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Advocating for change: The creation of a critical learning environment in an urban school with young children

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Introduction

In the current era of standardization and accountability, the educational attainment of poor, minority students continues to be the focus for anthropologists and educational researchers. Researchers have found that there are internal limitations within a school such as high staff turnover, inadequate facilities, and lack of resources, as well as external constraints operating in schools such as poverty, racial isolation, immigration, lack of political clout, that prevent minority students from receiving a quality education (Noguera 2003). Current research also has shown that there are “mediating structural” constraints in the school environment caused by the interaction between the culture of minority students and the teacher’s culture that also affects student learning (Moll 2005). Whilst our historical persistence to Americanize all individuals to a specific ideal (Olsen 1997), as well as coming to the sobering fact that our schools are responsible for mechanically and systematically reproducing social inequality (McLeod 1995) further complicates our understanding of why poor, minority students are not able to do well in school. It has long been suggested that a student-centered pedagogy along with a relevant curriculum and a conscientious teacher-facilitator appears to have a positive effect on students (Shor 1992). However, student-centered teaching has traditionally targeted older students. But given the contradictory role of schools and young students’ disempowered position it is important to examine critical pedagogy from the perspective of young children.

The focus of this thesis grew out of my intense curiosity to understand in what ways does the school environment shape the relationship between student and teacher. I set out to study what factors enable and constrain the creation of a critical learning environment in an urban classroom with young children. More specifically, how are students contributing to the success or demise of a critical learning environment in the classroom? My data shows that school practices and policies inhibit a critical learning environment, but that a conscious, bilingual, creative and flexible teacher that utilizes a relevant curriculum, in collaboration with committed students, enables it. However, I also found that without trust and respect the critical learning environment could not exist, trust is what holds the student-teacher relationship intact, its insertion or absence in the early stages of development guarantees its birth or demise.

My interest in the topic is due in part to my working in a K-8th urban school in Hartford for the past year and to the recent completion of my Hispanic Studies thesis project. More specifically, my Hispanic Studies thesis examined the effects of culturally relevant texts on student motivation and learning. The theoretical foundation for my work was based on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the pedagogical method of Ira Shor in *Empowering Education*. Both advocate for popular education, which emphasizes critical thinking and active learning with the guidance of a teacher-facilitator in order to bring students to higher levels of awareness and engagement. I found that through relevant texts, students were able to learn collectively while developing critical ways to engage the readings and each other's realities.

A critical learning environment is generated when both teacher and student open themselves to develop, "threads of communication that bind people together and prepare them for reflective action" (Shor 1992: 85). Dialogue is an encounter and an existential necessity that strives for the emergence of an active consciousness (Freire 2009). Critical pedagogy engages

students through research learning exercises and projects that students identify, develop and investigate through their own patterns of language, points of view and circumstances (Shor 1992). Similarly to cooperative learning, critical pedagogy promotes democracy in a classroom because it encourages a constructive engagement between students and teachers of diverse backgrounds and their specific realities (Slavin 1995). Student-centered pedagogy proposes an alternative to the “banking method” of instruction found in most urban schools where knowledge is commodified into transactional acts of deposits and withdrawals (Freire 2009). At the elementary school level, teachers tend to oppose group collaboration as either irrelevant or detrimental to children’s progress (Cummins 1994) due to the individual demands placed on students to perform on CMT tests. That is, elementary school teachers consider themselves the principal initiators and controllers of all interaction and knowledge in the classroom to facilitate the task of increasing Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). This approach has detrimental consequences for the schooling experience of urban minority students.

