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NAMING AND RESISTING THE (DIS)EMPOWERMENT OF PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the presence of non-democratic practices within public education. More specifically, discussion is provided on some of the negative consequences and effects non-democratic practices can have on education in general and public-school teachers in particular. The paper is essentially an exploration of a problem and an envisioning of how we, as teachers, can begin to take back control of our profession for the good of ourselves and the students we serve. My arguments are based on my personal experiences and reflections as a public-school teacher, as well as the literature on education in general. At the conclusion of the paper, I discuss and explore several possibilities for myself and other educators that could help us move us forward in breaking the cycle of oppression that can be often experienced as a public-school teacher.

Introduction

I am a public-school teacher. What does this mean to me? It means that every day, I, like others, try to educate those who walk into my classroom, not only through my chosen avenue of music, but also on other aspects of their lives. It means that I am, often, an adult that my students can trust and have as a confidante. It means that I, like others, am an educated professional who takes time to continue to develop and perfect the art of teaching. It means that for the past nine years of my career I have given everything I have to allow my students to experience learning that is meaningful and fully applicable to their lives. It means that with the tools I have, I am using my knowledge and voice to help them find their voices, empowering them for whatever paths they should choose beyond my classroom.

Lately, however, I have been finding it increasingly more difficult to embody these characteristics of a teacher. With every turn, there are additional complexities, expectations, and other difficulties that convolute the realities of educators. My most recent frustration with public education is that there appears to have been a noticeable decrease in communal endeavors and, simultaneously, a noticeable increase in anti-democratic practices and relationships. Though I do believe that small pockets of community exist—particularly at the classroom level and perhaps even amongst teachers within schools—I am more concerned about the issue on a holistic level as district leaders become more of a separate entity from those they claim to lead. Should I seek to survive within the profession as it is currently constituted, I will keep living the existence that is before me, complete with these difficulties. However, at this point that I seek more than survival—I seek to thrive so that I can help my students reach their best potential. Thus, my realities as a teacher have turned into constant systematic reflection, questioning, and problem-solving.

This paper is an exploration of how we, as teachers, might begin to take back control of our profession not only to care for ourselves but also the students and society we serve. My arguments are based on my personal experiences and reflections as a public-school teacher as well as the literature on education in general. In this first section I discuss various challenges I, like numerous other teachers, students, and community members, have encountered with a deeply flawed educational system. In the second section, I shift my focus to the impact of this non-democratic and anti-communicative system on teachers in particular—on our individual lives as well as our profession. In the final section, I envision ways in which we, as teachers, can begin to reclaim community and democracy within our profession not only for the good of ourselves but also for the students we serve and the society we share.

The process of my reflection and questioning has been an evolution of maturation and growth, which has been a product of my personal development as a teacher. In the earlier stages of my career, this looked differently for me than it does currently. Formerly, my reflection revolved mainly around my classroom, my lesson plans, and my pedagogy—particularly what was working and what wasn't and how I could make the experience better for my students. Currently, my sentiments remain the same, but the context has changed. I am still very concerned with what is working, what isn't, and how I can make the experience better for my students. However, instead of revolving primarily around a small or local perspective and space within the system (my classroom), today I am more inclined to examine the system itself.

The positionality I hold in the examination of the system is somewhat unique. The district that employs me is the same district I was assigned to as a public-school student. Concurrently, it is also the district and community in which I reside. This allows my perspective to be overlapping and multifaceted, tying together the past experiences of a district student of

twelve years, the current experiences as a district teacher of nine years, and my cumulative experiences as a district community member for the entirety of my life.

Although my roles and perspectives have shifted from child to adult and from student to teacher, a lingering problem has perplexed me throughout the years. This problem revolves around what ideas are presented, but more so are accepted by all involved, as a "satisfactory" educational experience. I have a hard time believing that parents and teachers would willingly sign up their children for a second-class education. However, this is exactly what we are giving the children of my district, like many others across the state and nation, as we deal with the realities of overcrowded classrooms, teachers fleeing the district and profession (resulting in high turn-over rates and inconsistency throughout our classrooms), a rise in emergency trained teachers in classrooms (who may be academically but not always pedagogically equipped), dwindling school resources and class choices, and so much more. These conditions affect our children in a variety of ways: hindering many from reaching their "grade-level" abilities; hindering students from excelling beyond their grade levels; and shifting educators' roles from teaching effectively (or in some cases, teaching at all) to crowd control as our classrooms become more and more packed. Overall, the experience for many students becomes mediocre and subpar as teachers continue to battle problems that prevent us from effectively differentiating instruction for each of the students that walk into our classrooms.

When deciding to become an educator, I understood the job was accompanied with many difficulties. I knew I lived in a society that had long devalued public education and public-school teachers. However, I underestimated just how difficult it would be to match my world of idealism with the world in which I was actually living, which was far from how I envisioned the educational experience would be for my students and myself. I had envisioned students enjoying

their learning, being involved in their educational process, and, as a result, teachers loving their jobs enough that the intrinsic benefits outweighed the obstacles that needed to be overcome. Instead, I am faced with an educational system that seems to function ineffectively and inefficiently for all.

Throughout the years, my outlook as a teacher has shifted from one of optimism that conditions would improve to fatalistic acceptance of the reality of the public education system to a current desire to systematically question why we have to endure these existences. I would have to say, the most common questions that take place in my mind come in the form of "Why do we have to do that?" and 'Why are we wasting our time?" I have found myself asking these questions countless times, as district leaders continued to roll out the latest curricula, career training programs, standardized tests, and other countless things that have been presented under the guise of "preparing our students for their best futures".

