

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

TO BE A BETTER TEACHER: A CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

By

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Norman, Oklahoma

2024

TO BE A BETTER TEACHER: A CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC
CURRICULUM

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Abstract

In this paper, I aimed to answer the following questions in order to find potential avenues of improving my present conditions as a teacher: What does it mean to be a teacher? What will it take to be a better teacher? I utilized critical reflections of my teaching experience thus far to analyze and interpret the sense of dread that I have come to associate with being a teacher. First, I aimed to uncover the source of this dread and investigate how it is perpetuated. Then, I juxtaposed my K-12 education experience with my college experience to identify the lack of community in K-12 schools as a reason as to why the dehumanization of students and teachers has become normalized in our society. I make the case for democratic education as a potential response to the dehumanizing education currently found in schools. Finally, I use theories from John Dewey and Paulo Freire to look into my future in the profession as a more democratic educator.

Keywords: Democratic education, problem-posing education, banking education, dehumanization, infracommunication, organic intellectual

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CHAPTER ONE

TO BE A TEACHER: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

Just Another Day

It's Monday again. I wake up after only a few hours of sleep. I need more, but my racing mind does not allow me. I get up even though I don't want to. I shower even though I don't want to. I get dressed even though I don't want to. I grab my backpack, get into the car, and drive to work, even though I don't want to. *I only have to do this four more times this week, after today.*

There is a heavy layer of dread weighing me down every morning as I get ready for work, and today is no different. My mind is clouded by a concoction of anxiety- and stress-inducing thoughts about what lies ahead. I mentally review the lessons for the day while I am in the shower. I think of what needs to be done during my planning period while I get dressed and make a to-do list as the car heats up, fully accepting that the plan will be interrupted by something out of my control. All this preparation to fight off the sense of dread keeping me down, and it has yet to work.

My fear and anxiety intensify as I drive, as if worsened by my proximity to my place of employment. Every mile I drive brings me closer to the source of my dread, with the layer of dread enveloping my body growing ever thicker. So much so that its tightening grip is affecting me physically. My stomach begins to turn, and the stress of it all results in a once centralized headache spreading to every inch of my head. My breathing is short, and I find myself hyperventilating. Music is playing, but I can barely hear it over my racing thoughts, my breathing, the ringing in my ears. Unfortunately, I arrive at my destination sooner than expected. I never know if it's worse to want there to be traffic or not. Is it better to delay the inevitable or to cut to the chase and get it over with?

Once parked, I put on the “mask” I wear to show everyone else that I am okay. *Haven't I been here before?* It's a tight fit. I've worn this mask ever since my mother dropped me off at school the very first time when I was four years old. The fit is snug, bordering on suffocating.

Once inside the school, I put my mask to good use. It's a relatively long walk to my first hour class. I walk amongst dozens if not hundreds of students and teachers and custodians and administrators and librarians and counselors and resource officers and paraprofessionals and attendance clerks. I try to conserve energy by only giving slight smiles, nods, and quick “good mornings” to those with whom I make eye contact - which I would keep at a minimum if not for the mask. More energy is used for those who enthusiastically greet me by name - usually students - which truthfully, I don't mind.

“Good morning, teacher!”

“Hello, Mr. Gallegos. How are you?”

It is when hearing these things that I get to practice being the person I want to be. I am someone who mostly keeps to myself. Social interaction can be exhausting. I would much rather stay at home than interact with strangers, or even close friends at times. But as a teacher I get to be the person I think I ought to be, for my own sake; there's only so much growing I can do by myself. It is a delicate balance, being social. It can expend my energy just as easily as it can give me energy. I find myself being fed more energy when interacting with my students individually. They truly are great people, and I appreciate the opportunity to build rapport with them. I let these short interactions in the hallway fill my head with ideas that I am going to have a good day.

Then I get to class, and I again struggle to feel okay. My first class has a unique problem. Students arriving late to school trickle in throughout the period. This means that there is a constant flow of interruptions, and a deluge of questions from those who are receiving

incomplete lessons. I have to repeat the instructions twice, three times, five times. *It's out of my control, I'm doing my best.* I am somehow able to make it through class, albeit without completing the lesson.

I don't have a second hour class. That time is dedicated to working with my professional learning community (PLC), which consists of myself and three of my peers who teach the same subject. This is the first break of the day, to some extent. Even though it is a break from teaching, I keep wearing my mask as interactions with my colleagues bring their own challenges. Namely, the considerable age gap between us, which doesn't impede our getting along and working together but does make it difficult to develop a deeper working relationship. I simply do not relate to their experiences, and they don't relate to mine. It takes me back to my K-12 education. Not only do I see the faces and hear the voices of my former teachers when in PLC, but I also assume my role as a student again as I listen and listen to them and see myself having very little opportunity to add anything to the conversation.

Third hour rolls around, and suddenly the weight of the dread has doubled. I weave through hallway traffic making my way to class on the other side of the school. I smile and greet my students, avoiding distracted walkers glued to their phones and groups of students impeding traffic taking center stage in the middle of the hallway. I arrive at my destination and greet the teacher whose classroom I am borrowing as she rushes to *her* PLC. This used to be my favorite class, consisting of only fifteen students, which provided the opportunity to develop a great working relationship. We worked hard and had fun while doing it. However, now third period is up to thirty-five students, and I have had an equally difficult time developing relationships with the newer students and maintaining relationships with my original fifteen.

Every teacher has an advisory class, a shortened period immediately following third hour, meant to help students complete their state-mandated “career exploration activities” while nourishing “personal responsibility” by keeping their grades up. Fortunately, my advisory class is in the same room as my third hour, so I don’t have to go anywhere. Unfortunately, I must share the space with the teacher whose room I am occupying. It is difficult for either of us to do our jobs as we share the same space, simultaneously trying to deliver different materials and activities to two different groups of students. Even when we do deliver similar material, we use different languages to communicate with our students. I take solace in remembering this period is only 35 minutes, although the constant chaos makes it feel much longer.

The second “break” of the day follows my advisory class, and I head to the library, the base of operations of most traveling teachers. This is my planning period, and I try to use this time to prepare lesson plans, catch up on grading, and make parent contacts. I say “try” because here again there are obstacles. During my planning period I encounter the general distractions of the library as well as regular requests for technical support from the other traveling teachers.

After my planning period, I head to fifth hour, which thankfully is in the same room as my sixth and seventh hours. It is in fifth period that I struggle the most with behavioral issues, and I use almost all of my energy. Constantly talked over, students playing on their phones, requests to repeat instructions, student ill-preparedness, and too few seats or tables all make for a terrible time. Every day I feel like a failure before, during, and after this class. By the end of fifth period my once snug mask is slipping away. At least I have lunch after this class, allowing me to recharge enough to get through the last two classes of the day.

I return to the library for lunch. Lunchtime is too short for me to go out to eat, and I don’t have my own classroom to relax in. I usually don’t eat lunch. My stomach never stops turning,

and I don't feel good enough to eat. But I do get to relax with the library team. We have a good working relationship, but I also like to think we have become good friends. I am lucky to have them. For the first and only time throughout the workday, I take off my mask. I don't have to pretend when I am with the librarians and library clerk. I can just be.

Echoes of my students' voices fill my head. I'm disassociating – focusing on what's in my mind and not what's in front of me. I hear all the side conversations I've had to break up throughout the day, and once again I feel the disrespect of being talked over. I think of all the questions students have had, and I start to think of better responses than the ones I gave on the spot. I think of all the things I still need to do tomorrow, the next day, and the day after that. I think of my mental to-do list, and I give myself a hard time for not having crossed out enough things. On the verge of panic, a question directed toward me brings me back to the conversation at hand. My stomach is still turning, my head is still aching, but at least I can breathe.

Making my way back to class after lunch, I notice some of my sixth period students walking the opposite direction. I ask them where they're going and warn them not to be late. They say they're going to get a drink of water even though there's a water fountain a few steps from our classroom. I decide it's not a fight not worth fighting. The students this period are the most willing to engage in conversation with me before, during, and after class. They are all friendly with one another, which has been a great help in forming a classroom community. But this also results in distracted conversations while I'm trying to teach. Energy is spent re-engaging them in on-topic discussions, which is the complete opposite of my experience with my seventh hour students.

I've never been very good at maintaining conversations, so having to go from refocusing conversations in sixth hour to fighting to start conversations in seventh hour is a demanding task.

I'm nearing the end of the day, and I am fighting to reach the final bell so I can start my relaxation time at home. But I do reach the bell because I must.

I'm finally home. I get to remove my mask and let myself feel how I feel. I am drained. I struggled in all my classes, for one reason or another, getting my students to pay attention; I struggled in my non-teaching hours preparing lessons and catching up on my grading; but most of all, I struggled in keeping up the lie that everything was alright.

I feel guilty for not loving my job the way other teachers say they do. I feel anxious about not meeting expectations set for me by my administrators and school district. But most importantly, I feel guilty about not meeting the expectations I set for myself. I feel stressed about having to readjust tomorrow's lessons and, in turn, the rest of the week's lessons, having failed to do everything I planned for today. I feel a lot, but at least I get to relax in the comfort of my home! *If only this were true.*

Instead of having time for myself at home, I must finish all the things I wasn't able to do during my planning period because I was asked for help by another teacher and my people-pleasing personality wouldn't let me say, "I'm sorry, but could you ask someone else? I have work of my own to get done." So here in the evening I do the work, and my actual workday ends much later than the time for which I'm being paid. I go to bed late, and I wake up early.

It's Tuesday again, and I have another day.

Sources of Dread

To be a teacher, for me, is to struggle. That is the lesson I've learned after three years of teaching. I don't feel this is the lesson I should have gotten, nor the lesson I *wanted*, but it is the lesson I learned. As is true of people in general, every teacher has a different experience and

perspective, so I recognize there are teachers out there (most likely, some I work with) whose daily experiences are not filled with dread and do not require them to mask their emotions. I also recognize that our experiences exist on a spectrum, so most teachers are somewhere between what I experience and what the most content teacher experiences.

