



Equality, Justice and Social Change: The Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis of Conscientization

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Authors' contributions

This paper was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author RS created the Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis and implemented its use in an urban setting. Author RS wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author BFH added to the research and completed final edits of the manuscript. Both authors approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Freire delineated in Pedagogy of the Oppressed [1] that reality is continually socially constructed and that the ultimate aim of any social action, including education, is to contribute to individual humanization and collective liberation from systemic oppression. After observing and questioning approximately 100 high school students over a three year period, these teacher educators feel that the role of education should be to facilitate the praxis of critical conscientization, the process of analyzing systemic inequality and acting on its transformation. Drawing on critical and reality pedagogy, as well as research in neuroscience and educational anthropology and experiences, we propose that critical conscientization is innately tied to the students' lived experience in their local reality and thus, requires that educators are acutely knowledgeable about and hyper responsive to the students' realities. The Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis, which was implemented with high school students, is a way to implement these ideas in today's urban high school classrooms and will help educators and students channel their anger to fuel their conscientization process. This is the kind of conscientization processes that educators must pursue to prepare their students to construct counter hegemonic classrooms that are rooted in students' lived experiences and which prepare students to

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act as agents of change. Ultimately, creating a counter-hegemonic classroom is, at root, a process of learning to lead by listening by the educator and reflection by students.

Keywords: Social justice; social change; equality; urban education; conscientization.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, Brazilian social theorist Paulo Freire's work began to dominate educational literature and was used as a basis to form a new school of thought: "critical pedagogy" [2]. Although he did not coin the term "critical pedagogy," Freire is recognized as the founder. In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [1], Freire outlines a pedagogical framework that is firmly rooted in a commitment to justice, equity and social transformation.

Freire's core concern was humanization, or the process of allowing human beings to fulfill their full potential and act in their own interests. He condemned systemic inequity for oppressing, or dehumanizing, individuals' humanity and argued vehemently for "authentic liberation" [1]. Freire believed that this liberation, or humanization, was produced through praxis, or "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" [1]. Indeed, Freire believed that it was this praxis, or process of analysis and action, which continually created our collective reality. That is, that the world is an "object of our transforming action" [1]—that the way we think about the world and ourselves directs our daily actions and that those actions collectively and continually construct our world, including the systems and structures which distribute power. If, as Freire asserted, "the future isn't something hidden in a corner [but] something we build in the present," then no action or thought is "neutral" in the sense that it does not have sociopolitical significance. Rather, every action (and the thinking in which it is rooted) either reinforces or interrupts the current social reality. Consequently, our education, or the way we learn to think about and act in the world, is never neutral. As Shaull explained, Freire illustrated that:

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and

discover how to participate in the transformation of their world [1].

Accordingly, Freire's pedagogical theory is inextricably embedded within his social theory. Freire did not position education as an institution or process that was separate from the "real world;" rather, he identified the process of education as the way through which our world is constructed and the key to its' transformation.

As theorist Macedo notes, however, Freire's pedagogical theory is too often reduced to "a 'teaching' method rather than a philosophy or a social theory" [1]. Paradoxically, depoliticizing his concept of education by detaching it from his social theory and reducing it to a mere instructional "method" is a *political* act—by guising over the role of education in determining the shape of our social reality, hegemonic ideology assures that we will *not* interrupt the status quo. Macedo points out that the Greek roots of "pedagogy" literally mean "to lead the child," and is thus, inherently political.

Freire's pedagogy, or "education for liberation," is grounded in his critique of hegemonic educational models [1]. Freire vehemently critiques the dominant "banking model" of education in which, he claims, education is seen as an "act of deposition [where] students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor [of knowledge]" [1]. Here, the student is reduced to an *object*—a dehumanized receptacle that is "filled" with the contents of the teacher's narration. Indeed, the teachers and students do not communicate; rather, the "teacher issues *communiqués* and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" [1]. The teacher holds the key to some ethereal larder of objective, neutral knowledge that is "detached from reality" and "transferred" from teacher to student [1]. Freire argued that this "banking model" of education was an oppressive, dehumanizing form of social control. By constructing students as objects and alienating them from their own critical thinking and decision-making, "education as deposition" prevents students from engaging in the critical praxis that is necessary for humanization. This

dehumanization further serves as a mechanism for social control, he added, as individuals who do not recognize their own agency or see injustice as *preventable* will not act for change.

