

PUBLIC STORIES OF MATHEMATICS EDUCATORS

Praxis as Dialogue: Teacher and Administrator

John Bragelman

University of Illinois at Chicago

In the spring of 2014, I accepted an administrative position at a community college in Chicago. I struggled with the decision because it meant leaving the mathematics classroom, a space I call home. As a critical educator, I had the opportunity to watch my students become critical participators in their communities, readers and writers of their world (Gutstein, 2006). I chose to transition to administration because I hoped for a similar narrative on a broader scale, impacting thousands instead of hundreds, but I worried that my values would be negatively influenced. I worried that by accepting this “power” that I was somehow placing myself in a position in which I would unintentionally reify systemic oppression rather than doing my part to dismantle it. That spring, I encountered bell hooks’ (1994) book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, and it spoke to me deeply. In *Teaching to Transgress* there is a section where hooks presents a dialogue between herself and her writing voice. This writing style inspired the dialogue presented in this public story between me, the mathematics educator (i.e., “John the Teacher”), and a recently adopted identity, me, the administrator (i.e., “John the Administrator”), to make my fears salient and to confront the effects my new experiences were having on my values. I worked in administration for a year before returning to the dialogue, reflecting on the effects of the position and its power. There is no conclusion, as my identities are still under negotiation, the dialogue ever continuing.

John the Administrator (JA): Before we get into why I’ve asked for this dialogue, could you tell us a little about yourself?

John the Teacher (JT): I’ll be happy to. You see, education wasn’t my first career. I entered the corporate world at a young age of 20, bouncing between school and corporate positions until I realized in 2005 that I wouldn’t ever be happy in that context. In 2006, I began a master’s of education degree program at Georgia State University. It was there that I was first exposed to

JOHN BRAGELMAN is a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a mathematics professor at Harold Washington College; email: jbrage2@uic.edu. His research interests include identity and self-efficacy in developmental mathematics education, restorative practices, teaching for social justice, and the morality of mathematics education.

Freire (e.g., 1970/1993b), Ladson-Billings (e.g., 1994, 1995), Ladson-Billings and Tate (e.g., 1995), Woodson (e.g., 1933/2006), Tate (e.g., 1994), and others. It was there that I found my calling as an educator. During the program, I tutored at a high school on the south side of Atlanta, and after I completed the program, I taught in and around that area for 3 years. In 2010, I transitioned to teaching in a college while I worked on a doctorate. And you?

JA: As you know, I'm new in the sense that this is my first administrative role; it's the first time in 7 years that I'm not in the classroom. I recently accepted a position as Director of Developmental Education at a community college in Chicago. I find myself overwhelmed, lost, and without guidance. Ninety percent of our students place in developmental courses, and almost all come to our college having endured systemic injustices (Lipman, 2011). As mathematics is the gatekeeper for college (Martin, 2000), I'm the person who works the gatehouse. Frankly, I need help. I've always considered you a critical educator. You taught for social justice through culturally relevant lessons (e.g., Gutstein, 2006, 2008; Gutstein & Peterson, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995), and you were always an advocate for students. It was because of you that I took this position. Can you help me?

JT: Yes, but understand I can only reflect on our past experiences. Freire (1970/1993b) would say it's up to you to continue the dialectical cycle of action and reflection, of praxis.

JA: Thank you! I want to bring the same critical emphasis to this new position that you had as an educator. Who or what is a critical administrator? Does such a thing exist? Administrating for social justice?

JT: I would say that a critical administrator takes a broader perspective of a critical educator. A critical educator focuses on the dialectics of teacher-and-learner, theory-and-practice, taking a problem-posing approach to education mediated through the students' lived realities (Freire, 1970/1993b). In *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994/2004), Freire argues:

The problem facing the leaders is: they must learn, through the critical reading of reality that must always be made, what actions can be tactically implemented, and on what levels they can be so implemented. In other words, what can we do now in order to be able to do tomorrow what we are unable to do today? (p. 188)

Notice that Freire speaks of the same praxis for administrators as he does for educators all the while broadening the perspective to include tactical choices within a long-term strategy. In *Education and Democracy* (del Pilar O'Cadiz, Wong, & Torres, 1998), the purpose of his administration is made explicit:

The orientation of Freire's administration, as we have tried to argue and exemplify, was towards passionately and slowly building a social movement responsive to the educational needs of popular communities rather than coldly and efficiently developing coordinated curriculum packages to be identically replicated in the city's 691 schools. (p. 247)

The intentionality behind these perspectives is unpacked in *Pedagogy in Process* (Freire, 1978) and *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

JA: In letters to Mario Cabral about advising Guinea-Bissau in adult literacy education, Freire (1978) mentions traveling to Guinea-Bissau to experience the lived realities of the popular classes. Is this what he means by “being responsive to the educational needs of popular communities?”

JT: I'm not Freire, and I can't directly speak for him. With that said, yes, I think so. And similarly in *Literacy* (1987), when he presents the work he did with the republic of São Tomé and the Príncipe, in the shared construction of the Exercise Workbook and the Second Popular Culture Notebook. In both cases, Freire and his administration work *with*.

JA: And by work *with*, what do you mean exactly?

JT: Do you remember some of my failed lessons when I was teaching high school? During those first few months, I brought lessons in, ones carefully crafted during the master's program, ones that integrated technology and mathematics, and ones that aligned perfectly with what I thought teaching should look like, because that's how it looked like when I was in high school.

JA: And ones that left the students disengaged?

JT: Exactly! None of those lessons derived from the students, from their popular knowledge and lived experiences. Even when I tried using lessons created by social justice educators (see, e.g., Gutstein & Peterson, 2006), I found lit-

tle success. The lessons were about my reality or, worse yet, on the assumptions I was making about the students' realities. I was centering my educational practice "exclusively on ... the educator" rather than understanding "educational practice in terms of the relationship obtained among its various components" (Freire, 1994/2004, p. 93). When I remembered this, when I remembered what culturally relevant pedagogy really meant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), I threw my lessons away and sat down with the students. I let them inform what we would learn and how we would learn it.

JA: So, you mean when you constructed the basketball statistics lessons because a few of the young ladies in your classes played on the varsity team, you were building lessons with them?

JT: Yes. Their realities, their acts of sharing informed my pedagogy. And through this sharing we moved toward critically examining those realities through problem-posing pedagogy (Freire, 1970/1993b); we discussed sports as a means of class mobility. Freire (1998) echoes how I felt perfectly in *Pedagogy of Freedom*:

Reflecting on the duty I have as a teacher to respect the dignity, autonomy, and identity of the student, all of which are in process of becoming, I ought to think also about how I can develop an educational practice in which that respect, which I know I owe to the student, can come to fruition instead of being simply neglected and denied. (pp. 62–63)

So, how would this perspective play out as a critical administrator?

JA: A critical administrator would privilege the realities and voices of her educators, students, and staff in forming and administering policy, using respect for the faculty and student as a lens. For example, in *Education and Democracy* (del Pilar O'Cadiz et al., 1998), "the overwhelming majority of teachers we spoke with asserted that the one outstanding feature of the PT administration was that for the first time in their professional lives they were afforded the opportunity to have a voice" (p. 245). Administering *with* is an activity that exhibits respect.

JT: Exactly. Always "*with* the people, teaching and learning mutually" (Freire, 1978, p. 9). The dangers of your position are your academic knowledge and the privileges it brings. "The relations among world-consciousness-practice-theory-reading-of-the-world-reading-of-the-word-context-text, the reading of the world cannot be the reading made by academicians and imposed on

the popular classes” (Freire, 1994/2004, p. 90). You must remain constantly vigilant against that privilege (Freire, 1970/1993b).

JA: But how?

JT: By remembering what a critical administrator is not. At my second high school, the principal spent the majority of her time in the office; she spent little to no time in dialogue with the students and faculty, choosing to spend the majority of time in dialogue with other administrators and the school board. This choice increased the distance between the administration and the students rather than decreasing it. My first principal was in the hallways constantly, always in dialogue with the students. Her evaluations of us as educators came first from the students.

JA: And yet she spent little time with the faculty.

JT: True. And that is why being a critical administrator is difficult, finding that balance in the dance of dialectics.