When the new school year began, I was asked to offer math tutoring to a group of 18 students varying in grade. During one of our initial lessons, a seventh grade student asked “Why are you here?” to which I automatically responded, “I’m here to help you.” I was so taken aback by his question that I did not react. He reverberated, “Why are you helping us?” I understood his apprehension and curiosity and proceeded to explain to him that the principal and his teacher felt that with some extra help he could do well on the CMTs, to which he responded, “That’s a lie. I know you’re lying to me right there.” I answered, “Why do you think I’m here?” He replied, “Because we’re stupid.” I went on to further emphasize that it was the opposite, that he along with the rest of the group had been selected for having academic potential. He stopped me and said, “That ain’t fair because they should get all of the kids that stay up there in the class the

same help so they are at the same level we're in here." I couldn't argue with that. I expressed to him my agreement, and I told him that schools function in very complicated ways and that most adults do not always recognize that. Another student added, "We used to have a good class, Miss, but now we're all bad 'cause they took the good ones and put in them in another class" (Field notes 3/15/10) From this incident I realized that my students were not given the opportunity to engage in critical discussions in their classrooms. I saw no evidence of dialogue, critical discussions or reciprocal connection between them and their teacher or even among students themselves. However, during our tutoring lessons, students displayed a different attitude toward learning. This phenomenon intrigued me.

Literature Review and Theory

My literature review focuses on exploring my research question through the specific circumstances of my students, their young age. Their specific condition in relation to the role of the school helped shape my understanding of what factors limit or facilitate the creation of a critical learning environment.

There are several factors that define a particular climate of a school that inhibits the creation of a critical learning environment. The performance driven climate, the all white, middle-class teaching staff that is unable to reconcile students' cultural norms with their own, and the contradictory practices instituted by the school administration send confusing messages to young, minority students. These factors contribute to a subtractive environment that engenders systematic undervaluing of young underprivileged minority students (Valenzuela 1999). Urban schools ignore minority students' assets and life experiences because students are perceived to enter schools with a deficit knowledge that needs to be filled, molded and shaped (Shor 1992). As a result, teachers who naturally hold unequal and coercive power relations over their students

disproportionally mediate tensions in the classroom (Gibson 1997). Students become keenly aware of this phenomenon the longer they are in school, they resent and are confused by the narrow notions of a “good” student legitimized by the deficit model of schools (Pacheco 2010:85). The deficit model of schooling inhibits the creation of a reciprocal relationship between teachers and students.

Students’ behavior at school is the product of the relationship between individual ways of being and the cultural norms of students, in relation to the space where these two influences interact, the school environment (Grenfell 2008). According to social reproduction theory, schools as social actors have a tremendous amount of influence over minority students for reproducing the same unequal social and economic outcomes found in society at large. Schools create social inequity by reproducing white-middle class norms and privilege (Macleod 1995) in urban schools with minority students who are perceived deficient both linguistically and culturally. Students internalize how they are perceived by the school and that affects their schooling experience and most importantly for this study, how willing they might be to trust a new way of learning.

A constructive, reflective and reciprocal environment in the classroom is dependent on trust. Trust can only be achieved through respect, for it is the correspondence between the two principles that generates the beginning of a reciprocal relationship (Dyrness 2007). Trust is mobilized by respect, a set of attitudes that demonstrate personal regard for individuals and their roles (Valdes 1996). The teacher, who by definition possesses the attribute of authority, must take the initial risk by exposing her vulnerability during the first encounter, thus she must extend her hand and trust that her students will grab onto it. The act of learning becomes a risky endeavor (Erickson 1987) that both teacher and student must whole-heartedly confront.

Conversely, anti-critical action, the subjugation of the oppressed by the oppressor (Freire 2009: 167) automatically prevents the two actors from ever making meaningful contact. For example,

Today I told my group that we needed to make a decision before we entered our classroom because I knew that Ms. Bernacki (pseudonym) was going to be there. Ms. Bernacki disapproves of my teaching methods, she constantly makes references about controlling my students, “You need to yell at them and tell them they can’t do that.” Students assured me that they would “behave”, but that I should send Jake (pseudonym) back upstairs because he was the instigator in the group; the group argued that it was going to be difficult to “behave” with him in the mix. I said I could not do that because Jake had as much right to be in the room as the rest of the group. Jake promised that he would “behave.” I said that I wanted to make sure I could help all of them, but if they did not meet me half way, that it was going to be difficult. Eric spoke for the group and said, “OK Miss you don’t have to worry about us; we will do our work.” And they did. (Field notes, 3/22/10)

