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Emancipatory education and democratic politics: An analysis of the sociological imagination in a first grade classroom

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Emancipatory Education and Democratic Politics: An Analysis of the Sociological
Imagination in a First Grade Classroom

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Teacher Education

Eastern Michigan University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

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in

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Dedicated to my home family, my class families, and my world family. Thank you for so much love and life. I cannot wait to see what comes next! –E.L.

Abstract

This autoethnographic research follows my personal and professional experiences as an elementary teacher reflecting upon the travails and joys that come with journeying toward a more liberating pedagogy and democratic experience along with first grade students. Braced with Freire's 1970 summoning to resist dehumanization in society and education, I have pursued with disappointment existing democratic and humanizing trails in schools. Excited to exit one district and move to another known as "exceptional" in the region, I found myself even more limited by a tightly controlled system. Unwilling to give up hope, I began in my second year to infuse more unmasked efforts toward democratic and critical pedagogy. The accompanying transformation of my intellectual, professional, and personal growth has resulted in even more hope and conviction about the possibility of public schooling in the US, and I move forward with renewed gusto.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Introduction

Recognizing others and ourselves as children of the same human fabric, as a human family, is, according to Paulo Freire (1970), the emblem of one's humanity. When these relations fall short, when we do not regard one another as vital partners in the life experience, or when we are not treated so, a dehumanizing violence occurs within us. A mutual treachery is exacted in both, as each accepts an impossible fiction of being born of such dissimilar constructions, that one exists to be of use only to the other. Meditated first by Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Freire warns of the character of oppressor and oppressed in us all. Oppressors are oppressed by their own dehumanization of others while the oppressed embrace the oppressor's hand from within. Neither, if left to persist in their reciprocal violence, can progress society to a more fully human point in history. Public schools, as one of the remaining bastions of potentially democratic space, have a grave undertaking. The power of education has been used throughout history in multifarious ways for varying purposes. However, the crisis of our humanity hangs heavily, viciously encroaching even schools and the no longer protected spaces of children. It is our task, as schools and a society, to ensure that we continue to extend ourselves out of such oppression and move toward liberation, toward life, to being as fully human as possible.

Because the oppression of society threatens all of us—as oppressor, oppressed, and more commonly, the dialectic of both, because dehumanizing processes can start as early as our first year of school, and because we work with the liberated citizenry and liberating trailblazers of the future, we have a responsibility as educators to bring the successions of interdisciplinary theory since Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critical pedagogy,

to our children when the vitality of life, hope for the future, and belief in transformation is at its most limitless. As Freire (1970) defines it:

Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human. (p. 44)

As young children, we are not immune to the processes of dehumanization, and once we are inducted into the prescription of an oppressed consciousness, rebirthing ourselves into a humanizing form can be, as Freire warns, frightening and painful. Intrepid and boundless young students, pushed far and wide to gain ever higher academic achievements in schools, have suffered intolerably in their losses to achieve their own humanity and democratic freedom as they develop inside and outside of schools. As adults who have undergone dehumanizing experiences and work in schools that are themselves dehumanizing institutions, we must proceed with caution, realizing and releasing ourselves from the biases and familiarity of the dehumanizing enclosures through which we live and labor.

Children do not grow up stipulating participation in schooling, but schooling is mandated because adults believe in the power of education to secure dominant ideology and economic independence. Certainly, the power of learning is a momentous one. The conspicuous intent of schools has generally been to provide right answers, essential skills, and personal advancement. However, children's persistent questions of who they are, who others are, and how they are or are not associated are also answered through the community culture that is expressed by the school, its hidden curriculum. Away from the snapshot moment of testing and laboratories of field-specific knowledge, this latter side of schooling is what propels the child and later the adult through daily life and contacts with others. The

wondering of who one is, why one is, and how one is in the context of society congeals to sculpt the basis of that person's life as well as our social foundation—not exclusively, as schools might profess in their intentions, one's scholastic accomplishments, rank of employment, and economic status. It is the more mysterious curiosities of selfhood and society that carry decisive life consequences, sometimes even before a student has reached the school's objective of adult employment, which eventually can become enduring and crippling if they are never altered or challenged. Problematically, the adults in schools who are answering these questions of selfhood and social interconnectedness often share these questions with as much confusion and disagreement that their answers mostly leak out in hesitating irregularity and misguidance. When they answer more directly, students keenly notice the incongruities in their realities and adults' best intentions to respond with optimism and kindness, exposing students to even more bewilderment and apprehension to directly ask for honest answers. Consequently, we lose as children in schools the fulfillment of our true human vocation, becoming more fully human.

Although Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is inspired by the liberation of Brazilian laborers, the calling to identify and relate to one another as a people who yearn to be more conscious and free is indeed a human vocation, and thus something that educators must never ignore in themselves or with their students. As infants, we depend completely upon the powers and decisions of others, initiated by their love of us and faith in us to steadily gain skills, knowledge, and independence. We are trusted to learn about, hone, and harness our own power, make choices with the understanding of the resources available and the presence of others so that life may continue. The wish of our adult caregivers is that we learn how *to be*. Yet there is a violence within modern society and schools that goes mostly

unspoken, scoffing from within the embedded ideological structures that we are inadequate, incapable, invisible, and impotent. It presents skills and knowledge as static, besmirches some as useless or dangerous, and the world and the people living within it as a finished stage set. The range of possible roles, acts, and beliefs has already been conditioned, and success in life is based on one's conformity and performativity in accordance with these rules. It boils life down to a vapor of lost desires, hollow imaginings, and tranquil hopelessness. Instead of learning to trust in ourselves to evaluate and reflect, dare to refuse what seems so readily accepted by the uninterrupted majority, we come to discredit our diverse experiences, hush our individual voices, and auction ourselves to the faceless control of hegemony that cashes in on our despair. For but a moment in our lives, we had started to grow stronger and more articulate, training our voices and language to express our needs and feelings, happiness and pain. Whether subtly or intensely, society and schooling confound this self-affirming development and append their marks of what ensues being, *to be under [domination]* and *to be like [the dominating]*, which is to say that *to be* is *to have* (Freire, 1970, p. 64). We lose the unpredictability, energy, and animation of being, depositing it for a confined identity of insatiable ownership. In losing how *to be*, we become dehumanized and oppressed. The drive to learn *to be*, *to better be*, or *to limitlessly be*, is replaced with uncontrollable gluttony *to have*, and *to have limitlessly more*. Since the self has deteriorated to a class of un-being, the oppressor's dehumanizing regard of others follows conveniently. In ceasing to recognize and trust our own being and the being of others, we abandon the humanity within ourselves and humanity as it trawls sterilely on. Freire (1970) defines liberation as a "praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). Only when we can awaken with self-resolution and commit to the

humanity of all around us may we be the truly free, independent human beings as those that love us at the inception of our lives intended.

Early Impressions of Teaching

Recognizing the need to organize and dialogue with others in order to transform myself and our limiting situations, I searched for revolutionary educational leaders as a young teacher. I wondered a lot about my own role and how much change I could effect alone as I began to observe the magnitude of oppression in which my teaching comrades had normalized into routine. I spoke often and listened carefully to the younger teachers who were hired with me, hopeful that they might carry the same aspirations of liberation, content democracy—and not just method democracy (Torres 1998) or critical pedagogy. In my first year of being a classroom teacher, I met countless remarkable, generous, and incredible teachers who inspired me and informed my teaching. However, my search for allies who openly shared that they were democratic teachers, critical pedagogues, or teachers of humanizing education remained arid and desolate. Eventually, my search became so filled with dust that doubt crept along with my inward isolation, followed by the reticence to be reprimanded by families or my administrators—especially under the meek title of “probationary teacher,” and finally quiet philosophical estrangement.

I became haunted by my resolution to maintain the connection between the human spirit and educational institutions. In my first year, teaching art and music in a district with high student expulsion and high teacher turnover rates, I was deeply disturbed by what I saw and experienced. I had not grown up or studied in a school system that so efficiently and openly squelched growth from its children and adults. Teaching at two schools, I met only one teacher who spoke openly with me about the coercive and acrimonious character of the

district and what she did as an art teacher to attempt to bring surprise and enjoyment into her students' school lives. Even still, she was an older teacher who had taught for years in Japan, and anticipation of retirement left her weary and defeated. Although I cherished my conversations with her, I knew that I couldn't start at the end, that just graduating meant having no excuse to surrender myself to humanizing pedagogical execution. It would have been an instant liquidation of the promises I made to myself as an aspiring teacher. In college, I had read about teachers who adopted renegade personas before under grim circumstances. They weren't the glamorously romanticized hero-teachers refashioned by Hollywood producers and actors, but teacher-writers who had written personally and deeply about the dire conditions from which their students and they wrestled love, joy, hope, community, and learning. It was their soft and earnest voices, brimming with humility and ardor that dwelled in my ears, tolling deeply into my teacher's heart, my human heart.

Herbert Kohl's (1988) 36 elementary children and delicate account of forging nurturing relationships and robust learning in spite of the school's lack of resources and regard for their children goaded me forward. I felt that the metaphor of flowers struggling to grow in concrete from Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991) was on loan to me that year, but still, I was inwardly wilting. I wondered how much the graduate program at the nearby university in which I was enrolled could do. Would it halt sagging spirits and infuse me with enough courage to advocate for what I believed was humane, fair, and right? Would it offer me any tangible resources upon which I could rely to bring about any real, lasting change? Would only my physical voice be drowned out or would the one inside my head, too, start to lose ground? The last question was perhaps what made me worry most. So it was with great anticipation and relief that I applied for and later accepted a teaching position

in what I thought could be one of the best public school districts in the state as I also dove into evenings of classes with professors who believed in dialogue and tremendous reflections along with provocative texts.

Moving Toward Change

The decision to leave a toxic environment was one that I felt fortunate to have been able to make. There are so many things that I appreciate about my new home district. Still, I would learn that toxins reside in my new home as well. As my student once said to me, “It’s funny and strange at the same time.” While possibly more well-meaning by definition, I couldn’t help feeling like a well-trapped teacher in the new district. As time went on, I felt more and more like a well-trapped mouthpiece, until finally, I felt like just another piece of a well-oiled trap. Art and music education, less respected than the “core curriculum” of general education classrooms, was accordingly less controlled by administration on building, district, and state levels. All of the freedom and flexibility I had was evicted by the rapidly rising and insulting national-level rhetoric of teacher accountability based on distrust of teachers and an over-trust in hard data. The obstinate bent toward data also turned its back unapologetically on students, who now were forced even more to forget learning or being concerned with how *to be*, for *to have* high numbers on tests would translate easily toward *to have* high numbers on economic and material measures in adulthood. Teachers were beginning to see a new political wave of exorcising students of their humanity, in turn dehumanizing themselves and formal education in general. It was a recipe to uphold the latest jingoisms of the day, neoliberal, neoconservative, multinational corporate, ruthless capitalism. This time, Giroux’s educational metaphors of being a classroom manager from a corporate framework or the Marxist labor metaphors of being a cog in the wheel from factory

work surfaced in my mind. Why wasn't anyone protesting? Looking more closely, why was everyone so quiet, hopeless, and insincere in their protest? Why was power so imbalanced? What had happened to everyone along the way? What had they done with the part of themselves that said, "I educate," not "I work for a school"? I searched for a ghost, a missing trail, a hidden individual or group mourning. I thought I sensed a lot of angst toward administrators, but I feared that something much more than work satisfaction had been lost. How would a dialogical, revolutionary education persist in classrooms with such resigned and oppressed leaders?

In the apprehension of confronting my own losses as an educator, I stumbled upon the happiest parts of learning time with my students. From these startlingly compelling moments grew one possibility of the antidote to the dehumanization of schooling, teachers, and students. A pedagogy of spirit, honesty, and hope that moves challengingly and conterminously toward democracy may be the misplaced link in why we so frequently miss in our educational goals and in developing authentic relationships in schools today. When I began to share my own reflections and questions about life, learning, ethics, justice, and social progress, I found my students unexpectedly shrewd and engaged. My 6-year-old partners in learning mesmerized me as we unpeeled the chaos of social things from a classroom to school to local to global scale. We spoke more directly and honestly than I had felt confident enough to do the year before or with any other adults in the school, and the resulting continuing conversations electrified and tested me. There was something more critical, exposed, and responsive than I observed even in some of my graduate level classes. Problem-posing, co-Subject (teacher and student) education, the praxis my fellow expert first grade teachers advised against for reasons to do with "developmental appropriateness," had

broken through. The illusion of permanent pedagogical asphyxiation toppled in a giggling flourish of children's hands raised ready to speak honestly and bravely to me, with me, with all of us. I was resuscitated.

With my students this year, I have learned that a different type—a humanizing type—of pedagogy is imaginable, attainable, and the only possible wisdom that's of any urgent use to us in today's schools. My words trickled over one another this year, as I rushed to tell friends and family the day's stories of school, of the children, of their words, and our tentative conclusions, daring resolutions, or poignant questions. I politely listened to others' work stories, but leapt eagerly into seconds of pause—sometimes interrupting altogether—to comment or ask for comments on my students' actions and reflections, the praxis that I astoundingly observed of them that day. I felt friendship and kinship with my friends and family, but with my students I felt camaraderie that at times felt beyond even friendships and kinship. The students and I appended many things with the word "family," as some Native American tribes do. We were the "class family," the school "school family," the city "city family," the world "world family," and so on. Besides consoling those in the fall who were not accustomed to the length of a full day at school and felt pangs of homesickness, explaining that we were also a family, I hoped to embed in our common language a pointed degree of closeness and affinity toward one another. I wanted to have a linguistic reminder that would thwart "othering," alienation, and ultimately dehumanization. As a result, there was a constant prickling of dynamic bustling and choruses of heartfelt expression for what we called our multiple "families," what I suspected were precisely the timbre of a healthily democratic and humanizing education.

This type of education, however, is not the trend in either spectrum of the districts I've been in or nationwide. It is not the education that is promoted and mandated at the federal or state level, and it is not the type of education in which the majority of those holding official positions of schooling power are familiar. It is also not the orientation of education that families and students have traditionally learned from or have come to expect. The brand of education in schools today mirrors the oppressive trends in society, favorably creating consonance for the adults who reside in both realms. However, if the trend is to reduce children to objects that passively receive learning from distantly appointed authorities, the adults responsible are guilty for ensuring their own oppressive circumstances as well as the oppression that the children will have to name, process, and struggle against on their own. Freire (1970) states, "Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression" (p. 78). If the forecast of education is to continue to prepare students to adapt to oppression and reproduce oppressive practices for that end, schooling and society will have abandoned all potential to be authentically enlivening and transformative spaces. The demise of democracy, freedom, and humanism will also be sealed in its self-collapsing languor.

We are in need of a blood transfusion as a human society and as the lost litters of schooling cohorts. The sickness that I have felt is, as I have experienced personally and learned from others, bitterly real and threatens our children, our future, and the present of who we are. In the current culture of US schooling, the signs of increasing stress as a society who may only understand democracy as a formality or abstraction are also erupting. The dehumanizing strains weighed on teachers, students, and society in general are leaking unto

each other. Efforts to defend against the pathology of violence toward our humanism, as I have learned, can provide striking changes for all engaged in learning—the teachers and students together. Identifying that connection to bring to light new pedagogical moves toward democratic liberation calls to me in its dearth. Thus I humbly present my experiences, reflections, and actions so that I may continue to engage in praxis of liberation. Critical pedagogy is the education I always wanted, what social emancipation always needed, and the truth about what we wonder as children. Who are we, what is goodness, why are we here, and what can we do?

Chapter 2: Learning About Being Alive

I remember my first teaching experiences as an undergraduate student in college, not only because it was an exhilarating point to be, finally “out of the books” and hiking “into the field” component of my teacher education, but because I felt so alive. This time marked our first formal foray into the teacher role, after occupying the role of student for so long. Ironically, just when my peers and I were starting to think that elusive comprehension of life and worldly wisdom that adults chided us for never having as youth was unbolting its door to us, we encountered something else, something that indubitably pulsated in elementary classrooms with what it meant to be. Hosts of young people whom we were readying ourselves to teach were about to teach us a lesson about being alive. It is this feeling of being around children in public schools that I have never shaken and from which I have come to draw so much inspiration, joy, and ultimately hope for our world. It also provides the grounds for much of my intellectual, professional, and personal transformation as a democratic citizen and teacher who tussles regularly with balancing her pedagogical philosophies with the material and political realities of schooling.

Away from the milieu of the university, there were children—almost a separate genus to a campus of young adults newly off their teenage years of “cool duty” only recovered by the university setting’s own “more grown-up cool” standards—fizzing with honesty, energy, and curiosity about the world. For these five- to seven-year-old children, the construct of “being cool” hadn’t warped into its more narrowly defined adolescent and young adult counterpart. The rules about whom one befriended and the means by which one befriended were not totally set or nearly as predictable. That tired adult filter of social appropriateness

weighed heavily on us, but seemed to retreat into dust beneath raisin-stained rugs and mud-stained Velcro shoes. The use of the word “fat” wasn’t banned and startled the college students. The use of the word “stupid,” however, was considered unutterable and referred to as the “s word.” Laughter, the eruptive and uncensored kind, not the awkward embarrassed chuckling we were accustomed to in young adult reality, dashed around and filled every gap of unlikely silence. The children didn’t move the way we did; everything impulsive, inconspicuous, and in fits of sound and color. None of them walked with hands tucked into their pockets, eyes hidden behind darkened lenses, or veneered a grimace on veiled countenances. Reality here was of starts and stops, ceaseless chatter, darting glances or bold stares, standing too close, speaking too candidly and all at once, getting easily overexcited, spontaneous dancing and music-making, and behaving more brazenly than adults tend ever to earnestly tolerate for themselves.

