Problem-Posing in a Primary Grade Classroom
Utilizing Freire's Methods to Break the Culture of Silence

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Liberatory Education

For Paulo Freire, the aim of education must always be to transform the world so as to liberate oppressed peoples. Freire conducted literacy programs for adult learners, mainly among indigenous populations in his homeland of Brazil. He saw learning to read as a political act in a country where few indigenous people could read and where power was concentrated in the hands of the descendants of their conquerors. His ideas have been embraced worldwide among educators committed to social and economic transformation.

Freire's educational theory includes deep respect for the strengths and capabilities that all learners bring with them. For the dispossessed, those strengths include crucial survival skills, and a special knowledge of the dominant group. Critical education starts with the experiences of the learners. It is the first task of the teacher to discover, recognize, and uncover for the learners themselves those strengths and areas of expertise.

At the same time, a powerful "culture of silence" conspires to prevent ordinary people "from creatively taking part in the transformations of their society" (Freire, 1985, p.50.) Human liberation requires learners to reflect upon their relationship with the world in which they live, and to "insert themselves in history as subjects." (Freire, 1971.)

Like Dewey (1938), Freire sees education as requiring social co-construction of

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knowledge. Freire proposes a dialogical approach in which everyone participates as co-learners. However, liberatory knowledge cannot be gained merely through reflection and discussion with others, but also requires acting collectively in the world so as to shape our lives and ultimately so as to change the world. "*Praxis*" is a term referring to people's *action* in the world and *reflection* on the world, in order to transform it (Freire, 2000, p. 79.) Action and reflection are cyclically iterative; they affect one another in turn.

Problem Posing

The state-backed education system in the United States, as elsewhere, arguably reproduces the status quo. It may be seen as supporting repressive forces that keep people passive. Problem-posing is an educational strategy meant to challenge those repressive forces. Problem-posing is a collective process that draws on the personal experiences of the learners, and that generates social connectedness and mutual responsibility for the learning process, with potential for societal transformation.

Problem-posing begins with "problematizing" (Freire, 1985, pp. 52, 56). That is, becoming conscious of the problems embedded and inherent in the ordinary, everyday "givens" of life. In this way, the learner uncovers the problems that hide in plain sight, in her everyday experience in an unjust world.

> [Learners] must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting—and therefore challenging. (Freire, 2000, p.85)

> Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. (Freire, 2000, p. 81)

Wallerstein (1987) employs a problem-posing methodology featuring: (1) *listening*,

(2) *codifying and dialogue*, and (3) *action*. Each of these is facilitated by the educator and, increasingly over time, undertaken collectively by the group as a whole.

1. "Listening" in order to uncover key issues or "generative themes" of the learners' community

The generative themes are derived from learners' daily lives: those issues with emotional impact for the learners, with a capacity to generate impassioned discussion about the learners' existential situations. To get started, look for what learners are worried about. What makes them sad, angry, happy? Listen in, as learners voice their concerns to one another in informal conversations (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 36).

The teacher should engage the learners in the search for generative themes. Ask them to notice and report on what things in the school setting concern them. Suggest they bring an object from home that has a story to tell. Ultimately, listening becomes an ongoing process, never completed, involving both teachers and learners as co-learners and co-explorers.

"Listening" in Primary Grades

In an elementary school in rural Vermont, it was time for the annual all-school drive to collect goods for the town "food shelf." Two enthusiastic middle schoolers came into Karen's and Susan's second and third grade classroom to publicize the food drive, inciting the class to try and collect more food than other classes so they could win a pizza party.

In the hours immediately following the announcement of this event, a few children singly approached one or the other of the two teachers and quietly confided that they would not be able to bring anything to school to contribute to the food shelf, because their families regularly made use of it themselves.

Karen and Susan were listening closely

to their young students. Clearly, a lack of money to buy food in the grocery store had emerged as a powerful generative theme for some of these children. It was plain that each child felt isolated from the rest by a sense of shame, which at age seven or eight they could already perceive was ascribed to their family's impoverishment, compounded by fear that they would cause their class to lose the competition for the pizza party. This was issue number one. Beyond that, however, the teachers felt certain that none of the children in the room clearly understood why some families can't buy the food their children need. This was issue number two.

They needed to create a way to tackle these issues with the class. They did this by collecting artifacts that "codified" and externalized the topic for the children.

