Leaders in Critical Pedagogy
Narratives for Understanding and Solidarity
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Critical pedagogy has variously inspired, mobilized, troubled, and frustrated teachers, activists, and educational scholars for several decades now. Since its inception the field has been animated by internal antagonism and conflict, and this reality has simultaneously spread the influence of the field in and out of education and seriously challenged its status as an integral body of work. The various debates that have categorized critical pedagogy have also made it difficult for younger scholars to enter into the literature. This is the first book to survey critical pedagogy through first-hand accounts of its established and emerging leaders. While the book does indeed provide a historical exploration and documentation of the development of critical pedagogy as a contested and dynamic educational intervention—as well as analyses of that development and directions toward possible futures—it is also intended to provide an accessible and comprehensive entry point for a new generation of activists, organizers, scholars, and educators who place questions of pedagogy and social justice at the heart of their thinking and doing.

“Martin Heidegger once said that Aristotle’s life could be summarized in one, short sentence “He was born, he thought, he died.” Porfilio and Ford’s brilliantly curated compilation of autobiographical sketches of leaders in critical pedagogy resolutely rejects Heidegger’s reductive thesis, reminding us all that theory is grounded in the historical specificities and material contradictions of life. For those well acquainted with critical pedagogy, these theoretical memoirs grant us a unique and sometimes surprisingly intimate glimpse into the lives behind the words we know so well. But most importantly, the format of the book is an educational intervention into how critical pedagogy can be taught. While it is often the case that students find critical pedagogy dense, inaccessible, and seemingly detached from the everyday concerns of teachers, Porfilio and Ford’s edited volume—like Marx’s Capital—approaches theory through the memories, struggles, hopes, and dreams of those who live within yet against the nightmare of neoliberal capitalism.”

– Tyson E. Lewis, Full Professor, Department of Art Education and Art History, University of North Texas


Sensation Publishers

Leaders in Critical Pedagogy
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Leaders in Critical Pedagogy
LEADERS IN EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

Volume 8

Series Editor: Leonard J. Waks, Temple University, Philadelphia, USA

Scope:
The aim of the Leaders in Educational Studies Series is to document the rise of scholarship and university teaching in educational studies in the years after 1960. This half-century has been a period of astonishing growth and accomplishment. The volumes in the series document this development of educational studies as seen through the eyes of its leading practitioners.

A few words about the build up to this period are in order. Before the mid-twentieth century school teaching, especially at the primary level, was as much a trade as a profession. Schoolteachers were trained primarily in normal schools or teachers colleges, only rarely in universities. But in the 1940s American normal schools were converted into teachers colleges, and in the 1960s these were converted into state universities. At the same time school teaching was being transformed into an all-graduate profession in both the United Kingdom and Canada. For the first time, school teachers required a proper university education.

Something had to be done, then, about what was widely regarded as the deplorable state of educational scholarship. James Conant, in his final years as president at Harvard in the early 1950s, envisioned a new kind of university-based school of education, drawing scholars from mainstream academic disciplines such as history, sociology psychology and philosophy, to teach prospective teachers, conduct educational research, and train future educational scholars. One of the first two professors hired to fulfil this vision was Israel Scheffler, a young philosopher of science and language who had earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. Scheffler joined Harvard’s education faculty in 1952. The other was Bernard Bailyn, who joined the Harvard faculty in 1953 after earning his Ph.D. there, and who re-energized the study of American educational history with the publication of Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study (University of North Carolina Press, 1960). The series has been exceptionally fortunate that Scheffler provided a foreword to the volume on philosophy of education, and that Bernard Bailyn provided one foreword for the volume on the history of American education. It is equally fortunate that subsequent volumes have also contained forewords by similarly eminent scholars, including James Banks of the University of Washington, who has been a creative force in social education for decades and the prime mover in the field of multi-cultural education.

The Leaders in Educational Studies Series continues to document the growing and changing literature in educational studies. Studies conducted within the established academic disciplines of history, philosophy, and sociology comprised the dominant trend throughout the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s educational studies diversified considerably, in terms of both new sub-disciplines within these established disciplines and new interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary fields.

Curriculum studies, both in general and in the particular school subject matter fields, drew extensively from work in philosophy, history and sociology of education. Work in these disciplines, and also in anthropology and cultural studies among others, also stimulated new perspectives on race, class and gender.

This volume, like previous volumes in the series, brings together personal essays by established leaders in a major field of educational studies. Subsequent volumes in the series will continue to document other established and emerging disciplines, sub-disciplines and inter-disciplines in educational scholarship.
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Dedicated to the memory and legacy of Dennis Carlson
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There are those *firsts* moments in life we remember…our first bike, first kiss, first time behind the wheel, first moment we identified our own sexual(ies), first time we read the book or heard the song; and the first time we were introduced to Paulo Freire. We place our own positionality within critical pedagogy by how we first came to know Paulo Freire. To separate Paulo from critical pedagogy is not possible, he is our progenitor. I cannot begin to preface the life stories of critical pedagogues without disclosing a bit of my own story. And this story was written through the influences of many who remain my mentors…and some who are my anti-mentors.

I was an undergraduate education student in Lethbridge, Alberta…a misplaced Yankee Jew who found myself in Mormonlandia, amidst farmers, Hutterites, and many, many Native Reserves. Putting off my assignments to the end, I bolted awake one winter’s eve, realizing I had a book review due the next day in my Multiculturalism course. Quietly scrambling to the living room, I sat down, ready to speed-read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I didn’t quite understand the use of pedagogy, but I knew oppressed. I expected the fast read would take an hour, then planned to throw together the review. Enough time to get back to bed before the kids got up.

You all know the story, I turned the pages and “couldn’t put it down.” For the first time, words were put into my mind and organized the musings I stored…thoughts I had been unable to articulate or to act upon. Freire identified core elements of my own world. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, I lived close to a park children played in: seeking water in drinking fountains: White and Colored. We moved to Los Angeles and I wasn’t allowed to play with Mexican children and where I was called a Jew Bastard in third grade. I grew up through the Viet Nam War, and only the poor Black or White kids from my high school were shipped out. And in Canada, I lived 2 hours from an enormous Reserve where every day, the Indian bus left early to come to our school, inevitably late, due to old creeky buses and potholed roads. I understood what oppression was in my world, in my context. And I understood Freire.
The next year, my critical education began in earnest with Julia Ellis as my undergraduate mentor, teaching me critical ways in which to engage in problem solving. Kathleen Berry taught me context, and about poverty and the working class. Two years later, I returned to school for a master’s degree, and David Smith was my guide. One of the first days of class, David showed a film from the 70s, *Starting From Nina*, and Paulo Freire came alive on the screen as he described the inequities and needs of teachers in working class Toronto. During those years I realized that all that *stuff*, all those hours in teacher education courses weren’t relevant, but those precious hours with my first mentors shaped my need to become critical, pedagogical, and political.

Irony and destiny surrounded my birth into critical pedagogy. At a dinner, I listened to a speech from my then-partner condemning involvement of the political, the critical into public education. This (and other issues) led to the end of the unpleasant union. Weeks later, I was funded to attend a conference in Dayton, Ohio reputed to be “swarming” with critical types. Julia Ellis and I flew to Bergamo, and 24 hours later, I met Joe Kincheloe. Joe overheard me speaking about my work on the Stand Off Reserve in Alberta, and interrupted me to discuss our common interests. That discussion lasted over 20 years, and our friendship, marriage, and partnership was based on the radical love we found within our own critical pedagogies.

In 1992, Donaldo Macedo phoned Joe and told him if we could find the money to fly to Boston, he would take us to dinner with Paulo. I’m still not sure how we found the funds for two plane fares, but the memory of a Portuguese restaurant with big pots of chicken and vegetables, eating, talking, talking, and eating for four hours is embedded in my soul. This was the day that Paulo introduced the notion of radical love to us. He illustrated how the personal and the political intertwined to create the strength needed to subvert the current state of education and of disenfranchised groups. After this meeting, Joe and I were committed to spending our lives, our radical love in the pursuit of equity, activism, diversity, and criticality. We made many friends and even more enemies in those two decades. We learned that critical pedagogy wasn’t a badge of popularity in an instrumentally rational world, and that challenging the lack of criticality within schools was a bit of a professional death sentence in many faculties.

For many years, our critical journeys were and are influenced by the words of those in this book along with so many others. We became acutely aware of pedagogical deconstruction and suspicious of curriculum. Along with our knowledges came the attached friendships, as we found years ago that our work was dangerous work, and safety was manifested in the relationships we made and nurtured, the critical friends we had. Everyone has their Paulo moments, and many of us are old enough to have memories of times spent with him. He laughed at the solemnness he was confronted with, joked about “Freirean methods,” and eschewed the deification often thrust upon him. He understood that he had contributed and that he had important things to say, but was chagrined at those who wanted to promote a unilateral politic and
ended up creating a canon of no canons. While each of us have our stories, our ways, our attempts to criticalize pedagogy, we also must attempt to embrace the humility needed, the radical love expected, and embrace the vision of hope Paulo gave us, even in the worst of our times. For every life story in this book, we have multitudes to find and to nurture. It is an honour to be amongst the rebels in this book.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The material that comprises Peter Mayo’s chapter originally appeared as responses to questions in two separate interviews one (by Juha Suoranta) which appeared in the Review of Pedagogy, Education and Cultural Studies and the other (by Hrvoje Simicevic) in Truthout and the Croatian journal H-Alter.

Peter McLaren’s text contains sections from published material. It begins with some autobiographical material from Life in Schools, and some material published in various internet conversations and internet journals.

Sonia Nieto’s text initially appeared in the Journal of Language & Literacy Education, 9(1).

Curry Malott’s chapter initially appeared in the Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies, 12(1).
When, on September 17, 2011, a handful of people set up tents in New York City’s Wall Street financial district—the capital of capitalism—few would have predicted that it would inaugurate a movement that is likely to be a popular reference point for decades to come. The movement grew almost overnight in New York City and just as quickly spread to towns and cities across the country and the world. This somewhat nebulous movement—with a much higher level of internal organization that is usually attributed to it—introduced new terms and frameworks into popular discussions in nearly all facets of society. It also brought to the center of activist discussions and praxis the question of pedagogy that had been relatively absent, or at best implicit, in recent decades. To be sure, questions about organization and the relationship between protest movements and society, for example, have always been pedagogical at heart. But at the nightly (and, really, all-day) meetings in Occupy encampments the pressing question of teaching and learning relations was constantly being foregrounded and explicitly addressed.

Thus, it is not just for critical pedagogues and critical educational scholars that the present volume has been compiled. While the book does indeed provide a historical exploration and documentation of the development of critical pedagogy as a contested and dynamic educational field—as well as analyses of that development and directions toward possible futures—it is also intended to provide an accessible and comprehensive entry point to a new generation of activists and organizers who place questions of pedagogy at the heart of their thinking and doing. In this sense, we see this book as embodying the praxis that is at the base of the orientation of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy has variously inspired, ignited, troubled, and frustrated educational scholars for several decades now. Yet the fact that the term is still called upon among a variety of different orientations, we posit, is illustrative of its continued relevancy. The question, “What is critical pedagogy?” is one that will elicit various and probably irreconcilable answers. The late Ilan Gur-Ze’ev (2005) noted that it has become difficult to “speak of... the various conflicting pedagogies that propagate themselves under the banner of ‘Critical Pedagogy’” (p. 7). The debates that have taken place around and within the field over the last several decades testify to the great instability of the term as a signifier, a discursive formation, and a practice.
Jennifer Gore (1993) noted the ambivalence of the term ‘pedagogy’ itself over 20 years ago, preferring instead to write about ‘pedagogies’ in order “to signify the multiple approaches and practices that fall under the pedagogy umbrella” (xi). In addition, then, to “critical pedagogy,” what constitutes “critical” and what constitutes “pedagogy” is not set in stone, but open to contestation and debate.

As is the case with any attempt to label a work under any banner, then, this book itself performs and constitutes, in part, what scholars count as “leaders.” We have been cognizant of this performative aspect from the beginning of editing this collection and soliciting contributions from scholars. We have tended toward being expansive rather than restrictive in our construction of the field of critical pedagogy. We were pleasantly surprised at the prompt response of contributors and their willingness to undertake the project. While some were unable to contribute due to health reasons or work obligations we think that, in the end, this volume represents the various tendencies within critical pedagogy as it has unfolded over the last four decades.

MAPPING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

While any origins story is necessarily elusive and at best partial—including, we note, the origins story of Occupy Wall Street—it is generally agreed that critical pedagogy has its origins in the critical theory of the Frankfurt school. In one sense, the theorists of the Frankfurt School were attempting to re-think Marxism in an effort to overcome what they saw as the limitations of Soviet-style socialism and the economic determinism that predominated much of Marxist thought during the mid-twentieth century, and contributed to the ascendancy of positivism. In attempting to combat the trend of economic determinism they emphasized the superstructural elements of society and the role that elements such as culture, knowledge, language, and desire play in the maintenance and reproduction of oppression, inequality, and injustice (i.e., capitalist social relations). Many of these elements, such as knowledge and language, are of course intimately connected with schooling and education, which leads Peter McLaren (1989), for example, when outlining the major concepts utilized in critical pedagogy, to write about such concepts as ideology, hegemony, cultural capital, and discourse.

