

**Decolonizing Schools and Our Mentality: Narratives for pedagogical possibilities from a former high school teacher and colonized subject**

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**Abstract**

Using personal narratives as a form of inquiry, the author describes the learning experience of colonized subjects being educated in colonial-based school systems. The author goes on to juxtapose such experiences with the challenge of teaching racialized, culturally, and linguistically diverse students in a standardized test-driven school context such as that of the United States. Further, the author talks about the way and the extent to which the colonial legacy, sustained by western neocolonial and neoliberal policies, has continued to influence the teaching practices of teachers as well as the learning of students both in the West and so-called Third World countries like Haiti. Drawing on these experiences, the author makes suggestions as to how one can counter neo-colonial and hegemonic practices affecting the learning, the well-being, and the teaching practices of both students and teachers.

**Keywords:** Decolonization, linguistic domination, linguistically and culturally diverse students, colonial-based schools, standardized tests, student learning

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For many critical educators, colonialism is still at work; its legacy continues to shape the practices of many institutions, such as schools, governments, churches, workplaces, and the mass media (Fanon, 1965; Kempf & Dei, 2006; Wa Thiong'o, 1986). Colonialism has been implemented through different educational, socio-economic, and political policies that have had a negative impact on the school system of many countries, particularly formerly colonized countries, as well as those that are currently occupied (Author, 2007; Dei, 2009; Loomba, 2002; Nkruma, 1965). The educational, socio-economic, political, and cultural disaster that colonialism has engendered may not be as obvious as neoliberalism, for example, partly because those in power have used the corporate media to gain the consent of people, including the poor, leading them to believe that they have benefited from global capitalism and the *free market*.

However, those who have presence of mind and are thus able to critically reflect on their direct experience with neocolonialism know this system mostly works for those who have created it (Fanon, 1963, 1965; Loomba, 2002; Wa Thiong'o, 1986; Young, 2006). In light of this view, I draw on personal and professional experiences teaching and being educated in a colonial-based, capitalist test-driven school system to examine the ways and the degree to which the legacy of colonialism continues to impact the learning, the subjectivity, and cultural and material conditions of colonial subjects, including linguistically and culturally diverse students. In the section that follows, I critically reflect on and examine my mis-education in a colonial-based school system. I go further to articulate what a democratic and participatory form of education should look like in a classroom context, arguing that this form of education aims at preparing students to become well-educated and informed critical citizens.

### **My Mis-education in a Colonial-Based School System: A critical self-reflection**

As a high school student, who was educated in a school system that mimicked and

followed the rules and teaching codes of the French colonial model of education, I was taught to believe that knowledge is something that is transferred mechanically from teachers to pupils. I was not allowed to challenge and engage in a dialogue with my teachers and peers during class. Instead, I was expected to sit, listen, and copy what the teachers wrote on the board. I was also expected to memorize and regurgitate back to my teachers what I “learned.” Needless to say, the teaching procedure involved rote behavior, and most of my teachers failed to create space where I could use what I “learned” and linked it to real life situations beyond the classroom’s walls and the collapsing fences that encircled the school building. I was not encouraged to make decisions on my own, to be a creative and an independent thinker, and to be a problem solver. While there was ample room in my classrooms for plenty meaningless activities, there was little room for teacher-student and student-student interactions.

As a prime example, I had to follow whatever my teachers assigned to me. My work was evaluated based on how well I followed what teachers did in class. I was mostly tested on what I was expected to copy in my notebooks even though my teacher’s explanation was often unclear. I felt that poor thinking, writing, and reading skills that I acquired could only prepare me for routine and menial types of jobs in the real world. Freire (1993) in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* eloquently synthesizes this oppressive style of the education that I received. Freire summarizes it in these terms:

the teacher teaches and the students are taught;

the teachers knows everything and the students know nothing;

the teachers thinks and the students are taught about;

the teacher talks and the students listen-meeekly;

the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;

the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;

the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;

the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who are not consulted) adapt to it;

the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;

the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (p. 54)