Rather than the “banking model of education” that focuses on the *transference* of knowledge, Freire called instead for “problem-posing education” in which the student could be actively engaged in *producing* knowledge. Freire believed that knowledge was produced through collaborative inquiry and dialogue, “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” [1]. Unlike the “banking model,” teachers act as “partners of the students” who facilitate learning by provoking a critical exploration of students’ realities [1]. The educator makes no claims to objectivity or neutrality, but the students are not expected to repeat the teacher’s words but instead, to “seek their own answers” [1].

The aim of “problem-posing education” is to develop students’ “critical consciousness.” Freire’s pedagogical theory is centered on this process of “conscientization,” which is essentially the educational process that enables praxis, or “action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” [1]. Specifically, conscientization is the process of learning to critically analyze and reflect upon the world and act in order to make it less oppressive. This process is grounded in an attention to social, political and economic contradictions. By analyzing *numerous*, contradictory perceptions of reality (not just that which is dominant), students begin to notice the complex, dynamic nature of the world and the ways in which power is structured and distributed. Students develop their:

...power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves [and] come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process of transformation...[1].

Students begin to understand the world as a “historical reality susceptible to transformation [and thus,] perceive their state not as fated or unalterable, but merely as limiting” [1]. Additionally, students can recognize their own

ability to act to change the world in their interests. The aim of conscientization is, in fact, to awaken such action and thus, bring about a more just world.

Since Freire’s ultimate aim was to encourage students’ action and reflection in order to transform their social realities, he insisted that their education must be rooted in their daily experiences [1]. Freire pushed educators to ground inquiry and dialogue in students’ daily lives. In *Critical Pedagogy*, Klincheloie insists that critical pedagogy “places social and political critiques of everyday life at the center of the curriculum” [2]. Since every particular community’s daily reality and political concerns are unique, Freire instructed his teachers to actually move into the communities and discover the current important issues. It is only with this understanding of the students’ community that educators could fully engage students in a process of conscientization and liberation.

Freire was adamant that, in order to support their students’ conscientization, teachers needed to have a nuanced understanding of students’ communities from the *students’* point of view. In many urban schools throughout the United States, though, many of the teachers are not originally from the local community, or even a community of comparable socio-economic status. This was the case in the urban high school in which this research began, where the faculty was almost entirely from white, upper- and middle-class suburbs but the students were from mostly African America and Latino, low-income urban areas. The teachers and students, therefore, were positioned on alternate sides of a vast socioeconomic division—it self rooted in broader structural inequities which must be addressed. This division meant that teachers did not *necessarily* have a comprehensive understanding of the students’ communities. Students in this school, in fact, often remarked that their teachers were not “‘bout that life”—that they didn’t understand what it meant to grow up in an marginalized urban area. Moreover, teachers’ limited understanding of the students’ lives was often further distorted by dominant deficit ideology that locates the “problem” of inequity in marginalized *individuals* rather than the structural roots of inequality in which we are *all* implicated. This ideology encourages paternalistic practices of trying to “save” or “fix”

marginalized “youth”¹ rather than working with students in a process of conscientization and liberation. In order to act as agents of conscientization, then, it seems that many teachers have the difficult task of *un-learning* deficit ideology and learning about their students’ communities and experiences from their *students’* points of view. The question is *how* can teachers develop this understanding and incorporate it into their classrooms.

2. REALITY PEDAGOGY

Some criticize critical pedagogy as an abstract theory that lacks applicability. Critics deride the “requirement on teachers...to be the agents of [conscientization] without providing much in the way of tangible guidance for that work” as unfair [3]. Emdin responded to this critique by developing a framework of “Reality Pedagogy,” or “teaching and learning based on the reality of the students’ experiences,” which is rooted in the philosophy of Freire’s work but further develops exactly *how* to embed education in students’ daily reality [4]. In fact, like Freire’s critics, Emdin believes that there is too much empty verbosity about “peace and justice in education” and not enough discussion of how to actually make more equitable classrooms. Thus, Emdin identifies five practices which teachers can use to implement “Reality Pedagogy”: Co-generative dialogues, Co-teaching, Cosmopolitanism, Context, and Content [4]. These practices may prove especially helpful for teachers who are trying to develop their understandings of students’ communities and experiences.

The first two “C’s” of Reality Pedagogy are Co-generative dialogues and Co-teaching. Co-generative dialogues, or “cogens,” are small meetings outside of the classroom in which students’ from diverse backgrounds discuss their perceptions of what is going on in the classroom, so that they might “co-generating” a plan for improving the class [4]. Although it might be difficult, educators are required to not only hear their students’ perspectives but also adapt

accordingly and immediately. It is vital that students see that they can have this influence. Moreover, Emdin explains that teaching from *students’* perspectives about what’s powerful is more equitable because it prevents the teacher from teaching from a paternalistic “place of guilt” [4]. Indeed, he adds, “Equity is not giving everybody the exact same thing. Equity is hearing somebody’s voice about what they need and providing them that” [4]. The second “C,” Co-teaching, is often the next step for students who first participated in the cogens. Co-teaching is the practice of “having youth teach the class [because] the students are the experts in how to relay information to one another” [4].

