

Teaching For Transformation:  
The praxis of critical pedagogy in social studies education

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores the theory-praxis gap in critical pedagogy as it relates to social studies education. The study uses a multiple-case study design to focus on the teaching practices of two high school social studies teachers, particularly on how defining aspects of critical pedagogy are reflected in their teaching. The data reveals several aspects of critical pedagogy that are present in the teaching practices of both teachers, but also reveals several opportunities where potential for critical pedagogy is not realized. The author makes several suggestions on how the “critical potential” in these specific instances could be realized, and what implication this study may have for future projects.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*"The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."* – Karl Marx

My interest in critical pedagogy first began during my final semester as an undergraduate in the Spring of 2010, when I was introduced to Paulo Freire's (1970/2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a required reading in my social studies methods course. It was a challenging read to say the least. The profound intellectualism with which Freire writes makes his work difficult to understand, particularly for those unfamiliar with critical scholarship. Nevertheless, as I slowly trudged through the pages, his words spoke to me, just like they spoke to many of the South American peasants described in his narrative. His words described a reality I had often seen through the windows of television and the pages of books, a reality that I knew existed beyond the enclave of my comfortable suburban upbringing, a reality whose existence I had rationalized into legitimacy, encouraged by a culture of American exceptionalism, a firm belief in God's benevolent will, and an innate, almost subconscious wanting to justify the countless aspects of privilege I experienced in my day-to-day life. They described a reality marred by injustice, oppression, and vast inequality.

As my studies carried me into graduate school, it became clear that critical pedagogy was my calling as a future teacher. I began to further immerse myself in radical literature, reading the works of Marx, Apple, Kincheloe, Giroux,

Ellsworth, Bowles, Gintis, and McLaren. However, as I continued to gain a deeper understanding of the theory, one question still remained largely unanswered: What did critical pedagogy *look like*?

Though I had yet to hold a job as a social studies teacher, my two years as a licensed substitute had led me to scores of classrooms in a dozen schools. Yet in both the lessons I was assigned to teach and the classroom and school cultures I routinely observed, there was little I witnessed that reflected the liberatory language from my reading. Further investigation proved that these observations were not merely observational. *The theory-praxis gap*, a term prevalent in critical pedagogy literature, defines this phenomenon as the immense disparity which exists between the production of critical theory and the documentation of its actual practice in the classroom. To put it succinctly, in the majority of U.S. schools, critical pedagogy was not happening.

The discovery of this phenomenon problematized my calling. How could I reconcile my desire to teach critically with the reality of the theory-praxis gap? To be sure, the literature does boast numerous examples of teachers and schools endeavoring in the interest of justice and equality, but the problem remained that even the thickest of descriptions failed to provide the materialization of theory I so desperately wanted and needed to see. Furthermore, many of these examples exist in environments and communities where social justice is *the* goal, not *a* goal. How were they to help me if I landed a teaching job in one of the schools where I

worked, schools that I perceived to be so uncritical?

Hence came this study, a study where I could hopefully *see* critical, a study designed to enhance my own learning and understanding, but also a study that could be useful to students and teachers like me, students and teachers who were interested in and passionate about critical pedagogy and social justice, but had nowhere to turn for examples. It is my hope that in reporting my findings, I can provide a contribution to those teachers and students seeking to do such work, and continue the efforts of more experienced scholars who have laid the foundation in bridging the theory-praxis gap in critical pedagogy, particularly for the social studies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Any literature review on critical pedagogy needs to begin with the work of Paulo Freire. Venerated scholar Stanley Aronowitz has called him “the virtual founder” of this perspective (Freire, 1970/2000, back cover). For this reason, I will devote considerable attention to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a revolutionary work where he lays the foundation for all that would follow in the field of critical pedagogy. Before beginning this analysis, however, I must acknowledge, as Richard Shaull does in his forward to *Pedagogy*, that any attempt to ‘summarize’ this book is an offense to the depth and complexity that makes it a classic (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 31). Nevertheless, I will now attempt to do just that.