2. "Codifying" issues into discussion starters for dialogue and critical thinking

The "code" is an artifact, a tangible representation of a particular critical issue that has come up (Wallerstein, 1987). The code or artifact can be developed by the teacher and/or the learners. For example, it might be a drawing, photo, written dialogue, story, skit or song. With his beginning adult readers, Freire used pictures that could be discussed, eliciting a list of words that were generative, with emotional impact for the learners and a capacity to generate passionate discussion about the learners' concerns (Brown, 1987).

The artifact is a codification that de-personalizes an issue which may be emotionally loaded or embarrassing. It represents a familiar problem situation that group members easily recognize. It elicits the problem as being complex, containing multiple facets or contradictions. The historical, cultural, and social connections to learners' lived experiences are clear. It is open-ended and does not provide or assume any particular solutions. The problem is not overwhelming, but offers possibilities for "group affirmation" and practicable actions to effect change. Its role is to promote critical thinking and transformative action. Eventually, learners themselves will begin to develop codified representations of critical issues in their experience. (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 38)

> Codification represents a given dimension of reality as individuals live it, and this dimension is proposed for their analysis in a context other than that in which they live it.…The learners … analyze aspects of their own existential experience represented in the codification. (Freire, 1985, p. 52)

The codified form in which the problem is posed now generates dialogue and discussion about the issues. This critical process Freire refers to as "*decodification.*"

> In the process of decodifying representations of their existential situations and perceiving former perceptions, the learners gradually, hesitatingly, and timorously place in doubt the opinion they held of reality and replace it with a more and more critical knowledge. (Freire 1985, p. 52)

Wallerstein (1987, pp. 39-40) provides a five-question strategy designed to move the discussion of the codified issue from the concrete to the analytical.

> 1. Learners describe what they observe, who and what they see in the artifact.
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> 2. Define the problem(s). What's really happening? What's wrong?
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> 3. Share similar experiences. Has something like this happened to any of us? Have any of us been involved with this issue or a similar issue?
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> 4. Question why the problem exists. Get down to root causes. Who benefits from the status quo? How do our personal stories fit into the larger socio-economic, political context? Ask "*But why?*" A string of answers to this question, starting with a statement of the apparent problem situation, can help uncover root causes.
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> 5. Learners strategize what they can do about the problem. What are others doing about it? What has worked with similar issues?

The teacher's role includes asking probing questions and providing important information, encouraging learners to take charge of their own learning and each other's. As learners become comfortable with the process, they will begin to ask one another questions, give helpful ideas on a problem, and carry out their own investigations. (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 41)

"Codification" and "Decodification" in Primary Grades

In their second and third grade classroom, Karen and Susan scoured the internet to collect first-person passages written or spoken by people in Vermont and elsewhere who were using their local food shelves or pantries. These passages, which used language that second and third graders could readily comprehend, and which told personal stories of hard work and hard times, became the code.

"My mommy had to use the food shelf, and boy, were we glad to get that food."

"I'm the face of middle-America, the middle class who is now down to poverty. I'm looking for work. I'm applying for 50 to 100 jobs a week and not getting any bites. I use the local food shelf to help feed my two children."

"We are going through hard times right now. My husband has been ill and has missed work because of being in the hospital. My husband is still working, but we only bring in enough to stay above water with bills, house payments, and small amounts of food every couple of weeks. I have been trying to find a job. I send out at least 10 resumes a week and have not yet found a job. We have little food in our home right now. We visit the food shelf once a month. I need to save the food we do have to feed my children."

"I'm 33. I have three children and don't have enough money. It's very hard. At the end of the month, no matter how much we try, there's not enough. We'll be low on food by the end of next week. I volunteer at the food shelf. I use the food shelf all the time. My two older children get free meals at school. During school vacations, when the kids are home, it's hard to keep them fed. It's stressful. If it was just me, I wouldn't care. I always want to make sure my kids are fed and not eating junk food."

Together, the teachers and students created a mock radio broadcast, featuring each student reading the words of someone somewhere who depended on a food bank to keep hunger at bay. Each student practiced her passage until she was fluent and strong in her role. When it came time for the "radio broadcast," each student in turn read her passage from behind a screen as classmates and teachers sat on the floor in a circle, a community of listeners attending to these compelling testimonies.

