

A Battle - Cry for Revolution: A Quest for Reformation

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Introduction

The public school system is traveling down a path of destruction. Every teacher, parent, and student acknowledges this as they face the results of high-stakes testing and mediocre student performance. “Dominated by pedagogies that are utterly instrumental, geared toward memorization, conformity and high-stakes test taking, public schools have become intellectual dead zones and punishment centers as far removed from teaching civic values and expanding the imaginations of students as one can imagine” (Giroux, p. 2). In a frantic quest to compete globally, policy makers and administrators have stripped the educational experience for teachers, students, and parents to one of conformity and rote recall of information. What can be done? How can we, teachers, parents, and students, realistically expect radical reformation of a school and a system that has been unquestioned for years? Using pedagogy theory and practice lived by Paulo Freire, this paper attempts to pose a theory to revolutionize a school, resulting in its reformation.

Biography of Paulo Freire

Paulo was born in Northeast Brazil, September 19, 1921 to a middle class family. Although his family was “middle class,” Freire was surrounded by the reality of the poverty and dire circumstances of his fellow comrades and knew times of hunger himself. Freire met his first wife, Elza Maia Costa de Oliveria, who was an elementary teacher herself, in 1944, while he was part of the Faculty of Law in Recife. They were married for over 40 years, having 5 children during that time. In 1946, Freire became the director of Education at SESI, which is where his educational theory began to be solidified. It was during this time that he completed his Ph.D. thesis, “Present-day Education in Brazil.” Freire proposed his pedagogy of literacy, which involves not only the reading of the word but the reading of the world.

Through this, he taught 300 farm workers to read in 45 days in 1962. The Brazilian government approved the initiation of cultural circles; however, this was halted due to the military coup of 1964. After the power shift resulting from the military coup, later in the year, Freire was imprisoned as a traitor for 70 days. Upon his release, he lived in Chile for the next 5 years working for the Christian Democratic Agrarian Reform Movement. Freire’s first book, Education as the Practice of Freedom, was published in 1967 and earned him a position as a visiting professor at Harvard. After the completion of this first publication, Freire began working on his next book, known now as his most critically acclaimed, the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which was published in 1969.

1970 found Freire in Geneva working as the special education advisor to the World Congress of Churches. He retained this position for 10 years, traveling the world over several times. After remaining in exile from Brazil for over 15 years, Freire was allowed to return home to Sao Paulo in 1979 where he became an active participant in the Worker’s Party in Sao Paulo. 1988 Freire was issued an appointment as the Minister of Education for Sao Paulo. It was while working here that his first wife, Elza, died in 1986, and Freire was remarried to Ana Maria Arajo Freire, who was a radical pedagogue herself. Freire spent the remaining years being activities for the oppressed and critical pedagogy, traveling and giving lectures all over the world, until he suddenly died of heart failure at the age of 75 on May 2, 1997.

A Quest for Reformation

Begin With the Teachers

Teachers can ensure the success or failure of any school. Lackluster teacher participation and commitment is guaranteed to produce results from students that mirror the teacher's mindset. If we want an education revolution resulting in school reformation, it must begin with the teachers. All prior reformation of schools has been initiated by a top-down approach. This has resulted in our current state of high-stakes testing and society degeneration. If different results are wanted, different things must be done. Paulo Freire poses in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that in society, there are two types of people, the oppressed (those who are dehumanized by the oppressors) and the oppressors (those which subscribe to a complete materialistic lifestyle). "This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both" (Freire, 1970). Within the public education structure, policy makers and administrators (using the word administrators to encompass all personnel that direct and decide pedagogy and procedures within a district or school) can be viewed as the oppressors and teachers, parents, and students often fall within the oppressed category. According to Freire, we (teachers, parents, and students) should not look to the oppressors to "fix" our failing school system; we must rise to initiate the change ourselves. Teachers, alongside with students and parents, must unify to initiate the paradigm shift that must occur for the future of our society.

Freire specifically addresses the most pressing area of teacher preparation, in his view, which is the ethical formation of a teacher. He notes that, "The education of a teacher should be ethically grounded that any gap between professional and ethical formation is to be deplored" (Freire, 1998). Freire comprises a list of attributes that progressive teacher's exhibit. These attributes include: common sense, humility, tolerance, pursuit of the Rights of Educators, capacity to apprehend reality, joy, hope, conviction that change is possible, curiosity, self-confidence, professional competence, generosity, commitment, ability to make decisions, knows how to listen, and caring. Throughout his books, Freire delves deeply into each of these attributes to provide a thorough explanation so that teachers will be able to fully understand what is necessary to be a progressive teacher.

Identify and Build a Curriculum

"Critical Pedagogy represents, in a phrase, the reaction of progressive educators against such institutionalized functions. It is an effort to work within educational institutions and other media to raise questions and inequalities of power, about the false myths of opportunity and merit for many students, and about the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life" (Berk and Burbules, p. 5). Once the battle-cry has been issued for revolution and has been echoed by the teachers, parents, and students, it is time to begin laying the foundation for reformation. Progressive teachers must engage in critical thinking—"thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved" (Freire, 1970). Teachers must embrace the unknown and find freedom in the quest for the appropriate pedagogy and curriculum to meet the needs of their individualized students and school. Once teachers embark upon a journey of critical thinking, they will be confronted with the reality of their incompleteness. However, there is freedom in embracing ones incompleteness because it leads to understanding that one's shortcomings as a teacher are not failings but a stepping stone as they journey to work on their understanding of their pedagogy and the perfection of their craft. "Hence the watchfulness with which progressive educators ought to act, the vigilance with which they ought to live their intense educational practice. Hence the need for them to keep their eyes always open, along with their ears, and their whole soul-open to the pitfalls of the so-called hidden curriculum" (Freire, 1992).