Surprisingly, to plug myself into this haywire excitement and call it the process of learning made sense to me. In the first few weeks, I couldn’t understand yet where to focus my attention. Learning was happening, but where did it start? Where was it shining the hardest? Where was the clearest path? The teacher was an obvious target, but even with the most masterful teachers with what I later learned to be called “classroom management” or “classroom control,” I was hard-pressed to find only her or him the sole source of interesting activity. And so, my attention flickered from two children much braver than I sneaking crickets through wires to feed the gecko in fulfillment of their classroom job to the girl singing and swaying as if on her own live stage as she penciled in her addition problem worksheet to the boys sniggering with missing teeth and round cheeks in the corner inviting all of my curiosity. Or there was the tiniest child in the group, completely still and silent,

sitting so upright and close to the teacher, so patently vying for teacher affection that I also held my breath in waiting for the teacher to say something, just something to acknowledge the pointed effort she was making for recognition. Was it a good thing? Could it be bad? Or the Spanish-speaking boy with hair gelled neatly into spikes at his own table against the wall with headphones on, apart in so many ways from the group so that he could listen to a book read aloud to him in English. Or the two kids who were completely content to nip at their graham cracker snacks for a full ten minutes after everyone had finished, cleaned up, and were sitting on the carpet for a read aloud. Even sitting from tables quite apart from each other, I caught grinning glances without breaking from tireless nibbling, satisfied that hardly any progress had been made on their second cracker. What was being learned? Which one was learning? Which experience was more important? What should the picture of learning look like? What did the overall school structure have to do with all this? At the end of it all, where was it going? In schools, society, and life, where are we headed anyway and how are schools (or are they not) getting us there?

There was familiarity in this at-first startling culture, but it was one that came with wistfulness, not present identification. The majority of our college classes had a clear focal point in the instructor, as the most obvious determiner of what is important and who will succeed, and the behaviors of the students were not as variegated as this. Surely, we weren't so noisy, disoriented, or distracted, but neither were we so bold to openly and regularly deviate or defy, questioning the way things are done, what is important, and who deserves admiration. With our destinies and freedom stoppered, we bore less motivation to connect so readily or authentically with one another or the teacher. I couldn't remember us ever looking so happy, agitated, or moved. It seemed we didn't give away that we even felt much at all.

For the most part, we conformed to our understood social norms, focused on our individual achievement, comfortably moored to hegemony to grease that primarily individualistic path. If anything, there was a trace of bitterness and fear of others in this course.

What I witnessed among the children wasn't a way of being that I could easily picture my peers engaging in, but more likely possibilities of us that we had left behind in our myriad trial and error moments in deciding who we were to be as adults—that process of “growing up,” dependent so much on what happens to us and how it happens along the way in these very spaces. Gradually, we had lost the ability to trust in our guts and in each other. On one level, we were the same, emerging learners trusting in the tuition delivered by an externally appointed authority figure. On another level, our difference in numbers of schooling and other social experiences had separated us substantially. The results of it were two very different pictures of learning and engagement in social activity, and among these children, I realized we were the ghosts in the gallery. A blazing part of us had packed up and left us caught in muffled stirring. Montreal band Stars' question and answer song, “Dead Hearts” (2010), about witnessing ghosts with “lights inside their eyes,” although perhaps not intentionally written about the consequences of modern schooling and the crumbling of democratic society lament over and over that ghosts are “kids that I once knew.” In our transition from youth to adolescence and adulthood, could that spark, “the light in their eyes” that multicultural educator Sonia Nieto (1999) also describes, still linger in us? As “dead hearted” ghosts, would the younger versions of ourselves recognize us in our present adaptations, and dare we ask if our childhood selves would approve?

Breeding Hope

In college, I always opted to carpool with peers to the elementary schools, not only because it saved us from the scarcity of parking spaces and provided us with an opportunity to talk about our classroom experiences, but because I usually wound up sitting silently in the back, appreciating the cool blues and grays of the dim morning light ride. It was my custom to also try to not attend to the prattling stories from the front seats of intoxication, binging, self-aborrence, and other manifestations of lost, insecure, and emotional numbing made ordinary for young adults and as universalized in corporate-controlled mass media. At first, I thought it incredulous how those of us who wished to help shape the formal educations of so many could feel so powerless and nihilistic in our own lives. Although my experiences did not outwardly match theirs, I was not unaware of its prevalence nor was I apart from some of the feelings that led to the outward expression of turmoil. I was also quite aware of the number of my teacher education program's peers who had parallel experiences and stories. I distinctly remember one young woman who, as a result of her personal disarray, presented herself insalubriously for school one day, and was expelled from the program with as much muteness as the university could muster. How did they follow up with her? Did she receive additional supports because of it? Was she offered resources and assistance? By whom and how would the more systemic issues that her incident spring from be addressed as an organization with significant institutional influence?

Despite flinty reminders of the need to recognize our incompleteness, I started to appreciate these cold morning drives, because of what I knew would come next. When the bell rang and the children arrived, we were transported. Something more than private inward grief rose to the surface of our consciousness, revaluing our perceptions and priorities. All

the degeneracy and violence that happened to us—in whatever its form—met its match in the children, in their tenacious spirit, wholly regenerating and inspiring us redirect our paths. It was the only direction the children knew to move in and the direction they counted on us to move. Quiet acts of self and mutual violence looked different under the light of day surrounded by young people brimming with forward-moving hope and the dependence of that hope on our current decisions. With that faith in the future as a basis, their words and movements were palpably rooted in the desire to connect and belong, to discover, understand, and create; not to petrify, reverse, or raze. Being among the children helped me to realize an internal mechanism that can completely alter our social and personal dynamics. When we understand that there is more to come, we have a tendency to find spaces to grow, to act with inquisitiveness, and to form genuine relationships. This is the everyday and sometimes material basis for hope. As Zygmunt Bauman (2009) pithily writes, “If we ever stopped hoping, we would no longer be human.”

Upward and forward were the children’s cardinal courses. They so looked up to the “big kids” in fifth grade and hurried to categorize third graders as “medium kids” and kindergarteners as “little kids.” They were always in anticipation of what came next. Was it Music or Physical Education? When was lunch? If they were hungry, why couldn’t they have just a bite of something quickly? Even if they asked every day and were told “No,” would this be the day that it’s okay to eat a piece of something before starting Writing Workshop? If they’re feeling sleepy, is it okay to find a place to lie down for a while? If the teacher or principal does something, does it mean that they are entitled to emulation? Is singing in the bathrooms okay? Or hiding in them when you’re feeling picked on and low? When they grow up, they might be a doctor like their parents or a poet, because they love

writing poetry. Or a motorcycle rider. They'll also be a "big buddy" to the new "little kids." That called for lots of screaming and jubilating. When Javier walked in wearing a hooded sweatshirt, skateboard slip-ons, and a pair of baggy jeans, gleeful gasps and widened eyes gingered up the morning. "Look! Javier's wearing middle school boy clothes! He's wearing big boy clothes! You look like a teenager, Javier!" When Mia brought in a candy toy phone, everyone wanted a chance to play and think about what it would be like one day to have a personal phone. Not much was really off limits, conditioning that would stigmatize anyone socially had not yet sedimented in the relationships of these open young people, and in order to learn limits, cosmic stretches of questioning and experimenting had to happen. Instead of sinking into broken hearts, an undefeatable energy and sense of always being on the cusp of something better and more "grown up" guided their actions. Even the air in the room, the posters on the wall, the students' drawings on their work, and the boot-lined halls seemed to shout sanguinely, "We're so very close to it!" Self-pitying stoicism and suffocating social detention couldn't draw a breath here.

The children moved us in a way that we didn't for one another, encapsulating Aldous Huxley's testimonial in *Music at Night* (1931), "Children are remarkable for their intelligence and ardor, for their curiosity, their intolerance of shams, the clarity and ruthlessness of their vision." He goes on to write,

A childlike [person] is not a [person] whose development has been arrested; on the contrary, [s/he] is a [person] who has given [her/himself] a chance of continuing to develop long after most adults have muffled themselves in the cocoon of middle-aged habit and convention. (p. 298)

Pablo Picasso's view of art as a medium toward truth and greater consciousness concurs with Huxley's admiration of children's character and vision. As stated by Pescina (2006), Picasso commented, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up" (p. 8). Picasso hints of the injuries incurred through the processes of adulthood, but does not explain, as Huxley also omits, what "muffles [people] in cocoons" of defeat. Cellist and conductor, Pablo Casals (1970), perhaps draws a clearer connection and explanation of what happens through schooling and the purpose of a humanizing pedagogy and its social, peace-making, and democratic implications.

Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that never was before and will never be again. And what do we teach our children in school? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all of the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed there has never been another child like you. And look at your body—what a wonder it is! Your legs, your cunning fingers, the ways you move. You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel. And when you grow up, can you then harm another who is, like you, a marvel? You must cherish one another. You must work—we must all work—to make this world worthy of its children. (p. 295)

In a more harrowing example, Alfonso Quaron's *Children of Men* (2006), based on PD James' (1992) science fiction novel of the same title, reality is a world exclusively of adults, and children are no longer born. Human procreation is defunct. In a society engulfed

by the masts of capitalism and annulled from its sense and need of one another, domination and ultimately obliteration become the only functions left. Without biological reproduction, society becomes infertile as well. There is no room for hope, for betterment, or for any future. In a world where the death of humanity is imminent, art diminishes to decorative artifacts of an obsolete past. Without a future, making meaning of the past also has no import. History's lessons and trajectory are just the debris of time elapsed, while suffering and brutality are inaugurated as the permanent norm. What can be worth doing to reform the present when the heavy tides of the status quo and our mortal limitations of time offer no guarantee of successful revolution, when there are but few who would struggle for it and appreciate it, and when there are no others to carry on when those who started it die out? Consideration for the suffering of others is trumped by self gain and individualistic survivalism, and the fatalistic outlook deactivates praxis. Alliances and change yield few rewards and eventual termination anyway. Resistance becomes purposeless. If corrupt and cruel forces rule, the spirit of rebellion and desire for change would not answer. In the closing scenes, the reluctant protagonist, Theodore Faron, walks straight through a mass of armored gunmen who had been firing nonstop through a dilapidated city's walls, shooting into buildings where people cowered. The film goes suddenly silent and the reason for the ceasefire is a baby in the arms of Theo. The meaning of the baby's life is matchless, and instantly it creates a profound effect on all who see. Human civility, all but extinct, is reawakened in the presence of the child.

Such a world need not be one that we choreograph as our reality, but the precautionary tale of the consequences of not recognizing the contemporary state of democracy, its assaults from global capitalism, and the dangerous repercussions that follow

in failing to liberate ourselves and making, as Picasso said, “the world worthy of its children.” Therefore it is imperative that as educators, we do not lose sight of the results of inaction in our own oppression and the oppression that enters into and through schooling, allowing exploitation and injustice to persist and propagate, and make idle promises of a better future to children. We have no excuse to behave as if we lack a reason to activate and agitate toward change or to resign to suffering. We cannot continue to be fooled into thinking that private problems are not symptomatic of social issues, or when fellow human beings endure peril and adversity that it is also only their private problem. Since such liberation requires learning along with others over time and with trust, we must harness such social possibilities and work to make them available to us in school settings. To abdicate our power, resources, and humanity to the devices of the presiding and most forceful administrators of schooling authority is to entirely undermine the intensity of society’s promise to the children, to all of our future.

Yet for many of us, the dominant institutions and historicity of schooling conditioned us to interpret schooling and ourselves within it fatalistically. The young students we were meeting were at the beginning of this road, and we were so far along that it was hard to turn back or toward alternate ways. We had learned repeatedly that schools educated us in, as Dewey (1916) called, “the subject matter of schools...isolated from the subject matter of life experience” (p. 29). When formal education becomes “remote and dead” for young people impatiently searching for how and who to be, we find ourselves on conflicting coasts in the intrinsically human quest for education to be relevant and full of life. When it didn’t surprise, invigorate, or engage, we had not learned how to resist this deadening of education and preserve our humanity. When it didn’t bring us closer, help us to better understand one

another or ourselves, or explain and expand our pressing interconnectedness, we were divested of our instinctive social curiosities and commitment. Instead, pelted by modes of puerile and crude interaction, we learned to consume corporate-owned media presentations of exploitative prying and madhouse spectacle. Without the guidance to understand one another as fully human, with formal education cleaved of its social nature and snared in a confusing battle of menacing foreground and unavailing background attention, we observe one another with skepticism and bias, caging society in diversion and profit-driven conceptual zoos rather than the love and community that metamorphoses us toward freedom and justice.

We had adapted to behaviorist methods of discipline, at times trained like laboratory specimens to systematically fear shock, punishment, and deprivation and know precisely which behaviors were rewarded. Over the years, we had become accustomed to learning from and among others and yet not recognize them as companions in the life experience, important comrades in the struggle for change in the world. We were immersed in Dewey's (1916) warning of a "machine-like plane" of human relationships, which is not truly social, but better related to the antisocial denial of others as people—people who suffer loss, who grieve their poor run of things, who catch ill and terrible days, who wind down in defeat and wish in private for better days, good luck, and more love. We learn to disconnect from one another, forgetting from long ago, that they are vulnerable to heartache and pain, that they are fragile and precious. We forget that they are like us, that they *are* we. We forget that we all shared the playground, whether it was in argument, peace, or in extraordinary elation and that we were told that everyone could play. We forget that when problems erupted or tears came to pass, that we used our voices to speak out, ask for help, and rummage for solutions. We forget our guileless togetherness. The increasing militarization, mechanization, and

regimentation of overall schooling structures and educators strangle all to such a scale that little life is left to celebrate, be celebrated, or grow.

Hope in Schools

In *Learning to Labor* (1977), Paul Willis corroborates the consequences of schooling that attempts to avoid and void rigorous social discourse with students through organizing materials and spaces that formally divide and limit students from possibilities of inquiry to one another, to authority, and to the outcomes of schooling. Borrowed textbooks, suffering what seems to be meaningless and arbitrary whims of teacher dominance, narrowly set working spaces that contrast with the expanse of perceived teacher ownership, bell-demarkated actions, the glorification of institutionally established formal knowledge and its fantasized direct path to individual career success, the illusion of upward social mobility for all, banking educational methods, and numerous off-limit spaces and registers of interaction composed students' realities of schooling in Britain, but have traveled scarcely far from prevailing schooling paradigms today. Through repeated acts of subordinating students into levels of obedience and conformity in order to not alter an institutional axis of control, some students sacrifice a freedom and social curiosity that the counter-school culture students wrestle to guard.

The self-named "lads," identifying the power of the "bigger establishment," disassociate with the teachers and school faculty, because they are reminded constantly of the school's positioning toward student inferiority and their inquiries. The lack of respect that "the lads" experience results in a disposition of hostility and resistance, as they engage in an education that separates them from understanding the "bigger establishment" and its teachers who rely on coercive authority. "The lads" look toward adult-mimicking exercises of

independence, their working class culture, and their efforts to feel belonging within their group for identity instead. The opposition of “the lads” toward schooling asserts their refusal to surrender autonomy to powers externally and officially sanctioned and their desire to participate in a group culture that accommodates them. The most important aspect of school becomes their friendship and the “laffs” that make their time enjoyable and significant for them. When Willis (1977) asks what “the lads” have learned, the answer lies consistently in the relationships formed with their peers and the absence of educators who recognize and understand their experiences (p. 23, 26, 60, 97). In this way, while “the lads” form a compelling social identity, gaps of racist, sexist, and otherwise violent or unhealthy interactions in drugs or intoxication that they have informally learned from adults persist unaddressed.

In revisiting and extending his theories through the twenty-six years that have passed since *Learning to Labor* (1977), Willis offers an account of three waves of our modernizing society and its impact on culture and youth in *Foot Soldiers of Modernity: The Dialectics of Cultural Consumption and the 21st-Century School* (2003). He observes the persistent nature of youth alienation and resistance in schools today—the first wave, modulated by a post-industrial second wave of unemployment and disorientation combined with disillusionment as well as a hyper-consumerist commoditized identity in an electronic third wave. Although the waves of modernization have brought forth new challenges, identities, and experiences for students, educators, and culture in the 21st century, Willis’ original research and his appeal to educators has not deviated far. There is still a dangerous ravine between teachers and students, especially in the negligence to better understand and come together as a multigenerational group envisioning a more connected and empowered present and mutually

vigorous future. Society and culture are constantly in flux, with youth marching first toward the unpredictable bends in culture and social structure that have been triggered long before them by those in power. Abandoned to individually navigate their identities and consciousness in these sinuous roads of modernity and without the assurance that schooling or caring mentors will have anything to offer apropos to their short-term and long-term puzzle of reality, it is no surprise that Willis (2003) finds himself still studying distressed and cloistered youth in schools.

Neither the extremes of withdrawal away from schooling nor the withdrawal of self into schooling are sustainable solutions for democratic and critical education. Although students may appear to be moving in opposite directions, both adaptation and refusal to adapt ultimately yield in social and personal disconnection as well as uncertainty about the purposes and potentials of public schools. Both also place educators in a moral dilemma as enemy of freedom and lackey of the status quo, sequestering the spirit of resistance short of revolution for stony subservience or expulsion from participation. What must be changed is the referent of students' troubling reactions—educators', policymakers', families', and the public's clarity of vision and praxis for schools. Such a transformation is possible, and amazingly, it is not a solitary one for educators as individuals or even as groups. Just as Freire reminds in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), the pursuit of full humanization can occur only in fellowship and solidarity. The first lead I had through my earliest teaching experiences was that the organic tempo of free movement and teeming feeling of life and energy was one that couldn't be lost.

Chapter 3: The Unique Position of Public Schools

I started to realize how unique public school settings are as live and formidable venues of democracy, resurrecting and evolving it in the present and future, local and global faculties. Although complicated layers of legislation, corporate systems, and data-ferreting try to infiltrate the bowels of schools, I've learned that the potency of what's been brewing for generations at its core is a heartbeat that refuses to be extinguished and must not ever be. Concrete walls that can barely contain the buzz of life that is the center of schooling is where we spend so much time learning how to talk to one another, how to listen to one another, to question, to agree and disagree, to challenge, to resist, to empathize, and to speak out. We learn to defend ourselves and others, reach out to or for others, define ourselves as individuals and as part of groups, make friends, and lose friends. It is where we first learn that others have the same name as us, where we make an independent decision about how to use leisure time and whom to spend it with, and where we sit anxiously awaiting our frenzied chance to chase one another through a gymnasium or a wet playground. It is where we first have a public accident in our pants, question the deservedness of the strange looks and comments about the contents of our lunchbox, and stare wistfully at the things (maybe clothes, toys, shoes, or a new fad item) another person owns and our family won't let us have. It is where we hear the piercing scream of a girl moaning to the teacher about something that we never know about, because she ends up not coming back after a while. It is where we meet the boy with the stains on his teeth and dirty finger nails and wonder why there's an onion-like smell and if it's common, if it's "normal." It is where we find out that we look the same or different, sound the same or different, and think and act the same or radically different from people outside of our homes. It is when we first realize that we do

not live only with those within the walls of wherever we call home, but within the fortifications of an entire world community unfolding before us or through the screens of technological interfaces. Indeed, schools are known to be a place for learning, but I soon realized that stopping there was an error. Perhaps most importantly, school is where we learn what it means to be together and how it feels to be together.

