

“But What Can I Do?” Fifteen Things Education Students Can Do to Transform Themselves In/Through/With Education

by
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In a “land of milk and honey,” the “American dream,” a place where freedom is supposedly enshrined in the cornerstones of its history, is it surprising, dumbfounding or simply incomprehensible that so many education students, those who will become, or who are currently, teachers, often throw their hands up and say “But what can *I* do?” To be clear, this is not merely an indictment of young people seeking a university education. The issue is broader than that as it leads to questions about the structure and organization of society (McLaren, 2007). The problem is multi-layered, and relates to patriotism (Westheimer, 2006), critical analysis (Noll, 2007), cultural trends (Banks, 2008), political literacy (Provenzo, 2005), societal representations of education (Sadovnik, Cookson & Semel, 2006), and the struggle to articulate a vision of social justice (Vincent, 2003). Ultimately, it concerns power and political literacy (Freire, 1970), two issues that must be considered in education if there is the realistic hope that society will be (critically) engaged in democracy during and after the formative schooling years.

The context for this paper is a series of experiences and observations stemming from two classes—a third year Education and Society course for students who aspire to be teachers, and a Master’s level Sociological Basis of Education course for teachers who are pursuing graduate education—I have taught several times in the past two years. These two classes focus on diversity, equity, multiculturalism and social justice. They are required courses in their respective programs, and each is often the most extensive and meaningful exposure that students have to a sociological vantage-point. This is not to suggest that the other required courses and practicum are not instructive and necessary components to their formal educational training but, rather, to underscore that the methods, strategies, approaches and processes of teaching and learning in these two particular courses are, arguably, different, and more attuned to the social construction of identity and the place of education within the broader political context than the regular methods courses (Nieto, 1999). The focus in these courses is more on the context than the content, more on the informal (hidden) than the formal curriculum, and more on critical analysis than the development of lesson plans and classroom management strategies. Significantly, the sociological courses do, I believe, help future and current teachers prepare for integral aspects of teaching by providing a deeper, more nuanced, reflective and critical understanding of who the students are, and how their educational experience is mediated by socio-political factors (Nieto, 1999; Sadovnik, Cookson & Semel, 2006). However, for change to take place, there must be transformation and infusion of concepts, approaches and processes throughout the educational experience, not only in designated classes (Banks, 2008).

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It is important to highlight that the analysis provided in this article is not intended to be a myopic, introspective profile of a couple of groups of students. Rather, picking up on trends, concerns, innovative practices and sociological research, this paper proposes fifteen considerations for instilling critical engagement among individual educators. For whatever reason, many education students often feel that their small contribution to the education world cannot make a difference. When this attitude is multiplied across-the-board, the overall effect is enormous. Ultimately, those with the cultural capital (Delpit, 1988) often succeed academically regardless of the nefarious democratic educational experience they encounter, whereas a large number of students will not benefit from a critical learning experience (Duarte & Smith, 2000). At this point, some teachers may even say that they do not wish to be “political,” yet the sociological literature on education clearly indicates that teaching is a political process (McLaren, 2007).

Some students want to be more engaged when they learn of racism, classism, sexism and other forms of discrimination, when they make the connection between neo-liberalism and sustained under-development at home and abroad, or when they understand that the *status quo* may be simply re-producing inequitable power relations. Their interest in moving forward is often challenged and derailed by what they perceive as an inhospitable social environment, one that does not encourage critical debate on fundamental issues. Thus, reason for this paper is to provide education students with strategies, concepts and considerations for becoming engaged, and, significantly, for taking action aimed at ethical, relevant, social justice-based change.

A cautionary note about the list of fifteen things that educators can do to make for a better educational experience for themselves and the plurality of students is necessary. One of the recurring problems one encounters when teaching one of the few mandatory sociological courses in a jam-packed undergraduate or graduate curriculum is that many of the students have the rather unfortunate conception that these courses are less central, less relevant, less substantive and, without reserve, less related to the science of teaching and pedagogy. Not uncoincidentally, many students openly request lists that will enable them to teach, for example, multicultural education. The notion that a quick 8-step approach could be used to have people become engaged in culture, learning, institutional change, diversity, racism and many other highly complex areas of inquiry conflicts with the notion that critical learning and engagement involves an on-going process, not just a lesson plan that will allow one to solidify relations with students. While content certainly has a place in education, the context is pivotal to education and schooling (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Therefore, my list is intended to be an anti-list of sorts, one that encourages thought, introspection, reflection and critical dialogue and action but does not limit the progressive and transformative work required to become a better teacher, one who is more attuned and responsive to the needs of all students.

