past initial questions, thinking can become increasingly critical, in the sense that the ideas students reflect on can be used to make judgments about the information they encounter and to relate findings to other situations as they apply. The word critical is derived from the Greek word *kritikus*, and refers to skillful judgment. All types of critical thinking involve reflection and skilled judgment applied to the evaluation of information in and across particular contexts. As thinking informs judgments as to how one should act, critical thinking relates directly to the actions one takes. In this sense, inquiry is the engine of critically-conscious activity, fueled by information and judgment, and driven by consciously selected purposes.

By adopting a mode of thinking that is reflective, questions and creative thinking breathe life into dialogue and activities designed to explore various subjects. At once, when a topic or subject is opened up to questioning, students begin to see the situation as something they can engage with on their own terms. Channeling inquiry so that students are able to bring their own knowledge to bear on subjects is sometimes challenging. But when a teacher is inclined to make students aware of their own capabilities and intelligences, the habit of generating inquiry and engaging flexible thinking strategies provides students with experiences in which they succeed at thinking and learning in ways that make sense to them and which they can help direct.

A teacher can model a process of inquiry, but students must develop their own habits of generating questions to identify needed information as it arises in dialogue, reading, problem-solving, and learning activities. This involves making personal connections, associating information to other familiar contexts, and thinking creatively about how the subjects being discussed and investigated in the classroom apply to people

and how we live in the world. In my literacy classes, students readily take on the most challenging questions and pose many of their own. At times it is surprising to discover that much of what I assumed had to be taught is already known to students, and that their points of engagement are advanced from the beginning. Clarifying concrete concepts and essential understandings allows each student to engage subjects and material in differentiated ways, while democratic dialogue provides a channel for rudimentary understandings to develop along a continuum of dynamic and more complex ideas that involve syntheses and evaluations of information communicated in process. Learning as we go, foundational and advanced knowledge are brought to bear on the topics that arise in research, dialogue, and evaluation of the texts we read, the media we consume, and information we consult from our own experience and other sources of knowledge.

### **Guiding Inquiry**

*Guided inquiry* is a deliberate activity and is necessary when working with young people. There are considerations and questions that students will not necessarily bring up themselves, and without some guidance, the possibility of fully uncovering the information that is available would be unlikely, as dialogue can become increasingly subjective and disconnected from academic content and objectives. Children and adolescents need more guidance and structured activities to learn and to remain engaged than adult students. Exposing young people to new ways of thinking about the world through multiple perspectives requires learning about the many disciplines of thought and knowledge that exist and practicing fundamental skills. Creating specific questions that incorporate the six question words is a necessary step for K-12 teachers. Inquiry-based research can be conducted through dialogue, listening, reading, writing, and problem-

solving. The purpose of deliberately asking questions and requiring students to search for answers and report their findings is *to develop habits of inquiry as the basis for discovery and communication*.

One way to ensure that all students in class are thinking and consulting materials themselves is to provide time for students to read and respond to questions individually, before moving forward with collaborative activities. A written inquiry guide, tailored to various formats of information, can assist in this process. Several examples of guided questions that students use in my classes for reading and discussing a newspaper or magazine article, analyzing a short story, and researching a concept are included as Appendices A, B, and C. The questions in these guides do not need to be answered in order, however the first several questions in each guide are designed to establish concrete knowledge before engaging in more critical tasks. Leaving space for new inquiry is necessary too, in order to not over-formalize the process. Selecting different questions that are more specific or that apply to particular subjects and problem-based situations can help keep inquiries novel and tailored to the contents of the materials students consult. As students work through questions with the help of their classmates, content objectives and target skills are exercised while classmates are able to share in dialogue and cooperative efforts.

In addition to learning important concepts and academic and social skills, guided inquiry activities teach students the discipline of studying in a non-alienating context. Individual work done within a small-group, *collaborative framework*, also tends to be of better quality. This might be because the motivation to satisfy the needs of a group drives a concentrated awareness of performance, or it could be that when students do help

one another, it works for everyone's benefit. Either way, when students have enriched their understandings through reading and working on investigations, dialogue and thinking are more informed and substantive than in preliminary or informal inquiries.

### **Disciplined Inquiry**

Disciplinary thinking refers to using logic, strategies, and techniques that are part of the various academic disciplines and other established fields of knowledge and human activity. Because thinking can extend in infinite directions from multiple perspectives, grounding questions in disciplinary standards allows students to generate concrete understandings of content knowledge. While critical thinking is an intrinsic part of this process, as students are asked to analyze information, evaluate meanings, and make connections and judgments within and across subjects, higher-order thinking is only possible for most students when they have a clear picture of the concrete situation they are dealing with.

Disciplined inquiry (Bruner, 1962; Newman, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996) is essentially the active pursuit of information along established lines of questioning that draw from standards within academic disciplines and relevant parameters for thinking about subjects. Teaching students to think scientifically, analytically, and with formal logic as readers, mathematicians, and problem solvers is an essential aspect of any formal education. Part of the art of teaching is designing inquiries that are compatible with the situations being investigated. Aligning inquiry that explores and utilizes disciplinary and subject-specific standards is an excellent way to guide the process. Developing *essential questions* to guide lessons and learning activities helps focus investigations and uncover information essential for understanding. Linda Elder and Richard Paul (2006) explained:

The quality of our thinking is given in the quality of our questions. ... Questions define tasks, express problems, and delineate issues. They drive thinking forward. ... Thinking within disciplines is driven, not by answers, but by essential questions. Had no basic questions been asked by those who laid the foundation for a field - for example, physics or biology - the field would not have been developed in the first place. Every intellectual field is born out of a cluster of essential questions that drive the mind to pursue particular facts and understandings. (2006, pp. 2-3)

By mutually collaborating to ask and answer meaningful questions about the situations under investigation in the class, students tap into lines of inquiry that have guided human civilization, as people have encountered obstacles and problems that challenged their survival and aspirational endeavors. Innovation and creative responses to life's challenges are intrinsic to human development. Through practice and guided activities, teachers can facilitate learning settings in which young people have to think their way through to accomplish complex tasks that relate to authentic problems in the world.

### **Using Content Standards to Guide Disciplined Inquiry**

Using content-area standards as targets is one way to anchor questions in disciplinary thinking. As a source to facilitate productive inquiry, standards are beneficial for developing the academic skills required to navigate contemporary schooling and curricula. Appropriating state and national standards in language that students can easily understand is a helpful way to make the content accessible.

Instead of discussing a hypothetical set of disciplinary standards, it is probably easier to provide an example. Appendix D is a document containing reading skills identified in the Pennsylvania Department of Education's literacy assessment framework, in the form of "assessment anchors" (PDE, 2011) that teachers are expected to use to guide reading activities. However, this is not the original document issued by the state. The standards are paraphrased and briefly explained in language that is more familiar to students and can be used in discussion and activity with them as active critical scholars.

Using anchors in this way, teachers can create guiding questions that are aligned with standard learning objectives and that are designed to challenge children to think critically. Pennsylvania's literacy framework is particularly useful and unique because in addition to providing a broad set of considerations for evaluating and understanding texts, the anchors describe actions and thinking that students *do* as they read. Thinking verbs such as, *Identify, Interpret, Compare, Describe, Analyze, and Evaluate* are used in conjunction with various aspects of fiction and non-fiction texts, and they can also be applied to non-textual media. These anchors can be used to generate meaningful questions for students to answer as they read and think through any text. Using anchors to guide dialogue, inquiry, critical reading, and collaborative problem-solving are possible in working groups and with individuated tasks.

Identifying and describing elements of information are essential tasks for building concrete knowledge and basic understanding of the content and context of the situation embedded in the text. Questions that challenge students to interpret, compare, describe, explain, analyze, and evaluate essential and related information, facts, concepts, characters, perspectives, motivations, settings, the dynamics of relationships between elements, conflicts, series of events, bias and propaganda, are necessary components of any area of study, and they provide opportunities for students to think critically and from different points of view. Understandings that result from collaborative inquiries can be applied to further critical thinking as concrete knowledge is solidified in the process of dialogue and interpretation of textualized information.

These *literacy anchors* are useful in any content-area because they include elements and skills that are common in a variety of non-fiction texts. The point here is



not to advertise for the Pennsylvania Department of Education, but only to demonstrate how a set of standard skills can be utilized as "anchors" in deliberate inquiries that engage students' abilities and perspectives in rigorous disciplinary study. Science, math, and social studies standards also provide teachers with rubrics for understanding and teaching the branches of each discipline. By providing students with these references, that is putting the disciplinary standards in their hands and in language that they are familiar with, students can then know what they are expected to be able to do with a given reading assignment or problem-based activity, and they can develop their own questions and inquiries using the anchors as guides. It is possible for this to proceed as a self-directed process, in which students in groups choose their information and sources and develop their own research questions and findings.

### **Generating Questions - Student-Driven Inquiry**

After students have read a text, worked on solving problems, watched a video, or interpreted information or data from another source, asking them what the information means, how it relates to them as individuals, and asking them to generate their own questions are excellent ways to develop their abilities to critically evaluate information, and to determine what else they need to know and are interested in learning. Asking students to generate questions for quizzes, tests, essays, surveys, homework, reading guides, and critical thinking activities can be a powerful way to evaluate what they have learned. Just as the process of generating words and ideas involves young people in the thinking they are doing in class, being asked to generate questions challenges them to revisit their first impressions, and reevaluate the information they have encountered.

Posing questions and new problems requires students and their classmates to

study materials to find information and details, and to make discoveries in the quest for sufficiently satisfying answers. Generative questions also teach students to form inquiries that require reliable use of evidence to support their answers. As students are often highly competitive, this comes out in their efforts to produce questions that are not easy to answer. Writing students' questions on the board, or having them write them themselves, provides opportunities for kids to make their own choices about what questions are important to them, and it allows them to get up from their seats to answer quandaries and document their own ideas on the board for the group's consideration. For writing assignments, having students generate thoughtful essay questions and topics about the subjects and content they are studying can be an invaluable tool for motivating genuine and passionate writing. Expanding or clarifying these questions with and for students, the teacher is positioned as a trusted guide. Often children's questions are more penetrating than a prewritten prompt or standard task, as they are more relevant and immediate to their ways of thinking as students.

Questions that challenge first impressions and obvious interpretations are generally the most engaging for students, and provide avenues for authentic instruction. Providing students a rubric for various types of questions<sup>7</sup>, or a set of anchors, can help to make the process accessible and relevant, as student develop their inquiry skills. Numerous examples of essential questions tailored to Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning have been posted on the world-wide-web. Teaching students to level questions in different ways for multiple purposes is standard practice in any discipline. Having them do this themselves is an essential part of critical praxis.