In this scenario, the possibility of Ms. Bernacki’s scrutiny represented an obstacle to our critical learning environment. However, I felt confident that my group trusted me and that in return I could expect their trust. The above vignette also brings another factor relevant to Freire’s critical pedagogy: young children in urban schools are expected to conform to white middle-class privileged cultural norms. Students are required to sit quietly, attentively and work individually. Critical pedagogy presupposes action; it requires students to engage with their environment and those who act on it. Teachers must avoid relying on disciplinary methods that attempt to liberate the oppressed with instruments of domestication because such practices further legitimize and reinforce minority students’ dehumanization (Freire 2009:65). I did not have to resort to dehumanizing practices to “dominate” my students; I opted for trust and dialogue instead. Through trust, teacher and students are able take the risk to meet each other (Erickson 1987) under neutral conditions in order to enter in a mutual arrangement of “educational sovereignty” and challenge the cultural as well as the discriminatory practices of schools (Suárez-Orozco

2002). Suárez-Orozco defines “educational sovereignty” as the mediating agency needed to challenge the arbitrary authority of white middle-class privileged cultural norms that characterize the educational status quo for minority students (2002). The critical learning environment delivers that mediating opportunity.

Although trust can help create a critical learning environment that can function as a counter-space, or a site of radical resistance (Dyrness 2007) that could stand in direct opposition to the schools’ antithetical mission, there is a secondary obligation implicit in the agreement of trust. The teacher has to be truthful. Eric’s rebuttal, “That’s a lie. I know you’re lying to me right there,” signal that young students are able to “name their world” (Freire 2009) when trusted adult figures in their lives are truthful with them. A democratic relationship compels the teacher to point out the truths. I had the obligation to tell him that his school was actively and systematically reproducing the outcomes that he experiences in his neighborhood. I wished I had the power to get in the car and drive them to West Hartford and show them how ridiculous their school was. (Field notes, 3/15/10) Or when Clarence questioned the conflicting policies of the school, I had the responsibility to tell him that he needed to stand up to the establishment by organizing a protest against the conflicting practices instituted by the school that reward students’ positive behaviors via “Yes Tickets” and simultaneously punish negative behaviors via “The Point System.” Freire’s method gets complicated with young students. Critical pedagogy is not supposed to, “impose [or] manipulate” (168). Freire’s analysis: “Conquered adherence is not adherence; it is ‘adhesion’ ... Authentic adherence is the free coincidence of choices” (168) reverberated in my head. No one “can unveil the world for another,” (169) but that was exactly what I was doing in response to my students’ curiosity and disempowered condition.

Context

In order to illustrate how the school environment and school policy can contribute or limit the creation of a critical classroom, it is necessary to provide a thorough description of the school where the research was conducted. All names of students, staff members and the school have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Blythe Elementary School is located in the South End (Zone 4) neighborhood of Hartford, Connecticut. According to the most recent Strategic School Profile, the school has a 94.4% minority student body population, with 95% of students receiving free or reduced price meals. In addition, 61.8% of students come from households where English is not the primary language (Connecticut 2007). At Blythe, English Language Learners (ELL) are combined with the regular student population, but receive tutoring services. Hartford does not have a bilingual education program, but that is not unusual. In 2002, with the ratification of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), bilingual education under Title VII ceased to exist as a federally supported program in the United States (Crawford 2002). The new mandate required that students be tested at different grade levels to ensure that teachers were effectively teaching state standards. NCLB's implementation and accountability measures cause tremendous inefficiency and confusion at the local school level. In the classroom, students who are unable to keep up with demands are ignored. Intense focus and assistance is given to students who can demonstrate ability to score well on the CMT. Rewards and incentives are used to coerce students into performing well on the CMT. Comments such as, "Is it true, Miss, that if we don't pass the CMT, we don't pass to the next grade," frequently circulate in students' conversations. One has to wonder where students get this?

Although ELL students are exempt from taking the reading and writing part of the exam for the first ten months after arrival, they are still required to take the math section during the same period. The exam is only available in English. The intense focus on performance coupled with the fear of not being able to perform causes ELL students to develop pessimistic outlooks. In this environment ELL students learn to accept early on that they are not smart enough because they cannot learn the language fast enough to perform well in school.

