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24 October 2016

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Section 80-A 16

Oppressive Roots and Liberating Ideals: Dismantling Education with Education

Education is many things. It is the process of ingraining supposed important knowledge and practical skills in students across America. It is the “equalizing factor” in the United States. It is the great process of retaining information in order to graduate to the next phase that would allegedly enable anyone -regardless of socioeconomic background- the shot to obtain a coveted degree and the promise of upward mobility in exchange for hard work. It is what urges students to practice good behavior and hone good study habits for a shot at a future, the “American Dream.” While education is seen as the golden gate to success, it is also a rustic cage that entraps students to adhere to not their own aims, but to the aims of a constricting society. Education discourages critical thinking and questioning. It instills how crucial obedience is and punishes any student who practices resistance of any kind. It glorifies American colonialism and imperialism, the brutal ideologies and practices that displaced and murdered our ancestors and continues to oppress marginalized students, in history classrooms. The same history classrooms keep current institutionalized discrimination and oppression out of the curriculum despite the crucial fact that students are directly affected. Its content and practices are regulated by the state to regulate students. In the end, education is a privilege that also only truly benefits the

privileged and it is valued to the point of determining worth in society. Education in the United States not only oppresses students nationwide, but it does an especially effective job in its oppression towards marginalized students. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are isolated into public schools that lack funding in both residentially segregated neighborhoods and gentrified neighborhoods. The isolation of disadvantaged students into infrastructurally inadequate facilities with classes that lack academic substance is American education's reality. The subjugation of vulnerable students to the "banking concept," an educational practice that encourages the reception of information and the adaptation of conforming to societal molds without question, is what occurs in the American real world. It leaves students susceptible to lack of consciousness pertaining to issues that leave harmful effects on their minds, bodies, and general livelihood. Students are a target of programming, of instilling the qualities necessary for benefitting state interests rather than human interests. Education is a site of oppression. A tool for oppressing. While the gravity of oppression can intimidate and discourage action, the roots of oppression can be shaped. The roots of oppression can be transformed. Education, a tool that oppresses, can be used as a tool that liberates. Education, an apparatus of manipulation, can be an apparatus of change. While not universally ingrained systemically, ideas that evoke social consciousness and in turn, kindle the desire for social action are what education should be. While education can oppress, education can also instill ideas necessary for sparking change in a society that desperately needs it.

Contrary to popular belief, segregation persists in public schools all across the United States 62 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. Nonwhite students (predominantly black and Latino) are not only segregated from white students in schools, but they receive the short end of

the stick when it comes to the quality of their education. In big cities across the nation (New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Los Angeles, Chicago, Baltimore, Baltimore, Detroit) the percentage of blacks and Hispanics in public schools ranged from 75 percent to 96 percent in 2002-2003 (Kozol 45). While they certainly are isolated and heavily concentrated in the public school system, they are also marginalized and deprived of adequate facilities and the educational resources their white middle-class counterparts receive.

Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are subject to disenfranchisement in education in the form of low funding, their futures deemed unworthy of state investment. American educator, writer, and activist Jonathan Kozol received a letter from a third grader that said, "We do not have the things you have. You have Clean things. We do not have. You have a clean bathroom. We do not have that. You have Parks and we do not have Parks. You have all the thing and we do not have all the thing. Can you help us?" When it comes to eight year old Alliyah, her residing state of New York spent \$8 ,000 yearly on her individual education in comparison to the \$12, 000 a year a child in a mostly white suburb would have spent on them in 1998. The disparity in funding for education when comparing socioeconomically disadvantaged students and advantaged students is apparent and it is unnerving. It is reflected when comparing the facilities of the latter and the former students. Restrooms in low-income schools lack basic supplies like toilet paper, some classrooms do not have air conditioning, and rats run rampant throughout the school (Kozol 51). Disrepair is ubiquitous in these schools, collapsing ceilings and non-functioning ventilation systems are normal conditions for learning. Supplies are lacking, outdated textbooks and equipment being prevalent. Variety in classes as well as rigor are lacking, college preparatory courses and advanced placement courses being sparse. While

socioeconomically advantaged schools allot students the opportunity to take courses that provide college preparation and academic substance (eg: residential architecture), low-income schools had courses that can be described as “vocational” (eg: sewing.) This serves to show that low-income students are not seen as important as they are being prepared to work low-paying jobs rather than to go to college (something current-day society values so much.) They are seen as not worthy of the same funding and opportunity as their counterparts. Coupled with the distressing facility conditions they learn in and the adversity (stressful home situations, unmet developmental needs, etc.) students live with on a daily basis, socioeconomically disadvantaged students are not as successful in American schooling because they are subject to state-run, state-regulated oppression. Current schooling segregation dubs low-income minority students unworthy of quality education, unworthy of sharing facilities with middle-class white students, and not deserving of the valued college education.