Obviously, "Why do we have to do that, and why are we wasting our time?" are not the most constructive questions, and waiting for the storm to pass is not the most constructive solution. Thus, I started to direct my frustrations towards reflections that would allow me to engage more constructively with the systems and practices that were infiltrating my classroom and affecting not only the value of education given to my students, but also my livelihood as a teacher.

One of the biggest frustrations I have experienced is the lack of community within the school system, exemplified by the increasing distance between teachers, students, and the community, on one hand, and between ourselves and our official "leaders" on the other hand. Although there are many people present simultaneously, the ability to interact as a community between students, teachers, principals, district officials, and other various stakeholders has

always seemed to be nonexistent. The communal aspect of people within the system remains absent and lends the system to one that is bureaucratic instead of democratic. As I examined my frustration, the following questions came to mind: Why would this lack of community be so frustrating for somebody living within the community? What would the presence of authentic community and communication imply for the pathway of public education? What is the impact on humans, specifically educators, of sharing an environment but not sharing a sense of creation and maintenance of that environment? And, at the end of the day, why is examining all of this important for the sake of better public education?

I turn to my most recent experience that has created utmost frustration for myself and many others involved. Though this is just one experience, it embodies many of the frustrations outlined above, as well as an underlying agenda that is implicit within my district, and perhaps other districts as well.

Within the last year, our district officials announced a series of changes that everybody would undergo. The announcement of the changes came suddenly, and the changes were to be implemented within a very few months. The official tagline for promoting these changes was that it was the most efficient way to free resources and finances to provide equity for our students and to allow our teachers to engage in best practices for collaboration. The changes included redrawing district lines and boundaries, forcing families out of their community schools, rebranding our district, and consolidating schools to alleviate financial burdens and shift extra funds for resources elsewhere. This was the vision that was being promoted to the community: optimistic and hopeful. However, people living within the community felt differently.

Several concerns were echoed throughout the community from parents, teachers, and students. To name a few, these concerns ranged from families being uprooted from their community schools to merging different demographics and communities to the displacement of teachers. Although district leaders assured us that our concerns were heard and valid, they proceeded with their plans anyway.

The results have been chaotic, mirroring the concerns of our communities: merging different neighborhoods has caused tensions, fights and riots; displacing teachers has decreased the overall morale of our educators; and our schools have become overcrowded with little sign of relief anywhere in sight. On top of this, our schools have yet to see the benefits that were promised: more resources, more class choices, smaller class sizes, and more time for teacher collaboration.

The underlying principles and standards of how our decisions are made remain prominent: we are often forced to live with decisions (and their consequences, intended and unintended) that are forced upon us without any input from the voices within our community. The process of decision-making is often non-democratic, and this becomes increasingly problematic as the public-school systems like ours are situated within a much larger system that is, ostensibly, itself democratic.

When change is a constant but access to shared communication is not, the educational experience can lead to chaos and confusion. Lack of shared communication comes in many forms, including teachers being told what to implement in their classrooms (with added layers of how to implement their ideas, and when); top-down changes in school environments (such as scheduling or staff assignments and allocations); and changes in school missions (which are currently determined by standardized tests assessments of the types of post-secondary goals

should be addressed with students). These examples embody non-democratic practices. Their common ground is that teachers are encouraged to implement the decisions of others without being given an opportunity to provide feedback to those in charge.

If the public schools are situated within a broader democratic system but operate in non-democratic ways manifested in top-down decisions and lack of authentic communication, what are the implications for the people in those communities? More specifically, does this imply for educators living within this world as they attempt to navigate the existence created for them, but not by them, while simultaneously trying to provide hope for their students and classrooms? The purpose of this paper is to examine how non-democratic practices and relationships can negatively impact education in general and teachers as a group. After assessing the negative effects of non-democratic non-communicative relationships, I will consider ways to begin imagining and enacting better possibilities for us, as teachers.

The Impact of Non-Democratic Practices and Lack of Community on Teachers

While examining why non-democratic practices and lack of community are problematic, it is important to note that components of the non-democratic process and its consequences are not separate but instead are intertwined in a more complex, systemic way and exist in compliment of each other. Although this process creates ripple effects for the educational system as a whole, I am choosing to examine specifically some of the effects teachers have to combat as we attempt to survive in existences constantly dictated for us.

In order to argue why non-democratic practices are problematic, it would be significant to characterize what a democracy and democratic practices are. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of democracy is “a government by the people” (Merriam-Webster,

n.d.). This is related to the common idea that a democracy is a government of, by, and, for the people. The United States is a country that is founded on democratic principles and relationships.

By extension, it would make sense if our public institutions, like our public schools, embodied democratic principles and relationships as well. Maintaining nondemocratic public-school systems can create conflicting ideals for people within a democratic society. In the case of education systems, I believe "the people" would include the body of educators and students. However, it is clear that the public-school system does not operate with such democratic ideals in mind.

John Dewey (1916/2018) notes that democracy is bigger than governance, stating "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience (p. 93). By extension, democratic practices would be experiences that allowed this shared participation in existence to come to fruition. The antithesis (non-democratic practices) would be composed of experiences that are not shared amongst the members and, additionally, lack the component of communication.

