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Connecting Theory to Professional Growth and Pedagogical Practices in a Multicultural Setting

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Race, gender, and class have always been at the center of my socialization and education. Growing up in the segregated South I learned from the people in my community that I was expected to be better than average just because I was black, female, and poor. Although no one in my family ever verbalized that being white was the standard by which I was to measure my self-worth, the message came loudly through education.

The pedagogical practices of many of my teachers, especially in the North, denoted they valued rugged individuals of European aesthetic who were competitive and action orientated. Also, they believed the only American history was white (Helm, 1992). The curricula and textbooks used rarely portrayed the contributions of African American men and women as creative, industrious, and intellectual citizens in the development of the United States. The images of African Americans that were presented were of Africans in shackles forced into slavery whose offspring, generations later, were released from slavery into poverty and welfare. In spite of those classroom images I clung to my racial pride and gender identity because I had lived among African American teachers, ministers, musicians, doctors, lawyers, housewives, businessmen and women, entrepreneurs, nurses, farmers, sharecroppers, and others who made valuable contributions to the community and society. It was through them and my family that I learned to work hard to prove that I was competent, intelligent, and capable of contributing to society. Nevertheless, the schools' mono-cultural approach to teaching and learning implied that I needed to work harder to prove my humanity just because of my race, gender, and class.

"I saw nothing wrong with being who I was, but apparently many others did. My world grew larger, but I felt I was growing smaller. I tried to disappear into myself in order to deflect the painful, daily assaults designed to teach me that being an African-American, working class woman made me lesser than those who were not. And as I felt smaller, I became quieter and eventually was virtually silenced (Collins, 1991, p.xi)."

Racism, sexism, and classism are forms of oppression that are characterized by injustice, exploitation, and violence which strip people of their humanity. When people's language, values, beliefs, and way of making meaning of their world are stolen there is a feeling of dehumanization. Paulo Freire (1970) argued that in order to struggle to regain humanity "the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed [is] to liberate themselves and

their oppressors as well" (p.26). Freire stated that the oppressors who use their power to "oppress, exploit, and rape . . . cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves" (p.26). Freire believed that the power in the weakness of the oppressed is sufficiently strong to free both. This process can be a very difficult one for oppressed people who see themselves solely as victims with no capacity to shape and determine their own destiny. Many of them did not have the opportunities to examine the historical facts that are connected to their race, gender, and class identity.

This was evident to me when I taught my first class of adults, pursuing a nursing career, in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, urban community college where more than ninety percent of all students received financial aid. The majority of the students in the seminar were women of color who received federal/state assistance or worked at least two jobs to support their families. The majority of them had a General Equivalency Diploma and/or English was their second language. The college placement tests placed eighty percent of them in developmental classes. These classes would require another year or two before they would be eligible for admissions into the nursing clinical classes. Their sense of failure was reinforced when told that their academic skills were not sufficient to allow them to take college level courses. The results of failure, according to Herbert Kohl "are most often a loss of self-confidence accompanied by a sense of inferiority and inadequacy" (1991, p.15).

Most of these women "terrorized psychologically by low self-esteem" (hook, 1993) struggled to hold onto their humanity framed in the economic reality of their daily lives. That reality involved finding a career that would give them enough money and dignity to provide for their families. The curriculum that was required for the course did not include a historical analysis of race, gender, and class as it related to the nursing profession or connected to who they were. Without this analysis the course lacked the strength to help them acquire the power they needed to liberate themselves and their oppressors.

To help adult students acquire that power I included the historical facts as I engaged them in a dialogue about their career choice: nursing/health care, balancing a rigorous academic program, family, and work; and developing college survival skills. I challenged them to place their experiences and ideals at the focus of their analysis during class activities. Journal writing was used to reflect-in-action about what they were learning (Schšn, 1987). Schšn theorizes that reflect-in-action occurs when "our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it" (p.26). I required them to write a one-page journal entry about what they saw, heard, and experienced during our class and in the articles they were researching. I responded to their papers by asking reflective or clarifying questions. I wanted to monitor how they were processing new information, making decisions, and applying what they were learning. It may sound like an easy process, but it was not. They wrote very little, such as: "The guest speaker was good. I learned a lot.", "Can't find articles. Spent hours in library." It was through class

discussion that I learned how most students were or were not processing information.