JA: How do you frame, navigate, and privilege the dialectics between administrator and faculty, administrator and students, and administrator and staff?

JT: This is something difficult for me to answer. Because navigating those dialectical relationships while privileging them equitably, not necessarily equally, was and is something I consider myself poor at accomplishing. If Freire were here, I think he would tell us that there is no single solution, that only through praxis, dialogue, and the theory–practice dialectic can the dance be performed, finding some balance in the tension. In *Pedagogy in Process* (1978), he says:

In a certain moment it becomes true that one no longer studies in order to work nor does one work in order to study; one studies in the process of working. There comes about, thus, a true unity between practice and theory. (p. 21)

There is a glimmer of an answer in this quote, the notion of “studying in the process of working,” that supports my point. I don’t think it’s possible to separate those dialectical relationships and navigate them separately. The focus should not exclusively be on any single dialectic or group, and dialogue in conjunction with practice is an inoculation against his path that can often lead to oppression.

JA: But which group do you support as an administrator, and when? I'm attempting to build a safe space for faculty and students to implement critical theory and practice, and it seems one group would receive the most emphasis.

JT: Take care with your framing. To name a thing is to give it power, and thoughtless naming invites domination and oppression. You are not building a safe space; you are co-creating a safe space. *With*, not *for*. Earlier in *Pedagogy in Process*, Freire (1978) states:

Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the common effort to understand the reality in which they seek to transform. Only through such praxis ... can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped. (p. 8)

You see the difference?

JA: Yes, I do. My best work in this role has derived from faculty and staff's reflections on their practice. The programs I'm implementing have originated in these dialogues.

JT: What about the students? How is your dialogue with them?

JA: To be honest, there hasn't been much dialogue with students, but that's slowly changing. I'm interacting more with students as new programs begin, and I've spoken with each who've stopped by. But you're right. It's something that requires more attention. It seemed easier being a critical educator.

JT: Haven't you begun yet to see that it's the same, just more? That being a critical administrator requires the same epistemological and ontological values? That it requires negotiating the same dialectical tensions? Reflect for a moment. Perhaps Freire doesn't emphasize critical administration in his work because he doesn't perceive critical administration to be any different than critical pedagogy; that even as an administrator, there is still educator and educand (Freire, 1994/2004). In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Freire & Macedo, 1987), he alludes to this lack of difference:

To live or embody this obvious confrontation [that we are not alone in this world], as an educator, means to recognize in others, whether they are becoming literate or are participants in university courses, students of primary schools or members of a public assembly, the right to express their thoughts,

their right to speak, which corresponds to the educator's duty to listen to them. (p. 40)

Yes, teachers as educators are positioned in such a way to foster and co-create liberatory movements, and because of this power to cocreate, Freire emphasizes educators' roles and devotes the majority of his life to serving them (Freire, 1978, 1970/1993b, 1994/2004). Freire's texts emphasize so often teaching *with*, learning *with*. He demonstrates this teaching/learning *with* by example through his work with educators and with educands. Is there a need to create this false dichotomy? Aren't educators and educands the same persons?

JA: I share the same perspective, educators and educands as one. But few teachers do. So often at work I see faculty buying in to a "banking system of education" (Freire, 1970/1993b) and presenting content in some extreme acquisitionist form (Sfard, 1994). How do you shift pedagogical philosophies?

JT: How did I shift them as an educator? I've often worked with traditional educators, and through my dialogue with students I came to know how their pedagogies were affecting our students. It was the first time my pedagogy extended out of the classroom. My reasoning aligns with Freire (1998) in *Pedagogy of Freedom*:

Whether the teacher is authoritarian, undisciplined, competent, incompetent, serious, irresponsible, involved, a lover of people and of life, cold, angry at the world, bureaucratic, excessively rational, or whatever else, he/she will not pass through the classroom without leaving his or her mark on the students. (p. 64)

I chose not to "fold my arms fatalistically in the face of misery" (p. 72). And even if my intentions weren't to follow a Freirian framing, it still happened. I, You, shift pedagogical philosophies by doing *with*, or in this case, teaching *with*. I openly shared my pedagogical philosophies, discussing the theories I had read, sharing texts. I co-taught with other teachers. In my courses, students actively taught lessons. My classroom was a transparent place where power dynamics were constantly upended. But none of that happened in one week, or even in one month or one year. Freire would tell you that you must learn the community first, as he said to Mario Cabral (1978) or as he showed in *Education and Democracy* (del Pilar O'Cadiz et al., 1998) and *Literacy* (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

JA: But that takes so much time. Students are finishing courses next week. Almost no changes have been made to the developmental program that I direct. Students are failing while I take the time to learn the community.