After this radio broadcast, the children worked together to create a bulletin board display for the hallway, showing why people use the town's food shelf. Each student made a paper doll to represent a person who uses the food shelf, and gave it a conversation bubble. Karen and Susan had expected most students to paraphrase the passages that they'd read to the class. As they circulated among students, though, they were drawn into conversations in which children asked each other to repeat or clarify other students' passages that resonated with them or confused them. Small groups of students speculated on the lives of some of the people whom they'd heard from in the broadcast, wondering if they'd found better-paying jobs, or talking about how nice it must be to be able to volunteer at a food shelf that you use. Many students chose to have their paper dolls represent

people they'd heard other students depict in the radio broadcast, rather than their own. The writing in some students' conversation bubbles was a combination of two or more people's reasons for using the food shelf. Discussions among children and adults during this activity were critical to this decodification process, as learners drew from the narratives the key reasons why people need to use the food shelf.

In order to investigate the wealth inequality that lay behind these stories, the teachers manufactured fifty-thousand-dollar bills with which the students created a bar graph on the classroom wall to illustrate how much more the CEO at Ford makes, compared to the average Vermont family's approximately fifty thousand dollar income. One 2-inch by 3-inch piece of green paper was put on the wall to represent the approximate income of a Vermont family. Then the students took turns taping up identical "$50,000 bills" in a column beside it to represent the income of the CEO of Ford Motor Company in a recent year. Beforehand, students had predicted that this CEO might make 2, 3, or even 5, or 10 times as much as this average family. As his column of $50,000 bills grew higher and higher, students chanted the growing income in unison, "$50,000, $100,000, $150,000…" Some began to exclaim, "Wow! How high will he get?" "Huh? How can he make so much money in one year?" "That's not fair!"

The column grew so tall that students could no longer reach high enough. Two students started to drag over a desk to climb on it. At that point, Susan took over, until she could no longer reach high enough. The total was not quite $2,000,000. As Susan showed the class the stack of bills still left, and told them that there were enough to get to a total income of $26,500,000, they determined that the column would have to reach to the ceiling, across it, and down the opposite wall a few feet to represent the CEO's entire yearly income.

Some student mathematicians decided to go further and figure out how many Vermont families could have a fifty-thousand dollar income if that CEO pay were shared equally among them. (Answer: 530 families.) While they did so, the rest of the class discussed the difference between the average Vermont family's income and that of the CEO. Even as second and third grad-

ers, several students were well aware that their family incomes were significantly less than the average. All agreed that at $50,000 a year, a family would have enough food to eat. One student reminded the others of their reading of Dr. Suess's Yertle the Turtle *(Geisel, 1958), earlier in the school year. "That CEO is like Yertle! He's at the top of the pile, but it's everybody else holding him up there." Other students agreed. "He could share lots of that money and still have enough for himself." "Why can't it be like the end of* Stone Soup*, with everyone sharing?" (Brown, 1975.)*

The culture of silence surrounding the issue of poverty had now been broken. Also, the food drive was originally an exercise in charity, but these young students had transcended mere charity and were poised instead to take action in solidarity with their impoverished neighbors.

3. "Taking Action" to address the issues

Learners now strategize the changes they envision and ways forward toward those changes. This is an essential phase in the process. Otherwise learners will be confirmed in a position of helplessness and hopelessness. The process must be iterative, involving a recurring cycle of reflection and action which makes up the praxis of learning and knowing. It is important to celebrate successes, analyze setbacks, and formulate new approaches to the problem.

Teachers should not impose their own answers to the questions or solutions to the problem. Strategies emerge from the group as learners analyze their reality and come up with ideas.

Solutions may take time and many small steps, much trial and error. If the solution were simple, the problem would already be solved. (Therefore Freire's method is problem posing, not problem solving.)

"Taking Action" in Primary Grades

The students first considered dressing up like "mini-cops" and invading the office of the CEO of Ford Motor Company to demand that he share his income. Ultimately, they decided instead to write a letter to the corporate food wholesaler whose headquarters were located in a nearby town, and ask for a donation to the food shelf. (The wholesaler donated several

cartons of canned food.) They also decided to contribute much of their class's share of the school garden produce to the food shelf (twenty large heads of organic lettuce).

In this way, every child in the class contributed substantially to the food collection effort, regardless of family circumstances. The effort was truly a communal one, chipping away at the alienation and isolation produced by the shame that is falsely associated with poverty.

All students learned lessons about the collaboration necessary to create the more just world that they clearly wanted to see. More, the root causes of poverty were examined, and myths connecting relative merit to wealth inequality were deeply questioned, as the students took on the personas of real people facing the full force of the economic system within which we all must strive and survive, even as we oppose it.

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