When authentic communication is removed from the educational experience, this would move the experience and the people within it towards being one that is more non-democratic, because this removes the possibility for true dialogue. Paulo Freire (1970/2000) reinforces Dewey's ideas about communication by articulating the significance of dialogue:

> Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. (p. 88)

Non-democratic practices usually involve removing the dialogue that Freire speaks of and can create complications within the public education system that manifest in various ways. This is particularly problematic for teachers, who are charged with educating and contributing to the rise of upcoming generations. What can we offer future generations if we are often prevented from engaging in authentic dialogue ourselves? Additionally, what does it mean for us, individually and collectively, when we are immersed in a system that does not encourage authentic community and communication/dialogue?

There are a multitude of consequences that stem from non-democratic practices and lack of community within education. Though these factors affect the education system as a whole, I would like to focus on the impact on the profession of teachers. I have chosen to discuss the following consequences as a result of the issue at hand: the destabilization of public education and how it leads to demoralization and fatalism within teachers; the existential crisis of teachers as we experience alienation from our professional life and values; and the dehumanization of teachers as our competence, expertise, and professionalism continue to be devalued by those who claim to lead us.

Destabilization in Public Education

In my experience, non-democratic public education systems function solely to survive and have little chance of moving beyond surviving towards thriving. Non-democratic practices can create environments that are constantly unstable and are filled with teachers and students just waiting for the next top-down change or decision, instead of being given space and time to cultivate authentic learning opportunities.

Often, lack of communication is paired with constant and frequent changes in decisions as educational leaders scramble to find the "next best thing" or the "solution for success." This leads to chaotic inconsistency and confusion. The chaos and confusion, then, can lead to breakdowns in the sense of community, as visions and goals for education become unclear and indistinct. This can become a vicious, cyclical process. Through lack of communication, visions remain unclear while solutions are proposed. Implementation, still without communication, further convolutes the vision for the community of educators. After just a couple of reiterations of this cycle, the consequences for education, particularly educators, can be disastrous.

The process described above, a reality for many educators, is one of destabilization: each component of the public education system becomes separate from the next; in turn, foresight is compromised within the process; as a result of compromised foresight, the function of the system shifts from one that could be a visionary movement to one that is instead fragmented and incoherent.

Fatalism and Demoralization

Destabilization can lead to fatalism and demoralization. In my experience, the shift in the function from education as a potential movement with vision for social improvement to a fragmented experience without a clear purpose or direction can create disarray among educators as we are constantly being shifted from idealism of education towards the difficult reality of being part of a system that is broken.

I know I share these concerns with many of my colleagues. The constant chaos contributes to feelings that I believe many educators are experiencing on a large scale. As much love as we have for the profession, our students, and for the learning process as a whole, this

love can become obscured as we drown in despair and hopelessness. We often shift from mindsets of "I love teaching" or "I love when my students learn" to "This job is too hard" or "I know very little about how to teach well" or, ultimately, "Nothing I say, think, or do matters". These feelings can be referred to as fatalism, "a doctrine that events are fixed in advance so that human beings are powerless to change them" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This sense of fatalism can become overwhelming, overcoming any previous existence. For many teachers, it has become a reality.

This fatalism that I speak of is more than a simple issue of hopelessness. It is a culmination of being strongly committed to the profession while constantly being undermined and undervalued. Because of this, teachers constantly have to grapple with the disconnect that occurs when we evaluate what they bring to the profession (academic capabilities, commitment, professionalism, and knowledge) against what is actually valued within the system (mediocrity, passivity).

As this disconnect becomes more established in every aspect of our teaching lives, we can also experience an overpowering sense of demoralization. According to Doris Santoro (2018), "Teachers who experience demoralization believe that the school practices or policy mandates that they are expected to follow are harmful to students or degrading to the profession and that their attempts to alter them have been fruitless" (p. 10). Santoro (2018) expands on this demoralization:

> Teachers experiencing demoralization are faced with moral dilemmas, but these dilemmas are not the type that demand, "What's the right course of action?" Instead, the moral dilemmas teachers often face take the form of, "I am confident about the right course of action and I am not allowed to take it." Demoralization reaches its peak when

> teachers believe that they are violating basic expectations that educators should embody: Do no harm to students, support student learning, and engage in professional behavior. (p. 11-12)

I believe that demoralization is something that many teachers experience in the profession. Most, if not all of us, enter the profession with teaching philosophies and core beliefs about what our classrooms should exhibit, what learning should look like, and what relationships we should develop. However, we are seldom allowed to live our core beliefs to the fullest potential because this would conflict with things that have value in schools, such as standardized tests, trendy curricula, and numerous other things we are told "matter". After repeated experiences, we can become disheartened and discouraged. This can lead to loss of spirit, determination, and motivation, leading us to become disconnected from our profession and own sense of passion.

Existential Crisis and Alienation from Professional Life

I have already outlined what it means for me to be a public-school teacher, all of which encompasses moral beliefs that I believe are fundamental to the profession: to educate students, to be a professional, to provide meaningful experiences for my students. However, the longer I am a part of the education system, the more I find external beliefs imposed upon me about what learning should look like and what attributes are presumably needed for "success". These beliefs usually revolve around *impressions* of learning, as opposed to *authentic* learning. Indicators come in the form of test scores, school report card grades, and various percentages (such as the percentage of students moving on to college, or the percentage of students that have high attendance rates).

