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May 16, 2012

Final Project: Option 5

Alone in America

There is a scene in the PBS documentary, “The First Year,” (a film that chronicles five TFA’s and their challenging first year of teaching in the Los Angeles public school system) where a fifth-grade, at-risk Latino child who has been disrupting a guest speaker (a reformed gang-banger trying to warn youngsters of the dangers of joining gangs) pushes the presenter to his limit. “Do you think this is *funny*?” the lecturer demands of the disrespectful audience-member who laughed when the speaker spoke of the death of his friends due to gang activity. “Do you think that *dying* is funny? How would you feel if someone *you* loved died? How would you feel if it was your *mother* who was killed?” The little boy’s smirk never faded. What the speaker couldn’t know, however, was that the boy’s response was all false bravado because the child’s mother *was* dead: she had been killed the year before.

To say that these children come from a culture as foreign to white-bread America as that of third-world countries would not be an overstatement to those in the trenches. There is a learning curve that demands awareness, attention, and respect. But, first, we have to examine that which we do not know: the definition of culture, itself.

What *is* culture? We have so many definitions of it, yet no one has agreed on a simple explanation. If you were to ask a third grader what culture was, he or she would probably respond with a definition including food, music, religious celebrations, or dress. Meanwhile, Webster’s dictionary defines culture as the [integrated](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrate) pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations. So which one is right?

Maybe culture isn’t easily definable—one of those words that will always have an ongoing debate as to what it includes. Are culture and religion one and the same? Which one carries more weight in society? Either way, culture is something that influences *any* person’s background—not just at-risk children from lower socio-economic groups. And *that* is what schools need to realize.

Too often, culture is explored from an aesthetic perspective (traditions, rituals, practices, etc.). Yes, teaching about other cuisines and customs is great for enlightening the minds of young students, but what’s more important is exploring the question of culturally relevant approaches and concerns: How do we teach to students who come from such different backgrounds in one classroom? How do we form the necessary bonds with our pupils to encourage them to excel, instead of giving into the norm of failing schools and allowing them to become just another statistic emblematic of high minority dropouts in urban schools?

Fortunately, two practices have combated the platform of assumption that all children come from similar educational and cultural backgrounds. Culturally relevant teaching and critical pedagogy respect culture, and use curricula that emphasize an integrated approach to literacy and learning. However, there are still many students who do not encounter teachers who use this approach to learning, and struggle as a result. A case study in point (to which I will refer throughout this speech) was done on an eighth grade Mexican boy named Alejandro Juarez. This study was conducted back in the 1990s by ethnographic researcher Chris Liska Carger. Alejandro was one of the boys who eventually became a part of the statistic. Instructed in a Catholic school that had the one-way-or-the-highway approach to learning, he struggled to overcome tremendous obstacles that resulted from his bilingualism and lack of total comprehension of either the Spanish or English language.

Alejandro’s story is the perfect example of what determination can do, yet what fate can undo. Chris was Alejandro’s advocate, fighting for his rights and educational success in a system that was so obviously against going out of its way for Latino students. By the time he got into high school, his parents were terrified that the large school (and the influences of gangs and drugs) would distract Alejandro, thereby diverting him from his academics. Unfortunately, the worst ended up happening. Although Alejandro purposely stayed away from these things, *they* found *him.* One instance occurred after school when he got off at his bus stop. As Alejandro stepped off the bus, an African American kid demanded to know what gang he was in. Alejandro said that he didn’t belong to one, but they didn’t believe him. As a result, twenty African American boys jumped Alejandro and nearly destroyed his face, punching him mercilessly. Despite his efforts to avoid gangs and their negative influences, they somehow found him, nevertheless.

In addition, when he moved to Crown High School, staff cuts were made the first month, and Alejandro’s future was once more put in jeopardy. The learning disability program that he was guaranteed before the summer had now been cut and was subsequently removed from his schedule. His parents had neither the language nor the resources to confront administrators about this issue. Putting it simply: they couldn’t work the system because the system was stacked against them. Chris was Alejandro’s only advocate, and ended up calling the city bilingual director for more information. In one month, his program had been changed half a dozen times. How is this fair?

