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DAVID N. PAULSON
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A SELF-STUDY IN MIDDLE SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES ENGAGEMENT

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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Neil Houser, Chair

Dr. Kristy Brugar

Dr. Heidi Torres

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Table of Contents

Abstract vi

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework 10

Paulo Freire's Student-Teacher Relationship and Banking Education 10

Paulo Freire's Problem-Posing Education 12

Parker Palmer's Vulnerability and the Self That Teaches 14

Parker Palmer's Culture of Fear 17

Chapter 3: Methodology 19

Design 19

Participant Selection 20

Data Collection 21

Data Analysis 22

Confidence and Trustworthiness 23

Research Positionality 26

Ethical Considerations 27

Chapter 4: Findings 30

The School 31

Course and Evolution of Problem-Posing Education in My Classroom 33

Phase 1: Dialectic and Discovery of Student Interests, Experiences, and Perceptions 33

Phase 2: Teacher-led Exploration of the Uncovered Student Interests 38

Phase 3: Student-centered Problem Solving 44

What I Learned About Myself as a Teacher 52

Deconstruct Hierarchies 52

Redefine Success 53

Trust, Critically Self-Reflect, and Hope 55

Applying My Theoretical Lens 56

Reconciling the Student-Teacher Relationship 56

Problem-Posing Education for Student Mental Health 59

Vulnerability to Strengthen the Self that Teaches 60

Navigating the Culture of Fear 63

Chapter 5: Implications 65

Implications for Teachers 67

Implications for Schools 70

Shared Insights 73

References 76

Abstract

We live in a time of great challenge and great opportunity. Neoliberal socioeconomic paradigms have become a global norm. Economic and military competition are driving forces on the world stage. Postmodern thinking has cast considerable and justified doubt upon traditional narratives and ideologies. The digital age has connected people, places, things, and ideas in ways that have never before been seen. For a young person who is trying to make sense of it all, authentic humanizing education has never been more necessary. Social studies teachers are uniquely positioned to empower young people to construct meaning and forge connections in a world of nonstop information. Despite the seemingly obvious need for powerful social studies education, like many other social studies teachers, I have experienced profound disinterest and disengagement from my students.

To address student disengagement in social studies classes at my middle school I considered academic literature regarding engagement as a construct, the potential factors that could influence student disengagement, and the pedagogical frameworks and philosophies that might be useful in improving student engagement. I found that modeling my educational practice in the style of Paulo Freire's (1970) problem-posing education had an altering effect on my perception of my role as a teacher and a positive effect on my relationships with my students and my perceived self-efficacy. I grew to perceive many aspects of American public-education as unhelpful, oppressive, and harmful for students and teachers. My findings implicate problem-posing as a powerful framework for a reconstructed social studies curriculum to address contemporary social issues and create solidarity among all stakeholders in public education.

Chapter 1: Introduction

We live in a time of great challenge and great opportunity. Neoliberal socioeconomic paradigms have become a global norm. Economic and military competition are driving forces on the world stage. Postmodern thinking has cast considerable and justified doubt upon traditional narratives and ideologies. The digital age has connected people, places, things, and ideas in ways that have never before been seen. For a young person who is trying to make sense of it all, authentic humanizing education has never been more necessary. Social studies teachers are uniquely positioned to empower young people to construct meaning and forge connections in a world of nonstop information.

Social studies education in the United States has traditionally strived to develop youth as they become citizens in our complex multicultural democracy. The breadth and depth of content knowledge within social studies appropriately mirrors the vast range of contemporary issues facing today's society. As a part of their vision statement the National Council for the Social Studies (2016) states, "This content engages students in a comprehensive process of confronting multiple dilemmas, and encourages students to speculate, think critically, and make personal and civic decisions on information from multiple perspectives." Given the numerous social, political, cultural, economic, and ecologic issues facing modern society, it is safe to say that there is vast potential for meaningful and engaging social studies teaching. Nevertheless, after three years as a middle school social studies teacher, I am not satisfied with the level of engagement between my students, the curriculum, and my teaching.

Student engagement is a complex multilayered construct open to numerous interpretations (Hazel et al., 2013). Literature on student engagement has not reached a consensus definition but tends to codify engagement along three various aspects: behavioral,

cognitive, and social/emotional (Anderson and Feldstein, 2021). Behavioral engagement involves student compliance behaviors such as class attendance, paying attention, and turning in completed assignments. Cognitive engagement involves sustained energy and commitment to tasks. Social/emotional engagement involves levels of enthusiasm, optimism, and curiosity. All three of these modalities for engagement seem to imply that engagement is teacher led.

Agentic engagement has recently emerged in the literature as a fourth codification for engagement. Agentic engagement involves student proactive behaviors which influence the course of events in the classroom. Agentic learners find ways to interact with and personalize instruction. When students engage in this fashion they are making their own assessments about the usefulness and relevance of the content then collaborating with their teacher on structured learning goals (Montenegro, 2017). As I consider the purpose of education and my goals as a teacher, agentic engagement is in my view the highest ideal to strive towards.

Research on school reform in Kansas was conducted in response to surveys by the state department of education which found that 38% of students felt disengaged while at school (KSDE, 2017). Interviews of faculty, students, and parents revealed differences in importance placed along constructs of engagement. During interviews faculty were much more likely to mention behavioral aspects of engagement. Students were more likely to mention agentic aspects of engagement such as their personal goals and whether or not school was perceived as helpful or as an obstacle. Researchers discovered a notable disconnection between stakeholder groups when it comes to conceptions of student engagement (Anderson and Feldstein, 2021). This research supports a powerful disconnection that I have experienced between the educational institution I work for and the students I serve.

My students reside in a low-income neighborhood of the largest city in our state. They are predominantly of LatinX heritage. A strong majority of them are classified by the state as low income and English language learners. Some are recent immigrants, and others are second or third generation Americans. My students face a wide variety of challenges in their personal and academic lives. As a teacher, I see my students as brilliant and unique individuals; however, in our institutional setting, I have seen their innate brightness fade. My students, who I know to be caring, curious, and ambitious, often demonstrate disinterest and disengagement in formal lesson settings that utilize traditional social studies curriculum.

It is important to point out that I do not share a similar background with my students. I am white, male, and from a family with an upper middle-class income. I grew up in a suburban Northern California town with a mostly white population. I attended well-funded public schools with mostly white teachers and mostly white upper middle-class students. Understanding my privilege is critical to my personal growth as a human and teacher, and also to this study. Teachers who wish to empower their students to transform the social order must acknowledge their own roles within that order.

In Oklahoma, where I live and teach, social studies teachers are given a set of content standards to follow over the course of the school year. These are a laundry list of topics and skills to include in the curriculum (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2019). As an 8th grade United States history teacher my content standards consist of a series of major historical events ranging in a chronological sequence from the early colonial period to the post Civil War reconstruction period. While perhaps intended to be helpful, these standards seem instead to restrict the curriculum into a predetermined set of approved topics. Few of these topics seem relevant to the lived experiences of my students. Additionally, there is an understanding that

these topics will eventually be assessed via standardized testing, although in our district our students are not tested in history until high school.

My school, in an effort to mitigate low standardized testing scores, places strong emphasis on reading, writing, and mathematics. Social studies education receives minimal attention from our administrators. Conversations with 6th grade social studies teachers have revealed to me that most of our students enter middle school having had little to no social studies education. This matches research from Delaware which found that social studies education in elementary schools is largely neglected because it is often sanitized and trivialized and thus perceived as uninteresting and irrelevant (Houser, 1995). I have personally encountered a significant number of students who upon entering the 8th grade lack basic social studies knowledge such as differentiating between a state, country, and continent.

In the first two years of my teaching, the social studies department did not receive institutional support in the way of mentorship or relevant professional development, but we did have some autonomy over our lesson strategies. More recently, my school district enacted rigid measures to increase standardized test scores in our tested subjects, which include mathematics, reading, and writing. Teachers of untested subjects, such as science and social studies, were unofficially reclassified as "remedial support teachers." As an example, my principal informed the social studies department that our focus was to be primarily on reading strategies and reading comprehension and, for all intents and purposes, we were now secondary reading teachers. All teachers district-wide, regardless of grade level or subject area, were forced to adhere to the same robotic and mundane teaching strategy. Superfluously detailed lesson plans were to be turned in weeks in advance, students were assigned year end growth goals for their standardized tests, and

our middle school seemed to have joined the ranks of other institutions who put social studies on the back burner.

In my third year of teaching, I found myself spending more time worrying about administrative teacher evaluations of me than I did about evaluating my own students. Every single day of teaching required a two to three-page detailed lesson plan. Every single day needed a measurable learning objective associated with an observable skill. Every single day was to be explained with language such as "mastery objective," "criteria for success," "student know-do-notice lists," "sample student work products," "teacher's exemplar," and "I/we/you skill modeling" instruction plans. I spent considerably more time ensuring that my lesson plans were in compliance for my administrators than I did enacting engaging learning experiences with my students.

All of my efforts to conform to the new system just didn't work. The product within my classroom was woefully inadequate, especially considering the time I was investing outside contract hours. My students were bored with the repetitive nature of the instruction. They were working less and acting out more. I was disheartened, and it was hard to blame my students for not being "on board". I wasn't the only one who was struggling. Nobody in the social studies department saw the mandated teaching strategy as effective or even practical for our discipline. Never was an example shown during professional development for how this method could be used in a social studies lesson. To say I felt frustrated and demoralized would be an understatement. I knew that social studies education should be more than the repetitive onslaught of isolated facts it was becoming. I couldn't help but draw connections between the predetermined curriculum, the mandated teaching strategy, the lack of value exhibited by the institution, and the apathy and disengagement my students displayed.

With the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and more recently the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), we find ourselves in the midst of an education system governed by standardized testing. For decades, teachers have been expected to focus on the practice and retention of basic skills, as these are easy to measure and promulgate. Students and teachers understand that funding is at stake and feel pressure to perform well. A three-year study of social studies teachers found that the testing accountability culture created a school climate of frustration and despair (Houser et. al., 2017). Not only was this true for me, but I also suffered from the realization that many of my students and administrators didn't seem to see what I taught as valuable. It's no wonder that I was struggling with getting my students to engage.

I believe that a quality social studies education can empower students to create positive change in society, but I felt pigeonholed by my institution and the broader system within which we functioned. I attempted to draw upon my university education to find some sort of solution to what I was experiencing. I thought of Alfred North Whitehead (1929) who warned against the teaching of inert ideas. In his view the reception of ideas without proper utilization was not only ineffective but harmful. I thought of Paolo Freire (1970) who saw that education had the potential to liberate or oppress, to humanize or dehumanize. It became apparent to me that I was enacting what Freire (1970) named banking education. This is an oppressive manifestation of education where a subject teacher with mastery and authority strives to impart knowledge in a narrating fashion to students who are merely viewed as empty receptacles to be filled.

Research from Rio De Janeiro, Brazil provides evidence that the use of critical pedagogy, beyond the scope of traditional curriculum, can be effective in empowering excluded youth communities to engage in acts of community transformation (Melo, 2019). A weekend program developed an eight-stage method for disadvantaged Favela teenagers to imagine and enact

substantive community projects. Without the constraints of a traditional pre-packaged curriculum, the youth participants were found to have developed enhanced capabilities when engaging in local development processes. Key to the success of this program was an approach that considered the students to be agents of change rather than passive objects of top-down instruction. While this agency benefits from organizational independence, the implications of their work for intra-curricular school activity is compelling.

Next, I considered the work of Fred Newmann (1995, 1999) on authentic pedagogy. Newmann envisions education with an emphasis on real world applicability. He points out a dichotomy between a transmission approach to instruction and a constructivist approach. The former only seems to achieve memorization of preordained rote information while it lacks deep conceptual knowledge and transferability to situations outside of school. The latter is a broad concept that includes many student-centered strategies, but is often criticized for achieving greater student enthusiasm while lacking quality fundamental learning. Could there be a way to construct knowledge with academic rigor while striving for social transformation?

The transmission approach seems to echo Whitehead (1929) on inert knowledge and Freire (1970) on banking education. More troublingly it perfectly describes the approach that my school took in my third year. The constructivist approach more closely reflects my attempts at teaching during my first two years. While perhaps better intended than the transmission approach, it did not consistently succeed at achieving high level engagement or understanding. To reconcile the dichotomy between transmission and constructivism Newmann (1995) presents a framework of authentic intellectual standards. These include assessment tasks and instruction strategies along three criteria: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond school.

Scheurman and Newmann (1999) liken authentic pedagogy to an attorney arguing a case before the supreme court. This attorney must possess a deep knowledge of constitutional law and relevant prior cases, as well as social and political perspectives of the community hearing the case. The attorney is also bound by disciplinary constraints such as the appropriate procedures and the arguments that will be understood by their fellows within the field. Once the case is decided the implications of the decision will extend well beyond the physical boundaries of the courtroom. The idea of a student being able to take something from my classroom and utilize it in their day to day life is something I have always strived for. But the answer to how I could achieve that eluded me.

Finally, as I continued to peel back the layers of my students' disengagement I pondered research on culturally relevant education. It cannot be ignored that I am a white teacher teaching a mostly white story to students of color. Curriculum content, such as the topics being taught, and instructional strategies are important variables in equitable teaching for students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Curriculum including a range of cultural perspectives and instruction utilizing cooperative learning strategies are some of her recommendations. I believe that a lack of representation in the curriculum combined with our imposed repetitive teaching strategy strongly contributed to my experiencing low levels of student engagement.