My experience has given me the following personal truths as a teacher: I can still impact my students and my students can impact me without measuring it by a number; my students can exhibit intelligence, common sense, compassion, and so much more and still "fail" a class; test scores, grade point averages, and percentiles are not the only indicators of whether or not a student will be successful in their post-secondary education. Knowing these statements to be true while simultaneously having to watch my students participate in these practices often makes me feel powerless within my classroom and profession. These practices communicate that our students are only as good as the numbers they are assigned. The conflicts between teachers' truths and realities can create an existence that is overwhelming and damaging.

Thus, I cannot help but question whether or not a teacher's existence is sustainable. We are constantly being pressured to engage with practices, curricula, and materials that are disconnected from our personal, developed philosophies of teaching. As our school leaders continue to enforce top down decisions while taking away our voices and spaces for communication, they reinforce the idea that we bring nothing to the profession other than our passive bodies to implement what they deem best for learning.

Henry Giroux (1985) has argued that this experience is highly problematic, describing it as the:

> proleterianization of teacher work; that is, the tendency to reduce teachers to the status of specialized technicians within the school bureaucracy, whose function then becomes one of managing and implementing curricula programs rather than developing or critically appropriating curricula to fit specific pedagogical concerns. (p. 376)

This proleterianization Giroux describes is harmful to many teachers and their identities everywhere. On one hand, we set out to become teachers, which often includes professional

training (in most cases at universities and colleges) and extended training afterwards (professional development and conferences). In this process, we come to believe we are masters of our crafts and arts. We then set out to teach, inspire, and connect with our students through our subject materials and classroom experiences, hoping to set in motion lifelong learning to empower them to create their own pathways for their lives. On the other hand, once we enter the profession, at each turn we are told by our principals, district leaders, local government officials, and various others what is best for our classrooms, how learning is achieved, and what shortcuts we should take for the sake of our limited budgets, test score expectations, and other number-based criteria that we are often reduced to.

We can begin experiencing disillusionment as we realize our expertise means little or nothing in the educational system, and this disillusionment paves the way towards environments where many of us experience an existential crisis and alienation from our own professional lives. This experience can have many systemic consequences for education. As teachers continue to experience this existence that is created for them but not by them, we can begin to question the purpose and meaning of engaging in this existence at all. Though not easily simplified, this can lead to a crossroads for teachers as they debate whether or not to remain in the profession, to cope with their existential crises, and to remain devalued and reduced by their "superiors". This issue, compounded with many others (such as low pay and lack of resources and respect), is resulting in an evacuation of the profession, which heightens the destabilization of the system and contributes to students' second-class education resulting from teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and various other issues.

Dehumanization

Non-democratic practices within education promote destabilization of the system and disconnection of professionals from the profession. As these elements are combined, there is another consequence worth mentioning. This is the dehumanization of teachers as a whole. According to Freire (1970/2000), "Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (p. 44). Humanity involves exercising our emotions, engaging in meaningful relationships, developing our intellect, and exercising free thought. The question of how often we get to engage in these practices as educators becomes prevalent while examining non-democratic practices.

Each time we participate with decisions made for us, without our input and communication, the more our voices become diminished. The longer the system weakens our voices, the longer it chips away at our humanity. According to Dewey (1916/2018),

> In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves (p. 90).

When we submit to a non-democratic existence, we essentially relinquish our connection to our voices, our free thought, and any power we may have otherwise had. This is damaging and violent to our humanity. According to Freire (1970/2000), "Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects" (p. 85).

The dehumanization of our profession and the teachers within it does not usually occur instantaneously. It is not even something that occurs with just a few one non-democratic practices. Rather, it results from the combination of teachers constantly pouring their humanity into the profession with the profession reciprocating by reducing us to vessels expected to carry out a concept of education based on anything but humanity. In addition to experiencing dehumanization, teachers can also experience a sense of oppression that often accompanies the profession.

According to Freire (1970/2000), "an act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being more fully human" (p. 57). He notes "The oppressed, as objects, as "things" have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them" (p. 60). Giroux (1985) supports this idea that teachers are being reduced to objects when he argues,

> For instance, many of the recommendations that have emerged in the current debate either ignore the role teachers play in preparing learners to be active or critical citizens, or they suggest reforms that ignore the intelligence, judgment and experience that teachers might offer in such a debate. Where teachers do enter the debate, they are the object of educational reforms that reduce them to the status of high-level technicians carrying out dictates and objectives decided by "experts" far removed from the everyday realities of classroom life. The message appears to be that teachers do not count when it comes to critically examining the nature and process of educational reform. (p. 376)

What, specifically, about the education system's non-democratic practices prevents us from "becoming more fully human", as Freire would say? For me, the answer is not easily articulated.

These practices are not oppressive in the most direct sense. When teachers enter the profession, they do not immediately feel oppressed. Rather, it occurs in a de-facto sort of

fashion. Because of this, it is difficult name and articulate the exact nature of the problem. In my opinion, the oppression teachers face results from a mixture of unanticipated elements that accompany the job within an overall system of oppression.

Over time, we face superfluous pressures that accompany our jobs that prevent us from using our voices to effectively advocate for education. These pressures include fears for our job security, the potential of damaging our relationships with our peers and "superiors", and worries of what impressions we may be making. All of these pressures, coupled with the power structures already in place, contribute to the overall experience.

After years of struggle, I have found myself wondering: "Is it worth saying if it means I will get in trouble?" "Why should I speak up when I know my leaders will just go with whatever plan they want?" "Does it make any difference what I think is best?" When we begin to silence the voices in our heads, we contribute to our own subjugation. The process becomes cyclical, following a familiar pattern: oppressive circumstances precede us; they are often uncritically perpetuated by our leaders; as we experience these circumstances, we second-guess what is even possible to change. If we do decide to question, we often find that makes little difference, which perpetuates our fatalistic assumptions. Yet, when we fail to question what we know to be inequitable and ineffective, we can slowly become complicit with the system as it cycles back through.