Latino students, at 72.8%, are the majority at Blythe School, followed by African American students at 19.7%, Asian American students at 1.9% and white students at 5.6% (Connecticut 2007). Although, the school's profile does not breakdown students by ethnicity, Puerto Ricans are the most represented ethnicity. Other visible ethnicities are the Peruvian, Mexican, Bosnians, Somalis, and Burmese students. There is another sector of the population that is not disclosed in the school's statistics, special education students. These are students that have been identified by the school as having emotional, learning and/or behavioral problems. There are two classrooms in the upper floor, specially designated to accommodate special education students. Teachers rotate overseeing these classrooms. Students are not instructed in these spaces; rather these spaces are clearly reserved to "house" students who are chronic misbehaviors at the school.

The numbers of students occupying special education classrooms vary each day. Some days, the classrooms are so full that there are not enough seats while other days the classrooms sit half empty. The ambience of the special education classroom is intense. Teachers who manage these classrooms have no regard for students' differences, therefore disagreements and conflicts erupt regularly in the rooms. There is another classroom in the second floor that is also designated for special education students. I take one of my students from one of these three

classrooms, three times a week. This same student was identified as having special needs because he can only read at third grade level even though he is in the eighth grade. However, his chronic misbehavior caused him to get dropped from my list of students for tutoring services. When I questioned the administration's decision, I was told by one of the secretaries to, "forget about Alex, he's probably going to end up in jail." It is important to mention that most of the students in these classrooms are in seventh or eighth grade. That is no coincidence. Teachers seem to have a difficult time forcing or coercing older students into complying with the demands of the current system. Their fear of "loosing control over bigger kids" is eminent and expressed frequently.

NCLB has left a damaging imprint in areas like Hartford where the majority of students, about 94 percent, are an ethnic minority (Hartford 2007). One day, on my way to pick up my eighth grade group, students decided to express their dissatisfaction with school. They were bored and tired; CMT testing had just finished a week earlier. However, they were still being drilled with monotonous worksheets. Consider the following vignette,

Kendra pushed Jack so hard that he fell on the floor, in another part of the hallway two girls were trying to scoop up Yeni and toss her in the air. The crowd started cheering, the teachers came out running from their classroom. Mrs. W. tried to break up their excitement and screamed, "Call security, they have to help us during transitions. They're going nuts!" Mr. D starts screaming, "Get back in class, NOW!" Students ignore their screams, but comply and begin to shuffle back to their respective classrooms. (Field notes 4/9/10)

Students often express their dissatisfaction with school through misbehavior or indifference. Clearly, the distrust that exists between students and teachers prevents the creation of a welcoming, democratic learning environment. Learning under these conditions is a huge challenge for all students, but it is compounded exponentially for minority students.

Structurally, Blythe is a recently renovated three-story building with a basement located on a busy street. The area behind the school is heavily industrialized. From the outside, the school appears to be in fairly good shape. However, since the school is overcrowded with over 500 students, the majority of the time the school looks unkempt and disorganized. Unlike most schools in the area, Blythe has a good size grassy back yard with playground equipment. It is mostly used by Pre-K through fourth grade students. Grades sixth through eighth are not allowed to go outside for recess. They are escorted to and from their classrooms during their 30-minute lunch breaks. Since the school has three main floors, and five different stairways to access the different levels, the stairs provide an avenue for escape from the mind-numbing classroom environment. Teachers do not grasp that students' misbehavior may be a symptoms of the current performativity-driven practices. Students' willingness to resist their schooling environment is a cause for further divide and mistrust.

In regards to the staff, there is a principal, Mrs. Young, and a vice principal, Mrs. Gates. They have three assistants, Jane, Mona and Sandra. There is also a school nurse, Mrs. Roberts who is left in charge when everyone is on a meeting. Blythe also has three uniformed security guards, two males and one female, who roam around the hallways and trek up and down floors when conflicts erupt or when they are trying to find missing students. Security guards are very distrustful of students and they get away with physically handling students. There are four male teachers and one female teacher in the middle school. The majority of the elementary school teachers are females. Ms. Bernacki is the ELL director; she is a well-accomplished young woman who is studying to get her masters in administration in order to be a principal. I share the ESL classroom with her in the basement. Two other ESL teachers, Joan and Liz, share a small

room on the second floor and alternate days to offer additional support in English to ELL students. All three have limited command of the Spanish language.