Outside of Special Ed, these children are often faced with similar issues in the classroom that are often as confounding as they are critical to their success. This is where the concept of culturally relevant reaching can literally change a person’s life. Alejandro was faced with assignments that had no connection to his life. His motivation and desire to learn the material waned, as it had no relevance to anything. For example: one of his assignments was to write about his trip to the dentist’s office. Alejandro had never been to a dentist. He construed it to be his experience visiting his doctor, instead. The majority of his classes were traditional lecture, note-taking, workbook, written-exercise formats that resulted in a passive response. This, in sharp contrast to his educational approach at home: In his family, oral history and collaboration were stressed. If this type of learning had been incorporated in his schooling, more connections between home and school would have been made, thereby facilitating his learning despite the literacy problem he faced.

There is an old adage: If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem. For Alejandro, sadly, that was often the case with teachers who couldn’t—or *wouldn’t*—help. Chris documented one such case. One of Alejandro’s teachers, Mrs. Wright, had a strict policy that she would never repeat things said orally in class. To her, failure to hear what she said had only one explanation: inattention. Barriers due to second languages were not entertained or given credibility in Mrs. Wright’s classroom. Before Alejandro got into high school, he tried everything in his power to succeed, despite the many obstacles he faced due to his background. As Chris put it, “He may get the words to the songs wrong, but he does not give up on the tune.”

When high school hit, he became just another statistic and eventually dropped out of school to work instead. Failing grades, negative peer influences, and curricula that had no relevance to his life were all ingredients for his inevitable surrender. How do we stop other Alejandro’s from experiencing the ultimate fate that he experienced?

At a time where thirty-one states have passed “English only” laws in classrooms, we need to find ways to encourage bilingualism, and put these kids on the path to success. Alejandro did not have the opportunity to enroll in a dual-language program early on, when it would have benefitted him the most. The implication for non-English-speaking children is painfully clear: Language in America is tied to identity, culture and home; by encouraging native languages, you are accepting one’s culture and skills. By denying them, you are shunning them and declaring their irrelevance in our society. It’s this all-or-nothing, one-size-fits-all mentality that confounds and complicates the system.

When Alejandro’s program was changed six times in one month, one of the first classes affected was a switch to an all Spanish-speaking class. At first glance, this might seem like a good idea—until you stop to ask the student. His parents were very frustrated with this move, considering they were upset that his English speaking skills were still very poor, and he wasn’t strong enough in Spanish (writing-wise) to do well in the course. Although a dual-language program would have helped him in his earlier years, being placed in it as a ninth grader was not of much help. There is, and will forever be, an ongoing battle as to the success and purpose of bilingual programs. If kids need to learn English, why should they be placed in a program that is completely in their native language? How successful can it really be? As there are pros and cons to everything, bilingual programs open up doors and opportunities for new methods of instruction, integrating relevant material (and language) into curricula, forming that bond with academics that kids need. We live in a world where linguistic diversity has an intrinsic value in our culture. By teaching a new language to kids, we are increasing their chances of success.

Critical pedagogy can also do the same thing. Incorporating culturally relevant teaching into its practice, it focuses on the right for students to critically question their social placement, instead of just accepting where they are. Sonia Nieto created a chart listing the levels of multicultural education in schools, ranging from monocultural education to affirmation, solidarity, and critique. In order to achieve the latter, the school must enforce “policies and practices that affirm diversity and challenge racism. There are high expectations for all students; students’ language and culture are used in instruction and curriculum. Two-way bilingual programs are in place wherever possible. Everyone takes responsibility for challenging racism and discrimination.”

In Alejandro’s case, if he had a teacher who believed in critical pedagogy, he would have had the confidence and the power to stand up for his programs, as well as the ability to use his language as a tool for change, as opposed to an excuse for failure. Using critical pedagogy in urban education would push us toward fundamentally changing the ethos of K-12 education from one of knowledge consumption to one of knowledge production. Because we don’t challenge students to ask questions about the system they’re in, education has remained the same for decades. Education could function as a mechanism for the development of a democratic and egalitarian social order if we use it the correct way. In the words of Antonia Darder:

The fundamental commitment of critical educators is to empower the powerless and transform those conditions that perpetuate human injustice and inequity. This purpose is inextricably linked to the fulfillment of what Paulo Freire (1970) defines as our "vocation" - to be truly humanized social agents in the world.  Hence, a major function of critical pedagogy is to critique, expose, and challenge the manner in which schools impact upon the political and cultural life of students.  Teachers must recognize how schools unite knowledge and power and how through this function they can work to influence or thwart the formation of critically thinking and socially active individuals.

There is an ongoing trend to teach the “basics” to remedial students. If you’ve ever walked into a remedial science class, there is an observable difference between that and a regular science class—in both diversity and course rigor. Some educators believe that minority students (with little English) need to be taught the fundamentals in a drill-and-kill, memorize-and-regurgitate manner. This is not only boring, it lacks basic motivation to try to relate the material in a fun and engaging way to the students.