The “But What Can I Do?” List: Fifteen Things

1. Accept that No One Knows Everything, and That We Can Always Learn

If fifty million people say a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing. -Anatole France (1844-1924)

Even after studying an area of interest for years, it is difficult to fully understand all of the aspects, issues, concerns, perspectives, data, analysis, and related components of a particular field of study. For example, the area of racism includes dozens of peer-reviewed academic journals, local, national and international conferences, workshops, study groups, associations, educational programs, and a plethora of studies, reports and books. There are also daily findings and incidents documented in the media (mainstream, alternative, and local as well as international, etc.) that require an understanding of how race is socially constructed and shaped. There are theoretical, historical, conceptual, applied and various other ways of examining racism in society. Different approaches, including structuralist, functionalist, feminist, post-modern, Marxist, and others, will also influence our understanding of race, racialization and racism in society. The field of methodology, inquiry and data-collection can also be a significant area of concern when considering race in society. An example of the evolution of the field of anti-racism, race and ethnic studies and multiculturalism is the relatively recent introduction of the concept of Whiteness (Fine, Weis, Powell-Pruitt & Burns, 2004), which has transformed how we understand the power and privilege of Whites in maintaining systemic barriers and racism. In other words, we have to be open to new ways of thinking about old issues because we should be wary of believing that we have all the knowledge and, importantly, experience we require to understand how students experience their educational journey. We need to challenge ourselves to always learn more, to become engaged, to comprehend the interplay between theory and practice (praxis), and to accept that people experience phenomena differently. Being able to critique divergent viewpoints is an integral part of teaching and learning, and, therefore, conscientious listening and dialogue are important skills to acquire (Provenzo, 2005). Teachers should be cognizant of how their teaching can shape the context for students as well as how their ability to accept that their own learning is never complete and, equally, is a factor in establishing the parameters for critical engagement (Noel, 2000; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

2. Content Is Never Devoid of Context

*How can one not speak about war, poverty, and inequality when people
Who suffer from these afflictions don't have a voice to speak? -Isabel
Allende (b. 1942)*

It is odd that when theory emphasizes that we take into account the context of instruction that there is more and more content to teach and to learn. The current educational context (How, what and why we learn? Who decides? How is the human condition factored into the equation? What are the implications?) is submerged in a deluge of content (expectations, standards, objectives, lesson plans, prescriptive curriculum documents, etc.). The context also includes where students are from, where they are at, how they experience phenomena, and the myriad issues that frame how culture is shaped (Nieto, 1999). While students need to learn some common and specialized curricular content, they also need to learn how to learn, how to be, how to think, how to relate, how to critically examine, and how to understand and be a part of society. Freire (1970) cautions that a focus on the content without the context can lead to the “banking” model, in which students are considered empty vessels that must be filled with knowledge in a staid,

unilateral learning process. From a sociological perspective—contrary to the neo-liberal approach of emphasizing the market-place, competition, employment, standards, uniformity and a “back to basics” focus to learning (Hill, 2003)—we are more than individuals and consumers, and public education is a formative period in binding together a society. Moreover, one might insist that students need to learn how to transform society, how to move it in the direction of a more humane, decent, caring, and noble place (McLaren, 2007). Giroux (1988) speaks of *emancipatory* learning as a means of positioning students to be able to critique, understand and politically negotiate their educational environment. What should be the equilibrium between the content and the context? Can we teach the content without a critical appreciation of the context? How do we understand the vast educational attainment gaps between groups without examining the context? If we focus on the content, how do we explain the rejection of the curriculum and schooling process by large numbers of students (Ogbu, 1990), particularly with regard to the under-achievement of African-American and Aboriginal students? Teachers must understand that they are not neutral, that insisting on such a stance only reinforces normative values that privilege White, male, middle-class, European origin, heterosexual, Christian hegemony. In sum, the content is always more appropriate, relevant and engaging when it is contextualized, and when it takes into consideration the needs and realities of the students.

