

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

“I've Never Heard of the Word Pedagogy Before”: Using Liberatory Pedagogy to Forge Hope for Teachers in Our Nation's Public Schools

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5kh8942g>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 4(2)

ISSN

1548-3320

Author

Rodríguez, Louie F.

Publication Date

2008-06-24

DOI

10.5070/D442000627

Peer reviewed

“I Have Never Heard of the Word *Pedagogy* Before:” Using Liberatory Pedagogy to Forge Hope for New Teachers in Our Nation’s Public Schools

“Class in session. What is democracy? Yo, it’s the rule of the people, the self-rule, it’s what the people want. That’s right, but is this a democracy? No, a democracy is a goal to be attained. That’s right. The character of the people should be reflected in the laws and institutions of the State. I don’t see my character reflected. Tell me why the schools are fallin’ apart and why the youth not taking no music or art, why the professionals really don’t know where to start, no one really cares about why.”

-KRS-One, *Why*

This paper describes an initiative that engages urban high school students, pre-service teachers, and university professors in liberatory practice using Participatory Action Research (PAR), critical dialogues, and on-going reflection. Drawing on principles from Freire’s liberatory pedagogy, three encounters are described that aim to provide opportunities for democratic engagement of all parties with the goals of participating in liberatory pedagogy, modeling critical engagement in the K-12 and university classroom, and raising the critical consciousness of future teachers (Freire, 1973), particularly those committed to serving low-income children of color in our nation’s public schools.

Framing the Problem

Children who attend substandard schools, particularly in urban communities, have been among the hardest hit by the high-stakes standardized testing movement as a result of the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. While this policy has for the first time forced the system to pay attention to teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2007), there is still no formal institution or mechanism that is responsible for student outcomes (Normore, 2006), especially if the child is poor, Black, Latina/o, or Native American. Specifically, whether a high school graduates 40% of its entering freshman class is of no real consequence to the system or to any of the people that the educational system employs—that is, no one loses their jobs if almost half of the students fail to graduate. Two of the most significant indicators of accountability are fiscal (mis)management (the increase in state takeovers of schools is recent evidence of this) and test scores. In other words, the only way a school can assertively command attention from state policy-makers, for instance, is if the school is in financial disarray or if it is failing the state test miserably and pervasively. The fact that pervasive and concentrated dropout rates warrants little action is

troubling, particularly in a climate of “heightened” concern for accountability.

Furthermore, the focus on the test does not guarantee high-quality intellectual engagement for students or teachers, nor does it adequately measure whether a student is academically ready for college. In fact, there are at least three certainties associated with high-stakes standardized testing: 1) students must take the test, and sometimes repeatedly; 2) if students fail, they cannot graduate with a high school diploma; and 3) if they pass, there is a good chance that students will still need to take remedial English and math courses in college, especially if they attended a substandard high school.

Unfortunately, high-stakes testing is just one tool that negatively and disproportionately impacts low-income children of color and the teachers who serve them. In addition to testing, policy-makers have also instituted some of the most counterproductive policies and practices that this nation has seen—the criminalization of low-income students of color in urban high schools as a result of zero-tolerance policies (Advancement Project, 2006), the outright denial of an adequate opportunity to learn because of insufficient and substandard resources such as the *Williams v. State of California (2004)* case (Allen, 2005), and continued isolation of some of the most neglected children through residential and school segregation (Kozol, 2005; Orfield & Yun, 1999).

Such realities just scratch the surface of what our present culture has created (Delpit, 1996). More than 50% of all Black and Latina/o children do not graduate from high school (Orfield et al., 2004); this is linked in part to the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates that low-income students of color face in school (Advancement Project, 2006). Black and Latina/o students are also more likely to be held back a grade by the fourth grade, a finding that has a direct correlation with dropping out (Valencia & Villarreal, 2003). Within schools, high-stakes standardized testing has shaped and in some cases dominated the culture of schools and has had troubling consequences for children (Noguera, 2007). During my visits to several urban public schools in a large southeastern U.S. city, I found teachers dealing with children who vomited and urinated on themselves due to test-initiated anxiety. In the upper grades, particularly in the most marginalized schools, adults are screaming at children, “get to class,” while students find themselves sitting in classes that are boring, intellectually denigrating, or being taught by a substitute teacher or a teacher serving outside of his/her subject area.

Pre-service teachers find themselves entering this system. During clinical observation hours, they frequently report that veteran and not-so-veteran teachers in the field often discourage them from entering the profession—“Don’t do it!” or “Are you sure you want to be a teacher?” While many of these remarks are made in jest, they do serve as sources of persistent discouragement and are direct strikes against the energy and spirit that new teachers often bring to the classroom. Upon entering classrooms, pre-service teachers find that educators often fall into the “teach to the test” mentality because the local administration is following central administration mandates and central administration is at the

financial peril of the state. Pre-service teachers also report that new and veteran teachers often operate in lock-step fashion as depicted by Kozol's description of urban public schools in the Bronx (Kozol, 2005). Pre-service teachers quickly learn that too often, creativity is stifled, energy is consumed by the test, and apathy is an all too present reality among educators and the culture of the most vulnerable schools serving the most marginalized children.