Paired with low-funding, students, especially in public schools, are not taught like human beings, but like containers one would stuff information in only to be topped off with a restrictive lid. The low-investment these schools receive is being used to indoctrinate students. As James Baldwin put it, “the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society” (Baldwin 678). The aims of society, in this case, are to produce obedient citizens and prevent critical thinking. Critical thinking leads to consciousness and in result, evokes the desire to resist institutional structures, something the state finds to be a threat. This is something the state had in mind when designing the education system. The state wants to program youth to obey the rules while they simultaneously accrue hordes of information through receiving, memorizing, repeating, but never questioning. In fact,

the meeker the student, the better. This is what Freire calls the “banking” concept of education, what schools across the United States implement into their curriculum. A practice that imposes passivity rather than activity and pushes a distorted reality that values obedience rather than critical thinking onto growing minds. Ways in which this system enforces obedience are disconcerting. It has been described as “taylorism” or “primitive utilitarianism” in the classroom, where taylorism refers to factory management theories that came about in the early 20th century. Techniques being utilized with students as young as six were techniques used by factory overseers to make sure workers were being obedient and productive. Evidently, America’s marginalized youth are being exploited. The only preparation they are receiving from American education is preparation in which they will be the future working adults that only went to primary school to benefit the economy and nothing else. This concept of teaching obedience goes hand-in-hand with the vocational classes low-income public schools employ, factory management theories being useful when applied to vocational jobs. This is the embodiment of oppression as it dehumanizes students (especially vulnerable low-income students) nationwide, preventing critical thinking, consciousness, resistance, and a future in order to maintain such exploitation.

The banking concept, most of all, serves the interests of oppressors because oppressors have no inclination towards revealing the true intentions and history of society, no desire to “have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (Freire 72). Critical thinking skills are a danger to questioning the status quo. Analytical thinking inhibiting coupled with the skewed history lessons students learn in American education helps with the construction of a barrier that prevents social consciousness. The contents of social studies courses distort history, presenting a

sanitized, two-dimensional picture of historical events and figures. The United States' war history is terribly romanticized under the guise of patriotism and the delusion of freedom in modern America. Elementary school children are taught glorified colonialism. Christopher Columbus was the great explorer who "discovered" America and the exploitation and forced assimilation of Native Americans in California's Spanish missions is a class project where kids build a house that symbolize imperialism and conquest. High school students know what slavery and Jim Crow segregation are, but do not know their devastating aftereffects and are taught that institutionalized racism ended with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Students can recite the quadratic formula but, as educator Derrick Smith put it, "Can't tell you a thing about where they came from." Students are taught with societal aims in mind. Those aims being to control people and prevent any skepticism or resistance relative to government practices and the history of this nation. The state knows that with awareness comes the desire to resist or ultimately take action. It is true. Only with consciousness can action occur and education is quite successful in its disposal of anything that may trigger consciousness. The consciousness of America's messy history rooted in imperialist ventures and genocide, the consciousness of current institutionalized racism, the consciousness of how society favors certain groups to others, the consciousness of inequity in education, all of this is prevented from being learned and the list only continues. It is difficult to see an end in sight to the detrimental practice of consciousness prevention. What change should be executed in the education system? With segregation, disparities in funding, domination and control of vulnerable students, how could education possibly be a site of liberation?

Education can be a source of collective liberation rather than oppression if and only if the structure of education is transformed. What would this transformation include? While Freire would suggest the complete rejection of the banking system, it can also be suggested that integrating our schools and providing equal opportunity for all students be implemented in such a transformation as well. While a “problem-posing” education that evokes consciousness and encourages acts of cognition is essential in liberating students, it must be recognized that most of the students subject to the banking system are those who are socioeconomically isolated within the educational platform and who are subject to marginalization socially and economically. While consciousness and critical thinking skills liberate the mind, whole liberation can only be achieved when education achieves equity and each student is valued and allocated the same treatment and respect. Integration and equal opportunity paired with social awareness is true liberation, as it not only equips students for postsecondary education but equips them with the tools needed to bring about change in the world. Transformation is needed in education in order for transformation to be accomplished in a world stricken with injustice and disregard for people who experience oppression and may not even know it. Transformation is needed to attain liberation and liberation is needed to achieve humanization.

Education is paradoxical. On one hand it can enlighten and spark action. On another, it can restrict and control. Too long have youth in America been indoctrinated to carry on the status quo. Too long have certain students been favored over others because of factors like that of race and class. Education is needed to dismantle education. What is this ideal education? Ideally, each school will be given the same quality resources within a safe educational environment. Integration efforts would be reimplemented, if possible, as socioeconomic diversity is valuable

for student exposure and learning. The teacher would engage their pupils more in discussions and encourage them to speak for themselves and draw their own conclusions. History wouldn't be distorted to fit the state's mold but rather, will be taught without censor and without glorification. Columbus would not be a hero and California missions would not be paid homage to. Students would exercise active learning and would learn unsanitized history, making their own judgements and developing their own individual identities. The transformation will not be easy, but neither is the current state of education for marginalized students. Change needs to happen. With the combination of respect towards students and the instillment of consciousness in young minds, collective social action in regards to issues that affect America's students can be practiced and liberation not only inside the classroom but outside the educational spectrum can be achieved. Education is contradictory, but it is also needed to dismantle education as a practice of conditioning. Education is a paradox, but education as a root of oppression can be shaped to liberty's advantage. Education can be used as a tool for change.

Works Cited

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