It is true and often commented that children learn much, including socialization outside of school. Whether it's extracurricular activities, organized sports, interaction with family and friends, neighborhood gatherings, or as often occurs today—in consumer-driven settings, children learn about who they are and who is around them in multiple settings and arrangements. The rates of introductions and manipulations of technological advances grant us access to survey one another's lives and make contact as we never have before, but they also leave us with new questions and openings for confusion, fear, and vulnerability. These reactions are part of the exploratory process of learning and can lead to complex new understandings. However, technology and media alone cannot always supplant actual lived experiences that bring us closer to some of the answers that we seek and to one another.

Growing up in a particular neighborhood, playing with the children of our parents' acquaintances, visiting with relatives, and meeting in public spaces such as parks, community centers, and libraries, we learn the processes of finding commonality and difference, negotiating alliances, resolving conflicts, and commitment to long-term relationships. There, we develop our practical sociologies, our understanding of the prevailing social structure and norms through which we can more smoothly integrate ourselves (Lemert 2005). These social skills are foundational to human community and yet they cannot always offer the assistance, debriefing, feedback, and reflection that we may need. We may be disappointed or surprised

by atypical relations and inherit great lapses of social confusion, chaos, or fear in our social habits. Left to incidental education alone, we have no guarantee that there is furthered understanding or reconciliation. At times, the adults or siblings in a family may provide more explicit, guided learning about socialization, but children will still be left without the assurance of someone who has the time, resources, and training to assume responsibility for facilitating sticky situations or navigating challenging interactions. We might easily learn how to behave in non-schooling social situations, but our learning of the why and how of social behavior can only be haphazardly conveyed.

Freire's former friend¹, Ivan Illich (1970), goes as far as to call for the elimination of what he convicts as the "domination of education by teachers and schools" to make the case for a fully deschooled society. He proposes that the question that launches education must be, "What kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?" (p.78). Presuming that teachers and the peer set that public schools generate are not and cannot be the answer to such a question, Illich (1970) hypothesizes that the elders of a society and a network of peer-matching for learners can supplant expensive and arrogant schooling systems. Through restructuring community education funds and tax incentives, learners obtain skills, knowledge, and practice with specialized tools from their most authentic local sources—the worksite itself, the company of the skilled person, or the now re-appropriated schoolroom as community meeting room that presents similarly authentic offerings and individuals. By liberating self-motivated learners to pursue their own interests alongside learning partners that they seek out on their own, Illich (1970) contends that the

¹ Richard V. Kahn, *Critical pedagogy, ecoliteracy, & planetary crisis: the ecopedagogy movement*, (2010) p. 25

boundaries of elite expertise and private ownership can be traversed to public use for education.

In some ways, Illich's (1970) proposal of learning from the community and outside of schools has already been initiated and even, at times, incorporated into public schooling. Field trips and invitations for the community to come into schools and classrooms provide opportunities of authentic, specialized learning. The high schools in my district form partnerships with the community and the local universities so that students may job shadow or learn from skilled local citizens. There are lunchtime and recess programs that involve families and community members to organize students in learning particular skill sets that they can share. Outside of school hours, students might hold various jobs or participate in clubs and organizations that match them with peers of similar interests. When school is not in session, the classroom spaces are often used by community organizations for an assortment of educative purposes. However, these educative means need not compete and do not nullify the unique spaces and responsibilities that public schools and public school teachers support.

Many logistical issues are unresolved in Illich's (1970) proposal of a deschooled society. He asserts that administrative, technological, and legal arrangements will have to be made to switch from a schooled to deschooled society. As I have explained, many features of deschooled learning can coexist and extend from schooling structures with administrative, technological, and legal arrangements already in place. Advancements in research and technological interface have also changed so rapidly that elders may not be primed to lead learners, while peers may have proficiency without the wisdom of experience or a more long-range view of its function. Equitable access will also be unaddressed, as some learners

retrieve resources from a more privileged social, economic, and geographic location while others falter with insufficient networks. Without a formalized structure weighing the existing inequalities and resources from student to student, private competition and privilege can surge unchecked in a deschooled society. Especially as there is no formalized space or time set for sustained reflection, a purely action-based outlook can prevail, a mania of the “how.” Consequently, praxis holds a dubious position, and the question of solidarity or democratic understanding also gives way to the status quo and dominant social norms. Young learners, already the target of market objectives as members of a hyper-consumerist society, may be marooned in such identities without any intermediaries of interpreting citizenship.^{2 3 4} Private industries, laboratories, and trades, appendages of the market economy will be wedged between production and education, but without a value change toward education, may only engage students in job training rather than a more complete range of educational possibilities. Furthermore, the learners’ training will be under corporately biased pretexts as well as at the whim of the storefront teachers and skill models. Since participation is voluntary and terms are written by the skill models and not the students, the scope and rigor of learning can be sharply curtailed with the student primarily as passive recipient of the worker-teacher’s benevolence and knowledge. If there are gaps and contradictions in such incidental encounters of learning, students will remain untutored of it. Dialogue will not

² See Kiku Adatto, *Selling out childhood*. (Hedgehog Review 5(2), 40, 2003)

³ See Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy*. (New York, NY: Scribner, 2004)

⁴ See Paul Lachelier, *Social Character and Social Order. Consumers, Commodities, and Consumption*, 7(2). (Retrieved from: <http://csr.camden.rutgers.edu/newsletters/7-2/lachelier.htm>, 2006)

have the conditions it needs to develop. In such deregulated education, issues of student safety and wellbeing may also be neglected.

Public schools and schoolteachers are able to tackle many of these issues and have for much time. When parents, family members, peers, or society does not have the time, resources, or interest in pursuing deeper questions or look beyond the “hows” of society, rather the by whom, for whom, when, and whys—especially if they are disruptive or pose potential threat to the working individual or current conditions, the ideal station of teachers is unique in that it may facilitate realization of such inquiries. When learners come from and live in dangerous, abusive, or impermanent quarters, schools ideally can be a safe haven of consistency, of safety, and of care. When worker-teachers are limited to the skills and knowledge of their incidental experiences, schools can provide a socially ecological view to highlight a more encompassing awareness and the interaction of its parts. Perhaps more importantly, when learners only partner with others through self-initiated appeals, the plethora of human diversity in their local and global community evade them. Deschooled learners run the risk of never learning to be around others with whom they may find it difficult at first to form bonds and friendship, others who at first seem to have little in common with them, to learn how to team and live peacefully with peers who may be at the outset challenging to get to know or get along with. Public schools have the potential to ensure and boast capacity for much of this.

Something Magical and Roaring

As both a student and especially as a teacher, I maintain that there is something distinctive about public schools that I have come to interpret as nothing short of magical. It is my belief that all public schools bear the possibility of a socially and politically

transcendent quality, because it remains in society while being independent from it. It can reside as a separate entity that critiques society from within, because its purpose and values need not be driven by profit and production as in the rest of society. It is safe to assume that things are not always this way and not everyone always shares this experience. Illich (1970) reinforces that the power of communicating ideology in schools cannot be ignored, naming schools as the “reproductive organ of a consumer society” (p.74). However, his premise for the abandonment of schooling falls on his limited definition of schools: “school is...schooling for schooling’s sake: an enforced stay in the company of teachers, which pays off in the doubtful privilege of more such company” (p. 17). He censures schooling for collapsing education with attendance at school and diplomas, and employing teachers as omniscient charlatans. He condemns the strict hierarchies of privilege, barring access to students “without credentials or pedigree” (p. 76). Certainly I have observed some frightfully maddening practices in schooling as well as some exasperatingly suffocating ones. Such stories of schooling are popularized today from newspaper headlines to portrayals in film and television to lunchtime conversation or widely publicized political debates. Even in the popular *Harry Potter* (1997) series, schools of fiction that teach magic can be overtaken by threats, punishments, and hostility.

However, Rowling’s (1997) story also features the power of determined and patient teachers aware of the importance of their students, a community and government system undisguised with their interest in the school and what knowledge is taught, as well as the transformation of students to not only change but to save the world. Magic is not a guarantee of public schools, but perhaps the lesson here is that the magical potential of schools can be controlled and limited to such degrees that it is anything but. The word “failure,” and the

fear of its specter haunt schools, while media feeds off alleged indications of it and policymakers brandish their belief in it to eat away more power from everyone inside the school—all of those caring educators, devoted community members, and courageous students preparing to change the fate of our world. The fear of failing in global and local market competition, in creating a deferential configuration of “patriotic citizens,” and in producing profitable new factions of consumer society fuel much media coverage, legislation, and changes in schools today. Many of these fears provide support to the argument of schools as being too dysfunctional, defeated, and distorting of reality to be relevant any longer. None of this, however, could sever from me my earliest experiences of being a student or an aspiring teacher.

While some legislators, administrators, and researchers may reprove the notion of appending the mystical to what is often now seen as the “business of schools” or the “science of schools,” I refer again to those images and sounds that I first encountered as a college student in an elementary school classroom, and ask, is it not some sort of mysterious delight that allows us—whether visitor, parent, child, or teacher—to appreciate fully and be drawn in by the clamor of life that conjures the associating feelings of human connectedness? Is there not some inferred quality of a room where one enters and can sense an unaffected gelling of disparate events and human experiences? Is there not something immutably present between human meetings that encourages us to gather to play, to mourn, or to struggle? In the case of Harry Potter and his friends, I argue that there is a magical eminence that has nothing to do with potions or spells but filled his summer vacations with anticipation for school to start, to be among Ron and Hermione, to speak with his beloved professors, Hagrid and Dumbledore.

The context in which I conceive of magic to describe schooling is more akin to the capacity of our understanding that elevates the mouse to roar in Anton Chekhov's (1959) "Across Siberia," which Raymond Carver (1996) relayed as a found poem.

To scream with pain, to cry, to summon help, to call
generally—all that is described here as "roaring."

In Siberia not only bears roar, but sparrows and mice as well.

"The cat got it, and it's roaring," they say of a mouse. (p. 290)

It is the empathic power of our humanity, our ability to read the experiences of all as dignified and worthily affective, including our own—the literacy of humanism. It is the fountain from which we make meaning of joy, absurdity, and pain along with others. It is a conviviality of spirit and recognition of one another as equally deserving of camaraderie even as our individuality differentiates us. Borrowing from Nieto's description of that knowing "light in their eyes," that spark of understanding that enigmatically shines through the eyes of students, the magic within schools for me is that light of understanding that is stricken when we find understanding along with others. It is the light in our eyes meeting and reaching mutual understanding and responsibility. It is the recognizing of each other as being of ours and others, of indispensable togetherness. In musical theater, it is the part in which everyone and every part of the stage converge to rejoice or cry in the powerful unity of feeling and experience. In other words, I believe that the magic that schools can possess is a delicate but tremendous and genuine ascertainment of belonging in all of our various voices, bodies, and ideas. Somehow, we tinker toward a cohesive assembly of individuals whose actions now, if coordinated together, amplify themselves immensely. It is the magic of pulling together in a particular, hardly predictable, never reproducible in the exact same way again.

If it sounds idealistic, it is because I believe idealism is part of that magical potential of schools. Only in schools can we conceive of a place where the entire community is not too erratically or predictably generated, but a roster of children from multiple cross-sections of the community, still small enough in number to know everyone's names and know each other intimately, close enough in age and locality, scheduled to learn, work, and play together on a consistent basis, and are as near to and engaged with their source of direct and in some measures autonomous figure of authority. If there is a conflict, complaint, problem, or question, it is possible for the child to broach it at any point within the high-contact time frames between teachers and students. If there is apprehension, discord, or calamity, permanent evasion or isolation from the community is typically not a choice. People can feel safe to search sincerely for genuine, long-term solutions. Parents and guardians of students can also mediate the classroom culture, allying themselves as advocates for the children or helping to interpret a classroom rule. Students, families, and teachers make a commitment at the beginning of a school year to accept their responsibility to each other, toiling to resolve as best they can any and all situations that enter their co-created collective existence. All have a fresh opportunity to participate as an active Subject, not just passive object, and interact through dialogic, balanced relationships.

Adults with conflicts, complaints, or problems tend to be nearby indirect representatives of a hierarchy of bureaucratic power or are far more removed from the central source of authority, which as Lemert (2005) tells, can cordon people into obedience and silence. The prestige, privilege, and power of a person imparted with authority to limit or control the freedoms of others can be misused and difficult to trace or censure until there is a glaring breakdown in performance. Lemert (2005) goes on to explain that “[r]ules are very

difficult to change when they become cumbersome or useless. On top of that, they seem to multiply at an alarming rate.” (p. 117). As the individual power of an authority mushrooms through the auspices of the bureaucratic structure, the individual runs the risk of standing in for the office of bureaucracy rather than serving the bureaucracy, and ultimately the citizens who award power to it. Such a collapse of power into the person rather than the contextual office of power threatens the bureaucracy’s system of checks and accountability to the public. This usurpation of power from the office can be utilized to disassociate power from citizens and lead to erosion of democracy. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1971) also observes and ponders this paralysis of public freedom and action in *Relations in Public*. In a democratic system defined by its rule “by the people,” Goffman (1971) comments, “The great sociological question [is]...how is it that human beings do this sort of [protest] so rarely. How come persons in authority have been so overwhelmingly successful in conning those beneath them into keeping the hell out of their offices?” (p. 288).

Students in self-contained elementary classrooms have the advantage of more direct access to an empowering consciousness. For public school students, the bureaucracy of the classroom is curbed by a number of factors. One of these factors is simply that rules are “restarted” each school year if there is a new teacher and new group of students. Furthermore, it has the unique potential to be an everyday social space where children have the chance to have a voice, to be unbarred from direct power by adult authority, and to exercise democratic rights. As it is unlikely that the classroom teacher or peer set will change for that school year, students are also met with the challenge to learn communication skills, patience, perseverance, and advocacy skills so as to cooperatively reach peaceful and fair agreements within the group who is also striving to decode democratic leadership and

citizenship. Schools thus have the potential to support a space where individual and collective empowerment is the norm and a long-term expectation. Through sharing this self-contained space, its resources, common language, a calendar, and a body of experiences with their peers and teacher, the public school's learning communities are allowed the possibility to explore democracy on a less constrictive, less bureaucratic, and more manageable scale together.

The Classroom as Democratic Space

Engaging in democracy in these immediate and local coordinates prepares us to participate in democracy on a more global and multiplex scale. In a public school classroom, each member of the community has already self-identified as a learning participant drawn from the requisites of dialogue—speaking and listening earnestly to one another, public space—maintaining the self-contained general education classroom as well as attending to the common school calendar, reflection—supported by the previous three tenets (and bolstered by self-identification as a learning student) to arrive at new revelations and forms of thought, and reflective action—the results of dialogue, public space, and reflection that lead to enacting changes that move outwardly to transformation of the self, community, and classroom or school. Daily, sustained rehearsal of democratic engagement can be cultivated within a consistent setting that controls for quelling arrays of human violence that inhibit freedom in an adult world (i.e. weapons, war, imprisonment, mind-altering and body-poisoning chemicals, the empire of media marketing and its exploitative enterprise, threats to economic needs, and physical or emotional bullying). Before a child formally enters this complex world of adulthood where rights and freedoms are forced to hang on at times by threads, years of sturdy experiences and belief of living democratically may be her or his best

defense. Meeting this threshold of adulthood flanked by peers that have become practiced and accustomed to productive democracy can only further yield group empowerment and possibly generations of young adults (and allied adults) prepared to combat the neoliberal, neoconservative, militaristic, and hyper-consumerist rupturing of society today.

In the public school classroom, the authority of the teacher need not be routed by capitalistic objectives of self-profit but may be genuinely invested in respectfully partnering with youth to develop an empowering, relevant, and just education that hazards toward a democratic coexistence that's missing from adult citizenship. The teacher's responsibilities toward the students and families and constant direct contact belie manners of neoconservative neglect and neoliberal bedlam. The focus on learning steers teachers more fervently toward reconciliation and healing than punishment and dismissal. Of course, a culture of adult fears (see Robbins, 2008) have jerked schools and teachers away from these hopeful possibilities, of treating children as children—young people only learning to be, learning to be with, learning to behold our world and become our future. The violence of these adult fears cannot be allowed to obstruct the safe harbor of democratic learning for children or exclude them from it.

The classroom provides a cache of common experiences for the learning community as well as a common language, both in terms of how it is used to depict an event, thought, or value, and in the case of which world languages are spoken. Classroom shorthand, mutually adopted terms and definitions, and mantras provide a path of accelerated and pronounced understanding. Shared live experiences or shared texts also present a referent base in which to annex meaning. When we are older, so many variations of experiences, linguistic expressions, and hardened perceptions can cause commonality to be obscured and precision

of meaning to be lost. A dialogue can too quickly be replaced by a debate or argument with an objective of “winning” and reinforcing one’s previous beliefs rather than be challenged and triumph with the very process of exchanging ideas and finding fresh nuance. If not accustomed to dialoguing, surfacing differences less habitually lead to curiosity and interest, but to vilification and marginalization as the distant “other.” This rancorous association toward one another is the foe of empathy, learning, and solidarity, in which democracy depends on resisting in order to achieve justice, freedom, and peace.

Furthermore, the ideal intent of the teacher is often quite clear, and can be unequivocally set to be inclusive of all students in learning and as a community, maintaining a tone of safety, fairness, and respect. Sadly, it does not take long to see where there are people in societies that are deserted and left to be forgotten or banned from engagement with others. Safety, fairness, and respect may still be the proclaimed ideals of modern society but do not appear to be the case when one acknowledges all of those who are marginalized as our hungry, poor, homeless, sick, enemy, or otherwise neglected. Everyday at school, we are all expected to arrive at the same time, share snack at the same time, take care of and clean the same space, eat lunch at the same time, and go home at the same time. Attendance is mandatory, and just showing up actually stands for something. And no matter what earth-shattering disagreement has happened, when it’s time to play, we all play at the same playground. This continuous and consistent structure is fertile ground for lessons in human relationships and a participatory democratic society.

