

The “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”: The Necessity of Dealing with Problems in Students’ Lives

by Patricia R. Reynolds

Students have problems in their lives, but can teachers help them? Should teachers help? The No Child Left Behind act and its emphasis on standardized test results have forced school systems to produce high scores, and in turn school administrators pressure teachers to prepare students for taking standardized tests. Teachers may want to deal with students’ problems, but a required curriculum emphasizing skill drills has compromised teaching time. Teachers are not free to determine what should be taught in their classrooms.

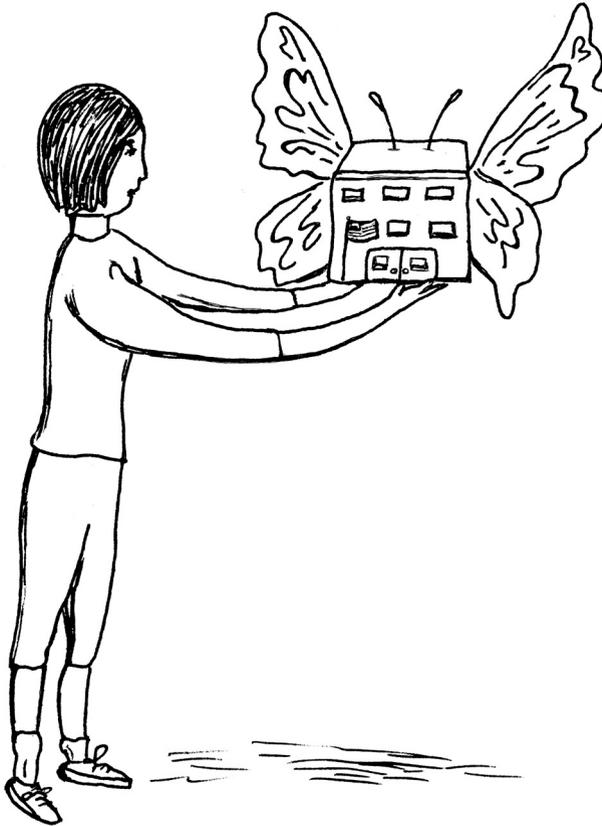
NCLB also tends to exclude certain topics from the classroom, where social forces already discourage teachers from encouraging critical thinking about the distribution of power in society. Michelle Fine’s ethnographic study (2002) of a low-income urban school found that most of the teachers discouraged students from considering the social problems that affect their lives. The teachers, she concluded, feared that discussing the distribution of power in our society would threaten their position in the classroom. As a result, the students became more alienated from the school and the classroom because their lives were not a part of the curriculum.

Yet this alienation can and should be addressed in the classroom. Giroux (1988) challenged teachers to become “transformative intellectuals” devoted to changing students’ lives and society. Bowers and Flanders (1990) saw Giroux’s mandate as an opportunity for teachers to help students understand how ideas can actually help change the societal power structure. Reinforcing Giroux, McLaren (1989) challenged teachers to help students understand the social forces that affect their lives.

Although many teachers are not comfortable with discussing students’ lives in the classroom, others want to help their students solve life problems. These teachers try to modify rigid or scripted curricula to

meet the needs of their students. A teacher can consider a question that arises in her teaching situation, read research that examines the question, and then modify the ideas in the research to create new methods of teaching the curriculum—which in turn can be shared with other teachers (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993).

The work of Paulo Freire described a method that teachers can modify to help their students. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1990) challenged educators to include the lives of their students in developing literacy. Freire used objects common in the slums of Brazil to improve residents' literacy while they considered how to improve their economic lives (Muello 1997). In thirteen weeks working in the public school system of New York City, he used the language and lives of high school students to raise their reading levels from functional illiteracy to sixth- or seventh-grade levels (Muello 1997).



To help teachers accomplish what Freire did, Wallerstein (1987) created a systematic process that teachers can modify to deal with students' lives. After identifying a particular problem, a teacher presents a Code, which can be a text or objects that stimulate discussion of the students' experiences with the problem. The teacher can then introduce other Codes to help the students understand social forces that affect their lives. Finally, the teacher encourages the students to create solutions and act on them (Wallerstein 1987).

However, teachers applying Freire's theory of critical pedagogy to “teacher research” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993) will encounter mandates to raise standardized test scores through skill instruction. As a result, teachers may have to modify instructional methods like Wallerstein's (1987) or find other alternatives to meet the personal and instructional needs of their students. In Fecho and Allen's extensive literature review of teacher research (2003), teachers reported on the results of methods they devised for questions they had about their practice. Fecho and Allen wanted to emphasize the research of classroom teachers, not university observers of teachers, to ascertain the questions teachers considered and the political impact of their research. A series of stories demonstrated how teachers helped students deal with such problems as racism or teenage pregnancy. The teachers' methods used text and writing to help students, which was how Freire (1990) envisioned teaching literacy.

To discover how teachers adapted Freire's critical pedagogy (1990) to their teaching situations, Reynolds presented both Freire's ideas and her own explanation of critical pedagogy to approximately one hundred teachers who took her graduate reading courses over a two-year period (January 2005 to the third summer session in 2006) at Holy Family University. She conducted a survey of the fifty-four students who gave permission to use their responses. In general, the survey results presented in the appendix revealed that to deal with problems in students' lives, teachers created lessons or units, used school units or assemblies, employed the help of guidance professionals, or adapted packaged program materials and methods.

After considering the methods the teachers had used, Reynolds concluded that urging teachers to create units like the one based on Wallerstein's ideas (1987) was not enough to implement critical pedagogy. Freire's construct requires individuals to consider the social forces affecting their lives and to apply solutions (Freire 1990). Although this process may have worked with Freire's adults and adolescents, Reynolds learned that several elementary teachers she surveyed were using the Second Step Program or Responsive Teaching programs, which emphasize children's social development. After analyzing these programs, Reynolds concluded that personal social development must precede children's consideration of the social forces that affect their lives.

Four teachers in the survey used the Second Step Program. Frey et al. (2000), in "Second Step: Preventing Aggression by Promoting Social Competence," explained that the program is designed to help children control their emotions so they can deal with social situations. That goal is reached by providing instruction in core social and emotional strategies designed to reduce aggressive behavior. The students learn lessons on empathy, solving social problems, and managing anger.

After a one-day teacher workshop and a half-day workshop for non-instructional staff, the teacher begins to teach strategies students can use to deal with their emotions. Group discussions consider different ways to respond to hypothetical situations based on students' lives. An example might be "What do you do when you feel frustrated?" Another method used is role playing, in which students learn to apply useful responses to situations the teacher has modeled. After offering the strategies needed to respond to situations, the teacher makes sure that students apply them to everyday classroom occurrences. First she provides modeling by showing respect and concern for each student. Then, when a conflict arises, the teacher will cue the students to remember the behavior they learned. She also involves the students in solving the everyday problems that arise in the classroom.

Because the entire school community and parents must be committed to Second Step, the school staff needs training to reinforce and understand student behaviors as the students try to apply the strategies. Principals must support the program and make sure the staff follows it. There is even a "Family Guide to Second Step" in which parents can help their children use the strategies when conflicts arise at home (Frey et al. 2000).

To help children function in the society of the classroom, three teachers in the survey used the Responsive Classroom Program. As described by Bowers and Flanders (1990), Responsive Teaching emphasizes student socialization so that they learn more than the required curriculum. Through Responsive Teaching, children can learn about being individuals, consider what ideas constitute knowledge, and deal with the differences between home and school. Bowers and Flanders (1990), citing the ideas of Giroux (1988) and McLaren (1989), asserted that the teacher as a transformative intellectual can show students how to improve society by shaping its power structure and that Responsive Teaching will help teachers use cultural differences to improve classroom instruction. Helping students understand how culture affects thinking is an aspect of Responsive Teaching that Ramirez and Callardo (2001) explained in *Portraits of Teachers in Multicultural Settings: A Critical Literacy Approach*.

These ideas constitute the philosophical base of Responsive Teaching. Cohen (2001) and other authors have described programs such as the Child Development Project and Peaceful School Program that teachers

can adapt to their classrooms. Cohen urges teachers to foster good home-school relationships and help students develop their ability to understand themselves and the reactions of others. Because Responsive Teaching has been the subject of numerous workshops and courses, a more thorough description of the various methods and materials that have been developed as part of the program is beyond the scope of this paper.

Second Step and Responsive Teaching are just two ways teachers can help students learn to address life problems. No Child Left Behind's punitive stipulations are making teachers more concerned with test scores than with the students who are taking the tests. Yet the children who score low on standardized tests are trying to achieve despite the problems that poverty or cultural alienation produce in their lives. These children have no one to help them develop ways of dealing with these problems. Elementary-age children need guidance in their personal social development before they can consider social forces that affect their lives. Teachers can use the Second Step Program and the principles inherent in the Responsive Classroom to help in this process.

Teachers can help adolescents consider how power is distributed in society. Despite Delpit's assertion (1988) that teachers from privileged groups in society can lack awareness of their power, they can become transformative intellectuals, engaging themselves and their students in a process like Wallerstein's (1987) to solve problems caused by society's unequal distribution of power.

Helping students learn how to deal with their lives is not a quick or easy process. It takes years as children develop and society changes, but ignoring the existence of problems is not a solution. Creating a curriculum of basic skills that can be measured by standardized tests is just another way of ignoring students' real needs.

Students' lives need to become part of the curriculum. Principals, superintendents, and boards of education need to ask, “What is education?” and listen to the classroom teacher. She is in the best position to answer that question, for she educates the children who are entrusted to her care.

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Further Readings

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Appendix: Survey Results

FEELINGS ABOUT BRINGING PROBLEMS INTO THE CLASSROOM	
Certain topics only	15
All problems O.K.	35
Not in my classroom	3
Undecided	1
TEACHER-CONSTRUCTED METHODS USED TO PRESENT PROBLEMS	
Class meetings	3
Morning meeting	1
Books	2
Create unit	1
Literature circle	1
Journals	1
PROFESSIONALS AND TEACHERS CONSULTED	
Family Guidance Center Day Treatment Program	1
Kidz Kare Guidance Counselor	1
Instructional Support Team	7
"A Woman's Place" representative	1
Psychologist	4
Social worker	3
School counselor	12
Peace counselors	1
SCHOOL- OR DISTRICT-CONSTRUCTED UNITS AND METHODS	
Assemblies	2
Drug and alcohol	1
Health/safety unit for each grade	1
"Making Good Choices" science unit	1
Bullying unit	2
"Skills for Growing" K-12 curriculum	1
Sixth- to eighth-grade program	1
COMMERCIAL PROGRAMS	
Second Step	3
Peer Conflict Resolution	4
Responsive Classroom	3
CORA	1

SEVEN INTERNET PROGRAMS	
Good Touch/Bad Touch	1
Chick-Fil-A Core Essentials	1
Camp Fire USA	1
D.A.R.E.	3
CADE	1
PROJECT PRIDE	1
C.O.P.S.	2

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