
Why's Everyone White? Moving Toward Critical Pedagogy in an Elementary Classroom

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This paper discusses challenges initiated by first and second generation Latino and Chinese American fourth graders in an urban elementary school, toward the perspective of California history in the mandated Social Studies curriculum. The required text highlighted significant moments in California and United States history with limited, if any, acknowledgement of the many contributions and hardships of non-European people. Through authentic dialogue (Freire, 1970) generated from the readings of counter-narratives of history (Loewen, 1995; Zinn, 1995) students recognized the exclusion of marginalized groups and questioned the validity of the text. They developed a critical perspective and constantly sought alternative sources of information from their communities, the Internet, and other texts. The classroom became a site for discussion that problematized dominant historical narratives and eventually led to the teacher's pedagogical transformation.

Introduction

On February 24, Hector asked a question that reflected six months of profound progression toward critical learning for me, the teacher, and my fourth grade students. It symbolized a transformation in how my students viewed the state mandated social studies textbook. While studying a photograph of a group of men at Promontory Point, Utah, where the transcontinental railroad was completed (Armento, Nash, Salter, & Wixson, 1991, 176 – 177), Hector asked, “Why’s everyone white?” For several weeks we had studied aspects of the transcontinental railroad from various sources including the social studies textbook. Most sources mentioned laborers from China. Hector and several other students immediately noticed that the photograph was inconsistent with information from the textbook and supplementary sources. His questioning reflected my students’ new confidence and knowledge of how to critically approach text.

Hector, like 90% of the 700 students at Lei Elementary, did not enter Kindergarten speaking English. By fourth grade Hector and his classmates were fluent in their home language, Cantonese or Spanish, as well as English. The school culture reflected the values and beliefs of the Chinese American community, where the school was located, as well as the Latino community from where half of the students were bused. Lei Elementary embraced bilingual education, employed a staff from the same communities as the children, and celebrated multiple cultures. It

was common to hear students and adults speaking Cantonese, Vietnamese, Spanish, and various English dialects in the halls and classrooms. The potential for a critical approach to text was tremendous.

In this article I examine the shift from what Freire (1995) calls a “banking concept of education” in which “education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 53) toward critical pedagogy. At that time, I lacked the discourse to address what McLaren (1998) describes as the tension between the day-to-day practice of teaching and the theoretical grasp necessary for becoming a critical pedagogue. The transformation toward critical pedagogy was exceptional in that my examination and reshaping of pedagogy was in reaction to my students’ movement toward critical learning. I discuss significant moments when students challenged the textbook through questioning, referenced their own knowledge and experiences, and sought texts beyond the history textbook for counter narratives. Finally, I discuss how this impacted me as an educator and the importance of a common critical discourse for students and teachers.

Why critical pedagogy?

According to Giroux (2001) critical theory, “refers to the nature of self-conscious critique and to the need to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation” (p. 8) making it both a school of thought and a process of critique. Giroux also states that although critical theory was never a “fully articulated philosophy shared unproblematically by all members of the Frankfurt School”, it supports the assumption that thought and action should be in response to the suffering of others. Individuals who tend to suffer most in schools have been minorities, the poor, and females (McLaren, 1995). If this is an accurate critique of current schooling, then teachers working with these populations have a tremendous responsibility to teach for social justice and emancipation through critical pedagogy.

Discussing the shift toward critical pedagogy requires clarification of certain educational terms. McLaren (1998) cites Roger Simon’s differentiation of teaching from pedagogy in which Simon states:

Pedagogy [refers] to the integration in practice of particular curriculum content and design, classroom strategies and techniques, and evaluation purpose and methods... Together they organize a view of how a teacher’s work within an institutional context specifies a particular version of what knowledge is of most worth, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment. (p. 165)

Simon's definition of pedagogy applies to both Freire's "banking system" and a critical approach. From a critical approach it "allows us to scrutinize schooling more insistently in terms of race, class, power, and gender" (McLaren, 1998, 166). It also recognizes that education is not a neutral, apolitical act (Apple, 1990; hooks, 1994). Until my students challenged my "banking" approach, I did not consider the political nature of teaching or my students' cultural, historical, and economic backgrounds.