As a professor and researcher who directly serves university (pre-service teachers, school leaders, and aspiring researchers) and community-based constituencies (students, parents, and communities), I approach my work with the principles of hope and possibility in my arsenal. I am finding that while traditional research serves its purpose and is in many cases required to hold the system accountable, creating a seamless connection between research, teaching, and service—the three pillars that faculty are typically evaluated on—must drive the work I do. That is, I am finding that problem-solving research (Cordova, 2004) should not only address some of the most pressing issues identified, defined, and framed by the people affected by these conditions, but should also be modeled, shared, and pedagogically applied with pre-service educators entering a system that is increasingly domesticating rather than liberatory. Therefore this paper address the following questions: What is the role of the university professor in a climate of counterproductive policies and practices that disproportionately impact low-income communities of color? How can teacher educators use liberatory pedagogy to foster and model democratic moments in the classroom?

Guiding Principles from Freire's Liberatory Pedagogy

Before outlining the guiding principles that informed the initiative, I will review Freire's notions of liberating versus domesticating education. Freire contends that education either serves to domesticate or liberate the masses (Shor, 1993). Domesticating education reduces the educational endeavor to a prescribed method of instruction where knowledge transfer and fact memorization are the goals. Known as the "banking" method, teachers are responsible for depositing knowledge into students. In such classrooms, education is "something done to them [students]" (Shor, 1993, p. 26). In liberatory education, on the other hand, teachers utilize problem-posing methods that encourage students to capitalize on knowledge from their own lives by connecting real-life issues with academic content; in some cases, such experiences and knowledge bases become the academic content. As such, liberatory classrooms encourage students to ask critical questions, create and own knowledge, and work to realize democratic processes in classrooms and in society. The goal is to create spaces where students learn by "recreat[ing] the way we see ourselves, our education and our society" (Shor, 1993, p. 26). To work toward creating a liberatory education, I have drawn on several guiding principles drawn from the ideas of Paulo Freire:

desocialization, dialogic pedagogy, and activist engagement.

Because students, particularly in today's high-stakes standardized testing environment, are often exposed to test-prep pedagogies whereby passivity and domestication are essentially expected from them, the first principle that drove this initiative was the desocialization processes to democratically engage students in the production of knowledge and social change. Typically, students are taught to be silent listeners who regurgitate facts. Very little meaning is made and students are rarely incited to personally, politically, or intellectually connect with the "official" academic content. According to Freire, liberatory pedagogies must desocialize students against this anti-intellectual and authority-dependence culture that is often fostered in schools (Freire, 1970). Unfortunately, desocialization is necessary for both high school students and pre-service teachers, as both groups have been subjected to domesticating forms of education. For example, the pre-service teachers often approach the end of their clinical training and academic coursework without a socio-political understanding of teachers and teaching in society or an understanding of the significance of pedagogy. Some have never heard of the word pedagogy. If we continue to replicate domesticating classrooms, students will continue to be silenced and teachers will work to ensure their silence.

The second principle that informed this initiative is the notion of dialogical pedagogy. As proposed by Freire, dialogical practices privilege problem-posing processes between students and teachers. Learning is scaffolded and students are encouraged to create knowledge. Within this principle, education is not an endeavor that is "done" to students but rather they are active participants in the production and utilization of knowledge. Again, such practices are particularly significant in the test-prep pedagogy era—pedagogies by which students and teachers are, because of pressure to perform on a test, subjected to teaching and learning activity that revolves around test preparation and reinforced by school cultures that perpetuate a test-taking ethos. Teaching and learning opportunities that privilege dialogue are often absent in these environments. Dialogical practices aim to challenge this counterproductive culture by creating spaces to engage in dialogue and encourage students and pre-service teachers to be active participants by "doing" education.

Finally, the principle of activist engagement sees the process and outcome of the educational endeavor as driven by transformation. In other words, the classroom culture and the intellectual work should prioritize a quest for social change. Students and teachers should be given the opportunity to practice and experience change in the classroom, as both a practice of freedom and as they work toward a larger goal for social change. These efforts and intentions should be fluid, dynamic, and democratic.