3. Work Locally But Make the Linkage With the International Milieu

A man of humanity is one who, in seeking to establish himself, finds a foothold for others and who, desiring attainment for himself, helps others to attain. -Confucius (551-479 BC)

Understanding that what happens locally, and getting involved locally, is an important step to making connections with the international sphere. The questioning, for example, of how the “out-sourcing of jobs in America”, as CNN’s Lou Dobbs has characterized it in his almost nightly attack on what he perceives as unfair foreign intervention into the US market, must be critically interwoven into the decades of American exploitation of labor, resources and politics in other countries. Who is responsible for sending American jobs overseas, especially when considering that US investors and executives are making decisions based on increasing profits for themselves and their shareholders? It is also important to question who is profiting from illegal immigration to the US, and whether as many people would still come to this country if no one would employ, or rather exploit, them. There is an undeniable inter-dependence in world affairs—illustrated by constantly shifting waves of people through migration, the exchange of goods, the global environment, travel, the drug trade, and wars and military conflict—and it is, therefore, imperative to critically understand how issues are inter-connected. Thinking and acting locally infers a comprehension of why local factories are being shut down, who prospers from the dislocation of labor, and, importantly, the implications for diverse peoples around the world locked out of the decision-making process from such measures. Macedo and Gounari (2006) have written about the “globalization of racism,” and Klein (2005) exposes the insidious labor practices worldwide that serve to render subservient large segments of diverse national populations. In effect, national boundaries do not stop

racism, sexism, poverty, AIDS, exploitation and other concerns. Interrogating how education prepares students and society to better and more critically engage in/with international phenomena is fundamental to achieving a more just society, both locally and internationally (Guttman, 1999; Holm & Farber, 2002). Therefore, local issues are also international issues, and achieving change at a smaller, local level should not be unnecessarily dissected from the broader political space. Teachers should strive to make connections within the formal and informal curriculum (Apple, 1996) and with the international context, elucidating the linkages, inter-dependencies and implications of the impact and reality of local concerns. Thinking critically about globalization is also an important area for consideration for teachers (Gandin & Apple, 2005).

4. Media Literacy Is Not a Sound-Byte

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral. -Paulo Freire (1921-1997)

The mainstream media has become so encompassing, widespread, and infused into the broader culture that a large number of people no longer read to acquire knowledge and develop their own original analysis (Curran & Gurevitch, 2000). One can easily notice how the corporate radio, print and television media work in unison to produce virtually the same reports, images and messages from the same vantage-points (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). In relation to the nightly news, it is astounding to realize how much time is spent on discussing the weather, which is interspersed with generous portions of banter between the smiling co-hosts as well as the constant advertising segments. Similarly, although newspapers can devote more space and time to presenting editorial positions, it is obvious that the vast majority of content in the media is purchased from the large press agencies, which generally construct homogenous stories that have a clear uncritical thread running through them. The corporate media has a highly nefarious effect on developing a national culture and mind-set, and teachers should be aware of how the “medium is the message,” as Marshal McLuhan (with Fiore, 2001) put it, or how the media’s main function is “manufacturing consent” (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Given the corporate media’s impact on society, in terms of basic information, swelling the notion of collective identity, and tempering social justice movements, being able to critically deconstruct the validity of the organization, the utilization and presentation of information is something that teachers should address. Basic literacy reposes, in part, on the capacity to comprehend, dissect and critique the media. One example could be the US invasion in Iraq, which has shown the media to have been equally manipulated, complicit and ineffectual in offering a supposedly neutral, objective, truthful and critical voice to allow citizens to understand the rationale, implications, and options for embarking on a path of a “permanent war against terror,” as Peter McLaren (2007) puts it. Teachers should be aware of diverse media outlets and perspectives in the alternative sector, either on the radio, television, in print or through the internet, and also be prepared to understand how a diverse student-body is affected by a mainstream media that traditionally avoids acknowledging and validating the experience of myriad sectors of society. Moreover, the media’s role in undermining education and supporting hegemonic

forces that support neo-liberalism should become a mandatory part of teaching and learning in schools.