Examining social studies from a critical perspective challenges the genre categorization of the curriculum. Authors write from a particular, subjective perspective making history textbooks narratives (Loewen, 1995; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). After analyzing twelve history textbooks, Loewen concluded that, "Textbooks encourage students to believe that history is facts to be learned" (p. 16). Students are rarely encouraged to read against the text and question the "facts". Therefore, it is imperative that educators teach students how to read the implicit and explicit messages embedded within the written texts as well as photographs, charts, and other visual representations. What appears to be an apolitical, normal and neutral retelling of history may negatively impact how students view themselves and their communities. This is particularly true if the students represent the disempowered and marginalized groups described by McLaren.

By labeling the history book a narrative, it is relatively easy to distinguish how it fits certain categories of children's literature. The textbook reflects four categories described by Nodelman and Reimer (2003): (1) the world and its people are wonderfully diverse, (2) the world is a rational place, (3) the world is a hopeful place; and (4) the world is getting better all the time (see chapter 7). Several of my students were Guatemalan refugees, approximately half had seen or held a gun, and four had witnessed a murder. Two boys were initiated into gangs at age ten and several were accused of gang affiliation by police officers. All but two qualified for free breakfast and lunch. My students did not share the overall positive view of the world propagandized by the social studies textbook.

What is Neutral and Normal?

As a third year teacher and California native, I never questioned my assumptions about the social studies curriculum. I viewed it as an apolitical and objective text and regurgitated the same history I learned as a student. As a female of color and child of a parent born in a relocation camp during World War II, it is odd that I believed the textbook and teacher's guide to be politically neutral. I was uncritical of whose story was being told, by whom, for what purpose, and for whose benefit. I

failed to employ what Allen (1997) describes as mandatory for critical pedagogues:

Teachers examine their own positional frames of references with respect to their power, social class, access, and privilege and how these might sometimes contrast or be in conflict with the frames of their students. Teachers must become aware of their cultural and class-bound perceptions of students to appreciate how their students interpret their school experiences, especially when students do not respond to schooling in ways that teachers expect. (p. 520)

I was stunned by my students' resistance and expected my diverse group of children to accept the text the way I had as a student and educator. I tried to duplicate the previous two years of teaching since, as bell hooks (1994) states, "There can be no intervention that challenges the status quo if we are not willing to interrogate the way our presentation of self as well as our pedagogical process is often shaped by middle-class norms" (p. 185). My students forced me to question how my beliefs about schooling and knowledge were shaped.

Resistance to Hegemony

I was naively teaching to maintain hegemony (Gramsci, 1999; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003)¹. My traditional pedagogy and reliance on the mandated textbook as the only source of historical information granted absolute power and validity to the text. If my students, who were of African, Latin-American, Asian, and European descent, digested the explicit and implicit messages in the social studies textbook as truths, we never would have moved toward critical pedagogy. If they had internalized the negative messages² about the limited influence of non-White groups and ignored the silencing of women and those who suffered in California history, little in my teaching practice would have changed.

Fortunately, resistance can occur and change can happen since hegemony depends on the acceptance of those who are most disempowered (Apple, 1990; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). My fourth grade children resisted the normalization of a white, middle-class culture in the school and challenged the hegemony promoted by the social studies curriculum. Granted, the textbook occasionally addressed the inexcusable treatment of certain ethnic groups; however, it tended to use neutral language when addressing the oppression of many disempowered groups.