Renowned educator Rafe Esquith (known for his books and documentary, “The Hobart Shakespearians,” where he inspires first-generation, immigrant fifth-graders to perform Shakespeare), defies every assumption made about disadvantaged minority children. He teaches far above their reading level, including high-school algebra and Shakespeare—all with incredible success. They excel far beyond their wildest expectations, and his classroom has become the ultimate model of success. His commitment to multi-cultural education is a model he encourages others to follow:

“There are hundreds of thousands of students …who are absolutely capable, but they’re not being given the opportunity. As I always tell my kids, ‘It’s not my job to save your soul, but it’s my job to give you an opportunity to save your own soul.’ I can’t make a kid smarter or better, but I can give them the opportunity to become that and show them how to do that.”

However, no matter how successful these programs may be, there is always someone plotting against it. Just like how the Mexican-American Studies program was shut down in the Tuscon School District, many others are facing negativity from opposers. The only way that we can overcome these obstacles is to infiltrate the system with determined, encouraging people who will battle the system and break the code to make sure every single student is reached.

It always frustrates me that the general public continually harps on how “our schools are failing.” It is not the *schools* that are failing, it is *society*. Schools are set up to reflect society’s values. They perform in accordance with its principles and ideals. It has always been the norm that *someone* has to fail. I remember watching the news one night, and the headline story was “Do we really need college?” The concept behind this statement was that the idea of success is so pervasive right now, that if everyone were successful, there would be no comparison for failure, and therefore *no one* would be special. It stressed how society needs those “failures” to run small businesses, to serve as the cashiers, to be employed by the town for trash removal. To say this was elitist would not be an exaggeration; it angered me beyond belief. Not only did it demean the dignity of those who serve in that capacity, it foredoomed generations of children to a future of low—or *no*—expectations.

What’s so wrong with wanting to achieve? Why *can’t* everyone be successful? After all, isn’t that what we’ve always valued in this county—“with liberty and justice for all”? Isn’t *that* the American Dream that brought millions of our ancestors to these shores: to achieve that which they could not even conceive of in the “old country”? Who are we to deny that same ideal to those who come after us?

Critical pedagogy can be the turning point in a child’s life. It could be the one thing that lights the spark for them to achieve their highest, despite what societal expectations might suggest. We need those people to question the system. We need those people to encourage the students.

We need *you.*

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Written Response: Final Project

May 16, 2012

As novice educators, the Teach for America recruits have long been associated with great heart, driving passion, and a wealth of good intentions—but come up short on specific techniques, innovative approaches, and a consummate knowledge of constructive pedagogy. The great irony here is that they are well known as being a force culled from the “best of the best,” yet their collegiate peers who have studied instruction from philosophical, ideological, and practical standpoints are often dismissed as “only” education minors.

My main goal in this speech, “Alone in America,” was to present a side of education that many people seem to overlook: that of the importance of student backgrounds. By integrating Alejandro’s story into the presentation, I hoped these budding instructors would be able to be able to connect and relate to real-life situations, instead of listening to statistical data that rarely impart any sense of student beliefs or educational values. I wanted them to remember these children as real people, floundering in a system that makes no attempt to reach them; and I wanted them to become aware of those exceptional educators who have succeeded where society, as a whole, has failed.

Critical pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching can change a student’s life. It can light the spark and make all the difference. Teachers who go out of their way to search for connections between assignments/lesson plans and the lives of their students, will be rewarded tremendously with determined and willing students. I referenced successful teachers such as Rafe Esquith, whose classroom has become the model for disadvantaged minority student success. Although the impetus for his technique stemmed from the simple fact that he cared where these students would end up long after they left Room 56, his techniques and pedagogy reveal many years of dedication through trial-and-error, as well as practical approaches to instruction that starting teachers would do well to emulate.

Alejandro’s obstacles and battles were used as examples to demonstrate a small fraction of the difficulties that minority children face. My goal was to combine the effects of culturally relevant teaching and Alejandro’s experience to show what could’ve been. If he had these opportunities, if he had been lucky enough to have these teachers, would he have made it? Unfortunately, there’s no way for us to know. There is hope, however, that, with the knowledge gained from other people’s experiences, we can fix the problem for all of the other Alejandros in America.

At the very least, we can try.

It’s not magic. It’s Education (with a capital “E”).