Leaving aside the myriad debates about base and superstructure—and the way that many Frankfurt theorists ultimately posited superstructural determinism against economic determinism—critical pedagogy picks up on the idea that educational processes, practices, and modes of engagement play an active role in the production and reproduction of social relations and systems. Critical pedagogy seeks to understand and is concerned with the ways that schools and the educational process sustain and reproduce systems and relations of oppression. The idea is that, if education is a site for the reproduction of oppression, it can also potentially be a site for the disruption of oppression and even liberation. Theorists of critical pedagogy see themselves as concerned with how to alleviate oppression and human suffering.
through pedagogy. Thus, its attention is focused on power relations both in the world, and in the university, school, and classroom. As such, the task of critical pedagogy is to guide scholars, schoolteachers, and citizens to understand what is responsible for oppression in schools and society and what steps are necessary for the dismantling of oppressive systems.

We might say that the “first wave” of critical pedagogy in the 1970s and into the early 1980s inherited most directly the theoretical inclinations of the Frankfurt school and its insistence upon the centrality of class. This “wave” is associated with the early work of scholars like Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Ira Shor. A “second wave” continued to develop around the early 1990s that, as a whole, and in contradictory ways, built upon, problematized, and even outright rejected the initial work of critical pedagogues. There are two overlapping routes that comprise this generation of scholarship. The first route critiques critical pedagogy from the feminist (and feminine) standpoint. The second route travels along the inroads made by poststructural and postmodern philosophies. It is perhaps partly because of the time in which these criticisms arose, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when poststructural and postmodern theories had already made sufficient advances into academia, that the two branches of critique are deeply interrelated. After all, the modern categories and frameworks are often tantamount to male categories and frameworks, and modernity is frequently seen as synonymous with masculinility.

One of the foundational critiques of critical pedagogy, and even today one of the most frequently referenced, is Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (1989) essay “Why Doesn’t this Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy.” In this essay, Ellsworth confronts critical pedagogy from a feminist and poststructural position. Ellsworth draws on her experiences facilitating (not “teaching”) a politically motivated and active college course. She argues overall “that key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely, ‘empowerment,’ ‘student voice,’ ‘dialogue,’ and even the term ‘critical’—are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (p. 298). The reasons for the dominating effects of educational theories and practices motivated by liberation, she argues, stem from the decontextualized, abstract prescriptions in the critical pedagogy literature and a particular conception of power. A similar claim was made by Jennifer Gore (1993), who wrote that critical pedagogy operates on an understanding of “power as property.” Such an understanding is implied in the very word ‘empowerment,’ for “to em-power suggests to give power, to confer power, to enable the use of power” (p. 95). Gore (1993) acknowledges that some critical pedagogy theorists have recognized how power is “embodied in concrete practices” (p. 94). Still, however, power is seen as something that can either repress or liberate. Critical pedagogy is seen as the praxis that can liberate the oppressed. Here Gore takes up Foucault’s (1983) famous declaration that “everything is dangerous” (p. 231) because of the inseparability of power and knowledge. Because power exists only in circulation, it can’t be isolated from the knowledge (language, ideas, forms of communication, etc…) through which it circulates.
In general, this wave was defined by the belief that critical pedagogues influenced by the Frankfurt school are correct to examine the forces behind unjust power relationships inside of schools, but several scholars felt their insights lacked the sophistication to understand the myriad forces giving rise to the lived experiences of teachers and students and lacked the sensitivity to recognize the complexity behind how social domination operates on the structural axes of race, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010). Consequently, the field of critical pedagogy now represents a constellation of insights from other intellectual fields, including feminist studies, environmental studies, critical race theory, cultural studies, and Indigenous studies, for the purpose of becoming critically aware of how “the political and economic landscape” give rise to the “actual conditions of life in schools and how it is possible to remake schools on the ideals of justice, equity, and democracy” (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, p. 3).

If the critiques and interventions of the second wave opened up and problematized underlying assumptions about the operations of power and oppression, ultimately leading to the inclusion of various forms of identity and difference, we have recently witnessed the emergence of a third wave of critical pedagogy that has returned to questions of class and capitalism. This does not represent a retreat, however, as this wave is—to varying degrees, of course—building upon and incorporating the critiques levelled during the second wave. Additionally, this form of “revolutionary critical pedagogy” emerged because of the domestication of critical pedagogy, its reduction to a method. The trajectory of this wave comes as a result of a resurgence of Marxist educational theorizing and is being developed in the recent work of theorists such as Peter McLaren and Curry Malott. One of the reasons for this return to class and the capital-labor relation may be the economic crisis of 2007–2008, which demonstrated once again the devastating ways that processes of capitalist value production (and the failure to realize those values) can make and remake our daily lives. The extent to which this wave of critical pedagogy remains entrenched in the structural/poststructural divide of the 1990s, however, remains to be seen. In navigating this wave, however, we might suggest that critical pedagogues look to activists to examine the ways in which various global social movements are negotiating different class and identity categories.

OVERVIEW

This volume can be seen as a first-hand account of the varying debates and struggles within and around the field of critical pedagogy. Again, we are excited to have diverse contributions from emerging and established critical pedagogues who truly convey the complexity and nuances of the field. There are, of course, common threads that run throughout each of the chapters of this book. A concern for issues of injustice, oppression, and exploitation animates each chapter. And this is no abstract concern. Instead, each contributor documents the intertwining of the personal and the
political, and how their life experiences came to shape their theoretical orientations and approaches to life and learning, and vice versa.

In the opening chapter, William Reynolds highlights how he started practicing critical pedagogy before encountering Freire or any other critical pedagogy literature. It was rather his experiences teaching in Upstate New York and his innate dissatisfaction with the banking method that prevailed at Romulus Central School. When he did come to read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Reynolds says it “was like being in a completely dark room and someone turning on a bright light.” He talks about the consequences that he and his students faced as they read the word and the world, which leads him to emphasize that critical pedagogy necessarily entails risk. He also reads his student comments in order to grapple with student enthusiasm and resistance to critical pedagogy. Finally, Reynolds insists on centering hope—and “practical hope” in particular—in resisting “this historical moment of free-market fundamentalism, micro-fascism, and right-wing mega church religion.”

In the outset of his chapter, Wayne Au acknowledges the importance of his upbringing as a central foundation for becoming a critical pedagogue. His “dad’s communism” facilitated collectivist political work and made him conscious of the need to personally challenge oppression within his own lived world. Next, the author pinpoints how his connection to hip-hop culture positioned him to reject being part of White, middle-class suburban surroundings in Connecticut, while simultaneously allowing him to “cling to his urban-ness.” After discussing the role that his college experience played in his identity development as a critical scholar, Au links how the “tension between postmodern subjectivity and Marxist dialectical materialism” sparked his “activism and orientation towards the world.” The author concludes his chapter by highlighting his work as a schoolteacher in Berkeley, CA, by explaining why he decided to study with Michael Apple at the University of Wisconsin Madison, and by detailing how his intellectual and personal development was connected to being an “academic-activist and public intellectual.”

Sonia Nieto presents her life and work through the lens of language, and in particular her growing up bilingual and biliterate. As such, her chapter focuses on the intersections among language, literacy, and culture, and what these intersections have meant for her, and what they can mean for students who have been marginalized, neglected, or made invisible by traditional understandings of the role of education. Although not linked conceptually in the past, the more recent tendency to connect language, literacy, and culture gives us a richer picture of learning, especially for students whose identities related to language, race, ethnicity, and immigrant status have traditionally had a low status in many societies.

Noah De Lissovoy captures how his upbringing in Berkeley, CA during the 1970s and 1980s positioned him and many White middle-class families to rebel against “feel-good hippie impulses of the previous generation.” Members from this community and social strata directed their alienation with mainstream US politics
to a form a politics of indifference, rather than building collectivist movements to challenge the structures behind the politics that fuelled their alienation. Next, the author pinpoints how he developed a deeper understanding of how larger social forces are responsible for racialized injustices. This occurred when he moved to Los Angeles during the 1990s. Here he witnessed firsthand “a drawn-out race war” launched by the state against Black and Latino(a) residents. The injustice experienced by oppressed racial groups in Los Angeles provided a learning experience for De Lissovoy. He notes the learning was “not always pleasant” since it involved “interrogating his White and middle-class sensibilities.” However, this learning became the catalyst for becoming a critical pedagogue. De Lissovoy became connected with numerous critical scholars in the Los Angeles region and Peter McLaren became his doctoral adviser at UCLA. During his doctoral studies, he became versed in critically examining the impact of neoliberal globalization on schools, students, and the wider society. De Lissovoy concludes his chapter by detailing the central impulses of his work since he graduated from UCLA and how he engages in communion with his students in order to unpack the “limits of the imagination and in the boundaries of “reality” itself.”

Curry Malott traces his journey to critical pedagogy, focusing on a significant element of his family's ethnic and class background and its connection to his own educational experiences from public schooling to university. Drawing on Marx’s historical discussions at the end of Volume 1 of Capital, Malott traces his own German background to the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe and how that process was connected to the American colonies and the emergence of capitalism in what would become the United States of America. Malott argues that this historical discussion helps us better understand both the current neoliberal era of perpetual budget cuts and austerity measures, and the true class position of most workers who wrongly self-identify as middle-class. In the end, Malott’s contribution works to advance a proletarian class-consciousness and the movement to transcend capital and its demands.

In her chapter, Jennifer M. Gore unveils “how aspects of childhood and experiences as both student and teacher guided my intellectual journey toward, through and since my initial engagement with critical pedagogy.” In the opening of the chapter, Gore reveals that she witnessed her sister being mistreated due to having cerebral palsy. The societal prejudices emanating “against difference” were major factors in the formation of her critical consciousness. After the author articulates how her family’s connection with the teaching profession made teaching an “honourable career option for her,” she sheds light on how her graduate studies at the University of British Columbia and at the University of Wisconsin Madison honed her thinking about teaching, education, society, and inequality. Next, Gore acknowledges the watershed moment of her intellectual development, which occurred when she read Elizabeth Ellsworth paper, “Why doesn’t this feel empowering?” The paper positioned her to become “passionate about what critical and feminist work might look like in
classrooms,” and how she “could operationalise (her) commitments to social justice and human dignity in (her) work in teacher education.” Gore concludes the chapter by detailing several strands of her intellectual work. Her work is imbued with “critical intent, aligning with the same principles for a more just world, more just lives for teachers and students.”

Peter Mayo writes about the development of his interest in adult education and alternative educational routes more generally, and how this interest intersects with the necessity of political education. While Mayo was drawn into the radical and socialist tradition while studying sociology at Athabasca University, his passion for social justice was furthered by the radical developments taking place in Latin America during the 1970s. In addition to detailing how he came into the critical pedagogy tradition, and how he was encouraged to read Freire together with Gramsci, Mayo generates important insights into understanding contemporary educational and social problems, focusing on the repression of migrants.

David Gabbard focuses his chapter on providing a concise summary “of the evolution of (his) thoughts on education and compulsory schooling.” In the introductory pages, the author notes why he believes education ought to be a continual “pursuing of answers that inevitably leads to more questions, leaving our answers always partial and tentative.” Unfortunately, Gabbard’s experience in higher education for almost 20 years illustrates that the vast majority of academics and students are not involved in this type of education. Rather, they are on a trek to earn a “piece of paper,” gain tenure, or obtain a job. Next, the critical pedagogue captures the role Žižek’s taxonomy of stupidity has played in shaping his development as a critical educational theorist. He concludes the chapter by “providing background information on the autobiographical experiences that gave rise to the questions” that he has “pursued over the past twenty-five years.”

Domenica Maviglia’s chapter is dedicated to capturing the intellectual and pedagogical legacy of one of the leading critical pedagogues in our generation, Joe L. Kincheloe. The author begins the chapter by providing cultural and biographical remarks surrounding Kincheloe’s upbringing, the scope of his research, and the trajectory of his administrative and cultural work. One of Joe’s numerous legacies that he left scholars and practitioners was his creation of the Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy. Before Joe passed away in 2008, the Project was responsible for forging an “international critical community” devoted to improving the world of schooling and society through research, teaching, and activism. Next, Maviglia captures the depth and breadth of Kincheloe’s pedagogy. Along with impacting the world of critical pedagogy, Kincheloe impacted numerous debates in such intellectual fields, as “postformalism, critical constructivism, critical multiculturalism, critical cultural studies” and “critical social studies education.” The author concludes the chapter by documenting the numerous merits of Kincheloe’s critical pedagogy. His pedagogy is essential for challenging injustice in schools and society because it “recognises the crucial influence played by social relationships and
it denounces the paralysing burden posed by the power dynamics that characterise the educational experience.