Chapter 4: Two School Districts

In my first full-time teaching position, I witnessed teachers punish students through public humiliation and exclusion. After routinely being punished through banishment from the group and from learning, students as young as six begin to preemptively ask for expulsion from the group, to be sent to the principal's office and give up on their learning. Yet there were many other indicators that reminded me that this wasn't really what the process of schooling was like. At least twice that year, all of the students in the school were herded into the gym for the sole reason of viewing a movie from the physical education teacher's projector, pointed at the corner where two walls met, situating the giant image at a distorting angle. For an entire afternoon, classroom teachers had time "free of students" while the music, art, library, and physical education teachers took on what I could only comprehend as student patrolling duty. Once in a while, the movie would be paused, casting us into darkness as we listened to a teacher bark names and threaten that we would sit for the rest of the day in darkness if she heard further talking. This usually led to rows of shrill screaming from the kindergartners, many of whom were still afraid of the dark. Too many children than I could count had already been lined up on the wall next to me, the Physical Education teacher's designated location for convicted "talkers" who had been caught in offense and now had to face viewing the rest of the movie in a standing lineup.

Listening to these teachers count down the days on a roll of toilet paper hand-marked with descending numbers hanging from the ceiling was a regular lunchtime topic as the last numbered piece of toilet paper fluttered like a bitter jest over our heads. Listening to a debate of leasing brand new cars instead of purchasing and maintaining one car led to a sigh and collective remark that it was for these things that we performed our jobs.

“Just remember, this Friday’s a payday.” One teacher consoled as she headed out the door.

“Oh, I’ve been waiting for it all week. Don’t think I’ve forgotten.” Another responded. Finally, I heard a more upbeat tone, a smile and a wink.

Here was teaching, spoken and grumbled about like what I imagined to be the many tedious and dehumanizing corporate jobs I thought we were insulated from in my undergraduate experiences in the College of Education. We were not in the business of producing objects or services to which we have no personal connection. There is no commission, sales objective, or need for client manipulation. Who could have predicted that cold and constraining cubicles littered with sticky notes and mountainous paperwork would be interchanged with sticky fingers and children we’ve forgotten are our young people and democratic citizens on the rise? Where were the teacher education classes that prepared us to advocate for our students and their diverse skills and learning needs while intensified bureaucratic pressures straitjacketed those of us trusted to heartbreakingly listen to their troubles, their worries? Other times, I thought schooling in this setting could be better compared to a criminal injustice system where both the incarcerated and incarcerators are routinely subjected to loathsome practices, gridlocked into a labyrinth of public misunderstanding and lorded over by removed authorities. In a place like this, it was easier to remember that this was the formal education system of the United States fleeced from an ethical core, openly and unapologetically set on a course of dysfunction. In a setting like this, it might be easier to blame teachers, blame the flaws and corruption of a public school system, and blame even the idea of formal educational settings.

Not only would jumping to such harsh conclusions be wildly imprecise with just one depiction of a hurting school community, but such a fatalistic condemnation of one of the last surviving public spaces in the free market regime of the United States would also be dimming of future-oriented hope. I have not lost hope. Yet while I remain forward-looking to what schools can be, I also realize that even in schools where the aforementioned experiences are not tolerated, it will take more than what we've done so far to bring about fresh and necessary changes within schools. If we rest on our laurels in classrooms and conference rooms that are in staunch opposition to such horror stories, we will still barely stand a chance against the onslaught of political, social, and economic changes outside of our schools that transpire so quickly around and into the state of us. Our schools and society are under siege of greater threat, threats that erode at our foundation and adhere themselves to the very walls that hold our most vulnerable and unrestrained learners.

In my new district, I couldn't find a single teacher who called to mind the teachers I knew before. It wasn't just because I met so many teachers with distinguished resumes—resumes that showed that they were former geologists and researchers at the local university who had returned to be certified to teach younger students, former journalists who wanted to participate more actively in the community, former and current parents of children enrolled in the same school district, active and caring community leaders, multilingual, and multicultural, but it was because I saw tireless teachers who weren't afraid of squeezing every last ounce of their time and energy into what they saw as their calling—the education and care of children. Exclusion, public shaming, and punitive threats were not what I observed to be the standard fare inside classrooms, hallways, or whole-school activities. In

contrast to the whole-school movie showings in the gymnasium, classroom parties had time limits, because school leaders wanted to maintain a more rigorous academic culture.

Expectations for fall teacher conferences were to meet with every single family. Teachers did whatever it took to meet with each student's family. It wasn't out of the ordinary that year when between rushing to obtain food stamps, WIC coupons, and owning and operating a fully family-run restaurant, a student's family waited for me to arrive at the restaurant where Grandma bounced a crying, undernourished baby on her knee in order to discuss my student's progress with his family in Mandarin Chinese.

Whenever a translator was needed, multilingual teachers, parents, and other community members volunteered their time. Teachers frequently stayed after school, calling parents and meeting with families, or gave up lunchtimes to reward students for their efforts with more personal time together or to provide a mediated space to help resolve student conflicts. I saw teachers take great pride in their work at school and after school, attend students' birthday parties, music recitals, athletic events, cancer research fundraising races, neighborhood gatherings, winter apparel and food drives, hospital visits, and family funerals. In this school, two local universities brought student teachers, interns, resources, researchers, consultants, and new programs to engage in a mutually beneficial and scholarly relationship.

Here was another example of public schooling, just a twenty-minute drive from the other, with common structures but cast with marked differences by economic, political, and sociological factors. In this latter community, the largest employer is a prestigious research university with abundant resources and array of organized activities for adults and youth alike. In the other, a hazardous waste treatment facility and landfill as well as discount retail stores and the public school district make up the major employers of the community, with the

higher paid employees commuting out to more affluent neighboring cities where they reside. The majority of teachers and administrators that I met in the former district lived outside of the district in which they taught. Their children were students elsewhere, they spent their leisure time elsewhere, and they did not disguise their antipathy toward the district and community in which they worked. That school property and facilities were poorly maintained, resources tight (and at times randomly raffled to the principals), and the families poor and not predominantly White American like the teaching staff exacerbated the lack of change and robust relationships.

I listened with dismay as the teachers chatted at lunchtime, blaming the students' parents for their poor values and for instilling an anti-academic attitude in their children. They shook their heads in contempt, utterly distanced from the youth, their families, and the school district's large, multi-city community. Of course, the administrators and policymakers would also take their turn in blaming the teachers for all of their students' struggles, dropout rates, and test performance. Overloaded with economic, political, and sociological difficulties and faultfinding, and bereft of the necessary articles to tackle them, the schools and educators within them remained dolefully impotent. It would take employers and community members who could support the students' families in ways so that they could participate more actively in their education and schools. It would take parents who had the temporal and material privileges that existed in my new district for there to be multiple parent soccer coaches, organize practices and games, and teachers who lived close enough and related enough (or wanted to relate enough) to attend them. It would take teachers who were not so totally beat from the day or the week that they could drive to a student's home for a conference. It would take administrators sharply surveying the condition of the schools,

the completion of covering up the asbestos lining the ceilings, more permanent fixing of the power outages, or purchasing playground equipment to make families and community members entertain the idea that the school was an inviting, nurturing, and desirable place to be. It would take governments who do not use money and control as punitive threat for teachers to “produce data” that show that their students are not being “left behind.” Instead, viable solutions to the miserable state of education that I saw for the students and teachers were shamelessly left behind. We were without a voice, without a dream, and without a chance of recourse.

The conservatism of curriculum and standards-obsessed, test-transfixed scholars and policymakers can offer nothing here. Even Diane Ravitch (2010), who wrote woefully of the mismatching results of her years of effort toward No Child Left Behind, claiming that she has “changed her mind” and warning educators of the many touted false panaceas of educational reform, stands by the blinkered silver bullet notion that a voluntary national curriculum can solve all. Not only does the rush to itemize a definitive canon of knowledge and skills — even if, as she permits, teachers can teach however they want, just not whatever they want—reek of headlong sweeps of silencing and marginalization, but it allows the traditions of oppression and bigotry that progressive educators have been combating for decades to carry the day. As Michael Apple (1993) reminds, “...the decision to define some groups’ knowledge as the most legitimate, as official knowledge, while other groups’ knowledge hardly sees the light of day, says something extremely important about who has power in society.” He goes on to write, “There is, then, always a *politics* of official knowledge, a politics that embodies conflict over what some regard as simply neutral descriptions of the world and others regard as elite conceptions that empower some groups while

disempowering others.”⁵ Educators in this district (or in my new district for that matter) “volunteering” their students to such a national curriculum could not bring about any sincere, lasting, and hardy reform to the challenges they and their students face in their struggle to democratic learning and a democratic experience. Such proposals only perpetuate the outfitting of citizenry as the compliant masses who follow the bidding of an external expertocracy.

It was revitalizing then to start fresh, be in a healthier community, around so much enthusiasm, optimism, sweat, and active pursuit of upholding a reputation of being the most exceptional district in the area. Educational staff, from custodians to teachers to secretaries to principals, constantly reached out to one another, offering their services above and beyond their job descriptions’ official statements. I felt privileged to be a part of such a collaborative group, so grateful that this was a characteristic of the school’s culture that was recognized and valued by its staff. Here was a staff that shared common beliefs about how to be an educator and a colleague. Newcomers to the staff were greeted with tremendous warmth and encouragement that didn’t evaporate after the first hour or even the first month. “Going across the hall” was a hallmark of the school that guest teachers substitute teaching would quickly learn and depend on for help. In my first year there as a long-term substitute teacher who had only recently graduated, I saw the faces of P.E. teachers, music teachers, custodians, IT support staff, secretaries, and classroom teachers of all grade levels pop into the doorway regularly just to say hello, ask how my day was going, and ask if they could help run copies, lend me materials, share tips about students, or answer any questions. Here was a school in

⁵ See Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990); and idem, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

which the custodian, noticing the heating problems in my room, took it upon himself to plug in and turn on a space heater that he lent to me from his own office at the beginning of each school day or saw the lack of parking spaces in the school's diminutive lot and offered to park my car for me so that I could start my work without delay. This was the welcoming and supportive environment to which I returned.

My high hopes for the school year were not disappointed as the fall began. I had already attended weeks of new teacher orientations, workshops, and curriculum trainings. (Due to federal and state budget cutting, none of these in later years would happen again.) We had mentor teachers and scheduled mentor meetings to check in with one another as well as to document the expected amount of communication. I signed up to work additionally on a committee established to tackle the achievement gap by confronting institutional and individual racism toward African American and Latina/Latino American people. However, racism beyond what they called racism toward the "black and brown kids," poverty, and other issues of equity were not priorities. When other teachers or I mentioned other factors that affect students at school, such as socioeconomic inequality, we were immediately reproached for not upholding one of the core agreements of the district's committee: to focus exclusively on race. This response stung me for a long time, but it illuminated for me quickly what topics were amenable through district-wide discourse.

When it was time to present to parents about the curriculum, other teachers helped me to prepare with the technology, visual presentation, oral presentation, and distribution materials. I heard—just as I had for weeks at the curriculum trainings—that, just like the educational staff, our district curriculum was the best of the best. These were the best educators managing classrooms with best practice teaching with the purportedly best-

researched curriculum. It was our chance to brag about our instructional content, the topics covered in each subject, the tools used to teach those subjects, and some of the methods employed to deliver the subject. Since I hadn't taught an entire year of first grade in the district, I felt like I barely knew more than the families that attended my presentation. It didn't feel honest to start gloating about a list of curriculum units that I hadn't taught through, but I expressed my hopefulness for the year and what I learned that my colleagues and administrators endorsed—that the district and curriculum are simply exceptional.

At the first staff meeting of the school year, I sat nervously beside another new staff member. The staff and principal graciously welcomed us again, but it didn't mask the heady angst and exhaustion in the air. The teachers had arrived at the meeting bursting with the need to connect in the way that the collaborative culture had taught them to connect. They wanted to hear about their former students in their new classes or consult with a student's former teacher to forge a stronger relationship with that student or her/his family. There was talk about brand new students with new issues and responses of recommendation for how to deal with unfamiliar situations. The principal's neck reddened as she brought the hubbub to a halt. She had a set agenda and central administration to report back to, including standardized test scores and report card data to be analyzed. The type of conversation that naturally arose from teachers' day-to-day experiences in classrooms, their worries and joys, never seemed to be on the agenda.

Graph after graph of district data, tracked from year to year and disaggregated by NCLB categories, needed to be digested, dissected, and discussed. We were asked to make predictions about percentages of students passing and failing on these tests and guesses about the achievement for each of the listed racial categories. We were commended for the

consistently upward direction of data points and asked to write new goals for areas of improvement. Having co-opted the language of business, we were striving for increased gains using always the metric of standardized tests scores first and report cards second. How could we close the achievement gap that didn't make us appear as exceptional as we claimed to be? PowerPoint Presentations with sample test questions, sample student answers, and packets of more test data were distributed for more analyzing. The conclusion and goals teachers drew frequently returned to the importance of meaningful and caring relationships with students. However, this wasn't acceptable as a goal, because the sample goals written by the district were based on content objective. The goals needed to be related to areas of academic weakness as proven by test scores, and nowhere did it leave a space for student and teacher relationships or wellbeing. Even though relationships in the classroom were unanimously heralded as the touchstone of good teaching by the teachers, the objectives wrote all of it away for more curriculum and professional development.

In this way, the buzz of teachers trying to confer with one another about their students was delegated to a disruptive background din. The opportunity for teachers to collaborate and utilize space and resources set aside to work and dialogue together after school hours was deterred biweekly. The principal did not hide her own feelings about the way our time was dictated but obligated to follow. We had to "keep our eyes on the prize," which ironically was less about students and more about their academic standardized testing performance, the ranking it gave our school. Each student was a number and categorized under a racial/ethnic group, English language status, and socioeconomic status. The only discussion about the students who had all been replaced by numbers by now was how to push more of their numbers into the passing side of test scores. The question was always how we

could improve the district through improving test scores. Any direct discussion of any of disaggregated data categories was limited to what the data called African American, White American, and Latina/Latino American progress during my racial equity committee's formal meetings with the staff.

The absurdity was that the unanimous belief in the magnitude of developing genuine and meaningful relationships with students, especially students whose life experiences had made it challenging for them to trust others enough to connect, never went away. It was apparent that these were teachers who cared deeply about their students and their families, but the organization of the staff meetings and district goals prevented these discussions of relationships with students, families, the community, the district itself, and one another from openly and freely happening. The focus was on percentages, the slope of line graphs, and attempting to pinpoint a specific academic febleness upon which all teachers needed to improve. In learning of this trend in Teacher Story Research in Australia's public schools, Pat O'Brien and Barry Down (2002) call this "paper warfare" (p. 123).

My head spun at many of these meetings. Notes were often passed back and forth, and teachers whispered questions embedded in real classroom concerns to one another.

"Thank you for lending a hand when my student ran away again today. A police officer picked him up."

"What can I do in Physical Education that would help your student learn the alphabet?"

"I used to have a garden outside my Art class, and it became something that comforted children who needed to take a break from the classroom to cope with difficult feelings."

“Thank you for watching my class while I helped a fourth grader handle her crisis today.”

“What was the process of calling Child Protective Services like? I may have to do it too.”

“My student came to school in the same outfit and the paint that spilled on him yesterday is still there. You’ve handled something like this before, haven’t you?”

“How did you make a strong connection with my student’s family last year?”

Or an exasperating, recurring question directly in response to the meeting agenda:

“How do you fit all this stuff in? Is this really necessary and more beneficial to our students to be a novice to our instruction each year? Do we really need to go through another curriculum update and recreate writing assessments, rubrics, and report card objectives? How do we have the time to learn a new curriculum and work on other areas of teaching as well? Is this the best use of our time and resources?” This last question asked why our questions were less important, less urgent, less “professional.”

I craned my neck to hear the answers to these questions, but oftentimes they were stopped short, because... It is not a priority to discuss these emotionally and physically urgent concerns with our students? It is not what “those who know better than us,” whom we almost never get to speak with or work directly with, believe we are supposed to talk about? It makes their paper warfare on teachers and students alike appear a petty charade? No. I could not see or agree with why teachers needed to be stopped from caring, collaborating, and questioning. These were the problems posed by experienced, hard-working teachers who know deep down that curriculum and test scores could not be the only reason that they taught, the only reason that students learned from them, and that the evidence of higher

scores was the solution to bettering our schools. In the background, there was also the irony that these same enforcers of paper warfare were channeling money out of public schools, funneling trust away from teachers, and flattening students and their families to mere figures. That the teachers, under so much attack and feeling responsible to their students but also to the mandates of their profession, were stressed, indignant, and worn out, did not surprise me. It was the degree to which they were expected to persist and authenticate their own competence through a maze of tasks unrelated to children—anti-children activities cheaply heralded as being “for the children,” that troubled me deeply. As a young teacher, I wanted so much to witness flourishing demonstrations of resistance and marks of independence from the dominant institution, but I found myself just waiting, waiting, and waiting.

Their questions were not the ones that were traditionally asked at organized staff meetings, but the questions asked by many progressive and successful schools that truly turn their focus to the student’s path—not as a mere number buried in a district of data sheets, but as complete human beings enduring troubled times, witnessing domestic abuse, hearing the beeping indicator of their insulin medication on empty, in the middle of bitter family breakups, sleeping in shelters at night, and losing older siblings to juvenile incarceration systems or fathers to prisons. I had known by now from my graduate classes that such schools existed.⁶ Democratic leaders worked with democratic teachers and engaged students and families in genuine acts of democratic participation.^{7 8} They were given time, resources,

⁶ See Eileen de los Reyes & Patricia Gozemba, *Pockets of hope*. (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 2002)

⁷ See Roger Simon, *Teaching against the grain: Texts for a pedagogy of possibility*. (New York, NY: Bergin and Garvey, 1992.)

⁸ See Nieto, S. (Eds.). 2008. *Dear Paulo Letters from Those Who Dare Teach*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

and respect. They faced many challenges, but democracy is challenging. The individuals who make up society are diverse and challenging. Yet society's victories have come from struggling through challenges, believing in humanity so deeply that we do make a move, even when we are afraid and unsure of chaos and retaliation.