In reflecting on the sources of dread in my teaching, it is important to acknowledge that I am not placing blame on any specific individual or even group of individuals. I believe the problem with education is much bigger than one person. It lies in the coevolution or development of the education system alongside society. The reflections on which this paper is built revolve around the symptoms of systemic problems rather than specific students or administrators.

The sources of my dread can be organized into one of two categories: internal obstacles and external obstacles. These, when linked together through an experience such as teaching, produce the dread I constantly feel. Internal obstacles are the emotional/mental struggles I deal with personally, things I brought with me to the profession and not something I got out of it. These can be things such as anxiety related to public speaking, feelings of ineptitude, or difficulties in remaining focused on a single task. Although these problems may not have started with my teaching experiences, it is important to recognize that they can be exacerbated by them.

External obstacles are those obstacles that teachers face daily, often related to scarcity of three of the most sacred resources in education: time, space, and money. In my experience, I've had to struggle with curriculum pacing. For example, my first year of teaching was at an alternative school structured around credit recovery, so the curriculum normally covered in sixteen weeks at a traditional high school was expected to be covered in eight weeks at this school. Additionally, and in conjunction with the credit recovery mindset of many alternative schools, each of us were expected to teach two different classes each period. For example, I had

students for Oklahoma History and students for Civics in the same class, and I was expected to teach the two classes simultaneously. This caused daily headaches as I struggled to function within an illogical and untenable structure within a broken system.

Curriculum pacing is still an issue at my current school, albeit for different reasons. Instead of being required to teach two classes simultaneously and cover the full curriculum in half the time, we are expected to follow the district pacing calendar as closely as possible. We are urged to make up ground and catch up whenever we are behind, which is always. Constant reminders that I am not at the expected pace or place in the curriculum is definitely a source of dread for me. It never leaves my mind, even when I'm supposed to be relaxing.

Aside from time, obstacles relating to space are also evident in my day-to-day teaching. Schools in our district are not large enough to accommodate their student bodies. My experiences are evidence of this. Without a classroom of my own, I must "borrow" other teachers' classrooms, and I am far from alone in this. In our department alone, there are at least five traveling teachers. Apart from having to walk from classroom to classroom, this creates additional challenges without the physical spaces needed for community.

Prior to becoming a traveling teacher, my only experience with travel teaching occurred last year when other teachers used my room during my PLC and planning periods. It was an inconvenience to have to go elsewhere even during my planning period since I work best without distractions and since organic distractions are inevitable when working alongside others. However, last year's experiences helped me empathize with the teachers whose classrooms I currently borrow, and I'm more mindful of my presence because of it.

Other than not having enough classrooms for teachers, the biggest external obstacle related to limited space is not having enough teachers for the students. Large class sizes have

plagued public education for years, and it remains one of the greatest obstacles to positive student learning. Another challenge, related to large classes, which persists no matter how many times I attempt to minimize it is students interrupting to ask for help. This can take form in one of two ways: students interrupting me mid-sentence as I give instructions or speak to the whole class, and students repeatedly calling out when I am clearly busy helping another student. This issue persists in part because of the large class sizes. Whether it is students trickling in throughout the hour, me constantly asking for quiet as I give instructions, or students being on their phones when instructions are given, none of these situations are helped by large class sizes.

It is also abundantly clear to all teachers in our district that our schools are plagued with severe problems of resource allocations such as a lack of certified teachers and insufficient classroom space. Understanding these issues of lack of time, space, and resources helps get to the root of the most important pair of questions to be asked of all of society's problems: Why are things like this, and what can we do about it? If I had not reflected on my feelings of dread, I would not have been able to name the conditions under which they were birthed; and without having named those conditions, I could not have identified their root causes; and if I never identified the root causes of my dread, it would be literally impossible to find a way out.

The Questions Driving My Inquiry

Reflection brings understanding, and I have come to understand that the internal and external obstacles to teaching I have experienced are products of a deeper issue at hand. There is a profound absence of connection in schools (Palmer, 2007). My schools' mission statements and district-wide initiatives have painted pictures of schools as community-driven spaces for growth, which is incongruent with my experiences of the day-to-day operations of in-school

practices. The schools I have experienced lack community, and they therefore also lack warmth, connection, and vision. No wonder such schools are producing apathetic, individualistic people.

How do I work against all things working against me? It is especially difficult to reflect on the experiences one is trying to escape. *Why must I think about the things I don't want to think about?* It is necessary to do so to bring the desired change, but also because not doing so would lead to acceptance and internalization of our present conditions. The purpose of this inquiry is to further reflect on these problems with school, in the hopes of finding ways to rid myself – and hopefully others – of the heavy layer of dread that currently resides within the profession and, in doing so, begin to reclaim our rightful place as democratic teachers (Brodhagen, 1995; Greene, 1988) and “transformative intellectuals” (Giroux, 1988).

The Status Quo

Accepting our present conditions, regardless of our classification of them as problematic, is the most surefire way to ensure their prosperity. I have personally encountered undesirable teaching conditions, and it took a great deal of personal growth for me to not blindly accept the status quo, instead playing my part in bringing necessary change. I'm still learning, but I have come a long way from where I started. We are forged by how we engage with what is viewed as “normal” in our society. Some may comply, and some may challenge or disrupt.

However, compliance and disruption are not two binary states, instead, they should be seen as being on opposite sides of a spectrum or, as Palmer puts it, “poles of a paradox” where energy and change can occur (Palmer, 2007). Whereas a binary view presents us with only two options under a single rigid growth process, a spectrum offers myriad options under more fluid and gradual growth processes. In other words, seeing things in binary terms puts us in a

predicament wherein we must choose between a state of compliance or disruption. We may change our choice between options, but never the options themselves. It's either one or the other. On the other hand, seeing things in a spectrum allows us to gradually progress. All this to say that talking to dozens of teachers throughout my career has shown me various perspectives on the roles of teachers when it comes to changing/maintaining the status quo.

Looking back on my two previous years in education, along with reflecting on my current one, I have noticed that most of the teachers I've worked and spoken with are quick to point out the problems with education. For example, colleagues from my first year shared my stress about the condensed schedule and, more importantly, having to teach two classes simultaneously. What differed was how different teachers vocalized their complaints and what solutions they offered, if any. Some of them just needed to vent. They didn't necessarily offer alternative approaches; they just seemed to want to complain about their current conditions. These teachers usually did so to other teachers, with whom I believe they found community and safety. Others were very vocal not only about their disdain for their current conditions but also the solutions they gladly offered to administrators in group settings such as staff meetings. While these two examples could be viewed as binary opposites, within a spectrum most teachers in both would actually fall closer to disrupting than complying. Within a spectrum, there were also teachers who did not disrupt, instead accepting their present conditions even though they had much to complain about.

Looking back at my first year, I would place myself closer to compliance than disruption on the spectrum. I did not feel comfortable complaining to others about the dread I was developing within the profession I had spent so much time, money, and energy preparing to join, much less offering solutions of my own. I kept my feelings to myself, reliant upon my mask to show everyone I was okay. My relationship to my mask was akin to Gollum's relationship with

the One Ring in J.R.R. Tolkien's (1937) *The Lord of the Rings* series. I was obsessed with its power without realizing its debilitating effects. In relying on my mask, I failed to connect with my coworkers in meaningful and productive ways. I allowed my negative experiences to sour my feelings but did not open the door for those feelings to improve my experiences.

I wasn't alone. In my experiences and interactions with others, present conditions make it exceedingly difficult for public school teachers to have positive teaching experiences, and those who don't fight these conditions are prone to do one of two things: (1) leave the profession, or (2) stay and accept the conditions. I gradually allowed myself to shed my mask and open up to my colleagues. However, this occurred in my second year and at a different school. I could not stay somewhere that caused emotional distress and continually made me anxious. So I left. Not the profession, only the school. Throughout the process, I was becoming increasingly aware that something is not right with public education as our decision makers continue to engage in misguided if not malicious efforts to "fix" the system.

Ryan Walters, Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction, has promoted incentive programs that, on paper, aim to rectify the issue of teacher shortages. However, when analyzed closely, it is evident that he fundamentally misunderstands the problem in Oklahoma education. Walter's handling of teacher shortages is like a doctor putting a band aid on a patient's obviously broken leg – it is not nearly enough. Undergirding this mistreatment is a misdiagnosis. Perhaps the patient broke his leg in a skateboarding accident, and the break is accompanied by cuts and scratches. The band aid may help with the cuts and scratches, but it will do no good in solving the fundamental problem at hand. Throwing money at teachers is the band aid of choice for our state superintendent.

To be a teacher, in my experience, is to be disrespected and unappreciated. It is astounding that our state superintendent has solicited untrained people outside the profession and from beyond state lines when there are so many thoughtful and passionate individuals currently *in* the profession who are not receiving the support they need to simply do their jobs. This is a perfect illustration of the undervaluing of the work teachers do, especially when combined with the external obstacles outlined above, including mandated curricula, insufficient resources, and an excessive emphasis on raising test scores. Our “leaders” are making decisions that negatively impact us as teachers, and, in turn, our students.

In my experience, to be a teacher is to be completely and utterly disappointed by the lack of vision and understanding among those in power. This makes it almost impossible to see any hope in the future of education. *Almost impossible...*

My Embers of Hope

Why am I even doing this? I ask this question anytime I feel strong disillusionment with my role within the education system, which is often. To be a teacher is to feel defeated. It is easy for me to see how and why we, as teachers, become jaded with our work, especially if we sincerely wish to prepare future generations of productive members for a democratic society. For so many of us, it is precisely this work with American youth that drives us not only to stay in the profession but to work on ourselves to become better teachers.

I consider it a privilege to be in a position where I can influence young people to become better versions of themselves – whether by working on their literary and analytical skills, developing their social skills alongside their peers, or just developing more informed outlooks on current events. This is a responsibility I do not take lightly.