As I have wrestled with my role as a university professor, researcher, teacher, and stakeholder in the wellbeing of low-income children of color in this country, I have discovered that liberatory pedagogy with K-12 students alone is

insufficient; nor is it sufficient with pre-service teachers alone. The goal should be to engage both groups in different forms of liberatory pedagogy, but also to model what such practices could look like in the classroom. I agree with Freire that liberatory pedagogy should never become a mechanistic outline that drives a teacher's practices, and that "we have to reinvent liberating education for our own situations" (Freire, 1970, p. 34). The initiative under discussion emerges in three central forms, 1) directly with the high school students engaging in a summer-long participatory action research (PAR) project at a university, 2) directly with pre-service teachers in a social and cultural foundations course, and 3) in the college classroom where high school students and pre-service teachers were brought together to engage in dialogue about PAR work and the role of teachers in students' lives. Below I describe each form of this initiative in more detail and then discuss how each form of the initiative engaged with the three principles of Freire's liberatory pedagogy.

Overview of the Initiative

During the summer of 2007, I had a unique opportunity to work with a group of high school students as part of a six-week summer institute at a large public university in the Southeastern United States. Fifty students from the local public school system participated in the institute as members of "The A+ Program," which is aimed at bridging math literacy and civil rights (i.e., social, political, and economic) for historically marginalized children. The A+ Program approached two pervasively failing high schools, with histories of high dropout rates and school violence, to participate in the summer institute. As part of the institute, I, along with another university-based professor, taught an action research course with 25 of the students from one high school. Approximately 82% of students from this high school qualified for free/reduced lunch and 99% of the students were either Black or Latina/o. Among the summer participants, 17 students were Black and four were Latina/o.

During the same summer semester, I also taught an undergraduate course to pre-service teachers at the same university. This course both meets the program requirement for all pre-service teachers and, through the manner in which I teach the course, provides an opportunity for future teachers to engage in critical issues facing education, teachers, and teaching. The course enrolled about 45 students, only four of whom were male. A majority of the students were from the city where they attended college, middle-class, and of Hispanic background (i.e., Caribbean or South American), and most had never lived or travelled outside of the local area. Given the demographic background of the college students and high school students, this situation began to emerge as the perfect opportunity to engage these two groups in critical dialogue and demonstrate to the country what possibilities exist when two demographically representative groups face one

another in the classroom. Among others, issues of race, racism, and deficit-oriented paradigms came to be challenged in these spaces (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005).

Because I was engaging with both groups at the same time, I began to organize several meetings between the groups. On one end, the pre-service teachers were an ideal audience for the high school students to share their research and present their findings. On the other end, the pre-service teachers had a unique opportunity to ask high school students candid questions about their experiences and in many instances garnered advice from the high school student experts. These dialogues soon became a rich experience for both groups, as well as for me and my colleagues, who observed many of the dialogues.

Data Collection and Analysis

The dialogues occurred during the summer of 2007 and took place over two separate sessions, each lasting for approximately three hours. During the first dialogue the high school student-researchers presented their key findings to the pre-service teachers. The second dialogue was meant to be a continuation of the first. Both encounters were video/audio-recorded, reviewed, and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the video footage and transcriptions of the dialogue, student reflections were collected after each dialogue to capture pre-service teachers' reflections, questions, and comments. These reflections were particularly meaningful in the context of the video footage and transcripts. For example, among the pre-service teachers who participated verbally during the dialogues, their participation was compared and contrasted to their written reflections. Congruities and incongruities were sought in order to assess the consistency of their responses to the student-researchers. Finally, I collected field notes to capture observations made during and after the dialogues (Emerson et al., 1995). All three data sources served as the primary data set for this paper. The data were coded and analyzed through an examination of pre-service teachers' responses to the youth researchers with an eye also on the student-researchers' responses to the pre-service teachers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, Freire's principle of liberatory pedagogy was used as the guiding conceptual framework for this analysis; therefore instances of desocialization, dialogical pedagogy, and activist engagement were noted throughout the data analysis process.

The following three sections cover the encounters previously mentioned. The first section discusses the ways in which the liberatory education principles emerged through Participatory Action Research (PAR) with urban high school students. Second, I discuss how the principles emerged in the classroom with pre-service teachers. Third, I explain how the principles emerged during critical dialogues between the high school researchers and the pre-service teachers. I

close with a discussion of implications for research, policy, and practice, particularly as they intersect with developing students and future educators to advocate for social and political change.

Applying Freire's Principles of Liberatory Education to Three Encounters in the Classroom

Encounter 1: Participatory Action Research with Urban High School Students

Upon entering the summer institute, I was driven by three key principles espoused by Freire's notion of liberatory education: *desocialization*, *dialogic pedagogy*, and *activist engagement*. Because the students attended a historically low-performing school that was under immense pressure to raise test scores, I knew that the students would be ready to engage and share in rigorous intellectual work. However, I also recognized that in the context of test-prep pedagogy, many students are socialized to comply with the curriculum, rely on teachers for the "correct" answer, and to a degree, reify what the system intends for them—to submit intellectually and spiritually. Having taught high school in a high-stakes testing environment, I sought to explicitly garner students' experiences and legitimize these experiences as valued knowledge—a reality with which they were essentially unfamiliar. Given that many historically underperforming public schools typically embark on an eight-month crusade to teach to the test, repositioning the students as active intellectuals required a process of desocialization. As posited by Freire, we were denouncing passivity and announcing active engagement (Freire, 2004).