The goal of Freire's pedagogy is that "men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; [and that,] they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in the process of transformation" (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 12). Freire describes this as "a task for radicals," a struggle for "humanization," and against "dehumanization," that must be performed "*with*, not for" the oppressed (pp. 39, 44, 48). The struggle for humanization involves not only the oppressed, who have had their humanity "stolen," but the oppressors as well, whose sheer existence guarantees the survival of a world marred by oppression and injustice (p. 44). Hence, the process of humanization seeks to liberate both the oppressed from their chains and the oppressors from their destructive privilege, resulting in both becoming more fully human.

This pedagogy requires that engagement with reality take place through "dialectical thought" (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 53). In thinking dialectically, the world is seen for both its "objective" reality, which represents the world removed from all interpretations of humankind, and its "subjective" reality, represented by the consciousness of each individual and his or her unique construction of the world. Both realities exist in mutual dependence of each other. If there were no objective reality, there would be nothing for subjects to perceive, and if there were no subjective reality, there would be no one to name objects. In critical pedagogy, it is through the awakening or unveiling of the subjective mind unto

this objective reality marred by oppression and injustice, that the foundation for the pedagogy is built.

This *unveiling* is only the first stage. The true key to the success of this pedagogy lies in the mastery of the “praxis,” which combines the components of action with critical reflection (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 53). Empowered with their newly discovered knowledge, the oppressed begin the struggle for their own liberation, seeking to transform their present realities, and continuously reflecting on their progress along the way. The end goal is the eradication of a culture of domination, and the permanent liberation of the formerly oppressed. Hence, this stage can be called the *liberation* stage.

Freire (1970/2000) argues that the traditional conception of education, what he describes as the “banking model,” is a primary culprit of both creating and supporting systematic oppression (p. 72). In the banking model, students are treated as “containers” or “receptacles” to be filled, turning education into an act of “depositing” where the students function as “depositories” and the teacher as the “depositor.” Knowledge is viewed as “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 72). While there are both knowing and unknowing “bank-clerk teachers,” both, intentionally for the knowing and unintentionally for the unknowing, legitimate the status quo, which in turn serves the interests of the oppressors (p. 75). This is because the oppressors “care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it

transformed...Thus they react almost instinctively against any experiment in education which stimulates the critical faculties” (pp. 73-74).

Liberatory education severely differs from the banking model. The teacher is neither a dominator of students nor the sole possessor of knowledge, but instead views teaching as a “partnership” in which both are responsible for creating and sharing knowledge (p. 75). To examine the world, teachers and students use what Freire (1970/2000) calls the “problem-posing” model (p. 79). In this model, the teacher presents the students with a problem in need of solving. The problem at hand is one unanswerable through status quo considerations because it asks the revolutionary question, “*Why?*” Asking this questions challenges students to critically question their world, and is a far cry from the rote memorization of “facts” that is so common to the banking model. (For example, look at how the fact, “*There are many African-Americans in prison in the United States.*” changes when presented as the problem, “*Why are there so many African-Americans in prison in the United States?*”)

There are numerous other ways to contrast the banking and problem-posing models. Where the banking model portrays reality as static and unchanging, the problem-posing model teaches reality as “a *process*, undergoing constant transformation” (p. 75). Where the banking model consists of “transferals of information,” the problem-posing model consists of “acts of cognition” (p. 79). Where the banking model limits knowledge to vertical

*consumption*, the problem-posing model expands knowledge to horizontal *construction*. And, where the banking model “attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness,” the problem-posing model “strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality” (p. 81). These contrasts show not only an underlying difference in process and procedure, but also opposing ideologies as to what the primary goals of education should be. Freire (1971/2000) argues for a pedagogy that puts justice and equality first. The problem-posing model accomplishes this by empowering students both critically and intellectually, and revealing to them their ability to transform the world. In solving these justice-related problems, students are not only combating oppression in a larger, abstract sense, but also tangibly improving their own lives and the lives of others in their communities.