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<sup>7</sup> We use a Level system in class for students to design and form questions in which; Level 1 = yes/no true/false; Level 2 = Identification; Level 3 = Description; Level 4 = Explanation; Level 5 = Evaluation.

When my students read a short story or a novel, they often read and work in small-groups or "literature circles" (Daniels, 1994), and work together to develop questions for reading and discussion guides. The task of revisiting what they read is a necessary part of forming all different types of questions, from identification of key elements, to critical evaluations of content and subject matter. The results of their work propel "extraordinary conversations" (Fine & Weis, 2003), and distinctly relevant learning experiences that are pertinent to the students, and that span multiple zones of development. When students exchange questions between groups, they are able to share each others quandaries and continue investigations from different angles and interrogative points of view.

Grounding inquiry in disciplinary standards is necessary for establishing the base knowledge for the subject area so students learn the core content and skills for them to succeed in academic settings and disciplinary fields. Of course, the field of communication and thinking is wide and diverse, so organic dialogue and inquiry will necessarily include informal quandaries, infinitely subjective considerations, and occasions for all sorts of connections, realizations, and usually a few good laughs.

Communicating to students that they are responsible for posing questions also reverses the traditional authority structure in the classroom that determines who will ask questions for assessment (Shor, 1992). Handing students the responsibility of directing their own learning is a delicate task, but it can be accomplished by modeling the process of asking questions as a discipline, an art, and a critical necessity. Teachers can demonstrate the difference between yes-no, true-false, or simple identification questions. As more *how* and *why* questions are used, detailed *descriptions* and rational *explanations*

of learning topics and situations become necessary to inform answers sufficiently. Incorporating these sorts of questions into dialogue and activities with students allows each child to participate and contribute their own thinking about the subject in their own way. Using open-ended questions that welcome multiple perspectives also gives every child an opportunity to express their voices and opinions. Questions that ask students to *synthesize* and *evaluate* information open dialogue and interpretations to the rich diversity of possibilities and valid ideas that shape understandings and determine judgments. As students learn that open-ended questions have many correct answers, they realize that, quite often, one carefully structured question is more valuable than a hundred answers. One could argue that thinking generated through creative inquiry, and guided by critical awareness, can extend in at least 10,000 directions.

The habit of developing penetrating questions is a skill that extends beyond the classroom, informing decisions and requiring young people to think through all the available information they can gather in order to make healthy and informed choices. Because of the habitual *silencing* and domination of children's voices in traditional schooling (Freire, 1973; Shor, 1980; Giroux, 1981, 1983, 1985; Greene, 1988; Macedo, 1994; Fine & Weis, 2003), some students have learned that important decisions are made by other people and they simply follow along with those that cause them the least amount of grief. As questions drive thinking and inform understandings that guide attitudes and actions, practicing inquiry can build confidence in students to think for themselves and to exercise agency in areas of their own lives. In this way, developing skills in research and inquiry that function to purposefully direct the process of acquiring new understandings, students in public school classrooms can be empowered by participating in learning

exercises. When inquiry shifts from questions about *what we know* to questions about what we *can do* or what we *should do*, the active nature of the critical process becomes apparent. Freire (1973) described this phenomenon in *Education as the Practice of Freedom*,

It so happens that to every understanding, sooner or later an action corresponds. Once man perceives a challenge, understands it, and recognizes the possibilities of response, he acts. The nature of that action corresponds to the nature of his understanding. Critical understanding leads to critical action. (p. 44)

Young people make decisions and choices every day in school and out. Deciding what to do with oneself is not always easy. Teaching children to think through situations and form their own questions to acquire critical information requires guided practice. When students can generate their own inquiries and pursue collaborative research with classmates, they exercise essential skills for problem-solving and determining the outcomes of the situations they encounter in school and in life.

### **Critical Engagement of Multiple Methods**

It is important here to point out that many traditional and modern teaching practices incorporate the types of inquiry described here. The wheel was invented long before the bicycle, (and it caused a revolution!). The power of questioning is a human capacity and it transcends methods. The discussion in this chapter is meant to explore critical practices that facilitate activities in which students are responsible for doing the thinking and the work necessary for them to learn. As instructors, teachers must be free to guide inquiries and lessons as they relate to the subjects they teach and their own students' needs.

It is often necessary to provide direct-instruction, mini-lectures, and explanations of difficult content and concepts, just as requiring reading, writing, homework, and note-

taking are also part of successful teaching and learning. However, if students are not included in dialogue, inquiry, and collaborative problem-solving, they typically lose interest in the material and often disengage from activities knowing that the teacher will continue on without them. Inquiry is a prime strategy for incorporating the knowledge, interests, and motivated participation of every member of a learning group.

Asking questions while searching and researching for new information is essential to learning and disciplined study. It is certainly not unique to critical pedagogy and dialogical problem-posing techniques. Inquiry as a method is also not limited to oral communication. In the form of verbal dialogue, it is an effective strategy to generate thinking and sustain social interaction with the communication of ideas. But the educational benefit of talking has its limits. Reading, writing, interpretation, problem-solving, and application of information and understandings are constant components in critical learning processes. After students have uncovered major ideas about a situation being studied, they are empowered to work with the benefit of a shared set of concrete understandings that can be applied to accomplish increasingly complex learning tasks.

### **Beyond Whole-Group Instruction**

Collaborative work can be conducted in a whole-group format, small-groups, or partnered pairs in classrooms. Whereas a whole-class discussion can be arranged with desks in a circular fashion or otherwise, there can be a tendency in this physical working format for students to rely too much on the teacher to determine the pace and quality of dialogue and thinking. Just as the same types of true/false, yes/know questions wear thin for stimulating deeper thinking, facilitating dialogue and inquiry in a whole-class, teacher-centered arrangement can limit what is possible to achieve during class sessions.

Many students have been conditioned to stay quiet during teacher led activities for any number of reasons. Some learn that they will fall victim to abuse and chiding from classmates. Some have been embarrassed by insensitive teachers who think nothing of negating them, or denying them the right to any opinion that is not exactly in line with their own ideas or beliefs. Some kids are just shy and don't want to bring any attention to themselves, good or bad. Many children, especially those who have been oppressed, reside in a state of silence that represents a form of "powerlessness" (Freire, 1973) in the face of overwhelming social forces.

Shor (1980) suggested that bringing students *to voice* represents a possibility for their "social emergence" (p. 37) within a context that presents real opportunities for individual and collective development and "capacity building" (Noguera, 2003). Creating opportunities for students to work in groups or partners is a means to create situations where students can speak and interact in "mutual humanization" (Freire, 1970) with each other and the teacher. "From the outset, [the teacher's] efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them (p. 75). Part of this relationship is putting students in charge of making an honest effort to learn and understand subjects and material. Designing and organizing group-based activities is an effective strategy for delegating responsibility to students to participate actively in collaborative work that puts their skills and creativity to task.

Groups can be selected and arranged in a variety of ways, through random assignment, by student choice, or by other creative methods. It is often necessary to

assign groups by taking the total number of students in class and dividing it by the number of students each group will have. Then students can count off 1, 2, 3, 4, 5... and the 1's go with the 1's, the 2's with the 2's, and so on. This prevents social cliques from dominating working arrangements and serves to differentiate activities by providing opportunities for new peer relationships to be formed, and for students with varying strengths to interact with others who possess various different talents. Small-group arrangements are also a way to maximize the temporal and physical space in the classroom, as more students are able to speak, discuss, deliberate, and share ideas, than in a whole-group setting where ostensibly only one person can speak or be heard at a time. Collaborative working arrangements also enable computer-based activities when there are only a few machines available for students to use in the classroom.

As additional content and materials are provided for students to work with, teachers can then assign inquiry-based projects that require students to read and interpret the information they are given as an extension of the problem-situations being studied. Reading a passage, a worded problem, a story, an article, or a section of a text, interpreting a set of data on a chart or visual depiction, researching on the computer, conducting an experiment, and viewing videos all require students to use appropriate media as the source of information for research and inquiries. As students read and work together, they can put their ideas together to answer questions and solve relevant problems, as they dialogue and discuss strategies and solutions.

Prewritten questions that ask students to evaluate the content should represent opportunities to relate to the information in ways that illuminate both subject-specific knowledge and students' own interpretations. Guided questions provide structure for



students, but it is critical to have them generate their own research questions and decide for themselves what to do with materials and information in a problem-posing context. Projects and ideas for performance of understandings will be discussed in the next chapter.

Facilitating group reading, problem-solving, collaborative exercises, differentiated roles for participants, and investigations of research questions open up student dialogue and inquiry in ways that are not possible in whole-class or strictly individualized arrangements. As students share their own knowledge with each other, they benefit from their classmates' knowledge and strengths, such that activities are co-balanced with the individual qualities they express and the contributions they are each able to make. By differentiating activities and content materials, a variety of different projects and tasks can be assigned to get to the bottom of the situations students are presented.

Reading, writing, critical thinking, and collaborative communication can all be incorporated in learning tasks that challenge students. While individualized work is an essential part of learning, when it is used alone and when students are isolated or alienated from dialogue and interaction, the inherent advantages of communication and collaboration are lost. However, it is often useful to give students an opportunity to work on decoding and comprehending information and material themselves, before collaborating, in order to acquire their own concrete understandings first. As concrete questions lead to more open-ended questions, inquiries that stimulate genuine dialogue, deliberations, and discoveries are best suited for group activities in which students can

choose what they want to focus on, how they approach subjects, and how to communicate and present their findings.

### **Critical Inquiry - Connecting Thinking to Living and Understanding the World**

Critical inquiry is a mode of asking questions and thinking, and is therefore both receptive and productive - analytical and creative. As a basis for making judgments, critical consciousness is employed by using questions as frames of judgment, or *critical lenses*, to evaluate information and situations as described in problem-posing pedagogies and instructional frameworks. Concepts and questions can act as *conceptual and evaluative lenses* to direct thinking and guide judgments that enable multiple understandings, and that can then be used to form the basis for further activity and research. Deciding which questions will enable meaningful understandings is a critical process.

Questions that relate to actual living are part of the process of developing critical literacy abilities and can be the most stimulating for students to think about and work on. Shor (1980) found that asking questions about oneself and one's society are essential for raising consciousness and awareness that enable young people to make informed decisions and to live as they see fit. Freire (1998) observed the creative function of "restless" questioning:

Curiosity as restless questioning, as movement toward the revelation of something hidden, as a question verbalized or not, as search for clarity, as a moment of attention, suggestion, and vigilance, constitutes an integral part of the phenomenon of being alive. There could be no creativity without the curiosity that moves us and sets us patiently impatient before a world that we did not make, to add to it something of our own making. (p. 37)

Critical inquiry implies the need for people to be aware of what *is*, and at the same time to have a clear sense of what "*ought to*" be (Keith, 1996). As a form of constructive

curiosity, this process empowers people to ask the types of questions that open pathways for new and transformative thinking. Guided by purposeful inquiry and astute judgment, critical consciousness can enlighten thinking, liberate awareness, and illuminate pathways for initiating transformative actions.