Only a few months into my third year as a teacher, I arrived at profound personal and professional crossroads. I knew fundamentally what I wanted to be as a teacher. I had many inspiring academic philosophies, theories, and frameworks to draw from. I wanted to connect with my students about relevant topics and empower them to create a better world for themselves. But I also existed within the reality of a system that did not allow space for my inclinations. Thus, my research began. I believe that many teachers have pondered how to

engage their students while reconciling academic theory, systemic guidelines, cultural relevance, community circumstance, and institutional pressures. In this paper I will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Given the many variables influencing my present situation, how can I become a more engaging teacher?
2. What have I learned about myself as a teacher in my efforts to engage my students?
3. What are the implications of what I have learned for engaging teaching in general?

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Four areas of academic thought, Paulo Freire's student-teacher relationship and problem-posing education, and Parker J. Palmer's inner-selves of teachers and the culture of fear, serve as lenses to inform this critical teacher action research paper. These are well suited for use as theoretical lenses because they explore the potential for education to be connective, authentic, and emancipating.

Paulo Freire's Student-Teacher Relationship and Banking Education

Paulo Freire (1970) presents "humanization" as a problem of central concern, declaring it as "the people's vocation". Freire (1970) notes that acknowledgement of humanization must be juxtaposed with the acknowledgement of dehumanization, and that dehumanization is a historic reality for a majority of people. Humanization is characterized by Freire (1970) as "yearning for freedom and justice", while dehumanization is characterized by "injustice, oppression, and violence". "I consider the fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of *domination*—which implies its opposite, the theme of *liberation*, as the objective to be achieved" (Freire, 1970, p. 76). Freire considered these dichotomies to occur within the context of the world at large, and not as specific or unique to education. Freire did, however, view traditional education as a significant part of the problem because of its role in keeping students passive and therefore complicit in their own oppression and dehumanization. He sought to develop a more interactive and egalitarian pedagogy that would make education part of the solution, and therefore liberating and humanizing.

Freire (1970) argued that the traditional manifestation of the student-teacher relationship is structurally "narrative" (Freire, 1970, P. 44). Teachers narrate while assuming the identity of "subject" and purveyor of knowledge. Students passively listen and act as "object" and

containers to be filled (Freire, 1970, P. 44). The result is the "sonority of words", "motionless and static reality", and the proffering of information that is "alien to the existential experience of the students" (Freire, 1970, P. 44). Freire (1970, P. 45) names this phenomenon "banking education" and observes the conditioning effect it has on teachers and students, particularly on the way they conceptualize effective education. The more a teacher can "fill", and the more a student can "contain", then the "better" they are, according to the system they exist within (Freire, 1970, P. 45). This system, that seems so ubiquitous, does not allow for creativity, transformation, or authentic knowledge (Freire, 1970, P. 45).

In "banking education" knowledge is viewed as a gift to be given from the "knowledgeable" to the "know nothings" (Freire, 1970, P. 45). This sets up a contradictory relationship between teachers and students whereupon absolute knowledge of the teacher is justified via the projection of absolute ignorance onto the students (Freire, 1970, P. 45). Students, when oppressed by banking education, become alienated, marginalized, and effectively dehumanized. Education that aims to liberate needs to begin by reconciling the student-teacher relationship in such a way that acknowledges both parties as teachers and students. Freire (1970, P. 45) believes that knowledge emerges "only through invention and re-invention, through restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other".

According to Freire, the aim of banking education seems to be the hindrance of critical development which prevents the oppressed from recognizing, intervening and subsequently transforming their reality (Freire, 1970, P. 46). The interest of the oppressors, who are a minority of dominant elites, is to change the "consciousness of the oppressed", thereby making them docile, ignorant, submissive, and pathologized (Freire, 1970, P. 47). The solution for the

oppressed is to transform the structures of oppression, not integrate into them, and humanize as "beings for themselves" (Freire, 1970, P. 47). Teachers who use banking approaches to education only serve to dehumanize their students, usually unknowingly, as the teachers themselves have fallen victim to the structures of oppression (Freire, 1970, P. 48). Humanizing teachers, those who wish to liberate themselves and their students, must reject banking education, and align their efforts with their students, who will naturally engage in critical thinking as part of their "ontological vocation" for humanization (Freire, 1970, P. 48).

Partnership and true communication are necessary principles to reconcile the student-teacher relationship and create solidarity in the quest for liberation and humanization (Freire, 1970, P. 50). Teachers cannot think authentically unless their students are allowed to do the same, just as teachers cannot think for their students, nor impose their thinking onto them (Freire, 1970, P. 50). Authentic thinking involves a connected reality where all humans are subjects and cannot occur in isolation (Freire, 1970, P. 50). To achieve liberation, authentic thinking must manifest action upon the world (Freire, 1970, P. 50). Liberation is a "praxis", a cycle of continuous action and reflection, by the people, in order to transform their world (Freire, 1970, P. 52).

Paulo Freire's Problem-posing Education

In order to reconcile the "dehumanizing contradiction" of oppressive banking education and resolve the student-teacher relationship, Freire (1970, p. 53) presents problem-posing education. Problem-posing education blends a series of actions that must also be accompanied by a shift in the paradigm of teacher-student relationship. For the teacher dialogue replaces narration, for the students active investigation replaces docile listening, and for the group cognition replaces transferals of knowledge (Freire, 1970, P. 54). This break in the "vertical

patterns" inherent to banking education results in the sharing of knowledge as "teacher-students" and "student-teachers" such that the traditional authoritarian power dynamic between students and teachers is alleviated (Freire, 1970, P. 53). The traditional roles of "teacher" and "student" dissipate as both become jointly responsible for growth, liberation, and humanization (Freire, 1970, P. 53).

The purpose of problem-posing education is the constant unveiling of reality and critical intervention therein (Freire, 1970, P. 54). Students, when posed with problems relevant to their lived experiences, will feel an implicit sense of engagement born of obligation to respond to unveiled challenges (Freire, 1970, P. 54). Students develop critical comprehension rather than theoretical isolation as they acknowledge these challenges within an interrelated context (Freire, 1970, P. 54). As students respond to authentic challenges their understanding of themselves, the world, and their consciousness therein grows (Freire, 1970, P. 54). Problem-posing education rejects humanity as unattached from the world and instead focuses on authentic reflection about people and their relationship with the world (Freire, 1970, P. 54).

Teachers and students of problem-posing education learn to critically perceive the way they exist in and with the world (Freire, 1970, P. 56). Reality is discovered to be "in process", rather than "static", and therefore can be transformed (Freire, 1970, P. 56). Problem-posing education seeks to "demythologize" reality with the use of dialogue, cognition, and critical thought (Freire, 1970, P. 56). Problem-posing avows people as incomplete beings within an incomplete reality, both of which are in a constant process of becoming (Freire, 1970, P. 57). Problem-posing education, due to the incomplete nature of humans and the transformational nature of reality, must be ongoing and constantly remade via "praxis" (Freire, 1970, P. 57).

Problem-posing education is based in hopefulness, creativity, and transcendence (Freire, 1970, P. 57). The beginning of problem-posing is always the "here and now", but the journey explores the "human-world relationship" such that nothing is "fated or unalterable", only "limiting" and "challenging" (Freire, 1970, P. 58). As teachers and students collaborate to critically perceive oppressive situations, fatalism becomes dispelled, and the "problems posed" become objects of transformation (Freire, 1970, P. 58). Problem-posing requires fellowship, solidarity, and a mutual quest for authentic humanity (Freire, 1970, P. 58). None can say it better than Freire himself that, "Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation" (Freire, 1970, P. 59).

Parker J. Palmer's Vulnerability and the Self That Teaches

In *The Courage To Teach*, Parker J. Palmer (1997, P. 4.) points out that teachers are often ignored in the rush to "restructure, rewrite, and reform" education. In the public conversation surrounding education it is common to hear questions such as, "What shall we teach?", "How should we teach?", and even, "Why do we teach?". According to Palmer, we are ignoring the question, "Who is the self that teaches?" (Palmer, 1997, P. 4). Palmer reflects that the quality of his selfhood is paramount in forming relationships with his students. Teaching and learning start with the self, and no system, structure, method, or technique can replace the self that teaches.

Palmer's landscape of selfhood consists of intellect, emotion, and spirit. When education is reduced purely to the intellectual, as it seems to have become amidst accountability culture, it becomes a "cold abstraction" (Palmer, 1997, P. 5). Intellect is necessary, but it must be balanced out with emotion and spirit. Teaching is a work of love and connection. The way we feel and the way our students feel can enlarge or diminish our human quest for connectedness. Technique,

which is an exercise in intellect, is only the tip of the iceberg, technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives (Palmer, 1997, P. 6).

In Palmer's view fear is prevalent in education culture (Palmer, 1997, P. 10). For teachers this could take many forms, for Palmer it was the fear of being boring, awkward, and incompetent. Even after 30 years in the profession, and with mastery over numerous techniques, Palmer discovered the need to rely on his identity and integrity in order to connect with his students, and then connect them to the subject. It was less relevant which method he used and more relevant that he could trust his selfhood and was willing to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is the catalyst to connection and connection is the catalyst to learning. Good teachers join with their students while bad teachers distance themselves (Palmer, 1997, P. 11).

Palmer points out that growing as a teacher means doing something "alien" to academic culture, talking to each other about our inner-lives (Palmer, 1997, P. 12). This proposition feels risky within our profession, which seems to fear vulnerability and fall back on the safe harbor of technique. Our identities as teachers mirror our identities as people, and our negative qualities play just as much of a role in our identities as our positive ones. We bring so much more into the classroom with us than a series of facts and strategies for conveying them. We bring a lifetime of success, failure, family, culture, love, pain, genetic makeup, action, and interaction. These aspects of ourselves, which feel vulnerable within our culture of fear, are actually our greatest strengths as teachers.

Teaching is a rare profession that occurs at the intersection of personal and public life (Palmer, 1997, P. 17). As teachers attempt to weave connections we inevitably face judgment, indifference, and ridicule toward ourselves and our subjects. This heightened scrutiny comes from students, parents, administrators, politicians, the general public, and fellow teachers. It is

understandable that teachers develop defense mechanisms to cope with this cultural phenomenon. Palmer names this the "self-protective split" between inner-self and outer-teaching (Palmer, 1997, P. 18). Academic culture seems to sanctify the objective outer world and disregard the subjective inner-self. The self, our greatest asset, becomes detached and suppressed, and viewed as an obstacle to be overcome.

These limitations on the inner-selves of teachers by the culture of academia also condition the inner-selves of students. Every teacher in every nation on every planet in every universe has heard their students ask, "Why do I need to learn this?", and, "How will this be useful in real life?" Palmer insists that these are not the questions "deep in our students' hearts" but are merely the questions they have been taught to ask (Palmer, 1997, P. 19). The cynicism of our students does not indicate personal, cultural, or generational inadequacy; but instead it exposes the deep flaws within our impersonal academic realm. We cannot expect our students to meaningfully engage with an academic culture that devalues their inner-reality (Palmer, 1997, P. 19).

The spiritual pain of being "*dismembered"* from our inner-truth is widely experienced in academia (Palmer, 1997, P. 21). Instead of waiting for our institutions to fix themselves, Palmer advocates for a reclamation of the belief that our inwardness, our true self, contains the power to transform our outward teaching (Palmer, 1997, P. 20). Remembering ourselves can lead to revolution in our field, but it has to be a deeper remembering, beyond the recollection of various facts (Palmer, 1997, P. 21). "*Re-membering"* ourselves is the process of rebuilding our identity, rediscovering the significance of our inner-reality, and reclaiming our power as self and as teacher (Palmer, 1997, P. 21). For struggling teachers who wish to embark on this journey,

forgetting technique, and remembering the mentors who shaped us and the subjects that chose us is the place to start (Palmer, 1997, P. 21 - 30).

Parker J. Palmer's Culture of Fear

Developing connectedness means understanding but resisting the appeal of the "disconnected" life (Palmer, 1997, P. 36). Many aspects of the academic culture promote disconnection; from grades to separate departments, and competition to bureaucracy. Despite these outer-influences, inward fear is at the root of all disconnection (Palmer, 1997, P. 36). Fear creates distance between all involved parties and inhibits our ability to authentically connect and teach. Fear is the result of shared vulnerability between students and teachers. When this vulnerability is not honored, education becomes paralyzed.

Self-knowledge is the first step toward overcoming the culture of fear (Palmer, 1997, P. 37). Teachers might fear losing their job, damaging their intellectual reputation, or slighting their institution. Despite these legitimate concerns, fear often runs deeper. Palmer (1997, P. 37) notes that we tend to fear encountering an "alien other" free to speak a truth different from our own. This "other truth" could be contradictory and even threatening to our own. We often desire to control such encounters so that we are not forced into the uncomfortable position of critically reflecting on our own views (Palmer, 1997, P. 38).