In this context, Participatory Action Research (PAR) became the vehicle that would facilitate meaningful engagement between the students, their experiences, and the challenges they face in the school system. Because PAR privileges the wealth (i.e., theories, knowledge-bases, experiences, skills, and dispositions) that historically marginalized communities bring to the educational endeavor, it seemed only logical to prioritize this methodological and pedagogical form of engagement in the classroom. Thus, we began the course, and typically each session, by asking a critical question such as, "Why do students drop out of school?" These questions served as lead-ins to addressing a host of issues and problems students encountered in school. Through issue identification, students were encouraged to tell personal stories and share stories of friends and family members. In many ways, this information was treated as genuine, grounded data and students were encouraged to document these stories. During several moments in the classroom, students spoke indignantly about their elementary and middle school years. One student pounded his fist on the table as he recalled an incident with a teacher who mistreated him in school. Other students lashed out with curse words, quickly apologizing to the adults in the room, but nonetheless communicating their points with vigor. In these sessions

students were encouraged to “make the familiar strange” by stepping back from these experiences and contextualizing them in their schools, communities, and society. In doing so, students began to make critical connections between their schooling experiences and national issues such as racism and poverty (Noguera, 2003). In some classroom sessions, students were also able to connect with global issues such as the wars in the Middle East.

However, students’ most passionate reflections and experiences were with the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Students were encouraged to theorize about its existence, its purpose, and its impact on young people of color in the United States. Simply giving students a space to share their experiences and privileging the power of dialogue evoked sophisticated critiques of the test, going as far as questioning why government officials require the test in the first place. During these dialogues, several students still exhibited some degree of authority-dependence by asking, “What do I write down?” I often responded with, “Write what is most important to you.”

Another way Freire’s principles drove the classroom process was through dialogical pedagogy. Cognizant of the fact that many students experience classrooms that are anti-dialogical, I always began classes with critical questions such as, “What is the purpose of education?” These exercises encouraged students to build theory and share their ideas in organically formulated small groups and later with the entire class. Because their ideas were accepted as knowledge and challenged by everyone in the classroom, a degree of knowledge ownership was fostered. For example, to connect critical issues students face in school with theoretical ideas emerging out of social theory and education, students eventually embraced the role of thinker and intellectual as they embraced identities of the “Culture of Power” group or the “Politics is Education” group. Because the students were presented with university-level literature, the language and ideas were challenging and a significant amount of time was spent struggling through the ideas and connecting them to students’ lives. For instance, students were asked, “In what ways is politics related to the FCAT?”

Such exercises served to scaffold student learning and engagement and helped build a culture of learning within the classroom. While group work was a challenge, individual group dynamics were also used as curriculum and capitalized upon as pedagogical moments. For instance, on more than one occasion, student conflict emerged between group members and all group members were asked to explain what happened, propose solutions, and to think about how to proceed.

Finally, the entire seminar revolved around Freire’s activist pedagogy driven by the desire to effect social change, both as a process and outcome. The class dialogues sought not only to model what dialogue could look like, but perhaps communicate to the high school students that true liberatory education can and should occur through critical dialogue in the classroom. I believe that once they enter their high school classroom again, they may be looking through

these lenses to critique their education and outline their expectations for meaningful engagement.

One of the key purposes of the summer institute was to engage this group of high school students to study their own high schools. Since they are experts and have unique insights into their schools based on experience—far beyond what university researchers could extract alone—students were engaged in a participatory action research project. After engaging with the dropout issue, students were encouraged to think about how their theories of student dropout emerge in their own high school. In order to do so, students were assembled into research groups based on interest and served as their group through the entire summer-long research process. In these groups, students were responsible for identifying issues and problems in their schools, developing research questions, examining theory, creating a plan of action for research including interviewing and data analysis, and finally drawing conclusions and providing recommendations to different constituencies (i.e., parents, teachers/administrators, other students, school board members and other policymakers).

PAR work is necessary because it is widely known that young people, particularly low-income students of color, are often silenced, marginalized, and criminalized within the public school system (Rodríguez & Brown, 2008). When reform is enacted in schools, students are often the most overlooked population yet the most directly affected. Therefore, to produce student engagement and perhaps inform educational decision-makers, students must become agents of reform and of the educational process, especially if true social change is to occur (Minkler, 2000). Thus, in the context of working with youth who are served by a substandard educational system, PAR repositions them as experts of their own experiences with unique positions in relation to problems typically identified and framed by university researchers (Córdova, 2004). In PAR work, the youth drive the research process by identifying the issues, framing the problem, exploring methods to investigate the problem, and inventing solutions. Through the process, PAR elicits opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills, build upon their academic and research skills, and become agents of change within their local context. Herein lies the direct connection with Freire's liberatory pedagogy. Because the youth are engaging in inquiry that is directly relevant to the context in which they live (i.e., their schools and communities), they are able to both create the hope that characterizes their existence as young people in schools and society and understand "the situations which limit them" (Freire, 1970, p. 99). Thus, not only did our work with the high school students give them a place at the decision-making table (our long-term goal), but the participatory action research process itself was personally transformative for everyone, including myself.