Questioning the state of one's circumstances sometimes involves interrogating aspects of one's life that could be considered "unquestionable" (Apple, 1979, p. 13). Habits, routines, perceptions, beliefs and dogmas, assumptions we make, cultural and social practices and institutions, and the sense people have about their own power to act and make choices, are examples of commonly unquestioned subjects that can be subjected to investigative inquiry and critical evaluation. Critical scholars have recognized that to ask questions is to begin to recreate one's own experience, to identify options for living in freedom, and to interpret and define life as one chooses (Greene, 1988).

Clearly, without the ability to question, individuals merely follow dictums. If we only utilize knowledge that has been provided to us by other people or unexamined informational sources, without subjecting ideas and information to our own reflections and evaluations, we inhabit a mental world that is created for us, and cannot help but become passive objects of outside forces. Inquiry is an essential tool of critically-conscious thinking, because it allows people to seek answers that enable them to form judgments and make decisions that are self-determined (Freire, 1973; Shor, 1980; Giroux, 1981; Scherr, 2005). Owning knowledge and determining one's experience can result from the awareness and thinking skills developed through the practice of critical inquiry.

The National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996) promote teaching students to use language for critical purposes by developing inquiries that are oriented to school subjects and are also self-referential.

Critical language users question and comment on what they read, hear, and view. Students' critical skills are nurtured in classrooms where questioning, brainstorming, hypothesizing, reflecting, and imaging are encouraged and rewarded. Students develop the ability to pose questions as they read, listen, and view: What inferences can I draw from this text? What perspective does this text ask me to assume? What viewpoint is presented in this text? What does this text omit or distort? How is my own response related to what is presented by the text?

Critical language users bring original ways of thinking and novel interpretations to texts. While critical thinking is often concerned with making distinctions and marking differences, effective critical thinkers also draw connections among texts, their own responses to them, various bodies of knowledge, and their own experiences. Development of critical language skills enables students to provide informed opinions about texts they encounter, and to support their interpretations with multiple forms of evidence. (p. 15)

As these descriptors indicate, in some cases, essential questions are provided in standards literature to garner broad reaching, open-ended inquiries that extend and modulate the questions driving particular disciplines to address critical objectives. However, despite coordinated efforts to produce sufficient standards for the academic subjects, standardized objectives and the questions they imply often leave out the types of analyses that are central to the tradition of critical pedagogy.

### **Critical Thinking in the Tradition of Critical Pedagogy**

Critical inquiry as a practice in the critical tradition of education goes beyond what is outlined in state-sponsored guides and curricular materials. Although inquiry-based strategies are increasingly common in educational practice, students are not automatically required to evaluate their own perspectives, to assess how power operates in social relations, or to decide what information is essential to understand the origins and interconnections between phenomena. Critical inquiry requires students to do these

things by using *critical lenses* to form questions that examine *root causes of phenomena*, *cultural and ethical considerations in human interactions*, and dynamics of *power*, *agency*, *conflict*, and *causality* in the subjects under analysis. These *lenses* act as conceptual frameworks for evaluating subjects in reality and they facilitate both understandings about the nature of the world, and people's involvement and experiences.

When school subjects are perceived as situations in which competing realities are at work, the need for developing critical-consciousness becomes evident. Physical, social, cultural, emotional, mental, ideological, spiritual, and subjective aspects of reality all demand consideration and inclusion, through multiple voices and perspectives. By developing critical consciousness in the classroom and extending it to worldly pursuits, individuals are able to make decisions about knowledge, form discerning judgments, and act in ways that explore new doors of understanding and possibility. Generating essential guiding questions to guide critical inquiries is always a useful device for engaging critically-conscious thinking in the classroom.

Throughout this process, dialogue, identification of key concepts and themes, and progressive inquiry are all actively at work. As concrete understandings and further quandaries are established, critical thinking exercises and activities help students to make sense of the acquired information by adopting “relational” analyses (Apple, 1979). As a mode of extended research, *critical thinking is focused and deliberate inquiry, directed to achieve designated purposes, and selected and designed to assess the information available within a situation according to the parameters established in the investigation, all in order to make judgments about meanings and applications for functionalizing the knowledge that is attained.* Because critical thinking is only possible

once students have concrete understandings of the situations they are studying, assessing whether students have sufficient background and contextual knowledge is necessary part of instructional processes that guide relational analyses.

Considering the fact that students are situated and positioned within a set of circumstances, developing their critical capacity is a means of educating them within a world of realities, material, subjective, interdependent, cultural, interdisciplinary, social and interpersonal, experiential, personal, and so on. Generally speaking, the *lenses* we use for critical inquiry can focus on any object or subject, event, idea, concept, issue, fact, text, performance, presentation, or any type of real situation or information to:

- a) identify and evaluate its “internal structure” (Shor, 1992), – what it means and how meanings are defined, essential elements, dynamics that determine how things work, why realities exist, origins and progressive developments through time and space, and internal logic;
- b) to critique how the situation compares or relates to similar situations, constructs, or discipline-specific standards of form in order to make judgments;
- c) to evaluate how the situation relates to the “self” and individual identities, subjectivities, emotionalities, aesthetics, functionality, utility, and how it applies to one's own life and experiences; and
- d) to evaluate how the situation relates to people's conditions living in society, public spheres, families, cultures, geographic regions, environments and ecologies, the world at-large, and humanity as a whole.

Extending discussions and critical investigations involves realizations about the subjects themselves and a wide range of connected and related realities. In both formal and informal ways, critical questioning is a process of honing one's skills of inquiry, research, and judgment so that ideas and determinations can be formed, supported, and defended using analytical frameworks, available evidence, and reliable sources. Critical pedagogy as a tradition involves teaching students how to develop these skills as well as the social

sense and critical capacity to see past interferences to logical and ethical reasoning in order to counteract forces that limit knowledge and constrain possibilities.

Critical thinking has a *de-masking* quality and involves analyzing information by investigating the internal and correlational structure of the subjective situation and the contextual situations it exists in and with, to "step beyond commonsense assumptions" and "falsified appearances" (Giroux, 1981) while "freeing the mind from error, delusions, or prejudices" (Lankshear, 1993, p. 21). Freire (1973) described this mode of thinking, described as the activity of "critically transitive consciousness," in his first treatise;

The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's "findings" and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old - by accepting what is valid in both old and new. ... *Conscientizacao* represents the *development* of the awakening of critical awareness. (1973, p. 18)

Many of the *critical lenses* within a framework for critically-conscious thinking are evident here. Critical scholarship in education points to the need to look beyond dominant narratives, "commonsense" notions, cultural assumptions, ego- and ethnocentric thinking. The evaluative lenses that critical thinkers adopt to conduct critical investigations are part of a liberatory set of analytical tools for ascertaining transcendental truths and emancipatory knowledge. When the dynamics of *constitutive elements* and *causal factors* operating within and throughout the various dimensions of reality that situated subjects and learning exist in are clearly identified and perceived, it begins to be possible to understand them, and to work to counteract elements and notions that work to people's detriment (Freire, 1970, 1973; Apple, 1979; Shor, 1980; Giroux, 1981, 1983, 1988b; Greene, 1998; Kincheloe, 2008; Morrell, 2008; hooks, 2010).

Richard Paul and Linda Elder (2008), of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, have also identified a set of elements that they have coordinated as a method for facilitating critical thinking with practical studies. These are presented in eight steps that can be used in order, or as they apply to subjects of thought, and can be summarized as:

- 1) Establishing a Purpose, Goal, or Objective for thinking;
- 2) Specifying Questions in the form of Problems or Issues;
- 3) Collecting Information, Data, Facts, Observations, and reflecting on experience;
- 4) Interpreting information and using Inferences to suggest Conclusions and Solutions;
- 5) Developing Concepts, Theories, Definitions, Principles, or Models that represent findings;
- 6) Identifying Assumptions and assessing information that has been taken-for-granted;
- 7) Observing Implications and Consequences of findings; and
- 8) Considering Point of View, Perspectives, Frames of reference, and orientations to consider alternative ways of seeing the subject and information clearly. (p. 3)

The methods and evaluative lenses for critical thinking described in the foundation's literature are enlightening for those interested in using an established framework to guide thinking exercises and activities. Here, the inquiry stage of thinking is one in a range of other investigatory research and deductive practices, but the information one gathers and accepts to be true must be put to some use. How findings are determined to be *accurate*, and the ideas that emerge regarding how to challenge one's own *perspectives*, *assumptions*, *biases*, and *purposes*, are all necessary components for critical thinking to unfold. Building these strategies into inquiry and activities with students is possible in a number of ways. As concepts are discovered, new activities and avenues for exploration and evaluation emerge within classroom activities and learning groups.

While critical thinking strategies and methods such as these are an essential part of a critical pedagogy, the *purposes and objectives* for activities must be deliberately considered to be an inclusive part of critical liberatory praxis (Burbules & Berk, 1999). As critical pedagogy is part of a tradition grounded in social research, themes relating to *freedom*, *power*, *causality*, and *conflicting truths* are necessary to understand the plight of



human beings, and need to be evaluated with *critical lenses*, along with the realities of *domination* and *oppression* that inhibit people from developing and realizing their full abilities and potentials en route to achieving their full humanity. People have the potential to not only see life as they would like it to be for themselves, but also to initiate actions that enable their visions to be realized, as creative ideas and projects grow and are developed to benefit individuals, families, and whole communities of people. The need for sustainable projects that support activities and facilitate the achievement of collective objectives is evident through a survey of conditions in communities that have suffered from the effects of societal and economic forces outside their control. Many communities have been abandoned by "progress" as society has transformed.

A survey of de-agriculturalized rural areas, deindustrialized or "rust belt" cities, and depopulated and troubled urban ghettos brings up questions about what the destinations for progress really are in the United States. On a global scale, assessing socially devastating environmental damage, deforestation, water and air pollution, and the state of human affairs and conditions that have been created by global economic and trade policies dominated by American, European, and more recently Asian interests and economic alliances, oppression and exploitation have profound meanings for people and cultures in both the "developed" and the "developing" world. Social and environmental justice are local and global imperatives that demand to be addressed as populations rise and resources become increasingly limited.