Something that has been a part of my teaching philosophy since before becoming a teacher is the value I place in forming a community with my students. I believe we teachers need to build bridges to connect with students rather than building barriers between ourselves and our students, as some teachers do (Palmer, 2007). Oftentimes, the justification for the barrier is one of maintaining professionalism. “We are their teachers, not their friends. We need to maintain boundaries.” I agree with this sentiment but believe it can be taken to an extreme. Just as I wouldn’t recommend that teachers become Facebook friends with their current students or spend time with them outside school in a friend capacity, I would argue that forming walls between ourselves and our students sets us all up for failure. Students should not be expected to blindly follow the instructions of strangers. Such unquestioning loyalty is what allows corrupt policymakers and problematic institutions to continue damaging our communities while retaining their oppressive roles.

We, as teachers, must connect with our students if we want to be “successful,” so I work hard to connect with my students, and I have seen both small and large instances of success as a result. These instances of success are precisely what we, as teachers, live for. An example from my classroom is that my students are developing greater willingness to advocate for themselves as a result of my modeling this type of advocacy for myself and our community.

From the very beginning here in my third year of teaching, I trusted my students with my problems as I want them to trust me with theirs. I cannot do my job as a teacher, after all, if I don’t know what obstacles my students are encountering. So if I want my students to share their learning difficulties with me, and to acknowledge what other teachers have done to help, I need to model similar honesty in the learning process. I can, of course, learn this information in time,

but having students work with me instead of me working off what I notice and understand expedites the process.

Therefore, I have tried being open about how my students' behaviors make me feel and connecting with their feelings and past experiences and behaviors on a less abstract and more personal level. For example, this year I say things like: "It makes me feel sad when students are on their phones while I am speaking to them, because they are showing me that they do not respect me, even though all I am trying to do is help." Modeling this kind of open and honest dialogue and opening it up for future discussion has been a key element in my classroom that not only helps in the process of getting to know each other but also humanizes everyone in the room.

"Success" in forming connections with students and modeling self-expression can be found in day-to-day interactions. It never ceases to amaze me just how open students can be about their feelings. As a student, I used to hear classmates bring up their frustrations with school and refuse to engage with the schoolwork as a way of rebelling against their teachers. However, now, as a teacher, my students express their frustrations in non-combative and productive ways to seek solutions. My students have become increasingly willing to advocate for their own education, and they let me know if and when I am falling short in my role as their teacher to facilitate learning. Yet, although this is important and appreciated, it is not without problems.

One of my new concerns is that my modeling of "appropriate" communication, coupled with my problematization of "combative" and "unproductive" self-expression, reinforces traditional mindsets regarding the "proper" roles of students and teachers in schools. I recognize that claiming appropriate ways of bringing attention to problems as better or more productive than others is a form of policing students' emotions. It promotes what Freire (2005) calls

“normalizing judgment.” That is not the teacher I want to be, either. So, the question remains, how *can* I be better?

I want to highlight a specific scenario that occurred in one of my classes this year to illustrate the complexities in forming a community with students. This scenario illustrates how my modelling of emotional honesty influenced my students’ and how easy it can be for teachers to dismiss resistant or uncompliant student activity as “bad behavior” while celebrating compliance and acceptance.

It was just another day in my third hour class. The lesson involved working with my students to analyze key concepts within a hypothetical scenario regarding income and budgeting. The main activity was to read a provided scenario and answer the accompanying questions. The lesson involved several steps throughout the reading such as identifying and circling the numbers (dollar amounts, hours worked, number of months) to later answer the questions.

Unfortunately, there were constant interruptions, and time and again I had to stop and ask my students to quiet down or get off their phones. It got to a point where I’d had enough. All my classes share the problem of not paying attention and then asking questions about what I was attempting to explain when we have moved on to something else. However, I get especially frustrated with the number of times this happens in third period. Frustrated with the constant interruptions and stream of questions, I was honest with my students. I told them that I wanted them to work on the worksheet by themselves for the remainder of class as they were being incredibly disrespectful towards me and their classmates, and I apologized to those who were paying attention and genuinely trying to learn. I told them that I would be available at my desk for individual tutoring.

The class became silent, and all eyes were on me as I walked to my seat. I could tell my students felt badly, maybe ashamed, because I overheard a few of them chastise their classmates for not paying attention and being rude to me. I took a seat, let out a heavy sigh of frustration, and buried my face in my hands. A couple of minutes passed, and I heard the shuffling of feet from across the room. I looked up as one of my students reached my desk, worksheet in hand, and asked for help. Her tone was calm and reassuring. I could tell she felt badly. I picked myself up and began to help her, trying to match her tone.

Others followed suit, and I was soon surrounded by a dozen of my students, about a third of the class. They were attentive and inquisitive, and they matched the calming tone of the first student. It felt nice to have my students simultaneously show and ask for support. I looked up at the rest of my students, who were noticeably quieter than they had been only a few minutes before. Very few were on their phones or off task. Many were working on the worksheet; some had their ears perked up in the direction of the mini class that had formed around my desk. I invited them over, but they respectfully declined, focusing on their work. I returned to those surrounding me until the bell rang and the classroom emptied.

Reflecting on this experience, two things stand out that directly relate to my forming community with this class. First, the students are willing to express their empathy to me and their classmates. Second, I am aware that I am giving more attention to those students who exhibit “good” behavior, and in turn placing a greater value on compliance than disruption. What this shows me is that no matter what I have done to improve the educational conditions of my students, I am still a part of a system that is actively working against that which I set out to do. Figuring out how to separate ourselves from a toxic system sufficiently to help transform or dismantle that system is a necessity, and it is what I currently consider to be my main career

goal. While our school district and state government demand that we work toward other goals such as increasing test scores and failing fewer students, I aim to be a better teacher for the sake of my students and myself. How does one work against the heavy layer of dread that results from being forced to comply with fundamentally dehumanizing and miseducative practices and relationships? I do not yet know, but I aim to figure this out. And I believe my students to be the key.

CHAPTER TWO

TO BE IN COMMUNITY: A BROADER VIEW OF THE PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

I began by discussing my heavy feelings of dread related to my educational experiences, and I identified several main sources of that dread through an exploration of the internal and external obstacles. However, as I have continued to teach and learn, I am becoming increasingly aware that my own educational experiences are similar to many others' experiences. Since this is the case, it stands to reason that my own experiences, from kindergarten through high school and college and into my first few years of teaching, could provide insight regarding the larger systemic problems that exist in education and society and, conversely, that understanding those larger systemic problems could help me and other teachers understand our own situations. With this in mind, this chapter focuses on: (1) the miseducation frequently experienced in schools; (2) the dehumanization that occurs in schools; (3) the dehumanization of teachers and students in general; and (4) democratic education as a possible solution.

The Effects of (Mis)Education and Stepping Away from It

My childhood was one of passive compliance. I lived a relatively comfortable life growing up; I was the youngest of three to loving, immigrant parents. We never went hungry and always had a roof over our heads. We were never rich, but we were never poor, either. We lived in an urban, inner-city environment, and I went to public school within this community. I was purported to be a bright student, one who was going to "go far in life." I enjoyed the social aspect of school, and only slightly remained interested in the learning, but only because I was

good at it. I accepted life as it was and felt passionate about nothing. As such, I never questioned much of anything that I was exposed to – whether in school or on the internet.

This lack of questioning became a two-fold problem as I internalized my disillusionment with education and slowly became radicalized by internet meme culture. School was the biggest part of my life that I didn't put much thought into. I had accepted it, from a very young age, as an expected part of life: everyone goes to school and learns in school. I never questioned the role of school in society as a space for learning and preparing for "the real world." However, in time, doubts began to grow over whether it was accomplishing these goals. Eventually, I started to question the effectiveness of schools in preparing students for life, but I did not consider that there were possibilities for change or betterment.

The older I got, the more fleshed out my criticisms of my educational experiences became, and at the root of these criticisms was an unmistakable feeling that my schooling was deficient. No matter how well I performed in school, I couldn't help but feel that I wasn't learning enough. No matter how large the schools were, they weren't big enough to appropriately house the students. No matter how many teachers there were, there weren't enough to ensure reasonable class sizes. These and plenty of other examples of deficiency were apparent to me, even as a high school student. As these criticisms were being fleshed out, considerations for possible changes in schools were entering my mind. For the longest time, I couldn't name what it was that needed to change, but I understood that *something* had to change. But until this change occurred, I only grew more and more disillusioned with the prospect that education was a resource for our individual and collective betterment, and I came to view it more as an obstacle.

As a student, I couldn't help but feel there was a disconnection between what we were told and what we were experiencing. We were made to believe that learning occurs in

classrooms, but I learned a great deal from my friends on the playground and lunchroom. I thought that maybe there was a lack of attention placed on the social element of education by the schools. We were being made to believe that the teacher is the holder and dispenser of knowledge, but the reality was that the teacher oftentimes didn't even know how to engage the students as well as we could engage each other. We were told that school was preparing us for the "real world" without acknowledgment that many of us brought plenty of lived experience from the real world. Even as a high school student, I knew there was a disconnect between schools and students, and it was blurring my vision of school. When you cannot see the purpose in something, you cannot see the value in it, so you search for things in which you do see a purpose.

Disillusioned with school, I sought comfort and understanding elsewhere, which led to my reliance on video games and the internet as vehicles of escapism. I was bored with school and saw little value in the experiences it provided. I had come to accept that it was a natural part of my life, just as sleeping was, and understood that I had to attend regardless of my feelings. I became, or was treated as, a passive object to whom teaching was done rather than an active subject engaged in my learning (Freire, 2005). If school wasn't giving me the tools to seek the knowledge I craved, or to engage with media that stimulated my brain and brought joy and satisfaction, I had to find it myself. So, I turned to the internet and video game worlds.

I now understand that there can be educative value in engaging with video games and internet communities if one is equipped with the tools to question and consume with purpose. However, mindless consumption can close us off to the problematic origins and nature of the media. This especially relates to my experiences as I engaged with media that reinforced the apathy I was developing towards important institutions in society, including schools. I was

becoming apathetic toward everything and could thus justify my lack of empathy for others and their struggles. I made jokes and said hurtful things to and about people I knew I cared about on a deeper level. But on the surface, my apathy towards groups targeted by the communities I engaged with online was being seeped in a layer of antipathy. What once were jokes, gradually became part of my belief system – a deeply individualistic and self-centered belief system that shut me out of other peoples’ lives.