The third “C,” Cosmopolitanism, is a “philosophical construct that, when described in reality pedagogy, becomes a tangible approach to transforming human roles in social settings” [4]. The philosophy of cosmopolitanism focuses on “human responsibility for each other and the value of individual differences” [4]. In today’s urban education, Emdin contends, this often means bringing the accountability and cohesiveness of students’ friend groups into the classroom. For instance, students may bring elaborate handshakes into the classroom to celebrate success. Or, the teacher may assign each student a role (board eraser, material distributor, etc.) that no one else is allowed to perform. Emdin notes one class when his “board eraser” was skipping and the other students were so opposed to the idea of taking notes solely by listening (not copying) that they all texted the missing student until he showed up. In another instance, one of Emdin’s students told her estranged father she could not go on vacation with him because she could not miss a lab day at school or her classmates would not have their microscopes distributed. Indeed, this shared responsibility and accountability creates a kind of family in the classroom [5].

The fourth “C,” Context, is very similar to Freire’s insistence on grounding instruction in the local community. Context, for Emdin, means that instruction is “hyper focused on the *immediate* communities the students are from” [4]. This can mean looking at who the community icons are and bringing them into the classroom. It can also mean seemingly trivial practices like using pictures that students take in the community as the visuals for lessons. Indeed, Emdin notes the excitement students express when they see their “hood” or “street corner” in the lesson. In addition to the benefits that Freire articulated, this focus

¹ The category of “urban youth” is problematic and can be used to mask systemic inequities or talk around the social construction of race and class. The very term brings to mind raced and classed imaged of particular youth living in particular urban spaces. We use this term in quotations to signify that we are trying to problematize the idea of “urban youth” as a discrete, natural category of students. Throughout this paper, we often use the phrasing “marginalized youth” to emphasize that groups of students are structurally oppressed (not inherently ‘deficient’). Marginalization is a processes that involves all of society, not just those who must suffer the consequences.

on the particulars of the local community “allows young people to see that you are not imposing yourself on them, that you understand that where they come from has value” [4]. Perhaps most importantly, Emdin explains, the classroom must be a place for students to engage in critical discourse about their experiences in the community:

...students [need] an opportunity to talk about how they see themselves as Trayvon Martin [or] about incarceration in their communities...a space [discuss] how they are part and parcel of an oppressive process outside of the classroom and how that impacts how they are inside the classroom...[4].

Emdin warns that these conversations require educators to forfeit the insistence that the academic space be a sanitized, neutral space. Indeed, he adds, “in order to obtain peace and justice it takes pushing forth an energy that is actually sort of powerful and shakes things up” [4]. The final “C” of Reality Pedagogy is Content. Emdin asserts that too often we put content *first* before we even engage the students in their learning. Indeed, he concludes, “you cannot get to the content if you do not focus on the environment of the classroom [or] if students don’t have a voice and agency” [4].

Each of Emdin’s “5 C’s” requires that the teacher has an extremely nuanced understanding of the students’ background, including the local community, *from the students’ point of view*. In fact, Emdin asserts that we can’t have peace and justice in education if we don’t know the communities” because we will not be able to connect with our students and “that disconnect causes us not to be effective” [4]. He adds that a superficial discussion of understanding students’ backgrounds is *not* sufficient. Notions of student-centered pedagogy and culturally-responsive pedagogy “make no sense if the teaching is based on *our* perspective of what the culture is” [4]:

I can’t be culturally-relevant if I’m teaching you based on what my perception is of your culture. I can’t be student-centered if I say ‘this is what I think the student wants and needs so let me give them that...[4].

Instead, much like Freire’s insistence that Educators move into their students’ communities, Emdin argues, “we [must] walk those streets and understand where they are coming from”[4].

3. NEUROSCIENCE: SOUSA AND DWECK

Neuroscience, particularly the neurological significance of emotions in learning, provides another important reason why educators *must* understand their students’ backgrounds and perspectives. For, as Sousa [6] explains, the brain’s neurological capacity to process and retain information is largely dependent on students’ emotions. Therefore, if educators want students to be able to think clearly, they must construct learning environments and situations in which the students’ emotional state allows them to do so. This, of course, requires an extremely nuanced understanding of and responsiveness to students’ backgrounds and perspectives [6].