Though, as I said in my disclaimer, it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to summarize *Pedagogy*, I hope that my attempt at doing so at least illustrates the immense depth and complexity of the ideas scholars had to contemplate following the book’s publication. This has made the task of generating a concise definition for the term ‘critical pedagogy’ rather difficult, as any concise definition leaves so much unsaid. However, for the purpose of this paper and this study, it is important to establish an *operational* definition on which to ground my work. The definition I have chosen comes from Apple’s *Ideology and Curriculum* (1979/2004), which, though it does not explicitly use the term ‘critical pedagogy,’

eloquently summarizes the two stages of unveiling and liberation through which all critical pedagogy takes place. The definition reads as follows:

First, [critical pedagogy] aims at illuminating the tendencies for unwarranted and often unconscious domination, alienation, and repression within certain existing cultural, political, educational, and economic institutions. Second, through exploring the negative effects and contradictions of much that unquestioningly goes on in these institutions, [critical pedagogy] seeks to “promote conscious [individual and collective] emancipatory activity.” (Apple, 1979/2004, p. 126)

This is a solid definition, but while giving us a theoretical framework, it still leaves much to the imagination as to what critical pedagogy might look like in practice. Hence, I will use the next several sections to more thoroughly describe some identifying characteristics of critical pedagogy. As other researchers have done before me, I would also like to point out that my descriptions and categorizations of critical pedagogy are merely my “take” on the phenomenon, and will reflect my own personal biases, perspectives, and interests (Kincheloe, 2008).

*Critical pedagogy makes teaching for social justice its primary purpose.*

All pedagogies and educational philosophies must have a rigorous and informed vision of the purpose of education (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 6). For the critical pedagogue, this purpose is the cultivation of social justice. Scholars have used different language to describe this central aim. Freire (1970/2000) speaks of

the “liberation of the oppressed.” Evans (2008) describes “emancipation from domination” (p. 4). Kincheloe refers to the “alleviation of human suffering” (p. 11). Regardless of the terminology, they are all talking about the same thing: social justice.

Critical pedagogues do not believe that injustice, domination, and suffering are accidental or inevitable. Instead they believe that “such suffering is a humanly constructed phenomenon,” and that, “steps can be taken to eradicate [it] if the people of the planet and their leaders [have] the collective will to do so” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 12). The goal of a critical pedagogy then is to cultivate this will, to empower students as agents of social change in the interest of justice and equality in both their lives and the lives of others on a level that is both global and local. Educators work not only to cultivate such orientations, but also to have these values reflected in their classrooms, creating a safe space where all students feel accepted, empowered, successful, and loved.

Of course critical pedagogy has many secondary goals. Some of these will be discussed in the coming paragraphs, such as the development of a rigorous curriculum and the cultivation of democratic citizens. Nevertheless, the aim to cultivate social justice always remains its driving purpose, and should be at the heart of everything that is done in the name of critical pedagogy.

*Critical pedagogy combines a critical intellectualism with morality.*

This aspect of critical pedagogy will further delve into the “unveiling” stage described above. A central goal of critical pedagogy is to empower students to transform their own realities, but before students can change their reality, they must first understand it. This requires the cultivation of what Kincheloe (2008) calls a “critical consciousness,” where students learn to understand, empathize with, and act to alleviate human suffering (p. 13). Such acts of cognition could also be termed “critical thinking.” However, much to the chagrin of critical scholars, this latter label has reached a level of ambiguity in larger academia, and is often used to describe cognitive acts that hardly match the tents of critical pedagogy.

Ahlquist (1990) employs a useful heuristic devised by Paul (1984) to differentiate between these varying conceptions of “critical thinking.” Paul separates critical thinking into two categories: “weak sense” critical thinking and “strong sense” critical thinking (Ahlquist, p. 53). In weak sense critical thinking, students are simply performing what are commonly known as “higher-order” thinking skills. These skills, such as synthesis, analysis, and evaluation, are often associated with the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, and while they can be rigorously employed, they do not necessarily incorporate the social critique aspect necessary to meet the standards of critical pedagogy. “Strong sense” critical thinking, on the other hand, incorporates what Ahlquist describes as a “moral and ethical component...[grounded] in a historical context which addresses the

problems and issues of concern to a group, nation or society [,] and seeks to solve social problems to improve peoples' lives" (p. 54). She further explains:

This is not critical thinking for the sake of debate, argument or logical reasoning, but for constructive change, for the transformation of society. This is not critical thinking for its own sake, not for the sake of agreeability, nor for the maintenance of the status quo, but critical thinking which enables people to grab hold of real life problems and construct solutions to them. (p. 54)

Here, Ahlquist makes several important distinctions and gives us somewhat of a measuring stick to evaluate questions and curricula labeled as "critical." It is also worth noting that critical scholars do not believe that critical thinking should take place apart from academic rigor. In other words, critical scholars believe in the necessity and utility of teaching skills such as reading, writing, and computation, but teaching them in a way that inspires a "commitment to collectively work for an emancipated world" (Evans, p. 4). To engage in such thinking without academic rigor risks cultivating anti-intellectualism and leaves students ill-prepared to engage in emancipatory activity (Kincheloe, 2008).