In my experience, when we choose to question our administrators' decisions, we are essentially told to keep our heads down and do what we've been hired to do: teach, and to leave the "big stuff" to those who can see the bigger picture. In time, we begin to internalize the implicit messages not to be too opinionated, not to concern ourselves with problems outside our classrooms, and that our thoughts have no value within the broader educational system. As

people, we find that even our consciousness has become suppressed, and as educators, we find ourselves dehumanized by the very system we have set out to be a part of, to love and to change.

Ways We as Teachers Can Begin Reclaiming Community and Democracy in Education

To simply name and analyze problems in public education without providing suggestions or direction for improvement would be equivalent to partaking in the passivity that perpetuates the problematic practices in the first place. If we, as teachers, wish to see the educational system move away from its current dysfunction, it is up to us to take action and ensure that it moves in this direction. It may not be fair to expect ourselves to assume the responsibilities of our more highly paid administrators and policymakers in addition to shouldering our own ongoing responsibilities, but history has shown that if we leave the larger systemic, structural, and ethical decisions to others, the consequences do not bode well for the majority of teachers, students and citizens in our society. So how can we, as teachers, maneuver the problematic circumstances of the system while attempting to simultaneously develop and maintain our vision for our students and our classrooms and our commitment to the profession? A simplistic answer to this question would be to just allow our love for the profession to overcome the difficulties and find small pockets of hope within the system to keep ourselves going. However, a more realistic and complex answer is that we must pool our intellectual and emotional resources and work in community to create the changes that both we and our students desperately need (Palmer, 1997/2007).

I have spent the majority of this paper discussing systemic problems in education and their effects on teachers, both individually and collectively. Now I would like to switch to the contrary and focus on what education could look like. Specifically, how we can reclaim a

greater degree of community and democracy in our classrooms, schools, and districts? Reclaiming of community and democracy in education can be daunting and immense. Although I could never exhaust all the potential responses to this problem, I hope to provide a few ideas about how to continue with our reflection and reclaim our livelihoods for the benefit of public education everywhere. In the spirit of Giroux (1985):

> It is important to stress that teachers must take active responsibility for raising serious questions about what they teach, how they are to teach, and what the larger goals are for what they are striving. This means that they must take a responsible role in shaping the purposes and conditions of schooling. (pp. 378-379)

Since a lack of community and democracy exists in education, the question becomes, "How can we overcome this problem and move towards instituting community and engaging in democratic practices?" Not only should we question how we can engage in *new* practices, but we must question, more meaningfully, how we can engage in *good* practices – with the assumption that "good practices" are those that benefit *all* members of the community. Further, how can we move beyond mere suggestions or partial implementation to ensure that the good practices we initiate become part of our thinking, our philosophical understanding, so that they become part of our second nature, so that public education can begin to thrive within our communities?

I can envision at least three intersecting ways teachers can begin reclaiming community and democracy within our settings. First, we, as teachers, need to examine what it means to be a community and how communication comes into play for a community to be prosperous and healthy. Second, we need to remember that teaching involves people and is first and foremost, a human profession. Because of this, we cannot discount the humane elements that accompany

education: experience, histories, knowledge and intellect, and of course, feelings and relationships. Third, we need to reexamine and reclaim the definition of education itself, because formal classroom teaching in the United States has evolved into something quite different from what most of us believe it should be.

Establishing Community and Communication with Purpose

While attempting to distinguish coexistence from true community, Dewey (1916/2018) notes:

> The parts of a machine work with a maximum amount of cooperativeness for a common result, but they do not form community. If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, then they would form a community. But this would involve communication. Each would have to have some way of keeping the other informed as to his own purpose and progress. Consensus demands communication. (p. 7)

By this description, simply having a mutual end goal in mind and cooperating along the way is not enough to form a community. People, in this case educators, must practice communication on a holistic level, interacting with others within the community, as decisions are made and actions are taken. Additionally, a community made of conscious members would be aware that each action that takes place on an individual level also informs every outcome on the collective level, and vice versa.

I realize that glimpses of communication do occur on a small-scale level within education, including many conversations between teachers and our students, teachers and students' parents, students with their parents, and teachers with other teachers within their buildings, and perhaps even across buildings as opportunity allows it. However, these local

conversations are not enough to begin reclaiming the democratic practices that are largely absent from the educational system as an entity. This is due largely to the fact that even though communication does occur within small pockets, it happens as a detached process where educators have little space to come together into larger, shared communities and, it occurs amongst people who, for a long time, have had few immediate ties to power within the system and have little connection to structural change on a larger scale.

For this reason, we need to begin engaging in practices that elicit a greater sense of purpose than just mere communication. If we, as educators, wish to change the oppressive tendencies of our current structure, we must move beyond simply communicating within our immediate circumstances towards communicating with each other and communicating with a larger purpose in mind. In Parker Palmer's (1997/2007) "second stage" of the process of social change (forming communities of congruence), he observes that people "develop the language that can represent the movement's vision, giving that language the strength it will need to survive and thrive in the rough-and-tumble of the public realm" (p. 179). Our shared sense of purpose can help us turn our shared frustrations into a shared language and vision. Next, we must find ways to effectively present our revelations to our educational leaders to combat existences we will no longer stand for.