Understood in these lights, the caring teachers around me were asking exactly the right questions. The students in our school systems cannot be reduced to the numeric schemes enforced and worshipped by corporate models of work. New additions to curriculum and the many resources spent on committees to pilot and select their favorite, acquiring the materials to teach them, training curriculum directors to be experts on them, and actually implementing them, do not help teachers begin to grasp the solutions that their students are counting on them to have. New curriculum alone cannot change the lives of our students or, for that matter, raise test scores. Similarly, concentrating on test scores alone will not yield the results that data-obsessed educators and policymakers might lead us to believe. The many factors of student performance in schools has unsurprisingly proven to be not solely the property of curricular, assessment, or numerically deposited changes. The human aspect of education is one that no record of education can ignore. Instead, these anti-child demands decelerate and drain teachers' abilities to effectively respond to their students as complex human beings with a vast array of experiences and challenges: academic, personal, social, political, economic, and emotional.

In my first year there, I wanted to ask questions about my students entangled in the turmoil of parents battling for custody, describing violent acts from father to mother, lying habitually, persisting in homelessness, having questions about the various portrayals of

kissing they saw on television and in movies, and trying out non-conforming gender expression. These were the thoughts that lingered in my head as I fought to relax enough to fall asleep, hoping that I could do enough the next day to offer a shred of relief, direction, or peace to their day and possibly have a worthy impact on their life. What words do I use? What wizened courses of action have experienced teachers taken in a similar situation? What things should I be mindful of so that I don't make unnecessary mistakes? It was clear to me each night, while the district and state's educational agenda was concentrated elsewhere, that I was most motivated by the living growth of the children, their inward confusion and traumas, desires and imaginings. And it was the materializations of such complex inner existences, their tears of anger, tickling laughter, mischievous pranks, and tongue-biting determined vigor that I awoke at dark school dawns to greet. Did others really dream of children as sterile numbers? How could anyone who remembers what it is like to be a child or is ever in the privileged company of children tell them that they are nothing inside except for their outward numeric performance? Even if we don't say it out loud, how dare we fire such dehumanizing processes through institutionalizing our schools thusly? It's enough to make any caring educator's stomach turn over, and yet the acidity of our stomachs are never allowed to reach our mouths or the ears of those monopolizing schooling power.

When I could have learned the most from all of my colleagues gathered together, relying on not just their wealth of experience, but on their wisdom from past and continuing relationships with these very students and their families, we were consigned to page after page of data. The result was a charged, frustrated group of teachers at times slipping the comment, "Yes, but this is just a lot. There's so much." It was a vague comment that sounded harmless enough to be repeated at least once at each staff meeting. I believe it stands

for more. When there's already so much we're genuinely concerned about, so many unanswered and pressing questions simmering presently in our classrooms, how much time do we have left to delay to fulfill curriculum directors' reveries of precisely pinpointing academic failure from the vigilant study of graphs? What service do we render unto our children when we allow the problems that stand right before them to fester so that we can be reassured by the illusion of assessment data primacy?

Commanded by the notion of professional accountability, each of us stood in line, allowing what we called "the higher ups" in hierarchical corporate fashion or "the powers that be" in religious deference to muffle our questions, apprehensions, innovations, and meditations. When I realized there was no space for genuine free responses, no open forum for democratically instituting our needs and concerns, I felt tremendous grief. There was no institutionally respected place for our voices as teachers, and what gifted, multi-skilled, loving, and astute people outfit the party of those who teach! What teachers have to offer cannot be limited only to our dictated interactions with students. Here I was, surrounded by educators whose brilliance made me believe that together, so much was possible. In the hands of these master teachers and dedicated human beings, the lives of so many other human beings and beyond would be touched by a wand of radiance. Yet accountability was another word for obedience, dismissing and disrespecting anything else that they had to offer. It was a depressing conclusion. We are most accountable to the administrators and those sitting on the boards of education, the profit-turning hands who hold the purse strings of too many. We are not allowed or protected our responsibility to the ones sitting in the tiny wobbly chairs of our classrooms.

Attempts were made by our principal to soften the steely veneration of data by opening staff meetings with video clips of swiveling schooling catchphrases layered over children's faces laughing and crying, photographs with comical notes on the bottom, or the Rocky theme song playing to a slideshow of teachers and students. It was a play for our emotions. These visual media functioned like commercial ploys, intended to elevate our sense of purpose and unity, motivate us at the end of already emotionally and physically fatiguing days, and subliminally associate the pounding anthems and heartfelt images of people to the vacuous agenda before us.

For many of my colleagues, including myself, the propaganda was immaterial. Our classrooms didn't lack that sparkle and earnest feeling. I remember hearing one colleague saying, "Don't waste our time. Just let us leave five minutes early. I can watch videos like that on my own time." It was easy to sit and nod to generic comments and snapshots of what made education such an important, challenging, and wonderful endeavor, but it wasn't the best use of our time together when each person sitting there was already a fast-spinning orbit of questions, trials, insights, and competencies. We weren't the ones who needed inspiring and reminding about the very human, emotional, and ontological quality of our work. We weren't lacking or losing the motivation to teach. What was diminishing was our time, energy, and our direct involvement in a choking hierarchy of school power.

I vigilantly attended our building union meetings to chase after a trace of bona fide expression of opposition, not just that upper film of resentment released in wry wit during staff meetings. Here was a building of mostly tenured teachers, asserting that they felt so much more comfortable saying what was really on their minds after that four-year mark, so utterly resigned to the district cliché that "after a while, you realize there's a lot that just

doesn't make sense here. We just do it." My colleagues began to train my ears to be accustomed to these words and learn the derisive laugh that tartly followed. As a young teacher, I started to hear this maxim and the same snorting resignation from teachers of other buildings in the district, and learned that it was how teachers coped with the institutionalized process of teacher silencing.

One point of contention that was apparent during staff meetings was the issue of teacher workload. The day stretched longer this year before school and the possibility of lunchtime supervision loomed. After school, the expectations were already for school staff to be posted around the school—mine behind a row of carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, and other particulate matter-pumping yellow buses. Parents awaited our return to the classroom for always relevant and valuable conversations. Children came back to pick up forlorn belongings left behind. There were broken chairs, desks, and heating systems to appeal to the already overworked and underpaid custodians for assistance. It was only after our classrooms had cleared, any children off course had been redirected safely back on their way, and the room moderately put back together with its forgotten lunchboxes and sweaters that any instructional planning could start—that is, if we weren't attending a district curriculum meeting, a school staff meeting, district committee meetings, university courses, hospital visits, or soccer games and birthday parties.

In my first year, all of these responsibilities and more added up to not having much energy or cerebral breathing space to spare. Of course the indoctrination of being a teacher new to the district who had so much to aspire to in an organization that didn't disguise its desire to manage by monitoring closely caused me to keep a distance from charting myself too remotely from the long list of official edicts. Out of sheer exhaustion, I consigned myself

to the priorities of my supervisor and her supervisors—curriculum, learning from assigned mentor teachers, communication to (less so with) families, and classroom order. My goal was to prove that I could be the teacher that the district expected and hired me to be.

Chapter 5: Wobbling

In my second year, with curriculum expectations and assessment targets more comfortably fixed in my mind and a better sense of what was happening (or not happening), I was itching to stretch more than a few fingers out toward becoming the educator I expected of myself. Positive notes and feedback from my principal, students' families, classroom guests, and students nurtured my confidence. Serving on a think tank-like committee as well as the racial equity committee reassured me that the district's seemingly unquestionable curriculum and instruction experts did not have all the answers. It was time for me to test, as my kids knew to do, how far I could move beyond the thickly painted boundaries of the district's and contemporary educational culture's key architects.

Around the time that Thanksgiving is celebrated in school, when teachers and students start to recognize the collective face and personality that takes shape after spending two months together, after nights of fall conferencing, after first semester report cards, after a few whirling and rainy field trips, after a Halloween parade and party, my mind begins to race. I wrote in my notes,

11-19: Every year this time comes around, I have a decision to make. How will I approach that celebration of Thanksgiving? Traditionally, it's a feast for the first grade. Yes, it's a lot of fun to pack all our families into our classroom, hang flags that say "thank you" in many different languages, and share food together, but what happens when it's just about fun and food? What happens to all those ugly stereotypes and fixed assumptions and misconceptions about our shared history? What happens when your family's culture is the one trampled over and disfigured in the reckless process of lying through omission?

These questions gnawed at my conscience, at my sense of ethical responsibility as an educator. Omission isn't any less hurtful than a lie that vociferously mutilates the truth. Lies of omission quietly claim all that it conceals as inconsequential and therefore deserving of silence. It validates and strengthens dominant narratives of the status quo to replace any potentially more complete truths. Furthermore, it functions as an undermining and erasing element of alternative perspectives and accounts. It works against the diverse voices of society that our democracy relies upon.

As a Taiwanese American child learning from exclusively White American teachers (save one high school math teacher that left after two months), I felt the ghosts of my past weigh heavily on me. I knew the feeling of my identity and family learning bubbling underneath like molten lava as teachers and textbooks melted my experiences and multicultural identity with textbook or "traditional," "common knowledge" expounded as absolute and incontestable. I knew very well as a student the discomfort and hesitancy of speaking out against authorities, district-certified texts, and peers that I admired and to whom I deferred.

One incident my family still talks about is from a middle school Social Studies teacher who taught us what she dubbed "the proper pronunciation" for the longest river in China. Not being Chinese or Chinese American, I thought it possible that my teacher didn't think I had anything to offer. However, Taiwan and China's common cultural and historical past brought about a common language in the form of Mandarin Chinese. Upon hearing my teacher's pronunciation, at first I held back laughter. I thought it was a joke, but when she proudly instructed everyone to repeat the "proper pronunciation" of the Huang He week after week, correcting even students who spoke Mandarin Chinese at home, and later administered

an exam about China, the dissonance between what I learned about China and Taiwan from my family and what I was expected to say and repeat in class turned quickly bitter.

“Why does she keep forcing us to say it that way?” I’d ask my parents. “Does anyone say it that way? It’s not right!” My parents laughed, expressed empathy for my frustration, but said I should let my teacher “continue to be the expert.” I wasn’t unbothered until the entire unit of Asia ended, and I knew that my parents were not completely unperturbed. At a minimum, they said that they were confused about why she didn’t think to ask her Mandarin Chinese heritage students and felt so self-assured. Still, we were forgiving of a well-meaning teacher with a linguistic blunder about a place that always seemed so far away in my years of schooling. However, if my teacher had taught, tested, corrected, and asked us to repeat words that celebrated a source of great cultural pain, condemning my family to deficient labels such as savage, simple, or uncivilized, I can only begin to imagine that my family’s and my feelings would not have been as temperate.

Native American organizations such as Oyate are one of several resources that provide educators with resources to present Thanksgiving in an anti-racist and humanizing way. They recognize that the authorship of dominant cultural stories such as the celebration of Thanksgiving is neither critically evaluated nor harmless. The silencing of Native American children’s home culture, historical learning, and personal identity is a violence that cannot be justified by ignorance and tradition. Teachers who may not feel as confident as my Social Studies teacher can appreciate Oyate’s resources, working always to learn more than what their prior knowledge and curriculum teacher guides can offer.

Aware of my personal experiences and the theoretical implications, I couldn’t bring myself to reduce our understanding of Thanksgiving to simply expressing thankfulness to

one another. It wasn't enough to reject the grossly mythologized fictions about the holiday in an act of erasure. A painful holiday message cannot be neutralized by simply ignoring it.

When I found out that my students' peers made paper costumes to represent Pilgrims and the beloved traditional Thanksgiving menu the previous year, I realized how embarrassing it was for me to not have been courageous enough to have said and taught more in my first attempt.

How insufficiently I had prepared my students for understanding a holiday that would be nationally celebrated, associated with affectionate feelings of tradition and togetherness, and widely publicized in the media for as long as they lived in a historically Native American disenfranchising United States. It wouldn't be enough to just avoid mentioning Native Americans and Pilgrims. My students were curious about the reason for which we would not be in school for a few days. Other classrooms were interacting with Thanksgiving and families, friends, community, and mass media—each presenting their own treatment of the Thanksgiving holiday. My students were surrounded by careless prejudiced narratives. Saying nothing to what I believed to be largely fabricated and racist, leaving a gap of total historical omission—an omission that the school district didn't help make me feel comfortable addressing—is no less harmful than telling half of a poorly constructed story.

Today, I did it. With my student teaching trio sitting there unsuspecting, I taught the mini-lesson, or at least gave the words I always wished I could hear as a learning teacher or as a learner period. I hadn't entirely made up my mind until the breaking point, but when I got there, I knew I had done all the reading, the thinking, and the planning that I needed—even if I hadn't known for sure if I'd go through with it.

We were introducing morning literacy centers as usual, but my students' magazines about Thanksgiving and the Native Americans had been troubling me since I opened the

package at my mailbox. The teacher's guide was a disappointment, the activities unsubstantial, and the rest of my curriculum lacking in addressing the feast we were about to have. Would we eat to fill our bellies with empty minds? Would there at least be some part with heart and meaning there?

All the student magazine did was talk about the tribe of Native Americans, but I had much more to say. I wanted to say that this is something not everyone agrees with. These are stories that aren't always told the same way. Even though there's celebration for many, there's immeasurable pain and upset from many that may not be heard about. Caution! This isn't the only perspective, and there isn't only one answer. I said, "You have to decide for yourself." I wanted to say that very directly, just like that. That was the point—not what perspective I had, what the most commonly publicized perspective is, what our friend's or family's is, or any other adults. I wanted them to remember very clearly that they can and deserve to be independent thinkers who reach their own conclusions when presented with as diverse a body of information as possible. No current or historical story is ever as simple as for one person or one perspective to tell it. Because we experience things differently, hail from different philosophical perspectives and "traditions," and are unique individuals, we must learn to trust ourselves with humility and recognize the rights of others to believe, tell, and remember things differently. The permanently and self-righteously ennobled objectified truths of high-stakes testing culture of schooling today are a farce. Their ugly byproduct is the divisiveness they have created in sorting our schools, teachers, and students into incontestable hierarchies and propagating the polarization of people in our society. It is such foolish and pigheaded egotism that leads to our bitter hatred and gruesome violence toward ourselves and one another.

At the same time, I also want to disrupt the traditional adult-child conditioning that turns educators into authority and control-obsessed tyrants. There's a lot of adult authority/superiority debunking myths in my teaching style, because I do not regard myself as a superior being simply because of my more senior age. Such overbearing arrogance can only groom people to the models of learners that Willis (1977) explicated with 'the Lads,' either total subduing of the self for senseless obedience and dependence on the hegemonic power or insecure and potentially self-destructive total rejection of the institution. I believe in this interference, because we are accustomed to rewarding the training of young people to be unhappy and confused, but too apathetic, hopeless, or afraid to act or question. We are teaching them, like the frustrated teachers, to be overburdened with stress, exertion, and survival until there is nothing left to give to others or ourselves.

Still, I'm an adult, and I remember with vividness what it's like to be a kid, to be in their position. As I'm young, I have sisters who are students in public schools who offer me relevant and updated accounts of what schooling is like for them. Most importantly of all, I decide there isn't a break between being a kid and adult. I cannot find one, and the variability in times and ways that we "grow up" prove that the change is a mentally organized one. What happened to me as a kid influences who I am as an adult today. I am an adult who lives out life through layers of childhood encounters and learning. Childhood memories and feelings have not left me. My childhood past contributes to the composite of who I am. I am only older and have learned how to industriously respect and learn alongside you. Things aren't perfect along the way from childhood to adulthood, and I accept my incompleteness so that we may both foster ourselves from this self-awareness. I want my students to know this.

Secondly, I assume that adults and kids are equally entitled to what they believe. Especially since adults—what incomprehensible mistakes we have made—are not always right! (We lose ourselves in muddy logic so often, don't we? Is it because we have experienced so much more suffering? Is it because we are too tired to think clearly? Is it because we are too despondent to think clearly?) Especially because many times kids can learn and understand new things faster and with more fluency than adults! Their curve for literacy and multilingualism is at a superior rate than adults! This may not seem obvious, but my contrasting experiences between adults and youth continually prove this to be true!

Related to this is that I believe the wit of children is in some ways more suited to the very important qualities of imagination, un/re-learning, new ideas, and approaching the world with hope. What does the adult who is hopeless do no matter how much knowledge has been deposited into her or his brain? Take language as a quick concrete example—kids learn it better and faster, because they are less afraid. A friend of mine has taken years of German classes, but admits that he is too embarrassed to ever attempt a more genuine accent or speak it fluently. He is trapped by media portrayals of English dominant media, and does not dare to “sound stupid” the way dominant accents of English make other dialects and accents “sound stupid.” How much does fear have to do with how we learn, grow, change, and act? Watching a tiny young toddler teeter across the sidewalk, my friend winces nervously but laughs.

“How can babies walk like that?”

“First of all, they're not babies. My first graders would be really quick to tell you what a baby is—and that is not a baby.”

“Okay, so what is it then, a toddler? I just always think toddlers are bigger. You know, it just looks so small like it shouldn’t even be walking.”

“It’s the only way they know how to walk. They’re learning.”

“It looks so funny, but it scares me. Why do they have to stumble forward like that? At any moment, it looks like it could get really painful. Maybe they should only be carried. Or maybe they should only walk on grass.”

“Yeah, it does look like they’re going to fall, but the child doesn’t know that. It might happen, and...oh my! Look at that speed. Yes, at that jogging wobbling sort of speed, it looks like a fall is inevitable. Still, they need to fall first to know that, to learn to make modifications to the way they’re walking. If they already know how painful it is to fall and fear it, then they might never learn to walk. They might never want to. That’s how we learn a lot of times, don’t you think? We just set off and don’t know what’s out there to hurt and hinder us, but we do it, because we are wrapped in optimism and faith. It’s the stuff that comes later that really tests us, shows us how badly we want to learn it in order to keep going in spite of it all.”

I am doing some jogging and wobbling of my own as a teacher. It’s heavy. It’s uncomfortable and my heart pounds a little as I tell it. I wonder if it’s the first time the U of M students have heard it this way. I certainly didn’t get a lesson in critically examining the stories and mythologies of Thanksgiving as a college student or an elementary, middle, or high school student. Even when I discovered that the version I’d learned and feasted to my whole life wasn’t complete, I hadn’t learned to examine for myself what I’d learned from the authority of textbooks and teachers. Actually, I hadn’t learned that I could even do that—

think for myself in a legitimate, sensible way and reject what came so assertively in the form of institutionally endorsed knowledge.