Overall, it is not unusual to hear teachers utter disparaging remarks to students, “Boy, are you guys dumb. Students in my other class were able to come up with 20 examples, right away” (Field notes 3/10/10). Or teachers speaking in derogatory terms about students as in the following vignette,

Ms. Bernacki’s laptop got stolen today. I got a call at home, Mona, wanted to know all the names of the students that had been to our classroom that day. They suspected one particular student I see before school dismissal. I told her that he had been there, but that I had escorted him out and that I was sure that he had not taking anything out of the room. The room is usually locked, but recently Ms. Bernacki had asked me to leave it unlocked because she had lost her keys. She was out for three days after the incident. When she came back, I asked Ms. Bernacki if she had recovered her laptop. She said that it had been found. It had been my student who had taken it. He had confessed and brought it back. That was disheartening, she said that things like that “make her very discouraged” and that her boyfriend is always telling her to quit. I asked her what was going to happen to my student, and she said she did not press any charges against him and that the administration had not taken any action against the student. She said that she resented that nothing was done and that the student’s Mom is oblivious to her child’s misbehavior at school. She also said she knows that he is going to end up in jail and that was sad. She also added that Blythe gets all the special education students and the behavior problems because the school is performing poorly. This school is a “throw away” school, she said. She blamed the magnet schools for that. She said that Hartford is creating two different types of school systems that are ruining the rest of the district. (Field notes 3/12/10)

Incidents like this reaffirm negative stereotypes of students and fuel feelings of distrust among teachers. Teachers are unable to recognize their role and how the current district practices contribute to such students’ actions. An incredibly boring and irrelevant curriculum, the drilling of CMT material, teachers’ prejudices and disengaging pedagogical methods harm the possibility of creating a trusting environment. Students do not view teachers as human beings deserving of respect or trust because teachers demonstrate everyday that they are not willing to give students respect or the benefit of trust. This system of schooling dehumanizes students and teachers.

Methods

A purposive sample of 18 students varying by grade, gender, ethnicity, and ability level took part in this participatory research project. Most of the participants were ELL students that I had tutored three times a week. All of the students were selected by the principal to receive additional assistance in math or bilingual education. Since I focused on the creation of a critical learning environment, I was curious to find out what students thought about the school environment. I conducted two surveys, (See appendix) one open-ended question and one close-ended question that asked specifically about students' perceptions of the school environment. Surveys were administered once at the beginning of class and a second time before the end of class, the same day. To the greatest extent possible I was responsible for controlling the location, time and conditions of the survey. All respondents were asked to disclose their gender on their slip, to control for differences in responses. Surveys were also available in Spanish to accommodate ELL students.

I worked at Blythe for over a year, and as I mentioned earlier I had began observing and collecting field notes for my Hispanic Studies thesis project. Field notes and observations for this project were collected during the last part of my time there, the last two and a half months of that year. Some descriptions found in my conclusion are part of my previous project's observations and field notes. For this project, I also interviewed four students and one informal interview of the ESL director. The results from the surveys were compared to my field notes and the interviews I collected. This helped to internally validate the responses from the survey to the actual behavior and perceptions I noted during class and the individual interviews. For example, one of the interviewees reluctantly completed the two surveys because she had never done a

survey before. She said that she did not know what to answer so she chose to answer, “Don’t know” on both surveys. But during her interview she disclosed insightful information that pointed to her dissatisfaction with the school environment.

Findings

For the survey part of this study, results showed that boys were more likely to perceive their school environment more positively than girls; however, field notes revealed that their schooling experience was more negative. Students who perceived their school environment in positive terms, expressed positive feelings about their learning, but were contradicted by their actions on the field notes. They were distrustful and disinterested in school. One student in particular responded that he “liked school because I learn a lot.” Yet this is the same student that was skeptical of my intentions and said that I was only helping them because in his words, “we’re stupid.” He had scored high in math and possessed the ability to be a critical and self-reflective thinker, yet he was unable to recognize the subtractive nature of the school environment he was experiencing.