The second step for a teacher who wants to authentically connect and teach, is to admit that our self and our knowledge, while essential to connection and good teaching, are not the only standpoints (Palmer, 1997, P. 38). To reconcile this aspect of fear and disconnection, Palmer (1997, P. 38) prescribes an admission of "pluralism". Academic institutions provide numerous opportunities for teachers to utilize the "pretense of objectivity" in order to avoid "live encounters" (Palmer, 1997, P. 38). If teachers assume homogeneity in the universe then they can

delude themselves into believing they possess absolute truth (Palmer, 1997, P. 38). Teachers ought to embrace diversity to capitalize on "encounters" once perceived as win or lose, threats or challenges; and acknowledge them instead as powerful opportunities for constructing knowledge (Palmer, 1997, P. 38).

The third step toward overcoming fear is to embrace the reality that we will inevitably change our beliefs and even the way we live our lives. Palmer (1997, P. 39) notes that our fears run deeply into our sense of self, and when we encounter conflict, we often feel that our very identity is under attack. Academic culture, in correlation with its preference toward absolute knowledge, seems to favor a win or lose model of discourse (Palmer, 1997, P. 39). This competitive culture is instrumental in nurturing fear and disconnection, and could be reconceptualized into a culture of "creative conflict". In such a culture "winning" would mean coming away from an interaction with a keener sense of self and a broader worldview (Palmer, 1997, P. 39).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that fear is not inherently a bad thing, rather it is the behaviors that occur as a result of our fear that need to be altered. Fears can help us survive, learn, and grow as long as we learn to decode them (Palmer, 1997, P. 39). Fear of bringing up a controversial topic in class could be seen as a signal that this topic absolutely needs to be addressed, rather than ignored. In other words, our fear is validating us, and leading us toward authentic connection. Palmer (1997, P. 39) quotes Albert Camus who said, "What gives value to travel is fear". Camus' words can be applied to the experiences of teachers who have chosen to face their fears for the sake of authentic connection and teaching. Fear can actually guide us to enhance our inner-selves and our outer-teaching, or; as Palmer (1997, P. 40) puts it, "the fear lets us know we are on the brink of real learning".

Chapter 3: Methodology

Design

Critical teacher action research is my utilized methodology for research design. This is a combination of critical qualitative research and teacher action research. Critical qualitative research endeavors "to critique and challenge, to transform, and empower" (Merriam, 2009, p. 34). Critical research goes beyond the scope of traditional qualitative research, which seeks to understand the construction of meaning relating to a given phenomenon, by utilizing evidence-based critique to pursue a more just and equitable society. My perception was that my teaching, and subsequently my students' learning, were being unjustifiably hindered by authoritative mandates from institutions of power. I believe my experiences existed within a broader context of teachers being stripped of their autonomy and professionalism and therefore my experiences warranted study and publication so that my voice might be added to the many others in my field experiencing bureaucratic and systemic overreach.

Teacher action research is a process wherein teachers "confront difficult issues of practice and generate both local and public knowledge about teaching, learning, and schooling" (Cochran-Smith & Lyttle, 1992). Teachers possess unique opportunities to "construct local meaning" and formulate action to address problems within "particular contexts" (Cochran-Smith & Lyttle, 1992). Too often teachers are ignored and underutilized as valuable and knowledgeable entities within the context of accountability culture. Critical teacher action research applies a critical lens to the specific context of the teaching practice, with the understanding that teachers are uniquely positioned to provide criticism and guide transformation within our profession.

Critical teacher action research aligns well with my theoretical frameworks; Freire's emancipatory education and Palmer's focus on the inner-selves of teachers and the culture of

fear. My data were gathered and my findings were analyzed in the hopes of providing an understanding of the impact of emancipatory education on engendering authentic engagement for social studies teachers who find themselves overburdened and undervalued in the midst of accountability culture.

In addition to critical teacher action research, my study might also be considered a form of auto-ethnography, or critical autoethnography. Auto-ethnography is the process and product of examining one's own society and culture during "a lengthy period of intimate study and residence in a given social setting" (Merriam, 2007, p. 28). The immersion process utilized in auto-ethnographic study leads to understanding informed by artifacts, records, documents, participant-observation records, personal impressions, and insights regarding the events and patterns of one's own culture (Merriam, 2007, p. 28). In my case, these insights were gained and applied during critical reflection on my role within the culture of teaching social studies at my school, and the relationship between my teaching philosophy and the role that schools and teachers play in society. These insights led me to alter my own teaching practice after examining various culturally internalized assumptions about knowledge and power.

Participant Selection

I chose to do a self-study in accordance with Palmer's insight on the importance of understanding the inner-selves of teachers in resolving the academic culture of fear and disconnection. My hope was to gain insight into the utilization of emancipatory pedagogy, its potential to transform the experiences of students within social studies classes, and to potentially create hope and solidarity within a system perceived by many to be oppressive. While students should always be our priority as teachers, we often overlook ourselves and our experiences

within the culture of education. Although my students' perspectives and actions contributed significantly to my insights, this study was first and foremost an examination of myself as I sought to enact authentically engaging learning experiences for my students amidst a culture and institution that seemed to demand the exact opposite.

More specifically, I wanted to be more conscious of and attentive to the reasons for my curricular and pedagogical choices and my interactions and relationships with my students, and to the ways these choices impacted not only my students but also myself. My attraction to teaching social studies is firmly rooted in its potential to create socially conscious and justice oriented global citizens. The mandated pedagogical approach from my institution and the prescribed learning objectives from my state did not create learning experiences that fulfilled the potential of my discipline. My attempts to live up to my own philosophy of education amidst my circumstances were unsatisfactory, so I sought to radically amend my approach and systematically record my own perception of the effects of emancipatory education on my teaching.

Data Collection

I used an in depth "participant as observer" approach (Merriam, 2009, P. 124) to collect data from my own classroom during my period of study. Observation was the logical choice here as it allowed me to learn first-hand about my phenomenon of study within the environment where it occurred. Teachers are natural observers of the behavior that occurs in their classrooms. I systematically observed and recorded myself and reflected on my choices as a teacher in order to gain a deeper understanding of my attempts at authentic engagement. Although myself and my teaching were the topic of study, my "field notes" also contain information about my students'

comments, actions, and responses to my teaching as well as my perceptions of how they were experiencing our interactions.

For three months I devoted the first 10 minutes of each class to authentically engaging with my students in the style of Paolo Freire's problem-posing education. In addition to acting as participant and observer during these "mini-lessons", as they came to be called, I took audio recordings of class discussions, and recorded thorough narrative field notes at the end of each school day. Throughout this study I utilized my field notes in a recursive process of consultation and reflection on the meaning of what had occurred, and as guidance on further class activity. At the conclusion of my study, I holistically analyzed my notes to uncover patterns and significant details relevant to the phenomenon of study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of data by utilizing consolidation, reduction, and interpretation (Merriam, 2009, p. 175-176). Data analysis is a recursive process of using induction and deduction between concrete data and abstract concepts to develop meaning and answer the research questions (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). Throughout my project, after data collection, I used open coding (Merriam, 2009, p. 178) to construct relevant themes that could potentially answer my research questions and provide direction for further emancipatory pedagogy. Gradually, I also utilized axial coding, the process of grouping open codes (Merriam, 2009, p. 180) to create data categories from my field notes.

I induced three answer categories to my first research question, "Given the many variables influencing my present situation, how can I become a more engaging teacher?":

(1) Discover my students' interests, experiences, and perceptions.

(2) Explore their discovered interests, experiences, and perceptions.

(3) Implement student-centered problem solving.

I induced three answer categories to my second research question, "What have I learned about myself as a teacher in my efforts to engage my students?":

(1) Deconstruct Hierarchies.

(2) Redefine Success.

(3) Trust, Critically Self-Reflect, and Hope.

I induced three answer categories to my third research question, "What are the implications of what I have learned for engaging teaching in general?:

(1) Students care a lot and we have to do better at reaching them.

(2) Altered curriculum can achieve greater student engagement.

(3) Engaging teaching is a personally worthwhile intellectual and emotional labor that aligns well with the intended purpose of public education.

Confidence and Trustworthiness

Qualitative research does not seek to measure, prove, or determine absolute truth; but rather it seeks to understand the social construction of phenomena, particularly the participants' meaning structures which, in turn, inform their actions. As such qualitative research strives to establish the trustworthiness and authenticity of research findings while being mindful of the worldviews and philosophical assumptions that influence the research process (Merriam, 2009, p. 211). Instead of the traditional notions of validity and reliability, qualitative research uses constructs such as credibility, transferability, reflexivity, and consistency of the findings (Merriam, 2009, p. 211). Credibility refers to the extent that the findings of the study accurately represent the phenomena of study. Proof of reality is unattainable, but it can be explicitly and

thoroughly detailed to the extent that a reader feels confident in the research (Merriam, 2009, p. 213). Transferability refers to the extent the findings of one study can be found or utilized in a different setting (Merriam, 2009, P. 223). Reflexivity refers to the awareness of the self as researcher and the extent that the self can influence interpretation of phenomena (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). Consistency is the notion that, according to outsiders, the results of a qualitative study are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2009, p. 221).

Validity in quantitative research uses research findings to prove that the findings of a study match with reality (Merriam, 2009, p. 213). Qualitative research operates under the assumption that reality cannot be proven because it is socially constructed. In place of validity, credibility seeks to establish confidence for the readers that the findings are credible given the data presented (Merriam, 2009, p. 213). In qualitative research human beings serve as primary instruments of data collection utilizing observation and interview to interpret reality. Credibility is a goal, rather than a product, and providing a thick description of the data can illustrate the construction of reality, from the perspective of the researcher and their perception of the participants, within the context of the phenomena of study. Findings are collected, analyzed, and interpreted to provide a holistic explanation of what has happened and why it is meaningful (Merriam, 2009, p. 215). My aim for this study was not to discover an absolute truth for how authentic teaching should be conducted, but instead to develop a deeper understanding of how authentic teaching could be beneficial and transformative within the context of my discipline, institution, and community.

As I attempted to uncover the complexity of the human behaviors and perceptions within my teaching, I utilized a rigorous and systematic process to record what occurred in my classroom and to note how I perceived and reacted to it. I closely observed my teaching and how

my students seemed to perceive it, I took daily field notes, and I audio recorded my lessons that pertained to my research. With these multiple methods of data collection, I was able to use triangulation when analyzing my findings (Merriam, 2009, p. 215). Triangulation, originally a navigation term, refers to the use of multiple data sources to investigate a phenomenon and is one way that qualitative researchers ensure credibility (Merriam, 2009, p. 215).

In addition to triangulation, I also utilized member checking to make sure that I accurately understood how my students and I were experiencing my teaching. Member checking is the process of seeking feedback from participants regarding emergent research findings (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). One of the guiding principles to my research was the exploration of problems relevant to my students' lives. I frequently paraphrased and summarized their statements from our discussions to make sure that I accurately understood their concerns, opinions, and perceptions.

Finally, the consistency and transferability of my findings should be addressed. To ensure consistency I kept a detailed audit trail or log, previously referred to as field notes. This log details, with thick description, exactly what I did and how I arrived at my conclusions. The expectation is not necessarily for others to be able to replicate what I did, but for them to understand what, when, how, and why I did what I did. On transferability, it has never been my intention to declare or prove that what I did could or should be done in another teacher's classroom. There are a number of significant and varying factors that influence engaging teaching and authentic curriculum. I do however believe that there will be a number of teachers who are able to identify with the systemic issues I have presented and my purpose in proceeding as I did. Teachers who read this report should consider what is written then decide for themselves if the information could have relevance or utility within their practice.

Researcher Positionality

While considering my data was of obvious importance, it was just as important to consider myself as both the researcher and the topic of study. Reflexivity is the "process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). Despite being educated and trained in research methodology, I am still a human with bias, worldview, and cultural orientation. I have a vested interest in everything that occurred as a part of this project. While my perspective and interest are relevant, they are not absolute. Readers of this report deserve transparency regarding my outlook as it pertains to the phenomena of study and the context wherein it transpired.

I am thirty-two years old, white, male, in the third year of professional teaching. I grew up in a family with upper middle-class socioeconomic status. This is different from the majority of my students, who are Latinx, and from middle- or working-class socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition to differences in background, my occupation as a teacher places me in a position of power and authority over my students. My critique of the education system in this paper pertains to issues of power and authority, specifically the misuse of power and authority regarding teacher autonomy and professionalism. While I levy my criticism of their authority, I must also be mindful that I wield authority in my classroom, and my students may experience my authority similarly to the way I experienced my school's authority.

My perception was that my school's decisions and practices were oppressive to their students and teachers. I believed that we had consciously or unconsciously sacrificed humanity, creativity, and critical thinking to make numerical gains on standardized tests and state report cards. This embodiment of education promotes social reproduction, preparing our students to obey and produce, without giving them the opportunity to transform their relationship to the

systems of power which govern them. I felt that I had to go against our institutional direction in order to live up to my conception of high-quality teaching and learning, which is grounded in critical theory and social transformation. My position is that education should be utilized to emancipate and humanize young people from systems that seek to oppress and exploit them for monetization. This is radically different from the traditional college and career readiness perception prevalent within the education system.

I believed that my students were being inundated by banking education (Freire, 1970, p. 45), and becoming disengaged passive learners, while myself and other teachers were unwillingly, or unknowingly harming their critical development. Influenced by a significant amount of pedagogic and philosophical literature, I proceeded with an uncommon approach, to diverge from the mandated prescription of teaching that I had been provided with. I wholeheartedly believed that what I was doing was fruitful and necessary; however, I also acknowledge that it served my advancement and completion of my university education.