JT: The sense of urgency you feel is good, but don't let it lead to impatience. Dwell within a space of urgent patience, but heed Freire's counsel (1978) against moving from that space: "breaking the tension between patience and impatience, under such circumstances, inevitably leads to teaching without dialogue" (p. 64). And teaching without dialogue, administrating without dialogue, is just oppression.

JA: It's been difficult, learning the culture of the faculty here. I hadn't anticipated how distrustful they would be of administration

JT: Was I not the same? Often I acted in self-perceived defiance and subversion all the while being unwilling to engage in real dialogue with the administration. It's entirely possible my administrators were always aware, and they let me keep these pretenses of rebellion because it was what I needed at the time.

JA: Yes, you're right; I need to be more patient. Show them through actions that I can be trusted, by listening (Freire, 1998) and through respect (Freire, 1994/2004). "What ought to guide me is ... respect, at all costs, for all those involved in education" (Freire, 1998, p. 101).

JT: And show them through dialogue. Learn who your faculty and students are. Freire speaks on this extensively. In *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994/2004), he discusses the importance of learning and privileging their culture and language:

It was by attempting to inculcate a maximal respect for the cultural differences with which I had to struggle, one of them being language—in which I made an effort to express myself, as best I could, with clarity—that I learned so much of reality, and learned it with Chileans. (p. 34)

I did the same as an educator. My students taught me about their language, their culture, and their communities, and together we taught and learned mathematics. The goal is to begin with the students' and faculty's realities, not yours:

Even though the educator's dream is not only to render his or her 'here-and-now' accessible to educands, but to get beyond their own 'here-and-now' with them, or to understand and rejoice that educands have gotten beyond their

'here' so that this dream is realized, she or he must begin with the educands' 'here,' and not with her or his own. (Freire, 1994/2004, p. 47)

From their realities, you work toward accessing their dreams. Those realities are the key. Their realities are the mediators for their learning, and they're the fountain of their knowledge. Later in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994/2004), Freire speaks of the importance of cultural activities as part of those realities:

Educators need an understanding of the meaning their festivals have as an integral part of the culture of resistance, a respectful sense of their piety in a dialectical perspective, and not only as if it were a simple expression of their alienation. Their piety, their religiousness, must be respected as their right, regardless of whether we reject it personally (and if so, whether we reject religion as such, or merely do not approve the particular manner of its practice in a given popular group). (p. 91)

It's difficult sometimes to reject those assumptions and beliefs you hold most closely when you're faced with the lived realities of others, especially when they're the antithesis of your own. It was through dialogue with my students that I learned to be more human, and they learned how to critically read and write their world with math (Gutstein, 2006), as I "discuss[ed] with the students the logic of these kinds of knowledge in relation to their contents" (Freire, 1998, p. 36). It was through dialogue my students discovered and developed counter narratives to the master narratives (Lyotard, 1984; Martin, 2000; Nelson, 2001).

JA: So dialogue helps the community move toward progress. What will that look like? How do you create a critical curriculum and pedagogy?

JT: For the most part, it sounds as if you're working toward that point. What has never worked in the past, at least in terms of students' empowerment and success, is homogenized, standardized curricular packages. Freire (1994/2004) speaks of this in *Pedagogy of Hope*:

The fundamental problem—a problem of a political nature, and colored by ideological hues—is who chooses the content, and in behalf of which persons and things the 'chooser's' teaching will be performed—in favor of whom, against whom, in favor of what, against what. (p. 94)

A homogenized curriculum only serves the dominant group through and by normalization (Foucault, 1975/1995; Leonardo, 2009). He exemplifies his

own suggestion during the implementation of the Inter Project under his administration:

The orientation of Freire's administration, as we have tried to argue and exemplify, was towards passionately and slowly building a social movement responsive to the educational needs of popular communities rather than coldly and efficiently developing coordinated curriculum packages to be identically replicated in the city's 691 schools. (del Pilar O'Cadiz et al., 1998, p. 247).