Girls’ perceptions of their school climate were evenly split; however, they were reluctant to openly express their opinions. One student expressed her dissatisfaction when she chided, “I feel bored at school because of the testing” (Survey) but failed to elaborate any further. An ELL student that answered, “No me gusta la escuela” - “I don’t like school” in one survey, when asked specifically in her interview, “What do you like least about this school?” she answered, “She [her teacher] knows that I don’t speak English, she doesn’t pay attention to me. She doesn’t even realize that I don’t understand what she says” (Interview). The interviews and field notes revealed that students were critical about their schooling experience. During her interview, Yeni,

a seventh grade student who is a recent arrival from Puerto Rico, compared the two school systems, stating that schools in the United States focused less on learning and more in teaching English, and that in Puerto Rico students were expected to learn and read everyday, come prepared to class, and give an oral presentation. (Interview) She also compared students' attitudes toward school and concluded that students at Blythe behave worse because they "don't care about grades" (Interview). I was surprised to hear this from her because although she is very capable, Yeni constantly gets into trouble for cutting class or for not doing her homework because she views the curriculum as irrelevant and monotonous. However, she failed to recognize the school's role in contributing to her fellow students not "caring about grades" or to her negative schooling experience.

Yeni is a good reader and a critical thinker; however, her teachers are unaware of her capabilities. She just finished reading one of my Hispanic Studies novels, *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas. She used to write notes on the margins, evidence that she had entered in dialogue with the text, and enjoyed discussing the intricacies of the plot, the author's message, implicit and explicit, and the trajectory of the main character, which she had come to know and analyze fairly well. Yeni behaves differently in different contexts, how can I explain this paradox? In her classroom, Yeni is ignored and required to learn irrelevant material. In my classroom she is given a voice to express her opinions and aside from helping her with math, I also encouraged her to read novels in Spanish that I thought she might find interesting. It was important for me that she nurtures her Spanish skills.

My findings show that a critical learning classroom can be established in an environment that devalues minority students. However, I found that its birth or demise is dependent on the establishment of trust and respect. I also found that the ingrained practices instituted by the

deficit model of schooling and the current performativity-driven agenda deeply affects minority students' cognitive ability. Students were reluctant to critically assess their schooling experience. How school affected them was not acknowledged. It is important to disclose that I have been with these students for over a year now, thus I can confidently state that we have developed a trusting relationship. They had no reason to give me short, superficial answers on the surveys because they knew that I sympathize with their plight and that I disagree with the way they are treated in school. Therefore, why were they reluctant to critically assess their schooling experience? I argue that a possible answer to this contradiction can be found in the classroom environment that my students and I created.

In our critical learning classroom I constantly focused on finding engaging, relevant and dynamic learning opportunities for my students. For example, students surveyed the five kindergarten classrooms of their siblings. We computed the ratio of boys to girls, we also made graphs and discussed that in Latino culture, girls are usually the ones that tend to young children. The girls in the group, of course, said they were going to change that. I said that in different cultures children have to work instead of going to school because global economic practices have made it difficult for families to make a living. I showed them an article which included pictures of children working in different parts of the world. In my second grade group, we read *Gathering the Sun*, a book by Alma Flor Ada that reinforces the alphabet through provocative pictures. The book raises awareness about social activism, the plight of Latinos in this country and the positive contributions that Latinos have in our economy. Students named their favorite fruit. From the illustration they were able to learn who usually cultivates and picks the fruit. We talked about their parents and neighbors' occupations and how hard parents work to make a living. They brought up the issue of immigration, some students felt that their parents had to leave their

homeland to get a better job in the United States because “life was too hard” back in their country. Activities for the middle school were just as engaging. The eighth grade group pretended they had dates with sports celebrities. I brought menus from local restaurants and they were able to calculate and budget their imaginary money. This brought up a sad point. Clarence declared he had never been to a restaurant or left the city of Hartford. We discussed racial isolation and how education could lead to economic independence, but that their current school was not preparing them for college. Most of our projects or discussions were generated from interests they identified; however, due to the heavily controlled environment of an elementary school, we were limited to the confines of the school. Nonetheless, our group discussions and projects manage to transport us to a space where we could openly explore their concerns and interests. I learn from them as much as they learn from what we were doing together.