My refusal to empathize with others opened the door for hatred to brew, which was heightened by my mindless consumption of media filled with hateful rhetoric targeting disenfranchised groups. For example, my opinion on movements drawing attention to the police brutality disproportionately affecting black communities was almost entirely shaped by internet personalities and meme pages that made light of the issue and pro-police news media using racist rhetoric to shift blame to the victims of police brutality. An important element of this victim-blaming rhetoric was the insistence that claims that this was a systemic issue were unfounded and exaggerated. In reality, these claims had substantial evidence backing them up – evidence that was strategically left out of these dismissive, one-sided online “discussions.” These perspectives were painted by the news media I consumed as sensationalism meant to radicalize people. I wouldn’t see the irony until years later.

Questioning my experiences and reflections was a skill I eventually learned as a means of survival. But I needed to be put in a situation that demanded growth and an environment that allowed me to grow. It took moving away and going to college for me to begin to see the world through a more complete, less individualistic lens. In college, I was no longer isolated from the world, stuck in my room seeking an escape from the monotony of life. Increasingly, my goal was not to escape the world but to survive and thrive within it. I started to question everything I knew

and began to listen to the voices of others. I became much more attached to the idea of living in community, of allowing empathy and not apathy (or antipathy) to dictate how I connected with others. In college, I was exposed to other perspectives – by connecting to people with whom I shared a physical space, as well as through the writings of those in other spaces and times. I experienced growth because I allowed myself the opportunity to do so. I began to see unity rather than division as the path towards connection.

College was essentially an opportunity for me to undo a lot of the “learning” that had occurred either *in* school or *because* of it, as a result of my individual search for learning. However, it wasn’t learning that I was searching for, I would realize while in college. Rather, it was an element necessary for learning to take place – connection with others. I was searching for the opportunity to build community that public school had robbed me of.

I originally pursued a college education to make my parents proud, but I soon found a personal purpose in this mission. By putting myself in this situation, I was able to learn and experience life with other people. Through this, I found a greater purpose in my pursuit of higher education – giving back to my community through service.

Through my undergraduate college experience, I found a more specific purpose in my goal: I wanted to give back to my community by helping my future students find themselves and *their* purpose within school communities full of love and support. Not all my students are going to attend college, and it is not assured that those who do will have meaningful experiences as I have had. But I can do everything in my power to ensure such experiences occur in my classes.

For me to ensure meaningful experiences like this for my students, I must understand *how* college provided the opportunity to build community as I learned. One factor was that a natural sense of community can result from studying with the people with whom you also live,

work, and play. Nonacademic interaction in physical communities provides natural opportunities for genuine connections to form. From my experience, seeing my friends as something more than fellow students allowed us to develop deeper connections. The enjoyment of learning increases when you're doing it with people you know, love, and respect.

Another component of the college experience that contributed to my learning was the way community was developed within the classroom. My professors understood the value of community in creating positive learning experiences, and this was reflected in how their classes were structured. Most of my classes shifted focus away from the teacher and onto the students as sources of knowledge. It was a jarring experience to go from being taught in my K-12 classes to learning in college. Because of this increased focus on student-student interaction, I got to hear perspectives that were different from mine and felt that I was being challenged to reflect critically on my thinking. And because I was hearing others' opinions and sharing my own views in a genuinely judgement-free environment, I became more open to the idea of being "wrong." I wasn't being told what to think, which often occurs in public K-12 classrooms. Instead, I was asked to think about my thinking. I was learning with and from my professors and peers.

That is the kind of liberation education can and should bring to people. Beyond minimal engagement and reluctant participation due to legal requirements, we, as students, should feel joy and excitement at the thought of being a part of something that helps us grow and become better people as members of a healthy community. As we have seen throughout history, however, this liberation must come from within. Much of the liberation that is required, in my own case as well as others, is from the barriers in place that rob us not only of educational opportunity, but of our very humanity.

A Dehumanizing Experience

I am eternally grateful for my college experience, as it undid many of the unproductive and problematic effects of my public schooling experience, which could be summarized as miseducative. John Dewey (1938) argued that any experience that arrests or disrupts continued growth and development is “miseducative” (p. 13). Since my experiences in public school pushed me away from people and undermined my relationship with meaningful learning, stunting my growth as a learner and as member of my community, they were miseducative.

To be in community is to work for the betterment of the group, of which one is part, and advocacy for others can help heal a community in progress. To improve the present conditions of teachers, we must consider our students’ experiences. Only by examining the experiences of our students and ourselves can we gain a deeper understanding of the sources of our dread. Only by considering the experiences of our students can we gain a more complete understanding of the problem, enabling us to diagnose and prescribe the best solutions to heal the system.

Stepping away from an individualistic, compartmentalized way of thinking and attaining a more complete perspective about schools is helpful in finding out what can be done about ridding the heavy layer of dread. Again, I do not place blame on any particular individual or group for the current state of education. I believe the problem is a normalized educational system that is, itself, part of a greater societal system that connects all spheres of life – personal, professional, political, etc. (Capra, 1996). This is important to clarify because it can be all too easy for us, as teachers, to find scapegoats in our students for the challenges we experience. In obfuscating the sources of our dread, those who are stuck in the most difficult situations can assign blame to the easiest targets. For teachers, those targets are our students.

I frequently hear teachers, including myself, complain about their students. This usually focuses on one of two problems: (1) our students' overt disrespect, or (2) their apathy towards "learning." There is a simple logic in blaming students' actions (or inaction) for our difficulties. They are the ones who most directly affect us, after all. Left unchecked, incipient feelings of frustration can grow into resentment and anger towards our students, and we can forget why we chose to become teachers. In so doing we stray further away from ourselves. However, once we recognize that our students' disrespectful, disruptive, and apathetic behaviors are often their own logical? *reactions* to schooling, we can begin to explore the deeper causes of the phenomenon encountered not only by teachers but also by students and in public education in general.

School can be a dehumanizing experience for both students and teachers (Palmer, 2007) and it is natural for people placed in dehumanizing situations to resist. As previously noted, teachers react in different ways to our own dehumanization: some comply (reluctantly or willingly), some disrupt and challenge, and some simply leave the profession. Students, however, do not have the luxury of choice, so they select and create their own logical options within the system that limits and dehumanizes them.

I was originally hesitant to use the word "dehumanization" to refer to the experiences of students and teachers in schools, because a popular understanding dehumanization is built around large-scale, overtly violent examples of ways in which people are robbed of their humanity. Other theories, however, expand definitions of dehumanization, structuring it within a spectrum that ranges from overt examples of intergroup violence (the traditional definition) to subtle kinds of dehumanization that occur on an interpersonal level, and which require no acts of overt violence. This is what Leyens, Rodriguez-Perez, Rodriguez-Torres, Gaunt, Paladino, Vaes, and Demoulin (2001) refer to as *infracumanization*.

Infrahumanization theory holds “that humanness can be denied to others in subtle and commonplace ways, rather than being confined to blatant denials in killing fields and torture chambers” (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014, p. 402). An important distinguishing characteristic of infrahumanization is that it can “in principle occur independently of any negative evaluation of the out-group” (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014, p. 402). This stands at odds with traditional definitions of dehumanization which require a purposeful, negative view of the out-group by the offending in-group. Leyens et al (2001) centered their theory of infrahumanization on “secondary” emotions such as joy or embarrassment, which they viewed as unique to our species, noting that they could be either positive or negative.

Haslam and Loughnan (2014) “proposed that human uniqueness, and the human-animal distinction on which it rests, is only one of two ways in which humanness might be understood” (p. 403). Most relevant to this paper is the type of dehumanization that is centered on blurring of the human-object distinction. Whereas the human-animal distinction is based on presumably unique human traits such as intelligence and rationality, the human-object distinction is based on the denial, lack of acknowledgement, or lack of affirmation of traits related to human nature such as warmth and individuality (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). I believe this latter type of dehumanization is at the root of our shared dread as students and teachers.

The Dehumanization of Students and Teachers

In my three years of teaching, I have yet to feel empowered as a professional, in large part due to the overemphasis on standards, pacing guides, pre-made curriculum, and professional learning communities that devalue teacher work. These prevalent elements of contemporary “teaching” indicate that teachers are viewed not as creative and trained professionals but as

technicians who are expected simply to implement the work of others who are perceived to be more capable (Giroux, 1988). This deprofessionalization of the teaching profession is one of the main ways teachers are dehumanized, stripping teacher autonomy and identity in favor of robot-like compliance, conformity, and alienation.

I remember feeling embarrassed at a professional development meeting, even before my first day in the classroom, when I wrote about my views on state standards potentially limiting teacher autonomy. We were prompted to write how we felt about standards and their role in developing curriculum. My embarrassment stemmed from the fact that all who volunteered to share their responses spoke positively of standards and were validated by the person leading the session. I felt I had written the wrong answer and subsequently erased what I wrote amidst feelings of shame and alienation. Not only have these feelings stuck with me, but they have been amplified by daily reminders that I am not teaching with the level of autonomy a respected and valued professional should be afforded. Moreover, I have become aware that mechanisms are in place to induce us, as teachers, to perpetuate our own deprofessionalization.

Professional learning communities (PLCs), in my experience, are an element of teaching that may sound great on paper, but whose execution reveals their purpose as a mechanism of control. Mechanisms of control exist to ensure specific outcomes. The expressed desired outcome of PLCs is achieving “high levels of learning for all students,” and one presumed way to ensure this outcome, in my experience, is the horizontal alignment of curriculum between teachers in the same subject area. In theory, horizontal alignment is a way to ensure all students within a given subject receive a similarly “rigorous” education. However, when the goal of “rigorous” education is simply passing standardized tests, the sacrifice of teacher autonomy can no longer be justified. In my experience, and consistent with others’ findings, claims that

horizontal alignment will ensure high levels of education for all obfuscate their true purpose as a mechanism of control intended to perpetuate and normalize the deprofessionalization of teachers.