Ethical Considerations

Merriam (2009, p. 228) notes that credibility and transferability depend largely on the ethics of the investigator. Research ethics demand that subjects are protected from harm, ensured privacy, and allowed informed consent (Merriam, 2009, p. 230). In addition to the collection of data, researchers must also consider how the dissemination of their findings will impact all parties involved. Furthermore, researchers need to consider power dynamics among institutions, researchers, and their subjects.

In my research, I had a clear position of power and authority, and, while I primarily studied my own teaching, my research decisions had a direct impact on my students and their learning. This student-teacher power dynamic also existed within the broader context of power

dynamics involving myself, a secondary education institution, a research university, and our state's department of education. I decided to conduct my research and teaching in a manner I learned from a research university because I believed that doing this was in the best interest of my students.

To maintain ethics regarding my relationship with my students, I was upfront and honest with them from the onset of our project. I told them that I didn't think our classes were going well, that I noticed their dissatisfaction and disengagement, and that for the most part I shared these sentiments. I told them what I wanted to try, and why I thought it would be more satisfying and engaging. I told them when I was recording, and that I would be taking notes on my teaching, both common practices even for teachers who are not conducting official research. In this way my students were at least informed about what was taking place, although consent is difficult to define amidst the reality of compulsory education. My perception of their cooperation and enthusiasm during my research leads me to infer greater consent to emancipatory education when compared to their lack of cooperation and enthusiasm regarding the standardized and mandated approach.

The dynamic of our student-teacher relationship was beneficial to my role as a participant-observer, because we were already familiar with each other and the setting for our phenomena of study. The guiding principle of my research significantly changed my approach to teaching, but the fundamentals of our group being gathered with the purpose of learning remained the same. I was able to guide our learning in a more productive direction without disrupting what would have otherwise been considered natural human behavior.

I disseminate my findings with transparency, honesty, and hope. While I am critical of my institution and its decisions, I do not wish to disparage any of the individuals who work

there. I wholeheartedly believe them to be competent and knowledgeable professionals with compassion for the community they serve. My criticisms are of certain decisions made, and bear a consideration that these decisions exist, as does the rest of this project, within a broader context of accountability culture.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study was conducted in response to the problem of widespread student disengagement in social studies education at my middle school. While there are numerous variables that contribute to student disengagement, my position is that standardized testing accountability culture and mandated uniformity of instructional practices led teachers and students at my school to experience alienation and detachment from their educational roles. From November through February I modeled my teaching after Paulo Freire's (1970, p. 53-59) problem-posing education with the hope that it would improve engagement and relationships in my classroom. Previous to this research, my students frequently displayed signs of disengagement. These manifested as not reading when asked to read, not answering a question when asked, not raising a hand when appropriate, slumping or leaning back in seats, putting head down when inappropriate, not turning in work or turning it in very late, avoiding work or refusing to work during independent work time, flat emotional affect, and verbal and nonverbal expressions of boredom.

In this chapter I will begin by describing the school, which was my research setting. Then, I will describe in detail the course and evolution of our experiences with problem-posing education (Freire, 1970, p. 53-59) which I have categorized into three distinct phases: a dialectical phase, a teacher-led phase, and a student-centered phase. Third, I will address what I learned about myself as a teacher as a result of this process. Finally, I will apply the theoretical lens of Paulo Freire's student-teacher relationship (1970, p. 44-59) and Parker Palmer's culture of fear (1997, p. 4-40) to interpret and explain my findings.

The School

Our school building is in the central region of our state, close to the intersection of two major freeways. The school district has repurposed a deserted mall into a school site that includes an elementary, middle, and high school. The building is two-storied, sprawling, rectangular, and built on the side of a hill. The middle school is on the southern side of the building, facing the large asphalt parking lot whose dark surface and painted yellow lines have mostly faded. The area around the school is populated by a few industrial buildings, a set of railroad tracks, an old movie theater, an abandoned strip of shops, a gas station, a fast food restaurant, a dilapidated residential neighborhood, and the freeways. The outside of the building appears rundown; several of the former entrances are boarded up, the foliage along the walkways is overgrown, and an accumulation of trash, gravel, and dust is ever-present. The inside, however, is surprisingly new and modern.

The main entrance to the middle school is two pairs of double glass doors with magnetic security locks. As you enter there is a small waiting area and another set of glass doors. Immediately to the right of the waiting area is the front office, and just past it is a wide walkway toward the heart of the school. The walkway continues north until it reaches the plaza, a central gathering space with bleacher style seating, a trophy case, small library, various school banners, and an American flag. From the plaza there is a hallway proceeding west toward the sixth-grade wing, and another going north towards the seventh and eighth-grade wings. My classroom is in the northeast corner of our school building, in the heart of the eighth-grade wing. To my right is the special education center, on my left is my grade level partner teacher, and across the hallway are the eighth-grade math rooms.

A large wooden door serves as the entrance to my classroom, opening from the south. Upon entering you immediately notice a large window on the northern wall which would almost have a beautiful view of the city skyline, if not for a large air conditioning unit blocking the way. Next to the window is a map showing the population density of the United States and a small portable bookshelf with an assortment of books, most of which were handed down to me by veteran teachers. If you look to your left upon entering, you will see a thumbtack board fastened to the wall. It displays the bell schedule, school map, school announcements, and student artwork. If you look to the right, you will see a closet, then a ledge where I keep textbooks, handouts, a turn-in bin, stapler, pencil sharpener, and three-hole punch. Above the ledge are cabinets where my students store their class binders, and below the ledge are a set of drawers and more cabinets which store various supplies.

On the eastern wall of my classroom are two large whiteboards, and on the opposite side, just beyond the thumbtack board, is a TV screen mounted to the wall. Beyond the TV screen is a diagonal blue-green accent wall connecting the west and north walls. A glass window is set into the middle of the northwest accent wall revealing an office pod that I share with my grade level partner teacher. The door to my office pod is in the northwest corner of the classroom, separating the accent wall and the northern wall. An assortment of posters decorates the room, portraying the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, American presidents, Martin Luther King Jr., the trail of tears, the Statue of Liberty, an abolition flag, and various other historical themes and events.

The student desks are gray, in fact, everything from the cabinets to the walls, the chairs, and even the carpet are various shades of gray. The grayness feels empty and invokes a sense of industry, institution, and even purgatory. The desks are triangularly shaped and they are mounted

on wheels, allowing for easy maneuvering. The classroom does not have a traditional front. Sometimes I direct the students' attention to the white-boards or the TV screen, and other times I stand in the middle or pace about from table to table. For this project, I have arranged my desks into six table groups of four desks, evenly spaced throughout the rectangular room. My intention for doing so was to create an open social space with a sense of community.

Course and Evolution of Problem-Posing Education in My Classroom

My guiding principle for this project was to become more engaging and authentic as a teacher, and to tap into my students' natural creative and critical energies. I knew these abilities and energies existed, and that authentic engagement was possible; but traditional curriculum and mandated standardized teaching techniques were failing to engage with them. I was determined to create a class that valued my students' inner realities, and contained educational experiences based on real life problems that they perceived as relevant. This meant creating space for and encouraging natural interaction in the classroom. The presentation of my learning space, my re-conception of my role as a teacher, and the construction of a humanizing pedagogy all played a crucial role in my efforts to become a more engaging teacher.

Phase 1: Dialectic and the Discovery of Student Interests, Experiences, and Perceptions

To begin the process of humanizing pedagogy, I wanted to create a space that allowed my students to feel safe expressing themselves and their interests. As their teacher, I was interested in their lived experiences and their worldviews. The table groups allowed us to build a closer community and explore diverse topics, slowly but surely, in a setting where dialogue could emerge naturally. I had noticed in the past that my students dreaded being called upon to speak

or answer a question in front of the whole class. To facilitate dialogue, I started classes each day with a question, or a conversation prompt then allowed my students to discuss amongst themselves while I visited each group, sometimes as a listener, and sometimes as a contributor. When I heard something I liked, I would ask for permission to share it with the whole class. This conversational warm up became a staple of class and succeeded at engaging my students in dialogue and creating a culture where considering difficult topics was the norm.

The very first day of small table group conversations set an important tone for what would become a months-long endeavor into a dialogue-driven, authentic, and humanizing pedagogy. Instead of our usual bell work, I instructed students to check in with each other, and ask how they were doing. I suggested they could ask about life at school and outside of school. Almost immediately the classroom came alive. A student sitting close to me in second-period told his table group that he had woken up late, and almost missed his ride to school. It sounded stressful, but he laughed it off. I overheard another student talk about a grandparent who was in poor health. A pair of students laughed nervously about an assignment that was due today in a different class. While these might seem like typical conversations, the change in the classroom energy was noticeable. There was a sense of ease and comfort with which the students conversed and gossiped. They seemed comfortable, open, and energized.

In fourth-period, after a few minutes of conversation, one of my students asked me the same questions I had encouraged them to ask one another. I told her that my life outside of work was fine, but that I did not feel satisfied with the way my classes were going. She asked me why, so I tried to explain the intent behind my project, in a way that made sense for an eighth-grader, and did not make me sound incompetent. I told her that I wanted to do a better job of reaching my students, learning about them, and educating them about things they really care about. By

that point most students in the room had stopped their own conversations to listen to ours. Another student joined in, stating that school seemed different this year, harder and stricter. Immediately a third student shouted out that there were too many tests. I was troubled to hear that my students were experiencing their schooling in a way that seemed to line up with my institutional and systemic concerns. But, I was also encouraged that there was a growing openness and authenticity to our learning space. When I reflect on this phase of our project, this was the earliest reconciliation of our "student-teacher" relationships (Freire, 1970, p. 50). A solidarity was emerging, which would be fundamental in allowing us to address the challenges we were facing. By admitting some of my shortcomings and stating my intentions, I think my students started to believe that I really was on their side.

In fifth-period my students joked about dating, then pondered never having to take another test. One student noticed calluses on my hands, so I told them about my weight-lifting hobby. In sixth-period several students expressed heightened feelings of stress related to school, and subsequent feelings of inadequacy. They echoed what students in my morning classes had said, that school seemed different and more stressful this year. A few students mentioned expectations at home, such as caring for younger siblings as an additional source of stress. Many students mentioned that they constantly felt overwhelmed.

I hated hearing that my students were having such negative experiences. The more I learned, the more my concerns about my school seemed valid, and the more an innovative approach seemed necessary. School should be a healthy challenge, but it should not be demoralizing or harmful. I was encouraged though, by the openness from my students. The conversations felt authentic, a mix of casual small talk, and vulnerable expression. I felt as if we were beginning to create trust and common interest that could lay the foundation for more

authentic experiences in the future. My students deserve schooling that adequately prepares them to be responsible, socially and ecologically conscious, well informed democratic citizens; while also honoring their lived experiences and personal concerns and curiosities.

For several weeks, I began my classes with diverse topics of conversation, so we could continue to join in dialogue and build mutual understanding. These conversations took place in lieu of bell work and lasted anywhere from five to fifteen minutes. Four specific topics of conversation stood out as especially thought-provoking and engaging for the students and I chose to use these as a basis for further consideration as our project evolved. These topics were: (1) "If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be, and why?" (2) "What do you wish school would teach you that it doesn't?" (3) "What is something in your community that concerns you?" (4) "What are your biggest obstacles to learning?" I was able to observe, and at times participate in, my students' conversations while they responded to these prompts. I recorded responses from each table group during each class period and ended up with a sizable amount of data. I was able to code this data to notice frequency of responses, themes among responses, and uniqueness of outlying responses (see Table A). This informed me as I continued to try to create authentic, engaging, and relevant educational experiences.

Table A.

QUESTION	STUDENT RESPONSES
If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be?	Politics, War, Police Brutality, Prison Reform, Racism, Hunger (2), Abuse, Cancer (2), Sickness, Workers Treatment, Teacher Pay, Cheaper Goods, Basic Income, Free Food (2), Debt, Better Income, Pollution (3), Climate change (2), More Sleep, Shorter School Day, Parents Too Strict, Teachers Too Strict, Dress Code, Grades
What do you wish school would teach you?	Finance (4), Tax (4), Investing (3) Paying Bills (2), Credit Cards, Bank Accounts, Hair Dressing (2), Auto-mechanics, Animation, Cooking (2), Starting a Business, Career Training, Hacking/Coding, Independent Living, Survival, Self Defense (3), Life Skills, The Holocaust, Mexican History and Culture, Reality of the World (no sugar coating),

	Current Events, Civil Rights, LGBTQ+ History, Anatomy, Art, Law, Health, Sex Education, Foreign Languages
Is there anything in your community that you wish you could change?	Gun Violence (5), Gun Laws, Violence, Drugs (2), Gangs, Breaking into Cars/Homes, Drug Addiction, Marijuana Availability/Legalization, House Fires/Fire Safety (2), Bad Roads/Potholes (3), Bad Smells, Traffic Safety, Better housing, Lack of Safe Parks/Public Gathering Places, Hate Speech, Workers Treated Badly, Loud Cars Late at Night, Train Horns, Littering, Homelessness, Poverty, Stray Animals, Abortion, Adoption, School Starting Later, Better Food at School, Teachers Too Strict
What are your biggest obstacles to learning?	Reading, Spelling, Poor Explanation of Work (3), Teachers Shame/Embarrass Students, Too Many Trivial Details (2), Pressure to "Grow" (2), Moves Too Fast, Boring, Too Many Tests, Overworked, Not Enough Time, Too Difficult (2), Work is Intimidating, Lack of Personal Space, Can't Concentrate (4), Hard to Remember, Mind Wanders, Zoning Out, Laziness, Lack of Interest, Don't See the Point, Don't Want to Ask for Help, Hard to Sleep at Night, Tired (3), Hungry, Home problems (2), Distractions/Friends (3), Disruptive Students, Covid (4), Covid Anxiety

It struck me that my adolescent students, the same ones I feared as disinterested and apathetic, had such knowledge and awareness of their world. Life was providing them with an education that seemed to outpace their schooling, and lack support from it. The variety of student responses exemplifies the adolescent psyche; on the one hand wise, curious, and empathetic; then on the other hand sensitive, distracted, and frustrated. Consider how the process of formal education; the rectangular box, the bell schedule, and the standardized testing, affect this complex psyche. Does the middle school experience treat students as an asset to be nurtured, or a risk to be managed? Freire (1970, p. 45) notes that banking educators project ignorance onto their students, to justify their own status and knowledge, thus invalidating and objectifying their students. Several of my colleagues during and after this project reacted to it with surprise and disbelief. The idea that students have the intellect and wisdom to influence their own learning seemed to contradict their philosophies of education.