Critics of critical pedagogy accuse such thinking of being pessimistic and/or utopian. Kincheloe (2008) addresses both of these criticisms head on. What some label as pessimism, Kincheloe labels as inspiration for emancipatory action. "Such a morose delineation," Kincheloe argues, "is not meant to depress us, but to alert those of us with a passion for fairness, justice, freedom, and human dignity to make our presence felt, to pick up the torch for a new generation

dedicated to the struggle for the social good and the sanctity of a rigorous and social justice based education” (p. ix). What some people label as utopian, Kincheloe labels as pragmatic. “A practical hope,” says Kincheloe, “doesn’t simply celebrate rainbows, unicorns, nutbread, and niceness, but rigorously understands “what is” in relation to “what could be”” (Kincheloe, p. x). This comes back to what Ahlquist describes at the beginning of this section, that without incorporating a moral and ethical component, “critical thinking” is not critical pedagogy.

*Critical pedagogy seeks to empower students with agency so they can transform their realities.*

True critical pedagogy transcends understanding, using the critical consciousness to inform and inspire transformative action. To cultivate the intellect but disallow this transformative action is to deny students their right to control their own lives, the very thing that gives critical pedagogy its empowering essence. Freire (1970/2000) explains:

If true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory of transforming action, this theory cannot fail to assign the people a fundamental role in the transformation process. The leaders cannot treat the oppressed as mere activists to be denied the opportunity of reflection and allowed merely the illusion of acting.... The leaders do bear the responsibility for coordination and, at times, direction--but leaders who deny praxis to the oppressed thereby invalidate their own praxis. (pp. 126-127)

In other words, teachers cannot solely encourage students to change their realities; they must facilitate it within their classrooms, empowering students to perform the work that the unveiling stage prepares them to do. To disallow this opportunity sends a message of distrust to the students and undermines everything a critical pedagogy sets forth to accomplish.

Kincheloe (2008) has termed this empowerment as “agency,” defined as a person’s ability to shape and control his or her own life, freeing self from the oppression of power (p. 2). Achieving and utilizing agency is a culminating aspect of critical pedagogy, a point where thinking, research, and reflection all come together resulting in some kind of transformative action. To be most effective, this action should be responsive to the needs, histories, and cultures of the students, and come from a curriculum that is designed from the bottom-up rather than the top-down (Apple, 1979/2004).

*Critical pedagogy considers all education to be ideological.*

Education is inherently ideological. This is not just the case for critical pedagogy, but for all forms of education, no matter how neutral they ostensibly appear or claim to be. Apple (1979/2004) was one of the first scholars to establish this link between the curriculum and its inherent political ideology, and his book *Ideology and Curriculum* remains one of the most insightful and

thorough analyses on the subject. In the book, Apple contends that education is inseparably tied to our values and culture, our beliefs about what is good and bad and what is right and wrong, about what is legitimate knowledge and what is not, and about how people should behave in society. These are highly political, highly ideological matters, but they are also inherent in nearly every decision, both major and minor, that is made in and about our schools. In other words, the removal of politics and ideology from our educational system is literally an impossible task.

Nevertheless, most educational systems in the United States have endeavored to produce curriculums that are politically “neutral.” It is under this guise of neutrality that Apple (1979/2004) proposes the existence of a “hidden curriculum,” an implicit ideology which tacitly serves particular economic and ideological interests (p. 20). This results in the preservation of the status quo, of existing privilege, interests, and knowledge which are maintained at the expense of less powerful groups (p. 45). The “hidden” aspect of this ideology makes it especially dangerous, as it is absorbed almost subconsciously, at the root rather than the roof of the brain, covertly asserting a form of cultural domination over its subjects. Furthermore, because “neutral” systems frame knowledge through the language of science and positivism, they leave little-to-no room for the critical inquiry necessary to reveal the destructive tendencies they possess.