Peter McLaren details his transition from a non-political child growing up in a conservative home, to beatnik-hippie, to liberal and, finally, revolutionary. The formative role that individuals—friends, teachers, fighters, and academics alike—played in this transition is documented. McLaren writes about his days at the University of Toronto and his combination of “arrogance and innocence” that initially led him into the work of teaching. In addition to this historical information, McLaren documents his theoretical trajectory, talking about the importance of Marxism and the centrality of the capital-labor dialectic in understanding and resisting oppression and exploitation. He also traces several of his current projects, which are increasingly becoming international in scope. Finally, McLaren delineates several aspects of the revolutionary critical pedagogy that he has played a leading role in developing over the last decade.

In his chapter, E. Wayne Ross testifies to his conversion “from believer, to heretic, to apostate.” In his earlier life and career, Ross moved in between schools and the church, all the while struggling with authority and hierarchy. Ross’ orientation toward critical pedagogy was influenced by life experiences, professors, and his teaching background. His interest in critical theory was cemented at Ohio State, through his study of curriculum reconceptualism. After completing his doctorate, Ross writes that the theories of Marx, Foucault, and Debord became increasingly useful for understanding the contemporary educational and political scene. Ross concludes his chapter by detailing some of his work, much of it collaborative. Of particular note is his notion of “dangerous citizenship,” which “requires a praxis-inspired mindset of opposition and resistance, an acceptance of strategic and tactical stances.”

John Elmore begins his chapter by exploring the roots of his political orientation towards schools and society. He reveals how his grandfather’s production on his pig farm helped him “recognize that his toil was not only an act necessitated by basic sustenance, but also, and ultimately, an act in pursuit of freedom.” He explains how he held an oppositional identity towards the schooling process, which lead him to opt for a GED and end his high school experience. The author details how his critical view of the schooling process is responsible for igniting his critical orientation towards the church’s “psychological and theological” domination over the public. Elmore ends the chapter by elucidating how his scholarship has been shaped by his critical orientation toward to religion, schools, and society. He also makes a clarion call for other critical scholars to become intimately involved in administrative decision-making in the academy. He believes this step is necessary because “the enemies we face are powerful and well funded, but what is on the line for our students and, ultimately, the society we live in is more than worth the battle.”
Ana Cruz’s chapter focuses on her journey with Paulo Freire’s work. She connects how Paulo’s work impacted her own development as a critical scholar as well as captures the significant influence of his work on the field of critical pedagogy. The author begins the chapter by connecting her geographical roots to Paulo’s birthplace of Brazil. Before being arrested and exiled to Chile in 1964, the reader learns that Paulo was raised in a middle-class environment, was deeply connected to the Catholic Church, and was the director of national literacy campaigns. Cruz illuminates the myriad ways Freire’s work has impacted the world of critical pedagogy. She also reminds us that one can only comprehend Freire’s work if she or he is “being cognizant of the background and realizing the context within which the individual work was produced.” The author concludes the chapter by outlining the “eclectic body of work that” Paulo “embraced to construct his thoughts on pedagogy” and by establishing several central concepts Freire generated to transform the world. She also articulates how her journey with Freire altered her understanding of education, activism, and relationships with the ‘Other.’

Michael Apple’s chapter begins by capturing how Teachers College was an excellent fit for him to begin his doctoral studies during the 1960s. It allowed him to combine his “interests in politics, education, and the gritty materialities of daily life in schools.” While at Teachers College, Apple worked with several progressive scholars, including Dwayne Hue and Jonas Soltis, who provided the foundation for much of his “work on the relationship among education, knowledge, and power.” Next, the author captures why the University of Wisconsin Madison became a “special place, an institution where” he has “spent more than four decades.” Apple then details the rich intellectual trajectory of his work and illuminates how his scholarship is dedicated to capturing the “significance of cultural struggles and of the crucial place that schools, curricula, teachers, and communities play in these struggles.” After documenting “the extensive international work” he has been engaged over the course of his illustrious career, Apple concludes the chapter by arguing that some radical scholar/activities have produced a “Freire industry.” He argues that these scholars are connected to Freire’s work for the purposes of creating “an illusion of political commitment while managing to make no sacrifices in one’s goal of individual advancement and prestige.”

Juha Souranta’s chapter covers his journey from qualitative methodologist to critical pedagogue. Noting that critical pedagogy is still a marginal tradition in Finland, he writes that sufficient groundwork has been laid for the field in the country and, more significantly, that critical pedagogy today comprises an international community of radical educators and activists. A large portion of this narrative documents Souranta’s underground life harboring a young Afghan who was due to be deported to Greece. As a tenured professor, Souranta’s first immersion into activism—and a radical immersion at that—occurred because, he writes, “I was struck by a social problem, a previously unknown antagonism in my own neck of the woods, and I needed to do something, I needed to intervene.”
Lisa Y. William-White uses poetry and autobiographic performance to frame the intersection of her personal and political life. This poetic telling begins before William-White, as she discloses the struggles of her foreparents and the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. This is a struggle that she would inherit and inhabit, one that would lead her to a permanent investigation into “the structural and cultural forces that shape me.”

Suzanne SooHoo offers us her “Asian ontology, critical incidents, and critical friends” that brought her into critical pedagogy. As education is so often a site of constant babbling, SooHoo writes about the productive and disruptive role of silence in her life, her thought, her teaching, and her political action. She relays a brilliant story about her time as a school principal and her efforts “to make a long-term commitment to that school to honor teachers as professionals and respect students for their rich inherent abilities and acquired talent.” While critical pedagogy has been critiqued as being too certain, SooHoo presents us with a chapter that cherishes the unfinished and the “humility of not knowing.”

In her afterword to the book, Sandy Grande makes a timely plea for understanding the current round of education “reforms” as a form of low-intensity warfare that is aimed at protecting and advancing racist, capitalist, and settler-colonialist power structures. Noting that, while the field is still largely white and male, the diversity of contributors to this volume evidences that this is changing. Grande then provides her own mapping of the field and reading of the book’s chapters, making explicit common threads and concerns. At the end of her afterword, Grande presents an understanding of the ways in which the colonial settler state “has relied on identity and cultural politics for its reconsolidation, requiring and soliciting certain ways of being, desiring, and knowing at the same time it destroys others.” As an example of this, Grande calls our attention to the (attempted) cooptation of #BlackLivesMatter by #AllLivesMatter. This is a form of erasure and that signals the dead-end nature of liberal politics. The task, then, is to move critical pedagogy “beyond the horizons of democracy,” which entails “nothing short of a remaking of the nation state through Indigenous repatriation and sovereignty.” We couldn’t think of a more pressing call for the international critical pedagogy movement to take up.

REFERENCES


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The idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken on that kind of naiveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. To attempt to do without hope, which is based on the need for truth as an ethical quality of struggle, is tantamount to denying that struggle is one of its mainstays. (Freire, 2002, p. 8)

Hope is alive, but it must be a practical and not a naïve hope. A practical hope doesn’t simply celebrate rainbows, unicorns, nutbread, and niceness, but rigorously understands “what is” in relation to “what could be” – a traditional critical notion. (Kincheloe, 2008, p. x)

INTRODUCTION

Existence is not despair, but risk. If I don’t exist dangerously, I cannot be. (Freire, 1985, p. 130)

This chapter will discuss one pedagogue’s lived experiences in attempting to define, initiate, refine, and develop critical pedagogical praxis in his classes over the last 35 years. It is significant that this development has taken place in a number of different geographical locations (Upstate New York, Northern Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Indiana, Illinois, Southeast Georgia, Quebec, and Calgary, Alberta, Canada) with hundreds of students. Students in public high schools, at an Ojibwa Reservation school, and at various university classrooms in the United States and Canada at the undergraduate and graduate levels have all engaged in the struggle to move from schooling that deposits to an education that strives to dialogue and works toward critical consciousness. Of course, the discussion of these experiences is limited by the constraints of a chapter. The socio-political situation(s) have changed during those 35 years and that is an important context in this personal/political narrative. The following sections are placed within a brief discussion of the socio-political context of that historical period. This struggle becomes increasingly more difficult as the times become darker, crueler, and more repressive. The struggle to work toward an education of critical consciousness becomes more difficult as hegemony
becomes more entrenched. The risks for the pedagogue who is attempting to work in critical pedagogy, without the naiveté that education is the single tool of transformation toward democracy and social justice, have increased during the past thirty years and particularly as we move through the 21st century (see Reynolds, 2013). As pedagogues and their students attempt to create a critical space to dialogue and move toward critical awareness, their efforts do not go unnoticed by those who are immersed in and profit from the neoliberal agenda in education. That neoliberal agenda has become pervasive in public schools and universities. Educators and students who refuse the agenda become visible and vulnerable as a result. Historically, it has been my experience that this visibility and vulnerability have consistently been the case. These current dark, nightmarish, neoliberal times for education and the larger society make resistance and critique increasingly risky. Certainly, they have always been against the grain.

Your challenge now makes you individually more visible and thus more vulnerable. If you are in the opposition instead of safely inside the established consensus (the official curriculum), you risk being fired, or not getting a promotion, or not getting a pay raise, or not getting the courses you want to teach, or the schedule you want, or the leave you apply for or even in some cases you become the target of ultra-conservative groups. (Shor & Freire, 1986, p. 54)

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I began teaching in public schools in Upstate New York in 1975. It was a time of teacher-proof materials, pre-packaged teaching kits, career and back-to-basics education.1 This was the Nixon agenda in education; it was designed to counteract the critical questioning of the 1960s. The idea underlying the Nixon agenda was that if students became career focused (certainly in place today as students currently are obsessively job focused) and worked hard on the basics, there would be no time for questioning the taken-for-granted or anything else.

Curriculum was tilted in the direction of work discipline and job-training. Perhaps that would cool the ardor of youth. If not careerism was followed in the mid-1970s by a “Literacy Crisis” and a back to basics movement. Perhaps those programs would put some noses to the grindstone. (Shor, 1986, p. 4)

I was hired at Romulus Central School to teach high school English and particularly grammar. Romulus was a rural school in the Finger Lakes region of Upstate New York with an average graduating class of approximately 85 students. I had been educated as a teacher to transmit knowledge to students. I stood behind a wooden podium and lectured daily on everything from Shakespeare to diagraming sentences. Students seated alphabetically in rows memorized passages from Shakespeare and did countless grammar exercises. I remember I was very satisfied that the
classes were making rapid progress through the Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition: Third Course Grade Nine (1958). I was teaching in the manner I had been taught to teach. The more information you could pour into the students’ heads the better. All the course work I had taken and was taking in teacher education was providing me with the latest methods that would make those transmissions more effective. The course work in undergraduate and graduate education courses fostered a type of methods fetish. Reading fiction was also about plot analysis and character development.

The principal was very satisfied with the job I was doing and the students appeared to enjoy the classes. I felt, however, that something was missing from this education. Somehow it felt empty. The first year I taught I had a class that was oddly labeled on my class list as English 9–12. I asked the principal about the odd classification and his response was “Keep them quiet and out of trouble.” This did not help inspire any confidence for me. This class was instrumental in transforming my pedagogy from depositing to dialogue. But it was before I read Paulo Freire or any other critical perspectives on education. There were seven students in the class. All of the students were white males ranging in age from 17–20. The 20-year old was trying desperately to graduate with a certificate of attendance. All of the men were from low-income families and all of them were volunteer fire fighters. All of them could barely read if they could read at all.

At first, I tried all the methods that were recommend by mainstream educational wisdom, particularly the use of so-called high-interest, low-level vocabulary books. These materials were horrible. They were certainly not “age appropriate” and they were just another reason for these students to hate reading and education. I remember staying up late one night and trying to figure out what to do. I finally decided never to use those materials again. I decided that we would read books together. Since these men had never read or been read a book in their entire lives, this was going to be a challenge.

The second step was finding a book that would be interesting, relevant, and could generate some discussion about their everyday lived experiences. I found the book, Report from Engine CO. 82 (1973). I am sure this was not on any recommend reading list in the United States. I bought each student a copy so they would have their own book. I read the book to them. I would read a section each day and then we would talk about the differences between fire fighters in rural New York and fire fighters in New York City.

Some would criticize simply reading a book to students, but reading and dialogue that did not demand a response that was pre-determined by the teacher was something these students had never experienced before and they loved it. The class and I read 7 books that year. Initially I chose the books, but eventually they chose books. This community (class) of honest, open dialogue led me to open dialogues with all my classes concerning novels, writing, and speech. This was before Literacy: Reading the Word and the World (1987) was written. But, it seems to me it was moving in that direction. The struggle to work toward a different type of education was difficult for me because I knew that this was the right thing to do, but I was acting/teaching in a
type of isolation. I want to emphasize that I am not the hero of my story. The students and I worked together to transform the educational experience. It was not about the “methods” I employed. It was about the community we attempted to create. I am still in contact with some of those students, even 38 years later.