During the summer PAR project, each group of students discussed and decided upon one key issue that they would like to research. The five issues were curriculum matters; teacher quality; the culture of low expectations in schools; principal decision-making and staffing issues; and the importance of electives for

high school students, particularly in the high-stakes testing environment where such opportunities have quickly dwindled away, especially in low-performing schools (Meier & Wood, 2004). Once they identified their research issue, students were asked to articulate why each issue was problematic in their school, and were encouraged to brainstorm some root causes of the identified problems. For example, students were asked to struggle with the question, “Where do low expectations come from?” Once students had a solid understanding of the issues, they were asked to think about their connections with the theory. For instance, how does power intersect with low expectations? Subsequently, students created and refined an overarching research question that drove their entire research process, followed by five interview questions to be asked to other students in their schools. Interviewees were selected based on accessibility and a desire to interview students who represented perspectives across grade levels. Students were responsible for preparing the interviewee, ensuring that the environment was video ready (i.e., quiet and comfortable), and were responsible for capturing the interviews on video. Students then analyzed each interview for themes and patterns. Students were encouraged to think about the following questions: “What story are students telling?” and “To whom is this story important and why?” as they analyzed the interviews. Upon drawing conclusions, students had no reservations about providing keen and candid recommendations to everyone they deemed responsible for the identified problems. Across issues, groups recommended more funding and resources, an interrogation of the principals’ hiring practices, and more engaging curriculum. They also urged other students to conduct similar research, distribute surveys, and even walk out or strike against the school to garner the attention of decision-makers within the school system.

Encounter 2: Engaging Pre-Service Teachers

Having taught the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education course for pre-service teachers five times to date, I have become more observant of the need to spend the first few class meetings working against the passivity, silence, and authority-dependence into which many pre-service teachers have been socialized. Many of these college juniors and seniors have been given little opportunity to engage in classrooms that are dialogue-driven. My theory is that these experiences have created a culture of dependence and uncertainty among pre-service teachers because they have been infrequently encouraged to take a stance or develop a theory of their own understanding of vital educational issues. While most students do come to the class with some theories about the ways in which the world works, they often lack a critical analysis of the issues and an understanding of their ideology, particularly as these ideas and explanations intersect with education (Bartolomé, 2002; Bartolomé, & Balderrama, 2001). I have been approached by several students during and after the semester saying, “I have never had to think about these issues. I really appreciate the course and the dialogue aspect of it.”

Conversely, many students have articulated that much of their engagement revolves around a professor who incessantly lectures, a chapter they have to read, and key concepts they must memorize. Because they have been socialized to accept these pedagogical approaches as the norm, a significant degree of desocialization has to occur. For instance, many students have told me that they memorize the facts, succeed on the test—often with an A—and then they forget the material the following semester. Perhaps these courses are preparing pre-service teachers for what to expect when they enter the profession—anti-intellectual and non-relational educational climates—but I refuse to reduce education to this type of pedagogy.

As we engage with the critical issues, pre-service teachers are encouraged to think about race and racism, Whiteness, social class, immigration, educational reform and policy, educational theory, student-teacher relationships, school culture, parent and community engagement, gender inequality, and issues of identity. Pre-service teachers are expected to personally, politically, and intellectually engage with the issues, something that they often have a difficult time adjusting to; as they sometimes say, “I’m not sure I should be so passionate about this issue...” or “I don’t want to offend anybody.” While these responses are expected, especially if they have not had many opportunities to engage in this pedagogy, such struggles nonetheless emanate from previous experiences of being told what to think, what to believe, what to memorize, and why they should care. Rather than passivity and authority-dependence, students in my course are incited and provoked to pose questions and develop their own dispositions toward critical issues in education. I continue to maintain that their passivity towards the issue is indeed positionality; however, I also encourage the class to interrogate why they have been socialized to accept the status quo—yet another example of socialization and hence the significance of Freire’s principle of desocialization.

Another manner in which liberatory pedagogy emerges in the classroom with the pre-service teachers largely revolves around dialogue, perspective-taking, and taking a position. One of the key intellectual forces driving the course is the structure-culture-agency framework used to analyze social, political, and economic issues, particularly when they intersect with education. In order to activate this framework, students are encouraged to analyze immigration, for example. Rather than settle for an “‘illegal’ immigration is wrong and close the borders” explanation, students are encouraged to discuss how immigration is framed in the media and how the different perspectives frame the issue as a problem, and then discuss how immigration will impact education and the work of teachers. Rather than analyze the situation through a pure policy perspective, real-life perspectives are included in the dialogue through multimedia materials and case studies drawn from various research and internet resources. When analyzing the situation from several standpoints, students are encouraged to personally, politically, and intellectually connect with the issue. They are encouraged to analyze other issues through similar exercises, all through the

pedagogy of respectful dialogue.