Selecting and pursuing social themes as the subject of inquiries, critical thinking, and creative responses, in the interest of liberating human beings, is a distinct objective in critical pedagogies. Themes relating to the human condition and human possibility are

part of the *critical project* to identify, bring awareness to, and ultimately to transform situations that oppress and dehumanize people. The "omission" (Gordon, 1995; McNeil, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Loewen, 2007) of critical information and relevant topics, and the "selection" (Macedo, 1994) of facts that obscure the subjugation and exploitation of people in the United States and across the globe in local communities, are constant oversights and hegemonic trends in mainstream education. "Prescribed" curricula overlook and leave out uncomfortable truths about human conditions and struggles for freedom that critical and liberatory pedagogies examine (Freire, 1970; Apple, 1979; Shor, 1980, 1986; Giroux, 1981, 1983; Anyon, 1983; McNeil, 1983).

In fact, the "hidden curriculum" in modern American schooling tends to dominate and exclude studies of contemporary and postmodern histories in favor of presenting volumes of antiquity in American and European civilizations, with brief surveys and mentions of other cultures and peoples (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Nieto, 1999). These practices delimit the historical vision young people have to develop understandings of the conflicts and contexts which have created present-day realities and have defined struggles over culturally contested territories and values. In addition to the fact that human suffering and happiness are immediate imperatives of social life in general, the fact that American cities are sites of ongoing struggles must be addressed in critical studies in order to enable urban youngsters to decide how they will respond to the demands that are placed on them (Freire, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Anyon, 2005; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Morrell, 2008).

## Critical Literacy

Investigating reality with critical theoretical frameworks and ethical perspectives is a process of humanization and empowerment in liberatory praxis. Understanding how people experience life adds a fundamentally different and more profound dimension to learning about the world. The complex associations, determinations, and judgments that can be rendered from purposefully guided critical thinking and inquiry-based research, as well as the actions people take based on what they know and learn, all represent aspects of a *critical literacy* that develops through critical educational practice (Shor, 1980, 2009; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1988; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993; Morrell, 2008). Ira Shor (1992) defined critical literacy as,

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (p.129)

The development of critical literacy is a revolutionary concept in education because conventional practices have managed to overlook a broad range of local, national, and international social realities. The *hidden curriculum* in American education avoids topics that would undermine the legitimacy of the established social order in which elite power and Anglo-Saxon privilege and cultural dominance dictate the content of textbooks and centrally distributed curricula and learning materials, as well as traditional instructional practices (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Shor, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Macedo, 1994).

Recognizing that the qualities and interests *represented* in the curriculum and classroom discourse directly affect what students are able to discover and do with

information, is an essential decision critical educators must make to design and organize activities that enable critical literacies to develop. Denying consideration of reality and human experience is an "anti-critical" (Shor, 1980) stance that serves to dominate academic narratives inherent in "banking" methods, prescribed models of curriculum, and traditional authoritarian modes of pedagogy that impose the dominant culture.

Critical literacy is more than a set of analytical skills. It is also a means of identifying realities and finding truths in subjective investigations that provide working concepts and directions for actions that can benefit the interests of an individual or the groups of people involved in a learning group's process and progress. Recognizing our own role in present experience is part of this process of identification. McLaren and Lankshear (1993) explained,

To this extent critical literacy becomes the interpretation of the social present for the purpose of transforming the cultural life of particular groups, for questioning the tacit assumptions and unarticulated presuppositions of our current cultural and social formations and the subjectivities and capacities for agenthood that they foster. Critical literacy is directed at understanding the ongoing social struggles over the signs of culture and over the definition of social reality, over what is considered legitimate and preferred meaning at any given historical moment. ...

It does suggest that curricula should be organized in ways that encourage and enable students to make judgments about how society is historically and socially constructed, both within and outside of a politics of diversity, how existing social practices are implicated in relations of equality and justice as well as how they structure inequalities around racism, sexism, economic exploitation, and other forms of oppression. (p. 424)

Cultural and historical analyses reveal that inequalities and social interferences to peaceful and plentiful existence are real aspects of life that people must contend with today. Alleviating suffering is an immediate imperative in the classroom and as a guiding purpose for engaging subjects and realities outside of school. The diversity of human experience is a challenging subject to explore without considering the ways particular cultures struggle to overcome dominant forms of power exercised through the

political, economic, and other structural forces of society that work to their disadvantage (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Shor, 1980).

Challenging students to confront reality both as a source for their own thinking and as the field where they can apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills is inherent in a critical problem-posing pedagogy. As students locate challenges that threaten to limit them, resisting the power that they wield and represent is a form of "self-defense" (Macedo, 1994; Chomsky, 2000) that requires recognizing the limiting situations and implementing strategies for transforming them. Themes of oppression and domination are directly related to the active pursuit of happiness because they represent obstacles that stand in the way.

However, in compulsory public schooling, where children and adolescents are sent to school without much of a choice, focusing only on issues that cause people to suffer can cause students to be uncomfortable and to ignore uncomfortable realities in order to maintain a "lightness of being" or a blissful ignorance. This fact needs to be acknowledged and respected by critical educators in order to not lead students to apathy or willful ignorance. In the interest of respecting young people's affective and developmental health, and their need and desire to have positive, uplifting experiences in school, maintaining optimism and positive thinking is a necessity. Affirming and exploring themes of freedom, justice, family, culture, life, nature, everyday experience, happiness, imagination, money, work, technology, government, art, and creative endeavors, are all part of critical and liberatory studies. Themes of experience are subject to investigations that can reveal both positive and negative expressions of thematic exigencies as they play out in reality. These themes, among other common experiences,

provide rich conceptual and contextual frameworks for critical investigations through inquiry, dialogue, problem-posing, and critical research.

Celebrating human triumph, discovery, vision, creation, liberation, love, hope, friendship, relationships, cultural expression, community, cooperation, and health is a vital part of this same work, in the spirit of illuminating human potential. Of course, every topic and situation that is dealt with in class will have its own themes embedded in it, presenting unlimited possibilities for inquiry and the conceptualizations that arise in exploratory investigation and collaborative learning activities and projects.

## CHAPTER 8

### ORGANIZING ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS TO COMMUNICATE UNDERSTANDINGS FOR ONGOING ASSESSMENT

Inquiry and critical thinking are fundamental aspects of critical learning, but to complete the process students must be given opportunities to demonstrate and communicate what they learn, know, and understand in purposeful activities, and with the benefit of ongoing assessment. Inquiry is the interrogative phase of critical learning, in which information is evaluated through critical lenses to guide judgments. Judgments can be seen as mental or conceptual formations that guide perceptions. In the productive sense, judgments form the basis for thought, speech, and action. In the first stages of this process, students take in information as they try to understand a situation. Children name what they know and think as they investigate subjects from multiple perspectives and angles, and form questions and inquiries like scholarly detectives assigned to a case. The final phase of thinking and working through the critical process involves students using what is discovered to formulate, elaborate, communicate, and act on their ideas. This can be done in many different ways and through various formats for teachers to provide ongoing assessment.

Learning assessments can include many different activities that ask students to solve problems, make a case, demonstrate their understandings, form arguments, connect ideas to other relevant situations, or to perform, create, write, display, present, publish, communicate, share, articulate, address, produce, act out, act on, design, illustrate, connect, extend, revisit, interpret, reinterpret, organize, propose, explain material, or to express what they know and have learned in another way.

As students work on decoding, interpreting, evaluating, and researching materials, receptive activity must be complemented by productive and expressive activity to complete the learning cycle and maintain the progressive acquisition of critical knowledge and skills. This can be conceived as a cyclical mode of investigation, comprehension, and communication through critically-conscious activity. In addition to completing the cognitive learning process, the ideas students produce on paper and in dialogue are valuable as the means for *formal and informal assessments*. As teachers read and listen to what students are writing and communicating, a world of information becomes available for evaluating proficiencies, understandings, strengths and weaknesses, and indicated areas of need. As an ongoing process, authentic and meaningful assessment is designed to target ways to help individual students and whole classes of children succeed in developing skills, knowledge, and critical literacies. In this framework, assessment is meant to be a *diagnostic practice* that researches what students are doing in-process, in order to find ways to help them grow and achieve objectives.

In-process, diagnostic, and developmental assessments are in direct contrast to traditional modes that aim only to reward and punish wrong and right answers. The *Gotcha!* game is a familiar mode of assessment that is prevalent in standardized testing practices and traditional styles of pedagogy, where answers on bubble-sheets and multiple-choice questions decide grades without requiring students to explain their thinking or demonstrate what they do know. Also, writing assignments and problem-based tasks that are graded but not corrected, revised, edited, or evaluated with critical commentary, only permit students to pass or fail, without addressing the ideas, understandings, or information and skills students need to have to develop proficiencies



and critical literacies. When used without any diagnostic purpose to decide where and how to develop instruction, these practices only condition students to pass or fail and do not necessarily provide results suitable for modifying instruction or meeting students' developmental or learning needs. Jerome Bruner (1962) observed a problem with the punishment and reward model, and its use of *coercion* to illicit knowledge production. He argued that as a system of behavioral reinforcement, the "effect loses potency with lapse in time" (p. 132). When students do get feedback in traditional testing and assessment methods and tools, it is often long past the time they were actively considering the questions and problems, and their motivation to adjust understandings is not present in the same way as it was when they were in the process of working on solving the problems originally, especially when they are already stuck with the grade they were given.

One way to maintain students' motivation to check their understandings and revise what they think and know is to provide opportunities for students to assess and review their own work, if right and wrong answers are part of formal assessments. This can be as simple as having students put their pencils or pens away after a quiz or exam, and distributing red ink pens for students to grade their own papers immediately after the assessment is issued. As students generate and discuss the questions and answers during the review, correct responses can be written on the board, and students can mark and correct their papers with red ink. This benefits students in numerous ways. Not only are they able to reconsider their own thinking and problem-solving methods, but they learn the answers to questions they didn't get right. In addition, as each question is reviewed and explained in the assessment session, students' understandings are reinforced, and

their knowledge of informational content and relevant skills is exercised and further expanded.

This process may appear to pose the risk of disingenuous results, but students are often pleasantly surprised to find that they are responsible for their own assessment and will cooperate accordingly. Of course it is important to double check to see if students "caught" their mistakes. This is an excellent way to review important material again while students are still thinking carefully about it, and to give them experiences assessing their own understandings themselves in a dialogical process. The qualities of self-direction and self-assessment are critical for instilling a sense of responsibility for autonomous learning, and can be exercised and strengthened in this way. Also, in a problem-posing format, posing mistakes on assessments as problems to be further investigated can present opportunities for alternative assignments that require students to revisit and review what they were unclear about and present a new project for extra-points. Of course, these types of assessment exercises are only possible with certain questions and activities that only require short and definitive answers.