The popular communities are the students and the faculty, the people you serve. Developing a coordinated curriculum means working with students and faculty to develop a curriculum *for* your college, *by* your college, *with* your college.

JA: Similar to the programs I'm currently working with faculty to build, curriculum informed by and created with the students is trickier. That will take faculty buy-in; it's a different type of pedagogy than what they're used to.

JT: It will be, and there will be challenges associated with it, just as there were with the Inter Project; challenges like teacher frustration and disenchantment from no standardized curriculum (del Pilar O'Cadiz et al., 1998). The faculty will require significant support.

JA: How?

JT: Professional development. How many times have I attended professional development that models the most traditional of classrooms, some "specialist" standing at the front of the room, the sage on the stage, imparting her or his knowledge to me? You need to implement supportive professional development that privileges the difficulties and rigor a curriculum like this demands.

JA: What kind of development would that entail? The school has already begun implementing some, including a set of development sessions on proactive restorative practices (Sugai, O'Keeffe, & Fallon, 2011) that the faculty and I are co-developing. It brings intentionality to creating communities within classes, and it scaffolds students' mathematics identity (Martin, 2000).

JT: But you have it! Professional development follows the same processes as any other educational endeavor. It should be problem posing, rooted in praxis, privileging both theory *and* practice, and foremost it should derive from

the realities of the faculty. Freire (1978) speaks of his vision in *Pedagogy in Process*:

Another thing the administration has to do in its dealings with the faculty and staff and their respective roles is to think, organize, and create programs of permanent staff development counting on the help of those scientists with whom we have until now been working. A permanent staff development must be based, above all, on reflection about practice. It is through thinking about his or her practice, it is through confronting the problems that will emerge in his or her daily practice, that the educator will transcend his or her difficulties with a team of specialists who are scientifically qualified. (p. 20)

Freire even models an implementation of his vision, exhibiting the importance of privileging theory and practice in professional development detailed in *Education and Democracy*:

It was necessary to reorient the policy for staff training and development by overcoming the traditional holiday courses that insisted on a discourse about theory, thinking that afterwards the teachers would put directly into practice that theory which was discussed through the practice of discussing practice. Such courses were not developed through an efficacious form of living a dialectic unity between theory and practice. (del Pilar O'Cadiz et al., 1998, p. 249)

These two excerpts suggest that you will have to change the culture of development at the school. Have you considered something that encourages active reflection?

JA: I've submitted a proposal to implement a reflective model for teaching and learning. Faculty would videotape classes and reflect on their practice in small sessions with other faculty. Initially, administration would have to be left out of the reflection process until more trust is garnered.

JT: It's reflective, yes. It even encourages faculty to consider the dialectic of theory and practice. But is it deriving from the faculty or from you?

JA: That's a good question. There are faculty members who've approached me about improving their pedagogy, but they're unsure how to go about the process. I posed this as a suggestion, and the faculty seemed interested.

JT: Excellent. Also Freire, I think, would suggest development oriented on the realities of the students. This orientation could be theoretical or practical.

JA: I can see the practical perspective. Based on dialogue I've had with faculty members, I don't think they fully understand Chicago Public Schools (CPS) or the communities the students call theirs. I want to bring educators from CPS to campus to speak with our faculty about the realities of teaching in a system plagued by neoliberal oppression (Lipman, 2011). Afterwards, I was hoping to send faculty to CPS high schools, to see what teaching and learning look like in that context. I think their realities—the faculty here and at CPS—are more similar than they perceive.