When you learn to only memorize what others tell you, it becomes hard to make any connections between counterstories and the prescribed facts you've worked hard to successfully memorize. It's called learning and testing mastery. You'll find yourself asking: what do they have to do with each other? There's no urgency to unlearn what you worked hard to learn and prove to your teacher and peers that you understood. You passed, maybe aced, the test. A different answer would have been wrong and earned a deduction in points, in their esteem for your scholarship. The bribe of accepting what you're told to accept is that your thoughts and views become accepted, and by proxy, you are closer to experience mainstream acceptance. Competing narratives remain on an irrelevant fence, a border of disobliging knowledge—a vague voice of discrepancy from the outside, but underground and undisruptive enough to dominant canons of knowledge trying to uphold a seamless monopoly of belief systems. The price to uncovering and examining marginalized voices and subjugated narratives can be the uncomfortable dismantling of “for granted truths” and the alienation of not only others, but of a long-established self. Conservatism, when well-worn to almost second nature, the common sitting room of ideology, and made so rewarding regardless of the harm it exacts on freedom, diversity, and democracy, becomes difficult to shake.

Solidarity and conformity become blurred, and the short-term refuge of conformity to the majority replaces the long-term refuge of a free society that supports its suffering. Sadly, what's lost in the lonely scuffle to avoid discontent is that no one is immune to the suffering of a society that's bound up in the business of denying others. For in the denial of others, the

denial of the self generates inflammation on a deeper level—the level that empathizes, connects, loves, and pivots with human feeling. It is the part of ourselves that is most vulnerable, fragile, and yet most fearless and limitless, because it is the innermost stratum of our humanity. When we dismiss others, it is this heart of our being that we inflict self-injury upon, and the source of our ambiguous anesthetizing. As hazy as it may be to locate the source of our individual suffering, embodying oppression—as oppressor or oppressed, the fissure of our loving existentialism from the forefront of our consciousness relays droning discontentment that petrifies us more into thinking we are alone, shameful, and ineffective. This ailing remoteness secludes us even further away from others and closer still toward the materialistic and superficial relationships of market sociopathy that sell tchotchkes counterfeiting social belonging, security, relationships, and ability. As Freire (1970) writes, “If [the oppressed] are drawn into the [revolutionary] process as ambiguous beings, partly themselves and partly the oppressors housed within them...it is my contention that they will merely imagine they have reached power” (p. 127).

So I tell the story that some resources or people might say, not the one I grew up with, not the one that is traditionally celebrated in mass media, but the one that cannot continue to be splintered any longer by a biasing, stereotyping, and propagandizing heroification of Anglo-Saxon colonizers. I attempt to tell it within a spread of multiple stories, without the guise of indomitable expertise that led me as a young student to passively accept US history as it was taught. “There’s not just one side of it,” I say. I try my best to summarize some competing narratives to the dominant one. There’s the sharp pinch of wrongdoing and violence, the sting of vicious injustice, and the fetor of the underlying question—why are these the invisible stories and who has made it so? For all of us, it’s a sobering moment

trying to reconcile this part of our national past. Still, I emphasize, I can't tell this story alone. Just as one story has been elevated to "tradition" in conjunction with a national celebration, I cannot assign any single account to be the complete truth. I, as only an indirect storyteller and single individual, cannot furnish a complete picture of history for others.

Behind this, I'm asking my students to realize that they must investigate and draw conclusions for themselves. We open up for discussion and end on that note of discussion, not the falsehood of a detached and objective history lecture that one self-proclaimed expert alone could never give. The lesson is to question and think critically, starting now before inert and elitist knowledge becomes so digestible, the standard. I don't want them to fall into the grumbling of college students encountering professors teaching as critical pedagogues, making transparent that part of literacy is the critical literacy in which to read the world, experiences, and information. They have learned too well how to be passive recipients of the declarations of others. This building block toward liberation, critical literacy, is not suddenly an awkward strain in young adulthood, but a tedious road built by years of conditioning from conservative, assimilative schooling. As feminist educator Barbara Davis (1983) writes, "The institutional pressure to [impart knowledge] is reinforced by the students' well-socialized behaviour. If I will tell them 'what I want', they will deliver it. They are exasperated with my efforts to depart from the role of dispenser of wisdom" (p. 91). It is a slow grinding toward social obedience and conformity, the unquestioning adoption of dominant ideologies and the loss of independence. In Freire's words (1970), it is to "discover themselves to be 'hosts' of the oppressor...[living] in the duality in which *to be* is *to be like*, and *to be like* is *to be like the oppressor...*" (p. 48).

Pacing into dialogue, I ask the students about countervoices that they can construe from these counterstories. Words like “wrong,” “not nice,” “bad,” “sad,” “hurt,” and “unfair” scatter the room. They are shocked that there is so much disrespect, and they are using their first grade language to relate to it. Respect, responsibility, and safety are drilled into us on the first day of school as the three school rules. I find them easy and valuable to learn, and don’t mind too much that we are asked to memorize and recite them so perfunctorily, but it’s also because it provides a somewhat stable framework to think critically from right away. We can break down each value together and evaluate their worth. We assess that they are useful local values to have in our learning spaces. When we start discussing more global issues, the students recognize violations immediately and have a familiar and common context in which to form critiques and also to understand one another. There is a connection between the global and local.

Finally, I ask, “How do you think we should think about our class family Thanksgiving? Why are we inviting our families to eat with us? What are we doing this for?” I do not have a predetermined answer in my mind. It’s a little scary to pose such a big question, and it’s not something we’re trained as teachers to do often, especially without a predetermined answer. In some teacher education tomes, to not have a predetermined answer is a serious offense. But this time, I realize my question is so big and so important that I don’t have an answer, that no one could or should answer it for them. I am honestly asking them. This is my responsibility, to ask them to live not within a closed world of knowledge or existence, but to invite them into an open one that they too must create. I will not hog or hide power in our group, but advocate for them to problematize and explore it. I’m not teaching them to suppress their own thoughts and become glib guessers of others’

opinions, ever seeking the approval of others who see themselves as more right, more good, more knowing, and more powerful.

My students decide based on so many, many previous discussions of peace, family, appreciation, and togetherness (that I've made customary of my teaching, even when I was too timid to teach exactly how I wanted) that these are the things we celebrate. "We celebrate one another and just being together." Those are their words. "Let's just forget about the story. We don't believe in that, because they did not respect each other."

I'm shocked. The outcome is the same as the year before, but there is a major difference. This time, I didn't decide to skip ahead and resolve Thanksgiving for them. This time, I accepted my responsibility to say more than that some people, in Native American tribes or not, deem it devastating and tragic. I had tried my best to explain why, to read from primary sources with differing views, respecting their commonly untold cultural and individual truths. Even more than the year before, I anticipated phone calls, nervous about what type of responses I would receive from my students' families, wondering if it would decrease attendance. I received no such angry contacts, every family was represented, and only wonderful words of love and gratitude on the day of the feast came in my direction. At the end of the party, with even more gratitude than my students and families could know, I mused about whether it had anything to do with how I had sweated through my first unmistakable turn toward a fully honest critical pedagogy from a young teacher like me.

P.S. And then I hear this weekend: that Thanksgiving is a patriotic holiday. A friend's father wears a blue sweater with a US flag that says "America" stitched underneath it. He is dressing himself to proudly express his patriotism on a day that, to him, represents an establishing of nationhood. What would he call what I was doing? Is thinking critically

or developing multiple perspectives unpatriotic? How does it betray a country at all? If not for dissent, then what does a democracy guard? Why are we, in the new national rhetoric, guarding so fearfully against learning, diverse perspectives, and dissent?

Media, Money, and Rights

Technology, innovation, travel, communication, production, and the velocity by which things in today's globalizing society move is one of the reasons that we can't continue to educate the way we have in the past. We can't keep pretending to be these untouchable experts. We simply can't keep up, and we need to be honest about that. Our own educations have outdated us, and the professional developments, which are mostly centered around curriculum—if there's any budget left to sustain and staff them—are also sorely inadequate. If the discontent and frustration in our own lives are indicators that society demands a revolution, we must teach revolutionarily. If we educate children only for our present station in history, to fit into it as effortlessly and inaudibly as possible, we make them the unwilling heirs of our current social deterioration. Yet as the thrust of the powerful in society continues to strip away at regulatory governance through neoliberalism and neoconservatism turns its back on everyone else, maturing young people won't be left with any time to wise up and stand up to their momentous oppressors. Our children and future responsible citizens won't be ready to be the flexible, creative, and undaunted democratic adults of the future. Humanity will always be just a step behind of the objects that are produced, the problems that arise, and the latest upgrades to corruptive methods of control. There are those who have started an inequitable race that formal education, if it continues to only serve as lapdog to, will never permit humanity and equity to catch up.

It is only our fear that brings adults to distance themselves from children, isn't it? Just as oppressors fear those they oppress and distance themselves from the oppressed. In a community of democratic learning, there is no place for fear unless the lesson is that ignorance is something to fear. Yet ignorance is not something to fear. Even as first graders, some of my students come in the fall with reservations about revealing themselves, their questions, or mistakes. There is also fear about interacting with others when "they just don't understand." These fears can lead to long episodes of tears, withdrawal, and silence. They learn to not raise their hand if they don't have "the Right Answer" or at the last second, right after being called on, retreat to saying "I forgot." I'll tell them, "Adults make mistakes; kids make mistakes; we ALL make mistakes." But if their kindergarten teacher lost something, it was because there were naughty leprechauns that came in at night, making messes and moving things around. It couldn't be because the adult, the cherished teacher, had made a mistake and needed to learn to be better organized? When someone has asked a question where any answer could only be the speaker's best guess or opinion, or when it is beyond the teacher's knowledge, an answer is given anyway because "I don't know" is perilous to the teacher's ego or authority. Or when the teacher asks, "What do you think?" the implication is already there that there IS a right or wrong way to think.

Still, we cannot fault teachers entirely, as popular media and politicians so often suggest. When nothing else in society is set up to reward inquisitiveness, humility, and patience, teachers try their best to prepare students to be rewarded by society—hard and fast answers, confidence even if it's feigned, and fib if you must. As a mandatory book club meeting at my school explained, teachers are meant to produce students who can go to college so that they can get hired. Get hired. That's it? That's the end of it? This never

fully attainable dream for everyone is the inequitable capitalist educational path that we are told we work for. It is the lie of the market system that claims to nullify racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, temporary ablebodiedness bias, and so many other forms of discrimination by simply not addressing it. It is the diseased mentality that ignores the health of everything else: the mind, body, spirit, and collective consciousness. It is the crippling axiom to a fading democracy, "Just get hired." And when you are so hired, so tired, and so mired in self-loathing and social hatred, but you don't know why, that is when you will be most productive as a consumer or a fellow exploiter of humanity. It is the path of oppressed to oppressor. The single act of voting will not save us.

So when it is time to "utilize modern technology," as my administrators entreat me to do, my mentor teacher and I start using the Internet for tracking weather data with our students. I look for weather-related news also to answer students' questions when they start hearing about devastating global disasters from their televisions at home. There is a delay, however, each time when I refresh the webpage, because a new advertisement has to load. It is a long wait, and I can start to sense my students' reactions to the dazzling array of colors, curious characters, and pilot-tested comedy. It only takes seconds, but the advertisement would last for 55 more. And so, not wanting to just minimize the screen and hide that "unknowable adult rationale," I start talking about commercials. It plays on, a quirky advertisement about traveling for lower prices, but I've muted it so that we can have a discussion.

"What are we here to do at school?" I start.

"To learn."

“Okay,” I accept, “What do you think the commercial wants us to do? Does it also want us to learn?” This is followed by a long pause. They haven’t been asked this before, and I’m just lucky that all eyes are off the screen and on me.

“I know,” Megan ventures, “They want to sell us stuff.”

“Do they want us to learn?”

“They want us to learn about what they’re selling and make us want it.”

“So what do you think? This will happen every time the screen refreshes, and you might even notice it on some of the websites you see when you’re with our media specialist or here with me. They’re on TV all the time. Should we spend some our time focused on learning about things that companies want to sell to us? Do you think they are things we need?” Just like that, trying to study meteorology turns into Social Studies. I introduce the term “media,” create a list of examples of it, and the kids exclaim, “Hey! Like media center? Is that media?” We talk about media that can be used to tell the truth, help us find answers like in our Animal Reports, but...is there media that lies?

“Yes,” asserts Ken. “They lie all the time. I always hear them say that you can buy more and pay less. That’s not even true. It just doesn’t even make sense. It’s just a trick so that you will go to their store. Or they tell you that they have really good prices, the best prices, and then you go into their store, and it’s not even true. You know, like with furniture stores a lot of times?” Others start to add.

“Yeah, and everyone always says that they’re the best. How can everyone be the best? And they’re not even the best. One time, my grandma went to the store, because she saw this commercial about the best vacuum. She got two different ones and she tried both of them, and they were horrible. The one in the commercial didn’t even do what it said it could.

She said it was so horrible that she had to take it back, and the other one was better. So they just say they're the best. They lie to us so that they can make more money." This segues into a discussion about the role of money in society, the role of truth, and learning. At school, I am not trying to sell them anything. It is a place that they can go to be safe and learn from people who believe in telling the truth, including if they don't know what's the best. Out there, some adults have grown up to just want money. Our next subject has presented itself.

"So why are there grown ups that only care about money? Are there kids that are born just only caring about money? Why do they start to only care about money?" Here, our discussions about injustice proliferate. I've made it no secret that our society excludes people who don't have money. They relate this to the commercial discussion anyway.

"Yeah," they say, "if it was really the best and everyone actually needed to have it, then they wouldn't even need to do commercials. They would just be giving it away!" So I ask them about health care, education, access to non-commercial/truthful information, and so on. We talk about rights. Who deserves all these things? Do we all? What if we are a child? What if we are really old? What if we're really sick and need a lot of health care? What if we're unemployed? What if we have no money and our families don't have money? What if we have made mistakes, committed a crime? What if we repeatedly commit crimes? What if we are in prison? What if we're from a different country? What if we are not a citizen? My questions go on and the kids tire. It is a long series of questions, and at times I catch a few hesitant glances, but the overwhelming answer is yes. I'm shocked that the answers have come so easily, and so I summarize, "Okay. So what I'm hearing is that you believe everyone deserves these things? These are rights for all people? No matter what?"

“No matter what, they’re all people,” Megan replies with certainty. “We’re all just people.” I want to cry. I want to rewind and record all of this and play this as a video to others. I want to say, look what children who are five, six, and seven believe. My friend chuckles and says later that night, “You know, that’s a show already. Bill Cosby did a show interviewing kids and just hearing them talk. Kids say the darndest things or something. I think someone else did it too.”

But it’s not that. It’s not that the kids are saying anything darned at all. They are speaking so clearly from their young human hearts, fresh and unspoiled by the pulverizing effects of mainstream society. “It’s not the same,” I say. “This wouldn’t be for jokes. On a show like that, the kids are getting laughed at. Listening to what my kids say, I think there wouldn’t be laughing at all. I would hope that there would be meditations about peace, adults taking them seriously and making their first mental steps toward social disarmament. Peace.”

Social justice, peace, and what it means for something to be unjust is the germinating seed of my critical pedagogy. These words are the touchstones of our conversations just as “respect, responsibility, and safety” are at the start of the year. I think to myself sometimes that they are the “high-frequency words” of my class families; not “the,” “is,” “at,” “not,” or “my,” but “peace,” “justice,” and what the kids use probably most often: “that’s unjust.” This is important to me, because social justice was never a priority or even a term explicitly taught to me until college. It was the reason that I thought things in life were “fortunate” or “unfortunate” growing up. It was the “you-can-always-pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps” myth mixed with servings of good or bad luck. My parents had also led me to believe in karmic goodness with a Mandarin Chinese saying that I remembered as: if one is good, good

things will happen. If one acts poorly, the same will come back to them. I don't think peace had any real meaning except that some didn't have it and some did. I was "lucky," again, to be in a place that had it. Perhaps "peace" was more of an individual state than to hope for a broader application. At the time, I thought it was just a silly pageantry cliché.

All of this confined lack of thinking in my childhood caused me to set my books down on my bed, reading Kozol (1970) and Kohl (1988) in college, sobbing into my pillow from the grief and guilt I felt from being wrong all along. My then sixty-six-year-old English professor who assigned those texts had pointed out my usage of the word "lucky" in my journaling to me, challenging me, "Ellen, do you really believe it's luck? Are our social circumstances just random luck?" It was painful to read those books, and I immediately ran to a friend's door, a young African American woman who lived on the same floor and had announced to everyone before that she was "ghetto-fabulous." She had talked briefly about her background, but no one had asked her more. She had been a great friend to me that year, always knocking on my door, asking me about my parents and asking me about being Taiwanese American. But this time, I hugged her tightly as soon as she opened the door. "Tell me everything. I'm so sick with myself for being ignorant and naïve. I thought I understood so many things, but I need to hear it from you. I think we grew up so differently, and I'm reading about places that hurt me to picture. Will you talk to me?" It took me a long time to overcome the guilt I felt. It was an overwhelming time, and I was furious with myself, sometimes with my upbringing, and sometimes wishing I had grown up like my friend instead. It was so unfair, so wrong, and even worse that I never knew it—that so many of my peers never knew it. It was also at this time that I first read Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). I set a goal then, shaking in that life-changing college course about how

to read the world, aptly listed as an English class. I would apply to the College of Education and teach differently.

Wants and Needs

In my transitions from one subject to another, one part of the curriculum to another, I'm grateful that I've learned the curriculum well, because I've learned to never overschedule our time together. I know that I can be accountable to the curriculum that the families, district, and other grade level teachers expect of me, but also responsible to my students first. Every lesson I teach from first grade curriculum is an opportunity to explore, challenge, dialogue, and reflect on social justice. It is almost as if I have secretly themed each year, before the school year starts. It is not enough for us just to "have fun." It is the most fatigued two words that I hear at the beginning of first grade. Sure, we'll "have fun," we'll have lots of it, but that's not really difficult. We will "have fun," because we learn to love and trust one another. We will work together to make ourselves and one another more fully human through democratic learning and social justice.

There is a unit about the wants and needs of families. I start the poster for two lists. One labeled "Wants" and the other "Needs." The children start naming things from our science biology unit. They know what living organisms require to sustain life, and they list these things first. We toss the idea of love and clothing around for a while. Love is definitely not one of the items in my teacher binder, but I don't mention this at all. Instead, I ask them more about it. The children insist that it is not as if we would die if nobody loves us, but that it deserves to be on the "Need" column, because we do need to be cared for. I think about this in terms of family and then on a greater scale. Yes, absolutely. We do need to be cared for and loved on some level, because human beings are an interdependent lot.