Formal and informal assessments involve more than issuing tests, quizzes, or tasks with right and wrong answers. As students work on reading, solving problems, and writing about materials in groups and individually, it is incumbent upon teachers to move around the room and engage with students while they are engulfed in the processes involved in doing their work. Reading what students are writing and offering supportive comments, praise, suggestions, and corrections are all ways to assess and address student thinking, writing, concrete and abstract understandings, and content knowledge and skills during class time. Talking to students, listening in and participating in their collaborative

work, and inquiring about their thinking, creates a personal and social connection that enables the teacher to understand children and assess their needs, abilities, and skill-based performances more holistically. Daily assessment of student writing, thinking, problem-solving, comprehension, critical literacies, cooperative and social skills, organizational habits, and decision making is a crucial practice for caring and committed teachers in critically-conscious classrooms. Each of the strategies outlined in the previous chapters provides a structure for assessing student understandings informally as they think and communicate about the subjects they are studying. Assessments designed to gauge the direction of activities and lessons depend on ongoing observations and immediate clarifications and modifications with students as they are working, writing, and thinking. In this sense, informal assessments are evaluations conducted in and of a process, in order to provide constant feedback.

Formal assessments are evaluations of student work designed to measure whether students have met specified objectives, and are produced as a result of ongoing instructional and learning processes. Formal writing assignments, tests, quizzes, compositions, demonstrations, and presentations of numerous sorts are all examples of formal assessments. These assessment tools are a valuable part of assessing what students know and are able to do with information and materials. Critical teaching approaches use these evaluations in tandem with other methods in ways that are authentic and meaningful for students.

Students must have numerous opportunities to work with information and material in a "sheltered" context that validates their persistent efforts, enables them to succeed at manageable tasks, and that engages them as active and motivated participants

working on problems that they can relate to. Shor (1992) argued, "An accurate picture of what students know and can do is possible only when students really want to perform at their best" (p. 21). Creating problems and questions that generate genuine motivation and thought requires providing students with activities, materials, and projects that reflect real engagement with subjects as dynamical aspects of living. Considerations for selecting situations were discussed in Chapter 5. The idea of connecting school and life is a prevalent theme in critical pedagogies and relates directly to creating tasks that apply to living "in and with the world" (Dewey, 1899, p. 303).

Assessments that are authentic take critical objectives into account, reflecting the "real world" orientation of both critical work and genuine evaluation of young people in socialization processes and conceptual development. Wiggins (1998) described "authentic assessment" as an evaluative tool that meets the following standards:

- It is realistic.
- Requires judgment and innovation. Here the learner must use knowledge and skills to solve problems.
- It asks students to "do" the subject.
- It replicates or simulates actual "tests" in the workplace, personal life, and civic life.
- It assesses the student's ability and skills to effectively and efficiently use a repertoire of many skills to complete a problem or task.
- It allows many opportunities to practice, rehearse, consult, get feedback, and refine actual performances and productions. (In Janesick, 2007, p. 241)

These standards support formal and informal assessments, and can be realized throughout a critical problem-posing process in which: students are presented situations that are relevant to them; the deliberate generation of ideas and logical judgments is facilitated through dialogue; inquiry and critical thinking are purposively guided; and when activities are designed for students to document and communicate their ideas and findings in progressively challenging tasks that require the performance of their understandings. Howard Gardner (1999) emphasized the importance of assessments that place

"understanding front and center" (p. 128). As a critical approach necessarily involves relating knowledge to the self and social contexts, understandings in this regard refer to solving problems, doing research work, and creating products that are useful for communicating new knowledge as it relates to living and learning in school and beyond.

In their research on authentic assessment, Newman, Marks, & Gamoran (1996) suggested that assessment tasks must include the types of language used by professional people in the world in various disciplines and fields. "The language they use - verbal, symbolic, and visual - includes qualifications, nuances, elaborations, details, and analogues woven into extended expositions, narratives, explanations, justifications, and dialogue" (284). For this reason, classroom assessments must integrate the reality of the disciplinary fields being studied in school with how they are practiced, experienced, and appropriated in society. When viewed in this context, the knowledge and skills taught and studied in school take on a life and meaning of their own. Connecting classroom and societal realities creates infinite possibilities for research and critical projects to take shape. Applying academic knowledge in these ways makes learning itself authentic, so the assessment of that learning is merely a reflection of learning to live and work in real settings.

Newman, Marks, & Gamoran (1996) outlined a set of "assessment tasks" that facilitate authentic evaluations. They include:

Organization of Information - Students organize, synthesize, interpret, explain, or evaluate complex information in addressing a concept, problem, or issue.

Consideration of Alternatives - students consider alternative solutions, strategies, perspectives, or points of view as they address a concept, problem, or issue.

Disciplinary Content - Students show an understanding and/or use ideas, theories, or perspectives considered central to an academic or professional discipline.

Disciplinary Process - Students use methods of inquiry, research, or communication characteristic of an academic or professional discipline.

Elaborated Written Communication - students elaborate their understandings, explanations, or conclusions through extended writing.

Problem Connected to the World - students address a concept, problem, or issue that is similar to one that they have encountered or are likely to encounter in life beyond the classroom.

Audience Beyond the School - students communicate their knowledge, present a product or performance, or take some action for an audience beyond the teacher, classroom, and school building. (p. 289)

Each of these tasks is an integral part of critical problem-posing pedagogy and activities, and they open possibilities for directing learning to the proclivities of living. As projects and activities are designed for students to work on, rubrics and standards for evaluation must be established and clarified in order for students to be aware of how they will be assessed, and what they need to do to demonstrate competence and proficiency.

Collaborative projects, reports, research studies, labs and experiments, surveys, multimedia presentations, written communication and compositions, speeches, public displays, photography, art work, business plans, proposals, action plans, case studies, journalistic media, websites, blogs, newspapers, video and films, poetry, music, dance, theater, movement, games, direct actions, and activism are all possible projects for learning in this framework for authentic assessment.

The learning that takes place within authentic projects is largely the result of genuine student interest, participation, and willful effort. These qualities are sometimes difficult to assess, yet they remain the most valuable for learning and liberated development, free from the narrow constraints of traditional constructs. Shor (1980) noted that it is possible to assess self-direction as a means for evaluating students' success as creative projects are underway and students work with less need for teacher directions.

He also explained that a dialogical problem-posing process has its own assessment framework that itself counteracts the oppressive structure of externally generated tests:

This kind of in-progress and in-process evaluation is an extraordinary challenge to the ordinary shape of power. Institutional testing through the agency of an empowered teacher is a way of keeping students paralyzed as objects. The liberatory class rejects alienation through its own means of organic self-measurement. (1980, p. 112)

When implementing in-process and organic assessment practices and strategies, flexibility is helpful. But teachers must establish guidelines or rubrics for projects and students' productive tasks. Teaching these metrics and standards for quality and measurement can be an instructional opportunity for modeling skills and demonstrating methods. To be fully responsive, it is also necessary to differentiate instruction and assignments to tailor to the needs of the particular students in each class. As teaching focuses on developing the requisite knowledge, thinking, and disciplinary skills necessary to understand and apply information, setting goals and making accommodations for individual students becomes an intrinsic part of assessment processes and practices. This not only enables students to perform the tasks they are assigned, but it allows the teacher to work within each student's "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978), and to provide necessary support and "scaffolding," according to their individual and collective needs.

All evaluation is a form of assessment, and as teachers evaluate where their students "are" and where they need to "be," assessment and instruction go hand in hand. Providing ongoing assessment and constant feedback requires informal and formal measures. In critical teaching praxis, assessing students is more than assigning work and giving grades. Critical teachers must assess a broad spectrum of student proficiencies, including academic literacies, skill development, social development, motivation, interest

level, effort, empathic capacities, creativity, self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs, goal setting, and other factors that relate to human beings living and learning in the classroom context other domains in the world. As students work collaboratively and individually, constant opportunities are available for observing, listening to, monitoring, evaluating, modifying, revising, extending, and facilitating what children know and understand. Projects that require multiple-stages of problem-solving and inquiry extend these opportunities and enable personalized, authentic, and critical modes of reflection and interaction between students, the subjects and materials they encounter, and the teacher who plans, organizes, crafts, and guides lessons and activities.

Providing ongoing critical and constructive feedback is an imperative for moving all students along without letting children fail. Interventions and direct strategies for targeting the needs of struggling students must accompany informal and formal assessments as indicated. Identifying areas where more attention is needed for particular children is a way to establish specific objectives for individual children, in an effort to help them recognize their strengths and weaknesses and work to improve their skills. Assessment strategies designed to measure the achievement of critical objectives need to keep all students' progress, motivation, and participation in mind as focal points and imperatives for guiding their learning.



## CHAPTER 9

### ETHICAL VALUES, IDEOLOGY, AND PERSPECTIVES: CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPERATIVES FOR CRITICAL PRAXIS

Critical pedagogy is grounded in ethical values and imperatives, transcending singular ideologies, and considering multiple perspective that empower teachers to conduct classroom practices to accomplish what is best for all their students. The actions people do that constitute living are largely the result of the values, ideas, and perspectives that occupy the conscious and subconscious mind. Establishing critical praxis requires an orientation that recognizes traditions and knowledge from the past while integrating realities and considerations from the present, and that dedicates efforts to improving the condition of life in the future. Envisioning a world in which people can be free to shape their own destinies without their efforts being impeded by overbearing, unmanageable, and oppressive conditions, or unequally distributed disadvantages, is a necessary exercise for critical teachers (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2007). When educators see injustice and inopportunities as fundamentally problematical and intolerable, it is possible to begin to see alternatives. All forms of oppression, exploitation, ideological and material domination, and willful imposition of conditions that limit people and cause human suffering are unethical and must be challenged from an ethical perspective and base, with critical thinking and strategies for persistent counteractions that challenge injustices.

#### **Ethical Values**

Guiding educational practice with ethical values and purposes is what distinguishes strategies in critical pedagogies from other teaching methods where disciplinary and critical thinking are formalized, but not necessarily aligned with the

established tradition of critical pedagogical objectives. It is possible to be analytical without thinking or acting ethically. There are plenty of corporate executives who capitalize on their analyses of economics by firing thousands of workers at a time and sustaining oppressive working conditions for citizens in the United States and abroad, while maintaining profits for their investors and personal "success" in their careers. Amoral and unethical thinking are not anomalies in this world.