JT: If possible, it would be worth taking faculty members to the students' actual communities, not just their old schools. I held so many assumptions and generalizations of the communities on the south side of Atlanta, and all were shattered within days of teaching there. My students spoke different than I, and they came to school with a different knowledge than I ever held. It was something I never knew or understood until they taught me the knowledge of their realities. I was determined to respect all aspects of my students, and this respect forged a Freirian philosophy, albeit unintentionally. He speaks extensively of these types of knowledges in many of his books, but *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994/2004) resonates with me the most:

I have argued the need we progressive educators have never to underestimate or reject knowledge had from living experience, with which educands come to school or to informal centers of education ... a respect for both knowledges—a respect of which I speak so much—with a view to getting beyond them, must never mean, in a serious, radical, and therefore critical, never sectarian, rigorous, careful, competent reading of my texts, that the educator must stick with the knowledge of living experience. (pp. 71–72)

Here, he privileges the importance of both types of knowledges, the popular knowledge of the people and the formal, hegemonic knowledge of the academy. He also warns of over-privileging one type, here the popular. Macedo (1991) makes a similar warning in the context of English Language Learners, over-privileging the home language to the detriment of the students as they're not exposed then to English, and as the primary tool by the dominant class, students are highly served by its access. The same must be true of any curriculum you develop and perspective you take, a balance in the tension of the dialectic, of both practice and theory, of both popular knowledge and academic knowledge.

JA: How will I know if I've found that balance? Can you assess it? So much assessment at this institution is quantitative, and while I've pushed against this

belief, there is still an inordinate amount of pressure to show results quantitatively, especially significance testing.

JT: I can't give much guidance on this question, as I have little experience in program analysis. The majority of my assessment experience is in the classroom, in a formative context. Freire (1993a) warns of assessment through traditional, dominant methodologies in *Pedagogy of the City*:

The evaluation criteria the school uses to measure students' knowledge—intellectualism, formal, bookish—necessarily helps these children from the so-called privileged social classes, while they hurt children from poor and low socioeconomic backgrounds. ... The experience of children from the middle class results in the acquisition of a middle-class vocabulary, prosody, syntax, in the final analysis a linguistic competence that coincides with what the school regards as proper and correct. The experience of poor children takes place not within the domain of the written word, but within direct action. (pp. 16–17)

This passage suggests assessment of a critical curriculum combines measuring the learning of both popular and academic knowledges in the context of the students' realities. Freire (1994/2004) confirms this interpretation in *Pedagogy of Hope*:

[It is necessary to find] a critical comprehension of how university arts and sciences ought to be related with the consciousness of the popular classes: that is, a critical comprehension of the interrelations of popular knowledge, common sense, and scientific cognition. (p. 169)

If you consider Freire's framework, every perspective, decision, and ideology is rooted in the dialectic.

JA: So then, I move in the "right" direction, positioning myself in the tension between qualitative and quantitative methodologies?

JT: I think so. In my readings, Freire (1993a) speaks of this only briefly. For instance, in *Pedagogy of the City*, he writes, "It is important also to point out that a critical politics of education cannot mechanically understand the relationship between these deficits—quantitative and qualitative—but it must understand them dynamically and contradictorily" (p. 15). This statement, I believe, verifies your rightness.

JA: How will I know if I'm successful?

JT: The students and faculty will be your lens. You're successful when they're successful, as they define the measure of success. And I don't mean successful as high grade point averages or retention rates or graduation rates. I mean successful critically:

In other words, it is a process of knowing with the people how they know things and the level of that knowledge. This means challenging them, through critical reflection, regarding their own practical experience and the ends that motivate them in order, in the end, to organize the findings, and thus to replace mere opinion about facts with an increasingly rigorous understanding of their significance. (Freire, 1978, p. 25)

JA: How do I know if I'm doing the right thing?

JT: Because you're not "evading [your] responsibility, hiding behind lukewarm, cynical shibboleths that justify [your] inaction because 'there is nothing that can be done.' The exhortation to be more a spectator; the invitation to (even exaltation of) silence, which in fact immobilizes those who are silenced" (Freire, 1993a, p. 72). You are struggling *with*.

JA: But how will I know when I'm a critical administrator?

JT: This dialogue is a step toward the answer.

One Year Later

In the spring of 2015, I returned to this dialogue to reflect on my growth and the challenges I faced as a mathematics teacher turned administrator, the impact this new identity has had on my practice, and the criticality of my work.

JT: You've worked as director of developmental education for over a year now. How does it feel?