The two primary expressed functions of this year's PLCs for horizontal curriculum alignment are: (1) the cooperative formation of common formative assessments (CFAs), and (2) peer-enforced regulation of our curriculum pacing. These two tasks represent the majority of what occurs within our PLCs. Whenever we are not creating our next quiz or unit test, we are discussing where we are on the pacing guide and how best to space our lessons to cover as much of each standard as possible. Our administrators assure us that this "collaboration" will alleviate some of the stress of the job. However, our PLCs are increasingly functioning as decentralized mechanisms of control. District and building administrators, extending centralized control while offloading personal responsibility, now expect teachers to engage in peer-to-peer oversight. These cumulative actions are eroding teacher autonomy, and increasing numbers are succumbing to peer pressure in the desire to keep up with their colleagues' pacing, fearful of underperforming in their roles as teacher technicians.

To illustrate the severity and rate of deprofessionalization occurring in public education, I included the above paragraph, which was originally written less than a year ago. It is already outdated. What little autonomy teachers were able to exercise in last year's PLCs is now gone. Initially, our school district created pre-made CFAs and presented them as suggestions, which were discussed in our PLCs. However, what were once suggestions have now become mandates. Our PLCs are now obligated to use the pre-made district created CFAs in our classrooms. Constant reminders by district- and school-level administrators and personnel now control not only the curriculum pacing, but the curriculum itself.

The focus of our PLCs has shifted to making sure we, both individually and as a team, are on pace with the district's pacing calendar – which is unrealistic, and advocates for an approach to education to which I am diametrically opposed. I constantly find myself attempting to “teach” concepts or events requiring substantial amounts of time in less than a week. All because we, as teachers, are being pressured by administrators – who themselves are being pressured by district-level coordinators and leaders – to keep up with the pacing calendar and district-mandated CFAs. This has the added effect of controlling our curriculum, so it isn't just that teachers are being told how long they must teach – which directly connects to *how* we teach – but we are also indirectly being told *what* to teach, by way of the content included in the CFAs.

The lack of teacher autonomy and the influence of peer pressure are further fueled by top-down directives that: (1) add an additional task in teachers' already full workload (devaluing our work and station), and/or (2) further reify the one-size-fits-all approach to education. Whether filling out forms to justify the failing grades earned by our students, attending required monthly after-school book club meetings, requiring our students to complete the state-mandated career assessments, or implementing mandatory curriculum and teaching strategies in the classroom, there is always something peeling away my status as a professional.

Such requirements place teachers and their students in similar positions, preparing us all for servitude within the dehumanizing and hierarchical systems of education and society. One of the most current examples of universalization and depersonalization of education in my district is the expectation that we incorporate the district-mandated, pre-made CFAs. At a recent “professional development meeting,” we were told that these CFAs were created to help make our jobs easier by removing one the many responsibilities from our workloads. In reality, this

was just another justification for the deprofessionalization of teachers, and another sanitized version of the reality we currently face.

Another element of dehumanization in education is the miseducation of students. The concept of miseducation as used in this paper is reliant on its general and universally accepted definition as “poor, wrong, or harmful education” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.); however, it is more specifically influenced by Dewey’s concept of miseducative experiences. Dewey (1938) posited that “any experience is miseducative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (p. 13). Dewey’s conception clarifies what makes education harmful.

Miseducation is harmful because it creates a rift between learning and the learner. If students’ learning experiences are not considered within the curriculum-development process, the curriculum becomes alien and, in turn, is seen as unimportant. This may look and sound different in each school and classroom, but it always prevents growth. A vivid example of miseducative schooling in my district is the overreliance on state-mandated testing to measure educational prowess. Students’ educational experiences are marred by miseducative “cookie cutter” lessons imposed in preparation for an overwhelming amount of testing. In my experience, the “de jure” objective of education to prepare students for life outside of school is at odds with the “de facto” objective of preparing them for state testing. This disconnection between the expressed and the practiced goals of school furthers student (and teacher) apathy and distrust towards the institution.

Miseducation also occurs when the assessment of student growth is reduced to grades or test scores that simply measure their test-taking abilities. This can also intensify the resentment students feel towards school and, by extension, learning, as they begin to associate the heavy focus on grades and testing with education itself.

The dehumanization of systemic miseducation is often experienced by students as objectification. According to Haslam (2006), human-object distinctions are drawn on the basis of traits such as warmth and individuality. Neglecting students' experiences and feelings in schools in favor of measuring their growth through data disconnected from their lived experience is representative of this objectification. Rather than being valued for their individual personalities, experiences, and perspectives, students in my district are valued primarily as data. Although they may still be humanized on an interpersonal level by their teachers, institutionally they are valued primarily for numerical improvements in their test scores and grades.

Media representation of students either as victims of miseducative schooling or as victims of unprofessional teacher indoctrination do little to resolve the continuing miseducation, objectification, and exploitation of students in order to increase district test scores (and thereby procure federal funding, as specified by NCLB, 2002). Within my state, rather than assessing students' educational needs, their test score gains are often objectified as statistics and anecdotes to push a specific political agenda. This is the second component of dehumanization that students experience – the politicization of education to control the narrative about what is wrong with education and society.

Antonio Gramsci's (1992) concept of the *war of position* relates to figurative wars being fought on the battlefields of ideas by political influencers in news media and other sites of social discourse. In this war, influential people either resist or support hegemonic forces that form our culture and shape our commonsense understandings. Within this war, our students are being used as ammunition to legitimize commonly shared beliefs and values underlying the current state of public education. Influential agents such as Ryan Walters, who Gramsci might refer to as an *organic intellectual*, help form shared understandings of truth and dominant notions of

commonsense. It is within this hegemonic power structure that students are presented and treated as politicized objects.

Students are directly affected by their miseducative experiences, and the politicization of their circumstances perpetuates those experiences. Moreover, the very act of politicizing the experiences of a group of people is itself dehumanizing, since this process entails objectification and victimization. Public discourse regarding the educational system continues daily, with politicians, educators, school and district leaders, and parents all chiming in with their opinions as to what has gone wrong with education. This discourse does two things that I find egregious and purposeful: (1) It distracts from the real problems with education, and (2) It removes students from the conversation, presenting them as objects rather than active subjects with opinions and experiences of their own, which further dehumanizes them.

If we truly care about solving the problems plaguing schools, and if we understand students as agents rather than objects, we need to work *with* them rather than presuming to work “*for*” them. Currently, when students voice their concerns in the media, too often they are shut down due to their perceived immaturity and lack of wisdom. Ironically, these ageist attacks are typically made by those who purport to protect the children whenever “the children” say things that do not align with their political agendas.

I recognize that I can fall into a similar trap when presenting my own experiences as representative of my students’ experiences simply because we come from similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. I recognize my biases, and I work to prevent them from blinding me to the unique realities and experiences of my students. Legitimately valuing our students’ input and experiences is an important element in building authentic community, and it represents

a more democratic approach to teaching – one that I would argue is essential to improving students’ and teachers’ educational experiences.

A Democratic Solution

There seems to be a general misunderstanding of what *democracy* is. This misunderstanding, perpetuated by political ideologues, characterizes democracy as simply a matter of voting or advocating for specific positions that align with one’s own political views. This is evident in discussions with my students. When asked, they invariably equate democracy with voting, and leave it there. This concept doesn’t even meet the minimum criteria of Benjamin Barber’s (1984) notion of “weak democracy.” The greater value of democracy comes from an understanding that it is more than just a form of government but also “a mode of associated living” that connects members of a society (Dewey, 1916, p. 91). This understanding is essential to democratic teaching. We have come to understand democracy simply as a matter of voting, protesting, and voting again. This extremely limited view of democracy presents it as an event that takes place every few years rather than as a lived, creative, everyday experience.

Like so many other concepts that cannot be adequately covered due to our district mandated curriculum pacing, my students’ education on democracy has been woefully incomplete. I want to consider an approach to teaching that is more democratic in nature (Brodhagen, 1995). One that is *truly* democratic. However, before exploring this possible solution, I want to use a personal classroom anecdote to provide an idea of what I mean by a more democratic approach to teaching.

This event occurred during sixth hour, the class most willing to actively engage with me. I had promised them pizza on the last day before spring break. This was inspired both by their

recent behavior and some guilt on my part, resulting from my inability to take them on a field trip I had promised I would look into. The day arrived, and I picked up the pizzas during my lunch break. As the students walked into class, their faces brightened as they noticed the pizza. They took their seats, and I made an announcement:

Good afternoon, everyone! As you can see, I kept my promise and brought you all pizza. But before I let you guys get your slices, I need everyone to get their Chromebooks out. We need to continue working on our DBQs today. Although we do have pizza, it is not a free day. Once everyone gets logged into the DBQ, I'll pass the boxes around.

My announcement was met with an immediate response from a bright student who consistently exercised leadership qualities within the class. She firmly but jovially responded:

No, mister! You didn't say that before. You can't just add that afterwards. It's not fair! Just like you taught us, we must stand up to injustice. I'm going to practice civil disobedience and not take out my Chromebook until you give us our pizza!

This was met with resounding support from her classmates, who cheered and applauded. I couldn't help but smile at both her protest and her acknowledgement of my contribution to her learning. I understood that how I responded could have serious consequences for the trust we had developed as a class, and that demanding compliance would be both out of character and would perpetuate the kind of teaching I oppose. In the end, we negotiated a compromise that appeared to be satisfactory to all.

Democratic education should not be limited to teaching *about* democracy. It should also be taught and learned *through* democratic forms of living. The pizza anecdote is just a small example of what it might look like to teach democratically. It would have been easy for me to assume sole leadership in the classroom, shutting down dissent and demanding that my students

listen to my directives. In fact, this is what is expected of me. This is the point of all the attention in our staff meetings that is placed on solving behavioral issues. In this case, rather than conceding to our administrators' normalized expectations for teachers, I acted on what I personally believed is the role of teachers, validating my students and myself in the process.