My data from the dialectic phase shows that my students possessed knowledge and interest in a range of global topics relevant to social studies such as politics, social justice, climate change, economics, current events, civil rights, and health. In addition to global interest,

my students were tuned in to their immediate community, with concern regarding crime, infrastructure, and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, they expressed the desire to be educated about money management, career preparation, and life skills. These revelations were invigorating, as I felt that I had an enormous body of evidence from which to construct meaningful, authentic, and engaging educational experiences. Unfortunately, it was also revealed that my students were facing a large number of obstacles inhibiting their formal education, many of which seemed to be having a harmful effect on their overall wellbeing. These findings were significant to my research questions because they supported my position that my students did possess natural and personal interest in social studies, but their interests were not being included sufficiently within their schooling. More troubling, findings began to emerge regarding the negative perceptions and experiences that my students were having toward their formal education; influenced by our overemphasis on standardized tests.

Phase 2, Teacher-Led Exploration of the Uncovered Student Interests

While the recorded findings from Table A were not the only conversations that we had during the first phase, they did stand out and lead us into the next phase of our educational experience, which was an intentional exploration of the uncovered student interests. By early December I felt that it was time to move beyond conversation and begin a more focused phase of learning. I used the same time at the beginning of each class to teach miniature lessons about topics of student interest that we had uncovered. I selected a number of topics from our dialectic phase, based on frequency of response, and my perceived relevance to social studies curriculum. Initially, I found that student engagement during these lessons was increased, evidenced by student body language, attention, and interactions with me and each other. However, as things

unfolded, I found that student engagement remained inconsistent and elusive as the novelty of the new topics subsided.

Despite what I would deem as overall success, our project was very much a praxis, I did not hit the ball out of the park on my first attempts to reach my students. There was a constant process of trial, error, reflection, and further trial. As I became more skilled in achieving what I perceived to be authentic engagement, there was still a notable ebb and flow in the learning environment. Some days I perceived powerful student engagement, and authentic learning; and other days the apathy and boredom returned. Sometimes I perceived a resolution in our student-teacher relationship, and other times we returned to a state of contradiction.

My first attempt at an engaging educational experience, beyond explorative dialogue, was to instruct my students about rates of global population growth over the past 2,000 years. This was a topic that had captured my fascination during a graduate school course. I presented it to my class because it connected to many of the topics they had brought up during our table group discussions; topics such as climate change, poverty, and violence. I showed my students a time-lapse video which displayed a map of the world, beginning at the year zero of the common era, with yellow dots scattered around the map. Each yellow represents 1,000,000 people living in that region. As the video plays there is a sound of a beating heart while the years are displayed along a timeline at the bottom. As time goes on, more dots are added around the map and the sound of the beating heart becomes faster and faster.

The video lasts seven minutes and covers well known global events, such as the rise and fall of famous empires, the bubonic plague, and European colonization. The climax of the video begins in the 19th century with the industrial revolution, but the grand finale occurs in the middle of the 20th century with the advent of “modern medicine”. The population dots explode around

the world like fireworks and the heartbeat sound effect becomes uncomfortably fast. I remember having a visceral physical reaction the first time I watched the video. It was hard to fathom that our population had grown from one to seven billion in a single century. Given the entirety of human existence, this is an incredibly rapid amount of growth with implications for numerous social, economic, and environmental phenomena.

My students in each class were very attentive to the video and exhibited a range of powerful reactions. Critically examining rapid and recent changes created serious reconceptualizing of the past, present, and future. After the video I posed several questions for them to discuss at their table groups. The first two questions were simple checks for understanding, (1) "*What has happened to our population?",* and (2) *"Why has our population grown so rapidly?"* The third question was more engaging, (3) *"What happens if this trend continues?"* A noticeable majority were alarmed by what they had learned and seemed to exhibit the kind of natural engagement that Freire (1970, p. 54) explains as "born of obligation to respond to unveiled challenges."

Students made connections between rapid population growth, climate change, and resource scarcity. Several of them pointed out that each of these phenomena had significant social consequences and the potential to create widespread human conflict. One student in third period asked if people should have fewer babies. Another student claimed that we could have serious violent conflict over space and resources if the population were to continue to grow unchecked. This prompted an intense class discussion about our personal interest to reproduce versus collective interest for society. China's infamous one child policy was mentioned as a rebuttal to the idea that reproduction should be limited. The idea of a two-child policy was put forth as a potential alternative. Some students expressed the notion that our population will level

off naturally, or that our technology will continue to advance so that we will not need to worry about overpopulation.

In sixth-period the conversation shifted to the relationship between education, population growth, and sociocultural factors. A student mentioned teen pregnancy as a known issue in their community, then connected the topic to overpopulation. Another student mentioned the lack of sex education in our district, and the state. I found myself facing a moment of fear, akin to Palmer's (1997) culture of fear. I was not necessarily afraid of hearing something I disagreed with. I happened to agree with the student. I was afraid of speaking on a topic that had the potential to be misunderstood, give offense, or to bring unwanted scrutiny upon myself and my teaching. On the other hand, I was encouraged by the critical perspectives being expressed, and I was just as afraid not to speak about it. My students felt strongly about this topic. If they could not find a safe place at school for dialogue about it, where else would they go to find one?

I explained a few things that I happened to know, for example that states with sexual education programs in their public schools have lower rates of teen pregnancy. There were some giggles and some snickers; but there were heads nodding, sustained eye contact, and somber facial expressions. My students seemed to appreciate being spoken to about a topic that, for many in their community and state, is considered off limits and inappropriate for adolescents. This entire portion of the discussion was not planned or intended, students used their agency as learners to direct the conversation where they needed it to go.

By the middle of January, I decided that climate change would be our next topic to explore as it could be bridged logically from the overpopulation video; more people means more pollution. I have strong personal beliefs about the climate crisis, many students had mentioned climate change as a topic of interest during our discussion phase, and it had been brought up

frequently as a problematic effect of overpopulation. I thought my classes should have some background knowledge, so we watched a short video of celebrity scientist Bill Nye explaining the basic terminology of climate science, then providing a short synopsis of how climate change happens and why it is dangerous. As with the overpopulation video, the signs of behavioral engagement were evident. Students faced forward, sat up, and maintained attention to the video.

Their demeanor during the video indicated perception of this topic as relevant and worthwhile. Discussions after the video were slightly less enthusiastic than they had been for the population video. A number of students seemed to already know the information from the video. There was a sense of boredom and less enthusiasm to discuss the topic. Several students did share beneficial points, such as the importance of education about climate change, and the overwhelming evidence that climate change is a result of human behavior. Overall, the social emotional engagement, and the agency, seemed to be missing.

Through January, I continued teaching short lessons at the start of class. I chose the topic based on student responses from the dialectic phase. We explored climate change again, this time watching clips from the Al Gore film *An Inconvenient Truth*. There could be no doubt that the students viewed this topic as relevant and meaningful. Students could clearly identify the social and scientific causes of climate change, and these prompted interesting discussions about human interests and behavior. But, after an initial spark of optimism and engagement, my classes seemed to fall into what Freire (1970) describes as a fatalistic view; an acceptance of the world as it is and a belief in the limitation of our own impact. I asked my students if we could and should do more to combat climate change. While the answers to both were a resounding yes, the specific solution felt elusive and out of reach. There seemed to be feelings of powerlessness

followed by disengagement. Several students did make pledges to recycle more and be responsible consumers, but overall, the hopeful humanization seemed to be missing.

Throughout the month, we touched on several more topics such as climate change denial, infrastructure in low-income neighborhoods, the holocaust, the stock market, Mexican history, and personal finance. Much of our time felt well spent, but I could not shake the feeling that something was missing, and that we could go deeper and do more with humanizing pedagogy. We were learning about relevant topics, engagement had increased, but I still felt that I could do more to involve my students in their learning beyond teaching them about topics they preferred.

At the end of January, I took an inventory of our experiences so far. I felt that I had successfully learned about my students, their perceptions of the world, and the problems they wished to address. My perception of my teaching and my students' engagement was improved and I noticed increased student engagement across all four categories (Anderson and Feldstein, 2021) and (Montenegro, 2017). Students had spent more time actively listening, sitting up, raising their hands, asking questions, listening to me and their peers, and responding in conversational discussions. Despite these improvements, something was still missing. The humanizing element, the personal connection, was too fleeting. I was going after engagement for the sake of engagement, not engagement for the sake of humanization.

It dawned on me that I might still be doing too much. While I had explored problems that my students cared about, I had not allowed them to contribute anymore to the learning or attempt to find their own solutions. I had been trying to give them what I believed the solutions were. I was still practicing banking education (Freire, 1970), albeit a slightly modified and more student-centered version. This might have been my single biggest lightbulb moment of the entire project. It allowed me to clarify my intentions and realign myself with them moving forward. Problem-

posing education is not just another classroom technique, it is a change in mindset and relationship between students and teachers. This education experience was about humanizing pedagogy and reconciling the contradictions in my relationships with my students. My students needed to address and improve their own problems, to liberate themselves, they did not need a savior.

Phase 3, Student-Centered Problem Solving

In February, we began the final phase of our project, a student-centered phase of learning focused on addressing one specific problem. My students democratically decided to address a problem personally impacting them, student mental health at our middle school. I supported them as they researched, explored, and attempted to construct and implement potential solutions. We began anew with a dialectic phase, this time specific to our problem. I facilitated the discussion with two questions: (1) *"What do we already know about this problem?"* and (2) *"What do we need to learn next?"* We followed a similar discussion procedure, table groups, then together as a class. These discussions were critical in conceptualizing our problem, and deciding what our next steps would be.

My students were largely familiar with mental health related phenomena. When asked what they already knew, my students were quick to mention manifestations of poor mental health. Concepts like anxiety, depression, anger, attention, and obsessiveness were presented as known quantities, in addition to more serious psychopathology like bipolar, schizophrenia, psychopathy, and sociopathy. Students in my second hour class identified the connection between mental health, socioeconomic status, and correlating social issues like divorce, poverty, crime, substance abuse, and domestic violence. My students exhibited personal engagement with this problem, citing mental health challenges like stress, anxiety, and depression as persistent

obstacles to learning, and a byproduct of the institutional changes happening in our school, such as the hyper focus on standardized testing, and society. The problem was easy for us to perceive, name, and analyze.

Encouraging might not be the right word for that, but at least we had a starting place, and a pertinent personal connection to our phenomena of study. Our second question would help us decide what we needed to learn so that we could begin to address poor student mental health, and humanize our learning experiences. My students, in a natural display of humanization, immediately expressed the desire to learn how to help. I felt that this was a logical next step, and an epitome of humanizing pedagogy; a social construction of action, movement, and hope. I prodded my students with some follow up questions to analyze what exactly they might need to learn if they were indeed going to address aspects of this problem. Several students mentioned that a knowledge of diagnoses and treatment options would be helpful. Another student mentioned access to affordable healthcare, and a greater presence of mental health workers at our school. A student in my fourth period mentioned the need for awareness and education, for our school and the surrounding community. A student in sixth period brought up the idea of a middle person, someone who isn't a mental healthcare professional, but could be a safe person to speak with.

We had follow-up discussions the next day but ran into a familiar problem. All the solutions we could think of seemed to be outside of our control. Several aspects of living such as nutrition, diet, sleep, and meditation were identified as beneficial for mental health; however, none of these seemed sufficient as solutions to the root causes for the mental health challenges students were facing. It seemed that before we could find a solution we needed a further exploration of the specific causes of student mental health problems. Not for the first time I had

to grapple with the insecurity and fear of not having the answers my students needed. Any teacher who uses problem-posing education needs to become comfortable with a sense of discomfort, to do this right you need to keep the ship sailing forward while letting the students be the wind that guides. Sometimes that means floating for a while. It isn't easy, especially when you have been brought up in the culture of objective truth and "find the right answer immediately" schooling. I had to keep them engaged and offer slight nudges and suggestions, without thinking for them or giving them what I thought the answers were.