Ethical values are not always complex. They come from beliefs in doing what is right and what is good for people and oneself. Moral and ethical values are learned in families, organizations, and through cultural forms of knowledge production (Gordon, 1995; Morrell, 2008) acquired through experiential interaction and socialization with the world and nature (Freire, 1973; Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981; Shor, 1980; Scherr, 2005). As children and as adult members and affiliates of groups with distinct cultures, the experiences we have shape our perceptions of what is "right". One could argue that perceptions shape beliefs, beliefs shape attitudes, and attitudes shape judgments and behaviors. What we do within the bounds of the world we live in is largely determined by our perception of *what we should do*. This moral trajectory and the degree of agency we perceive ourselves to possess, can motivate and empower people as individuals, collective groups, and cultures to make decisions and embark on actions that literally change the world. Educational settings provide spaces for critical interventions into our conventional perceptions, attitudes, and understandings that guide what we do.

Ethical and moral reasoning are also highly subjective forms of thinking. The wide range of systems used to gauge and engage the values that guide reasoning varies among individuals and groups of all kinds who possess shared cultures and beliefs.

Lawrence Kohlberg (1973) elucidated a set of "stages of moral reasoning" in an attempt to understand the perceptions and beliefs that guide human beings as we make decisions about doing what is "right" or ethical in social, physical, practical, and logistical contexts. One end of the spectrum of moral reasoning is embodied by *me-first* mentalities characterized by egocentrism, narcissism, and selfish actions. The modes of reasoning at the other end of the spectrum can be described as *we-first* dispositions which include altruism, compassion, and selfless devotion to a common good. However, while the stages follow a sequential progression through human development, they do not necessarily signify "right" or "wrong" thinking in every instance.

The qualities of the various moral dispositions reflect the differentiated range of thought processes that people utilize when making moral decisions and encountering immediate social and situational demands. This is why ethical reasoning is necessarily subjective. Depending upon the demands of the environment one lives in and is subjected to, dispositions and beliefs vary about how to best think and act effectually to achieve objectives that are necessary and deemed to be of personal or collective value. This often involves considerations of how to move forward with the "self" intact and "on track," and depends on one's own ideas and conscious choices about the reasons for taking action. A psychological or spiritual evaluation of self-concept in relation to, or in connection with others and society, is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it is helpful to understand ethical thinking as a catalyst for engaging critical literacies that involve moral reasoning with values that are based on human judgments about what is right and just.

Considering how beliefs about the relationship between oneself, others, and living in a society are fundamentally moral choices, adopting the ethical imperative to do what is best for every child in the classroom is to take a moral stance. This same reasoning applies to critical perspectives of human affairs and social realities. Taking a moral or ethical stance can be one of the most powerful choices classroom teachers can make to embark on critical investigations and to substantiate critical pedagogical praxis.

Kohlberg's six stages of moral-reasoning extend on a continuum from "pre-conventional," to "conventional," to "post-conventional" (1973). Critical teaching involves working from a "post-conventional", or *principled* perspective. By grounding classroom norms and practices in the recognition and imperativeness of human dignity, empathic capacity, social justice and responsibility, democratic relations and sharing authority, and the belief that it is wrong to consciously harm people, critical teachers embrace ethical and critical reasoning that transcends the narrow boundaries of *me-first* belief systems.

Ideologies that exclude others from being worthy of respect, that limit the extension of freedom and consideration to only those who can provide reciprocal benefit, and that only permit people to tolerate others who share the same ideologies, are all dangerous to the welfare and integrity of a pluralistic and democratic society. Adopting *critical lenses* to assess how *power, agency, culture, and ethical values* operate in *social realities* is part of the liberatory tradition in critical pedagogy and education (Freire, 1973, 1970, 1998; Giroux, 1981, 1983; Shor, 1980, 1992; Greene, 1988; McLaren, 1998).

Critical educational praxis sees human potential and dignity as being ultimately important and instructional strategies are designed respectively, to encourage people to

practice their freedom to make sense of reality in ways they see fit, and to strategize how to transform factors in their lives that are debilitating and oppressive. Common decency and mutual respect for human life and freedom are basic principles guiding this work. A liberatory perspective also entails ethical limits to freedom that disallow harming others or infringing on people's rights.

When teachers decide to be educators, they make a commitment to helping children reach their fullest potentials. In itself this is an ethical choice, but unknowingly, many teachers step into the classroom having already made choices that inhibit young people's freedom to make sense of reality on their own terms, and that prevent them from being able to integrate their perspective and faculties with actual experiences they have in the classroom. Instructional ideologies driven by good intentions do not guarantee that students' potentials will be fulfilled (Apple, 1979). The oppressive practices described in the previous chapters testify to this fact. As ideologies are value-driven, critically examining what one believes and assumes to be true can be a liberating and transformative exercise.

Critical pedagogies are oriented in a multifaceted ideology that attends to the moral, ethical, and political imperatives that reflect American civic values and liberatory and enlightenment perspectives and notions. Freedom, justice, and democracy relate to authority, fairness, and mutually informed social interactions and decision-making, while reason and scientific thinking lend credence to evidential knowledge that results from disciplined research and inquiry. Critically-conscious reasoning is driven by ethical imperatives that guide judgments and focus perceptions of what is right and what is necessary for the liberation and humanization of people in the world (Freire, 1973, 1970).

While progressive instructional ideologies promote student-centered learning and affective considerations, they do not necessarily focus on the causes of human suffering or conditions that force people to experience dehumanizing, oppressive, discriminatory, and detrimental treatment and conditions.

### **Ideology and Perspectives**

Ideology is closely related to the perspective through which one looks at the world. A child's perspective of a classroom includes how he sees himself, his classmates, the teacher, and the roles that each is supposed to play. A teacher's perspective involves how she or he perceives students, the content area and relevant information that children should learn, and his or her own role in helping students develop and improve. Critical pedagogical theory is grounded in pluralistic, democratic, and multiperspectival approaches that supplant modes of thinking in which single, limited perspectives are determined to be "best practice" (Zemelman et al., 1998). As the pursuit of knowledge is a quest for truth, unidimensional, positivistic, empirical, and hegemonic ideologies have the potential to limit what can be found to be true, by obfuscating critical and relevant perspectives and information, obscuring and denying alternative ideas, and silencing hypothetical thought, in order to ensure the validity of the single perspective that guides them (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1981).

For example, a "cultural-deficit" model, that sees academically low-performing children as lacking culture and ability, is a positivistic perspective in the sense that a theory is posited, and all of what is observed of children is found to support the theory. In this positivistic theoretical framework, one might find what he is looking for, but by focusing solely on the factors that support the original theory, the theorist and practitioner

ignores all the other factors that provide evidence otherwise that could disprove the original hypothesis (which is of course not open to discussion). Educational *malpractice* can result from such negative attributions and empirical beliefs. Critical praxis directly confronts and counteracts limiting and restrictive ideologies by creating a constantly evolving field of practice that enables young people to engage their many intelligences and challenge crystallized perspectives that are limiting or insufficient for full and balanced understandings.

Michael Apple (1979) suggested that by considering "the totality of perspectives one can bring to bear upon" reality (p. 131), critical understanding is possible and a plurality of ideas and "truths" present themselves as valuable sources of information to guide understanding. Clearly it is possible to have multiple ideas about any given item of thought. This is what characterizes situational and subjective thinking, "code-switching," and all forms of critical thinking. While Apple's quest for understanding all perspectives is perhaps idealistic, considering as many perspectives as possible about the subjects embedded in classroom work is essential for establishing accurate, balanced, and enlightened understandings through critical investigations of relevant problems.

Using cultural, historical, scientific, ethical, political, sociological, or individual and subjective perspectives as analytical tools for investigating subjects and problems, these frameworks and practical strategies enable new ways of seeing the world. Such perspectival analyses open up possibilities that might otherwise be overlooked. In her work in multicultural education, Sonia Nieto (1999) wrote about this:

Reality is often presented in schools as static, finished, and flat. The underlying tensions, controversies, passions, and problems faced by people throughout history and today are sadly missing. To be truly informed and active participants in a democratic society, students need to understand the complexity of the world and of the many perspectives involved. They have to understand that there is not only one way of seeing things, nor even two or three. (p. 15)

When teachers present ideas or content as having only one possible meaning or acceptable interpretation, their efforts can result in restricting students' thinking by putting limits on mental activity and critical thought. By bringing students' thoughts and ideas into contemplative light and opening reflective dialogue, critical and hypothetical thinking exercises strengthen students' abilities to consider and develop multiple perspectives and alternative ways of perceiving and grappling with the problems they encounter, and the necessary actions they might entail.

It is invaluable for a teacher to understand how students see and perceive problems, issues, and topical subjects in order to guide inquiry and dialogue and to determine where instruction should lead. Responsive practice does not necessitate using every observation students make as the beginning of a new tangential conversation, but it does involve listening to young people as they deliberate and form ideas, and ask pertinent questions. Considering the ways different people see things, whether it is the students in class or people in other real contexts, analyses of multiple perspectives clarify the subject or problem at hand, and provide students opportunities to identify and relate to subjective realities on terms that they understand and can engage with as they form their own perceptions and judgments.

No one is always right, and this is precisely the point. Sharing and considering multiple perspectives and discussing the validity or problematics of observations, ideas, interpretations, beliefs, assertions, declarations, and arguments is a mode of democratic and deliberative communication that respects all voices and viewpoints. Perspectival analyses can result in clearer perceptions about what meanings can be validated, what is true, and what one deems necessary to know. As students weigh in their own ideas, the



spectrum of possibilities widens and a broad range of intelligences and identification processes are activated and reinforced. Deliberately considering the perspectives of people who are involved in and impacted by situations being studied also grounds learning in real social contexts.

Looking at important issues from multiple perspectives offers numerous benefits for students. Circumspective points of view and alternating or shifting vantage points allow children and learners to "test" their interpretations, assumptions, and conclusions of what is true by looking past immediate impressions (Giroux, 1981). Multiperspectival analyses also allow young people to see how their own ideas and actions are influenced by their subjective experiences and background knowledge. Analyzing perspectives broadens what is possible by illuminating paths for individuals to think and act in freedom, based on what they decide to be salient ideas, and what is to be in their best interests (Greene, 1998). Understandings about the concrete elements involved in situations are respectively less flexible than knowledge and subjective considerations that can be brought to bear in interpretive analyses. But, both concrete and critical understandings, as they are applied to the circumstances and qualities of living, are subject to diverse interpretations and associations, as well as practical and situational applications.

Of course, as the teacher is responsible for guiding instruction, sharing one's own perspectives is valuable and necessary. But in order to maintain balanced dialogue, teachers' ideas and ideologies cannot be imposed as the only way to look at things (Shor, 1980). This is a sure way to stifle creative thinking and student expression because students lose motivation to participate as they see that their voices are "silenced" to the

tune of the teacher's narrative and expository discourse. If children feel that no matter what they say they are going to be proven wrong, they are likely to stay quiet and guard their thoughts and words. This poses the problem where teachers believe that students have nothing to say, so they revert to a "banking" perspective, thinking that this is the only way students will learn.