If we are to accept Apple’s argument, it is clear that “neutral” education systems are no less political than openly justice-oriented critical pedagogies.

Nevertheless, it is critical pedagogy that often faces accusations of indoctrination, much of which is due to its embrace of ideological transparency. While the accusation may be unfair, this is a concern worth addressing, as indoctrination should certainly not be a goal of critical pedagogues. The democratic and inclusive nature of critical pedagogy means that at times the teacher's opinion will and should enter the classroom, but certainly not as the only opinion or perspective, nor as an enforcing one. As will be discussed later, critical pedagogues should strive for diversity of opinion, both in the texts and resources they allow to enter the classroom, as well as from their student body, so issues and content can be understood in their fullest complexity. The hope is that in conducting these studies, the "unveiling" of injustice, oppression, and inequality will *inspire* students to become *self-proclaimed* social justice advocates, not brainwash them into carrying out a teacher's political agenda. The overriding point, however, is that the admittance of an educational ideology does not automatically equate a pedagogy with indoctrination. On the contrary, it is the "hidden" or undeclared ideologies that pose the most danger to students, which is why all pedagogies, critical or otherwise, should be viewed critically and suspiciously.

*Critical pedagogy considers all knowledge to be constructed, complex, and contextual.*

Most schools in the U.S. perceive knowledge in a way similar to Freire's (1970/2000) banking model. They perceive it as a "thing," produced by experts, and transmitted to or received by consumers. This positivistic conception of knowledge is an epistemological position, a position which believes that the way knowledge is produced in the physical and social sciences is essentially the same (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 27). This would mean that human behavior and cognition should be studied with the same law-like predictability with which we study the natural world. Critical pedagogues disagree with this epistemology.

Critical pedagogy takes the constructivist approach to knowledge, which believes that all new knowledge is built upon and linked to knowledge previously obtained. For example, one does not learn the fact, "George Washington was the first president of the United States," in isolation, but connects this to previously existing conceptions of the United States, presidents, history, people named George, and a myriad of other factors. Likewise, knowledge is also gained within a context. Contexts can be social, cultural, political, ideological, historical, racial, or economic, and in all cases influence the way that knowledge is perceived by the individual. To again use the example above, George Washington's presidency may be viewed very differently depending on whether you are a White person or a Black person, a man or a woman, a European-American or a Native American, and also depending on the countless other ways in which you are different from other people in the world.

This all makes for a very complex conception of knowledge. Kincheloe (2008) calls this complexity “central” to critical pedagogy:

Critical pedagogues who take complexity seriously challenge reductionistic, bipolar, true-or-false epistemologies. As critical teachers come to recognize the complexity of the lived world with its maze of uncontrollable variables, irrationality, non-linearity, and unpredictable interaction of wholes and parts, they begin to also see the interpretative dimension of reality. (p. 37)

Critical pedagogy recognizes that there is much more to learning than the straightforward presentation of “facts.” Knowledge is uncertain, untidy, and complicated and related to the various contexts and constructions of each individual. Hence, it should be explored in school as such, not reduced to the rote memorization of names, dates, and events, as it so often is in the current culture of standardization.

*Critical pedagogy challenges the status quo.*

Although “neutral” pedagogies claim no allegiances, they typically reinforce the status quo and all the existing privileges and inequities that come with it. In many ways, despite their ostensible neutrality, U.S. schools actually embody the status quo arrangements that exist in modern day America: power is structured hierarchically and enforced with authoritarian measures; grades and curricula reflect the individualistic and meritocratic tenets of capitalism; White students are more likely to find success than are students of color; affluent

communities perform favorably, while poor communities perform poorly. In these ways, schools function as places where the status quo is not only legitimated, but also replicated.