5. History Is Not Uni-Dimensional

He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps perpetrate it. -Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)

Students and teachers should be concerned about the multidimensional way that history is shaped, defined, presented and connected to contemporary times. Who writes history? Who is not involved in mainstream history? We learn about the virtues of the US Constitution and liberty for all Man but how do we reconcile that philosophy with the fact that all of the Founding Fathers were slave-owners, that the land was virtually stolen from Indigenous Peoples, and that numerous laws, practices and incidents of a racist and racist flavor swept through the diverse non-White and non-Christian communities of the US for generations? Who has been persecuted, and why? What role have women played in the construction of society? How are labor, social action and peace groups represented? Is there a connection between slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws and continuous discrimination against African-Americans and the fact that, presently, the latter experience, in comparison to the White population, a lower rate of home ownership, less wealth accumulation, more poverty, higher rates of incarceration, lower postsecondary participation rates and, using a range of indicators, less access to decision-making and political power? How do we critically understand the linkage to historical phenomena, especially when considering the traditional method of teaching about wars and conquests without articulating the human dimension? Do we learn as much about peace as we do about war, about social justice as much as injustice, and about minorities as much as the majority? Therefore, the context for discussing, teaching and learning about history should be critical, and should concern itself with diverse perspectives and issues that are not traditionally understood in the formal curriculum (Kincheloe & Weil, 2004). The US, like other countries, is not *only* a benevolent regime that has brought liberty, fraternity and goodness to its own people and others but, as well, it is a regime that has used its power disproportionately and in an abusive manner (McLaren, 2007; Shapiro & Purpel, 2005). In sum, teachers should be concerned with the construction and various interpretations of history.

6. Culture Is More Than Sombreros, Tacos and Mariachis

One does not sell the earth upon which the people walk. -Crazy Horse (1838-1877)

While culture can be used negatively to produce stereotypes, understanding culture is also fundamental to breaking down stereotypes, and also to building a textured analysis of individual and collective identity (Banks, 2008). In the undergraduate course I teach, a common refrain by the end of the course is that “I had no idea that culture was so complex.” Although it is dangerous to narrowly and uncritically define culture as food and festivals, the practice of identifying people based on perceived cultural traits such as

ethnic origin and everything that that implies is common-place in education (Nieto, 1999). The implications for not understanding that not all Hispanics speak Spanish, not all people of Chinese origin are Buddhist, not all Italians are predisposed to large family dinners on Sunday, and so on are numerous. Culture involves race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, family, and, importantly, lived experience, and, therefore, identity is considered to be socially constructed (Nieto & Bode, 2008). People have their own individual identity, and this intersects with collective identity. Someone's racial identity will mean different things in different contexts, as will their religion, language and citizenship status. Culture is dynamic, shifting and transforming according to local, national and international phenomena, and, is significantly, affected by power (Duarte & Smith, 2000). To be a Japanese-American during the Second World War was to face internment, which, ultimately, had an impact on the succeeding years. Who can be American (Westheimer, 2006)? Is it necessary to be White (Fine, Weis, Powell-Pruitt & Burns, 2004)? Would it be unfair to generalize about Whites, who clearly are in a position of power and privilege? Would it be equally unfair to generalize about other racial groups? What are the implications of a limited understanding of culture (Delpit, 1988)? Do teachers have a natural lower expectation for African-American students, and higher expectations for Asian-Americans students? Teachers should strive to understand that there may be many reasons for a student's success or under-achievement, and that it is critical to examine one's own identity as well as the multi-faceted ways that people form their unique cultural identities. Understanding how groups perform should be contextualized in relation to how education systems institutionally and systemically function to work for the success of certain sectors of society over other sectors of society. Teachers should be open to discussing and examining what they do not know about others, and also to accepting that understanding culture is a key component providing a level playing-field for all students. As a last point, it is important to highlight that understanding culture critically does not infer that one must learn dozens of languages, and the traits, traditions, histories and contexts for myriad cultures around the world; rather, the emphasis here should be placed on being appreciative of difference and divergent perspectives, and on being engaged with others without succumbing to the hegemonic notion of Western cultural superiority (Banks et al., 2005). Ultimately, engaging in a critical way with diverse cultures can lead to not only greater understanding and harmony, but also, significantly to peace. Instead of a reflex of annihilation, there should be an instinctive call for comprehension in times of conflict.

7. Problematize War, and Fight for Peace

A country cannot simultaneously prepare and prevent war. -Albert Einstein
(1879-1955)