I can’t remember how I came to read Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). It was probably suggested by someone in one of my master’s classes. I read it in 1977. The experience of reading Freire’s book was like being in a completely dark room and someone turning on a bright light. I read it with a pen and a highlighter. There were countless highlights and marginal notes. There in those words was what I had been feeling and thinking about for years. After reading the book, I began to have a language to discuss the ideas and a way to explain to others what I was trying in the classroom and most importantly why. It gave me a philosophical framework for what I was attempting in my classrooms. Of course, critical pedagogy is not a method and many of my colleagues and students to this day want it to be. If only there were a critical pedagogy method book or a video capable of transforming the world!

The other focus of this pedagogy is the world. A critical pedagogue cannot preach about social transformation and social justice without working toward those ideals inside and outside the classroom. If students observe you as the teacher discussing the need for social change and do not see you acting on that then they can discount the talk. There will more on this later in the chapter.

Another book that helped to shape my early critical framework was Richard Ohmann’s English in America: A radical view of the profession (1976). I read this shortly after reading Freire (1970). Ohmann placed teaching English into a political perspective that was crucial to my personal and political understandings.

Here a general principle of ideology is helpful: a privileged social group will generalize its own interests so that they appear to be universal social goals (“What’s good for General Motors…”). In America, in the fifties, the bourgeois intellectual needed assurance that his privileges were for the general good. For example, a critic and teacher of literature whose work is fun and respectable, but who sees little evidence that he is helping to ameliorate social ills, or indeed serving any but those destined to assume their own positions in the ruling class—a teacher in this dubious spot will welcome a system of ideas and values that tells him that politics and ideology are at an end, that a pluralistic society is best for all, that individual freedom is the proper social goal for rich and poor alike, and that the perfection of self can best be attained through humanistic intellectual endeavor. (Ohmann, 1976)

This began to put my profession in critical perspective. How it was about reading the word and not the world. I had to rethink my notions of expertise, knowledge, and pedagogy.

In 1979, I moved from Romulus Central School to Red High School (approximately 321 students). Red Creek was an economically depressed area in Upstate New York
located a mile from the shore of Lake Ontario. The school district was comprised of two towns, Red Creek and Fair Haven. While Red Creek was a low-income area, Fair Haven had wealthier families living in lake front homes. So in my English classes, there was a spread of economic backgrounds. As I assumed the responsibility of teaching 11th grade English, I was confronted, on the previous teacher’s bookcase, with an entire year’s Scholastic packaged curriculum, *Scholastic Literature Units 5100* (Dunning, 1973). This Orwellian curriculum contained in four loose leaf notebooks: scripted lessons for each day for 40 weeks, quizzes for all lessons, unit tests for all material, teacher synopsis for all readings and various suggestions for additional activities. These were the epitome of teacher-proof materials.

Upon my arrival, I promptly sent these notebooks to the storage room. These were certainly not consistent with any attempts to work with the students on moving toward critical consciousness in a critical community. The five years attempting to do this at Red Creek taught me some lessons about critical pedagogy. In high schools in the late 1970s and early 1980s, critical pedagogy had consequences. As the teacher, I was not prepared for those consequences nor did I prepare my students for the consequences of developing a critical consciousness. The consequence for me was a type of anger/alienation from other teachers. Students who were free to ask questions and challenge me in classes began to expect that from other teachers and that simply was not going to happen. When the students were asked where they got the idea that they could ask questions, they responded that they could in my class. That brought other teachers to confront me about what I was doing. I suggested that they read Paulo Freire, but there was immediate resistance. More concerning than my position was the manner in which students were demeaned and received poor grades from other teachers for their critical perspectives.

In one case, a female student was assigned in her 11th grade social studies class to write a term paper on racism. She was a very bright student and asked me if I thought that writing about her history textbook being racist was a good idea. I immediately responded that it was a great idea. She wrote the paper and had me proof read it. It was an excellent paper. I was very pleased with the ways in which she had critically analyzed questions of racial representation in the textbook. She turned it into her social studies teacher, who was a traditional banking teacher and the result was a grade of F. The only comment on the paper was –How Dare You Criticize My Textbook. After many heated arguments, the grade on the student paper remained an F. This experience taught me that as a critical pedagogue, it is not only necessary to develop critical consciousness with students but also to discuss the politics of employing critical consciousness in specific situations. Those involved in a critical education must be critically aware that there are always consequences to critiquing the status quo. If you do not question the taken-for-granted and remain asleep and not wide-awake (Greene, 1978), there is no risk and as a teacher or student you will have little to fear. On the other hand, my experiences with critical pedagogy and critical consciousness have mostly been about risk and struggle.
As I was working with high school students toward critical consciousness, I was pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of Rochester. I wasn’t aware of it at the time, but I was fortunate to be there. I had not investigated scholars in the field, but I decided to attend the University of Rochester because of its proximity to my job. Looking back now, especially, I realize how very lucky I was. William F. Pinar, Madeleine Grumet, and Philip Wexler were all at the same place at the same time, and I was able to study with all of them. The work in this program allowed me to read widely in critical literature (see Reynolds, 2003). It was the intellectual safe place where I read and discussed the political. I have come to realize in the last year that I have been writing about curriculum as a political text for more than thirty years. Certainly I see critical pedagogy as political act. It was the preparation I needed to leave public school teaching and move to university teaching.

I left public school teaching in 1985 and moved to Menomonie, Wisconsin to teach at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, a technological institution whose major purpose historically has been and continues to be career preparation. This was during the Reagan Administration. My first attempts at developing a type of critical practice were at best haphazard. There were few colleagues with whom I could discuss critical pedagogy, and at the time, there were few volumes that discussed it; even my best accomplishments were often unplanned. It was relatively easy to return to a “banking” (Freire, 2006), or an autocratic type of pedagogy that manipulated students. If the students did not understand or comprehend then they were just not intelligent enough and were incapable of understanding. During the first few semesters of my six years at UW-Stout, I did revert to a type of banking lecture periodically at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Although I was tempted to pursue that pedagogy much more than I did. I recognized that the students would find all the material we discussed difficult, foreign, and in their words, “too theoretical.”

I arrived at Oklahoma State University in 1992 to work exclusively with doctoral students. Russell Dobson, who has remained a friend and an example for me as a worker in this academic life, recruited me. The move to Oklahoma coincided with the beginning of the push for a nationalized curriculum and state testing in the guise of outcomes-based education. I witnessed the insidious return to the discourse of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and social efficiency education. I was worried that teachers and students were being duped, once again, by business ideology and what McLaren (2000) called in another context “bargain basement” programs. I had worked with critical pedagogy with high school students, undergraduate students, and master’s students. I was, at this point, ready to engage with doctoral students in critical pedagogy in a curriculum theory program. While at OSU I attempted to engage in critical pedagogy in curriculum studies classes, trying to develop critical curriculum
studies. During those three years the dialogues sometimes were difficult, especially when conservative Christian beliefs entered the complicated conversations, but having an open discussion about those beliefs and their relationship to education and politics helped our understandings. While at OSU, the graduate students and I produced a journal, *The Journal of Curriculum Discourse and Dialogue*. The articles from graduate students and international scholars reflected many of the critical dialogues we were having in classes. In 1995, I was asked to join the faculty at Purdue University.

When I started teaching at Purdue University in 1995, I was asked to develop the curriculum theory specialization in a curriculum and instruction program. There were outstanding students in the program and the critical pedagogical orientations of my seminar continued. Purdue also allowed me the opportunity to work with students from a variety of fields inside education and from various disciplines across the university. Indiana is a very conservative state and in some cases the dialogue in classes raised some uncomfortable issues for the students. But the community of conversations in the classes, I think, in many cases moved through the stages of developing critical consciousness.

I left Purdue University in 1997. I was recruited to be a member of the faculty of a new and exciting program in curriculum studies at Georgia Southern University. The issues of critical pedagogy remain in this institution as the grasp of the neoliberal agenda is stronger. At Georgia Southern, I have had the opportunity to teach undergraduate, masters, and doctoral classes. One of the questions I hear quite frequently for all level of classes is: Why haven’t I heard about any of this critical pedagogy, or cultural studies before now? It is an important question and indicates the entrenchment of not only banking education, but the corporatization of education. Undergraduates beginning teacher education programs indicate that they have never even thought about the ways in which their public or private school experiences were locked in this type of education and we dialogue about their experiences with standardized testing and how meaningless they found it. Graduate students, many of whom have had several years of teaching experience in schools, reflect on their teaching experience and decide that they have been somewhat complicitous in the neoliberal agenda. Both groups become angry with the education they have received.

In our dialogues, we attempt to turn that anger into productive alternatives all the while discussing the risks and rewards of doing so. Both groups are aware that the challenging of such an entrenched system is precarious to job security. In many cases we discuss how to negotiate that rough terrain. After 17 years of teaching at this institution the complicated, critical conversations continue. There is always more critical work to do. The students and I try to develop new ways to enhance critical perspectives. Again, I emphasize with the students that it is not enough to simply discuss social justice and equity in the classroom, but efforts must be made to be a voice in the larger community outside the schools. I try to demonstrate that in my activities outside academe.
One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding. (Freire, 2006, p. 95)

Such a history leaves significant questions at the turn of the twenty-first century. First and foremost, how can schools – which are deeply embedded in the exhaustive history of colonization – be reimagined as sites of indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. (Grande, 2004, p. 47)

While teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, I had the opportunity to work with Native American teachers at the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe High School in Hayward, Wisconsin. It was an approximately 210 mile round trip. I was the director of a program that delivered course work for a Master’s of Education degree to the teachers at the school. It was an amazing opportunity to engage in this program. I agreed immediately to take on the responsibility. Then, I realized there were so many issues involved. This experience was in 1988 and this is the first time I have written about it, because of the issues involved. I am a white male. I grew up in a working class suburb in Rochester, New York. All of my teaching experience up to that point had been with white students in predominately white schools. The university had changed this experience some as I had the opportunity to work with students of color from the United States and other nations. But, Northern Wisconsin is white. The demographics demonstrate this. The current population of Menomonie is 91.9% white, 0.8% African-American and 0.5% American Indian (United States Census Bureau, 2010). What on earth did I know about Native Americans, their culture or their lived experiences? I certainly did not want to engage in the type of malefic generosity or cultural invasion that Freire described.

Accordingly, these adherents to the people’s cause constantly run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as malefic as that of the oppressors. The generosity of the oppressors is nourished by an unjust order, which must be maintained in order to justify that generosity. Our converts, on the other hand, truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. (Freire, 2006, p. 60)

Pursuing critical pedagogy at a Native American school during the legacy of the Reagan budgets cuts to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the beginnings of the George H. Bush agenda did not help. I was aware that no pedagogy is inherently liberating. Was I going to be another in a series of white men engaging in colonizing a Native American tribal school? The question for me as a critical educator was how to understand and not perpetuate this dilemma. I realized that critical pedagogy could be just as colonializing as any other. I understood the history of the establishment of
the school. The tribe’s students were mistreated in many ways in the public school. In many cases they were being forced into physical fights with white students. Finally, the students had enough and collectively walked out of the public school and the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe High School was formed in 1976.5

I remember clearly my first ride up to the school. A colleague of mine, Daniel Paulson, rode along with me and we discussed many issues about this endeavor. I had decided not to come in as the expert white man telling the Native Americans what needed to be done in their school. I decided the best thing to do was listen. So, after greeting the eight teachers, I asked them to talk about themselves and in an open discussion asked them what were the issues that they would like to discuss. The reaction initially was silence. Oh yes, I thought, trust. I next asked them to tell me the history of the school. They were all willing to contribute to the story of the establishment of the school. They said that teachers hired at the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe High School were given rankings for hiring. Tribal members were given first priority. Native Americans from other tribes were given second priority and all others came third. I found it interesting that at that time all of the teachers were Native American, but the principal was white. As the semesters progressed the conversations became much more open. They talked about how the students were resisting the curriculum. It was still a white curriculum. The high school students would tell these teachers that they didn’t have to do any of this schoolwork because eventually they would go on the “dole” like their parents. We talked about the possibilities of creating an indigenous curriculum and what that would look like. I mostly listened. Eventually they invited me to come and visit their classes. This was a big step in developing our community. I was spending a great deal of time on the reservation. I would attend their classes and we would use those observations as discussion points. Issues such as discipline and motivation were mainstays of the conversations. Eventually I was invited to attend the weekly Friday Pow-Wow. This was an incredible honor and I remember those Pow-Wows vividly. There the traditions of the tribe and the tribal elders were presented in story, song, and dance. I observed students who were not interested in the least in the class offerings were riveted by the traditions of the tribe. It was extraordinary. I discovered in conversations with the elders that their Ojibwe language had been stripped away from them. The white man had come on the reservations and took the children to boarding schools to learn the white culture. Part of this process was the stripping away of their language and culture. Their fear was that when the elders passed away so would the language and the culture. The Pow-Wows were one way of keeping the old ways alive. The conversations with the elders also made their way into the conversations of the classes.