This theory of “reproduction” is exactly what was proposed by Bowles and Gintis (1976) in their revolutionary book *Schooling in Capitalist America*. More specifically, they propose that one of the primary goals of schools is to prepare students for employment in the workforce by replicating the workplace environment in schools. This environment, with its unequal distribution of educational opportunities and resources and its enforcements of dominant culture and ideologies, tends to also impose a rigid class structure with limited social mobility, particularly for those students already located in the margins. The authors further explain:

The educational system serves--through the correspondence of its social relations with those of economic life--to reproduce economic inequality and to distort personal development, thus under corporate capitalism, the objectives of liberal educational reform are contradictory: it is precisely because of its role as producer of an alienated and stratified labor force that the educational system has developed its repressive and unequal structure. (p. 48)

These authoritarian and antidemocratic efforts of social control are often accepted or acquiesced to by well-meaning teachers. However, while these teachers are not intentionally hurting their students, but merely following the dictates of their superiors and the rules of the system, the results are the same nonetheless

(Kincheloe, 2008, pp. 8-9).

Critical pedagogy moves students to question the hidden political assumptions and colonial, racial, gender, and class biases of different forms of education (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 34). In social studies, this often involves the questioning of the United States both historically and present-day. Domestically, students may examine the country's tradition of oppression with women, people of color, immigrants, transgender people, and individuals who identify as anything other than heterosexual. Internationally, students may look at how the United States has conducted itself abroad, including acts of military, cultural, and economic imperialism, as well as the notion of American exceptionalism. Opponents of critical pedagogy try to frame such critical inquiry as "subversive and anti-American" (Kincheloe, p. 9), but critical pedagogues view such critical inquiry as an essential component of being a democratic citizen. Apple (1979/2004) has even called social criticism the "ultimate act of patriotism" (p. 168), as it means that we "expect [and] demand, that [the United States] live up to the ideals for which it supposedly stands" (p. 191). In this sense, challenging the status quo is not just something a critical pedagogy *might* do, but something it *must* do if it is to make a serious attempt at accomplishing its lofty, social-justice-oriented goals.

*Critical pedagogy views issues through multiple perspectives.*

Schools as well as social studies classrooms often focus on dominant perspectives (Goodlad, 1983). A dominant perspective can be described as a voice derived from a group that holds relative power within a society. In the United States, these voices might be White, male, middle-class, Eurocentric, or heteronormative. When occasional departures are taken from dominant perspectives, they are usually cursory and depoliticized, relegating important people and stories in areas like women's history and civil rights to side margins and special sections. This approach not only reinforces dominant perspectives, but also rejects the ethnic, class, and cultural backgrounds of students in the margins and the forms of knowledge that accompany them (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 15).

Critical pedagogy explores these alternative bodies of knowledge. In particular, it emphasizes knowledge produced by the margins, knowledge that is non-Western, subjugated, and indigenous, and knowledge from those groups whose lives are affected by the sting of poverty and oppression (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 11). In other words, critical pedagogy "amplifies the voices of those who have had to struggle to be heard" (p. 24). Sometimes attempts at educating or "reaching" marginalized students can be misguided, often aiming to "save" the students from their oppressive situation. These attempts do not legitimate subjugated forms of knowledge, but instead discredit them by promoting a paternalistic agenda in order to help the marginalized become more culturally

White. Critical pedagogy's embrace of alternative bodies of knowledge does not seek to assimilate but to empower, to recognize as legitimate the cultural contexts that make bodies of knowledge different from those of the status quo. This exercise in perspective taking is also meant to cultivate a critical awareness of how bodies of knowledge are informed. By asking questions like, *What counts as knowledge?*, *How is this knowledge produced and legitimized?*, and, *Whose interest does this knowledge serve?* (Giroux, 2011, p. 42), students learn to become critical readers of texts, media, and the world, and to identify biases and interests that inform the perspectives they encounter.

*Critical pedagogy explores phenomena thematically.*

The notion that critical pedagogy is best implemented thematically corresponds with Freire's (1970/2000) description of "generative themes." These themes essentially function as organizational heuristics that Freire and his students use to investigate the world. Freire describes these themes as "concentric circles" of "units and sub-units" "moving from the general to the particular" (p. 103). The overriding, or "universal," theme is that of "*domination...which implies its opposite, the theme of liberation, as the object to be achieved* (p. 103). As the themes move from the broad to the general, Freire incorporates his problem posing model, presenting students with societal contradictions that cause "limit-situations" for the oppressed. As students work to decode these limiting

and oppressive situations, they are participating in the aforementioned unveiling stage in which the critical consciousness is groomed and primed for subsequent emancipatory action.