My first thought was to do some research for them, and provide them with some resources that I thought were helpful. But, I remembered my earlier attempts at feeding them my own discoveries had limited success. We had a brief conversation about how to proceed, which concluded with my students searching on their own for media that might be able to help us with our situation. A handful of students were unsure how to begin, or what to search for. Some students found websites that were questionable, others were unskilled in the proper use of a search engine and all too content to copy down the very first thing they found, usually a truncated sentence displayed atop Google search results.

These were teachable moments that allowed me to use my knowledge and experience to assist them in locating and identifying reliable sources of information. With some coaching, my students engaged avidly in the research process. Their engagement seemed significantly increased by all aforementioned facets. They sustained long amounts of time focused on their tasks, and resilience in maintaining their effort when they encountered a difficulty, such as an unhelpful source or a poorly worded entry into the search bar.

One piece of media they found that proved to be especially helpful was a TedX video about a high school senior from Oregon. She worked with a student-led coalition to pass a state

law allowing excused school absences for mental health. The video, powerful and informative in its own right, also exemplified that solutions to problems come in all shapes and sizes. At many stages of our project we had collectively felt powerless, unsure if we could have a meaningful impact. As we learned, it doesn't always take a grandiose and all-encompassing solution to make a difference. Instead, many small solutions can have significant effects. This video was a great resource, found by a student, that helped us to reconceptualize our own potential moving forward. The next day, after some discussion about what we could do next, we decided it would be helpful to analyze what was specifically causing students to experience mental health challenges in our building. I posed a question to the class for discussion, "Why is mental health a problem for students at our school?" Responses were rapid, thorough, and eye opening (see Table B).

Table B. Why is mental health a problem for students at our school?

THEME	STUDENT RESPONSES
Student Driven	Lack of motivation (2). Procrastination. Laziness. Disruptive students. Social anxiety. Tiredness. Hard to pay attention. Scared/nervous. Anger. School isn't a part of my future. Suicidal feelings. I dread my classes. Once I get behind I stop trying, it isn't possible to catch up. Doing the work doesn't seem worth it.
System Driven	Overwhelmed (2). Strict deadlines (2). Grades cause stress. Not enough help available. Too much work (4). Too many tests (2). Anxious. Stress (3). Not enough breaks in the day. Hallways and cafeteria are too crowded, claustrophobic. Abuse from the school.
Teacher Driven	Teachers compare students and play favorites (2). Poor explanation of assignments. Teachers create pressure.
Community Driven	Problems at home. People don't feel safe expressing problems. People won't understand what I'm going through. Bullying. Cyber bullying. Social cliques. Fights. Drama/social conflict (3).

I had many powerful reactions to their responses. The first was an overwhelming sense of empathy and sympathy. I remember middle school being a difficult time, as most people probably do. This common remembrance might actually minimize the empathy adolescent students receive and cause their plight to be overlooked and their experiences invalidated. This did not seem like it should be normal. Adolescent students should not feel this way, especially at such a critical stage of development. Sure, some things like stress over deadlines and hard work might be unavoidable. A certain amount of stress is even beneficial and necessary for growth. But what my students described was more than that, it was too much. I remembered earlier in the year, feeling frustrated at my students' lack of engagement with me and my teaching. Now I wondered how anyone could positively engage while contending with these things.

My next reaction was fear. There are certain aspects of mental health I am comfortable discussing and attempting to problem solve. I also know my limits. I am not a mental health professional. While I wanted to help, I also felt afraid. I'm not qualified to treat someone who is feeling suicidal, or experiencing abuse. While our school does train us in reporting abuse and referring students to the counselor, I never wanted something I was doing or teaching to trigger someone. These problems were real, they were right here right now. Addressing them meant facing them, facing the reality that this stuff was powerful and prevalent.

Not for the first time, I was afraid I might be in over my head. I reached out to the school counselor to bring her in on our project. She was supportive and encouraged us to proceed. Her perspective was that addressing student mental health is difficult, but it is better to address it than ignore it. She gave me some brochures for community health resources and instructed me to make sure my classes knew that her door was open for anyone.

Now that we had spent time analyzing student mental health, we could see that it was a multifaceted issue. We deduced that any solution we wanted to implement would likely need to be specific to one, or maybe two facets. It was not realistic to solve student mental health, but we could attempt to solve one of its underlying causes. We spent the day brainstorming possible solutions. I asked them "How can we support student mental health?" Nothing was off limits. Students responded with numerous creative and practical ideas (see Table C).

Table C. How can we support student mental health?

THEME	STUDENT RESPONSES
Terms of Labor	More breaks (2). In-school work day with no new assignments. Half-days on Friday. Longer lunch. Make up days. Free/work hour each day/study hall.
Administrators	Mental health Monday. Students can take off mental health days. Safe space/room. More mental health days. More clubs. Social days.
Teachers	Less work, more fun/activities. Less HW. Fewer tests. Less work. Looser deadlines.
Community	Fund raise/raise awareness. Parent/family/community outreach. Talk about it, educate about mental health. Better food. More school counselors/therapists. Counseling for families. Donations.

At this point our praxis became routine, a continuous cycle of search, refine, decide what was needed next, then proceed. With so many great ideas, we had to refine our solution to something that felt right-sized and doable. We spent our next class day crafting various research questions that could help us address these problems. Students began by forming their own research questions in their table groups. Once each student had their question, we spent time workshopping them as a class. This was an incredibly important step. Most student research questions started out as vague and generalized. I was able to provide feedback and direction to guide them to more specific research questions. After a little practice my students came up with a

number of focused research questions to aid them in supporting the mental health of students. (see Table D).

Table D. Student Research Questions

STUDENT RESEARCH QUESTIONS
• "What methods can help with mental health?" • "Why don't schools do more to help students with mental health?" • "How can students raise mental health awareness?" • "What student mental health programs already exist in schools?" • "How do I help someone with depression?" • "What can schools, teachers, and students do to support student mental health?" • "What are common mental health issues for students?" • "How does brain chemistry relate to student mental health?" • "What more can schools do to teach students about mental health?"

With these research questions we began our final round of research. My students visited various websites, read articles, viewed videos, took notes, and conversed with one another about their discoveries with little explicit instruction or direction from me (see Table E). The speed with which my students got to work and the sustained focus and determination they exhibited seemed to indicate authentic engagement in the learning process. To my perception, these moments fully validated the idea that when students perceive personal connection and relevance with a topic, learning is natural, energizing, social, and humanizing.

Table E. Student Researched Solutions

STUDENT RESEARCHED SOLUTIONS
• Therapy animals. • Teacher education and training for mental health support. • Gamification of learning. • More school counselors. • Social emotional learning for students. • Positive school environment. • Wellness Wednesday or mental health Monday. • Mental health breaks. • Cultivate social support.

- Mental health check ins.
- Support physical health.
- Mindfulness.
- Students education about mental health support.
- Safe spaces.
- Excused absences for mental health.
- Parent/community outreach and education about mental health support.

We used one final democratic process to determine what exactly we would try to put into practice at our school. My students elected to advocate for having an emotional support animal at our school. Strong interest was also expressed for mental health breaks and social emotional learning. Several students had researched the benefits of emotional support animals and were able to make convincing arguments to their peers as to why one would be helpful. With the decision made, we discussed how to go about implementing this solution.

My students drafted personal testimonies about the need for additional mental support at school. I drafted a formal proposal for our principal, explaining the original intent of our project and how it arrived at a request for an emotional support animal. I included research notes from my students as well as their personal testimonies. I had my students sign off on everything I said to make sure I had accurately reflected their experiences. The principal graciously received our proposal and expressed admiration and enthusiasm, but went on to inform us that such a matter would have to wait to be brought up during a budget meeting over the summer.

And with that, the working portion of our project was finished. It was now March, Spring break was days away, the specter of state testing loomed in April, and then anticipation for summer break would be near enough to entertain. We would have to wait until the following school year to find out if our efforts materialized, and by that time my students would be downstairs at the high school. Despite the uncertainty, I felt proud of what we had done. Our

success went beyond the project's material outcome. Our success was the way we learned, communicated, and engaged in problem-solving processes.

What I Learned About Myself as a Teacher

Deconstruct Hierarchies

Throughout the course of this project, I discovered that the more I tried to lead my classes in the traditional sense, as a narrating teacher, the less my students wanted to engage and take an active role in their learning. This phenomenon was evident during phase two of our project when we explored topics of student interest that had been uncovered during phase one. For each topic we explored I encountered initial interest and engagement followed by a saturation point when the students would disengage. It happened during our exploration of personal finance knowledge, then again during our exploration of climate change, and with each subsequent topic. The common theme was that I was teaching them about topics they were interested in, but I was still controlling the information being presented. I was telling them what I thought they needed to know about the topics they were interested in. Their engagement didn't last because they were not active as agents of their own learning.

During those times of information saturation and loss of student engagement, I felt profound discouragement. I doubted my ability to effectively live up to my guiding principle for the project and meaningfully engage with my students. Allowing ourselves to go backwards in our project helped us to move forward. We had lost some continuity because of the holidays, and since being back from break we seemed to be having limited success. In late January I decided that we needed a reset. I instructed our students to check in, just like the first day of our project,

so that we could refocus on each other and what we needed. I was reminded of my students' capabilities and I recommitted to partnering with them in a supporting role.

The conversational time in January proved to be effective in guiding our project towards the third and final phase. Just like the first day, our room came alive, the students reminded me that their critical and creative human energy was abundant. I had to admit that my attempts at reaching them during phase two, while improved, were not yet sufficient at achieving authentic humanizing engagement. In the end, it wasn't any of my ideas that led us into our deepest levels of engagement - the exploration of student mental health. Rather, it was my students' advocating for their own needs and attempting to emancipate from their own perceived oppression that got us there. This suggests that problem-posing teachers will need to be comfortable accepting a supportive and guiding role, while allowing students to become partners in their emancipation.

Redefine Success

The notion that journeys possess as much, if not more value than their destinations is undoubtedly an overused cliché; however, I cannot deny its truth in my experience with this project. By its conclusion all we had gained in tangibly affecting our system was knowledge that our proposal for an emotional support animal would be brought up in the budget committee over the summer. That's something, but we had no sense of the likelihood that it would be approved, or even how seriously our proposal would be taken. Even if it were approved for the following school year, my students would be in high school by then. An outsider, a skeptic, or a traditionalist might look at our time and energy invested into this project and wonder what we actually accomplished.

What I believe was successful about this project was the experience my students had in redefining their roles in gaining knowledge and their purpose for applying it. My students

seemed to greatly appreciate and respond to being included in the process and outcome of their learning. In this instance, at least, education changed from something that is done to them to something that they are a part of. With the space to express themselves freely, explore relevant topics, identify problems within their system, then attempt to emancipate from their oppression, my students' overall attitude and demeanor significantly changed. My students seemed happier, more talkative, and more hopeful. All of this contributed to a style of learning that, despite its hiccups and uncertainties, produced meaningful and empowering experiences for them and for me as their teacher.

For this project, “success” was dialogue, community, and process. Success was conversations about the death penalty, conversations about the ethics of population control, conversations about student mental health, and the hope that our efforts might effect change. Success was allowing ourselves the time and space to be human for a few minutes everyday amidst a system that didn’t seem to value that. Success was trying something new when what was old was unhelpful. Success was our willingness to grow and adapt to each other, to ask difficult questions, and to construct answers until they were acceptable.

One of my proudest moments as a teacher was at the end of the school year, several weeks after we had submitted the proposal to our principal. One of my students came to visit me at the end of the day, she told me she had been admitted to the high school student council. The high school student council has a prestigious reputation in our district, and is known for only admitting a small handful of eighth grade applicants. She said that she talked about our project during her entrance interviews and that they were very impressed. She seemed to think that was what led to her admission.

Trust, Critically Self-Reflect, and Hope

From the very first day of our project when my student in fourth-period asked me why we were doing this, to the very end when I handed our proposal to our principal, I experienced a profound and complex mix of thoughts and emotions. Despite a firm belief in the guiding principle for my project, and a trust in the research backed literature that I drew from, I still had a sense that I might be stepping too far outside of my role as an eighth-grade teacher of early American history. As our project evolved, I found myself struggling with the extent of its effectiveness, and wondering if our time spent was appropriate and justifiable.

In addition to my doubts regarding my role, competency and effectiveness, I also experienced difficulty, at times, fully trusting my students to become partners in their schooling. It is difficult as an adult, as a teacher, to admit that you might not know what is best for the young people you are charged with educating. I think, as teachers and as adults, we want to tell ourselves that we know what is best, and I think we are largely conditioned and expected to think this way. And we certainly do have valuable knowledge and experience to offer our students. However, young people possess perspective and wisdom that has the potential to create real positive change in the world, if we give them the chance to use it. When we turn them into empty receptacles to be filled with factoids all day everyday then define success as the regurgitation of these factoids, we risk alienating them, and ourselves, from this potential.

Trust in myself and trust in my students had to be supported by a significant amount of honesty. I had to be honest with myself that my earlier efforts as a teacher were unsatisfactory. I had to be honest with myself that it wasn't my students' fault for being disengaged. I had to be honest with them about why we were doing this at the onset of our project, and in the middle of it when things stagnated. Most significantly, I had to be honest with myself about my philosophy

for education. What did I really want to impart and cultivate in my students, and how could I reach that goal? Honestly answering these questions and critically self-reflecting, empowered me to empower my students along our journey of humanizing pedagogy.