Validation and collaboration are important components of a more democratic approach to teaching that I believe could produce deeper connections and genuine investment in learning from students and teachers alike (Brodhagen, 1995). It wasn't until college that I began to feel valued for my contributions to the learning occurring in the classroom. As a result, I felt more open to sharing my experiences and ideas. Similar sentiments were felt by my classmates, as there was an air of openness and honesty that we hadn't experienced in our high school classrooms. Through the ways in which we, as students, were validated in our thinking and invited to collaborate in forming deeper understandings, I came to learn as the result of democratic teaching practices. My understanding of democracy was deepened as I learned *through* it rather than simply learning *about* it.

Recognizing democracy as an everyday mode of associated living would constitute a paradigm shift for most Americans. To live democratically would mean to live in community, which contradicts many celebrated ideals centered on extreme individualism. In my experience, schools and learning have not been built around the value of living and working in community to collectively solve our problems. Instead, education has been presented as an experience meant to help us better ourselves *individually* and to improve our chances in competition with others for jobs and college placement.

Against such notions of individualism, "Dewey envisioned a school as a microcosm of the larger democratic society in which students and teachers learn from each other through

interaction on equal terms” (Kira, 2019, p. 57). From this perspective, there should not exist a disconnect between school and the everyday lives of students, as the former should function as a reflection of the latter. This conception of school rests on the valuing of individual differences among community members as opportunities for growth and experience.

As a pragmatist, Dewey (1938) placed great emphasis on the role of experience in education. He stated that “education is a development within, by, and for experience” (p. 13). For Dewey, the problem in traditional school environments was not that they did not provide experiences from which to learn, but that the experiences they provided often stunted students’ growth and disrupted the continuity of further learning. Such miseducative experiences can lead students to become disillusioned with education as they develop negative associations between learning, testing, and irrelevant curricula.

Traditional teaching seems to take the life out of teaching, whereas democratic teaching can breathe life back into the process. What is often missing in schools is a sense of connection, of community (Palmer, 2007). This is a major source of my dread, and it is revealed in the myriad obstacles, including the deprofessionalization of teachers, objectification of students, and antidemocratic relationships, that inhibit the development of authentic classroom communities.

Despite the obstacles it is still possible to build community on a smaller scale within each classroom. In spite of the many difficulties, there are still moments of clarity and connection where our all-important but oft-forgotten visions are revealed in their clearest forms. These moments can help remind us of what we are fighting for, why we are doing what we are doing, and who we are and wish to become. These are the experiences, the moments to which we *must* cling, no matter how fleeting or brief they may be. A teaching life without these moments is not a teaching life worth living. These moments provide a glimpse of exactly what we live for.

To be a better teacher, I have put myself in the difficult position of reflecting on the dread that has engulfed me for the past three years. In doing so, I've come to understand the ways my experiences and feelings have taken form. I have explored the ways my experiences as a student have shaped me, and how these experiences connect to those of my current students. I have identified the dehumanization that occurs in schools, and I have developed a personal vision for the betterment of the profession for the sake of my students, myself, and our society. What remains is to explore just *how* this vision could take shape, and my role in ensuring that it does.

CHAPTER THREE

TO BE A BETTER TEACHER: A FREIREAN/DEWEYAN ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

After identifying the sources of dread in my teaching experience, I reflected on my learning experiences as a student in K-12 public schools and in college. Doing so afforded me the opportunity to understand how those experiences influenced me in different ways: my K-12 experiences caused me to become disillusioned with learning, and in turn, to detach from community, whereas my college experiences countered the miseducation and general lack of growth experienced in K-12 schools and reconnected me with my community. Both experiences helped me understand that value of community in one's learning, and the dangers experiencing disconnection in school. I perceive my K-12 and college learning experiences as dehumanizing and humanizing experiences, respectively. I looked at the dehumanization of students and teachers in public education and began to name democratic education as a potential response. In this chapter, I aim to utilize the theories of John Dewey and Paulo Freire to better understand: (1) *how* and *why* the dehumanization of students and teachers exists; and (2) how to overcome this dehumanization in order for education to reach its liberating and humanizing potential.

The Foundations of Dehumanization

Moving forward requires a complete examination of the current teaching experience. To continue the analogy used previously, when treating a patient, doctors must fully understand what the patient is going through. Otherwise, there is a chance of mistreatment due to misdiagnosis. In other words, to improve the current conditions in education for the sake of students and teachers – and of course, for society as a whole – we must identify the *real* reasons

for the dread being experienced. I understand that the dread defining my own and others' teachers' experiences comes from both internal and external obstacles that stand in the way of doing our jobs. And I understand that these obstacles spawn from systemic practices that dehumanize students and teachers. But what is the *reason* for the dehumanization?

Dehumanization is an active process – one with clear benefits for the perpetrators (as well as many bystanders) at great cost to those who are victimized by it, as well as to our society and world as a whole. My prior analysis of the experiences of students and teachers helps identify some of the main perpetrators and beneficiaries of our dehumanization.

Important to this discussion is Gramsci's concept of the *war of position*. In studying Gramsci's concepts, and applying them to the current problems in education, we can begin to see that the dehumanization of students and teachers most directly benefits those currently in power. I understand as much as anyone the frustration that comes from reading about systemic issues and not having clarity in terms of *who* to blame, so I want to identify at least one person, Ryan Walters, who represents many of those who benefit from maintaining the status quo.

Ryan Walters, Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction, has made it his mission to push for the end of a “woke” agenda in schools and for a “common sense approach” to education. He specifically states that “conversations around sexuality and gender ideology in the classroom” should not be allowed, and that we need to go back to the “basics”.¹ Furthermore, he continues to attack teachers and teachers' unions, claiming that they are out to “indoctrinate” students by pushing a “woke” agenda.² In regards to Critical Race Theory, he states that it “is a

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UtunXOcnCA>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCP-ZA9IFfM>

dangerous and racist philosophy, and all it does is divide and characterize entire groups of people solely based on the color of their skin.”³

It is possible to misinterpret Walters’s words as those of one who is ignorant or misinformed about what *really* occurs in Oklahoma classrooms, and about what Critical Race Theory and being “woke” *really* is. However, I believe we are seeing Gramsci’s concept of the hegemonic *war of position* in action. He is stoking the flames of an already fearful and untrusting political base, using incendiary language to create problems that do not exist in order to encourage those he knows will fight for what has been inaccurately deemed “traditional.” The faulty assumption of a gender binary is deemed traditional. The revisionist Eurocentric retelling of history as a static, linear, singular, and absolute truth is deemed traditional. Preparing students for a life of manual, underpaid, exploitive, and alienating labor is perceived as traditional.

The problem is that tradition isn’t working. At least not for *us*. It isn’t working for students or teachers, or for all the other victims of hegemony, no matter how susceptible we may be to *believing* that it is working for us. Going back to the “basics” is to remove reflection, creativity, and diversity of thought in favor of teaching respect for corrupt authority, blind obedience, and acceptance of the status quo. This can and must be changed, for everyone’s sake. It is our job, as teachers, to show our students that they are capable of much more than what has been expected of them by schools and society (Baldwin, 1963). Through his actions and rhetoric, Ryan Walters exercises (and represents) many of the hegemonic forces that ensure an uncritical and domesticated populace. This highlights the importance for teachers, as organic intellectuals, to be aware of the many unjust and harmful systemic problems that have been normalized.

³ https://ryanwaltersforoklahoma.com/?page_id=3712

Organic intellectuals, as Gramsci (1971) described them, are persuasive public figures who help shape common sense (or commonsense) understandings that exist within a society, including the views of members of social classes not typically exposed to the ideas of *traditional* intellectuals. Among other things, organic intellectuals can influence popular understandings of the systemic oppression that is normalized and maintained by political and economic elites for their own personal gain. In the case of education, the dehumanization of students and teachers, long accepted as part of the status quo, has been actively challenged by organic intellectuals such as critical theorists, activists, journalists, and educators who label the current system as outdated, exploitive, and alienating, likening schools to factories and prisons due to their emphasis on forced obedience to ensure continued compliance when entering the workforce (Anyon, 1980; Parramore, 2018).

It is easy to understand why the current war of position regarding schools has become so focused on the inclusion and exclusion of critical theories pertaining to race, gender, and sexual inequality. Hegemonic activity can only maintain power over the masses if the masses remain unaware of the existence of alternative possible conditions in which they are *not* subjugated. Critical theory provides an understanding of those possibilities – of possible alternatives in which people determine their own realities and identities rather than permitting them to be determined by an *oppressive few*.

An example of the current *war of position* can be seen in the way Ryan Walters describes the motives and proponents of critical studies with words such as “indoctrination” and “predators.” These are attempts to influence the public by appealing not to their logic and reasoning but by stoking hatred and fear. No one wants to be considered – or to entrust their loved ones to – a supporter of the indoctrination and predation of children.

Ultimately, those currently in power want nothing more than to maintain their power. This requires control of both the intellectual and technical spheres of society, which is ensured by control of the education system. Incorporating teaching requirements that devalue the work of teachers while maintaining policies that replace trained professionals with unqualified alternatives is having a severe and intentional effect on public education. Making schools intolerable to qualified teachers who recognize the transformative potential of schools opens space to those who share in the desire to devalue the profession and maintain the status quo. Those who enter the classroom without training in teaching tend to rely more heavily on prepared materials and curriculum and to be unquestioning or unaware of the deeper problems in public education.

Control of the education system also ensures control of the technical sphere of society. To those students who know nothing but school for twelve or thirteen years of their lives, there tends to be an acceptance of their place in society as followers, as people incapable of holding and succeeding in leadership positions. Common school practices implicitly drill a belief of ourselves as followers with no proper training in the intellectual realm. Ironically, it is these oppressive conditions from which organic intellectuals develop. It is the responsibility of organic intellectuals to help ensure that those in their communities find ways to live life for themselves and not for those who oppress them. Otherwise, the cycle of poverty, trauma, self-hatred, and self-oppression continues.