Subsequent scholars have worked to mold Freire's (1970/2000) generative themes to the social studies. Evans (2008) has described an "issues-centered teaching" approach to education that he believes would be a step in the right direction to bring critical pedagogy to the modern classroom (p. 8). In issues-centered teaching, teachers and students select issues important to them and their communities and then organize units around them. At the beginning of each unit, the teachers and students collectively produce as much knowledge as possible around the issue at hand. Acting as a problem-poser, the teacher then constructs questions around the knowledge that has been produced and brings relative data and resources into the classroom that will help students begin to address these questions. This eventually culminates in a plan of transforming action.

Ahlquist (1990) has suggested that a deconstruction of the disciplinary boundaries that constrain many social studies curriculums would assist in this effort. In making this argument, she points to the "false and artificial categories" that limit the connections teachers can draw between geography and history, psychology and sociology, and so on (p. 55). Issues that are studied in a critical pedagogy, issues like racism and sexism, hunger and homelessness, global warming and over-population, and health and disease, are not issues restricted by

such arbitrary boundaries in reality, so why should they be restricted in this way in the classroom? Critical pedagogy embraces issues in all their complexity, and legitimates knowledge produced from all groups of people and all relative disciplinary fields. Therefore, Ahlquist argues, social studies should rediscover its “dynamic interdisciplinary reality” in order to better prepare students for an interconnected world (p. 55).

*Critical pedagogy promotes democratic solidarity.*

Teaching for democratic skills is not unique to critical pedagogy. However, the way democracy is perceived and implemented in a critical pedagogy differs greatly from “traditional” social studies classrooms. Traditional conceptions of democracy, what Giroux (2011) describes as “neoliberal” conceptions, are rooted in a culture of corporate capitalism. These forms of “democratic” education are not interested in creating an autonomous and informed citizenry who can solve the countless issues challenging the modern world, but instead look to train students to acquiesce to status quo arrangements of power and to acquire market-oriented skills to compete in the global economy.

Giroux explains:

With the growing influence of neoliberalism in the last 30 years, the United States has witnessed the emergence of modes of education that make human beings superfluous as political agents, close down democratic public spheres, disdain public values, and undermine the conditions for dissent...Neoliberal ideology

emphasizes winning at all costs, even if it means a ruthless competitiveness, an almost rabid individualism, and a notion of agency largely constructed within a market-driven rationality, that abstracts economics and markets from ethical consideration. (p. 9)

Such a platform hardly lives up to the original conceptions of democratic education first proposed by Dewey in the early 1900's. Dewey preached for social responsibility, collective action, and the critical consideration of ideas, issues, and policies, not for selfish, individualistic behavior and unquestionable respect and obedience for powerful people and institutions. Ultimately, although these capitalistic modes of education often employ Dewian language, they hardly embody Dewian ideas.

Contrary to the market-oriented tenets of capitalism, critical pedagogy frames democratic education through "a socialist ethos based on solidarity and social interdependence" (McLaren, 1997, p. 1). The use of the word "socialism" often suggests Marxist orientations, but while Marx's (1848/1998) notions of class conflict are certainly relative to critical pedagogy and social justice, critical scholars vary in their use of Marxist terminology and their subscription to Marxist ideas. In critical pedagogy, the ethos of socialism is most identifiable in its emphasis on equality, its call for collective action, and its community-based orientation.

Like Dewey, critical pedagogues believe that democratic forms of education are a necessity for sustaining a democratic society. Again, Giroux's

(2011) words are helpful:

[Critical pedagogy proposes] that education is fundamental to democracy and that no democratic society can survive without a formative culture shaped by pedagogical practices capable of creating the conditions for producing citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable, and willing to make moral judgments and act in a socially responsible way...It also provides tools to unsettle commonsense assumptions, theorize matters of self and social agency, and engage the ever-changing demands and promises of a democratic polity. (p. 3)

In this way, Giroux recognizes that education is not only important in preparing students for a career, but also “for creating the formative culture of beliefs, practices, and social relations that enable individuals to wield power, learn how to govern, and nurture a democratic society that takes equality, justice, shared values, and freedom seriously” (p. 4).