The most important element in all of this was belief in and intentional manifestation of hope. Hope was always there for us in the abstract, but our actions and our intentions led us to construct a closer relationship with hope, and to embody it as we proceeded. Hope allowed us to believe that we might be able to change our realities. We didn't need a guarantee, just a small spark for what was possible. That by itself allowed us to grow and construct knowledge with relevance to our lives. Without a sense of hope we might have given up along the way, and reverted to the seemingly inevitable doldrums of our situation.

Applying My Theoretical Lens

Reconciling the Student-Teacher Relationship

Most of us who enter the teaching profession do so for benevolent reasons. We want to help, we want to make a positive difference in the lives of our students, and a positive difference for society. We knowingly accept a lesser salary in exchange for a certain kind of social wealth that is earned in service to the greater public good. Without naming the concept, many teachers would likely champion the idea of humanization (Freire, 1970) and declare their support for freedom and justice. I was no different, I entered the profession with the desire to help improve the lives of my students, in any way I could. What I discovered was that the concept of student success has become externally defined, we are telling students what success means instead of allowing them to construct that for themselves.

The difficult but necessary step toward humanization is the recognition of dehumanization (Freire, 1970) in our society and in our education system. As things unfolded at my middle school I couldn't ignore what I perceived as dehumanizing practices. The loss of teacher autonomy coupled with the proliferation of standardized testing created a climate that I perceived as unjust and oppressive, for students and teachers. When I learned how my students were experiencing their schooling, and how many of them reported a relationship between our school and their poor mental health, I became disillusioned with the construct of the noble selfless teacher. I began to recognize my role as complicit in a system of oppression, supported by a mere illusion that I was fighting the good fight. Once I saw things that way, I couldn't accept them, so I attempted to change my own practices.

I reflected on my relationship with my students and noticed the many troubling similarities to Freire's (1970, p. 44-48) banking education. It was common for me to practice a narrating style of teaching as I conceptualized my role as somebody who must impart vast quantities of knowledge along to my students in a strict and regimented fashion. This conceptualization was supported by constructs such as institutional uniformity of instruction and hyper focus on standardized testing. Due to my position of authority as a teacher, there was an implication that my relationship to my students was that of subject versus object. Too often, I acted as "purveyor of knowledge" (Freire, 1970, p. 44) while they listened and attempted to contain information that was alien to their existential experience. The result was a contradictory relationship (Freire, 1970, p. 45) between myself and my students. My teaching was irrelevant to them, so they enacted behavior that many would label as being a "bad student", unmotivated, and disengaged. My students became alienated from their learning in the same way I was alienated from my teaching. Freire (1970, p. 45) notes that alienation in this fashion leads to

marginalization and dehumanization, hence the widespread personal frustration and student disengagement that I was experiencing.

To achieve personal professional satisfaction and student engagement I had to resolve the contradictory student-teacher relationship in my own practice. I had to practice a pedagogy that honored my students' lived experiences, and allowed them to locate and apply knowledge toward problems that were personally relevant to them. I had to practice dialogue, listening, and compromise. I found that this was not a mere "technique" that could not be implemented overnight or achieved by any singular action, but rather it was the result of a paradigm shift and many small intentional changes made to my practice over time. The first phase of our project, the group discussions centered around thoughtful questions, marked the beginning of our journey away from narration and into dialogue. The second phase was characterized by a search for meaning and relevance within our daily roles, and the struggle to emerge from the system that had conditioned us. Eventually, this materialized into our third phase, the exploration of student mental health problems at our middle school, which gave space for my students' desires for justice to be acted upon.

As my focus shifted to the discovery, exploration, and implementation of problems that were chosen by my students as relevant to them, I began to experience significantly improved student engagement. My project allowed my students the space to become "beings for themselves" (Freire, 1970, p. 47) as they naturally engaged their "ontological vocation" (Freire, 1970, p. 48) once the constraints of their oppression were lifted. Throughout our project we engaged in a humanizing praxis (Freire, 1970, p. 52) as our conversations, efforts, failures, reflections, and further actions constructed a sense of hope and community. By the end of our project, my relationship with my students had clearly and fundamentally changed. I no longer

practiced narration, but instead participated in conversations, and asked them to guide our learning themselves. As much as possible, I ignored the systemic pressures to impart knowledge onto them, and instead I allied with them as they sought knowledge they needed to seek their own justice.

Problem-Posing Education for Student Mental Health

Problem-posing education is Freire's (1970, p. 53-59) proposed alternative to banking education, and to the contradictory student-teacher relationship. Chief among the aims of problem-posing education is the transition from narration to dialogue. The former being characterized by a top down authoritative paradigm between the teacher and their students, and the latter being characterized by solidarity and sharing of knowledge between teacher and students. Problem-posing educators use dialogue to discover external factors that are oppressing, exploiting, and dehumanizing their students. Oftentimes these realities are accepted or perceived as "static" or "just the way things are". Problem-posing educators continue to use dialogue in order to help their students perceive their own dehumanization not as inevitable, but as imposed upon them, and as something they can take action to change.

Dialogue was a defining element of our project from start to finish. Dialogue allowed us to share ourselves, our perceptions, and our realities with each other, and uncover the knowledge that we would need in order to transform our realities. Each dialogue session that we had allowed us to construct meaning out of our experiences at school. Asking about what they wanted to change and learn helped me to understand how my students saw the world at large, and the daily world they existed in. I began to perceive that we were being dehumanized by the system we found ourselves in. Once we began to explore this, it felt like we were on the same team, working together with the same goal; to humanize our education experience.

Freire (1970, p. 59) writes that liberation is not something that can be given to the oppressed, the oppressed must lead their own liberation. By that token, dialogue alone was not sufficient. Dialogue aroused our critical consciousness and led us into the action of humanizing, attempting to change the reality we perceived as dehumanizing. While we uncovered numerous problems that we perceived to be dehumanizing, we ended up consolidating our efforts toward solving one localized problem: poor student mental health. The students identified this problem, discussed its root causes, then researched and proposed their own solution. While the final outcome may or may not materialize, the very process of doing so was humanizing in its own right and proved to be significantly more engaging than my efforts during phase two, when I instructed them about other uncovered topics of interest.

The engagement my students exhibited during the process of problem-posing education was significantly greater than anything in my career I previously experienced. Freire (1970, p. 54) describes a sense of obligation to intervene once dehumanization has been unveiled. I attribute the engagement my students displayed to this phenomenon. Once they began to see their own mental health struggles as deeply connected to the practices of our school, they were determined to do everything in their power to transform their reality.

Vulnerability to Strengthen the Self that Teaches

In the midst of my frustration, prior to beginning this research, I often found myself questioning my role, my purpose, and my effectiveness as a teacher. For the most part, what and how I should teach were decided for me. So why was I teaching, and who really was I as a teacher? Palmer (1997, p. 4) critiques contemporary education reform for ignoring the selves of teachers, an omission he argues inhibits the formation of quality relationships with students. Decisions made by my institution reduced my selfhood as a teacher to a monitor of menial tasks

and a proprietor of paperwork. I was told that completion of these tasks would lead my students to have success on standardized tests, and that success on these tests would lead them to success in their adult lives. All the while myself as a teacher seemed nonexistent.

"Success" is a broad social construct open to a multitude of interpretations and humans are complex individual beings. Success amidst accountability culture seems to be narrower in scope, and is often characterized by compliance and achievement within the context of a college and career pathway. While this is objectively worthy as one facet of success, it seems to have become the dominant norm, leaving little room for personal fulfillment or empowerment as alternatives. Palmer (1997, p. 5) identifies intellect, emotion, and spirit as the pinnacle qualities of our selfhood as individual beings. He cautions that education reduced to only the intellectual, as it had been at my school and seemingly many others, becomes a cold abstraction because it ignores the full selves of teachers and students. The way we feel about learning, and more specifically, the value and relevance that we feel towards our learning are incredibly important, and seem to be missing from systemic concepts of student success.

In Palmer's (1997, p. 10-12) view, fear allows for and reinforces the status quo in the culture of education, while vulnerability allows for growth, connection, and transformation. I experienced a great deal of fear prior to beginning this project, and throughout its duration. Admitting to myself and to the people I trusted as professional mentors that I believed I was ineffective, and perhaps inadvertently harmful, felt incredibly vulnerable. Openly stating that I believe my institution, and the education system, are oppressive, I felt even more vulnerable. But, it was making these admissions, seeking guidance from academic literature, and remembering who I really wanted to be as a teacher that allowed me to align myself with the interests of my students.

My fear and vulnerability in relation to the status quo eventually met my fear and vulnerability regarding change. What if my efforts at change were naive and misguided? What if I was doing a disservice to my students, giving them a false hope? Transformation and emancipation might be fascinating ideas for a college seminar, but could they really be adapted for middle school instruction? Maybe we were straying too far off course. Maybe I was depriving them of discipline, structure, and rigor. Gladly, I do not believe any of those things are true when I reflect on our project, but I share them to illuminate some of the darkness along the way.

Throughout our project vulnerability consistently led to engagement and growth. I remember being worried that I would lose my credibility by admitting to them that I didn't think classes were going well. In many ways it would have been easier, and socially acceptable among my peers, if I had maintained my righteousness by positioning them as "bad students" or "apathetic teens". Once I started asking for their input my students' attitudes toward class began to change, seemingly because they felt that their voices and ideas were valued. They actually saw me as more credible as I became, in their words, "more real". I believe that this in turn allowed them to become more vulnerable with me.

Vulnerability acted as a catalyst for authentic learning. Vulnerability allowed us to learn about each other, and what kind of learning we valued. Without this, we never would have learned about population growth, climate change, personal finance, or Mexican history. Returning to vulnerability when things stagnated during phase two led us into our deep exploration of student mental health in phase three.

At the project's conclusion I view fear and vulnerability as necessary catalysts of growth and learning. They provided the spark which, slowly but surely, grew into a classroom culture

where our inner-selves emerged and were “re-membered” (Palmer, 1997, p. 21). This is the process of rebuilding, rediscovering, and reclaiming the power of ourselves as teachers and learners and occurs within the context of being “dismembered” by our culture of fear. Teaching is an act of love and connection, and if we forget that, then no system, procedure, or technique can suffice.

Navigating the Culture of Fear

Palmer (1997, p. 36) observes fear and disconnection as qualities that must be understood in order to be resisted. Accountability culture creates fear for schools as their funding is influenced by their end of year performance. Schools permeate fear via disconnection with grades, departments, competition, and bureaucracy. Teachers and students exist within this swirling context of fear and disconnection and must choose how they will react.

In my experience, the amount of fear that students and teachers experience cannot be overstated. Fear of being wrong. Fear of wasting time. Fear of going against culture and system. Fear of alienation, scrutiny, and failure. Fear of incompetence. Fear of despair. Fear of causing harm. Palmer (1997, p. 39-40) notes that fear is not actually a bad thing, leaning into fear can actually lead to greater connection and learning.

To prevent a disconnecting reaction to fear Palmer (1997, p. 37-39) provides three steps for teachers: self-knowledge, pluralism, and change. For me, this meant first acknowledging the necessity for a change in my teaching. Second, and perhaps more difficult, was realizing my own limitations in creating this change. Myself alone could not create change sufficient enough to fully engage with my students. I had to accept that the real driving force of change would be group driven and emerge from pluralism (Palmer, 1997, p. 38); the existence of multiple viewpoints, each contributing to the construction of knowledge. In the end I found myself and

my relationships with my students to be completely changed by the synthesis of our many viewpoints. By opening myself up to the lived realities of my students, I became realigned with them, and humanization became an active reality.

Chapter 5: Implications

This study was conducted to explore the potential of problem-posing education (Freire, 1970, p. 44-57) to improve student engagement in my middle school social studies classroom. For three months I utilized praxis to study how best I could incorporate this social and academic philosophy into my daily teaching practice. We began with a dialectic phase of uncovering student interests, concerns, needs, wants, circumstances, and worldviews. Second was a teacher-led phase whereupon I created lessons to teach them about topics uncovered during the dialectic phase. Finally, we arrived at a student-centered phase where I partnered with my students and supported them as they learned how they could address a democratically selected topic, poor student mental health at our middle school.

What I found was a significant increase in student engagement with implications for all teachers and schools who are interested in practicing a pedagogy that is authentic, humanizing, and transformative. After adjusting my approach in the classroom, I learned that many of my students possessed deep knowledge about the world and a strong desire to enact positive change locally and globally. It was also apparent that the impetus of student disengagement was rooted in our accountability culture; which was miseducating them to a point of apathy and alienation, and contributing to real psychological harm. Problem-posing education provided space for them to learn as subjects of their own lives and agents of their own education. It also provided space for me to reflect on my role as a teacher and the role of education in society. While I began with the intention of formulating problem-posing as a useful teaching technique, the reality is that problem-posing is a social philosophy that can use education as a tool to enact emancipation and liberation within the context of our oppressive global society.

Furthermore, I discovered that my own conception of student engagement transformed, as did my relationships with my students. At the onset of this project I wanted my students to pay more attention to me, focus more on the readings I chose, work harder on the assignments I constructed, and bring more curiosity, positivity, and motivation into the classroom. I thought that if I could learn more about my students via dialogue then I could more effectively lead them to engage with me and the traditional eighth grade history curriculum. My conditioning in the education system, first as a student, then as a teacher, had reinforced the concept of a narrating teacher (Freire, 1970, p. 44-45) leading their students to the knowledge that they lacked. I found that once I critically self-reflected upon my role as their teacher and deconstructed the hierarchy embedded in our school and broader culture, I became a partner in my students' efforts to seek knowledge that they perceived as necessary to achieve justice. This partnership led their engagement to become willing and sustained, and it created a sense that I was meaningfully educating them.