I spent three semesters delivering a course each semester to the teachers, observing their classes, attending the Pow-Wows, and traveling through the reservation. I am not sure whether critical pedagogy or dialogical education made much of an impact. The program was cut the year I left UW-Stout. It was for me a life changing experience in many ways. I regret that I did not get to spend more time with the teachers and students there.
STUDENT REACTIONS TO CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Student reactions to my many attempts at critical pedagogy over the years have been varied and interesting. During my experiences in critical pedagogy, there have been basically three types of reactions exhibited toward my attempts at critical pedagogy; the same reactions were reported in personal conversations and in written form by numerous scholars who have attempted to pursue critical pedagogy in their classrooms and daily lives (Freire & Shor, 1987; Shor, 1987; Giroux, 1988; Hooks, 1994; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Kincheloe, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrel, 2008; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2008; Macrine, 2009; Giroux, 2011; DeLissovoy, 2011; Kincheloe, Hayes, Steinberg, & Tobin, 2011; Porfilio & Viola, 2012).

The first type of reaction is a very positive one. The students think that our attempts at critical pedagogy/dialogue education are the best type of education that they have experienced in their lives in educational institutions. Comments that were written (anonymously) at the end of course throughout the thirty years reflect this.

This has been the best course I have ever taken; all of us looked forward to it a great deal. We were treated as individuals and able to dialogue as soon as we got a base of knowledge, which I feel is important. (Graduate)

While Black teachers and administrators assisted me in navigating and surviving white schools it was Dr. Reynolds a white male teacher who first validated my blackness in an educational setting. (Graduate)

The course examines many aspects of critical pedagogy and literacy thus allowing students from many different backgrounds to collaborate in class discussions, while drawing from each their personal/professional experiences. The manner in which theory and content were integrated into the lessons this stimulating class discussion (a dialogue format), the passion and enthusiasm with which the course material was discussed and the excitement with which our comments and suggestions were addressed was conducive to a vigorous yet relaxed and truly liberating learning

I loved how we were encouraged to discuss topics that we enjoyed and that were relevant to what we were learning in the field. I feel that we were encouraged and praised for asking questions. Discussions were always participated in. (undergraduate)

These student comments illustrate responses with a new attitude. The students are also likely, as Shor and Freire (1987) state and as I experience, to inform relatives and friends of the discussions and the class. I have always felt that was the best indicator of whether critical pedagogy was being somewhat successful. That is when the conversations continue on outside of class with others. In some cases, students even brought those relatives and friends to the class to participate in the dialogue. This is the type of reaction and response that all of us engaged in critical pedagogy hope will happen.
The second type of student response, somewhat less enthusiastic, comes from students described by Shor and Freire (1987) as “students who showed not much participation and not much resistance but they would come back for another semester or two, to be around an atmosphere that appealed to them (p. 25). These students, to a certain extent, appear to withdraw after the first few class sessions in the dialogical classroom. They were unresponsive in class and did not contribute. I thought they were either not understanding what was transpiring or choosing not to participate or both. Their comments were interesting, but brief.

Most of this is too theoretical and can't be applied to the schools. (Graduate)

There was too much information. (Graduate)

The content was pretty heavy. (Graduate)

Too many readings, books were too difficult to read quickly. (Graduate)

I thought this was an education course! (Undergraduate)

Very opinionated material. (Undergraduate)

These students I found to be the most problematic. I continually seek through dialogue and through personal discussions to reach them. At times these students tell me that they are so used to classrooms of silence and memorization that it just “takes time” to get used to a class where it is ok to say what you think and feel without fear of being silenced. These students certainly indicate the lasting impact of the banking system.

The last type of reaction Shor describes accurately: “Still others were actively hostile, challenging me in ways to stop the critical thrust of the class. They were committed to tradition and saw the class as a threat to their established values” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 25). Some students, through the years, have been actively hostile to what was happening in my classes. Most of the resistance comes from students of privilege, both white students and students of color. These students saw the dialogue about social issues, capitalism, and banking education as a threat to their established values. In particular they saw these ideas as an assault on their common sense. Their response usually manifested itself as some variation of “that is just the way things are or it is what it is.” They also accuse the writers they read of “reading too much into these situations.”

Too many radical and liberal beliefs and opinions in the class. (Graduate)

I learn absolutely nothing in this class. (Undergraduate)

It could be more relevant for new teachers…as new teachers we cannot do these things w/o getting into trouble. (Undergraduate)

There were more productive things I could have been doing. (Graduate)
One male graduate student early in my university teaching career wrote a telling criticism. I simply dismissed it at the time, but over the years I have thought about it. It may be one of the most telling comments made.

What are you trying to do? It seems like you are trying to make the class a sewing circle. Are you doing this to discuss criticism and alternatives to the nation’s schools? Why do we discuss all this personal crap?

The allusion to a sewing circle is in actuality quite astute. The student, I believe, meant this comment in the most sexist and negative way possible. Implicit in the comment (sewing circle), I am sure, was the fact that the student perceived the class to be like a “bunch of women sitting around talking and wasting time” (comment made in class). But the student pointed out a crucial aspect of the experience of critical pedagogical praxis. These dialogically oriented classrooms, where lived experiences are shared and discussed in their relationship to education, society, oppression, racism, sexism, and homophobia, begin to break down walls of authoritarianism, which across the years have become entrenched in schools and universities as they have become corporatized and the neoliberal curriculum(s) have continued to be instrumentalized.

Despite the ever more perplexing, cruel, and nightmarish times, students and I continue to work together to create a more dialogical, democratic classroom. The additional works on critical pedagogy have contributed a great deal to its progress, but the work must continue especially at this point historically, as the schools and universities struggle against the neoliberal, corporate curriculum of skill, drill, and test (Reynolds, 2014). As the work continues it must allow for additional conceptualizations. For me, the addition of critical media analysis has helped to engage students in the dialogue (Macedo & Steinberg, 2008; Ibrahim & Steinberg, 2014). Present day students are savvy concerning popular culture, particularly technologies. This allows initial and continuing dialogue about lived experiences with students. We should dialogue, discuss, present, blog, Facebook, tweet, and participate in social action. Action is imperative or our efforts degenerate into a type of slacktivism (posting radical messages online). Posting is important but not sufficient. All these of these activities should be with colleagues, students, practitioners, and communities to enable numerous voices to be heard. Therein lies hope.

HOPE

One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be. After all, without hope there is little we can do. It is hard to struggle on, and when we fight as hopeless or despairing persons, our struggle is suicidal. (Freire, 2002, p. 9)

I know that many colleagues think it is foolishly naïve to have hope in the present historical moment. I have been in heated arguments about the having of hope. It
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may well be one of the last vestiges of my Eurocentric mind. Yet, I could not pursue critical pedagogical praxis without hope. What would be the point? It is part of our language of possibility (Giroux, 1988). It is practical hope.

Practical hope rings with possibilities and can assist in restoring educators from the dim recesses of disillusionment. That disillusionment can end in immobility and surrender. Practical hope also moves educators to more activist positions despite the risks of visibility and vulnerability (Reynolds, 2013). The discourse of practical hope and critical pedagogy in this historical moment of free-market fundamentalism, micro-fascism, and right-wing mega church religion (Reynolds & Webber, 2009) must orient itself to the struggles of everydayness in the face of such overwhelming obstacles; “This means recalibrating the discourse so that it “speaks” to the immediate problems of workers and others who struggle under the daily grind of time edicts, low salaries, disrespectful work environments, etc…” (McLaren, 2007, p. 75)

The stubborn persistence of hope operates within a context of radical love. We can only hope for those we love not in a romantic sense, but in the sense that we must, as educators entrusted with the welfare of children, work as rigorously as we can to make a better world and in doing so provide youth with critical capacities that enable them to ask the difficult questions concerning education and the larger society. That rigorous work demonstrates not only radical love but hope. Radical love dwells in hope and likewise hope dwells in the context of radical love. Radical love and hope are about the project to end human suffering through the critical awareness of the businessification, militarization of education and a socially unjust society.

The struggle with and for a critical pedagogical praxis that speaks to the immediate educational, societal, economic, political, class, race, gender, and sexual preference issues we face is the hope we can have for creating a more humane world and in that attempt to alleviate human suffering. I continue to work with students and others toward those goals with hope.

NOTES


2 I have discussed critical consciousness in the context of liberation theology. Reynolds, W. M. (2013). Liberation Theology and Paulo Freire: On the side of the poor In R. Lake and T. Kress (Eds). Paulo Freire’s historical roots: Toward historicity in praxis (127–145). New York: Bloomsbury. Freire discussed three levels of conscious (Fritz, 2010, p. 2) that people move through as they progress toward critical consciousness. The first level is that of magical consciousness or thinking. In this state people are silent and docile and live in the taken-for-granted. Events are explained by way of some superior, mystical or magical force (Fritz, 2010, p. 2). It is beyond their ability to remedy so they accept. Of course, religion plays a part in perpetuating this type of consciousness and was one of the objects that a conscientizing evangelization was trying to change. Whether Freire influenced this movement or whether this movement influenced Freire concerning magical thinking is difficult to determine. The next stage in this development of a critical conscious is naïve consciousness (Fritz, 2010, p. 2). In this stage people become aware of problems but the notion of changing those problems becomes individualized not put into a larger socio-political context. In this stage for example in
education teachers might blame an individual administrator or fellow teacher for their problems or students blame an individual teacher for how awful the schooling experience has become. In terms of the church a member of the congregation might blame an individual priest for the problem of poverty or the sad state of things. The result, of course, is the very system that causes the problems is never questioned and remains in place. Many get stuck in this stage of consciousness. The final stage is critical consciousness (Fritz, 2010, p. 2) in this stage people start to see issues as systemic problems. They begin to see their positionality in terms of class, gender, race, and so on. They also become conscious of repressive social structures and arrangements. As Freire cautions, however, critical conscious must be a collective process not a top down interventionist strategy. It also needs to move beyond interesting debates about this theoretical perspective or that perspective or building castles in the air (p. 139).


4 These reactions are described in Shor & Freire, 1987 (pp. 24–30).


KEY READINGS


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2. JUST WHAT THE HELL IS A NEO-MARXIST ANYWAY?

A Political and Intellectual Biography

When asked to write my intellectual biography and how and why I came to enter the field of critical pedagogy (to the extent it can be called a “field,” see, Apple & Au, 2015, for further discussion), a large part of me wants to give the short answer: For as long as I can remember, my dad has been a communist. Now that answer is simplistic and incomplete, but it does speak to some things that were foundational in my development as a child and into my adult life. For instance, I have strong memories of participating in many a May Day rally and march either in Seattle or in the San Francisco Bay Area. One of those early memories includes a decision by marchers to swarm through the Nordstrom’s clothing store in downtown Seattle. As we wove our way between the clothing racks and perfume counters I distinctly remember looking around and wondering to myself, “You mean we can just do this and not get into trouble?” Quickly followed by the realization that, “Wow. When people are together like this, we’re kind of powerful.”

There are other memories connected to my dad’s communism that were important too. My folks were divorced for a lot of my life, so I often spent a month in the summer staying with my dad, usually in the San Francisco Bay Area. One summer in the 1980’s when I stayed with him was during the height of the anti-South African apartheid divestment movement at UC Berkeley. My sister, who was also very politically involved at that point, had been organizing and agitating amongst the shantytown that student and community activists had symbolically constructed to occupy the campus square there (facing police brutality in the process). Telegraph Avenue, a street which runs almost directly into the campus square, was also a site of protest, and as part of an anti-apartheid march and rally I had a blast gleefully tossing toilet paper rolls through the signs and trees along the street as a part of the protest.

These are just a couple of memories, and they can’t be tied directly to a specific intellectual tradition (I certainly didn’t consciously have those traditions in mind as I tossed toilet paper along Telegraph Avenue), but they oriented me towards injustice and they taught me from very early on that people got together to fight against that injustice. I also feel very deeply that my early experiences in these kinds of protests allowed me to glimpse what moments of what it meant to feel free in some sense.
I may not have understood what exactly I was feeling free from, but I definitely felt it. And it was something I came to feel again and again later in my life.

There are other more general political things that came along with my dad, some overtly connected to his communism and some not. I would wager, for instance, that very few young boys grew up as I did, getting regularly lectured to about women’s oppression and my duty, as a boy/man, to struggle against it incessantly. There were also the political meetings at our house and at the houses of others, and the “war stories” of fighting with the cops at a protest here, or fighting the conservatives on the shipyard docks while trying to organize workers there. Additionally, despite what I see as his lack of self-interrogation of his own racial identity, my dad did contribute to my own identity development in some key ways. Whether through the simplicity of food, his tai chi, and, of course, stories about our family history (Chinese American via Hawai’i as early as the 1880s, as well as his own father’s communism), I was learning about what it meant to be mixed, to be a part of the Asian American and Chinese American diaspora, and what differentiated me from the predominantly white family members and communities I was living amongst during my formative pre-and-early adolescent years.