Finally, pre-service teachers are also constantly encouraged to reflect on their role as educators in resisting or perpetuating inequality in schools and society. In fact, agency is a key principle that drives the course and intersects Freire's principle of activist engagement. For instance, the goal of the course is to encourage pre-service teachers to understand agency (i.e., individual will, behaviors, and dispositions) within the context of complex policy (structural) and cultural influences (Brown & Rodríguez, in press). With this goal in mind, teacher agency is both influenced by the structures and cultures of schools and also contributes to the formation of structures and cultures in schools. I encourage agency by engaging pre-service teachers in rich dialogue about critical issues facing education. To a large extent, the course is used as a space to model liberatory pedagogy for future teachers. For instance, on more than one occasion, we have pressed "pause" on the dialogue and reflected as a class on the progress of the dialogue. In one class, we stopped and talked about talking—about participation. I gave my reflections and asked students to share their experiences. This type of dialogue occurs at least three times per semester and so far each dialogue has been constructive. During one class, for example, after having the dialogue and reiterating my role to support and encourage student participation through dialogue, a couple of students began to participate or approached me after class to discuss their individual reservations about participation. Students sometimes say they are shy, are not used to speaking in public but want to, are fearful that they will be ridiculed because of their accent, or do not feel articulate enough to speak in front of the class. I constantly tell the students that my responsibility is to ensure that respect is a key principle that drives the dialogue (Rodríguez, 2005). During these moments, I try to be transparent about the significance of these dialogues and encourage these pre-service teachers to determine the degree to which they will work to create such a climate in the classroom with their own students.

Pre-service teachers tend to appreciate the opportunities to grapple with critical issues, share their perspectives, struggle with their own role in recognizing critical issues facing education, and recognize their role in challenging educational inequality and advocating for justice. While this is a struggle and a tremendous learning experience, I have observed that liberatory pedagogy with pre-service teachers both models this pedagogy and challenges educators in ways that will hopefully benefit their future students.

Encounter 3: Forging Dialogue between High School Students and Pre-Service Teachers

The final and perhaps most significant way in which I use liberatory pedagogy to work with high school students and pre-service teachers is when both groups are brought together to engage in dialogue. This type of exercise was co-

planned with a colleague, Tara M. Brown at the University of Maryland, College Park, who is currently working with a group of students at their high school. One of the activities she conducted revolved around a presentation that her students gave to a special education course for pre-service teachers. When we observed the recorded footage of the dialogue, we quickly learned that such dialogues are not only necessary but telling about the challenges facing pre-service teachers and their dispositions toward low-income youth of color. The dialogues demonstrated to us that when given the opportunity to share their experiences, these high school students bring a much needed perspective to the larger discourse on education and teacher education in this country.

At the beginning of all dialogues I begin by stating that the purpose is to create a space for high school researchers and pre-service teachers to engage in a rich exchange of learning. Since pre-teachers rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to interact with high school students beyond their required clinical hours, I reiterate that such opportunities should be capitalized upon. What I am a little more reserved about addressing up front are the demographics of both groups, although these are obvious. The high school researchers are all Black and Latina/o youth who come from some of the most marginalized high schools in the city, and the pre-service teachers are mostly middle-class Latina/o and White. The obvious evidence of socialization, given the dynamic between pre-service teachers (adults) and the high school researchers (school-aged youth), is the power struggle. In any space where both parties are expected to dialogue, my theory is that I have to be cognizant about the adults lecturing the students. This is a reality that is probably applicable to most spaces where these two groups interface because our society largely socializes adults to do this, and most adults were probably treated the same way as children. However, when the demographics of the groups intersect, I am particularly sensitive about the possible types of issues that could be discussed—such as parental blaming. The tone I try to set and the space that we all create attempts to recognize that such dialogues are most likely rare and that the dialogue itself models for pre-service teachers what is possible. Such dialogue also communicates to high school students that they can and should be engaging in these dialogues; high school students have a lot to teach and pre-service teachers need to learn how to listen and encourage problem-posing questions to students, rather than engaging in the one-way pedagogical processes that typically characterize K-12 education in the United States. This amplifies the significance of Freire's desocialization principle that must remain at the forefront of the dialogue and throughout the pedagogical process.