When the curriculum fails to challenge normalized oppression in society, the “learning” that takes place reinforces that normalization. This is seen in all areas of the schooling experience – from the curriculum itself to the teaching methods to the process of organization. Schools are treated as spaces where limitations are expected, reinforced, and rationalized. Feelings of

deficiency are treated as normal features of schools. Students cannot develop their curiosity because we do not have time to cover topics that are not on the numerous standardized tests. Students cannot stand up without asking for permission, and they must be limited in the time they remain outside the classroom to prepare them for a country of law and order. Teachers must work together in PLCs to standardize the curriculum because the data, rather than students' experiences or teachers' assessments, determine educational success. Students – *and* teachers – are taught to be compliant, and students are doing a better job than teachers of resisting.

Complaints from students are commonplace, whether about a certain lesson or topic that is found boring, their distrust of teachers and other school officials, or undesirable school policies. In this way, students showcase their understanding of schools as spaces that “introduce and legitimate particular forms of social life” (Giroux, 1988, p. 3). Through their words and actions, students are reclaiming their roles within schools in establishing the more equitable and just life of which we claim to be part. Too often, however, we, as education professionals, label our students' legitimate complaints as outbursts and silence their dissent without hearing them out. We do this because we mistakenly find the sources of our dread in our students. When we do this, we reinforce not only the use of schools to limit student voice, but we also limit our own voices by going along with what is expected – no matter how problematic we deem it.

Schools are social sites of learning and are targeted by those in power precisely because of their ability to instill a sense of communal responsibility and camaraderie. The one thing those in control (of schools, corporations, and governments) cannot afford is to allow the oppressed to form community behind the common goal of ending the status quo. If teachers had power to make the pedagogical more political, as Giroux (1988) stated, it would be easier for:

critical reflection and action [to] become a part of a fundamental social project to help students develop a deep and abiding faith in the struggle to overcome economic, political and social injustices, and to further humanize themselves as part of this struggle. (p. 3)

In other words, we need to channel the political nature of schools as sites to develop a critical consciousness within students, enabling them to not only see the social and political struggles they are a part of, but to also act in overcoming their oppression (Freire, 2005).

I have begun to understand *why* the dehumanization of students and teachers exists, but that alone won't help me be a better teacher. It is my goal to not only understand my own dehumanization, but to overcome it. Failing to gain an understanding of how we may overcome that which is limiting us, we remain in mental and physical states of frustration – we become stuck. Being stuck not only kills the spirit but also severs connection to the world. That's what decision-makers like Walters who are shaping the education system want, and it is precisely what we need to fight. The question isn't whether we should fight, but how.

Understanding Dehumanization through Dewey and Freire

The theories of John Dewey and Paulo Freire give further insight into how and why/ the sources of our problems are realized through dehumanizing policies and rhetoric. The dehumanization of students and teachers is enacted by decision-makers through a devaluing of education. This devaluing most notably exists through what Freire (2005) calls the “banking model of education” wherein “the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” of knowledge (p. 72). This model of education is inherently dehumanizing and inequitable, as students' roles in their learning are limited to “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (Freire, 2005, p. 72), and being subjected to the role of an inanimate object.

Students come to accept this objectification because it is reified in their day-to-day experiences. In many cases, students' expectations of school are simply to come to class, be quiet, take notes, and complete assignments and tests that assess their comprehension of what was taught. Little if any room is left for student-led or student-informed learning.

As Freire (2005) explains, it is when the people "are denied their right to participate in history as Subjects that they become dominated and alienated" (p. 130). Banking education denies students the power to transform their lives, much less the lives of others. It instead imposes objectifying and domesticating experiences on students who accept their positions as silent and powerless followers of the decision-makers. When people are objectified (dehumanized), and when this objectification is accepted, it becomes difficult to hope for social transformation.

This is how public schools promote miseducative experiences that stunt the growth of people as active, autonomous changemakers in society. Limit-situations, such as Dewey's "miseducative" experiences, impede growth. More specifically, *acceptance* of the limits within these limit-situations prevents us from reaching our full potential as humans. It is as if admitting defeat before even attempting to win.

The current public education system is a perfect example of an extensive limit-situation. It consists of institutions that dehumanize already vulnerable groups of people, constantly presenting the current state of things (including our current state of being) as the status quo, further preventing change.

Students do not value education because it does not provide valuable learning. However, while some resist and act out, many others do nothing because they have come to accept that this is just how things are, just as I did when I was in school. Teachers do not feel empowered to

intervene because their work is devalued and they are viewed less as professionals than as technicians who must follow the script of standards, pre-made curricula, and rigid pacing expectations. Students do not practice agency because they are not given the tools or the opportunities to do so. Teachers, too, have come to accept these conditions as the norm, so their expectations are lowered, and they fail to intervene.

In the case of Ryan Walters and numerous others like him, the dehumanization of students and teachers is entirely purposeful in its aim to prevent students and teachers from practicing reflection – a critical element of the human condition. Freire (2005) argued that humans differ from (non-human) animals in that the latter “are unable to separate themselves from their activity and thus are unable to reflect upon it” (p. 97). The unique ability to reflect is key to lifting ourselves out of our limit-situations, and it is reflective of our humanity. The current educational system blocks us from engaging in reflection, denying a central aspect of our humanity, as can be seen in the scapegoating that occurs in the public education as students, teachers, administrators, and parents point fingers at one another in unfocused attempts to name the problem.

Those who are the victims of dehumanizing, domesticating, and oppressive conditions frequently mirror the behavior and attitudes of the decision-makers who are dehumanizing, domesticating, and oppressing them. An example of this is the hunger for personal freedom and prosperity which drives so many of us. Of this, Dewey (1916) wrote that the “doctrine of extreme individualism” influencing “existing political organizations” hampers our humanity in order “to meet the requirements and selfish interests of the rulers of the state” (p. 96). Ironically, the very thing that influences many decision-makers to oppress and dehumanize is what the oppressed are encouraged to strive for – a true measure of success. Extreme individualism serves

to benefit those whose power is left unquestioned when everyone else is competing with each other. From this perspective, teachers and students are meant to struggle and to not see the bigger picture.

Freire (2005) describes dehumanization within his framework as “attempting to be more human...individualistically,” which prevents others from *having* in the name of *having* more for oneself (p. 85-86). This exemplifies the decision-making process of many in power, as the dehumanization of students and teachers subjugates the many in favor of the few. Individualistic advocacy can lead to desired results without upsetting those in power. However, this undermines the community’s needs. The extreme individualism mentioned by Dewey results in the dehumanization defined by Freire.

Ultimately, the dehumanization of students and teachers is perpetuated by the systemic elimination of community from public education. In my experience, there is little sense of connection within the school system. In a sense, the public education system is disconnected from reality. Public education tends to separate students and teachers from the community when it should be forming community. Students *and* teachers are increasingly removed from the development of relevant curriculum that affords students the opportunity to gain the valuable experiences necessary to achieve personal growth and growth for the greater good of society. Using Dewey and Freire’s writings to understand the sources of dread enveloping our schools, we can begin to see avenues of liberation.

Overcoming Dehumanization through Dewey and Freire

Dewey and Freire would agree that the role of a teacher as “banker” is counter-productive to learning, and that teachers ought to be facilitators as they help students explore learning

experiences that directly connect to their lives. Within a democratic educational framework, “teachers are responsible for creating a learning environment that is conducive for students’ continuous growth” (Kira, 2019, p. 57). For Dewey, teaching does not involve depositing or delivering knowledge *to* students (as with traditional banking education). Rather it involves creating educative learning environments and experiences for students to gain knowledge *with* their teachers and peers.

In line with this Deweyan approach, Freire explicitly calls for an education that is both dialogical and problem-posing. Freire advocated for an education that steadfastly uncovers and dismantles oppressive systems in society. Dialogical education involves – as the name denotes – dialogue between all involved in educational settings. This dialogue affords “the opportunity both to discover generative themes and to stimulate people’s awareness in regard to these themes” (Freire, 2005, p. 96-97).

Freire (2005) used the people’s perceptions of their limit situations as generative themes to produce critical reflection and dialogue needed to understand and better their social conditions. Freire insisted that if we are to change what we experience, we must first recognize that what we experience is indeed oppressive and develop the language to engage in dialogue to understand these experiences and our potential paths for liberation. This process is reflected in the structure of this paper, in which I first acknowledged the oppressive nature of my teaching experience, then identified the steps of my development within this education system, and now am describing the concepts behind the vision that will be explored in the end.

Freire’s approach to education is ultimately a call-to-action – one in which students and teachers develop an understanding of the oppression (dehumanization) they are subjected to in order to bring an end to it. In response to the traditional banking model of education, which does

not afford students or teachers the chance to learn about and through their experiences, Freire (2005) offers the problem-posing approach to education:

For the anti-dialogical banking educator, the question of content simply concerns the program about which he will discourse to his students; and he answers his own question, by organizing his own program. For the dialogical, problem-posing teacher-student, the program content of education is neither a gift nor an imposition – bits of information to be deposited in the students – but rather the organized, systematized, and developed “representation” to individuals of the things about which they want to know more (p. 93).

Additionally, “whereas the banking method directly or indirectly reinforces men’s fatalistic perception of their situation, the problem-posing method presents this very situation to them as a problem” to be solved (Freire, 2005, p. 85). This is an essential element of viewing democracy as a way of life, as Dewey did. Being able to work in community, through dialogue, to help bring light to the problems of the community to collaboratively find solutions is democracy in action.

Freire (2005) argued that individualistic thinking – which creates oppressor-oppressed relationships – must be met with “the pursuit of full humanity...[that is] carried out...in fellowship and solidarity” (p. 85-86). Only in finding community, in seeing the humanity in others, may we begin to humanize ourselves. Freire posits problem-posing education as a vehicle for this humanization.

Engaging in praxis within a democratic problem-posing educational framework “enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism” that only benefits the oppressors (Freire, 2005, p. 86). The next step is to learn how to incorporate democratic principles that elevate

student experience and understanding to the forefront of the learning process, and that combat the inherent internalizing effects of normalized dehumanization.