Is education intended, at some level, to allow us to avoid using violence as a means of resolving our disputes? This may sound, at the same time, too esoteric and simplistic but the point is directly related to international events. Do our schools prepare students to challenge solutions based on military might and the concomitant suffering and annihilation associated with it? Is it political and "indoctrinating" to discuss the war in Iraq, not to mention the dozens of other on-going military conflicts around the world, or

not to discuss the war? What are the implications of not working toward peace? How do we understand the ethical and moral implications of foreign military intervention, the arms industry, the militarization of education, with the Pentagon being publicly mandated through legislation to be able to recruit at the high school level, and the human and financial costs of maintaining large military infrastructures? How do we critically analyze the racialization of a government-sponsored military, with a disproportionate number of minorities at the bottom being locked into battle operations? What can schools do to encourage a critical understanding of war and military conflict, and also to work for peace? Similarly, what is the relationship between military action and the environment? These questions should be considered by teachers in a critical way. It is not unpatriotic to question war as a reasonable, acceptable or lasting solution to conflict. If students are not exposed to a range of perspectives, experiences and contexts during their formative education years, how will they be prepared to fight for peace in the future? Teachers can offer the space and context to students for discussing, understanding and examining issues that will have a tangible impact on their immediate and future prospects. Therefore, teachers need to understand the limitations and nefarious nature of the tightly prescriptive formal curriculum, and also seek out opportunities to make it more relevant, meaningful and critical. Lastly, the notion of strict discipline, anti-bullying programs and concern about weapons in schools should be contextualized within the framework of the need to reduce and eliminate violence at all levels, including within the national sphere.

8. Humility Is an Unbelievable Virtue

The life that is unexamined is not worth living. -Plato (427-347 BC)

We live in a time that when wars are started, rather than reflecting on the reason, morality and legality of such actions, the debate is often turned on its head: we are involved in a war, we must win it, and we cannot divide ourselves with senseless debate. On the basketball court, multi-millionaires are often involved in what is politely called “trash-talk.” In some circles of society, it is not uncommon to be physically maligned and even killed for “dissing” (disrespecting) another. When Enron continued to fabricate surrealistic balance-sheets, arrogantly--i.e., we can do anything and get away with it--doctored by one of the world’s largest accounting firms, the profits rolled on until the house of cards crumbled, leaving thousands of people without any savings. Donald Trump has made a career out of the extravagant, unapologetic drive to make money, and to boast about it, very loudly. To be elected as President of the United States, it would appear that it is important, first, to have military experience, and, second, to demonstrate a strong resolve to use military force, two qualities that bend the mind when one considers the values which are supposedly enshrined in communities that see themselves as charitable, kind, open, embracing and “a good place to raise children.” In sum, as the above examples attempt to illustrate, the notion of humility seems to have a diminishing status in our society, some might argue as a function of neo-liberalism, which places a premium on individualism and materialism (Hill, 2003). Yet, in general, religions do not ordinarily encourage such audacious, un-humble behavior, nor do parents when a newborn arrives. Traditionally, educators are thought of as people who have garnered some respect in the community, individuals who exemplify decency and fairness, and, further,

who attempt to inculcate values of fairness and respect. Are most people disrespectful, audacious, and purposefully self-centered? Or is it the culture that promotes and condones such behavior? Does it make a difference to comport oneself with dignity, decorum and decency avoiding some of the pomposity alluded to above? Teachers should be aware of the various aspects of the cultural life of individuals, groups and society, and should also reflect on their own approach to human interaction. This is not to suggest that educators are naturally predisposed to unacceptable behavior, only to highlight that the broader cultural and political framework forces us to consider the implications of the lack of humility in society. Humility can lead to a panoply of authentic dialogue, rapprochement, and action as people recognize that the truth often lies well outside the parameters of the marketplace. Top-down, hierarchical, exclusionary leadership can only further distance and dislocate people (Ryan, 2006). Humility is a means of starting the process of understanding. Lastly, I acknowledge that some forms of humility can lead to a passive condoning of the reprehensible, or of being a follower (see next section), that being humble may be construed as being disengaged and obedient, but the argument presented above centers the debate more around the humaneness and humanity of humility, as espoused by Freire, than the acceptance of oppression.

9. Be Wary of Being a Follower

Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow; don't walk behind me, I may not lead; walk beside me, and just be my friend. -Albert Camus (1913-1960)