Aside from the themes we studied, once a week I brought students a snack. Following our custom of reaching a collective consensus, deciding on snacks took more time than deciding on a learning activity. Many times, I smuggled the snacks into our classroom because I was told teachers were not allowed to bring any foods to school due to allergy risks. After asking my students about allergies, I decided to go against the rules and brought a snack of their choice to class every week. As a Latina, I know that food is an important part of social interaction. The practice of *convivencia* is an important cultural norm across Latina America that helps establish the bonds of trust and caring necessary in a reciprocal relationship. From my experience, I also discovered that creating a learning environment built on trust and finding engaging activities to satisfy my students’ curiosity was not as difficult as reconciling Shor and Freire’s vision of critical pedagogy against the reality that young minority students experience in urban American classrooms.

The role of a critical teacher becomes complicated in an environment with young children because on the one hand I felt responsible for guiding them to find their own truth, on the other hand, I felt compelled to explain the complexities involved in the adult world. Freire and Shor did not have to deal with this dilemma; however young children are situated in an inherently disempowered condition because of their age. Regardless of the limitations I found in Freire's method in regards to young students' particular situation, my evidence shows that through a critical learning environment, minority urban students are able to resist dominant narratives grounded on deficit ideologies; while at the same time their newfound awareness could have profound personal and political effects (Dyrness 2007) in their future adult lives.

Further analysis of my field notes disclosed three important findings. First, students have a hard time assessing their schooling experience because they are rarely, if ever, asked for their opinions about anything related to school. Second, they have resigned themselves to the fact that the negative school environment they experience is a natural occurrence, that this is how American schools operate. And lastly, and most importantly for this project, their reluctance to engage in critically assessing their schooling experience is due to an internalized "avoidance of learning." Nancy Lopez alludes to this oppositional posturing often expressed by minority students as a byproduct of chronic mistreatment in urban schools in *Hopeful Girls and Troubled Boys*; she describes it as "willful laziness" (Lopez 2003:64). My conceptualization of "avoidance of learning" is directly linked to the instituted and systematic negative practices of the school. The current school environment has conditioned students to immediately detect and react against anything that resembles the banking method of teaching they detest so much. They have been trained to provide short and insignificant automatic responses. That is why their responses were

so superficial and alien to me, their personal thoughts and real voices were totally absent from the exercise.

Although students are capable of thinking critically, the current performance-driven framework continues to subject minority students to an outcome-based system that devalues their identity (Pacheco 2010). This climate generates a new class of students who get accustomed to performing simplified acts of learning, stimulated by the drilling of the CMT, which inhibit active reasoning. Teachers absorbed in these outcome-based notions of success are unable to perceive students as active generators of knowledge. I have outlined in this paper that students' reactions to a critical learning environment stand in absolute opposition to the current performance-driven style of schooling. A critical learning environment does not propose a contradiction in students' mind; students can experience that teachers genuinely value and care about their educational experience.

Conclusion

The creation of a critical environment is possible in urban schools with young students. However, young students are the gatekeepers in this reciprocal connection, trust and respect are the keys that open that space. It has been more than a year since my students and I have been working in a critical learning environment. During this period, I have learned that of the eighteen students I tutored, eleven students have repeated a grade at least once and five of them have repeated a grade more than once. The majority of my students are categorized as behavior problems or special needs students by the school. At least four students see the school psychologist on a regular basis. Although it may be easier to blame culture, language and poverty; the current "neoliberal education policies" that identify and rank accordingly who is

making AYP or not (Pacheco 2010) contribute far more to the negative academic outcomes of minority students than any other factor I have observed in the school setting by far. I do see hope in alternate methods of teaching that minority students and ELL students appear to enjoy.