Sousa outlines the “Information Processing Model” to explain the process through which the brain learns. Learners must first attend to the given sensory inputs. Then, this information must pass through the sensory register, into to immediate memory and then on to the working memory. The information is only *then* stored in long term storage networks if the learner attaches both sense and meaning to the learning and if she works with information in multiple ways.

Each step of the “Information Processing Model” reveals the many ways in which “emotions interact with reason to support or inhibit cognitive learning” [6]. First, the amount of attention dedicated to the initial sensory inputs is largely determined by the learner’s cognitive self-concept, especially how the learner feels about a learning situation and her ability to learn. Indeed, Sousa describes the self-concept as the brain’s “blinds” that allow light, or learning, “into” the brain: If the blinds are closed, Sousa notes, “no light will get through regardless of how bright it might be” [6]. Second, if the students do attend to the inputs, the actual cognitive processing is greatly dependent on students’ emotions. For example, if the student feels negatively about the learning environment, her cortisol levels will rise, increasing her anxiety and sending her frontal lobes into fight or flight mode. Her brain will focus on how to deal with this perceived stress, not the content. Conversely, a positive climate produces endorphins that lead to a feeling of euphoria and stimulate the frontal lobes. Clearly, “students must feel physically safe and emotionally secure before they can focus on the curriculum” [6]. Thirdly, learning is further dependent on the learner’s past experiences and consequential emotions [7] because the working memory

seems to ask two “questions” to determine whether an item is saved or rejected: Does this make sense based on my past experiences and does it have any meaning, or relevancy, to my life?

Dweck’s [8] notions of fixed and growth mindsets, further contributes to our understanding of how students’ emotions influences their learning. A learner with “growth mindset” believes that intelligence and ability are process-oriented—that one may not be skilled in something now, but can work to improve or develop. A learner with a “fixedmindset,” conversely, believes that we “naturally” have a given amount of intelligence and skill that we cannot do anything to change. Dweck explains that there are psychological manifestations to mindset, largely because one’s mindset directly influences how she perceives herself in relationship to her learning and thus, the amount of effort, resiliency and focus one applies to a task. Brain scans show students with fixed mindsets worry about how they will be judged (“Do I *look* smart?”), while students with growth mindsets focus on the process of learning (“How can I *learn*?”). Accordingly, those with a fixed mindset see effort as “bad” (as only those who are “dumb” would need it). When they encounter an obstacle or begin to struggle, they perceive this as a failure and conclude that they are incapable. Moreover, they do not want to ask for help. Thus, Dweck explains that to protect their ego, they loose interest or withdraw, which we observe that as lack of motivation, but behind that is a fixed mindset [8].

Fortunately, Dweck’s research, as well as other neuroscientists, shows that the brain is very malleable and that we can change our own ability to think and perform. In one of Dweck’s studies, researchers documented that one sentence of praise (and whether it was fixed or growth oriented) had a significant impact on students’ learning processes. Indeed, when educators praised elementary students *process* (“You must have tried really hard!”), students began to take on more challenging tasks and persist. Conversely, when educators gave one-sentence of fixed praise (“You must be smart at this.”) the students tried to avoid more difficult tasks and even lied to try to protect their “smart” image. If this was the influence of one mere sentence, clearly educators can have an extremely profound influence over time. In fact, when Dweck piloted a workshop with seventh graders to develop their growth mindsets, she

documented an increase in effort and academic achievement. Dweck adds that this impact is even greater for students who face stereotypes, like girls in math or racial minorities in schools [8].

4. EDUCATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY: DEFICIT IDEOLOGY AND SUB-CULTURAL RESISTANCE

The neuroscience that Sousa and Dweck discuss reveals the importance of how students feel in school, particularly their self-concept and mindset and their experience of the classroom environment. Specifically, students who feel unsafe or uncomfortable in the classroom, or who feel as though they are “stupid” and that their intelligence is “fixed” are neurologically *unable* to engage and *unwilling* to attend to rigorous material. Arguably, this vulnerability is further exacerbated by the dominant deficit ideology among educators [8].

Various scholars argue that educators’ deficit perspectives can lead them to approach marginalized students as morally and intellectually deficient and thus, provoke negative emotions among the students (which, according to neuroscience, prevents retention) [9,10]. Dominant deficit perspective constructs the teacher as the “remedial educator” who will “save” oppressed, inherently- “deficient” youth by “correcting” their individual “misgivings” or cultural “flaws” [10]. When educators approach their students from this dominant deficit ideology rather than a place of solidarity, they risk: (1) Directly influencing students’ self-concept; (2) Alienating students and soliciting disengagement or confusion; and (3) Assaulting students’ cultural identities and provoking a kind of self-defeating resistance.