"In Black American, the oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for gittin ovuh. That tradition preserves the Afro-American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race (Smitherman, 1977, p.72)."

"Gittin ovuh" wrote Geneva Smitherman "has to do with surviving" (p.72). She explains that it challenges the human spirit to "keep on pushin" towards "higher ground". They understood how to survive to "git ovuh" in the classroom by remaining silent and invisible. They now used their storytelling skill to explain how they kept on "pushin" until they reach this point in their lives.

The students who struggled with English as a second language added another perspective to the story-telling by sharing their experiences of trying to communicate via written and oral language. Hooks wrote, "conversation and story-telling were important locations for sharing information about the self, for healing" (1993, p.11).

Noting that we were all wounded by racism, sexism, and a capitalist economic system, I shared my story of feeling inadequate and inferior as a doctoral student. I told them there were times when I did not feel safe as a Black student in the classroom. My way of knowing and making meaning of the world was not acknowledged if it were not written and spoken the way the dominant culture defined "standard English". However, it was my choice to become a student again knowing that schools had played a major role in my feelings of low self-worth. I was determined this time to seek the voices of Black women whose stories would validate my ways of knowing. I was starting to heal.

At the time I started teaching the seminar, I also began an Independent Study course, as part of my doctoral program, called Teacher Education and Philosophical Ways of Knowing. I was interested in teachers' philosophical ways of knowing and making meaning of knowledge from a non-Eurocentric perspective. The first book I read was Paulo Freire (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire's concept of problem-posing education named and validated my approach to teaching and learning.

"Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the- one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. . . Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world,. . . (p.61)."

Not only had I found the theory that supported my teaching and learning practices, I was engaged in a learning situation where liberating education was happening. "Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (p.60). I became excited about learning and was eager for change that would be self-determined yet connected to the teaching/learning relationship I established with the Professor.

Since Freire's work provided the liberating education theory, I selected the writings of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks to provide the black feminist voices and language that helped me express my experiences and ideas in an academic setting.

"Oppressed groups are frequently placed in situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups (Collins, 1991, p. xiii)."

Prior to this Independent Study course, I had never been involved in a dialogue with a white male professor who listened to how I was experiencing the affirmation of my ideals and thoughts from an African-American woman perspective using language I was familiar with. His approach to facilitate my learning allowed me to hear him because I was not overwhelmed by external circumstances, feelings of victimization and a sense of powerlessness (Greene, 1988). During our dialectical discussions I never felt like my ideas were being challenged because they were wrong or bad, "To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition" (hooks, 1993, p.94).

The kind of recognition I was receiving from my professor was the same kind of recognition I strived for with my students. I wanted all my students to participate in the conversations because I wanted them to know that what they had to contribute was of value and that I respected "their objective situation and their awareness of that situation" (Freire, 1970, p.76) . This Freirean approach allowed me to learn with them "the various levels of perception of themselves and the world in which and with which they exist" (Freire, 1970, p. 76). I knew that I could not empower students to become active participants in their own learning if it were not connected to their "own preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears" (Freire, 1970, p. 77) . Therefore, I created a classroom community with diverse students that accepted "different ways of knowing, new epistemologies" (hooks, 1993). I provided the structure and a safe learning environment for them to develop the skills needed to empower themselves. Thus the healing began.

The Healing

There were twenty students of color in the class for the final presentation. The average age in the class was 27. The class consisted of three Philippino men and seventeen women of African American, Puerto Rican, Haitian, Jamaican and African heritage. Their education was important to them. However, they had talked about schools as the one place that made them feel the most inadequated.

"How does it come about that the one institution that is said to be the gateway to opportunity, the school, is the very one that is most effective in perpetuating an oppressed

and impoverished status in society (Stein, 1971, as cited in Douglas, 1997)."

Their final oral project involved a brief presentation of their research on careers in nursing and health care. They were to reflect on what they learned about themselves that shaped/influenced their thinking about nursing as a career. They were to cite comments from guest speakers, articles, and anything else of interest to them that was connected to their classroom learning. I encouraged them to be as creative as possible and to have fun.