In my experience, implementation has been the most difficult step in the process of democratizing and humanizing education. My ultimate goal is to help rid our education system of its dehumanizing policies and practices, and to transform it under Dewey's and Freire's visions of schools as spaces where democracy, dialogue, and critical self-reflection take place. It is unrealistic, however, to expect the desired systemic change to take place without individual transformations within teachers and their classrooms.

Keeping that ultimate goal in mind does have a motivating effect when attempting to transform oneself into the teacher that is needed. So here is my wish for education, stated explicitly: I want schools to be safe spaces for students to learn and grow alongside one another, wherein they organically form community, from which they can develop skills and understandings that they can then turn and use to improve their community's conditions.

In essence, I want democracy to become the norm in theory and in practice. I want students to have the most productive experiences in schools from which they may grow. I want students to feel safe and comfortable in schools, and for them to be heard when they use their voices to bring awareness to school/community issues. I want students to see the problems of the world as obstacles that may be overcome, not as expected elements of the human experience. I then want these experiences to help students understand that they matter, and that they are capable of doing whatever they want to do – that nothing is or should be predetermined. For my wish to come true, I must be a better teacher, and for me to be a better teacher, I must accept two things: that not every moment in the classroom will be a step forward, and that I must continue to see my role as teacher as a political one.

I must give myself credit: I am already exhibiting traits that I believe are necessary to reaching my goals as a teacher. I am self-critical and reflective, let this paper be a testament to that. I never take learning experiences for granted and seize the opportunity they bring to grow as a teacher and person. But I am human, and being hyper-aware of the subjugating systems within our society doesn't make me any less susceptible to the intended effects of living under this system. I sometimes hold fatalistic feelings and find myself accepting my conditions in the moment. I try not to feel badly about that, because this fight is a long and slow one, and I need moments of regular respite brought upon by these spurs of willful compliance.

There is a difference between picking and choosing our battles and not fighting at all. I wanted to speak on that because I know it is a common issue. We often give ourselves the impossible task of fixing the world without thinking of ourselves. We are part of the world, too. And we deserve to work on ourselves as much as we work on it. Through writing this paper, I've learned that it's okay for me to breathe.

In between the temporary moments of compliance, teachers must embody the political nature of their role. In one sense, our role in society is a political one because it is *politicized*. The education system is constantly being politicized to push and normalize a dehumanizing agenda – one in which the public's fear of the unknown is stoked and our knowledge of the unknown is shaped by purposeful misrepresentation. Those who claim to want to keep politics out of the classroom, and not to make students uncomfortable, are doing exactly that.

Only after accepting that not every moment in the classroom will be a step forward, and that I must continue to see my role as teacher as a political one, can the work of implementing Dewey and Freire's concepts begin. In the most general sense, this work revolves around

becoming a more democratic teacher, according to Dewey, and a more humanizing teacher, according to Freire.

Implementation of these principles must take shape across three dimensions: the practical, social, and political. I placed a lot of attention on the external practical obstacles identified as some of the sources of my dread, so I want to clarify that I do not see practical implementations as *the* solution so much as I see them as pathways to democratic and humanizing solutions.

If I want to continue down this path of democratization and humanization in the classroom, I must continue my work in building connections with my students. This is paramount to reaching my goal. In terms of curricular practices, the obvious option is to include more student choice in the classroom curriculum. I could follow Barbara Brodhagen's (1995) lead and incorporate a classroom constitution, wherein I work with students to co-develop our classroom norms and expectations. It goes without saying that these must and will apply to both students and teacher. I realize that structure and expectations of respect are necessary for the prosperity of our classroom, so it would be necessary for me to model this by placing myself within these expectations – as part of the classroom community and not as an authority above it.

In line with the collaborative development of classroom norms and expectations, I also need to include my students in deciding the curriculum. In my outline of my typical school day, I touched a lot on the energy I exerted in getting students to focus on classwork and discussion rather than being distracted. It is obvious that students do not see value in the learning that is currently happening in schools, much as *I* did not see value in my learning. It seems that the obvious answer is to develop curriculum that students *do* see value in. If developing curriculum *for* students got us into this situation, it makes sense to develop curriculum *with* students.

According to Freire, education must be dialogical and problem-posing to be humanizing. Freire writes of dialogue as a truly democratic vehicle of learning – as the right of everyone. The human right to engage in dialogue – which cannot exist without love, humility, faith, hope, and critical thinking – presupposes *naming* the world (Freire, 2005). As Freire (2005) states, “once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming” (p. 88). The act of dialogue is an inherently humanizing one, as it requires those engaging in it to see each other as equals in their capability to see, name, and transform the world. Our educational leaders may not be willing to see students as equals in this capacity, but we must be.

A step towards this dialogic, problem-posing approach to education would be the restructuring of the curriculum based on student input. For example, instead of structuring units around a chronological timeline in our history classes, we could instead center each unit around interconnected themes, which are themselves directly based on students’ questions. Furthermore, these thematically distinct units could each present a current real-world problem that students want to address. This way, the learning would be more pertinent to our students’ lives and engage them in the kind of problem-solving and critical thinking necessary to rid the world of its problems.

My role as teacher would be of inquirer and facilitator. I would inquire about student suggestions and ideas – asking them to think deeper and to consider more. I would facilitate classroom discussions and connections between students and people or entities outside the classroom as part of expanded dialogue. Although this would ideally happen in conjunction with stepping away from standards-based curriculum and rigid pacing expectations, it would still be feasible under the current system on an individual level. Collaboration would be necessary,

whether with our PLCs, administrators, or both. We must continue to build bridges with everyone involved – students, teachers, parents, administrators.

For many teachers, the difficulty with this approach arises in having to share responsibility and authority with students. But for me, the difficulty comes in the form of student refusal to participate. Not engaging in classroom discussions is one thing, but this approach rests entirely on students' willingness to collaborate with one another. Too often I come home from work devastated that my planned class activities were not realized due to lack of student participation. With that said, those were *my* activities. I must believe that student engagement would increase once I work *with* them to set up and incorporate the activities. Just as reform is a slow and tedious process, so is the process of developing new routines. I want the classroom routine to be students voicing their opinions, concerns, and ideas, along with listening to others; not just listening to *my* opinions, concerns, and ideas, and regurgitating basic information.

According to Dewey, for learning not to be miseducative, it must allow for personal growth and be structured within a democratic framework. The dialogic, problem-posing approach to education is an inherently democratic one. It relies on the formation of community, which is missing from schools.

Applying Freire's problem-posing approach, I can now work on solving the problems that I have identified. But it wasn't that easy. It took a great deal of dreadful day-to-day experiences as well as deep reflection on those experiences for me to identify patterns that exemplified the lack of community present in our schools. I have taken my insights to my students, asking them for their opinions regarding our school events and policies. I've had discussions with students about this very issue. I've engaged with them in dialogue and identified the issues, but I have yet to take the next step, working on finding solutions *with* them.

Similarly, that is the situation in which I find myself with other teachers – we express our opinions and pinpoint the problems but do not take the next step of finding solutions. I’ve heard plenty of teachers across my three schools express discontent towards school- and district-wide policies. There is a palpable sense of relief within the room when a group of teachers identify a common “source of dread.” I know I always feel glad I am not the only one who sees the problem for what it is. This relief is necessary. *This*, in a sense, is how community is formed.

Similar experiences affect us similarly, and solidarity through such experiences brings with it a sense of connection otherwise unexplored. We must tap into this within our teaching. After all, it is how students make friends outside the classroom. Voluntary friendships are perhaps the purest form of democracy. They are genuine, mutual relationships based on choice and driven by passion. Friendships are built on communication, love, and respect. In my experience, schools are missing all three of these in one way or another. Reintroducing communication, love, and respect in our schools would support the goal of democratizing and humanizing schools.

Considering Dewey’s notion of schools as laboratories of democracy and microcosms of society, alongside Freire’s problem-posing approach to education, I find it necessary for schools to open themselves up to the greater communities in which they exist. If we aim to inspire our students to engage in dialogue and see themselves and each other as capable of changing the world, we need to take advantage of the many instances in which this happens all around us. School must act as a microcosm of our democratic society, so the natural next step would be to open schools up as a part of the community. This can work on both broader organized systemic levels and on more local and personal levels. Organizing school trips to museums, public

libraries, community events, and charities should be done on the district-level, but they can also be done by schools, departments, and individual teachers on a more personal and local level.

In my teaching career, I've had the pleasure of taking my students to several museums for unique, out-of-classroom learning experiences. This was done through inquiry and collaboration between myself, my PLC, and our contacts at these establishments. In this spirit, I look forward to planning future field trips to other spaces for my students to experience learning and growth outside the classroom.

On the systemic level, schools should transform themselves to become more student centered. We need to have student input at every level of the decision-making process. I believe the expanded focus on vocational training and college-preparedness in our district is a great step forward in preparing our students to be productive members of society, but there needs to be a greater focus on those "soft skills" that help ensure our students know how to connect with their peers. There needs to be a paradigm shift of the focus in schools from the rote memorization of information that is not valued by students to self-reflection, critical problem solving, and connecting with other people and ideas in healthy ways.

To be a teacher, I've learned, is to be a changemaker. I had to experience teaching before I could attach a feeling to the experience. I then had to name my feelings of dread before being able to identify and name the sources of this dread. It was only when I named these sources that I could begin to reflect on them. Once I dedicated my master's thesis to reflecting on my experiences, the feelings I attached to them, and the sources of those feelings, I was able to explore potential solutions to the problems defining my teaching. I could take what I read from Dewey and Freire and apply it to my experiences to see *how* I could become a more democratic teacher and how doing so could help fight the dehumanization of myself and my students.

To be a teacher is to be human. To be a student is to be human. Unfortunately, there are currently policies and practices in place in our public schools that dehumanize students and teachers. Because schools are an element of society interconnected with all other parts, they reflect the normalized oppression present within our society. It is the teacher's responsibility to prepare their students to become active members of our democracy and to prepare them to question, challenge, and reform that which is working against the greater good. To be a better teacher is to take this responsibility seriously, and to work with our students to ensure that tomorrow is more than just another day.

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