Balancing communication, relationships, and considerations of multiple perspectives can be difficult work because there is always the tendency for children and teachers to get competitive about who is "right." As teachers guide dialogue and activities, *it is essential to demonstrate critical thinking by entertaining the hypothetical.* This requires an attitude that admits multiple perspective into the contemplative forum, and is comfortable with not always having all the answers or being right. Recognition of one's own limited perspective is one of the most basic ingredients of critical democratic thinking in practice, and is an inherent quality of critical pedagogies in any learning setting.

### **Ideological Imposition - Hegemony in Instruction**

An attempt to dominate the classroom climate with the teacher's own ideas and perspectives, presenting them as being the only form of knowledge that can be considered acceptable, is a form of *hegemony*. This is an undemocratic and limiting approach in regard to the diversity and possibilities that exist for students' own perspectives to be recognized and affirmed, and for a full range of conceptual representations to develop. Teaching through "transmission" and "banking" methods is an imposition of outside perspective that denies the multiplicity of views that are inevitably present among students towards the subjects and situations they encounter in the classroom (Giroux,

1988a). Attempts to impose views without mutual consideration of student perspectives and cultural experiences is both disrespectful and disempowering. In his book, *Empowering Education*, Ira Shor (1992) explained how teachers are trained to be predisposed to monopolizing power and dominating classroom interactions:

The culture of schooling trains them in the dominant discourse and practices - teacher-talk, reading the riot act, the last word, short-answer tests, competitive grading and individualized work, commercialized textbooks, standardized exams, tolerating the administrative monopoly on power, seeing students as deficits to be filled with grammar, and an official syllabus drawn from existing canons of knowledge. (p. 203)

This broad analysis captures an ideology of instruction that is pervasive in American schooling, and reflects a cultural form of ideological, social, and material domination.

The fact that these practices pass for professional instructional practice reveals the entrenchment and persistence of traditional authoritarian approaches to education, and the hegemonic tradition of American schooling that Carter G. Woodson spoke to. By manipulating classroom activities and materials so that students are always behind the curve, teachers can shut out the creative and cognitive input their students will offer, while denying them rich cultural knowledge that is relevant to their experiences.

Most injurious to the quality of the social and intellectual fabric of classroom relationships, attempts to dominate the ideas and topics that compose thinking and reasoning reflect what critical theorists refer to as *hegemony*. As an ideological imposition and a form of cultural dominance, hegemony is an attempt to control people's behavior by manipulating how they think, and what they think about. This involves a dominant class or group (teachers in this case) who represent the interests of an oppressive culture, and who attempts, "to establish its view of the world as all inclusive and universal" (Giroux, 1981, p. 23). Hegemony in instruction involves "framing" (McLaren, 1998) how subordinate groups and individuals (students in this case) respond

to and interpret "objective" subjects in school. By imposing cultural views and biased conceptual frameworks as if they were "common sense" (Apple, 1979; Giroux & Aronowitz, 1985; Gordon, 1995), alternative perspectives and ways of perceiving reality are marginalized and discredited, often subtly and through practices that leave no room for second-guessing (Shor, 1980).

Commonsense notions are often debunked as irrational and assumptive when they are discovered to be incomplete, not true, or simply illogical. Such notions are especially important to evaluate when they are reinforced by specific people representing a dominant culture, for the benefit of their own interests, and at the exclusion of the interests of the majority of people in a social setting, whether it is students in a classroom, or citizens in a democratic society or cultural community.

Consider commonsense ideas that prevail in large portions of American society: a 9am to 5pm work day with long commutes; a 40 hour (or more) work week; xenophobia as a form of cultural pride or patriotism; jingoism as patriotism; trust and truth in corporate-sponsored journalism; democratically elected representation that is misaligned with democratic opinion and polling; longer school days and school years necessarily equating with higher achievement; the benefit of working harder but not necessarily smarter; the beneficence of technology and governmental agencies; and the provision and effectiveness of government oversight of financial and environmental regulations in light of pressing scientific critiques. All of these ideas represent notions and assumptions that many Americans take for granted. It is beyond the scope of this work to explain how each of these notions is problematical and contradicted by realities in American society and across the globe. However, because each of these ideas conditions public and

individual perceptions, designing strategies to evaluate their legitimacy is a way to achieve clarity and informed perspectives that can reveal contradictions and alternatives for initiating transformative actions.

Maxine Greene (1988) examined liberatory practices in schools in her book, *The Dialectic of Freedom*. She explained that hegemonic teaching practices involve "persuasion" of thoughts as opposed to critical modes of practice that utilize dialogic inquiry and critically-conscious thinking. "The persuasion is often so quiet, so seductive, so disguised that it renders young people acquiescent to power without their realizing it. The persuasion becomes most effective when the method used obscures what is happening in the learners' minds" (Greene, 1988, p. 133). Teachers have the power to conduct classes hegemonically, by enforcing their choices disciplinarily, administering institutional methods of punishment, selecting irrelevant or abstruse materials and topics, allowing limited student input, and deciding what counts as "legitimate" knowledge (Apple, 1979; Shor, 1980; Giroux, 1983). Because of the institutional nature of schools, school systems, and the teaching profession, critical educators and theorists argue that hegemony is a real attempt in state-sponsored education to maintain power in the hands of the dominant sector of society, the wealthy and privileged, by limiting opportunities for marginalized sectors of the population to succeed in becoming educated and economically solvent, thus enabling the reproduction of inequalities that exist in society (Apple, 1979; McLaren, 1998; Lipman, 2004; Fine & Weis, 2003; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Critical educational theorists observe that teaching practices do have a degree of power associated with them, and that a democratic distribution of authority and

delegation of responsibility for learning are ways to *empower* students as agents of cognition and action. Using power and authority to silence children and restrict their freedom is dehumanizing and degrading, as well as ineffective for achieving authentic learning (Fine & Weis, 2003; McNeil, 2000). Understanding that the world students inhabit outside of school already poses challenging and oppressive circumstances, critical educators have the responsibility to both familiarize themselves with the factors that threaten to dominate and destabilize healthy development, and to strategize ways to implement a pedagogy that can counter the effects of these factors by providing a learning environment that is mutually liberating and socially, developmentally, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually enriching.

Dominant forms of power are exercised in society through structural configurations and practices within institutions like schools, and they are also deployed to determine how people think through other means. Private interests that maintain wealth, property, and political influence in the hands of a dominant class find their way into children's lives through corporate advertising, business models of education, and corporate-run media consolidations that limit what information is presented on television and radio (Shor, 1992; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993; Chomsky, 2000; Morrell, 2008). Corporatization and privatization have been major factors in setting limits on the quality of public education for years. Shor (1986) documented how back-to-basics literacy campaigns, vocational training, and for-profit publishing and curriculum development companies have contributed to limiting public school systems' abilities to sustain socially responsive, culturally relevant, and humanistically progressive pedagogies.

Recently, with a shift towards accountability schemes and standardization of curriculum and assessments, privatized interests have advanced further into the domain of public schooling (McNeil, 2000; Chomsky, 2000; Levin, 2001; Lipman, 2004). The "imperatives of big business" (Giroux, 1988d, p.9), threaten to "crowd out alternatives" (Shor 1980 p. 8) for schools and teachers to function in democratic and independent ways. Education for freedom, democracy, and socially just outcomes involves balancing curricula and instructional programs to include humanities, creative arts, experiential and exploratory learning, physical education and activities, and interdisciplinary academic areas throughout school programs. The fact that schools in affluent areas do these things, supports the notion that those with money and political power recognize this set of preconditions to be necessary for the education of their children. The fact that urban schools are limited in the programs and activities they can offer, and that conditions are exacerbating with state and municipal budget shortfalls, is a demonstration of profound injustice, whereby the societal structure of public schooling limits the opportunities available to underprivileged sectors of the society, while benefitting the upper-classes. The infiltration of private entities in public education represents a further advance of dominant cultural forces that have historically and presently disadvantaged children who attend urban schools (Shor, 1986; Giroux, 1988c; McLaren, 1998; Suoranta, 2005).

Media privatization and the limited availability of journalism that is not corporately sponsored and ideologically entrenched is yet another hegemonic force in American society. The news that is broadcast on corporate networks has profound influence in society because of the stories that get told, and the way ideas are conveyed to form impressions and shape the perceptions of people who consume news media, and

whose determinations and choices are based on what they are told is true and important. The fact that the mass media controls much of what Americans know about the present state of the world is not a trivial reality (Shor, 1980; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). Since the advent of radio and television, people have relied on what they hear and see through media outlets to shape much of what they believe about the world and their society. This represents sublime power to regulate and control information, and was one of Antonio Gramsci's fundamental criticisms of fascism, incorporated in his argument that hegemony is used as a tool for dominant and elite classes to determine the way society functions to disempower subordinated groups of people, while those who hold authority and political power are further privileged, enriched, and empowered (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1998). Gramsci's notion of hegemony is an essential concept in critical social theories and relates directly to educational spheres and settings as sites of cultural, social, and informational exchanges and negotiated relationships of power.

### **Freedom and Reality**

From an ethical standpoint, societal structures that limit people's ability to be free to live as they choose are highly problematic. The effects of economic deterioration, joblessness and overworking, housing and food prices, inflation, lack of health care, college tuition hikes, and other challenging factors make living an art of survival for most Americans. Jean Anyon (2005) found that in addition to suffering the effects of historical discrimination and segregation in almost every aspect of living and working, inner-city residents are faced with limited labor opportunities and often have to travel out of cities to work to support their families. This partly explains Noam Chomsky's observation (2000) that the time parents are able to spend with their children has declined rapidly in



American society as a whole since the 1950's. Ira Shor (1992) also lamented that "with long work weeks, long commuting, low wages, high cost of living, shortage of decent housing, underfunded schools, inadequate playgrounds, and unsafe streets in many areas, the system is undermining the family life many students cherish" (p. 222). When families are destabilized by social and economic realities and demands, it is only realistic to critique the various systems and structures that have been established that create them.

The purpose of critiquing social realities is not to be pessimistic or to limit oneself to fault-finding. Shedding light on the ethical dilemmas of a corporate-driven capitalist society that seems to ignore basic human needs such as child-rearing, being able to afford food, enabling motivated young people to achieve higher education, and ensuring that every citizen has the right to healthcare, familial stability, and safe communities is a pragmatic and critical necessity for sustaining a healthy, just, and democratic society. For millions of citizens who are critically aware and conscious, contemplating and confronting these dilemmas in the pursuit of freedom and sustainable livelihoods is justifiable, and can help to dispel illusory ideas that are wrapped in myths about the "American dream."