If our leaders cannot or will not create spaces for us to engage in mutually respectful communication with them, it is in our hands to create those spaces ourselves. Palmer (1997/2007) notes:

> Organizations represent the principal of order and conservation: they are the vessels in which society holds hard won treasures from the past. Movements represent the principle of flux and change: they are the process through which a society channels its energies for

> renewal and transformation. A healthy society will encourage interplay between the two. Reform-minded organizational leaders will often welcome movement energies, despite the chaos they can bring, and leaders of movements must understand that they need organizational structures to sustain whatever reforms they may achieve. (p. 171)

This idea creates a paradox for many educators who have been engulfed in the system for so long and are familiar with the school system and how well it represents Palmer's definition of what an organization is and how it has come to be. The question, then, is how to transform the organization (in this case the educational system) from a place of intractable order and conservation towards a place of movement and change, and then to find a healthy balance between the two?

One thing we might consider are the various ways we can develop healthy democratic relationships with our building leaders. Establishing reciprocal relationships between teachers and leaders can reinforce the idea and practice that communication and shared vision are significant components of democratic communities. Another thing to consider is how we, as teachers, can continue communicating amongst ourselves about our purposes and then use this communication as a common ground to move forward in creating our own spaces for stepping into our own pathways of leadership and movement. This suggestion is not to indicate that teachers must assume formal positions, such as building principals or district board chairs. Instead, I am merely suggesting that leadership can be shed in many different lights. This is essential in order to capture the spirit of transformation and renewal that Palmer suggests for movement towards a healthy society.

The relationships that need to be developed between teachers and leaders to help promote community and communication with purpose should deviate from many existing examples in

public education. Current relationships between teachers and leaders are often linear and hierarchical, with board members and superintendents at the top, followed by executive directors, instructional leadership directors, principals, and concluding with teachers and staff members near the bottom. Decisions are implemented through chains of command, leaving little room for democratic relationships between teachers and those at the top. This promotes disconnection and/or lack of interest among all concerned. In describing how to become a member of a group, Dewey (1916/2018) says:

> Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that he feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step. As soon as he is possessed by the emotional attitude of the group, he will be alert to recognize the special ends at which it aims and the means employed to secure success. His beliefs and ideas, in other words, will take a form similar to those of others in the group. (p.17)

To combat the disconnect between ourselves and our leaders, we must become full partners in our endeavors in public education. We must engage in true dialogue in which we discuss our experiences and concerns and listen to the experiences and concerns of others and mutually adjust as a result of our new understandings. Freire (1970/2000) distinguishes between false or anti-dialogue and true or authentic dialogue:

> Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants…. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another. The domination implicit in

> dialogue is that of the world by the dialoguers; it is the conquest of the world for the liberation of humankind. (p. 88-89)

This implies that teachers must move beyond speaking to just one another, and instead move towards establishing habits of speaking with our principals and other educational leaders to initiate the relationships that are needed to promote the welfare of all involved within the process. When we are disconnected from one another and operate in a way in which teachers simply take orders from principals and principals simply give us orders, there is no emotional connection. However, if we share our thoughts and feelings through healthy and consistent communication, both "leaders" and teachers can become involved in an ever-evolving process for the betterment of schools. This type of relationship would give the communication between all parties greater meaning, authenticity, and purpose.

In addition to establishing authentic dialogical relationships with our official "leaders", we should also work toward creating our own spaces for leadership. One way to begin might be to create our own groups that allowed us to lead ourselves and bring our own voices and visions to life. In many schools, versions of this exist in the form of faculty advisory committees in which "elected" teachers are imposed with tasks such as speaking on behalf of the teacher body or student body or bringing issues to the attention of school leaders. The problem with these types of groups is that they are still created by non-teachers and can give a false impression of free communication and thought. The agenda is still usually determined by someone who is not a teacher and, in my experience, is often done without communicating with the majority of the teachers. In my experience, these conversations usually surround issues within the school building and are often followed by unproductive conversations that result in few viable solutions.

If we, as teachers, can turn the narrative and create our own groups and spaces in which we can come together and talk, the communication can become more authentic with the potential of developing sustainable resolutions to the issues at hand. This type of experience could also empower us to engage in what Dewey (1916/2018) calls "normal communication":

> Normal communication with others is the readiest way of effecting this development [of consciousness], for it links up the net results of the experience of the group and even the race of the immediate experience of an individual. By normal communication is meant that in which there is a joint interest, a common interest, so that one is eager to give and the other to take. It contrasts with telling or stating things simply for the sake of impressing them upon another, merely in order to test him to see how much he has retained and can literally reproduce. (p. 231)

This type of practice would enhance the communal experience in education as it would promote common interests amongst educators. Self-created and maintained leadership groups could give us more ownership in our experiences, allowing us to seek better pathways for education as opposed to continuing to be governed by bodies outside our experiences.

Remembering that Teaching is a Human Profession

In conjunction with establishing community and finding greater purpose in our modes of communication, we must remember that communication is accompanied with lived experiences and histories. Often, upon discovering that someone is an educator, the next question is "What do you teach?" We often respond by naming the subjects or grades that we teach. Though such answers are not untrue, I think we need to reconsider our answers when prompted with such questions. Instead of responding with a typical knee-jerk reaction such as "sixth grade" or

"mathematics", or in my case "sixth through twelfth grade orchestra", we might remember the simple yet very complex response that works for all of us. "I teach humans."