In the third chapter, “Life on a Mission”, my students used the word slavery after reading a section called “Work to Be Done”. It states: The Indians did all of the physical work at the mission. In return, the Indians received their food, housing, Spanish clothing, and religious training. They farmed, constructed and repaired mission buildings, and practiced crafts like tanning leather. The padres supervised the Indians as they worked. (p. 76)

In this same chapter is a section called, “Problems at the Mission” which focuses on Indian revolts. The authors use the word violent to describe the Indian’s behavior, stating, “Sometimes Indians revolted violently” (p. 79), when discussing the uprising and burning of the San Diego Mission. My students cheered and several commented that they would have done the same. A few pages later, in the middle of two pages titled “Understanding Culture” is a picture of a group of children and a woman, all of whom appear to be of European descent (p. 78). In this section

¹ Nodelman & Reimer (2003) define hegemony as “how a dominant group maintains its power over others by regulating a society’s beliefs and practices through the media it controls” (p. 244).

about missions and the oppression of Native Americans, the photograph did not fit the text and again my students wanted to know, “Why’s everyone white?”

A group of students from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador began to align themselves with the American Indians. They were enacting what Lewis (2001) describes as students learning to “immerse themselves in text and distance themselves from that text at the same time” (p. 138). They made personal connections to the people in the text who shared their history, then stepped away to critique how the book presented the information. Their perspective was changing and once I recognized this transformation, I ceased to rely on the social studies textbook as our main source. This led to a sharing of other sources to validate their reactions and to offer multiple perspectives of California and United States history. Finally, students were not moved by the last line of the book which reads:

In 2050, when the space shuttles of the future circle high above the earth, the astronauts may look down on a world that is a little clearer, a little healthier, and a little nicer because you helped make it that way. (p. 290)

By the end of the school year, they were more angry, frustrated, and skeptical toward the textbook than in the beginning of the year. However, they were able to discuss the text from a critical perspective, questioning its purpose as well as whose voices were heard and whose were silenced.

Questioning & Voice

Challenging the text was typically in the form of questioning what was written against students’ own experiences and background knowledge. Freire and Faundez (2001) discuss the importance of questioning in *The Paulo Freire Reader*. Faundez states:

Knowledge begins with asking questions. And only when we begin with questions, should we go out in search of answers, and not the other way round. If you produce answers as if all knowledge consisted of them, were already given, were absolute, you are leaving no room for curiosity or the discovery of fresh elements. Knowledge comes ready-made- that is what teaching then is. (p. 222).

Initially, the social studies textbook represented the only source of knowledge, which I supported.

In response to Faundez’s statement, Freire replies, “the authoritarianism running through our educational experiences inhibits, even if it does not repress, our capacity for asking questions. In an authoritarian atmosphere, the challenge implicit in a question tends to be regarded as an attack on authority” (p. 222). During social studies instruction, the textbook and I represented the authority which the

students were not expected to question. This eventually changed when students grew confident in questioning me and the messages in the text.

I failed to consider that my students had been socialized for the past four years to accept the textbook and their teachers' words as truth. A safe space to question the text was not something I initially supported. However, by the proposed debate on the last page of chapter one, whether or not to build the Hetch Hetchy dam in Yosemite National Park to provide water for people in the city, I recognized that my students were approaching the text differently than how I originally anticipated. They dismissed the debate with a simple answer- build the dam and give the people water. My students' parents worked in sweat shops in the city. Many shared a bedroom with three or more people and relied on the school for breakfast and lunch. They were not concerned with saving the wildlife in Yosemite National Park. This was their way of questioning me when I tried to make the issue more complicated and they unanimously agreed to build the dam.

Questioning became a distinct characteristic of our discussions. Rather than accepting the text as the voice of authority, we began to push against assumptions. Occasionally, the written text did not support or match the photographs and graphic representations. We were able to circumvent what hooks (1994) discusses as a serious problem at the university level. She states, "The experience of professors who educate for critical consciousness indicates that many students, especially student of color, may not feel at all 'safe' in what appears to be a neutral setting. It is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement" (p. 39). My students demonstrated their sense of increased empowerment by questioning the text and measuring its "truth" against their own experiences and knowledge.