Educators alone cannot reverse the effects of such large-scale systemic inadequacies. But teachers can teach children how to develop their capacities to think critically and ethically and with a sense of hope and realistic optimism, in order to devise strategies to achieve sustainable modes of living, working, and thriving in today's world, while challenging oppressive forces (Freire, 1992). Education is more than preparing students for the workforce, despite hegemonic agendas that would suggest otherwise. One way to begin to unravel the structure of American society is to ask critical questions

about ourselves, society's structure and demands, and individual and collective agencies. Critiquing the relevance and applicability of schooling can legitimate establishing concrete knowledge, critically-conscious understandings, and counter-hegemonic strategies that expose and contest contradictions within the fabric of society that present problems for sustainable living, in an effort to transform them. When conditions are unsustainable and freedom and justice are obstructed, revolutionary changes are needed in order to reconfigure social realities with American constitutional values.

### **Critical Praxis**

Critically purposive and counter-hegemonic educators are motivated and determined to develop the capacity and faculty to challenge dominating forces, cultural impositions, and oppressive social structures while inspiring students to be critically aware of their own abilities to act in their best interests. In the quest to inspire students to achieve their fullest potentials, it is not productive or fair to unload pessimism or despair, and it is not ethical to instill a sense of hopelessness in light of society's dysfunctions (Freire, 1992). It is necessary to teach young people how to think for themselves with the benefit of critical understandings and the attainment of critical literacies. As people gain knowledge and skills that enable them to make informed judgments and choices, they can direct purposive efforts into activities that work to their benefit. Maintaining hope and determination to progress through life successfully is a crucial component for these critical capacities to take hold and for potentialities to become realized possibilities.

The practices inherent and embodied in the critical tradition of pedagogical praxis are useful for accomplishing the objectives and goals outlined here. Bringing attention to the fact that oppression is not the result of personal inadequacies or failings, and that

there are possibilities to find ways to transcend challenges and overcome difficulties, these are crucial and critical steps in the educational development of children living in the modern world and in American cities. Only by developing an awareness of one's challenges is it possible to strategize and act in ways to change circumstances and conditions. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of critical praxis. What can one do to counteract the superstructural forces at work in society that make life so difficult for people? One thing is for certain, ignoring pressing issues and real dilemmas, hoping that they will go away, will not contribute to the solution of real problems.

Strategies do exist for thinking and acting in critical ways to reverse the negative effects of a society that dispossesses a large sector of its population, and many avenues and organizations have already been established to make society work better for its citizens. Recognizing that one does not have to act alone can be a powerful realization for people working for change and endeavoring to challenge the status quo. Critical citizenship and democratic action and resistance to injustice is also an American tradition.

Making choices about one's own education, skill development, and knowledge base; deciding sustainable consuming habits; associating with organizations that work to attain goals that support personal and collective interests; and engaging as an active citizen by communicating and working with people democratically to accomplish critical objectives, these are all ways to develop agency and traction for mobility in the face of troubling aspects of society. Critical work is never finished. By directing awareness and efforts to researching and discovering knowledge that is relevant and useful to learners, and to improving the quality of life human beings experience, teachers can inspire and

empower young people to develop their own skills for critical praxis, logical reasoning, strategic and practical planning, and for implementing transformative actions.

As struggles for freedom are constantly challenged by undemocratic and oppressive forces, contradicting the status quo is a functional imperative in all areas of education. As millions of young people move through American schools each year, the quality of their education must be tailored to meet their needs as well as the demands of a society in constant transformation. Critical teachers can create opportunities for students to take charge of their learning and to develop critical abilities that will enable them to create the realities they envision.

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APPENDIX A

**Critical Reading of a News Article**

\*(Newspaper or Magazine)

1) Make a List of **Key Words** and ideas that are important for understanding the situation in the text. (*Elementals*)

Who: \_\_\_\_\_

What: \_\_\_\_\_

Where: \_\_\_\_\_

Why: \_\_\_\_\_

When: \_\_\_\_\_

How: \_\_\_\_\_

- Favorite Sentence: \_\_\_\_\_

2) What's the point? **Summarize** the Main Idea (i.e. essential message) in one sentence. (*Use Key Words*)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3) What are the **important details** used to support the main idea? (*Complete Sentences*)

a) \_\_\_\_\_

b) \_\_\_\_\_

c) \_\_\_\_\_

d) \_\_\_\_\_

e) \_\_\_\_\_

4) What **new words** were you able to learn by using **context clues**?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5) What was the **author's purpose** for writing this? (*\*Think about the problems posed*)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\*Is the author trying to convince the reader to believe something? \_\_\_\_ What is it? Are you convinced? Why / why not?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6) What information can you **infer** from this piece that was not stated? (*Read between the lines*)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7) What are your **conclusions** about what you read?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8) What is the **context** that surrounds the events or situation? (*Circumstances in the background, setting*)

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9) What **themes** did you notice as you read? How are these connected to what's going on in the rest of the world?

a) \_\_\_\_\_

b) \_\_\_\_\_

c) \_\_\_\_\_

10) Can you find any **comparison(s)** and/or **contrast(s)** that were used?

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11) What examples can you find of **cause and effect** in this situation? (*Chain of Events, Reasons for Occurrences*)

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12) What **assumptions** do people have that are relevant to this situation? What do you think about these? \_\_

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13) Whose **perspective** does this story represent? Are there other **points of view** that should be considered? Why?

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14) How can you apply or **connect** the information you are reading about to your life or the rest of the world?

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15) What **argument** can you make about the information you read? (*Use evidence to support your answer*)

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16) What **questions** would you ask the **author**, an **expert**, or **people involved with the story** to find out more about this subject? Write 3-5 questions that you would like answered.

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- How could you get these answers? \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX B

**Critical Reading and Analysis of a Short Story**

1) What is this story about? (**Themes**)

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2) Make a list of **key words** and **phrases** that stand out to you as you read. (at least 10-15) Then copy your **favorite sentence** from the text.

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3) Who is **narrating** and from what **perspective**?

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4) Who are the **characters** (major/minor)?

Write the **name** and **role**, and **describe each** character as fully as possible.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Description</u>
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5) Describe the **setting(s)** in which the story takes place. (Time, Place, Climate, Mood, Descriptions)

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6) What are the major **conflict(s)** in the story? Who is involved and what are the **problems** that need to be resolved?

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7) **Summarize** the sequence of **action** in the story **plot**. Think about the **turning points** and **important events** that occur as the story progresses. # each and annotate each event. (1. \_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_ 3....)

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8) What is the **climax** of the story? Why did this happen the way that it did?

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9) How does this climactic event affect the major conflicts, the relationships between characters, and/or the plot of the story?

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10) What important **decisions** were made by the main characters? Were they good decisions or not? Do you agree with the **choices** they made? Why or why not?

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11) Are you satisfied with the way the story turned out? Why? How would you change this story if you could?

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12) What **conclusions** can you make after reading this narrative? (I think, I believe...)

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13) How does the story relate to your own life and experiences and/or the people you know?

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14) What **connections** do you see between this story and the rest of the world today, or throughout history?

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15) Write a **one paragraph review** of this story recommending it (or not) to other readers.

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16) Think of 3-5 **questions** you could ask the author or the characters in the story to get more information?

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APPENDIX C

**Critical Inquiry into the Concept of \_\_\_\_\_.** Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1) What is \_\_\_\_\_? (definition)

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2) What key elements and/or components make \_\_\_\_\_ what it is? (5WH composition)

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3) Where did the idea come from, how did it start? (history, background)

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4) How is the concept applied or used in today's world? (application)

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5) How is \_\_\_\_\_ applied the same way now as it was when the idea originated? (articulation)

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6) What has changed? Why/how did this happen? (development)

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7) What do you think about the changes that have occurred with \_\_\_\_\_?

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8) Who uses \_\_\_\_\_ and in what way? (For what purposes?) (appropriation)

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9) Who else is affected by \_\_\_\_\_? (Directly or Indirectly) How? (social impact)

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10) What are your beliefs about \_\_\_\_\_ in general? (generalization)

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11) Have you considered other perspectives? Please explain another perspective that people might have.

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12) What rules are implied by this concept? (regulation)

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13) What assumptions do people have about \_\_\_\_\_? (perspective/orientation)

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14) Who makes these assumptions and why do you think they make them? (explanation)

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15) What do you think people should know about \_\_\_\_\_ in relation to the world today?  
(evaluation)

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16) What is the future of \_\_\_\_\_ going to look like, in your opinion? (prediction)

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- What should we be talking about now to steer us in the right direction for the future?

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18) What other questions could you ask to better understand this concept? List 3-5.

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## APPENDIX D

### Literacy Anchors and Skills

#### Word Meanings

- using context clues, examples in text
- multiple meaning words
- synonym/antonym
- affixes (prefix, suffix) (effect on word meaning)
- content specific words

**Inferences** - (what can you infer that was not stated?)

**Conclusions** - (what have you determined based on available information?)

**Generalizations** - (what you can say in general about the information? \*cite evidence)

#### Main Ideas/Supporting Details

(use who, what, where, why, when, how words)

#### Explain Cause and Effect

**Summarize the whole text**  
(key details/events/information)

**Summarize major points, processes, and events**

**Purpose of Text** (author's purpose, genre/form, details that support the intended purpose)

## Identify

## Interpret

## Compare

## Describe

## Analyze

## Evaluate the following.....

#### Characters:

<u>Actions</u>	(what they do)
<u>Motives</u>	(why they do it)
<u>Dialogue</u>	(what they say)
<u>Emotions/Feelings</u>	(how they feel)
<u>Traits</u>	(what they're like as people)
<u>Relationships among characters</u>	(how they interact - why?)

#### Setting: Where / When

(place/time/context/background/timeframe/climate)

#### Plot: What happens / How?

- Conflict(s) major/minor  
(why the action happens)
- Rising Action (how the action builds)
- Climax (when are the major conflict(s) in the action resolved?)
- Resolution (how is the situation resolved-or not?)

**Theme** - Prevalent idea(s)

#### Tone, Style, Mood

**Symbolism** - (what is used to represent what?)

**Connections** between - story elements / self / nature / society / other texts

#### Figurative Language

- personification
- simile
- metaphor
- hyperbole
- satire
- imagery
- foreshadowing
- flashback
- irony

#### Point of View / Perspective(s)

- Narrator (1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person) (why is this important?)
- of the characters
- of the author, reader, relevant people

**Facts vs. Opinions** – (how are these used to make a point or construct an argument?)

#### Essential vs. Nonessential Information

-relevant details (**who, what, where, why, when, how**)

**Bias/Propaganda**- identify use/effectiveness

#### Organization of Text

- headers
- author's purpose for decisions about organization and content
- interpret graphics, charts
- sequence of actions, steps in a process