We have always been, and globalization has worked to advance it as well as obscure it. As for clothing, we decide that it's a need, but we qualify it with the acknowledgement of communities that don't wear clothes. Here, a past social studies unit based on differences comes in handy. Of course, the differences mentioned in my teacher binder were about favorite colors and favorite sports, not about the endless range of human diversity of thought and existence in our world. I have modified much. Sure, we laugh a little too—it's okay, but then the second column, the "Wants" column gets serious.

After piling on a listing including toys, TV, presents, a bike, and unhealthy junk food like candy and pop, a few knees start to sway. Claudia bursts out in a huff, "I don't even LIKE this list. Why do we even HAVE to do this list? I don't even WANT some of that stuff!" I'm shocked. I haven't heard this before. The list has always been so easy to make, and the lesson clear. I am completely intrigued.

"What do you mean, Claudia?"

"Well, it's not like I really WANT it. It's just the name of the list isn't even what it is! It isn't our WANTS!" A bunch of voices chime in. They agree.

"Interesting. So you're telling me that you don't think it's labeled correctly. If they're not Wants, what should we call them?" I began to cross out Wants, and cheers arose behind me. "What should we revise it as?" I think privately, I'm glad I've taught revision in writing. Here we are, "re-envisioning" our Social Studies learning.

"Well, it's what other people think we want," Claudia's unsure about the new name. After more murmurs of agreement, we have our new column title.

"What the media WANTS us to want. Yea, exactly. That's what I mean." More agreement.

Chapter 6: We are All Going into the Universe

On a bus one morning, on our way to a field trip at the local university art museum, I heard sudden peals of excitement. We hadn't arrived at our destination yet, and I peered quickly through the bus windows to check for any unusual occurrences. Instinctively, my mind prepared itself for warnings, disclaimers, complicated explanations, or even just a simple "look away." As I listened for clues from the children's words, I realized there was nothing unusual. The children were thrilled to gawk at streets jammed with walking college students on their way to class, to a dormitory hall, to a crowded cafeteria, to a café to read, to a library to research, to a hot dog stand for a bite, to a bank for cash, or into a boutique to procrastinate. This, the stock footage of a world so many of us are familiar with as adults—groups of people walking in different directions and for different purposes—was the cause of the happy ruckus and wide-eyed interest among my students.

"Wow, look—there's so many people! I think they're college students!"

"Where are they all going?"

"All these people...going into the universe." The answer from an especially small, but athletic and relaxed Leo struck me.

Conceptualizing the universe isn't part of our first grade curriculum, because it's generally regarded as "developmentally inappropriate" by teacher guidebooks and educational psychology models of human developmental readiness. The universe, I'm told, is too vast just as subatomic particles are too minuscule in the first grade. Furthermore, things on such scales net abstraction, and young children are too egotistic and concrete. Yet an abstract, elegantly sociological and philosophical idea had been lobbed into the air on a bumpy spring school bus ride. The idea that we are all ultimately headed into a common

physical address, a secular spiritualism of humanity's interconnectedness, that seeing groups of people on the move is a galvanizing sign of such: this was a view with which I was unaccustomed and accosted by its gestalt. This idea is one missing from mainstream media, politics, and even the school setting itself. It certainly had not been an idea of mine.

Out there, I learned to be alone. It was part of what I came to believe it meant to “grow up.” Independence and individualism were not separate by many degrees. In my years of schooling, even having made many close friends, I had always felt alone and knew others did too. Something else tore at all of us and our friendships. Sitting in my desk, pushing and squeezing through hallways, buying my own breakfast or making my own lunch, responsible for raising my own hand to speak up, earning my own marks, trying to break into a percentile or a rank for the list of whoever carried uppermost judgment and access—knowing someone always had to be forbidden entry and doing everything I could do make it not me, purchasing my standardized test, mailing scores to universities with limited enrollment—highly selective enrollment, they boasted or apologized, or having people to call friends who could offer you a level of protection, protection from being the loser, the idiot, the exile, the socially nonexistent. When we learned about the Untouchable class of India, it effortlessly became incorporated into student language. Socially and academically, we learned to block, hide, and cram ourselves through school. It seemed to fester ubiquitously, a chilling superficiality underpinned by the implacable fear of not belonging and made insignificant, someone of no esteemed value. Some relied on adults and teachers for this, constructing an identity based on their studies, of being ahead of everyone else. Others carved themselves social niches that made belonging and worth unmistakably clear, leaving academic achievement a wasteland drummed up by trifling adults.

We learned the import of social props, of having people to relate to and support you or something else to claim you, but it was stillborn out of fear and insecurity. We molded ourselves in ways so that it would be easier and more efficient to make friends or earn ranks of respect, but never did we learn to embrace the contours of our own or others' multifaceted identities. We did not actively explore our character or critically review ideas clad as the Standard—the capitalized Norm, because we were not taught about whom or what made us feel afraid to welcome pluralism within ourselves and others, to challenge social constructs with equanimity and purpose. Besides, we had not learned how to collectively construct a pluralistic existence. Integration of differences without dominating assimilation, although formally exulted in schooling, remains enigmatic in actuality. In failing to dedicate authentic respect to others and ourselves, we forfeit our humanity, compassion, and empathy. With media, public spaces, and schools all doing such cocksure work in homogenizing reality, declaring particular ways and looks “this” and other ways and looks a contemptuous “that,” we have come to distrust ourselves, absorbing our parts as empty bills on which a master hand of society writes. We learn, quickly without the chime of our own say-so, to be lonely in a busy world.

It has been my experience in schools that the world we walk into (including the school) is a secretive place with private individuals or sets of individuals living in communities alongside one another, but rarely knowing each other or speaking the truth. It is in this isolation and alienation that fear, insecurity, distrust, and disparagement ripen, leading to acts of exploitation, extreme competition, terrorism, violence, and war. In Leo's view, “all these people...going into the universe,” the world is less partitioned and may even hold the possibility of togetherness. Leo's common destination, shared space view can interpret any

exchange of blows, any insertion of mutual harm as engagement in civil war, as devastation for the whole and all of its constituents. In Leo's view, it is possible to pronounce none as enemies, but more urgent calls for healing and connection instead. It makes me wonder, would we be so abusive to one another if we commented as he did gazing upon a busy public street? If we could perceive the universality of humanity binding multitudinous directions and peoples together, what gut wrenching conflicts and injuries within society could be made more peaceable?

Leo's words strike me also, because in that moment, I realize also that I don't have an equivalent curriculum at school for what he is describing. Competition and the division of children, not organization and unification through commonality, is largely the language of schools and society today. The multicultural curriculum that was taught through Social Studies in the district years ago was found outdated and deficient, and so it was thrown out as I came to inherit the teaching materials of the retired teachers before me.

"Remember that, though," the teachers would muse, "it was kind of fun."

"Yeah, but nobody does that anymore. We keep getting more and more now. How many times have we gotten new curriculum? Who has time for that?" Nothing else had taken its place, and so even as outdated and deficient that it was, it occupied a position of its own. That dusty, dilapidated window that attempted to respond to culture, communities, and human identity shut indefinitely for students. Although I also will never find the time or justification to use racist and stereotyping teaching materials, I also know that democracy germinates from a love for human community, respect for diversity, and a commitment to genuine, lifelong curiosity. Of course, while so many places can be fertile grounds for

developing such orientations, it is my firm belief that public schools are particularly ideal and necessary prime terra firma for an enduring and vibrant democracy.

The First Day and Democracy as Routine

In my memories of school, the first day of school is always an exciting one. As a student, it means weeks or even a summer of anticipation in the form of new school supplies, listening for others' impressions of new teachers or rounds of classes, planning the first day's outfit, shoes, lunch, and maybe even which friends to keep or make at lunchtime, at a recess, during the group work that teachers so enjoyed assigning. Would there be embarrassing patronizing "icebreakers" or would some of us be put on the spot only to be so publicly humiliated that they already begin to dread crossing the threshold of that classroom the next day? Would the teacher utilize our classroom space as a stage to boast her superior knowledge and experience, authority and control? It tended to be a hard day to remember every detail from, a day where just completion was a sign of the day's victory. What I never considered or understood until I started my first day of school as a teacher was what the teacher's first day is like. Yet it was also not entirely by fault of my own that the teacher's experience did not cross my consciousness. Accepting and learning from a young age that the semblance of teachers was beyond our comprehension, they remained conceptually far out of our grasp.

I have witnessed this phenomenon often from both the student and teacher's world. It perplexes me that there is such separation when there is such high frequency of sustained, long-term contact and connection, even dependence between the two. And then I remember that this separation also exists in various settings among adults: the corporate workplace with employers and employees, the school hierarchy itself with administrators and teachers, the

governmental divisions of governing and governed, the globalizing marketplace with the chains of proprietors and consumers, and its ideological branches with the sellers and the sold—the narrators and the told. Everywhere, it seems that children have only been tumbled from one soft cycle of distancing authority to harder and harder cycles into adulthood, where domination multiplies in quantity, dissociation, and yet severity of power and pressure from an even further removed foci. Conformity and obedience from peer groups also expand, making voices and acts of dissent or attempts to forge overpasses against detached authorities less likely and more risky. As Freire (1970) writes,

When they discover within themselves the yearning to be free, they perceive that this yearning can be transformed into reality only when the same yearning is aroused in their comrades. But while dominated by the fear of freedom they refuse to appeal to others, or to listen to the appeals of others, or even to the appeals of their own conscience. They prefer gregariousness to authentic comradeship; they prefer the security of conformity with their state of unfreedom to the creative pursuit of communion produced by freedom and even the very pursuit of freedom. (p. 47, 48)

Insurgence is made outlandish and imprudent when the vast majority dons appearances of facile integration and adaptation, despite the fact that few seem to actually be in direct benefit of the system. This elite group's well-preserved fable that their advantages are equally available to all and are rewarded only through the merits of the "American Dream" or the demonstration of fastidious school performance disseminates an affectation of fairness, upward social mobility, and capitalistic stratocracy posed as patriotism and freedom. There can be no democratic uprising if the political and social geography is posited as so laudably and illegibly written in stone. When structures of domination present themselves to

be unreadable to “the people,” a vacancy is created for those who have developed a critical literacy to facilitate others to also “read the world.” The bedrock of oppressor and oppressed in adult relationships is being set in schools by teachers reflecting their own numerous and consistently but contradictorily structured adult oppression. Yet even if we are to recognize the unseen—especially as the most oppressed of society—social and political unrest can be difficult to organize when we are so scarcely rested in our own physical and mental states. Instead, we lay prone, barely surviving, effectively arrested in our democratic rights and responsibilities.

Wanting to dispose of this early conditioning of people into oppressive structures, I carry just as much anticipation, nervousness, hope, and excitement as students on the first day of school, hoping to facilitate a lasting impression of democratic community that fetches conflict when they are confronted with such hierarchical power in the future or in other settings. So first, we start with our names. It is essential that we begin as early as possible to get to know the members of our democratic learning community, as we lay the foundations of listening and talking. In time, we will develop a “class family constitution,” stating in first grade terms our code in which trust and relationships are nurtured. It coincides with the school’s celebration of Constitution Day, after our principal’s Opening Day assembly in which we will have already learned the school’s edicts of responsibility, respect, and safety. We call our constitution a promise that we word and post on the wall for the entire school year with our multicolored signatures in crayon. This year, it reads, “We promise to take care of each other on the outside and on the inside.” I also sign it, Ellen, my first name that I state casually without the reservations that my student teachers and their university program instructors, my university program, have. For me, it is not out of “false generosity” or “false

charity” (p. 45) that Freire (1970) mentions of the loveless oppressors. I sign, because I am aware of my participation in the very oppressive systems that I must promise to not exact on my students, my partners in praxis and learning to construct a democratically community together. I sign “Ellen,” because I do not share the same belief of coercive authority made nascent by distancing tactics of mythology, secrecy, and ceremonial titles. Just as I cannot be intimidated by the prominent titles of fellow citizens working in politics, law, commerce, or education, I do all I can to present myself as humanly as possible. I know that this is decisive for my students in constructing with me a humanizing culture. Interestingly to me, perhaps because I have not elevated the knowledge of my first name to any special status, my students learn it, use it with a twinkle in their eye at times to tell me jokes, or recognize it as what I write on my models of student work on the “Name” line or the name that others call me in my personal anecdotes. Otherwise, they keep to the traditional, “Ms. Lin,” by which the rest of the school knows and refers to me. It seems that because I do not mind, I do not show any signs of trying to withhold it, my students very quickly move on from it.

What I do not want them to move too quickly from is the construct of the classroom teacher, an at times towering figure of control and adulthood for young children, embodying all of knowledge and good judgment. The first day is a day of self-disclosure for me. I so eagerly want to know them, but in order for them to work democratically along with me, not beneath me, I need to also allow them to get to know me. At our first morning meeting, I ask them how they like our learning space, and if they are feeling nervous, but excited—just like me. I tell them that I have been thinking about them for a long time, and I have been wondering what their faces look like, what things they like, what things they are interested in learning about, what things they can teach me about. I want them to know right away that

there is not only one teacher in the room, but twenty-four of us all together! I tell them that I have been thinking about our year together, trying to clean and prepare the room for us to use. After these introductions, I also tell them that this is the last time I will speak so much on my own without hearing from them and the time for me to work alone on the learning space—poster displays, organization, and tidying—has passed. From that moment on, all speaking, working, and living spaces would be *ours*. We would share the responsibilities and rights for learning together and maintaining the space together.

As a young person in a very public role with others watching closely, judging, and formally evaluating, this arrangement takes a lot of letting go. When I student taught in the fifth grade, I thought that only ten and eleven year olds were ready for the degree of independence that I expected of students in their thinking and actions. Even then, I was told that it could be a risky move. None of my field instructors, education professors, or observation classroom teachers had openly shown their support to such pedagogy for elementary-aged students. My fifth grade mentor classroom teacher, however, was very open to my ideas, and I became fascinated by the way fifth graders could conduct themselves. I thought then that I would only be able to achieve democratic learning with older children. So when I learned from my principal that my assignment was in the first grade, I was concerned about how they would fare when confronted with great expectations of democratic independence and critical learning. As I quickly learned, my fears and the warnings of other more experienced colleagues, to my great joy, were unfounded.

After penning a constitution, we work together to make posters based on discussions of how to work together in small groups (as well as how to resolve conflicts as they may arise). We talk about how to agree and disagree with one another respectfully, and which

methods are most effective (i.e. shouting out all at once, showing quiet signals, or raising hands to take turns “having the floor” and then calling on other hands as well). We talk about taking care of the bathroom, composting duties at lunchtime as well as the corresponding environmental responsibility, lining up, signals for attention, who can make these signals, how the microphone is a resource for us to hear other’s very important words clearly, their personal spaces for mail, their private desks (which is, in the district, unusual for first grade), their coat and backpack hooks. We locate good spots for materials such as tape, paper, extra pencils, extra coloring tools, staplers, and so on. I also give my input about how things have worked in the past—I am a participant still of this democratic community, after all, and I might also name areas of potential trouble, but I keep these to a minimum and ultimately recognize the group’s decisions.

During this time, I also remark to them how much I notice they already know about how school works and how things can work well. Unlike other classrooms, I do not have pre-constructed posters and lists for students to take home and sign with their families. We create these classroom procedures together, and each year, there is variance. The kids have had various experiences in preschools, private schools, open schools, different kindergarten classes, extracurricular activities, sports or religious organizations, and home environments. They arrive each year with memories of how schooling can work, how they have seen it function well, and how they think it could go better. It is a time of experiment for us, and I evoke Dewey (1897) in my mind as we move forward during this time. I think of how he reminds that we cannot prepare children for an unknown future society, but that “prepar[ing] [the child] for the future life means to give [the child] command of [him/herself]...” understanding that “the individual to be educated is a social individual, and that society is an

organic union of individuals” (p. 6). I cannot be insecure and greedy for control at this time. I must be patient and believe in my students, empower them to trust in our collective praxis to make out ways of being that will be agreeable for us.

Many posters are made during this time, and the kids are eager to pick up new responsibilities. We form groups to make bathroom signs, helpful reminders, and posters, with my teacher role providing access to markers, poster paper, crayons, other supplies, and the laminating machine to protect our handiwork. A mom the next morning walks in with an old sidewalk chalk pail, explaining that her daughter has requested that she bring in this dust collector in the garage.

“Do you know what it’s for? She just told me that the class really needed it.” I nod, amused. My old compost bucket has disappeared over the summer, but instead of replacing it (as I have several times before), they explain that something smaller with a handle will improve ease of use, cleaning, transporting it to the school compost buckets in the cafeteria and back. I thought it would be up to me to supply such a container, but thanks to Claudia, it has already arrived. The rest of the class family sees it in the morning and, after a quick confirmation from me that it is okay that they postpone the morning work that is set out for them for a free time later (snack time), a small group gets to work creating a Compost Bucket sign with which to label Claudia’s old chalk container. As it is only the second day of first grade, they ask me to check their spelling, but I have nothing else to do with it. When I see it next, it has been taped on. Another person rushes by to reinforce it with more tape, and I am impressed with the neatly printed block letters surrounded by many kids’ illustrations of vegetables and fruits: what the principal had explained at the Opening Day assembly are compost choices. I warn them that the sign might get wet and maybe even tear from the

water damage. Would they like me to laminate it? I check the sign more closely and realize it's already barely fitting one side of the bucket. The only way I can laminate it and keep their sign is if I cut it. I leave the decision up to them.

“It’s fine,” they say. “I like it how it is. We’ll just try to wash it on the other side so the water doesn’t touch it.”

Of course, eventually, the sign falls off, because learning how to manage the sink, soap, and water is a first grade lesson in itself. By then, however, the responsibility of managing the compost bucket is completely theirs, and it is a well-functioning routine in which I have no further role. No one else manages the compost bucket but them, and so the sign and pictures are now just memories of our past.

Many things move automatically this way by October. They ask to take on more and more responsibilities, and my response generally goes, “Okay, you’d like try this new responsibility? What’s your plan?” After a while, I don’t even have to ask this question. Students know to come to me with plans already in mind and show me how, as they usually say, “easy peasy lemon squeezy” it’ll be.

Bringing in classroom materials and resources is also something that doesn’t go away. The kids, excited to share with others what they have at home or what they have found at the library, bring in games and books that they enjoy, and marking pages with sticky notes for me to read. Sometimes, they are directly related to the curricular lessons I have taught, and other times, they are books that are meaningful to their culture or identity—books about adoption, Japan, or German children’s stories, for example. They also bring in books with information that they think is relevant to the class family, such as a section in a book about head lice.