It is often common in education-circles to be pre-disposed to group-think, the process of achieving a common, unitary notion of reality, one that limits divergent, original, critical thought (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). The implications for this are numerous, including, in particular, the strong potential to disregard and undermine minority opinion and viewpoints. Are educators trained and encouraged to critically assess the tools—learning materials, standards, rubrics, teaching methods, lesson-plans, professional development, business plans—at their disposition? Teachers can influence the texture, shape and even the content of the educational environment in which they find themselves if they become engaged in the context (Nieto, 1999). More than a trite slogan, teachers can question the potential impact of reforms and decisions, especially when they are not directly involved in the implementation. If they do not believe in the education that they are implementing, then this will inextricably flow through to the students (Leithwood, Steinbach & Jantzi, 2002). Being kind is not enough to transform the educational experience for students, and, therefore, striving to improve and connect the teaching and learning to the needs and lived experiences of the students requires careful consideration and initiative (Noel, 2007). Institutionally, it is often difficult to be the person who stands out, the “lone wolf” so to speak, but there are also numerous examples of those who choose to stand on principle, and who make proposals based on solid foundation and reasoning, which can then have a lasting impact on the direction of reforms. As Ryan, (2006) points out, leadership is a multi-faceted art, and being in sync and being willing to address social justice needs is pivotal to transforming educational systems; as a corollary, being silent on such issues sends the message that they are not to be considered in spite of

policies that might indicate positive movement. This is clearly problematic territory because being part of a team is highly valued in educational institutions. However, in a wide range of employment advertisements for progressive and leadership positions, this is often counter-balanced with the popular mantra of being a “free thinker,” “having a critical vantage-point” and being a “risk-taker,” which are considered positive virtues. Being a follower means being “color-blind” to racial inequities, not speaking up to counter injustice, and potentially, albeit indirectly and implicitly, partaking in further marginalization in education.

10. Accept That You Are a Political Being

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral. -Paulo Freire (1921-1997)

In mainstream society there seems to be the general sentiment that education is an apolitical enterprise whereas the literature on the role played by teachers develops that notion that understanding the political nature of teaching and learning is pivotal to serving the interests of the students (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). Being political does not mean being a member of the Republicans or Democrats, or even participating in the electoral process, but rather it is associated with grasping the nature of power in our actions, our thinking and our societal conventions. Developing a critical analysis of decision-making related to the curriculum, policy development, parental involvement, school culture, and student achievement surpasses the simple pedagogical process of examining issues from a neutral vantage-point. Not acting to implement social justice is a political decision, as is the priority placed on purchasing computers or developing an anti-bullying policy (Ryan, 2006). Teachers’ unions clearly lobby for the interests of their constituents, and school board members have clear ideological antecedents, even if they argue in the firmest tone that they are simply there “for the students.” Ultimately, education is a political enterprise, and teachers, therefore, need to understand how their own politics and political experience plays into their approach to teaching and learning (McLaren, 2007). This leads to the question of political literacy, and whether we should teach to promote it (Giroux, 1988). Fearing the label of being *political*, which, unfortunately, has been used to discredit and marginalize some views, is a cultural reality facing educators who desire change and a movement toward social justice within their schools. Teachers should consider closely their own views as well as others on a range of matters outside of the narrow electoral process that has been conflated to represent the totality of democracy and democratic action. Making the connection to the qualitative educational experience, which includes citizenship, democracy and social justice, through service learning, school activities and especially the curriculum, should be taken up as a necessary part of the political education of teachers (Freire, 1970). Teachers should not be inhibited to consider the how (the context) of education in addition to the what (the content) (Nieto, 1999).

11. Read and Write, and Seek Out Authors Far from Mainstream Culture

Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule.
-Buddha

It is disheartening to see how the written word is occupying a more limited place in the lives of many people. While the Internet has opened up a plethora of avenues for reading, researching and consuming knowledge and culture, it is also clear that many people are not reading thoughtful pieces in a critical way, forcing them to reflect and develop their own arguments (Shor, 1997). This is clear in Colleges of Education in relation to using peer-reviewed resources and writing papers, which seems to be less of concern for a standards-based teacher education program that emphasizes content, lesson-plans, the practice of teaching and classroom management. Through reading thoughtful, well-developed arguments in books or peer-reviewed articles, one can escape the temptation to repeat populist slogans that have served to limit constructive debate in education and society. In the era of sound-bytes, blogs and Wikipedia where anyone can post an opinion, text-messaging, and an over-zealous corporate media, it is sometimes difficult to develop original, critical arguments. Reading authors with whom one may not initially agree can stimulate the neurons to re-formulate why one thinks a certain way. Writing is equally important to develop important communication skills, and also to critically engage in substantiating a position. As Shor (1997), McLaren (2007), Giroux (1988) and (1970) argue, it is important to contextualize learning for students, and to use sources, resources and situations that relate to their realities, straying from the traditional conundrum of teaching all students the same way with the same techniques based on the same worldview. Teachers can easily cover the content requirements of the curriculum by engaging students in experiences and scenarios that resonate with youth culture. The benefits for such an approach would include, principally, that students are more likely to stay in school, to learn, and to share this learning with others in their schools and communities, thus making the teaching process a more meaningful one (Kincheloe & Weil, 2004; McLaren, 2007).