Similarly, in *Cries from the Corridor* McLaren (1980) describes the horrible and anti-democratic conditions in which poor urban school students are expected to learn. McLaren argues these students often have to memorize and regurgitate to teachers what they “learn” via rote teaching and learning mechanisms. Those who manage to do so are usually considered the best students. At some point during my high school and college years, I was perceived like one of these students, for I managed to regurgitate to my teachers what I was taught in my classes. It was not until I came across and read avidly a book called *Emile Ou de L’education* written by a French writer named Jean Jacques Rousseau that I realized I was being mis-educated. Specifically, thanks to this book, I was finally able to draw the conclusion that the form of education that I was receiving from my teachers was essentially domesticating my mind. The overarching argument Rousseau (1966) makes in *Emile Ou de L’education* is that pupils should

be allowed to learn at their own pace and should not be expected to engage in any learning endeavor that is abstract and meaningless to their life. Education in this sense is conceived as a self-discovery learning process where pupils explore their learning without any forcible control of a teacher. Kneller (1964) captures Rousseau's philosophy of education and states:

[Rousseau] stated that it was useless to expect a child to indulge abstract intellectual pursuits until he had reached the age of reason. Instead, a child should learn the things that he is capable of understanding through personal discovery. Followers of Rousseau urged teachers to connect what the child learned in school with what he would experience at home in his community, that is, to connect education and life. (pp. 104–105)

Although later in my learning curves I partially rejected Rousseau's view on education, at that time I found his radical philosophy of education refreshing and inspiring, especially after being mis-educated by almost all my high school and college teachers. I later refuted some of Rousseau's view on education because I felt and still feel that it is essentially a laissez-faire learning style that he consciously or unconsciously promoted through his book, which is worth reading nonetheless. Unlike Rousseau, I believe that if students are to learn, they need to be clearly guided and challenged by their teachers, although there are people who manage to learn on their own. However, even the so-called autodidacts do not construct knowledge alone. They do so collectively with others, whether it be in school settings or other settings.

Furthermore, before I became familiar with the scholarly work of the Russian philosopher Bakhtin (1986), the American educator John Dewey (1997), and the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1993) who believe in co-construction of knowledge, my learning experience had already taught me that knowledge is constructed collectively. In other words, I

already knew before being introduced to the work of these theorists that knowledge is not something that is automatically passed on from a teacher, who is believed to know everything, to a student, who does not know much or, worse yet, does not know anything.

Centuries before Dewey, Freire, Plato and Socrates already illustrated for us that knowledge is dialectically constructed through dialogue between teachers and students, and/or mentors and mentees. Plato (1992) demonstrated in *the Republic* that through open dialogue, a mentee learns from his/her mentor and vice versa. The dialogue in which he and Socrates engaged in is a case in point. By creating space for a genuine dialogue between him and his mentee, Plato, Socrates does not merely guide, teach, and challenge Plato, but he also learns from him. Although one might think that he is playing the role of a master, by dialoguing with his mentee, Plato, Socrates learns from him in the process. In my view, teachers' philosophy of education and teaching practices should reflect the dialogical learning relationship that Socrates and Plato established between themselves as teacher and pupil. In other words, as Kneller (1964) argues:

The Socratic method is the ideal mode of education, since by it the student learns what he personally asserts to be true. The teacher-pupil relationship becomes intimate and personal. The teacher persuades the student to think by questioning him about his beliefs, by setting before him other beliefs and thus forcing him to probe the workings of his own mind. In this way the student accepts the truth, but only because it is true for him. (p. 70)

### **My Evolving Philosophy of Education and Teaching**

My philosophy of education is grand yet simple. I believe that teachers first and foremost ought to be aware of what they are teaching students to become. In other words, before engaging in the act of teaching, they need to ask themselves questions such as: Am I going to teach my

students a set of fragmented knowledge and how to regurgitate it to people as tangible evidence that they are “smart” and prepared to meet certain academic, intellectual, and professional expectations, and fit certain social norms? Am I going to help them develop critical thinking skills to dismantle this set of fragmented knowledge and reconstruct it based on their prior knowledge, lived experience, imagination, and own understanding of it? Am I going to encourage my students to take intelligent risks informed by their intellectual curiosity and personal interests? Or am I going to censure their learning by expecting them to open up their mind and fill it up with a pre-packaged information and knowledge that I prepare for and impose on them? Am I going to encourage them to interrogate that information and knowledge and to figure out what piece of it they can relate to their interests and goals? Am I going to single them out in my class for daring to question what I teach them and for disagreeing with my teaching approach and philosophy of education?