“Okay, so can you read this out loud to everyone later? Can I share this with the class family?”

“Of course, when do you think is a good time for that?” I watch them glance instinctively at our daily schedule.

“Snack!”

Snack time is always an interesting time for visitors to walk in. We can be engaged in an unexpected variety of things, and sometimes classroom tutors stay and chuckle a bit at the occasionally stage-like presence our classroom takes on. After checking in with me in the morning so I can help manage time allotments for each speaker or assist with the form of presentation, students can be seen often with special items from home, photos, books, trip souvenirs, or just with a piece of paper to record survey answers. It is a time that they use the microphone to speak to their peers about an interesting new finding, the events of their time away from school, jokes, a new baby sister, a new broken bone and request for helpers, a dead pet, or ask a question to the class family, because they are curious about how we come to school. Jake follows up another day by sharing his results in the form of a tally chart and also displayed on a bar graph, two new skills we recently learned in Math, his favorite subject. Sometimes, the kids want to sing along and practice their months in Spanish from a CD I played for them in their first week of school. Other times, they have brought in CDs from home with assurances that they are appropriate (I double check if I'm unfamiliar to make sure) and ask if they can dance and sing along. One time, Max, a shy African American boy who has talked with me about needing a “cool down” spot sometimes, asks if he can dance ballet across our meeting carpet during snack. I announce to the group our snack time show, and after he tells me to “hit it” on the Spanish calendar song, he breaks out

into graceful leaps and spins across the floor. My three student teachers watch with surprise in their eyes. The rest of the kids know their responsibility, to be a respectful audience, and although they may be as surprised as me, they scream adulation when the song ends. Standing in the back, I can't help but feel awed by these wondrously independent and sophisticated children. Snack time is their time. We are responsible for passing snack out, cleaning up, and having our writing tools out in preparation for the next part of our academic schedule. Other than that, everything else is theirs in that span of time. The more I feel myself fade into background support, the more pride I feel in their developing command of self in a social context, just as Dewey (1897) interpreted of schooling. As the children learn to sprout wings, I, too, feel set free.

They help each other with work, ask one another to be more quiet so that they may concentrate on their work, make new birthday signs for the calendar when a month has more birthdays than the calendar materials are prepared to indicate, remind me to record the class family tally of lost teeth, distribute work and materials to one another, let me know who's absent or tardy or coming without me looking up from the attendance chart on my computer screen, gather bandages and tissues for minor cuts or runny noses, hurry to comfort one another when someone's in the corner wiping at tears or when to whisk someone away when that child needs "personal space," take on "librarian," "post officer," and "meteorologist" jobs. I observe them also hold the hand sanitizer bottle to give a squirt to each hand when the librarian is late to arrive to the computer lab, because they have universalized this empowerment, efficiently taking over where they can. Because it is different each year, I get to be surprised by the responsibilities that they choose to take on and how they perform it.

When I am gone one afternoon for a district meeting, David brings me a small piece of paper with a signature on it.

“What’s this?”

“Well,” David says in a low voice, “I felt really safe and like I could learn with the sub yesterday, and so I asked her to write her name down. I thought you might need it next time you have a meeting. I just put a check by it so you can remember I checked it. She’s good, and I like her.” I am very aware of David’s language. Every time that I am away, I ask the students when I return about the guest teacher. I want to hear from both sides. My two questions always go, “Do you feel safe?” and “Do you feel like the guest teacher really helped you learn?”

Hearing from the kids is important to me, especially because I notice that my notes are somewhat cryptic. They mention, some with disdain, that the kids are “overly eager to help and have lots of ideas.” Others appreciate the help, but I wonder overall about the hint of surprise in the notes I receive.

This year, our daily weather data collection routine on the computer is made more efficient, because as I am taking afternoon attendance, there are two students who have already rushed to the website, having seen me click on the projection screen the “favorited” weather tab so many times, scroll down so that the current weather is displayed and then a relevant weather report as necessary. What tickles me is that the boy taking charge of this new responsibility hasn’t entirely asked me with a plan beforehand. Since some responsibilities are more complicated and require some training, the kids have learned to train one another as they develop their own skills, and managing all the right buttons and clicks isn’t something I’ve explained step-by-step. I had always done it out of efficiency.

Yet there he sat, a Japanese boy who had started the year very shy and quiet, and his English language skills still somewhat limited. Sitting before the “weather computer,” he smiles at me from across the room and says simply, “I can do it! Okay?” There is no doubt in his mind that I would say no.

“Thanks, Yota. You know how to do it?”

“Uh-huh!” By Friday, there are kids asking him to train them in this new responsibility. They’ve also started to add a new Math piece to the weather forecast, calling on each other to give differences or sums of the temperature highs and lows.

When disaster strikes in the winter, the classroom that we call our “Friend-Ship” floods from a malfunctioning heating system over the long break, melting posters off the walls and windows, leaving each foam ceiling tile in need of replacement, the floor pools of steamy brown broth, the school is shocked, less so by the disaster, but by the composure of the children as we march from room to room, even studying Math in the cafeteria and on the school stage, borrowing whatever space and materials we can in order to continue our day. Even I, who am now concerned about mold issues and how long we can last displacing sympathetic teachers from their rooms, am utterly astonished by the kids’ flexibility and calm. We even create a nickname for ourselves: the traveling class family. When learning together is habitually such a collectively owned and managed experience, it seems that not even flood or (classroom) famine can shake us. At the end of the week, we turn it into a group-written story and I am asked to make copies for each of them to take home to show their families.

Empowered Students and Resolutions

Troubles of the social type, naturally, can also strike. Leo approaches me one morning, upset that Brad is not respectful or peaceful in saying “I hate Germans. They like violence and made a war.” He requests a meeting with me present. We meet immediately, me sitting to the side and the boys facing one another. Leo starts,

“My whole family is German and we do not like violence. Some Germans might have started the war you are talking about, but not all Germans today did it. When you say that, it really hurts my feelings, and I don’t understand what I did to you to deserve it.” Brad concedes quickly to this logic, but proceeds to talk about the actual root of the intentional insult. He is sad about a scuffle with Leo’s twin brother, Ray, on the playground playing soccer the day before. Leo listens carefully,

“Yes, and I’m not saying that you are the only one to blame. I think we are all at fault, but you should know that what you said hurt my feelings. Look, you should say sorry and we will have a meeting at lunch recess together, but I will say sorry for him right now. Sorry, Brad.”

“I’m sorry too, Leo.” The meeting has ended. There is no need for me to say anything. Ivan Illich, I do not dominate the power of calling meetings.

A Visitor and Feminist Dialogue

It is late spring, and it’s the first time that our school principal, Candace, has been there while we are talking like this. We are critically engaged in a discussion about gender equality, and there’s talk about power dynamics, historical sexism, and an evaluation of present-day institutions. It all starts as simply as a reminder from Leo that Germany has a woman prime minister. Germany is a country that has elected a woman to be the leader of

the country. There are other examples from Megan, for example, with Argentina. Bill, whose mother has lived in Chile, adds a third country to the list. Their voices indicate their excitement, but Cleveland puts an end to this. He soberly remarks that this is still not enough. He goes on to explain that worldwide, the number is still overwhelmingly male-dominated. Yes! I say and think in my head. I'm shouting inside. Yes, this is so true. We cannot be satisfied with just parts of progress. It's not enough to have these "small wins," and they are reminding each other and me of that. What does it really count for if we can only name three like this? Then there's us...us in the US, we can't even say that we have or ever have had that claim. This point sits heavily. The need for further change sinks in.

This loss is palpable on their faces and we are all silent for a moment, struggling with this fact.

"Well," someone else says, "President Obama is our first black president."

"His mom is White," Megan adds.

"Yeah," another person responds, "but President Obama sometimes doesn't even care that he is the first black president, because he's the only one." There, another point, served with harsh reality. We are unflinching in our ability to face the work of reality.

To flesh out the point, I remind them of our study of fractions. One out of forty-something is such a small portion! They all buzz in with our family cry, "That's unjust!"

"We need another black president, and it should be a she." Bill.

I'm thinking in my head, what about other ethnicities...Asian, Chicano/Latino, Indigenous peoples, other multiethnic combinations, and so on. There's so much to explore here. We can take any career, but right now we're including political power in our discussion. The president has a big role in their mind.

Candace walks in and we're knee-deep, still thick in this discussion, but since it diverged from our morning meeting of hellos, I panic. What would she think? In the culture of schooling today, how would she react? As if sensing my dread, someone saves me in a breath with,

“This is another way to say hello, ‘siya’. Hungarian, right?” We go through the routine. But then Pattie raises her hand, saying she’s checked with her Hungarian friend. We’re not saying it right, “It’s like there’s no y.” Okay, I think to myself, that’s phonics for Candace. We ask Pattie to lead us, because I’m not the expert here. We practice and try again together. We have immense respect for linguistic diversity, because it’s so present here at our ESL magnet school, but also because it’s one of the simplest and most direct pathways into diversity. It’s all around, and the differences and need for cultural learning become quickly apparent through it. Really, one can start anywhere, but I find language in first grade such a germane and soothing way to start the day. It’s a daily reminder that this is where we begin: respect for diverse speakers and ways of doing things.

Megan’s hand is up now. Which hand will give me another more neutral language lesson? I think briefly, but more than likely the rest of the hands are back to our richer discussion of socially unjust global and national political power.

Earlier:

Cleveland asks, “Is it because women don’t want to vote? Maybe they don’t want to vote and don’t vote.” Jake looks at him.

“I think they do, but it’s why we have to grow up and still change the world.”

This is an important question. Aaron, an adult classroom helper listening and on his way out, tells me later he thought Cleveland’s question was a horrible thing to say. No, I

vehemently disagree. It's the very thing that must be said so that we can unravel the institutionalized and hidden misconceptions and biases that we take for granted. It's what the adults who are walking around have never openly said and are now grown-ups wondering silently or not at all. We cannot address things head-on unless someone has the courage to say it.

Okay, "So is that it?" I ask the kids. "Do you think that's why? Do you think that's true? Only men care and want to vote? Women don't care? They just say, 'Oh whatever. Let the men decide,' as if agreeing that the men are better?"

There is a pause to think about it. Yes, this is exactly the process of thinking that we have to go through. It's not about me deciding for them and filling in for them the opinions that I think are "right" or "fair." It's about digesting each question, theory, and piece thoroughly enough and making that judgment ourselves. After a moment, they shake their heads.

"NO!" They yell loudly. "They're not being allowed to vote." Wow, I make a mental note. That's another topic for another day.

Then I present the possibility that such an opinion is historically based and exactly why some people might think to justify maintaining a status quo. Women don't deserve it, right? They don't care? They realize now how strange that sounds. It's simply counterintuitive to them. It's not how our recess works, how our classroom works, or our school for that matter. They can't believe it. And certainly, as a woman teacher, I think it's hard for them to imagine women as a group that doesn't care.

"You care," they observe. "and you're a woman. Most of the teachers here are women though. We need more men."

My mind's being stretched—all our minds, together, are stretching. But I see how empowering it is here, I see the kids start to go through this process: we lay everything flat, stare at it, point at it, and wiggle our noses for a while. We pause, we each chip in a bit, and then someone says let's lay it flat again. Then we come to our own conclusions, and aren't afraid to say when we think there's something with a terrible stench there. We're okay with that though, because they've learned now that's just their cue to say, "Well, that's why I'm here. That's where I have a responsibility to grow up and change things. The adults in power right now don't get it."

Pattie is still miffed, "There's never been a kid president either. Kids care."

"So, if it's because so many adults for so long (referring to our study of schools in the past in Social Studies) thought in ways that are the 'thinking of long ago,' they must have thought it was okay to think that way—that men are...

Pattie interrupts: "Yes, people used to think that women should just stay home and do chores and men should work only. They thought men were stronger and stuff." Her comments, including more modern day Chinese politics and ideology, open into another challenging, but completely relevant, conversation. The statement she submits for their examination is completely odious to the kids and it's the breaking point. I jump on it.

"So they're thinking, yes—that men are smarter, stronger, and just better than women. Do you think there are still men that think that way? Is that why most world leaders are still men? There are grownups that don't understand what we're talking about here in first grade, and so they continue to let that injustice happen. They don't understand that it's an injustice or don't see it that way." So many more hands are up, incensed, but it's getting close to our time to go to the gym.

“A president last year was running for president as a woman. Palin or Clinton, I’m not sure.” Kelly says, using the word “president” twice, but the message is still clear.

“I’m so glad that our school has a woman leader.” Candace doesn’t hear it, but catches her name somehow to turn around.

“What,” she stops, “I didn’t hear that.”

“Haley, will you say that again so that everyone can hear?”

“I’m so glad that our school has a woman leader.” Candace’s face cuts into a long smile, her eyes crinkling the way that they do so wonderfully for someone who so often must wear a stern front. All eyes turn back toward her with matching beams. “And who’s that?” she teases.

“YOU!” they yell, as if scripted by me. Aaron laughs later that I couldn’t have planted that better. All my nervousness about teaching like this in front of my supervisor, and the kids just dance into it with guileless childlike grace.

“Thank you,” she says graciously, “Well, I’m glad too, because women can be very powerful and strong. Girls can do anything!” She exits, and we line up for gym with so many voices still chattering excitedly through each other and into my ears (contrary to the rule and order we sometimes try to masquerade in for hallway presentation). “Want to know something so unjust, Ms. Lin?”

It’s music to my ears.

Sky’s mom catches me in the hall on my way back and stops to comment, “Sky’s really thrived in this environment, Ms. Lin. She’s so inquisitive and asking all these

questions and thinking about things. I honestly think it's because of you. And her writing too!" Inside my heart, I am also having some gym time.

Chapter 7: Lasting Reflections

At the end of the week, I'm talking with Monica, Haley's mom. As she helps me stuff the students' folders, she begins to tell me about something she's wondering if I've noticed too. She comments that she has a distinct feeling of the kids' relationships with one another, that Haley could spend two hours with anyone in our class family. She says that she's noticed that this is unique among the other classes, that the kids share a "same voice," a same sense of humor, that their laughs mimic each others', and that they share a language or say things in a similar way. I'm enthralled by what she's saying. Not being a parent involved in various parties and play dates throughout the year or being the parent volunteer at the many school-wide events, I don't really know about the dynamics of the other classes.

Monica hypothesizes that it's because we feel really connected as a class family.

"I've noticed that it's not a strictly teacher-controlled environment and that there is child freedom. You seem to let them do their thing, but it all still comes together. I really think it's a skill, a talent, and I'm just blown away by how well you do it, because I don't think it's common or instinctual for adults to be calm and liberating when surrounded by young children. We're worried about the chaos and we think we just have to control everything, but it's so good for me to see that this works. Watching you lets me know that not every little thing needs to be controlled." At the end of the year, these words aim right at my heart. A space swells beneath my eyes. She goes on, "Haley's two best friends from kindergarten aren't in this class and they all speak highly of the teachers, but there's something different about how they play and connect in other classes that make this group stick out. I can't really say what it is. What do you think? Do you notice it?" Still, Monica is worried about next year.

I think about parents' worries about their children and who they can trust/why. I start to wonder about why this connection that she describes could be uncommon. Is it, like she says, that well-meaning adults' gut reactions, based on their own oppression and alienation are to reflect it in their interactions with kids? Or is it because as teachers, we lack a more defined philosophy and are simply being crushed under the weight of everything else around us?

I think about the time that we spend talking together freely, openly, and honestly. And I realize how time-consuming it has also been to become who we are with integrity, without any "just because" excuses or writing off of problems and inquiries into every small and big "how" and "why" of "the way things work." Could it be because we are simply not allowed the time that it takes to build such pedagogies? Nevertheless, I can also name at once what Monica has so beautifully said to me.

"Solidarity," I confide, "I don't know exactly if there's a precise recipe for it, but I've been questioning a lot since I've started teaching how we—and if we—truly educate our students for a democratic society. I try, and being so close to it, I don't think I can be that clear of a judge for how I'm doing. But hearing you say that, I think that connection is our solidarity. It's what I think democracy depends on and can invigorate."

More than a century ago, Dewey (1897) wrote in *My Pedagogic Creed*,

I believe, therefore, that the true center of correlation on the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the child's own social activities. (p.10)

I believe, finally, that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing. (p. 13)

I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. (p.16)

I believe that education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction. (p. 16)

In the twenty-first century, I still believe in Dewey's piercing enumeration of education.

What I believe is that the "social activity" and "social consciousness" to which he alludes is solidarity, the match of democracy.

The Enduring Heart

"I'm so proud of you!" I bow to them, telling them that they have been my best teacher so far. "I have to tell you this now, because we still have a month together, and that's why it can be a happy thing. I want to tell you how I really feel about all of you, because I start to feel too sad when it's really the end. So the good part is this isn't a goodbye yet, but I really want you to know how proud I am about all of you. You make me feel so hopeful for our world and the future. I know I can count on all of you. We've learned so many things together and about how to live our lives and what learning is for. We know that learning..."

"NEVER ENDS!"

"We know that the world is not perfect and we are all responsible for it. But the future..."

"Is our responsibility to change it! To make the world more peaceful, more just!"

My plan to deliver this early is in danger of falling apart. I'm getting choked up anyway just listening to this, Wow. I cannot contain the emotions I have and the ones that can't be concealed from my face and body give away the truth. Somehow, the kids recognize it in my silence and break out running toward me, in their giggling, twittering cacophony of color and spirit.

This is the story of how I was liberated as an educator in the process of struggling toward a democratic and critical pedagogy with first graders. I believe that it is this regenerative power that can heal a world that may often feel excavated of its supplies to connect and sustain us. What I learned is that we don't need to all start in the same place or even a completely convinced place. Where we can start is knowing that in the distance, a vibrant democratic education is at stake, and each step must loyally orbit in its direction. These are the real high stakes, and the test is in our liberation toward humanism within ourselves and toward others. And we'll know, because I believe that democracy does have a particular scent—a sharp one, a certain look—a kaleidoscopic one, and a ringing sound—a resounding *pluralistic we*. It is not a finite endpoint, and it will vary with all the creativity and imagination that we decant to it from our human hearts, but what it won't do is puncture us internally and cease our breathing in, out, in, and out to the all the kids we once knew and still know us as alive.

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