My students brought multiple cultures and languages to the classroom, as well as an incredible wealth of knowledge from their homes and communities to our readings and discussions. Many students had extended family living in their home or nearby. After discussing several issues, such as Mexico's loss of land in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and forced detainment of Asian immigrants at Angel Island, students began sharing our classroom discussions with family members on these and other topics. An extended conversation about Angel Island occurred after reading a section in the book called "More Discrimination". The book states:

Like the Indians, Asians were often the victims of violent attacks. The United States government even passed laws against Asian immigrants... Many Chinese passed the time on Angel Island by carving poems into the walls of the bare wooden buildings. (p. 210 – 211) Several students had family members, especially grandparents, detained at Angel Island for extensive

periods of time. Independently, students interviewed family members and shared their stories with the class. They were not satisfied with the three paragraphs in the book and sought other sources they could trust.

Referencing Other Written Texts

My students wanted to learn about related topics and to share their own stories, which were treated by their peers with more credence than the textbook. Several students became interested in laws related to language after reading about the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which promised that Spanish would remain one of the country's official languages. This led to a discussion about their school's history regarding language, since this was the site of the lawsuit that established bilingual education in California. They wanted to learn more about their own school and city history and how they were personally impacted by these changes. We referenced sources such as the internet and *A People's History of the United States* (Zinn, 1995) to learn more about the outcome of the 1846 war between Mexico and the United States. The two pages in the history book were not sufficient to address their questions.

Conclusion and Discussion: *Was This Critical Literacy?*

In an article discussing critical pedagogy in an elementary classroom, Allen (1997) asks a series of questions:

- Do elementary students come to school already aware of the social inequities in their environment?
- Do they really notice the forms of biases they encounter and are they even interested in issues of equity and social justice?
- Is there a need to raise these issues in an elementary classroom in the first place and are students at this stage developmentally capable of recognizing and dealing with bias in the classroom materials or the curriculum? (p. 519)

My students were acutely aware of social inequality and we created space to challenge the mandated hegemonic social studies curriculum. We learned to confront bias in social studies and other subjects. We enacted a critical reading of the text similar to what Kohl (1996) describes as, "questioning a text, challenging it, and speculating on ways in which the world it creates can illuminate the one we live in" (p.22). This occurred through discussions of equality and representation of various groups. It was a critical reading of the text, and perhaps even a movement toward critical literacy, but not yet critical literacy or critical pedagogy.

My students critiqued the text however, a more developed understanding of critical pedagogy was necessary on my part. McLaren (1995) states that, "critical pedagogy is fundamentally concerned with understanding the relationship between power and knowledge" (p. 183).

Was I encouraging knowledge-seeking to empower my students, explicitly teaching them to question the hidden curriculum, and recognizing how hegemony ensures social reproduction? We were pushing against ideas in the text, but the purpose was not toward social justice or preparing my students with the discourse to continue enacting critical literacy in their academic lives and beyond. I believe the transformation of my pedagogy *toward* critical pedagogy and the way we studied history was incredibly important, but not yet critical pedagogy.

Recognizing the need to learn more about critical theory and pedagogy encouraged me to follow bell hooks' advice. She states, "It is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention" (p. 129). She suggests that the critical thinkers are the teachers, but in my classroom the critical thinkers who changed my pedagogy were my students. Eventually I embraced McLaren's position that "the traditional view of classroom instruction and learning as a neutral process antiseptically removed from the concepts of power, politics, history and context can no longer be credibly endorsed" (p.164). My students made this evident in their questioning of the text in relation to their own experiences and knowledge. I quickly realized that teaching is what hooks calls a "performative act within a highly charged political environment" (hooks, 1994). Indeed, the process of moving toward a critical reading of social studies with my fourth graders was challenging. Students, such as mine, who have been most oppressed and marginalized by schooling, deserve an education based on critical educational theory. I believe that transformation is more than possible- it is imperative.

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