We teach humans, and we need the world around us to remember that we, too, as educators, are humans. As humans, we are thinkers, and so are our students. Giroux (1985) suggests:

> By viewing teachers as intellectuals, we can illuminate the important ideas that all human activity involves some form of thinking. In other words, no activity, regardless of how routinized it might become, can be abstracted from the functioning of the mind in some capacity. This is a crucial issue because by arguing that the use of the mind is a general part of all human activity we can dignify the human capacity for integrating thinking and practice, and in doing so highlight the core of what it means to view teachers as reflective practitioners. (p. 378)

We know that we can support Giroux's argument because we, as teachers, know that we *are* intellectuals who engage in reflective practice. Therefore, we need to insist on being recognized for our intellectual thoughts, reflections, and contributions to our profession. We should no longer accept being perceived as passive bodies that carry no identities, no histories, and no vested interests. Palmer (1997/2007) addresses the harm in this:

> Though technique-talk promises the "practical" solutions that we think we want and need, the conversation is stunted when technique is the only topic: the human issues in teaching get ignored, so the human beings who teach feel ignored as well. When teaching is reduced to technique, we shrink teachers, as well as their craft—and people do not willingly return to a conversation that diminishes them. (p. 149)

Realizing that education is an encompassing system that involves humanity is a small act that can have huge implications for the larger narrative in public education. As the system currently stands, the masses are suffering because many instituted educational leaders tend to ignore the human aspects when determining which course of action to take or what decisions to make on behalf of the community. This, in turn, promote dehumanization. As Parker notes, we must stop ignoring the human issues, such as identities, relationships, communities, and voices so that we can use education as a space for affirmation instead (Parker, 1997/2007).

It is up to us, then, to illuminate the humanity in education and let it serve as a constant reminder that the profession, the system, and education itself is not simply used to teach objects or materials. Though formal curricula may be our vehicle for teaching, we need to remember the profession is about educating students and building relationships with humans. Freire (1970/2000) strongly supports the idea that the purpose of education is to promote humanity:

> Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations to the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it (p. 81).

What does education as the practice of freedom look like realistically? On the teacher side of it, remembering that teaching is a human profession essentially starts with reminding ourselves daily about a number of different things. Although teaching is our livelihood, we must remind ourselves that our livelihood reflects more than just a paycheck. Our livelihood is also about the relationships we build with our students, our parents, and our colleagues. Though

"success" in education is often measured by test scores, pass rates, and grades, we must continually remind ourselves that this is not by any means what constitutes success, and that this is simply one dimension of "success" that has been heavily impressed upon us. What constitutes success can also be seen in the children that find hope in our classrooms, in the abundance of happiness that comes from knowing they will be accepted. Success can be seen in the provision of meaningful experiences and in the many ways we allow and encourage our students to learn, to find themselves, and to connect with each other in our classroom communities.

Although it can be tempting to reduce our perceptions of our struggles to the lack of resources and overcrowded classrooms, we must continue to remind ourselves and others—as we have always done—that our overcrowded classrooms are filled with children who are ready and need to learn, to be influenced by thoughtful teachers and peers, and to find their paths in life. We know our students do not deserve to be reduced to the size of our own struggles any more than we deserve to be reduced to the size of our administrators' and policymakers' struggles. If we remember that humanity is what is at stake through the whole learning process, we can continue building the relationships and communities needed to make our classrooms what they need to be for each of our students.

These are a few of the ways it seems to me that we can bring aspects of humanity back into our work as educators. As we proceed with our professions, I think we should continue to keep the purpose of education for humanity at the forefront of our minds and let it steer our educational paths so that, collectively, we can begin reshaping the visions and perceptions of the education system as a whole.

Reclaiming the Definition of Education

Finally, as educators, I believe we need to constantly question what "education" means to us. I think we should use this question as a starting place to begin transforming it from where it currently stands to where it needs to be. We must also engage in praxis, turning our questioning and reflection into affirmative action, thereby moving beyond the initial steps in the transformational process to continually adapt our actions to respond the needs of ourselves and others who are engulfed in the system. Freire (1970/2000) explicitly addresses the praxis needed to emerge from an oppressive system:

> Reality which becomes oppressive results in the contradistinction of men as oppressors and oppressed. The latter, whose task it is to struggle for their liberation together with those who show true solidarity, must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle. One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings' consciousness. Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. (p. 51)

When many of us reflect on what education should be, it definitely does not match what it currently is. We know this is true. Therefore, I think it is time for us to move beyond this initial reflection practice. It is time to start seeking small acts of resistance to combat the existence that has taken away our voices and distanced us from the passion, morality, and reason for it all. We must begin partaking in decisions that allow us to move further away from having the meaning and experience of education decided for us. These decisions should move us closer

to reclaiming education and transforming it into what we believe it should be. We, as teachers, need to reclaim ownership of our educational experiences and profession.

Reclaiming the meaning of education is not separate from anything that I have previously suggested. Instead, it is a means for us to pull all of our practices together and paint a bigger picture of what education has the potential to be. In line with being more critical about how to react to our current settings, I believe that reclaiming education has to begin with systematic questioning and reflection.

This questioning must start with ourselves before applying it to the larger system. We, as educators, must ask ourselves: "What do I think the purposes of education should be?" "Based on those purposes, what things do I know for sure work and create success?" "How can I apply what successfully works toward achieving these aims to the bigger picture we all share as a profession and society?" Dewey (1916/2018) argues that education is "the reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (p. 83). I think we should consider using ideas like these as a starting point as we begin to examine the deeper purposes and processes of education and reclaim our right to determine for ourselves what it should be.