In the first instance, teachers may act in ways that lead the students to internalize their teachers’ deficit thinking and develop a negative self-concept and fixed mindset as a “bad student” who “cannot learn or behave properly” [10]. In the second instance, of alienation, teachers may fail to recognize the importance of integrating *non-dominant* perspectives into the curriculum. As sociologist Loewen notes, this provokes feelings of alienation and disengagement (which the neuroscience discussed above helps us to better understand) and thus, leads to academic “underachievement” [11]. Additionally, given the neurological importance of students’ abilities to make both sense and meaning of the content,

students from marginalized backgrounds may struggle to process the highly ethnocentric dominant curriculum.

In the third instance, cultural assault (however unintentional it likely is), teachers' efforts to teach students to behave "properly" (or, really, to assimilate), may feel like a cultural attack and provoke students to resist in ways that are often deemed "defiant" (further reinforcing problematic stereotypes in both educators and students' minds). Many anthropologists, drawing on sub-cultural theory, argue that such resistive practices are a key mechanism in the social reproduction of structural inequality [13].

Anthropologists who study the "subculture of resistance" among "urban youth" draw on a vast body of scholarship of sub-cultural theory. This theory explains that marginalized communities, comprised of individuals whose agency is constrained but not entirely obliterated by their social-structural location, develop (or adapt) patterns of behaviors and attitudes that are a direct response to their daily experience. As Harvey and Reed [12] explain:

...the subculture of poverty is not a mere 'tangle of pathology,' but consists, instead, of a set of positive adaptive mechanisms. These mechanisms are social constructed, that is, collectively fabricated by the poor from the substance of their everyday lives and they allow the poor to survive in otherwise impossible material conditions...[12].

Individuals adapt practices and beliefs to survive *and* feel comfortable in their material environment.

As Bougois so thoroughly details in *In Search of Respect* [13], the material conditions of poverty often encourage the idea that one must defend his reputation, or his respect, at all costs. In fact, Bougois and other scholars explain that marginalized individuals frequently create subcultural practices that protect their dignity and self-respect in the midst of constant systemic dehumanization. Such dehumanization is, of course, the result of a dominant ideology that deems one's social group as "inferior" and by a socio-economic system that continually oppresses and marginalizes some at the expense of others. In order to defend one's dignity, therefore, these practices take on a "resistive" nature. Indeed, in her ethnography,

Bettie [14] explains that marginalized youth's subcultural practices are intentionally confrontational and defiant in their efforts to reject or discredit the hegemonic system that subjugates them. As Bettie notes, this theory helps us to understand how such behavior and the anger out of which it often stems, is often a "political emotion" or what she deems as "class-barely-aware-of-itself" [14]. That is, many low-socio economic status (SES) youth have a keen enough understanding of class inequality to be angry and resistive and attempt to defend their dignity; however, given the pervasiveness of dominant individualistic ideology, not a critical enough understanding to see how their resistive practices frequently reinforce the structures which oppress them. In many instances, youth subcultural resistances end up reinforcing the very systems of oppression that they are attempting to oppose.

It is this paradoxical nature of the "subculture of resistance"—that is meant to oppose systemic oppression but ends up reproducing it—which Bougois describes as the "contradictory key to its destructive impetus" [13]: That "through cultural practices of opposition, individuals shape the oppression that large forces impose upon them" [13]. Thus, as Bettie explains, subcultural practices are simultaneously resistances to and reproductions of the very inequities from which they grow [14].

5. METHODOLOGY

This teacher research occurred over a three-year period with diverse students during extra curricular summer programs and during individual and group support during their sophomore, junior and senior years in high school in an urban setting in the United States. Approximately 100 students were observed and questioned; however, a smaller group of twenty-four students received one-to-one direct support and participated in small group conversations during their sophomore year in high school. Of these twenty-four students, twenty were male and classified themselves as either African American or Latino, while four were female and were of Caucasian and Latinodes cendent. These students attended high school and summer programs gave their full consent to participate in this research. Additionally, parental consent was also obtained.