Their presentations indicated they had developed "the power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world...in which they found themselves; they came to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 1970, p. 64). The presentations were a tribute to the students' willingness to develop trust in self, and others. They had grown into a community of learners that valued their way and others' way of knowing. An African- American woman, 25, stated "until this class I never realized the importance of hearing what my classmates had to say. (humping her shoulders) I did not care. (pausing, exhaling) I have learned a lot from the other people who shared their experiences." The one student who had not prepared a written presentation felt this course had no substance and said to me, "I did not get anything out of your class. (smiling) Yea! It's my fault. I did not attend class as I should have." The fact that she made her comments after some students had presented led me to believe that she had learned something from her peers. I felt excited and affirmed in my approach.

The exciting aspect of creating a classroom community where there is respect for individual voices is that there is infinitely more feedback because students do feel free to talk and talk back. And, yes, often this feedback is critical. (hooks, 1993, p.95)."

Some students came dressed as nurses to demonstrate their determination to succeed despite what some of the guest speakers had shared with them in regard to job shortages, faculty expectations, the length of time it could take to be admitted to the program, and cost. What I had not been prepared for were the tears. Some students were unable to finish their presentations because they were crying. Two women, an African and a Puerto Rican, who had barely spoken in class all semester stood up before the class, presented, and broke into tears after they finished. They explained they had never spoken before a group and thanked me and their classmates for giving them that opportunity.

A Philippino gentleman in his mid-thirties who smiled all the time told a story that exemplified how an African American student helped him become a part of the learning community as he struggled to learn the English language. His smile represented the joy and comfort that I had come to expect from the class. He said that every time he spoke to her and she did not understand, she would quietly ask him to repeat it. His smile lit up the room when he stated that he was lucky that he did not have to turn off his hearing aid. He was teasing us; he did not wear a hearing aid. He explained that Americans had a way of speaking loud to people who did not speak English. "My problem is not my hearing" he laughingly said, "I don't speak good English He thank the student for being the first

African-American woman on campus to befriend him.

The students' transformation confirmed for me what I believed about teachers' racial, gender, and class identity shaping what they teach and how they teach. The liberating pedagogy I used required me to reflect-in-action as I introduced students to a "shift in paradigms that seem to them completely an utterly threatening" (hooks, 1993, p.95). I identified strongly with their pain in accepting this way of learning.

"And I saw for the first time that there can be, and usually is, [for students] some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking, knowing, and learning new approaches. I respect that pain (hook, 1993,p.95)."

Patricia Hill Collins' and bell hooks' conversations and storytelling skills help me take back my stuff - "my rhythms and my voice." My professor's teaching style helped me relax so I could learn. Freire's liberating teaching theory helped me rejoice in the knowledge that my thinking and actions were on the mark. My class helped me to release the fear that bound me to the dominant, culturally defined image of a strong silent black woman.

Many of the women in the class who attempted to resist the call for healing tried to remain stoic, analytical, and objective. I wanted to be there with them because of the perceived comfort I found there. I also knew the pain of trying to 'git ovuh' in a white supremacy society that was not eager to let you in no matter how much they 'talked the talk' of diversity. I had come to view the class as a collective group struggling for the means to define their humanity. I, as only a Black woman could at that moment, gave those women permission to let go, if they wanted to, because there is strength in tears.

"The power of the group to transform one another's lives seemed to be determined by the intensity of each individual's desire to recover, to find space within and without, where she could sustain the will to be well and create affirming habits of being (hooks, 1993 p. 13)."

We all cried. My worst fear did not come to be--overwhelmed with feelings of external circumstances, victimization, and powerlessness that immobilized us. The class ended in the spirit of the "life-affirming black cultural traditions" (hooks,1993). After the hugs, thank you's, and I love you, I wondered what would happen to them if they were unable to apply what they learned about themselves in other settings? What knowledge did I teach? What cognitive skills did the student learn who said that this was the best class she had because she learned more about the meaning of "options" than she had learned about the subjects in her content courses? My thoughts hung out there as I clung to the memory of the African-American woman sitting on the windowsill, speaking for the class, quietly asking me if I would fail them all so they could take the course with me again. Once the healing has begun our voices can't remain silenced.

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