12. Problematize the Discrepancy in Wealth, But Also the Importance of Money as an Indicator of Worth or Value

Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is in an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe. -Frederick Douglas (1818-1895)

What is the value of money in our society (McLaren, 2007)? Do we need money to live? What is the value of one's life? Is it logical to pay a basketball player \$10M and a teacher \$35,000? Should companies be given financial incentives, including an exemption from paying tax, while average citizens must pay a percentage of their wages to subsidize the profits of these companies? Is there a connection between funds spent on education and those spent on war? Is education a right or a privilege? Should money be spent on early childhood education, literacy, wealth distribution, meaningful employment, healthcare

and housing support for lower socio-economic status groups, or on prisons, policing and welfare later on? Are these questions too categorical and not nuanced enough to take into account the complexity of our society? Teachers need to be concerned with how money influences the quality of, and access to, education. Some children already have significant cultural capital before entering school, are not required to take part-time jobs, and can have the luxury of educational visits, reading and exposure to activities and personalities that further reinforce their learning in school, whereas others are tracked because of what is considered to be poor language skills and limited cultural knowledge (Delpit, 1988). Teachers should be critical of the over-emphasis in the curriculum on employment in relation to earning power (Hill, 2003). Why are some students streamed into programs that will assure that they will be ineligible for university admission, and, therefore, be subject to low-skilled jobs that have limited remuneration and opportunities (Nieto, 1999)? Teaching and learning, as Kozol (1992) has effectively illustrated, should not be conducted in an abstract manner isolated from the myriad financial factors influencing how education is organized: the structure and maintenance of the physical plant of the building, the availability of textbooks, computers, laboratory and related equipment, the status of extra-curricular activities, including field-trips, gymnasium and sports centers, and the human resources supporting the school, the attractiveness of the cafeteria, and other related features that encourage students to appropriate their schools. Funding also plays a role in the retention of teachers. Therefore, teachers should be concerned with the economic equation in education, and understand that this may have an impact on how students perform in school. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that school boards from more affluent areas generally having higher academic outcomes than those in which poverty is more evident.

13. Consider the Proposition That There Is Hope

*There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world,
and that is an idea whose time has come.* -Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

Two of the key factors in ensuring effective educational achievement are high teacher expectations and parental involvement. Teachers need to believe that all students can learn, which sounds rather simplistic and even pedantic but is worth repeating because decades of research on streaming indicate that some students have been routinely placed in lower learning tracks, effectively ensuring that they will not continue their studies at the postsecondary level (Banks, 2008; Kincheloe & Weil, 2004). Students need to believe that there is hope; otherwise, as Ogbu (1990) has illustrated, scores of young African-American students may believe that schooling is only for Whites, exemplifying a culture of resistance, culminating in their under-achievement. If there is no hope for education to lead to transformational change in individuals, in communities, in societies, and at the international level, then the neo-liberal focus on employability and competition will translate into the simple re-production of social relations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Hill, 2003). Much of the sociological literature aims to empower students and teachers (Banks, 2008; Delpit, 1988; Nieto, 1999), and this can be realized through forward-thinking approaches and acknowledgement on the part of teachers who refuse to close their eyes to institutional intransigence. In addition to individual appropriation of one's

reality, hope requires engagement and action. The field of critical pedagogy has spawned largely because of the notion that good will alone will not break down systemic barriers (McLaren, 2007), that it also necessitates the political imperative of not giving up on those who are marginalized. Having hope can also mean understanding what American society looks like for different individuals and groups, who is silenced and who has voice, how power works to advantage some and not others, and why some appear to be more comfortably positioned to demonstrate the virtues of a democratic society whereas others are locked into permanent struggle. Without hope for all students, education will become nothing more than a holding-cell in which large numbers of students will not be able to realize their potential.