I found that problem-posing education led to a renewed alignment with my philosophy of education, which is to create informed ecologically democratic citizens who understand the world and desire to become positive forces, locally and globally. After some time of teaching through this philosophical lens I found a sense of hope that many of my students were developing and utilizing a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970, p. 9). Despite our call as teachers to do good, the sad reality is that many teachers, like students, are experiencing forces of oppression that negatively impact their morale and utility. This demoralization of teachers inevitably leads to a lower quality of educational experience for their students, and subsequent disengagement. Problem-posing education helped me to feel like I was making a difference by supporting the empowerment of my students to seek their own justice from education and

society. Other teachers who have had similar concerns about the present state of the education system could explore problem-posing as a lens through which to enact their curriculum.

These findings implicate problem-posing education as an effective means for engaging teaching in middle school social studies, and perhaps beyond, with wide ranging benefits for teachers, schools, and society. Engagement with problem-posing education is born from a student-centric perspective, specifically the aim is for students to transform aspects of reality they find oppressive. While some students may express ideas that are antithetical to the spirit of education for democratic citizenship and humanization, I have found that these are within the minority. Most of my students, in alignment with Freire's (1970, p. ??) declaration of humanization as the ontological vocation of the people, desired to learn about the external conditions of oppression, and how to address them.

Implications for teachers.

Middle school teachers who wish to explore problem-posing should do so with the intention to partner with their students as they seek to perceive and then liberate themselves from the oppression they experience at school. It will mean an acknowledgement from teachers that accountability culture is oppressive and traditional standardized curriculum, when influenced by accountability culture, is not preparing young people to develop in a healthy fashion or meet the problems of today's complex global society. Teachers must also be prepared to critically self-reflect on the harmful experiences students have at schools, the roles teachers occupy within these schools and towards those harmful experiences, then commit to taking action with their students to redress their causes. This student-teacher partnership will require teachers to invest meaningful time and energy into learning about their students: their inner selves, their interests and concerns, and their lived experiences. Teachers will also need to be willing and able to reject

the traditional top down student-teacher relationship and enact a dialectical partnership with their students. It is necessary for teachers to accept that many of their students are imminently qualified to be full partners in transformational change.

Interested teachers may struggle with the when, where, and how of problem-posing. There is no objective recipe for success. Each community of students will have different perceptions of the problems affecting them and a dialectical student-teacher partnership will be necessary to uncover them. In my experience, problem-posing did not seem to have any effect on students' willingness to engage with traditional curriculum, but it did uncover a humanizing curriculum which in our case was much more focused on contemporary social issues. This seems to suggest that current methods of instruction, when influenced by our accountability culture, have become irrelevant and ineffective, and that those in charge need to reconstruct our social studies educational model to reflect students' desires to address pressing issues in today's world. Additionally, the students at my school did not see themselves reflected in early American history, nor did they feel that their voices were being heard. For other teachers who have experienced similar challenges teaching social studies, a problem-posing approach to their classroom could help them to reach their students and make connections between curriculum and students' inner-worlds.

I want to be clear that I do not support a metaphorical burning down of all that has been established. In my criticism of accountability culture and traditional curriculum, I have not lost sight of the fact that many of my predecessors have done and continue to do excellent work. But, I cannot ignore what I have experienced, and that is a dramatic need for innovative approaches to social studies instruction and curriculum; and perhaps beyond. Students want to learn, but they are not being reached. We need to meet them where they can make personal connections to

content, apply knowledge to their lives, and create spaces of hope for new ideas in the world they will inherit. I suggest a radical reconstruction of social studies education that is student-centered and uses problem-posing to prepare students to address the social, political, economic, and ecologic dilemmas of the twenty-first century.

Discussion about innovation and new approaches with buzzwords like transformative and student-centered are likely to inspire deep concern for many of public education's stakeholders, teachers included. Some teachers who read this might be concerned about the idea of adolescent aged students becoming partners in their classrooms. One colleague in particular responded to me after I described my research to them by asking, "What do they [the students] know?" in a tone that suggested skepticism and bemusement. Student-centered does not mean anything goes, lack of structure and discipline, or the absence of academic rigor. In fact, more often than not my students' chosen topics intersected with state learning standards and objectives. For example, seven out of twelve Oklahoma academic standards for eighth grade social studies call for student analyses of "political, economic, and social transformations" during specific time periods (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2019). Problem-posing education can coexist with state learning standards for social studies and traditional curriculum, though it does need to be restricted to a linear chronological survey of historical events.

The most important thing teachers can do is provide space for students to express themselves and listen to what they have to say without judging or attempting to impose their perspective. Problem-posing is not a transactional gimmick where I give you ten minutes to talk to each other then you give me forty minutes of undivided attention while I lecture about interstate commerce or the settlement of Oregon. Problem posing is a relationship building endeavor aimed at understanding and validating the concerns and interests that students have,

then expanding on those to create authentic learning experiences. This approach stands in contrast to the impact that accountability culture has had on traditional standardized education because it treats students as agents of their own education and subjects of their own lives rather than passive containers for objective knowledge.

As students begin to express their concerns and perceptions, teachers must dedicate time to address these concerns with the intention of seeking solutions and transformation. Problem-posing teachers should find out what students already know about problems of interest, then help students decide what they need to learn in order to achieve their goal of solving the problem. This aspect of problem posing may cause teachers to experience discomfort and role confusion because they might not have expertise regarding the information their students seek. Problem-posing teachers can actually lean into this uncertainty as an opportunity to create solidarity with their students and strengthen their partnership by working together. In addition, it is always okay to seek assistance from others who can help you to find the solutions you are looking for, and we should remember that as teachers we should also be committed to being life-long learners.

Implications for schools.

In my experience, problem-posing education was highly effective at engaging students with contemporary social issues, but not with traditional social studies curriculum. This suggests that social studies curriculum centered around traditional history and geography, while fascinating and valuable, is not connecting with young people; who tend to view contemporary issues as much more relevant and urgent. Social studies are by nature interdisciplinary, so the inclusion of fields like psychology, cultural anthropology, and the intersection of race, class, gender, and economics seem to be warranted as topics that will allow students to address the

problems they perceive as pertinent to their humanization. Students exhibited a great curiosity and willingness, which many would call engagement, to learn about problems like climate change, socioeconomic inequity, and mental health; however, this did not transfer to engagement with traditional curriculum or institution prescribed teaching practices put in place to succeed amidst accountability culture. Secondary social studies education largely attempts to create informed democratic citizens with a past to present approach along a standardized track. This system is ostensibly intended to prepare them, by the time they graduate high school, to be well informed democratic citizens; however, it is causing disinterest and disengagement due to its irrelevance to the lives of students.

This may not be accidental. Anyon (1980) explored social reproduction of education in working class schools, and observed that students were being conditioned to obey authority and follow directions, seemingly to become workers in the lower tiers of our capitalist economy. Houser (1995) commented on the trivialization and sanitation of social studies education to avoid instruction about topics that may be perceived as uncomfortable and controversial. The Texas legislature passed HB 3979 and SB 3 in 2021 to silence instruction regarding race, gender, and systemic oppression. In 2022 the state of Florida passed the "Parental Rights in Education Act" censoring information regarding sexuality and gender identity education from being taught. There is considerable evidence that external actors, who are not education professionals, are attempting to influence the public education system for social, political, and economic interest. Such actors, whose interests are to maintain positions of elevated status and privilege, would certainly benefit from purporting social studies as boring, trivial, and unnecessary to prevent future generations from challenging them or addressing their undue privilege. Thus, the cycle of dehumanization is perpetuated and the need for humanization is realized.

Similar dehumanizing laws aimed at silencing the voices of countless young Americans have passed in other states, including Oklahoma. Problem-posing education is a philosophy that can allow schools to align with student voices, American voices. It begins with what students perceive as relevant here and now, and uses these problems to build engagement, while learning how to create social transformation. These problems, which for my students ranged from political equity, climate justice, socioeconomic progress, and personal wellness, can be backfilled with valuable historic knowledge. The difference is the students allow their natural critical mind to determine the information that is pertinent to their being a democratic citizen. Instead of starting in the past and filling in to the present, problem posing starts with the present and fills in whatever is necessary from the past, in order to create positive change for the future.

Because of the significant engagement effect of problem posing education, further research seems warranted on a potential conjunction of state learning standards and problem posing methodology. For example, student interest in climate change could be aligned with instruction about the industrial revolution. The Oklahoma academic standard for social studies 8.9: "The student will analyze the social and economic transformations of the early nineteenth century." and subsequent objective 8.9.1 "Explain the impact of the industrial revolution in the north including the concentration of population, manufacturing, and transportation." (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2019) seem to have value and relevance for education about climate, economic, and ecological justice.

A selection of mission statements from the three largest public-school districts in my state revealed ideas strongly aligned with the principles of problem posing education. A suburban district reports their mission as follows, "To prepare and inspire all students to achieve their full potential. A leader in reform and innovation. Create good citizens who are prepared to

be engaged members of the community." One urban district publishes their as, "Every day, …will ignite a passion for learning in every child, invite families to engage, and inspire respectful and trusting relationships with our diverse community." Another urban district declares their mission, "to inspire and prepare every student to love learning, achieve ambitious goals, and make positive contributions to our world." Problem posing education is ideally suited to help schools enact their principles and prepare students for the modern world.

Shared insights.

This is as far as I got. My relationship with my students changed dramatically, as did the energy in my classroom. Despite this shift, we failed to enact any material change on our system. As I complete the writing portion of this project I have the knowledge that our proposal for an emotional support animal was not accepted. Still, much was gained, and; we are only one classroom, in one school, in one state, in one nation. To enact substantial meaningful change to address forces of oppression and dehumanization will require a worldwide revolution of thought and belief. Humans will have to critically reflect and change the way they think about and view systems, small and large. Imagine if one classroom in every school, in every state or province, of every nation or territory, all over the world approached education through the problem-posing lens. The limit situations (Freire, 1970, p. 99) that so many of us have learned, the belief that we cannot have any effect on issues that plague humanity, could be unlearned and replaced with hope, possibility, and practical humanization.

When I first began my project, I viewed problem posing as another technique to add into my practice, but after spending time learning about my students and their perception of school, I critically reflected on the role education plays in society, and I realized that it was bigger than

technique, it was about a change in mindset, relationship, and way of being. Problem-posing is a commitment to supporting students, and perhaps teachers, to become more fully human amidst an education system that, for both, and perhaps others, has become dehumanizing. Problem-posing education should not be imposed upon teachers, or mandated as some sort of requisite savior; but, it deserves consideration by teachers and schools seeking authentic engagement and justice-oriented learning experiences.

Teachers who are ready to critically reflect on their practice should ask themselves why they became teachers in the first place. Most likely the answer is to create good for individual students, their communities, the nation, and perhaps the entire world. The next step would be to think honestly about our education system, our factory model born during the industrial revolution, and ask if we can do better. Finally, the notion of better must be considered and discussed at length, what does better mean, and how can we create equitable betterment for all stakeholders. I profess that betterment in the classroom must be uncovered using dialogue between students and teachers, as they move towards partnership and away from traditional hierarchies.

Deconstructing traditional hierarchies could be a remarkable epistemological transition, as the viewpoint of knowledge belonging to a privileged few meted out on a need to know basis can dissipate. The present model of public secondary education, which mostly adheres to traditional hierarchies, implies that success has a single external definition, and that schools know better than you what you need to know in order to be successful. History has shown us that so much of what passes for success and progress within traditional hierarchies, benefits those at the top much more so than it benefits the rest. Schooling often seeks to reproduce society in this model, but problem-posing education has the potential to transform society and deconstruct these

hierarchies. Knowledge and success, when socially constructed by the people, the students, the humans, with the teachers, and even the administrators and community members in solidarity, can become progress for all of us.

The culture of fear (Palmer, 1997, p. 36-40) in education, as well as dehumanizing forces (Freire, 1970, p. 44), contribute to a sense of othering and isolation between people in the education system. Students are seen as wild or uncaring, teachers as wicked or incompetent, admin as out of touch or cold, and parents and families as suspicious or unsupportive. All the while, communities lose their faith in the merit of public education. External factors of oppression; some of them politicians and private interests; take advantage of this loss of faith and enact controlling measures that further dehumanize our schools. This cycle needs to be stopped from the ground floor.

Student-teacher solidarity was a core tenet of my experience with problem-posing education. I learned to perceive how my students were experiencing their schooling, which motivated me to make significant adjustments to my practices in my classroom. The solidarity we experienced empowered our humanizing educational experiences. I would extend the importance of our solidarity to all other stakeholders in public education; parents and families, community members, and administrators. Palmer (1997, p. 4-30) wrote of the value of the self that teaches. Parents, teachers, and administrators each have value and the potential to create solidarity with each other to share their values, in much the same way that my students and I did. Dialogue between these stakeholders, in the same fashion as a problem-posing (Freire, 1970, p. 53-59) dialectic, could lead to a practical reconstruction of our education system, in a model that is humanizing for all.

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