The research question for this study is: How does the Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis allow

students to channel their anger to fuel their conscientization process? Conceptual analysis was used to understand and explore high school **minority** students' perceptions of their own reality and its significance in the educational process. Analysis of students responses from group and personal narratives from their "Bout That Life" project provided the idea for the development of the Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis, which was then implemented with a subgroup of remaining members of the initial high school sophomore students described above. Continuous and ongoing conversations with these students spurred the researchers to want to share and implement the Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis with other urban students and educators.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 "Bout That Life" Student Reflections: Internalized Oppression & Conscientization

During our "Bout That Life" narrative project, a relationship between stereotypes, self-concept/mindset, and academic experience and performance was painfully clear. Of the twenty-four students who participated in direct instruction and analysis, two senior high school students, Beth² (who moved from Puerto Rico to this urban community when she was eight) and Jay (an African American who was born and raised in this urban setting) were particularly vocal about this issue. Over the last year, as our group has explored the systemic roots of the "achievement gap," both students have become acutely aware of their internalized stereotypes and how that has influenced their experience of schooling. As Beth explains:

"All that negatively from the media, and from other places, even from our friends...it builds up. It is like a chain. Like all those negative ideas and comments about how we Latinas are "bad" or are "dumb" or "poor"—those are the links in a chain. And it is hard to break. One positive comment from a teacher isn't gonna break the chain, maybe it'll break a link, but that chain ain't going anywhere. It's gonna take time."

Jay added that it is not just comments that make up this "chain" of negativity—that living in an environment where struggle and deprivation are normalized leads one to internalize such expectations for oneself:

"Unlike a lotta kids in the suburbs, our norm is bein in places that are falling apart. Like, the elementary school I went to was so crapy. We didn't even have basketballs that bounce and the bleachers always had wood stick in up on them so you always getting splinters in yourself. If a privileged kid got a splinter in his butt he'd probably go runnin to the principal sayin someone better fix that. But, that's our norm. Once you get enough splinters, you just start expectin' splinters and you're not gonna pick 'em out anymore."

Both Beth and Jay often explain how these internalized expectations of failure influence their schooling. Now seniors in high school, both state that they only recently [within the past year] became comfortable asking for help. Beth explained that she did not want to raise her hand and admit she did not know something because she thought that her white teachers or classmates would think, "Oh that's just another stupid Puerto Rican." Jay agreed, but added that he also did not ask for help because at some point along his education, he "just kinda concluded that I was just bad at school or stupid or something":

"I used to think I was really stupid at math. Like I didn't see any point in trying. I would go into math class and put my head down on the desk right away. Why bother tryin? I thought I was just another stupid black kid. But then, we talked about how I didn't have a real math class for seventh or eighth grade. It was on my schedule it was just a bunch of different subs who'd just sit at the desk and not do anythin. I mean, it was nice then—we loved it cuz we got to goof off. But you know what? That's when I shoulda been learnin how to divide and shit! So when I got to algebra, the letter stuff made sense to me but I didn't know how to divide and so I got everything wrong and I just thought it was cuz I was stupid. I mean, the other kids was getting it, and no one ever talked to me about it. But when I started studyin about the "achievement gap" I started thinkin how it's not that I'm stupid, it's that I wasn't taught it! I didn't know how to divide because I wasn't taught division. So I'm not really embarrassed

² Pseudonyms are used here to protect student identities.

to tell my teacher I don't get division anyone, because I know it doesn't mean I'm stupid."

Beth, too, acknowledges that she had to understand the systemic nature of inequality before she was able to reject the stereotypes she had internalized and act in her own (and others') best interests:

"I think we were lucky. We did this project and we got to talk about the system ...that let us know it's not just our fault that we are "behind"—that we aren't just stupid. And now I raise my hand in class and stuff. But a lotta kids don't get that. So, we speak in out for the kids who weren't as lucky. This is our cry for help. Teachers needa be taught differently. Or the system has to change. Or something. Cuz I don't want other kids in the future being stuck like we were."

Beth's words are a direct testimony to Freire's theory of conscientization: That by analyzing systemic inequalities, students will realize the *constructed* (and thus, changeable) nature of society and will begin to recognize and act on their own agency. It is as if there is a direct relationship between learning to see society as socially constructed and learning to see *oneself* as socially constructed and thus, not "fixed" as a "bad student" who is "unable to learn." Both recognitions are key for individuals to develop the growth mindset and self-concept that is neurologically *imperative* to the learning process.

It is quite understandable to develop ways to defend one's dignity by resisting the very system that marginalizes you; the issue here, though, is that such acts of resistance end up reinforcing individuals' subjugated positions. Educators *must* understand, however, how hegemonic pedagogy puts marginalized "urban youth" in an extremely difficult position. As Beth explained, students often feel stuck between two cultural paradigms:

"...teachers needa understand that when they disrespect us in front of the whole class, every bone in my body is tellin me that I better diss that teacher back in order to defend myself. What if my friends or my parents heard that I let myself get disrespect? I'd get a whopping! But...that's what it's like. I either act the way the teachers want or I act the way my friends and family want. I can never win. Someone's always pissed."