14. Examine Important Events, Personalities and Experiences in Your Own Education

Everything has been figured out, except how to live. -Jean-Paul Sartre
(1905-1980)

By critically examining our own educational experience we can become more attuned to how students might be experiencing teaching and learning. This activity, which Foundations professors integrate into the undergraduate course at our University, ultimately allows students to retrospectively understand the salience of the content they learned in their formative years in juxtaposition to the context. Almost universally, students refer to incidents of inclusion or exclusion, peer-pressure, the school culture, the involvement or lack thereof on the part of their parents, their own social situation at home, their feelings of marginalization based on social class, culture, ethnicity, race and other markers of identity, and, importantly, how one or more teachers was disrespectful, discouraging and even detrimental to the educational journey and aspirations they had. Few students point out how easy school was, how there were no issues that affected them, and how the school experience effectively reflected their particular needs. The goal of the exercise is not to denigrate education but, rather, to reflect on how and why some people do not succeed while others do. It is enlightening for many to discover that their under-achievement, even their abandonment of education, had little to do with their intellectual capacity, which is borne out by the fact that they are in the midst of completing a degree in education. Sometimes we believe that major happenings are merely coincidences, de-valuing the broad impact of institutional practices that undermine some people more than others (Provenzo, 2005). As we look back in a critical way, we may start to see how the curriculum was exclusionary, how racial minorities were routinely ostracized, and how the learning we undertook did not effectively allow us to appreciate our own complicity in sustaining or undermining social justice (Apple, 1996). This activity also leads us to understand how the context for learning is pivotal to learning the standardized content that is generally insisted upon through the standards movement symbolized by No Child Left Behind. To be a good teacher, one must be aware of the impact of one's gestures, comportment, language, thinking, values, and approach to teaching and learning. Critical reflection on one's own challenges in education, as exemplified by Nieto (1999), can lead to important discoveries of how

schooling, despite good will on the part of teachers, generates inequitable experiences for many students (McLaren, 2007).

15. Affirm That “I Can Do What I Can Do”

You must be the change you wish to see in the world. -Mahatma Gandhi
(1869-1948)

The starting-point of this paper—But what can *I* do?—raises the issue of the perceived impotence, disenfranchisement, solitary individualism and hopelessness of a certain current running through the educational field. This does not take away from those educators who see hope, and act in ways that demonstrate that something can be done. However, it is clear that individuals—for example, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and others—can make a difference. Recognizing that individual action takes place within a broader context, and also involves the infinite stories and manifestations of others, it remains that individuals can influence their immediate, and sometimes the broader, environment on a number of issues on a daily basis. Our personal actions can be infused with ethical reflection, introspection, comprehension of others, an examination of the implications as well as the unique consequences of demonstrating decency, or they can be equally devoid of such processes. How we talk to people, how we share and discuss matters, how we move, how we consider, embrace, respect and debate, how we include, validate and name, how we openly consider our own infallibility, how we strive to understand issues, how we accept the political nature of political phenomena, such as education, and how we accept to learn through teaching and learning will all have an effect on the educational environment. Is it too Pollyannaish and simplistic to consider that we can be a proverbial “agent of change”? Is it too cynical and fatalistic that none of our actions matter? Teachers need to grapple with how they can participate in the change process and the social justice dialectic. Affirming that something can be done, **but** that there is no prescriptive list that will quickly answer how to deal with such far-reaching issues as those discussed in this paper is a necessary precursor to transforming education, but this can only be obtained if teachers engage in critically examining themselves, the teaching and learning context, the local as well as the macro-level context, and the fundamental factors underpinning the learning experience for all students—including those who have been traditionally marginalized.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a more lucid, constructive, meaningful, and, especially, critical engagement in the process of teaching and learning in schools. Considering the context in addition to the content of what is being taught is crucial. What is fundamental in this process, and for it to have some salience and meaning, is the involvement of teachers themselves. Educators need to interrogate their own implication in shaping the educational experience of others, those who may or may not share similar identities, experiences, ideologies, opportunities and perspectives. Education for educators need not stop after the end of a teacher-education program. On the contrary, it only starts once one

finds him/herself in the classroom. Transformational change, which has become somewhat of a campaign slogan of late, can take place if educators challenge the practices that have served to re-produce inequitable power relations. This critical dialogue involving educators needs to take place at several levels, involving a range of contentious and controversial subjects but also allowing for genuine critical reflection. Educators are well placed to initiate debate on the state of schools. Merely adopting an apolitical, neutral stance toward students, parents and communities would only serve to further entrench socio-economic marginalization and disenfranchisement. It is hopeful that the list of fifteen things that educators can do, provided in this paper, might serve as a starting-point for such a process to question and disrupt educational practices that do not seek to enhance political literacy and social justice.

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