"Only dialogue truly communicates" (Freire, 1974). Holding this statement true, Freire designed a framework of literacy for adult learners that attained huge measures of success in his country. Freire's framework for literacy was composed of "codifying" ten social situations. From here, the participants enter into a critical discussion where the educator's role is to enter into the discussion with the students about concrete situations and offer instruments in which the learner will teach himself or herself to read and write. Only through this process, by the learner becoming intrinsically motivated and taking ownership of their learning, can revolutionary strides towards illiteracy take place.

In phase 2 of the literacy circles, the participants engage in vocabulary building and phonemic enrichment through natural word family groups. Although Freire wrote his literacy framework for adults, there is merit in adjusting it to fit within an elementary school context. This can be done with a reflection of the area of need for our Bilingual, ESL, and economically disadvantaged children. We know that a critical area of need for these students is in the area of vocabulary. These students are more fluent in their BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills), which is the everyday language that students converse in at home and while talking to their peers. The area that the students struggle in is the CALPs (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency), which is the academic language and vocabulary used within and about school. If we utilized Freire's literacy framework, we would begin using codified social situations, with relevant academic vocabulary imbedded within the picture, to begin discussions within a classroom. By beginning the discussion with the familiar situational vocabulary and then moving on to the new academic vocabulary, discovered by the students in an organic manner, students are using their prior knowledge base to construct their new learning. As Freire did in phase 2, phonemic enrichment can occur in response to this through natural word families.

Continuing Education

"There is no teaching without learning. Teachers' political, ethical, and professional responsibility puts them under an obligation to prepare and enable them before engaging in their teaching practice. Teaching requires constant preparation and development on the part of teachers, as is made clearer and clearer by their teaching experience, if well lived and apprehended" (Freire, 2005). Everyone agrees that teacher's continuing his or her education is necessary. However, as teachers face each New Year with a laundry list of classes required by their school or district, inevitably the teacher take-away from predetermined classes will be minimal. School reformation must saturate all areas of a school, including the way that teachers are expected to continue their education. Progressive teachers who have overcome oppression must begin continuously searching for ways to develop their incomplete self. This can only be done by personal critical reflection, identification of areas of strength and weakness, and development of a plan to expand their knowledge base in those weaknesses. Critical reflection is natural for many teachers, however, the actual identification of areas of strengths and weaknesses and the drive to address those areas is difficult for most teachers. "In animals as in human beings, there are rules of critical distance for competition: my stretch of sidewalk. In short, a territorialization of functions is the condition for their emergence of "occupations" or "trades" (Britt & Rudolph, p. 38). In an attempt to be infallible, teachers often mask their areas of weakness; situate themselves in their own territory, unwilling and unable to change. For true reformation of a school to begin, teachers must first abandon their territory and accept their reality so that they can change it.

Student-Teacher Relationships

According to Freire, "The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (Freire, 1970). Using Freire's problem-centered approach, teachers and students become the co-authors of curriculum based on the prior knowledge and interest of the students. There are several ways in which to implement this approach in the classroom. For example, interdisciplinary education and project based learning both utilize integrated curriculum, which is defined by Beane as " a curriculum design that is concerned with enhancing the possibilities for personal and social integration through the organization of curriculum around significant problems and issues, collaboratively identified by educators and young people, without regard for subject-area boundaries" (Warner, p. 44).

The relationship between student/teacher is one that must be honored and held sacred. Teachers "must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not antiscientific" (Freire, 2005). Teachers love their students. They worry, nurture, and strive to provide everything their students' need. In their attempt to be all-encompassing, teachers have taken on a role that was not designed for them, and that is the role of the parent. The art of teaching is a profession that is embarked upon by qualified experts. Over the years, the role of the teacher has deteriorated to " a parenting role that devalues teaching by holding teachers responsible for assuaging all the ills of society, particularly the cruel and unjust presence of human misery that directly affects in multiple ways the students they teach" (Freire, 2005). Society places the success or failure of our country on the backs of teachers as they continue to try to meet the individual needs of each diverse child in their class. Expectations are unrealistic in this situation.

The role of teachers needs to shift back to that of a professional and parents need to reassume their mantle to truly achieve reformation.

Parent/Teacher Relationships

Parents play a vital part in the reformation of a school. Parents that join in the revolution to bring about school reform will embark on the journey of the school reformation and can provide valuable input and previous experiences to enhance the developing curriculum. The role of the teacher at this junction is to stand WITH the parents. As public school systems stand now, all too often, teachers and parents find themselves in opposition. They are separated by a wall of past etiquette that dictates that parents are sub-servant and rely unquestioningly on the teacher's judgment. Just as the teachers have overcome their oppression from administration, parents must overcome their oppression from the school and teachers. "Not even the best-intentioned leadership can bestow independence as a gift" (Freire, 1970). Teachers must enter the fight WITH the parents, as opposed to, launching the fight FOR the parents. Regardless of how much the teachers want this change for their school, without the true partnership of the parents, school reformation will be unattainable.

Conclusion

"In our making and remaking of ourselves in the process of making history-as subjects and objects, persons, becoming beings of insertion in the world and not of pure adaptation to the world-we should end by have the *dream*, too, a mover of history. There is no change without dream, as there is no dream without hope" (Freire, 1992). The dream for a school utopia is alive in most schools, hidden within the recesses of teachers, parents, and students alike. Once the battle cry for an educational revolution is issued and assumed by the teachers, parents, and students the hope flourishes. School reformation is scary. It is the beginning of a journey with an unknown destination and is rife with struggles, failures, and frustrations. It is also the beginning of true understanding of one's historical role within the context of history and how the decisions and actions that one takes guide and change the collective societal history. Revolution begins with one; one spark that becomes a flame that can reform the educational experience of countless students.

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