It would be unfair for me to recommend reflection and questioning for others without engaging also doing it myself. When I think about what education should be, I believe it should be a reflective, meaningful experience—one that bridges abstract concepts (based on philosophies, theories, formulas, histories, words, and labels) to relevant concrete concepts and actions in order for students to engage with their daily lives beyond our classrooms. Education should provide spaces for students to find their voices and to empower them to continue whatever paths they choose beyond our classrooms. Education should be liberating, stimulating,

and inspiring. Lastly, education should be a space where students find glimpses of themselves in the academic curricula and classroom communities.

I recognize that my views of educational success differ from many of the traditional perceptions and avenues for "success" that are currently in place. Rather than emphasizing grades, grade point averages, and test scores, rather than measuring our students and ourselves against standards determined by others, my views of educational success are based on questions such as:

"Did this student learn something new today?"

"Can this student use prior knowledge to draw their own conclusions?"

"Has this student demonstrated growth in their morality through things such as acts of kindness or leadership? If so, how? If not, what is happening?"

"Does this student see worth in themselves because of my classroom?" …

The list of questions is endless, but it is important to note that none of them can be answered with a simple number. Instead these questions and answers require deep reflection and thought. I realize that my list of questions may not work for all educators, but this is not necessary. The point is that all of us can and should begin to redefine what educational success means in terms of the quality of the experience for our students and ourselves. I believe this could be an important starting point in deviating from the current traditional public-education system towards a more visionary system that works for all.

As I reflect upon what I believe has been successful for me and has exhibited true qualities of a successful education, I think about the experiences that I share with my own

students. This is a small picture of just one teacher's class, but in the spirit of communication, I think it is important to acknowledge and share our efforts and experiences with others.

Upon entering my classroom, I hope that an outsider would see a well-functioning ensemble. What does this mean to me? It means that my students would be working together toward achieving a common goal. This could look a number of ways, but usually it involves an open discussion among the teacher and students about how to achieve a particular goal, plain experimentation with many methods, or the consideration of various suggestions until all participants come to an agreement. My students generally understand that their responsibilities are not confined to the limits of my physical classroom, and they are constantly working on their parts individually so that the next time we are together, they will be prepared to reach the goals in mind.

I believe most of my students leave my classroom knowing they are all part of the vision and that without their contributions, there would be a tremendous breakdown in the process. Because of the amount of communication that occurs within an ensemble, my students are not reduced to their mechanistic functions and contributions. Instead, they are recognized for their thought and humanity within the classroom. I believe that the way my classroom functions exhibits democracy, community, and authentic communication, which is exactly what I believe many are searching for within our system.

Developing a greater sense of community and democracy in my own teaching has been a long and difficult process, and I am still not where I eventually hope to be. My own evolution began to occur when I consciously stopped valuing my "professional and educated" voice over my students' voices, as I had failed to do earlier in my career. It gradually occurred as I began to take my students' interests and knowledge into account, starting with a small process of allowing

them to help choose repertoire we would perform. It also happened as I started to build personal relationships with them, which involved everything from asking them how they were doing to regularly attending their extracurricular events.

My point is not to say, "Look at me! My classroom works, and your classrooms should look like mine." Rather, my point is that for too long and for too many of us, education has been associated with very specific qualities. These qualities are not usually determined by educators, and they look very different from what many of us want education to be. Because of this disconnect, we, as teachers, are undervalued as professionals.

To counter this, many of us are teaching every day and have found successful experiences in our own paths with our own students. We do not have to be confined only to the success within our own classrooms and spaces, separate from each other. Instead, we should bring our successes and stories into shared spaces to create bigger communities and to redefine how education should and does function. If we want to see community and democracy come into play, we have to note that we will have to first practice it ourselves. We will also have to recognize that it will take time, commitment, experiment, and a lot of give and take for everybody involved. Education is not something that should be dictated for us, but instead created by us. Because of this, it is up to us to begin taking back ownership of the experience and, in so doing, give our students the learning experiences they deserve. To do this, we must continue to remain authentic to ourselves, as educators. We can slowly continue to reclaim and redefine education by committing to what we know is successful in our everyday classrooms.

Conclusion

Though many problems can be addressed within the education system, I believe examining and addressing the lack of community and democracy is critical to the endurance of public education. For a long time, we, as educators, have continued to bring immeasurable passion, determination, and intellect to our students and our classrooms. However, we have also had to continue battling the bureaucratic systems currently in place within education.

Because of this, teachers are struggling with many disconnects as we continually navigate between what we want the experience to look like versus what it actually looks like, and why. As a result, we have experienced demoralization, dehumanization, and the destabilization of public education. Additionally, we have been given little space to communicate our concerns, let alone reform the broader system. Many of these problems are systemic in nature, permeating districts and schools, affecting teachers and administrators, and ultimately impacting the educational experiences of our students.

Because the systemic issues are complex and intertwined, effective responses can be equally complex. Although the suggestions I have offered may not be applicable in a precise way to every setting, I do believe much can be gained from internal reflection and systematic questioning by all educators within their own settings. Freire (1970/2000) states,

> The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of a man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion (p. 47).

We, as educators, must not fear reform and the freedom that can come from advocating for ourselves and our students within the educational system. Rather than fearing reform and freedom, we must go forth and pursue the pathways that we know we and our communities deserve.

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