More importantly, am I am going to be willing to engage in a dialogue with them to find out more about their previous learning experience, different approaches of teaching and philosophy of education, and be open to learn from them new ideas about learning and teaching? Or am I going to be continuously stuck in my comfort teaching zone expecting my students to passively receive and repeat like parrots the knowledge that I pass on to them? Am I going to cultivate the intellectual and moral courage, the respect for human intelligence, and self awareness so I am prepared to treat my students as intellectual beings who have the innate ability to think critically, reflect actively, decide for themselves, and with whom I can deconstruct knowledge while, at the same time, constructing new ones in the process?

Teachers guided by a progressive philosophy of education help students develop creative and critical thinking skills to continuously question their own learning, which should always be

in the making. These teachers assume a responsible task to help their students understand that education is not how about many theories they “learn” through rote memorization. Rather, it is about challenging students to interrogate, constantly search, and figure out how these theories come into being; how they can connect them to their interest, intellectual needs, and life; and how they can use these theories to effect social change. Teachers who teach students to become critical and independent thinkers also take on a gigantic teaching task to help their students develop sociopolitical, cultural, and historical awareness and consciousness to challenge social norms, instead of preparing them to become mere docile adapters to these norms. Equally crucial, progressive educators are the ones who urge students to discover their own path through continuous search and exploration of novel ideas while providing them with genuine support and mentorship.

What students are expected to learn in school is meaningless to the extent they are not able to read their own meaning into it, that is, linking their own experience and interests to it. Students study and learn best when the relevance of what they study or are expected to learn is made clear to them or, better yet, when they themselves see its relevance to their intellectual interests, needs, or curiosity. Stated otherwise, something is meaningful to students so long they feel they can connect it to their own real-life situations and those of others.

Since their real life situations might change as they go through higher stages in their academic and intellectual journey, students ought to be encouraged and helped by their teachers to cultivate intellectual flexibility and openness to try novel ideas, deconstruct prior ones, construct news ones, and take on new challenges. Their teachers ought to help them develop intellectual awareness so that they understand that the knowledge they acquire, as a result of personal intellectual search and interaction with their teachers and peers, is not a fixed entity.

Simply stated, they need to fully comprehend that knowledge is not like a beautiful piece of art they buy at an art studio, take it home, hang on the wall in their living room, and leave it there. Rather, knowledge is acquired through social, cultural, and historical transactions with people and exposure to varying sources of literature. While knowledge should be highly appreciated and valued, it needs to be continuously expanded on, re-examined, questioned, and constantly put to tests.

As noted earlier, students should not be expected to develop all these critical skills on their own. They ought to receive assistance and guidance from their teachers. However, in order for all this to be a reality, educators need to make a conscious effort to reach out to and know their students, which can only be possible through genuine dialogical relationships. Knowing their students will enable educators to have a sound understanding of their learning styles, their cultural, linguistic, and historical repertoires, their prior knowledge, and how to help them build on that knowledge. Building on students' various repertoires and prior knowledge facilitates the learning process of students and the teaching practices of teachers and most importantly validates students' identities while strengthening their confidence and self-esteem.

Equally important, teachers have a professional and moral obligation to find ways to make the school curriculum accessible and meaningful to students whose backgrounds might not match with the content of this curriculum. In other words, since education is the essence of life but not the means and the end to it, therefore in order for students to be able to relate what they learn in school to their lived experience, school materials should be based on real life circumstances, but not on abstract ideas. To this end, it is critically important that students and teachers collectively question how school materials and curricular are selected and developed; what shapes them and where they come from. It is equally imperative that they interrogate which

voices are being represented in these written curricular, as occupied and colonized students' voices often are not represented in the learning materials they are often required to use in class.

Since "the curriculum is often seen as the driving force for instructional practice, the framework within which day-to-day decisions are made" (Auerbach, 1995, p. 15), should not school materials, such as textbooks and school curricula, then emerge from students' world and lived experience? In other words, should not school curricula student-centered to allow space students' active participation and interaction with other students and teachers? As Auerbach (1995) maintained, when teachers "start from the students to the curriculum rather from the curriculum to the students" (p. 16) students are able to arrive to construct their own knowledge and act upon it.

Drawing on Auerbach's contention above, I argue that in order to understand what fundamentally causes the mis-education of students, it is educationally vital that one looks closely at what is going on in the classroom in terms of how teachers teach, interact with, construct or fail to construct knowledge with students. I am not implying here that the mis-education of students should be placed on teachers' shoulders alone because such an argument will take off responsibilities of the school system, policy makers and the government, and overlook other factors, such as the negative effects of the legacy of western colonialism and neoliberal education policies have had on the learning of students, particularly linguistically and culturally diverse students, and teaching practices of teachers, especially urban school teachers. However, teachers' teaching practices, attitude towards, level of trust in students, and level of investment in the learning of each student need to be taken into consideration, for arguably these factors play a crucial role in students' academic achievement.

### **Lessons Learned**

As a social justice educator, it took me a long time before I finally understood the vital role a culturally relevant and meaningful curriculum plays in student learning. It also took me a long time to understand how crucial it is to know first and foremost my students and use their prior knowledge as a building block in order to help them achieve academically. I come to that understanding through my personal schooling experience; the contact with the great works of Dewey (1997), Vygotsky (1978), and Freire (1993); the acquisition of various teaching methods and theories in multicultural education articulated by Nieto & Bode (2011) and Sleeter (2005); and through constant self-questioning on what kind of teacher I want to become and how I would teach my students to become what they want to be.

Before I became a teacher, I questioned myself as to whether I had the human understanding and political and cultural awareness to teach effectively. I also wondered if I had a strong enough sense of social justice, responsibility, and commitment to begin this long journey. This was when the immensity of the teaching profession seemed really challenging to me, for I knew whatever I taught my students in the classroom would impact their lives. These puzzling questions were left unanswered until I started teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students from poor working class background. Working with these students made me realize that I could not teach them these subjects without considering their cultural background and identity, which constitute an integral part of their learning process.

### **My Experience Teaching Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students**

I taught minority students in the most marginalized high school in Boston, Massachusetts. This experience helped me better understand how racial and social inequality impacts the

learning and academic growth of poor minority students and poor White students. This high school was underfunded, so many caring and dedicated teachers had to teach their poor students of color and Whites under horrible working conditions. For example, school materials were scarce, consequently many of my colleagues and I had to use our own money to buy school supplies. Worse yet, many of us were forced to leave our teaching jobs because of budget cuts. I was one of the teachers who were laid off. I question why schools in poor neighborhood serving poor children of color and poor Whites are always the first ones to drastically suffer from state and federal budget cuts. Shouldn't these schools be the least affected by these cuts?

I was fortunate to be hired as a bilingual reading and ESL (English as a second language) teacher at a high school located in Boston, Massachusetts. This experience has shaped my teaching experience and philosophy. I remember the intensity of inner fear that I experienced when I first became a high school teacher, especially during my first year. Though my Master's degree provided me with the necessary critical and analytical tools to look at the world with a critical eye, I did not feel that it prepared me to teach. Consequently, during my first year as a teacher I experienced much fear that nearly paralyzed me. I incessantly questioned myself if it was ethical to dare teach students, especially marginalized groups of students, as I did not feel adequately prepared to do so. Suddenly, this type of self-questioning led me to reflect on many ill-prepared teachers that I had in high school and even in college. I did not learn much from them. Hence, I did not want to reproduce what I was done to me: being mis-educated by poorly prepared teachers.

However, I was and am still sure that I have much love and passion for teaching and, more importantly, for co-constructing knowledge with students. Such passion and love enabled me as a first year teacher to make the effort to find enough humility in myself to reach out to

colleagues, especially those who had extensive teaching experience. Some of these colleagues tremendously helped me by sharing with me teaching material resources, while others served as my mentor.

For example, during my first and second year as a high school teacher, I asked two of my colleagues, who were like mentors to me, if I could go to their classrooms and observe how they taught. They both happily honored my request. They also came to observe my class while teaching. They gave me constructive feedback on my teaching methods. In fact, one of them invited me to come to his class during recess, so that he could share with me some of his teaching methods and strategies, which I experimented in my reading and ESL. These two colleagues were very kind, friendly, and welcoming, and showed genuine concern for their students who were from poor working class background and living in marginalized neighborhoods. However, I would soon be disappointed by one of them who made a value judgment about one of his students. He said that his student, who apparently was not doing well in his class due to a temporary language barrier and cultural shock, should drop out of high school and go learn how to be a mechanic because he did not think that this student was college materials. His judgment suggested that he had very low expectations for this student.

As a teacher I felt hurt. It was sad to hear such a harmful comment from a colleague for whom I had much respect and to whom I was and am still grateful for his mentorship when I needed it the most. At first, I wondered whether I should distance myself from him because of his insensitive comment, which is, in my view, a deficit view about his student. Because my colleague was white and middle class and this student was black from a poor working class background, the idea of him being possibly racist and classist inevitably crossed my mind. I challenged such a thought, however, asking myself: Could a teacher like my colleague, who said

that he cared for his students, be racist and classist? I am still puzzled by this question, to which I have not yet found an answer.

Reflecting on the example of my former high school colleague, I felt that by remaining silent I was in complicity with my colleague's dehumanizing way of looking at his student's potential. I regret not having taken a stand for this student by challenging my colleague's comment. In my mind, by choosing to not challenge him I thought I was trying to be tolerant and respectful to him as a dear colleague and a mentor.

Now reflecting back on this professional experience as an educator, I have come to the conclusion that teachers who are biased and lack political and cultural awareness can negatively affect students' self worth and the course of their learning. In other words, a teacher can psychologically and educationally break his or her students in small pieces, especially those working in schools that are colonial-based and corporate driven. Echoing Freire, I argue that my colleague's comment about this student suggests that he did not have a humanizing approach of education. Freire and Betto (1985) states, "A humanizing education is the path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world. They way they act and think when they develop all of their capacities, taking into consideration their needs, but also the needs and aspirations of others" (pp.14-15).

The majority of the students who attended this high school were African Americans and Cape Verdeans from poor working-class backgrounds. During my three years teaching at the high school, teachers were pressured to teach to the test. Students, including my bilingual students, were taking tests almost every two months regardless of their limited English skills. I constantly had to administer tests to my students. I was required to use a scripted curriculum to

teach my students how to read. The curriculum required giving my students a pre-test on Mondays and a post-test on Fridays. These tests were supposedly designed to help my students build on their vocabulary words. This curriculum did not allow me enough space to engage my students in sufficient critical literacy activity. Despite my opposition to these tests, I had to administer them to my bilingual students, including those who just arrived in the United States and could barely read, write, and speak English. In fact, in my class there were many students who did not receive formal education in their first language. For this category of students, taking these tests was much more painful.

When I was not under the surveillance of my supervisor and the school's assistant principals, who came to my class whenever they wished, I engaged my students in activities that I thought would be meaningful to their lives. For example, I knew that what I taught had to matter to them, therefore I incorporated in my lesson plans thoughts and ideas generated from their classroom group discussions. Writing exercises and class discussions were usually generated from the questions that I encouraged them to ask about their family, living conditions at home and in their neighborhood, and the socio-economic and political realities that they were facing in their daily lives. The concerns they expressed and questions they asked in class about these factors were part of the classroom experience. For example, my students were always eager to talk about their culture and experience as immigrants. Thus, to make what I taught in the classroom meaningful to them, I produced a unit about culture and immigration. They wrote short essays in which they compared their culture with American culture and talked about their experience as immigrants living in the United States. Repeatedly, I was amazed to see that all of my students were actively engaged in the class discussion and activities.

As a result of this experience, I have learned that teachers have an obligation to find ways to teach their students what is practical and relevant to their lives. From this experience, I have concluded that it is crucial that the school system has well-trained educators who are capable of effectively teaching students necessary writing, reading, and critical thinking skills so they are prepared to face multiple challenges in the real world. Teaching students of various ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and social class backgrounds has made me fully aware that students need full support and encouragement from their teachers to preserve their cultural heritage and identity. This might help them connect with the past, make sense of the present, and prepare them for the future.

### **Conclusion**

It is hoped that my narratives in this essay about my learning and teaching experiences in a neocolonial, capitalist, test-driven school system would not discourage the reader from believing that educators, especially those who believe in social justice, can play the role of agents of social change by helping their students develop a language of hope to believe that the creation of a better school system and society is possible. It is also hoped that these narratives would not dissuade the reader that there are educators who have helped students develop a language of critique, which has enabled many to counter the negative consequences of the colonial legacy on their learning. Even though the neocolonial context of countries whose school systems continue to be affected by the colonial legacy entrenched in the capitalist system, many progressive teachers have risked their jobs to ensure that we have a democratic school system where students are treated fairly and are given the opportunities to fulfill their potential irrespective of their backgrounds. This is what has given hope to many teachers, parents, and students. We need to build on this hope for a better future where all students will have the opportunity to attend well-resourced schools and receive

high-quality education regardless of their cultural, linguistic, social class, and racial backgrounds.

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