Coinciding with the above-mentioned move to a predominantly white community to be nearer to my mother’s family, it is important for me to add another critical, foundational aspect of my intellectual autobiography: hip hop. I had moved from a very diverse, urban, and working class community in West Seattle to a generally affluent, mostly white suburb in Connecticut. It was shocking to me in many ways, a shock that included being called a Chink on the bus ride on my first day at my new elementary school. It is amazing how much being “mixed” is in the eye of the beholder, and in that new, less diverse context, I was easily marked as different.

When I reflect back upon this time period, I feel pretty clear that my embrace of hip hop music and culture was in part my rejection of my new, white suburban surroundings (and the cultural norms that came with it) and in part a clinging to the urban-ness I remembered from my old neighborhood. In Connecticut I went to schools that usually had 2–3 African American students total and usually no Asian American students at all (and no Latinos and no Native American kids either). I wasn’t conscious of it at the time, but now it makes perfect sense to me that I became close friends with several of the African American kids, and one of our shared loves was hip hop music and the growing b-boying (aka Breakdancing) and graffiti scenes which at that moment had entered pop culture and were being mass marketed for the first time (Chang, 2005). Once in Connecticut I could stay up late on the weekend nights fine-tuning my boom box radio to catch and record New York City deejays cutting up the latest hip hop records. So an identification with hip hop culture, and by a limited extension, Black culture, became important rudders for me as I navigated the cultural politics of overwhelming whiteness, and I carried these sensibilities with me through the rest of my life (I still do).

Flash forward to high school, where, after a return to Seattle, I attended Garfield High School – historic home of Quincy Jones, Jimi Hendrix, and the Seattle chapter
JUST WHAT THE HELL IS A NEO-MARXIST ANYWAY?

of the Black Panther Party. Always negotiating the fluid and messy mix of whiteness, being Chinese American, identifying with hip hop culture (and by extension, some amount of Black culture too), and attending Seattle’s historically Black high school, I continued to make my own political way. This was the time of a highly politicized movement in hip hop music (Chang, 2005) and I immediately took political education from listening to the likes of Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, N.W.A and Queen Latifah, an education that continued into my college years through emcees like Paris, the Poor Righteous Teachers, and Ice Cube.

At Garfield High School I engaged my friends and peers on issues of culture and race politics through hip-hop music. I also was lucky enough to stumble upon two courses at Garfield that took up an African and African American-centric orientation to curriculum—a course on the Harlem Renaissance and a world history course, both taught by Mr. Davis. Those classes were critical to my political and intellectual development. I was only one of two non-African American students in each class, and certainly the only Asian American. Through Mr. Davis’ curriculum we entered into incredibly important conversations and arguments about history, culture, race, and racism, and through those conversations and arguments we also developed meaningful relationships (Au, 2009a).

When I think back on that time now I feel like those courses served three purposes for me. First, it was a time where I existed in a space that was decidedly Black, full of a wide range of African American students expressing a range of perspectives on Black experiences and Black culture in Seattle, in education, and in general. Second, that space allowed me to hone and shape my own political analyses. I brought my own set of politics to that space, politics that were guided by a then-unnamed Marxism and my own scrambled identity, and I was politically sharpened through those conversations and arguments. Third, by that time I had already decided that I wanted to be a teacher, and I learned about how a powerful curriculum can make a real difference in the consciousness of students. There are, of course, many other things that contributed to my high school experience. My communist father was still in the mix, supporting my love for science and science fiction by giving me science books by radical evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould and politicized science fiction books by Ursula K. LeGuin, for instance. However, when thinking about my high school experiences, Mr. Davis’ classes loom large in my mind’s eye.1

My intellectual and political autobiography continued into college, of course, where I was drawn to more “alternative” universities that didn’t rely on letter grades and instead focused on narrative evaluations for assessment. I attended the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) for the 1990–1991 academic year, splitting my time between looking at being a Marine Biology major or an American Studies major. In the end, the American Studies courses won out. Suffice to say I was drawn to history courses and my first-year core course that focused on politics and culture in the United States, where, for instance, I had the chance to first view the film Who Killed Vincent Chin?, which explored the race-based, premeditated murder of Vincent Chin by two white auto workers in Detroit who beat Chin to
death with a baseball bat. Both of the killers were found not guilty, and this film left an indelible mark on my understanding of race, racism, and Asian Americans in the United States. Also critical at this time was the fact that the first U.S. war against Iraq began in January of 1991. As soon as news of the U.S. bombings broke, I joined other UCSC students in a protest march against the war that wound its way through Santa Cruz and eventually shut down highway 17 for a number of hours. I later traveled to my father’s house in the nearby Bay Area to take part in demonstrations, including a massive rally and march of 100,000 protestors through the streets of San Francisco as part of a global day of action (not knowing, of course, that I would return about 10 years later for an even larger protest of Gulf War II).

Frustrated with the cost of being an out-of-state student in California, I transferred to The Evergreen State College (TESC) in Olympia, Washington, just over an hour’s drive south of my hometown Seattle. TESC proved pivotal in my intellectual and political trajectory. It was there that I found the space to work through much of my identity development as someone who is mixed race, Chinese and white. TESC also gave me time to work on my political identity. I was able to take full time programs in Marxist theory, U.S. and world history, and cultural politics. I was afforded the flexibility to do independent study work both to prepare to become a social studies teacher and to spend time in Hawai’i living with my Chinese family there. The Los Angeles rebellion after the 1993 beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police Department took place while I was at TESC, as did the national uproar over Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas’ sexual harassment of Anita Hill. It was such a heightened moment of political awareness for me that these national incidents and conversations only fed the development of my understanding of the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality.²

Being at TESC during this time period profoundly influenced my understanding of race and education, particularly relative to indigenous politics. Nineteen-Ninety Two was the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus’ first genocidal contact with the indigenous peoples of the Americas. As such there was an explosion of art and political work being done around issues of Native sovereignty, colonization, and indigenous resistance. It was at this point that I had my first encounter with Rethinking Schools, specifically teacher, editor, and author Bill Bigelow, who was touring the country doing workshops on the portrayal of Columbus in kids’ books and the rethinking of how this important history might be taught from a native point of view. As I discuss later in this essay, Rethinking Schools proved to be critical to my development relative to critical pedagogy. My ongoing understanding of indigenous issues and sovereignty also continued to grow while I was in Hawai’i studying my family’s history. My trip to the islands coincided with the 100 year anniversary of the illeagal overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom, and I was mentored by one of the leading Native Hawaiian sovereignty activists of the time, Haunani Kay Trask (1999).

My undergraduate years at TESC were particularly critical to my intellectual development. This time period (early 1990s) saw the rise of postmodern identity
politics – a set of politics focusing on the subject positions of our identities as being central to our ways of knowing and understanding reality. These identity politics contributed to my own identity development in making sense of my mixed-ness, my identity of being from a radical family, my identification with hip hop culture and, to a lesser extent, Black culture, and understanding myself as Asian American and a part of the Asian diaspora. While all of this was important to me, I was simultaneously pushing back on postmodern identity politics at this time as well. I was starting to more strongly identify as a Marxist, in part through my ongoing discussions with my communist father, and in part through my own exploration of Marxism relative to the clear inequalities produced by capitalism.

Between my discussions with my father, my campus activism, my own personal study, and my course work, I was developing an understanding of dialectical materialism, which I grew to know as the core of Marxist theory and practice (an understanding which I still hold to today). It was here that my concerns with postmodernism arose, where I saw direct parallels between postmodernism’s focus on subjective reality and Kant’s own subjective idealism. While I understood postmodernism’s rightful resistance to the philosophical positivism which had dominated academic study, mainstream politics, and the sciences (including the social sciences), I also had concerns about how the reliance on a completely subjective reality placed limits on knowledge existing only through experience (ironically taking a play from empiricism, the philosophical and epistemological cousin of positivism), a position that I felt left us nowhere in terms of actually changing the concrete realities that existed for the masses of the world. I was becoming a Marxist, dialectical materialist who both rejected power-laden positivist constructions of truth and objectivity that I saw supporting patriarchy and capitalist exploitation, and rejected postmodern overreliance on subjectivity that I saw as establishing reality as being our own little worlds each unto ourselves. I thought that a world did indeed exist outside of our immediate perceptions and experiences and that this world, because of its actual existence, not only could be changed to improve the lives of others, but also should be changed because it was made up of human relations in dialectical relationship with an objectively existing reality that shaped all of us (a position I still hold quite firmly today). In sorting through these foundational philosophical and epistemological issues, I essentially came to understand that I was rehashing the arguments that Lenin was making against Kant in his book, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (Lenin, 1972).

I cannot emphasize enough how central this aspect of my critical, intellectual development was to my thinking as a teacher and a scholar. In many ways I’ve been sorting through this tension between postmodern subjectivity and Marxist dialectical materialism throughout my entire career, and it has helped me both in my activism and orientation towards the world. It helped guide me through my graduate studies, and today I still work from a base of dialectical materialism as I sort through what I see as overly subjective and overly positivistic tendencies in research, theory, activism, policy, and analysis.
One book I picked up later during graduate school that helped me understand this period of the 1990s and the rise of subjective idealism better was *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Jameson, 1999). Jameson’s text helped me make a connection that I couldn’t see and didn’t understand while I was in the midst of it. The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of neoliberalism as a major force for social and economic policy. Neoliberalism relies on Adam Smith’s idea of the invisible hand of the free market as the guide to everything social and economic. In this model deregulation is key, unions and taxation are anathema, states/governments should be small or nearly non-existent (except in the support of maintaining the market by using authority to remove fetters to free trade), “public” is to be shunned in favor of “private,” and people increasingly see themselves as individuals competing with each other in the marketplace of society (see also, Harvey, 2004). In simpler terms, neoliberalism signaled the rise of the “consumer society” in mainstream consciousness in a way that was deeply individualistic. This goes hand in hand with what Apple (2006) refers to as the “conservative modernization.” What Jameson (1999) helped me see is that postmodern, subjective idealism is philosophically and epistemologically aligned with neoliberalism in a very fundamental way: In the same sense that postmodern subjectivity posits that the world is made up of individually competing realities (again, as a reasonable pushback against the oppressive norms of positivism), neoliberalism posits an atomized world view of individuals/individual products competing with each other as determinants to define marketplace reality. As Jameson essentially argues, the individual subjectivity of postmodernism is a logical and cultural parallel of late stage capitalism.

But I didn’t come upon Jameson until graduate school. Back at The Evergreen State College several years earlier, as both an undergraduate and a graduate student, I continued to further my pursuit to become a teacher – with the explicit intent of becoming a radical teacher at that. As an undergraduate I began working with the Upward Bound program there, which provided support for students who were low income and the first generation in their families to attend college. Upward Bound was a study in reality and culture, and it only reinforced why I wanted to teach. Through the program I visited indigenous kids in their homes on various Native reservations around the South Puget Sound region. In the process I saw levels of poverty that I didn’t know could exist in the United States, and I also learned about Pacific Northwest Native culture in some very deep ways. I also worked with African American, Latino, white, and Native students from urban schools and communities in Tacoma, Washington. Some of our students were on the edge of gang life. Some had experienced abuse in their homes. Some were dealing with drug issues either personally or in their families. All of them were poor, and all of them held vast potential. I loved those students, and I loved working with them. I still miss them today. At the same time they gave me an education on the concrete realities for so many in this country, they also gave me an education on why it was important to teach and change lives – and change society by extension.
After I graduated from Evergreen with my bachelor’s degree, I immediately entered the Master in Teaching (MIT) program there to work towards my social studies and language arts teaching credential. My experience in the Evergreen MIT program was pivotal in my intellectual development in several ways. First, the Evergreen MIT program was constructed around the principles of interdisciplinarity, seminars, and team teaching. This meant that the MIT program attempted to model some aspects of critical pedagogy in form and structure, providing a valuable lesson for me to learn about how to structure my own teaching in the future: make it participatory and grounded in context. The second way that the MIT program profoundly influenced my intellectual development as a critical educator was that it introduced me to Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1974), which became my introduction to Freire and liberatory pedagogy. I remember reading the book, and I remember struggling with his prose style. I understood some of it, but had a hard time reconciling his theoretical density with my developing practice as a teacher. In reality I didn’t feel like I understood Freire until I studied his work thoroughly for my Ph.D. preliminary exams. Regardless, the MIT program at TESC introduced me to my first scholar in critical education theory and practice, and as I’ll explain in more detail later in this essay, Freire and his ideas have shaped my thinking, writing, and practice ever since.