JA: I miss the classroom. Every single day, I miss it. I question whether this was the right choice, this path as an administrator. I do good work in this role, but I'm overwhelmed. The struggles I faced as an educator are magnified as an administrator. I don't have 120 students in a semester; I have 2,000.

JT: What struggles?

JA: As a teacher, my students, their communities, grounded me. The relationships I developed affirmed my choices, teaching for justice, teaching *with*. It took this past year to realize that I was missing these relationships with students as an administrator. I work in broad swaths. When I uncover need, I build programs to support that need, but programs target hundreds. This is the good that I do. I've been given the power to enact change at the school level, but I lose reflexivity without these relationships. It's so easy to lose the *with*. I felt this happening when I first took this position, so now I build relationships with students at this school, engaging them in dialogue to learn of their lived experiences and the impact (or lack thereof) my programs have on their lived experiences (Freire, 1994/2004).

JT: What do you mean?

JA: I sat with a student a few weeks ago in my office. She alternated between tears of frustration and, in her words, militancy. Battered by her reality and the sociopolitical forces that buffet her on a daily basis, she was losing hope. She is taking our gatekeeper math class for the second time, and at mid-terms, she was failing. The school has no additional services to support her. So I tutor her now, two to three times a week. Teaching *with*. Learning *with*. Struggling *with*.

JT: It sounds like you are still a teacher at heart.

JA: It's my most salient identity. It's the truth of me, and it guides my decisions still. I feel as an administrator that I should question if devoting time to one or three students is beneficial to the whole college, but the teacher part of me, you, demands I invest in the individual.

JT: Why not return to the classroom then? To teaching? To what you love?

JA: I ... I can't. Not yet. Despite not wanting this, despite missing the classroom, I can do too much good in this position. And if I left, who would replace me? I don't trust anybody else.

JT: So you continue on this journey? After all of you gone through, do you consider yourself a critical administrator?

JA: Freire (1970/1993b) would say I'm in the process of becoming. And part of me thinks he would be correct. I navigate political pressures, especially pol-

icy and how it is enacted. I work *with* both faculty and students, and I strive to build a program that serves the “educational needs of [the] popular communities rather than coldly and efficiently developing coordinated curriculum packages to be identically replicated” (del Pilar O’Cadiz et al., 1998, p. 247). But no, despite this, I’m not an administrator. I’m a math teacher.

References

- del Pilar O’Cadiz, M., Wong, P., & Torres, C. A. (1998). *Education and democracy: Paulo Freire, social movements, and educational reform in Sao Paulo*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Westminster, MD: Vintage. (Original work published in 1975).
- Freire, P. (1978). *Pedagogy in process: The letters to Guinea-Bissau*. New York, NY: The Seabury Press.
- Freire, P. (1993a). *Pedagogy of the city*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1993b). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum. (Original work published in 1970).
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Freire, P. (2004). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academics. (Original work published in 1994).
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gutstein, E. (2006). *Reading and writing the world with mathematics: Toward a pedagogy for social justice*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gutstein, E. (2008). Building political relationships with students. In E. de Freitas & K. Nolan (Eds.), *Opening the research text: Critical insights and in(ter)ventions into mathematics education* (pp. 189–204). New York, NY: Springer.
- Gutstein, E., & Peterson, B. (Eds.). (2006). *Rethinking mathematics: Teaching social justice by the numbers*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47–68.
- Leonardo, Z. (2009). *Race, whiteness, and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lipman, P. (2011). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Macedo, D. (1991). English only: The tongue-tying of America. *Journal of Education*, 173(2), 9–20.

- Martin, D. B. (2000). *Mathematics success and failure among African-American youth: The roles of sociohistorical context, community forces, school influence, and individual agency*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Nelson, H. L. (2001). *Damaged identities, narrative repair*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Sfard, A. (1994). On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one. *Educational Research*, 27(4), 4–13.
- Sugai, G., O’Keeffe, B. V., & Fallon, L. M. (2011). A contextual consideration of culture and school-wide positive behavior support. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 14(4), 197–208.
- Tate, W. F. (1994). Race, retrenchment, and the reform of school mathematics. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(6), 477–483.
- Woodson, C. G. (2006). *The mis-education of the negro*. San Diego, CA: Book Tree. (Original work published in 1933).