This internal conflict surely closes the brain's "blinds" to learning. Indeed, considering these socio-emotional dynamics in light of neuroscience is extremely troubling. For, students who are uncomfortable in the classroom, see no meaning or sense in the content, or have no faith in their ability to learn, simply cannot process or absorb information. In fact, an educational system that does not embrace and cultivate the identities and self-concepts of *all* students, particularly those who are most vulnerable to negative stereotypes, is neurologically oppressing those students who it is meant to educate. This further entrenches the "achievement gap" (or *opportunity* gap) and precludes the kind of conscientization that, as Freire so clearly explained, is absolutely imperative for our individual humanization and collective liberation. Rather than pushing students to "choose" between the cultural paradigms of school and home, educators must create classrooms that simultaneously value and embrace students' realities while helping students' to critically analyze and act to change the systems that marginalize them.

6.2 Educators' Critical Conscientization: The Importance of Listening

Although we firmly insist that the "achievement gap" is produced by structural inequality, we believe that educational inequity is further reinforced by the neurological and cultural consequences that so often occur when educators are not sufficiently knowledgeable about and responsive to students' realities; this is particularly problematic due to the vast number of poor, urban students of color who are taught by relatively-wealthy, suburban, white educators who are frequently *not* prepared to see through dominant deficit ideology and into the lived experiences of their students. Clearly, the socioeconomic and cultural "divide" between many educators and students is yet another symptom of systemic inequity which must ultimately be "treated" through structural change. In the mean time, however, this "divide" requires that we do a much better job of: Disrupting educators' deficit ideology and developing their understandings of *and* abilities to respond to the daily realities of urban youth.

Educators' critical conscientization must of course begin in their own education, both before and throughout their official "Teacher Preparation." A systemic analysis of social inequality, a theoretical basis in critical pedagogical methods,

and an emphasis on learning about students' cultural backgrounds should be *central* to all teacher preparation. Moreover, once teachers are in the classroom, we feel that they should learn about their students' communities [1,4] by drawing on practical models like Moll's [15] "funds of knowledge". This model requires teachers to step out of the role as the "expert" and enter into the students' community and families as a "learner." Specifically, teachers, in collaboration with anthropologists, develop their ability to learn *from* and *with* (not just *about*) their students. The aim is to develop an understanding of students' "funds of knowledge," or the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" [15]. Educators can then better center their classrooms around these "funds of knowledge." Notably, this requires that teachers learn ethnographic methods as well as reflexivity, both of which are dependent upon the ability to step out of the dominant teacher role and truly *listen* to one's students.

During one of our "Bout That Life" sessions, one of the students articulated the importance of such authentic listening. Beth was explaining how she thinks "privilege can be like that two-sided glass in those cop shows...or whatever":

"...you know? The ones where the detective can see into the room but the criminals can't see out? Well, I guess it's kinda backwards. But, like, that two-sided glass thing is like what privilege is like. Us, on the 'outside' of the privilege, we can see 'in' and see all your privilege. But you guys, on the 'inside' you can't see 'out'—you can't see your privilege."

In response, the teacher-researcher told Beth that this is why teachers from privilege needed to hear their students describe their daily experiences "bout that life." She quickly corrected saying: "Nah, people from privilege don't just needa hear us, Miss, they need to *listen*."

6.3 Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis©

Very little research is focused on educators unpreparedness to root their practice in students' realities and still less is focused on exactly *how* educators can do so [4]. Emdin's Reality pedagogy does provide a number of concrete suggestions for how to root the classroom

experience in students' realities, all of which we certainly support. One of the teacher researchers in this study developed a framework for how to implement the ideas of critical pedagogy in today's classrooms. We refer to this framework here as the "Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis."

The Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis framework draws on urban students' anger to fuel their critical conscientization (critical analysis and action). Specifically, the framework is intended to help educators and students work collaboratively to create spaces in which they can: Express their *anger* with social inequities, learn to *analyze* their individual experiences within broader, socially constructed systems and practice the collective resistance necessary to *act* for social change. Although various critical pedagogy models encourage educators to analyze social inequalities and act to transform them, they frequently skip what we believe is the foundation of students' learning: Their emotional connection to the material. Indeed, the neuroscience discussed above testifies to the importance of assuring students emotional "blinds" are primed before one worries about the content. Emdin, too, argues that content should come "last" and that our students' emotional experience in the classroom is primary. Still, too often, we see educators try to ignore, suppress, or pervert what we believe could be a primary emotion among many marginalized students: Anger. For instance, we have watched as well-meaning educators begin their Social Justice course with a lecture on civil rights that, while intimately connected to the students' lives as well as the daily injustices which they do in fact care deeply about, does not sufficiently engage their emotions *first* in order to spark their interest. In other instances, we see educators tell urban students that they need to "flip" their anger, or turn their frustrations with the world into "motivation to put in the hard work necessary to succeed." In our experiences, students need to first feel as though they can authentically express and explore their anger before they recognize the importance of analyzing its sociological roots [16].