The dialogues between the two groups are powerful. The high school researchers tend to take ownership of the process. After all, it is rare for high school students to influence what future teachers actually think and may do in the classroom. For instance, during one dialogue a high school researcher asked the pre-service teachers, "What would you do if a student corrected you in class?" This aroused an outburst of responses from the pre-service teachers, "I would

thank them,” “Say thank you,” “Fix the problem,” etc. One pre-service teacher asked, “Why do you ask that question?”. The high school researcher explained how this situation had occurred in one of his classes and the student had been removed from the class. Because of the student’s sense of injustice related to the situation (getting kicked out of class), he became outraged, resulting in his suspension. This situation, which escalated into unnecessary consequences for the student, could very well have been prevented if the teacher had known how to respond to student criticism. This scenario both demonstrates the power of problem-posing pedagogy and the value of dialogue as an exchange of ideas between the two groups.

During another dialogue, one of the pre-service teachers asked, after reading about the significance of relationships in school, particularly for youth of color (Valenzuela, 1999), “What advice would you give us about student-teacher relationships?” This gave the high school researchers the opportunities to teach about what works and what does not work. The high school researchers said, “Get to know us,” “Give us a chance,” “Be real,” and “Give us fun, hands-on things to do in the classroom.” One high school researcher said, “And don’t make us aggravated because that just makes us want to throw a desk at you.” A couple of pre-service teachers responded quite negatively by saying, “Now you know why we don’t want to teach in your school.” This angered many of the high school researchers and one student said, “Do you really think we are going to throw a desk at you?” During this dialogue, it occurred to me that the desk-throwing statement immediately reinforced any preconceived notions that the pre-service teachers had about the high school students and the types of schools they attended. (Many pre-service teachers reflected on this situation and concluded that the students were really trying to communicate with the pre-service teachers, not literally throw a desk). The major forces behind these dialogues were to create an active, critical, and organically driven dialogue between the two groups.

Another demonstration of liberatory pedagogy occurred when the high school researchers presented their research findings about low expectations and the power adults have over students. The presentation demonstrated to pre-service teachers that when given an opportunity, high school students from some of the most neglected schools can achieve and engage in transformative work. This is necessary when the media and popular opinion communicate to society that students who attend such schools are not capable of engaging in rigorous intellectual experiences and therefore resort to the, “the test just makes sure that kids are learning something!” mantra. This is in and of itself an outcome toward social change as it displays not only what is possible but perhaps models what students can do once they are in a classroom that prioritizes Freire’s pedagogy of activist engagement.

Both the high school researchers and the pre-service teachers learned that traditional pedagogical practices must be unlearned, that dialogue and problem-posing methodology is vital to the richness of the learning experience, and that

activist engagement of both groups is crucial to realizing the transformative possibilities of education (Freire, 1970). Specifically, these opportunities demonstrated to the high school researchers that they could and should be voicing their opinions. They learn that it is their right to advocate for their own education and that engaging with teachers should be part of the process. The pre-service teachers were exposed to what is possible through dialogue and challenged themselves to incorporate similar practices with their own classrooms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has attempted to outline what is possible when the principles of liberatory pedagogy are acted upon in the classroom. When schools and teachers are under increased scrutiny and pressure to perform (Noguera, 2005), and yet the system fails to provide the necessary support to succeed, anguish and apathy become the norm. Pre-service teachers almost immediately receive this toxic culture, starting from their experiences while completing their clinical hours. Unfortunately, the schools and the cultures that drive them are not only laced with negativity, but the policies and procedures that also reinforce this culture are counterproductive to the optimism and hope that pre-service teachers bring into the classroom.

This paper has demonstrated that organic dialogues between pre-service teachers and high school-age youth are one way to realize the promises of liberatory pedagogy. Teacher education programs need to prioritize this type of engagement because it not only models such pedagogy for pre-service teachers, but also serves as another degree of meaningful accountability to the schools and communities that the pre-service teachers will one day serve. The pre-service teachers discover that despite the dominant educational policies and practices that revolve around a high-stakes test, alternative forms of pedagogical engagement create youth who can conduct research on their schools and communities through issue identification, issue framing, qualitative and quantitative data analysis, theory-building, exploring solutions, and presenting research to multiple audiences. Such engagement is far from the typical book work that is so often denigrated by today's youth. This demonstrates that teacher education programs need to move beyond the "methods fetish" (Bartolomé, 1994) that drives curriculum and instruction because such approaches merely reinforce the system's backwards attempt at accountability. If teacher education programs solely focus on ensuring that pre-service teachers fit into the system by teaching to the test, then it is inevitable that our educational system will continue to domesticate the already marginalized children in this society.

Teacher education programs should also engage pre-service teachers in dialogue with the student population they wish to serve during their first year in the program. The knowledge that emanates from these dialogues should be used

by professors to structure dialogues in the university classrooms and to select the types of readings and exercises they engage with as a class. Time after time I hear from pre-service teachers that they appreciate the readings in my course because they are current and relevant to critical issues facing the field today. Most of these pre-service teachers argue that their professors use the same materials from 20 years ago despite revolutionary changes in the context of schools, demographics of students, and the policies that dominate what teachers actually do in the classroom.

