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Education is the Problem and the Solution

In his address, “A Talk to Teachers,” James Baldwin presents a paradoxical relationship between education and civic responsibility, declaring, “precisely at the point when you begin to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with society. It is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person” (Baldwin 685). Education makes people aware of the brokenness in our nation. With that knowledge comes the responsibility to call for change. Education is the key to making a difference for the future. However, as Regina Langhout presents in her article, “Acts of Resistance: Student (In)visibility,” our education system has major problems. How can we expect students to become educated members of society who will make a difference if their educational system is designed to silence them? The responsibility often lands on students themselves, to resist the system with their own power. Paulo Freire also describes the problematic dynamics of our educational system in his “Pedagogy of the Oppressed.” Teachers dump information into their students instead of fostering conversation, a process that makes learning passive and silent. Freire presents a different model of education that gives students power and agency. Educators must revolutionize the way they teach, and young people must put their spirit of resistance to use. Together teachers and students must struggle against the current system of education to develop citizens who will challenge our nation’s injustices.

Educating people to think critically about the world is the way to bring about social change. Baldwin explains the true purpose of education: “to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions... To ask questions of the universe, and then

learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity” (Baldwin 678). Our schools should be designed to enable and encourage students to think for themselves, to be curious, to be self-confident, and to ask questions. As Baldwin says, once a person develops consciousness, they become aware of all the problems in our nation, finding themselves “at war with society” (Baldwin 685). We need critical and conscious people like these to challenge oppressive institutions in our society.

The problem is that our school system is one of the institutions that we need to challenge. Currently the education system does not equip students to make change. It is designed to keep kids quiet and obedient instead of encouraging them to be bold and curious because “no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around” (Baldwin 679). Our nation does not want citizens who challenge it, which is why our education system is so flawed. Regina Langhout describes the school system, saying that, “Students who are working class or of color, then, are taught to obey authority and not question the power structure” (Langhout 128). Langhout’s article includes interviews with students asking them what they learn in class. Their answers were, along with math and reading, “when the teacher’s talking, that you need to pay attention to the teacher,” “listen to what the teacher has to say,” and “if it’s time to do something, she tell us to go do it and we, and we do it. That’s it!” (Langhout 140). What these children are remembering from their time in class is that they need to be quiet and pay attention to authority. There is a major emphasis on behavior; students learn discipline before anything else.

Paulo Freire similarly characterizes our system of education as a “banking system,” writing that, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and

makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (Freire 72). In this system, learning is shallow, because students are simply receptacles of the teacher’s information. Students learn how to “receive, memorize, and repeat,” instead of learning valuable information that they will retain. For example, the students in Langhout’s articles remember to listen to the teacher instead of retaining what they learned in math and science. The banking system creates a problematic power dynamic between teachers and students. Teachers, as the depositors, hold all the knowledge and power over the students. Freire writes that, “the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects” (Freire 73). The teacher is the only one in the classroom who is interacting with the information, so the students have no power over what they learn or how they learn. In this banking system, students are passive and silent.

While I think it is important that students learn to be respectful of each other and their teachers, teaching them to be silent harms them. The way our education system silences youth will ultimately have negative repercussions on our nation because no one will be able to create change. Students can’t speak for themselves at all because “Children who do speak up are branded as troublemakers or labeled as undisciplined” (Langhout 128). The system makes students powerless to make change because teachers can just dismiss them by calling them troublemakers if they try to think on their own. Either they can be a “good student” who obeys robotically and fears punishment, or they can be “bad” and get in trouble for trying to resist. Baldwin describes the effect of silencing students by saying of injustice, “He can more or less accept it with an absolutely inarticulate and dangerous rage inside--all the more dangerous because it is never expressed” (Baldwin 681). Students, particularly lower-class students of color, are trapped. The only choice presented to them is to accept the unfairness the world offers

them. They are not allowed to have a voice, so they harbor anger within them, which is dangerous for them and for this country. Students are the future, and we cannot have students who have been taught to be silent as the hope for our future.

To fight the system, teachers have the responsibility to empower their students to use their voices and recognize their importance. Paulo Freire offers a revolutionary method of teaching that he calls “problem-posing,” which is based on dialogue instead of depositing. Students and teachers have the opportunity to learn from each other. Freire writes that, “banking theory and practice, as immobilizing and fixating forces, fail to acknowledge men and women as historical beings; problem-posing theory and practice take the people’s historicity as their starting point” (Freire 84). In the banking system, students are detached from what they learn. In the problem-posing system, where teachers and students learn from each other, each student’s identity is important. “Historicity” is being an authentic and true part of history. In a problem-posing classroom, there is something to be learned from each student’s history and identity. Good teachers can empower students by changing the way they see themselves and their role in society. I grew up being taught discipline in school, similar to what Langhout writes about in her article. I was afraid to be wrong, and I was afraid to speak up. I thought my voice didn’t matter in class. However, in high school I was blessed with some great teachers, who encouraged me to ask questions when I was confused and were genuinely interested in my thoughts. In particular, my history teachers taught me how significant the past is for our present day. They taught me about my own historicity, that I am a part of history, with the power to affect the future. Over four years my teachers instilled in me an understanding of the value of my voice. If

I had not had teachers who used a problem-posing method, I would probably still be afraid to speak.

The problem-posing method of education shows students that they are important in this world. Teachers who use the problem-posing method encourage students to make a difference in their own communities: “Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems related to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (Freire 81). When students learn about problems with which they identify and begin to ask questions about the society in which they grew up, they begin to take ownership of their education and of their role in society. In a problem-posing education, students become people. Freire writes, “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*--as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality,” (Freire 84). Problem-posing education is more concerned with development than memorization. Education should be about “becoming,” about becoming citizens, questioners, experimenters, and world-changers. Educators need to teach their students to take ownership, because this world, “unfinished” and in need of transformation, belongs to us as students. Our society’s problems are our own problems, and, even though we are young and “uncompleted,” we have the power to make a difference. Students are not outsiders in this world, we are its hope and future.

Even within the oppressive banking system of education, young people still possess a spirit of resistance that has the potential to create change in our society. After detailing all the ways schools work to silence students, Langhout shows that students still rebel: “Nevertheless, children have found creative ways to resist. In these actions is hope, not despair. These children

have agency and have found ways to make themselves more visible and heard despite the constraints of the setting... They see injustices and name them” (Langhout 151). All people have agency. Even when children are limited and silenced in schools, they still have free will. They have hope for the future and possess an innate and human ability to resist. Baldwin characterizes this rebelliousness as potential and energy, saying, “America is not the world and if America is to become a nation, she must find a way--and this child must help her find a way--to use the tremendous potential and tremendous energy which this child represents” (Baldwin 686). Young people possess immense power. I am a part of this generation, I am angry, and I have hope.

Through education people begin to see how painfully flawed this country is. Educating more and more people about our nation’s problems is necessary to bring about social change. However, while education is a major part of the solution, our school system as an institution is a major part of the problem. Schools are designed to force students into silence, to teach discipline and obedience. They are not designed to create the kind of citizens that we need, ones who will make a difference by thinking critically and speaking up. The odds are stacked against us as students, but still our nation needs us. If we don’t challenge our society, how will it be transformed? It is the responsibility of young educated people to use their voices for social change and for educators to empower them to do so. As a part of the new generation, I place my hope in our spirit of resistance. We must take control of the education intended to silence us and use our power to change the course of our nation.

Works Cited

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