Creating spaces in which students can individually and collectively express their frustrations with social inequality has a number of additional benefits. First, educators from more privileged backgrounds have another opportunity to learn about and from their students' perspectives. This also builds students' trust and respect in the educator and is particularly

important for white teachers as, in our experiences, many students of color often default to the belief that white teachers are “racist until proven otherwise.” Our students seemed to only begin to trust and respect us once they learned that we would *not* try to stop them if they expressed “anti-white” sentiments. Indeed, we have come to believe that students of color often use racially-charged humor to “test” their white teachers to see if they are “the kind of white person who does not want to talk about racism.” Instead of waiting for students to “test” our racial paradigms, however, we would do well to intentionally create spaces for students to voice their anger with racism (among other inequalities). Second, such opportunities to express their anger will likely allow students to feel heard and thus, be less likely to demand to be “heard” (e.g. acting-out) during times when it is disruptive to their and others’ learning. Third, by expressing their anger in community with others, we set students up to begin to rethink their “personal problems” as “public issues,” which is the first step in developing a “sociological imagination” and becoming an agent of change [16].

The “Analysis” of the Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis is, of course, absolutely imperative, lest the classroom is reduced to a mere support group for students to gripe. Students must first learn to contextualize their individual experience within broader structures of social inequality. As Beth and Jay noted, students must learn that their struggles are not, as dominant ideology would suggest, “the individual’s fault” but the product of a broad system of social inequality in which *all* citizens are implicated. Then, as Freire explained and the students in this study so adamantly supported, students must learn to see that such structures are socially constructed and *not inevitable*. Then, students can see that they can act to change the very structures that unfairly oppress them and as Beth and Jay exemplified, they can also un-learn their “internalized oppression” [17]. As students recognize their own agency, they are better prepared to act in their own best interest.

7. CONCLUSION

In our opinion, using urban students’ anger to fuel their critical conscientization is simply “best practice.” Educators may also appreciate, however, that the Anger-Analysis-Action Praxis may very well decrease students’ “defiant” behaviors. Dominant practice is to discipline

students as a means to eradicate problematic behaviors—a tendency which has exploded into a blatantly racist suspension/expulsion rate and a veritable “school-to-prison pipeline” which is neither ethical nor behaviorally or financially effective. These discipline practices focus on reforming the individual/culture and depoliticizing the context of the students’ behavior. Instead, in addition to addressing the inequitable conditions to which students are likely responding (ie. inequitable housing, health, jobs, infrastructure, etc.) we should encourage students to identify the systemic roots of their anger and recognize the difference between “self-defeating” and “transformational” resistance [17]. As students learn to contextualize their anger within the socioeconomic system, they are better able to make informed decisions about how to best resist.

Scholars like Emdin and Irizarry do work that is connected to this—Emdin continually advocates for professional development that is “student-driven” and Irizarry engages the Youth Participatory Action Research model to have students analyze systemic educational inequity and then present their findings at academic conferences. We have yet to come across any work that combines all of these elements—that works with students to reflect upon and analyze the systems that oppress them and then create the opportunity for students to use their experiential and scholarly knowledge about such inequality to teach their teachers how to create more egalitarian classrooms.

This pedagogy, including our beliefs about how education and social change are inherently connected—suggests that this hybrid of critical pedagogy and student-driven professional development could be extremely beneficial for all who are involved. We wholeheartedly believe in the importance of working with a small group of marginalized urban high school youth to draw on their anger to fuel their critical conscientization—their analysis of *and* action to change systemic inequality. Moreover, we believe that the opportunity to use their personal narratives to educate their teachers is extremely validating for students *and* valuable for educators. The “Bout That Life” project was the first attempt to implement this model, and we are anxious to continue to develop it. Indeed, we think this process is, in fact, our own critical conscientization—analysis of *and* action to transform the world in which we live—that, according to Freire, is necessary for us to

become “fully human.” We hope that our conscientization process contributes to the construction of a more egalitarian world that protects the dignity and agency of each and every one of us and we truly believe that it is a sure way to assure prioritization of those voices that have too often been marginalized: The voices of marginalized youth themselves. In this way, our “pedagogy,” or philosophy of how and where to “lead a child,” is at root, a process of learning to lead by listening.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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