The third way that the Evergreen MIT program shaped my intellectual biography is that it allowed me to take advantage of two important student teaching opportunities. One was the chance to student teach out of state with nationally known social justice educator, author, and long time editor at Rethinking Schools, Linda Christensen. Linda, and her husband Bill Bigelow were both teachers in Portland, Oregon, the hometown of my spouse/partner/wife, Mira Shimabukuro. Mira had been one of Linda’s and Bill’s star students, and her connection to them allowed me to spend time student teaching under Linda’s masterful watch. There I worked with Linda on teaching about the politics of language, and I felt lucky to be in that space as I developed my master’s project – which turned out to be a curriculum that taught critically about the racial, cultural, political, and historical issues surrounding Hawai‘i. There I also started to cement my relationship with Rethinking Schools, as I had both Linda and Bill to mentor me in curriculum development and my writing about practice. My first Rethinking Schools article (Au, 2001, originally published in 1998) about teaching critically about Hawaii grew directly out of that mentorship. Both Linda and Bill are dear friends of mine today, and I feel indebted to them for being some of my writing teachers.

My other student teaching opportunity was with a Seattle Public Schools program for dropouts/pushouts called Middle College High School. It felt like an extension of my work with Upward Bound students, and it was a direct application of the Freirian (Freire, 1974) ways of understanding the relationship between education and liberation. At Middle College we taught a very politicized curriculum guided by the specific vision that these students, most of whom had been alienated from or tossed out of the regular school system for a variety of reasons, could become
more critically conscious agents in their own lives. Within this vision, books like Zinn’s (1995) *A Peoples’ History of the United States* and its purposeful and explicit siding with the historical and political standpoint of the oppressed writ large, were our textbooks. At Middle College I saw how the most marginalized students became excited by the knowledge that was being kept from them in more mainstream schools and texts, and to them it felt like they were gaining the key to understanding critically important aspects of their own existences. Upon reflection, and in retrospectively Freirian terms, I was witnessing how curriculum could help students feel like the subjects of their own lives, and not merely objects being acted upon by outside forces. It was here that I also really started to think about what “critical consciousness” really meant – a concept I still chew on today (Au, 2011a).

After I graduated from my teacher education program, I was fortunate enough to help establish a new Middle College program for dropouts for Seattle Public Schools, this one located at South Seattle Community College. I also continued to work for local Upward Bound programs, and generally saw myself building curriculum in the Middle College tradition of working towards critical consciousness. Amongst the myriad of students I remember fondly, and amongst the memories of powerful graduations and personal triumphs, there are two teaching units that I find most memorable from my years teaching at Middle College at South Seattle Community College. One was a mini-unit I taught on Marxism. I focused on two concepts for my mini-unit: historical materialism and surplus value. Historical materialism easily mapped onto our broader studies of U.S. and world histories, where we continued to use *A Peoples’ History of the United States* (Zinn, 1995) for U.S history, as well as Galeano’s (1998) *Open Veins of Latin America* as one text for our studies of the world. Historical materialism helped explain the major shifts in production and changes in regimes throughout the world. Similarly Marx’s concept of the surplus value being drawn from the exploitation of resources (the planet) and people served the purposes of both explaining the rise in power of different classes and nations, and helped students understand contemporary economic relations that impacted their own low-wage lives.

The other teaching unit that was critical for me was the one my teaching partner, Alonzo Ybarra, and I did during the autumn quarter of 1999. That year was historic for Seattle and for the anti-globalization movement around the world because the World Trade Organization (WTO) was set to have its annual meeting in Seattle in November. In preparation for this Alonzo and I spent the entire quarter, in the context of our world history course, teaching about globalization, neoliberalism, and helping our students understand the politics surrounding the global exploitation of people and their resources. It was a great unit that saw our students produce a class book of essays, poetry, and art that critically analyzed the WTO and neoliberalism (Au, 2000). Even better was that, on November 30, 1999, there were massive protests in Seattle as huge crowds took over the streets and activists successfully shut down the WTO meetings. In the process the Seattle police functionally rioted against the
protestors and first amendment rights were squashed by the declaration of a protest free zone in downtown Seattle.

Of course Alonzo and I were at the protests, along with many other teachers, unions, and activist groups. And while ethically we could not and did not have a class field trip to the protests, many of our students voluntarily showed up to participate in the protests at varying levels. Seattle, the entire Puget Sound region, and the rest of the world, really, vibrated for days after protests, and the reverberations shook many of our students at their cores. The experience was transformational for all of us, teachers and students alike. In my mind’s eye I can still picture my students’ faces in the class days after the protests – vibrant and full of excitement about the history being made around them, and even the history they helped make themselves. Again I was feeling and seeing what it meant to be a critical educator.

In 2001, Mira and I moved to Berkeley, California. We moved for a number of reasons, chief among them to be in a more politically active area. The dust of the 1999 WTO protests had settled, and Seattle once again returned to its generally sleepy, passive-aggressive self. Using my Rethinking Schools networks, I had shoe-horned myself into a job at Berkeley High School where, amongst other courses, I was fortunate enough to teach ninth grade ethnic studies (then a district graduation requirement) as well as Asian American history and Asian American literature. Berkeley High has its well-documented issues, but there I learned about what I might call “curricular solidarity” as I worked closely with a cadre of social justice teachers in the development and sharing of our ethnic studies curriculum. Here, teaching was (and continues to be) an extension of my identity, and I was lucky to get to revisit these issues and teach about race and identity in very explicit ways.

A couple of key activities stuck with me and contributed to my political and intellectual development while teaching at Berkeley High School. The first was that just after our arrival in Berkeley, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center happened (I remember teaching school that day, or trying to at least). Once the United States launched its war machine on Iraq, I found myself amongst some of the largest demonstrations I’ve experienced – some 500,000 people marching in San Francisco. That was a powerful moment in and of itself, but I also appreciated the student activism that emerged as well. On their own, Berkeley High students staged a massive die-in, sprawling throughout the courtyard and with an informational kiosk set up in the middle so onlookers could educate themselves as to why these students were “dying” in the middle of school grounds. Some of my students wanted to participate, some didn’t, so we all went outside and I took attendance as I tip-toed through the bodies laying in symbolic protest of the latest U.S. aggression into Iraq.

Another critically important moment for me at Berkeley High was more focused on organizing. My time at Berkeley High was marked by massive California state budget cuts to education, with simultaneous increases in state spending on prisons. I and several of my colleagues felt the impact of these cuts very viscerally because we had been laid off for two years running (California state rules require anyone
who *might* be let go due to budget reasons be told by mid-March, thus leaving us to spend the last two months teaching without knowing if we would have our jobs or not). That said, we also were upset about the political implications of cutting education to essentially fund prisons – a very concrete manifestation of the school-to-prisons pipeline. In response a group of Berkeley High teachers met, and began an organizing campaign called “Education Not Incarceration.” We established connections with youth organizers, other education activists, parents, students, and prison activists (like Books Not Bars). Using these networks a core steering committee was organically established, and we met to plan our actions, media campaign, and build curriculum. In the end we had a very successful governmental education day at the state capitol in Sacramento where students met with legislators, and we also held a very successful rally and protest at the capitol. We generated a lot of media attention about the issue, and, perhaps more importantly, we essentially built an organization that survived beyond the event (Education Not Incarceration developed into a non-profit organization which lasted a few years after). Personally I feel like Education Not Incarceration also taught me a lot about organizing as a teacher, but with students, parents, and community members. It was a powerful lesson illustrating the role that education can play in shifting people’s consciousness towards criticality.

I know I’m relaying a lot of my personal history here, but writing this essay has made it clear to me that I have a difficult time parsing my critical, intellectual biography from my own personal and political biography as well. I think this is the case because my politics have stemmed out of, grown, and developed from my personal and political experiences. This in itself is perhaps an important point to highlight, one that I think signals a particular truth of the postmodern subjectivity I so commonly critique: politics is identity, and identity is politics. In this regard I’ve always taken to heart the well-worn feminist point that the “personal is political.”

I also have to briefly mention something here. During my last year at Berkeley High, the 2002-2003 school year, an M.Ed. student from the University of Wisconsin, Madison contacted me and wanted to study my classroom and my practice. She was working with Gloria Ladson-Billings, and she wanted to come study how the teaching of ethnic studies impacted students generally, but with a particular eye to how the white students in class responded. I have to note this because, while I was thinking about going to graduate school to get my Ph.D., I had a very limited sense of whom I thought I wanted to work with. Originally I had only two people that I knew of that I thought would support me as a Marxist teacher who wanted to do something Marxist for my dissertation: Peter McLaren and Bill Ayers. I didn’t find UCLA to be that inviting as an institution (based on incomplete knowledge, I now know), and Bill Ayers, whose brother Rick Ayers was a colleague at Berkeley High and who I had met through my work with the now defunct National Coalition of Education Activists, didn’t return my email. So it was this graduate student studying my classroom that introduced me to the name of Michael W. Apple at UW Madison
and his work in critical education, and because UW Madison’s teaching assistants are unionized, I applied to work with Apple and earn my Ph.D. as a Badger.

It is obvious to say, but attending the University of Wisconsin, Madison as a Ph.D. student working with Michael Apple proved to be critical in my intellectual development. I would say that the first question that arose for me when I got to Madison and was taking Apple’s classes was, “What the hell is a neo-Marxist?” And I was serious in asking that question. I was a Marxist (and still am, for the record). I knew all kinds of Marxists and Marxist revolutionaries. My dad was a Marxist communist. I thought there were two categories: Marxist and non-Marxist. So what the hell is a “neo-Marxist”? So I learned from Apple and others about neo-Marxism, which was essentially a two-fold reaction to “Marxism” in a general sense. This turn was one part a turn away from perceived economic determinism within Marxism and a turn towards more cultural understandings of class.

I was very skeptical of much of the neo-Marxist turn in critical education, and rightly so. For instance, I found the general critique of Marxism being economic determinist to be thin, and often made by critics whom it appeared had not actually read much Marx. To me Marxist political economy was guided by dialectical materialism, and even the most basic understanding of dialectics would allow someone to know that Marxist economic analysis couldn’t be determinist or mechanistic. Dialectical thinking about processes and relationships simply do not function in linear, simply causal ways. Within Marxism you couldn’t have a simple deterministic relationship between the economic base and the socio-political superstructure. Marxism doesn’t function like that (Au, 2006).

Similarly, and returning to my earlier intellectual arguments with postmodern subjectivity, I was critical of the neo-Marxist cultural turn as well. I saw much of this work (and today still see a fair amount of it) as a departure from materialism. Indeed, this was perhaps one of my deepest and earliest critiques of Apple and his work – one we’ve talked about on multiple occasions. It seemed to me that in some of his work he had shifted too far towards postmodern subjectivity (e.g. Apple, 1996), or at least to the point that I thought it contradicted the materialist philosophy that grounded so much of his earlier and later work (Apple, 1995, 2006). I wanted to figure this out for myself, and so I explored the neo-Marxist turn relative to Marxist dialectical materialism, and found neo-Marxism to be wanting on both of the counts of dialectics and materialism, discussed above. In particular I revisited how Marx and Engels (Engels, 1968a, 1968b, 1968c; Marx, 1968a, 1968b) themselves discussed the relationship between economic production, culture, and the functioning of the state, and I also delved into the work of Althusser (1971) and his conception of the state, and found all of their work, particularly that of Marx and Engels to be far more dynamic and non-deterministic than the critics were willing to recognize (Au, 2006). I even co-authored a chapter with Apple on this issue (see Au & Apple, 2009) where we parsed through our differences a bit and arrived at a general consensus surrounding the neo-Marxist project.
The other thing I saw in neo-Marxism was critical scholars essentially running from Marxism, either based on gross misunderstandings or fear of what their colleagues might think. So as I began reading and being influenced by various scholars, I began a personal and political project of essentially reclaiming what I saw as the Marxist roots of critical educational theory and practice, even if the field of critical education didn’t seem to care to admit it. For instance, I took up a deep study of Freire. I combed through his texts, old and new, and within them I saw someone who very much embraced dialectical materialism. To me the textual evidence was all there if one actually read his books, particularly if one knew dialectical materialism well enough to see it in Freire’s writing. In the process I engaged with several of Freire’s prominent critics and found many of their critiques to be based in misunderstandings and misconceptions of Freire’s work (Au & Apple, 2007; Au, 2007a, 2009b).

Lev Vygotsky’s (1978, 1987) work in psychology has also proved to be of importance to me, and I also saw Marxist, dialectical materialism in his work. What was interesting to me was that I saw him cited regularly by mainstream and progressive scholars and practitioners for the concepts of “scaffolding” and his “zone of proximal development.” When I read Vygotsky, his work was so clearly Marxist to me I felt as if these mainstream and progressive applications of his work either just did not want to admit it out of a fear of Marxism or they had no idea about his Marxist roots. I specifically remember reading Vygotsky’s discussion of the relationship between “spontaneous” or “everyday” concepts and “scientific” concepts (Vygotsky, 1987) and thinking that I recognized that framing from Lenin’s (1975) *What is to be Done?* and his discussion of what he termed “spontaneous revolts” versus more “conscious” and “strategic” actions. There are many more connections to be made between Lenin and Vygotsky, which I outline more fully in my paper “Vygotsky and Lenin on Learning” (Au, 2007b).