In conclusion, teacher education programs should use the principles of liberatory pedagogy by finding ways to desocialize passivity and authority dependence, prioritize and integrate dialogical processes when engaging pre-service teachers, and structure teacher training around processes for social change. Until this happens, teacher education programs will continue to produce educators who domesticate students and reproduce social inequality in the classroom. Reducing education to test-prep and test scores is not the solution to social change and perhaps the very reason why it is used so powerfully to hinder the progress of the nation's most marginalized communities. Finally, if the larger society continues to marginalize the already low-income children of color who are targeted by every other social inequity possible, then this educational system continues to ensure that *our* children are not important enough to prevent being left behind. While this reality makes social and political change grim, it becomes all the more necessary; future teachers and the universities that serve them should know that they have a stake and an obligation to act. If we remain on the same path where the "professionals don't really know where to start," as articulated by KRS-One, then our goal of using education to build a democracy is really in trouble.

Notes

¹ "Hispanic" is the preferred label of choice in this context. Because of the region in which this initiative took place as well as the concentration of people with connections to Spanish-speaking countries such as Central America, South America, and the Caribbean, who prefer to associate themselves with their Spanish roots, "Hispanic" is preferred. The author would like to note his preference for Latina/o or Raza capturing the indigenous roots of people from the Americas.

References

Advancement Project (2006). *Arresting Development: Addressing the School Discipline Crisis in Florida*. A Report Prepared by: Florida State

- Conference NAACP, Advancement Project, NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc., Spring 2006.
- Bartolomé, L. I. (2002). Creating an equal playing field: Teachers as advocates, border crossers, and cultural brokers. In Z. F. Beykont (Ed.), *The power of culture: Teaching across language difference* (pp. 167-191). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Publishing Group.
- Bartolomé, L. I & Balderrama, M. (2001). The need for educators with political and ideological clarity." In M. de la Luz Reyes & J. Halcon (Eds.), *The best for our children: Critical perspectives on literacy for Latino students*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bartolomé, L. I (1994) Beyond the methods fetish: toward a humanizing pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64 (2), pp. 173–194.
- Conchas, G. Q. & Rodríguez, L. F. (2007). *Small schools and urban youth: Using the power of school culture to engage students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Córdova, T. (2004). Plugging the brain drain: Bringing our education back home. In J. Mora & D. R. Diaz (Eds.), *Latino social policy: A participatory research model* (pp. 25-53). New York: The Haworth Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). Evaluating ‘no child left behind.’ *The Nation*, May 21, 2007 Issue. Retrieved: May 25, 2007 at: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070521/darling-hammond>
- Delpit, L. D. (1996). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. The New Press: New York, NY.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York: Crown Press.
- Meier, D. & Wood, G. (2004). *Many children left behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is damaging our children and schools*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Noguera, P. A. (2005). It takes more than pressure to improve failing high schools. Retrieved September 7, 2007, from: http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/er/pn_pressure.html
- Noguera, P. A. (2003). *City schools and the American dream. Reclaiming the promise of public education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Normore, A. H. (2006). From a pivotal Civil Rights activist to radical equations: Grassroots leadership and lessons for educational leaders. A conversation with Robert Moses. *UCEA Review, University Council of Educational Administration*, 68(1), 19-22.
- Orfield, G. & Yun, J. (1999). *Resegregation in American schools*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University.

- Rodríguez, L. F. (2005). Yo, mister! An alternative urban high school offers lessons on respect. *Educational Leadership*, 62, 7, 78-80.
- Shor, I. (1993). Education is politics: Paulo Freires critical pedagogy. In (Eds.), P. McLaren, P. Leonard's, *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter*. London: Routledge
- Solorzano, D. F. (1989). Teaching and social change: Reflections on a Freirian approach in a college classroom. *Teaching Sociology*, 17, 218-225.
- Solorzano, D. & Yosso, T. J. (2001). From racial stereotyping and deficit discourse toward a critical race theory in teacher education. *Multicultural Education*, 9(1), 2-8.
- Valencia, R & Solorzano, D. (1997). Contemporary deficit thinking. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *The evolution of deficit thinking in educational thought and practice* (pp. 160-210). New York, NY: Falmer Press.
- Valencia, R. R. & Villarreal, B. J. (2003). Improving students' reading performance via standards-based school reform: A critique. *The Reading Teacher*, 56 (7), 612- 621.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. State University of New York Press: Albany, NY.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.

Author

Dr. Louie F. Rodríguez is an assistant professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and a Research Fellow for the Center for Urban Education and Innovation at Florida International University. An educational researcher by training, Louie is committed to research expanding educational equity, opportunity, and access for historically marginalized children in the U.S. While completing his graduate work at Harvard, Louie worked as a teacher and counselor in the local schools and communities. Louie also led several research initiatives examining high school reform, school culture, educational policy, and school dropouts. Louie is currently conducting participatory action research with youth in a Miami high school and also working on initiatives intersecting quality education and civil rights.