Critical pedagogy is especially beneficial to ELL students. A friend and fellow Trinity College student conducted research at a local school in Hartford about an alternative method of teaching through the incorporation of dance movement. In her research, Stacey Lopez found that ELL students responded positively to movement-based curriculum because it encouraged students to expand their writing ability, critical thinking skills, and creative expression. In her evaluation, Lopez found that 92 of her students' writing prompts during the first class meeting demonstrated low level writing ability, lack of creativity and self-reflection. However, after exploring the theme, "Skin in and out of school", through a book published by the Chicago Children's Museum, *The Skin you Live In*, students began to conceptualize race relations in a whole different way. ELL students began to express reflective notions of race and how it affected them. Comments from students such as, "I realize now how difference hurts me" or "When you come to school your skins become pale" serves as reminders, according to Lopez, that students interpret the school culture and its reception of minority students in very negative ways. Hence, she added, the "safe space" they collectively create provides an outlet for ELL students to voice their opinions and to feel valued and connected to a learning experience that is meaningful in their lives (Lopez 2010). I also discovered that students feel valued when they are included in meaningful interactions.

The critical learning environment my students and I were able to build demonstrates that there is potential for change in urban schools. I am neither certified as a teacher nor have any special talents other than being patient and respectful of others. Schools are not benevolent or

altruistic spaces; they are active agents that reproduce specific outcomes. Students need to be aware that they do not have to consent to their own subordination under such system. Students in my reading groups developed a love for reading that they did not have at the beginning of the school year. I also understand how difficult it is to forgo the need to rely on “tangible results” as evidence of learning. Most of my students have been found to increase their CMT math scores, increase their DRP (Degrees of Reading Power) scores and improvement their self-esteem and class participation. One of my students was recognized as student of the year.

It has been great to share their success, “Sabe qué Miss, me dieron un test de reading y suví seis niveles” – “Guess what Miss, I took a reading test and I went up six levels”. (Field notes 5/12/10) They have learned that they could be active participants in their own education. My students are, “active knowledge generators [who are] capable of thinking critically and creatively” (Alanís 2007:32). Further research needs to focus on the direct cognitive limitations that the current performativity agenda is generating in minority students. Despite the subtractive nature of schooling (Valenzuela 1999) and the negative attitudes frequently experienced by my students; the feeling that, “nobody cares” can be replaced by a welcoming democratic environment where real learning is possible. I am hopeful and imagine the day when my students will have a school system where our version of schooling becomes the reality not the exception.

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Appendix

Survey

How would you rate the environment here at Blythe Elementary?

Ranking	Number of responses
1 Very positive	5
2 Somewhat positive	6
3 Positive	0
4 Don’t know	2
5 Negative	1
6 Somewhat negative	3
7 Very negative	1

Survey

How would you describe your schooling experience? (I had to elaborate on this question, I talked about their perception of their teachers, friendships, and rules and norms at school)

F – No tengo la palabra. Es Feo porque es Feo. (I don't have a voice. It is ugly because it's ugly)

F – No sé como muy negativo y hay personas que son bisexuales y hacen cosas muy mals que yo me enterado so para mi es negativo. (I don't know very negative and there are people that are bisexyal and they do bad things that I have found out, so for me it is negative)

F – No me gusta la escuela. (I don't like school)

M – Dicen pero alguna cosa no me lo sé. (They say something, I don't know)

M – School is OK, but a teacher is not fair because she has two favorite students.

F – I feel bored because of the testing in school.

M – I would say it (school) is very hot.

M – When I come to school I feel different from when I am home because you can sleep at home not at school.

F – When I come to school I feel unsafe because kids bring drugs, weapons, and is always fighting.

M – I don't know!!! I feel the same way I feel I home. I learn.

M – The school climate is very good because it's comfortable to have a little sweater or no sweater.

F – Safe and comfortable because we have people 4 you here to protect.

F – It is very fine because I got friends to talk to and that they care about me and a good grade.

M – I feel positive at this school.

F – Bueno porque es bueno por las profesoras. (Good because of the good teachers)

F – Nice I like my girl teacher.

F – Bien porque me enseñan. (Good because they teach me)

M – It feels good and fun.