In a large sense, much of my early work on Marx, Engels, Freire, Althusser, Vygotsky, and Lenin was an effort to reclaim the Marxist, dialectical materialist roots of critical education theory, or at least defend the Marxist tradition against what I saw as simplistic and often erroneous attacks. Moving forward from that foundation I continued to explore both Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions, still sorting out my own thinking and looking for useful constructs for understanding power and the relationship between education and consciousness. In this specific regard I certainly carried forward the thinking of Marx, Engels, Vygotsky, and Freire (and Lenin, by extension through Vygotsky) with regards to the concept of “consciousness” itself, which I see grounded in a dynamic dialectical relationship between people and their surroundings (including other people) in my own dialectical materialist conceptions of both “critical consciousness” and “curriculum” (Au, 2011a).

It is important for me to note that despite my critiques, I did not reject more culturist analyses outright and I strongly embrace some for understanding how politics functions inside and outside of education. For instance, anyone who was one of Apple’s Ph.D. students has to become familiarized with a few key theorists as part of their experience, particularly Gramsci (1971), Bourdieu (1984), and Bernstein.
(1977), and all three certainly shaped my thinking about critical politics in education. All three have also influenced Apple’s work greatly. Gramsci’s (1971) conceptions of hegemony and commonsense/good sense are probably the most crucial of his, for they attempt to explain the kinds of alliances the powerful make in order to stay in power and influence the commonsense thinking of the masses through appealing to their good sense as a vehicle for advancing conservative agendas. Apple (2006) has made excellent use of this to explain the conservative modernization in the United States and the rise of education reforms like the No Child Left Behind Act. Both Bourdieu (1984), and Bernstein (1977) have been critiqued for being too culturist by some, more sectarian educational Marxists (see, e.g., Kelsh & Hill, 2006), a critique I’m sympathetic to given my own concerns about subjective idealism supplanting materialist philosophy. However, I have found Bourdieu’s (1984) work useful for understanding how class locations become physically and culturally embodied not just in our identities, but in how we present ourselves and make our day-to-day choices.

The work of Bernstein (1977, 1990, 1996) has also been very influential to me. I felt like his analysis, however dense and at times confusingly written, helped provide a way for understanding how more macro social, political, and economic relations translated into the more micro level of classroom interactions vis-à-vis the politics of knowledge and the structuring of pedagogic discourse. In this regard I have used Bernstein’s work to explain specifically how high-stakes, standardized tests function as an imposition of power relations external to schools (Au, 2008b, 2009c) as well how a class fraction of technocrats known as the professional and managerial new middle class have conflicted interests within systems of high-stakes testing (Au, 2008a). In my reading of Bernstein, I also found some of the critiques of his work being too culturist and not materialist (see, e.g., Kelsh & Hill, 2006) to be off base, for it seemed clear to me, based on his own words, that Bernstein was very clear about how culture, discourse, and the sociology of knowledge were an expression of materialist economic relations (Au, 2008b).

It is important to recognize that my use of Bernstein (1977, 1990, 1996) and Bourdieu (1984), as well as other important works that Apple introduced me to such as Fraser (1995) and her distinction between a politics of redistribution (economics) and a politics of recognition (identity) or Williams’ (1977) Marxism and Literature, which attempts to establish the concept of cultural materialism, all reflect the fact that despite my resistance to identity politics and the cultural turn in critical educational theory/neo-Marxism, I didn’t reject culture and culturist analyses per se. Indeed, I engaged them on my own terms and found several to be useful and not contradictory to my own Marxist analyses. Additionally, throughout this time, my own understanding of critical educational theory and practice continued to grow into more refined and complex analyses of gender, sexuality, and ability as well, some of which found its way into my book on high-stakes testing (Au, 2009c).

In moving into the portion of my biography that focuses on my Ph.D. work at U.W. Madison and growth in a specific set of “critical” politics, I have been a bit
remiss regarding other important aspects of my experiences there. For instance, when I entered academia, while I had a fairly easy time incorporating my identity as a Leftist and social justice educator, I immediately struggled with reconciling my own identification with Hip Hop culture, as well as my racial/cultural identity. One way I did this was to produce an article on how hip hop culture, vis-à-vis rap lyrics, functionally expressed a critical view of education from the perspective of working class Black and Brown youth (Au, 2005). This paper itself was an outgrowth of my work with Jim Gee, who was a professor at UW Madison at the time. I found Gee’s (1996) work around discourse and the politics of cultural communities to be fascinating, powerful, and useful for critical analyses of power relations inside and outside of schools. Similarly, early on I was also influenced by Ladson-Billings (1995, 2006) and her work in the cultural politics of teaching, and more recently I’ve returned to her earlier work on critical race theory as well (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995) in my race-focused analyses of education policy. My time at Madison also influenced my political and intellectual development in another important way: Between the other Apple advisees from around the world and Apple’s own work internationally, my understanding of the international politics of critical education grew tremendously and helped me think more carefully about how much context influences how we understand educational politics.

Also during this period I joined the editorial board of the social justice education magazine and publishing non-profit, Rethinking Schools. It is hard to over-emphasize the role Rethinking Schools has had on who I am as a critical scholar/activist today. The Rethinking Schools editorial collective contains some of the most brilliant and most politically committed educational minds I know. From my earliest relationships with Linda Christensen and Bill Bigelow, to working with the founding editors like Bob Peterson or David Levine, to seasoned Rethinking Schools vets like Stan Karp, to the most recent editions to the editorial board, my analyses of educational politics and practices have been sharpened constantly through the years. In many ways I had a perfect combination of working in the academy with Apple (and others) on critical education theory in conjunction with my participation as an editor for the practitioner-based Rethinking Schools. Rethinking Schools not only kept me grounded and sharp, it also was effective at reaching broader audiences than the academic work – making it a more activist educational project (Levine & Au, 2013).

And of course amidst all of this I did write a dissertation on high-stakes testing, which turned into my first book, Unequal By Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality (Au, 2009c). In many ways Unequal By Design stitched together a lot of the thinking and writing I had been doing, and I saw that project as an explicit expression of Marxist analysis of testing from various critical angles. Chapter One takes up the long conversation amidst critical scholars about the relationship between schooling and inequality, and I argue for a dialectical view of (re)production in an attempt to recognize that schools produce culture and resistance even as they reproduce inequality. Chapter Two is a historical materialist
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analysis about the roots of standardized testing in the U.S. and its connection to the establishment of specifically race and class-based inequalities. Chapter Three provides looks at the political economy of high-stakes testing, outlining the corporate forces behind the tests as well as the gendered inequalities embodied within the political and bureaucratic education structures. Chapter Four is an empirical/materialist account of the impact of high-stakes testing on curriculum, instruction, teachers, and students, including particular attention paid to the racially disparate impacts of testing on communities of color. Chapter Five is an in depth application of Bernstein to the tests as a means of explaining how they operate as a vehicle for the reproduction of socio-economic relations external to schools, and Chapter Six, the conclusion, returns to considering the reproduction of inequality as well as the resistance to such reproduction.

As I continue my political and intellectual growth and development as a critical scholar/activist, I’ve noticed that there are two things that drive my “critical” politics. One is that I seek to uncover power relations in education and society – and not just along economic or political lines, but also along the lines of culture and identity more broadly. The more sectarian Marxists may or may not critique me, but mostly I could care less. I’m still a committed materialist, and also understand that as human beings we express our material relations through the multiplicity of our identities. If I am pressed for a more Marxist analysis, I’d even go so far to say that we, as humans, sublate our material and cultural relations and then express them externally through our humanity. The other thing that drives my “critical” lens is a constant search for ways of dialectically connecting the macro to the micro, of understanding just how individuals are expressions of broader social, cultural, and economic relations.

All of these things undergird my earlier analyses of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Vygotsky, and Freire, and enter into some of my latest turns in critical analyses of curriculum and the politics of epistemology. In some of my recent scholarship (Au, 2011a, 2011b), I’ve drawn heavily upon the work of Hartsock (1983, 1998) and Harding (2004a, 2004b), who themselves drew upon Lukacs’ (1971) work around class-consciousness, in an attempt to bring Marxist-feminist standpoint theory into education. In doing so I continued to work on a conception of consciousness and epistemology that recognized the relativity of perception from our subject positions while maintaining a firm grasp on the existence of material reality beyond those very same subject positions (remembering that dialectics, amongst other aspects, sees relations between things such that we can choose “both” instead of being forced into choosing between disconnected, atomized options). Hartsock’s (1998) and Harding’s (2004b) conceptions of “strong objectivity” are particularly critical here, for in opposition to positivistic notions of pure objectivity in research, they require us to explicitly vet our positionality relative to our knowledge projects in order to better understand the material reality under study.

My political and intellectual development has also continued to be connected to my identity as an academic-activist and public intellectual. I’ve always maintained
a line of research and critical analysis of education policy. This started with my dissertation on high-stakes testing and has since extended into critiques of charter schools as part of a broader critique of the entire anti-union, anti- teacher, and anti-public school, corporate education reform movement in general. I’ve been able to express this through more public and accessibly written critical analyses in the pages of *Rethinking Schools* (e.g., Au, 2008c, 2013c) and in academic discourse (e.g., Au & Ferrare, 2014; Au, 2013a). In my local capacity as a professor in the Seattle area, I’ve lent my expertise publicly to activists and campaigns against the charter school initiative that became law in 2012 (even becoming a plaintiff in a constitutional lawsuit against the initiative) and have been supporting teachers and parents in their fight against high-stakes testing (Au, 2013b). One of the most personally validating things that has happened in these recent local struggles is finding out that some of the teachers involved in organizing the Garfield High School teacher boycott of the MAP test (Hagopian, 2014) were directly influenced by my book, *Unequal By Design* (Au, 2009c). This helped remind me that, while it is true that academic work has smaller audiences, committed and critical practitioners can and do benefit from serious conceptual analyses of education and power.

In many ways I’ve been very lucky in my political and intellectual development as a critical scholar. Throughout my career thus far I’ve been surrounded by a wealth of critical mentors who have supported me from the beginning. Friends and prominent senior colleagues like Sonia Nieto, Bill Ayers, Antonia Darder, Zeus Leonardo, Jean Anyon, Ira Shor, E. Wayne Ross, David Berliner, Ron Glass, Diana Hess, Pauline Lipman, Pia Wong, Celia Oyler, Mara Sapon-Shevin, Gustavo Fischman, Doug Selwyn, Rico Gutstein, Michelle Fine, Bill Watkins, James Banks, and Angela Valenzuela, amongst others, have helped me intellectually and personally throughout the years. There is also a bevy of critical and progressive scholars who are my contemporaries—too many to list here—many of whom are dear friends and whose work I respect for its brilliance, sharpness, and power. I am also lucky to have the mentorship of education activists like my colleagues at *Rethinking Schools* (the entire editorial board and staff, past and present), and that of the now-defunct National Coalition of Education Activists – Linda Mizell, Debbie Wei, and Debi Duke in particular. Local education activists like Dora Taylor, Jesse Hagopian, and the Washington Bad Assed Teachers, continue to keep me grounded and contribute to my growth, and my spouse/partner/wife, Mira Shimabukuro has also been crucial in my ongoing development. I list all these names out of respect and honor, and also because I really do feel in my core that I am all of my relations.

As I’ve made clear in this essay, my intellectual biography is intimately intertwined with my political biography as well, and all of it is wrapped tightly by my identity as a critical scholar, academic-activist, and public intellectual. Finally, as patriarchal as it sounds, relative to my critical intellectual development, my communist dad was influential and certainly has been my biological and political father on one side, and Apple, who has been both incredibly supportive and influential in my thinking
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and my career, has been my neo-Marxist academic father (and dear friend) on the other side.

NOTES

1 For all the complications and problems associated with how desegregation has been implemented, including serious questions as to whether it was done to benefit African Americans, my experience at Garfield does illustrate the power of what can happen at the edges of desegregation.

2 It should be noted that I also met my partner and spouse, Mira Shimabukuro, while at TESC. We worked through much of our identity development around race, gender, sexuality, politics, and culture together and in parallel. Indeed I wouldn’t have become who I am today without our partnership, allyship, and mutual commitment to struggle.

3 Note: Bill Ayers, whom I now consider a good friend, later confessed that he told Rick a year later, “You know I think I messed up. I never returned Wayne’s email…” So I was perhaps an email away from being a student at University of Illinois, Chicago. Also I want to add that McLaren has proven to be a supportive colleague as well.

4 Note to Mike if he’s reading this: Sorry Mike. It may be hard to believe but I didn’t know who you were until the year before I came to work with you, and yes, despite the widespread influence of your work around the world, not all teachers have read your stuff!

REFERENCES:


