

The Elephant in the Room

A Conundrum in Democratic Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This study reflects an autoethnographic conversation between two graduate students whose purpose is to explore the tensions teachers face in the classroom as they are confronted with the demands of a standards-based curriculum while striving to assert themselves as educators for democratic citizenship. These tensions manifest in the most fundamental ways as a teacher seeks to define her or his role in the classroom, offer authentic and meaningful instruction, comply with increasingly prescriptive standards, and negotiate student resistance. In trying to navigate the demands of a system only concerned with end products and stratification of a citizenry into performers and nonperformers, the authors confront concerns of otherization. The proverbial elephant in the room, then, is how to create teachers capable of successfully navigating the system as it exists by empowering them with the tools to “play ball” while at the same time honoring their higher calling of educating for democratic citizenship.

Through the schooling experience, children come to understand their place within society and the expectations society has for them. This socialization process may appear individualized, but factors like gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic standing often impact how students are treated and how they identify their role within society. Teacher interactions with students reinforce or interrupt those notions of what school is and ought to be. These understandings, in turn, influence adult perceptions of self and place in the world.

The experiences of students in those early years can profoundly shape one's performance and expectations of formal schooling. As academically adept students, these two authors had similar positive experiences upon entering the school system. Educators perceived both the authors as "smart" kids and thus treated them differently from their peers. They navigated the school system with some ease, quickly mastering the work and benefiting from the established status quo. School was clearly a meritocracy for them, but to a greater extent, school became a sorting ground for classifying students as "smart" or "dumb." Both understood that participation, discipline, and cooperation were necessary behaviors to be successful within the expectations of school.

Internal responses, however, are not the same as external behavioral responses; and it is in these internal responses that the authors experienced differences of thought and attitude. Before they ever read one word of scholarship on the problems in education, they had clearly observed the gross disjointedness of the education system as it stands. Although they did not clearly understand or have an awareness of the philosophical and pedagogic disparities in which they were immersed, the authors both became aware of the inequities in the school system, attributing rationale for these inequities to different sources as their roles in the school system changed from student to teacher. In this paper, the authors discuss their own experiences of school, both from their perspectives as students and as teachers in the public school system. Additionally, they reflect on their experiences with race and class.

Method

Because narrative can be understood as an essential way for humans to make meaning (Bakhtin, 1981; Barthes, 1966/1974; Bruner, 1986; Ricoeur, 1981), the authors use their own stories to tease out some of the complex issues that result from these experiences as students and teachers. Laurel Richardson (2000) discusses ways in which writing is a way of knowing. In writing about their encounters from within the system, the authors hope to attain such knowing for themselves and other practitioners as to how schooling serves, and does not serve, the learners within it.

The authors share concerns about justice and equality in schools. These concerns are approached from different groundings. Shannon's experience in critical pedagogy colors her teaching epistemology, as does Serina's foundation in perennialism. These philosophies anchor the theoretical lens through which both authors interpret their experiences, and they make no attempt to draw a line between their experience and beliefs. According to Schwandt (1994), interpretive enquirers "watch, listen, ask, record and examine" (p. 119) without attempting to objectify or distance themselves from their own understanding. Barone (2007) asks why narrative should be used in educational research. He ascribes its value as a method to be used to empower teachers from the outside and to

challenge long-held views of education. The authors lay down their beliefs and philosophies in ways that can be examined and interpreted to better understand the development of these epistemologies. It is for this reason that this text moves in and out of first-person and third-person narrative. The authors move between theory and story, recognizing how theory deepens their understanding while the story is a part of the teachers that they are and continue to become. Beliefs, experience, and memory cannot be differentiated from theory, as Bochner (1997) explains: “[T]here can be no split between theory and story. . . . [W]e give up illusions of transcendental observation in favor of the possibilities of dialogue and collaboration” (p. 435).

Socialization through Schooling: What We Learned about Power

From the inception of public education, students are taught to follow established rules (Dewey, 1956; Frère, 2001). Specific modes of behavior are reinforced while other modes are discouraged as hierarchies of authority are inculcated (Delpit, 2006; Frère, 2001). Arguably, it is a microcosm of larger societal systems that exist, and school is the place wherein youth develop their position within “the system.” For some, this larger system is an extension of what has already been learned in the home. For others, however, the system within the school is a foreign experience that imposes a new set of behavioral expectations that run counter to home or community environment experiences. Thus, what begins as a positive opportunity full of excitement, possibility, and high expectations rapidly deteriorates in a negative experience full of constraints and oppression (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Tyson, 2002).

Shannon, from an early age, did not like school. Early assessment indicated gifted status, but school was boring and did not challenge her thinking. Her apprehension about challenging authority created outward compliance but did not subdue feelings of resentment toward teachers who failed to understand and appreciate their students on a personal level.

In the fifth grade, I was assessed as being several grade levels above my age group and was offered the chance to skip the sixth grade. It was at this point that I learned two things; first, that being smart was all that was needed to avoid academic tedium that other people were forced to endure. Second, being smart never needed to be proven once labeled. I learned very quickly that my best work was never required in order to meet the expectations of the school system.

I believed that there was a real meritocracy, which sorted kids into categories; however, there was no need for me to buy in, as my place in the system was established early. I knew that there were students who got better grades than me, but they weren't as smart. I believed that I was fooling the teachers in my high school and the better my grades; the less I respected the teachers for giving them to me.

There was a system in place in school that I didn't believe in, didn't benefit me and failed to engage me. Only my fear of being branded a "bad kid" and parental expectations kept me from completely disengaging from school. I understood high school as limited to a set of behavioural expectations that once met, would allow me to go on with my real life. Students that were complicit in this system also risked losing my respect, because I understood they were just being fooled into thinking that something of value would come to them with their compliance. We were learning to follow the rules, and although I was caught on more than one occasion trying to get around those rules, the punishment was never memorable because I was a "good kid."

Serina, on the other hand, respected authority and had significant "buy in" to the system. Her father was a military instructor who ran the home like he ran his training classroom. From this she came to understand and internalize ideas about chain of command, obeying authority, and following orders.

Expectations were high, and I was determined not to disappoint as Daddy's smart little girl. I recognized the need for hierarchy and the benefit to working within the system. I also understood the rules of the game: compliance coupled with excellence gained one favor, and I reasoned that although there was no "beating the system," one could maneuver and manipulate it effectively if only one understood the rules. This schema would be confirmed repeatedly in high school where as a "good kid" I escaped mandatory suspension for having received too many tardy slips. I was an AP and honors student who excelled in every class and thrived on being the best. By the time I exited the K-12 system, two notions were firmly entrenched within me: (a) the system worked, and (b) people got what they deserved or earned.

I was always a bit of an independent thinker in that I questioned and sought the rationale for the systems that were in place; I did not just blindly accept the status quo. I remember getting very angry as a child at the seeming injustice of certain rules or unfair treatment. As I got older, I also recognized the rules as an inherent good and respected them enough to work within them. More importantly, it was clear to me that learning and following rules was a matter of personal choice. If the system did not work for someone, it was because that individual had clearly made bad choices or at least choices that led to negative consequences. If one desired a more positive personal outcome, then one need only change one's attitude and behavior to function more favorably within the system.

Through complicity with the status quo, people uphold a fixed set of expectations for behavior. Foucault (1977) points to a social contract in place with rules of engagement that only work well when people adhere to and reinforce them. The existing systems in schools use both the hidden and explicit curriculum to educate students about how to act in larger society. Dewey (1916) recognizes that education is the lifeblood of social continuity (pp. 6-13), but he also argues that education is about growth (p. 59), not merely preparation for adult life. In that vein, he rightly acknowledges that part of the problem of the education system is

that too many treat children like “candidates; they are placed on the waiting list” (p. 59). When children are treated like “candidates” school very much becomes the sorting grounds the authors have conceived it to be. Wolk (2007) contends that this social-class sorting ground means, “going to school is largely preparation either to punch a time clock, or to own the company with the time clocks—depending on how lucky you are” (p. 650). Those “smart” and “dumb” categories we recognized as students were really that of “good” and “bad” potential for active participation in public life.

Race and Otherization: Power Structures in Schooling

Moving frequently as a child gave Shannon the opportunity to interact with many different students from many different backgrounds. Her relations with the students of color are a reflection of the experiences of many White women (Sleeter, 1993).

Many of the small towns I lived in had strong Native American populations. These families were assumed to be poor, with bad parents who were struggling with drugs and alcohol. “They” were oppressed by a government system that took choices away. I was conditioned to feel sorry for those kids. Their poor behaviour and/or lack of academic achievement were to be excused because they were negotiating lives that were much harder than mine. By the time I reached high school, in a large suburban district, I did have friends of color, mostly from Indian and Asian families, who were in my AP classes. There were Black kids in my high school, but I had no classes with them and didn’t interact with them socially. Again, as with Native Americans, there was an underlying assumption that they were somehow different. I engaged in a cultural idea of “color-blind racism,” even failing to identify my best friend as a person of color. Possibly because I had no need to feel sorry for her, I failed to see her ethnicity. As a teenager, the race of my friends meant nothing to me, except as pertained to interesting food and cultural experiences. The race of people who weren’t my friends meant only that they were outside of my consciousness.

Serina’s experiences with race in a predominantly minority school population caused her to reflect on her positionality as a White person in a different way. *From an early age, I became well aware of racial tensions. My K–8 experience as a minority in the classroom was wrought with challenges such as being called racial epithets and never quite fitting in. While attending school in Okinawa, Japan, and North Chicago, Illinois, I developed a keen sense of otherness within my psyche. My intelligence separated me from my peers, but more importantly, my skin color created an invisible barrier. I lacked much of the cultural capital needed to fit in. When I was accepted by my peers as one of the group, that acceptance was conditional upon exhibiting certain cultural behaviors (much to my own father’s chagrin). Because I experienced both Asian and Blacks as people and peers first, I had no notions of people of color as monolithic groups.*

Instead I saw a diversity of personae, space for difference, and most importantly, persons. Ultimately, my experiences only served to reaffirm my notions about individualism and personal choice. If someone was “dumb,” he or she was not going to be as successful as someone “smart.” Laziness bred negative consequences no matter what the skin color or environment.

When I was living in Okinawa, my daily experience was definitely as a minority. I had very few reinforcements of White images anywhere. More importantly, the social hierarchy within the military and in the schools seemed to offer no privilege to my Whiteness. Back in the United States, I still did not perceive my Whiteness as giving me any privilege. Rather, it separated me from my peers so that I was never quite part of the group. We were enlisted military and lower middle class at best. The rest of my family was in poverty or were working class. Until I got to high school it never occurred to me that I was a majority or in a position of privilege. My consciousness about the workings of society was subsumed by the school society in which I existed. My high school experiences were radically different, but by then my thoughts and opinions about race and school were well embedded.

High school offered its own lessons on race. For the first time in my life I was going to school with mostly White people. I remember trying to make friends with the other Black students because I felt a greater kinship with them than my White peers whose middle-class concerns about “hair, makeup, and boys” were foreign to me. I experienced two very rude awakenings. First, I did not much care for White people. They were cliquish and ugly to each other. Second, Black people did not like me. They categorized me as just another White person who was clearly not welcome in their circles. This shock combined with the sudden death of my father during freshman year generated significant resentment and confusion toward this sudden turn in my social experience. Thus, I turned my focus to developing my intellect. I was very cognizant of the lack of diversity in my AP and honors classes. Issues of race, however, were subsumed by my need to learn to navigate this new and unfamiliar system of Whiteness and academic competition. By the time I graduated from high school, I had mastered the rules of this game and foolishly felt prepared for my impending elite education at Smith College.

In many ways society offers promises of success and projections of positive images of America that are not entirely compatible with minority students' experiences. This challenge is discussed in many disciplines, but we contend that this conversation is most important in education. It is through the act of learning more than simply possessing knowledge that people learn how to navigate and negotiate this world. Lisa Delpit (1988) argues that the culture of power that exists in schools primarily benefits those who hold the power and reinforces a system that denies success to those outside it. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey (1916) warned us of the “danger of creating an undesirable split between experience gained in more direct associations and what is acquired in school”

(p. 13). Dewey was talking about the difference between formal and informal education. When students feel a significant disconnect in their formal and informal education, we argue that they are literally being locked out of mainstream society. Dewey was right. This danger should not be ignored. Yet our schools continue to operate in this very Foucauldian way wherein those who do not comply with the system are labeled as deviants and effectively excommunicated from society. Delpit (2006) argues that students of color are continually ignored or their behavior (which is a by-product of their informal education) is misinterpreted. Such negative responses to alternative behavior standards are realized with a disproportionate number of African-American males in special education (Delpit, 2006; Kozol, 2005).

A Critical Perspective on Early Teaching Experiences: Resisting the Power Structure

Shannon began her preparation for teaching with a master's program in education in a tiny town in northern New York. Having decided to do her student teaching in that area, she learned a great deal about poverty and race as it pertained to public schools.

I wanted to be a different kind of teacher—one that knew and valued her students for the people that they were, not for the grown-ups that they might be one day. I was strongly focused on justice and on the ways in which schooling let kids down. As a student-teacher, I was idealistic about my own power in the classroom and destined for disappointment. As an elementary school teacher, I hoped that high expectations and enthusiasm could head off feelings of disappointment and indifference before my students reached high school.

The reality of the conditions of my students truly did not match the theory of good schooling. I was quickly warned not to eat snacks that came from certain kids' houses because their families were understood to be dirty. I had fifth graders who smelled of urine daily and were rumored to sleep in the barn. Gifted children were not able to participate in supplemental programs because of financial problems. First graders were under the impression that the other kids didn't like them because they were Black. Several children had already given up on school in general and on themselves specifically. For my part, I was expected to write my lesson plans, teach the material, and try not to be too incendiary with regard to the ideas I hoped to discuss. As a student-teacher, I wondered how I was supposed to make real change happen on a broad level when I could barely address the kids' basic needs for acceptance and appreciation. Working for supplemental education services in southern Illinois further served to frustrate and discourage me. In both programs in which I worked, I primarily engaged with poor children of color and saw that not only did they not buy into the professed goals and benefits of education, but they also didn't believe in the society for which they were supposedly being prepared.

Teaching in classrooms that were rural and poor, I quickly saw the ways in which teachers, curricula, and administrators worked to create the same attitudes of complicity that I had fought against as a student myself.

Textbooks in the schools were the same ones that the teachers had used as students. The math curriculum was scripted, and teachers and administrators resisted any attempts to deviate from that script. Kids were expected to sit quietly in their seats and “learn.” Teachers were expected to read the basals and assign the worksheets. Creative lesson plans were viewed with suspicion. These students came from homes where support, whether emotional, financial, or academic, was not available. They were thought to be lazy or simply not capable of achievement. This further underscored the way that factors beyond the control of students would influence their perceived success in the system.

Even as a “progressive” teacher, I felt limited by the system. I had become a symbol of what I had rejected as a student. The only distinction I saw between the students and me was that I had experienced school as White and had been marked as “smart.” My success had been practically guaranteed. My students, however, were primarily poor children of color. The goals that I saw being promoted in schools and in these programs were designed to mend the achievement gap—to bring these “at risk” kids up to the level of their not-so-at-risk peers. However, my feeling was that what was actually happening is that we were leaving all the kids in the educational system feeling bored, complacent, and unfulfilled. As a privileged White person, I felt foolish proselytizing about the profit education brings to people who have no access to or interest in the system for which I was advocating. Was I to encourage these students to learn the skills that would make them successful in the dominant society—a society that might not ever grant them entrance, regardless of their level of education or commitment? Or was I to teach them skills that might actually make them proud of their culture and heritage, but have no commercial value in the so-called real world, and cause further alienation? How could I change the experience of schooling for my students in order to guarantee their success?

Critical pedagogy dictates that the “major objective . . . is to empower students to intervene in their own self-formation and to transform the oppressive features of the wider society that make such an intervention necessary” (McLaren, 1988 p. xi). As a critical pedagogue, Shannon could see this was not happening. She struggled with the ways in which schooling in this country reified concepts of power and privilege. In order to upset the system and grant access to the power structure, students would not only have to be educated to think critically, they would have to be convinced of their own ability to reject complicity and affect change. In the meantime, students from poor families and students of color would also have to be taught to “play the game.” Without access to the rules of the Foucauldian social contract, even intelligent and hardworking students would be left out of the existing power structure (Delpit, 1988).

A View from the Front of the Room: Perpetuating Power Structures

Similarly, when Serina entered the public school classroom in 2005, she was greeted with disconcerting realities of the educational system that she never experienced as a “gifted” student. She was teaching students with horrendous test scores, with abominable behavior, and with attitudes that seemed lackadaisical to say the least. They were considered the lowest of the low achieving. Most of her students were African American.

It was not long before I began questioning this seeming disparity. After all, my personal experiences of going to school in majority minority schools taught me that, generally speaking, these students are creative, energetic, and willing to learn. At one time they were my peers, and I never noticed any striking disparities that told me skin color created some intractable difference or inferiority.

Being on the “flip side” of the equation, I began to understand the retrospectively racist and prejudicial remarks of my colleagues. Even though I knew these thoughts and comments to be horribly wrong and detrimental to the learning process of our students, I did understand where they were coming from. Some days it was all I could do to keep order, let alone teach anything of value. My students did not seem very interested in anything that was happening at the front of the classroom; they resisted work of any kind and questioned everything. Perhaps the worst challenge was watching these students consistently make choices that closed academic doors to them. Many of these kids were at risk, and they knew it. School held no reality for them. In fact, their experience at school seemed little more than a daily reminder of how woefully inadequate they were in the mainstream world.

The adults in their world appeared to reinforce students’ perceptions of their seeming “inferiority.” The teachers were determined to “stick to their principles” and refused to “dumb down” their curricula for those who would not do for themselves. It never seemed to occur to anyone to rethink the problem from a different perspective. Many teachers would never dare consider the notion that perhaps the curriculum and instruction might be underserving our students. Every conversation held the status quo sacrosanct. As Lisa Delpit (2006) points out, the cultural hegemony of schooling consistently fails students of color whose own cultural experiences are discounted by the system. Panoptical kids of color are complicit to the extent that they show up, they want As, they want to pass, and they buy into the value of a diploma. Yet lack of access to the rules of the game holds these students at a perpetual disadvantage. Delpit (1988) argues that if students of color were given access to the rules, they too could be successful. Serina was well aware of the power of knowledge and education. She urgently wanted her students to recognize its power as well.

Delpit’s descriptions resonated deeply within me and gave voice to my own quest for a deeper understanding of how to address the curriculum in a pedagogically relevant way. I continue to struggle to find a method that will engage students

in the learning process and empower them to the critical thought of which I know they are capable. I became increasingly desperate. "There has to be a way," I would often think to myself. Based on what I knew and understood at the time, I felt there could only be one of two conclusions: it is either the students or the system. I had already witnessed so many of my colleagues arrive at the former conclusion. After all, how could it be the system? This was the same meritocratic system that had rewarded me for my intelligence and drive, the same system that established my intellectual prowess, and the same system that differentiates the "dumb" from the "smart." This was also the same system that kept teachers' blood pressure elevated over almighty test scores. It also kept student success tied to the be-all and end-all standardized test and limited teacher creativity. Exactly whose needs were being met in this system? Something was definitely rotten in Denmark.

Michel Foucault's panopticism describes the school system and its demands for compliance. It is a totalizing experience from the moment children enter into the system. Those who do not comply with the indoctrination may be considered deviants. Teachers comply by choice, ignorance, or coercion through the controls in the system which functions much like a panopticon. With standardized testing as the all-seeing tower, "visibility is a trap" (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). Every teacher is separated into her own classroom and within each classroom, students are placed at their own desks where they are taught not to touch or talk to each other. Frère (2001) makes similar observations about pedagogy. These classroom arrangements underscore behavioral patterns that people are expected to follow throughout their lives: walk in a straight line, focus on work, and isolation in a cubicle. Such assembly-line functions deny what it means to be a human being. Dewey (1927) defines the essence of humanity by our social actions (p. 154). Yet schools relegate individuals to mere bodies who are "seen but [do] not see"; students are the "object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). The true beauty and power of this system, as Foucault points out, is not merely in the complications but the acceptance. One need not be constantly observed; one only need believe that at any moment an administrator can come walking through the door and observe. Shannon's and Serina's experience as students, however, revealed the true nature of the panopticon as a construct that could be manipulated. Shannon recognized this had been happening her whole life; no one was ever really watching her. Serina knew what she could get away with and what she could not. In later teaching experiences, both authors understood that by closing classroom doors, they were free to do whatever they wanted. Both have developed an affinity to only comply as far as is necessary.

Conclusion: Disparities in What is and What Ought to Be

Currently, Shannon teaches teacher education courses in educational philosophy and diversity, and she sees that freshman and sophomore college students find

it tremendously difficult to think critically about the system that has socialized them not to think. Hytten (2008) writes about her experiences in teaching the same course, remarking, “sadly . . . they have been so infrequently asked to think about what could be, and instead have been required to absorb and reproduce what is” (p. 195). Serina’s K–12 observations and her current position teaching college freshman skills show a strikingly similar pattern. She sees that students of color are trained to be docile but have limited experience in how to critically explore what they are learning. The gross differential in standards applied to students of color in K–12 clearly manifests itself in the work and responses of these same students at the collegiate level.

The idea is that education offers opportunity. The authors firmly believe that teachers can open those doors. In the best cases, public schooling offers students access to the pipeline that leads to success in whatever way society interprets it. In the worst case, students emerge from their experience alienated, frustrated, and cynical about their place in society. Our education system should be bringing all future citizens into the fold of society, not sorting for exclusion. If we are to expect public schooling to create not just pedants, but active citizens, then it should also teach students

a perspective that looks at the underlying values and politics that pervade education; attends deeply to inequalities associated with race, class, gender and sexuality, and language; and begins with critical questions about how educational practices and conventional wisdom came to be, who benefits from them, and how we can create more empowering alternatives. (Oakes & Lipton, 2003, p. xiv)

There is an enormous gap between student experience and teacher preparation. Herein lies the elephant in the room. There are serious structural problems that our educational system and society are not confronting, not the least of which is how to negotiate our socialized understanding of the meritocratic nature of schooling within the diverse understandings and experiences that come to us in our students. We must recognize the system for what it is: a construct that devalues and disenfranchises a great number of our students. We know that although privilege may allow us to remain ignorant, our moral and intellectual compass demands we examine and seek to explore these complex issues and confront the realities of school for those who may not look like us. No amount of classroom preparation seems able to help one to confront the social and institutional barriers erected to limit difference and promote sameness, for although America loves its individuals, it wants each of those individuals to be the same. The question then becomes how we can educate future teachers to be prepared for the complexities of classroom life and the diversity and difference one will most likely encounter.

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