Critical pedagogy does not stop with teaching democracy; it also models it. Unlike the traditional classroom where the teacher is an authoritarian figure serving under a chain of authoritarian figures throughout the education hierarchy, the critical pedagogue views a classroom as a place where power is *shared*. Critical pedagogues do not view themselves as the sole possessors of knowledge, but recognize the fountains of knowledge that their students are as well. They do not view learning as a banking transaction, but as a collective act that all can take part in together as both creators and consumers of knowledge. Critical pedagogues also believe that this notion of shared power extends beyond the immediate operations within the classroom and into actual curriculum decisions.

This gives students the opportunity to study issues relative to their interests, their questions and concerns, and their lived experiences. This Dewian notion views the teacher more as a facilitator of learning, as someone who can “provide general guidance and...articulate the major important features of the learning experience, while still leaving open the opportunity for the student to explore and create” (Seltzer-Kelly, 2009, p. 156).

### *Critiques of critical pedagogy*

Like any form of educational philosophy, critical pedagogy does have its critics. Though a thorough review of those critiques is beyond the scope of this study, one particular essay does deserve mention due to the significant attention it has received since its publication. In her essay *Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?: Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy*, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) highlights what she believes to be critical pedagogy's repressive elements, elements that, rather than contributing to the eradication of different forms of domination, actually serve to perpetuate them. Though critical pedagogy is supposed to give voice to the marginalized, Ellsworth contends that many of its primary underpinnings, including its accepted patterns of thought, understandings of discourse, and methods of implementation, are derived from positions of privilege which in turn reinforce current manifestations of oppression. This begins with a body of literature that is largely dominated by

perspectives that are “young, White, Christian, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied,” and male (p. 314). While scholars cannot be faulted for occupying what historically are positions of privilege, Ellsworth is concerned with the complete lack of recognition of the problematic effects that the occupancy of these and other social positions can have on discourses. Critical pedagogy is ostensibly a collective effort for liberation from all forms of oppression, but simply stating this goal does not automatically mean that the dynamics of oppressor-oppressed relationships cease to exist within the walls of the classroom. Ellsworth explains:

[Critical pedagogy’s] formula for dialogue requires and assumes a classroom of participants unified on the side of the subordinated against the subordinators, sharing and trusting in an “us-ness” against “them-ness.” This formula fails to confront dynamics of subordination present among classroom participants in the form of multiple and contradictory subject positions. (p. 315)

Ellsworth argues that the failure to recognize such dynamics is hampered by critical pedagogy’s inherent “rationalism,” a pattern of thought that has been “oppressive to those who are not European, White, male, middle class, Christian, able-bodied, thin, and heterosexual” (p. 304). To ask the oppressed to use such modes of thinking as a vehicle of liberation is inherently contradictory, a paradox Ellsworth illustrates through Audre Lorde’s quotation, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 305). Furthermore, Ellsworth has accused critical pedagogues of the same fraudulent implementations of democratic education described in the previous section, with critical pedagogues

using “strategies such as student empowerment and dialogue [to] give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact” (p. 306).

In making her critique, Ellsworth is not just speaking from a philosophical standpoint, but from her experiences in trying to implement critical pedagogy in the college courses she teaches. She repeatedly refers to her college’s efforts to fight on-campus racism, an initiative that led to the creation of her course “Media and Anti-Racist Pedagogies.” To her, this course demonstrated how the universalist and rationalistic goals of critical pedagogy, goals such as fighting against racism, were indeed much more complex and incorporated many more interests than the literature on critical pedagogy acknowledges. Despite her efforts to turn her classroom into a safe space for discourse, Ellsworth found that the differing social positions occupied by her students, and the way these social positions affected their relationships with one another as well as with her, led to a number of things “not being said”:

These included fear of being misunderstood and/or disclosing too much and becoming too vulnerable; memories of bad experiences in other contexts of speaking out; resentments that other oppressions (sexism, heterosexism, classism, anti-Semitism) were being marginalized in the name of addressing racism--and guilt for feeling such resentment; confusion about levels of trust and commitment surrounding those who were allies to another group’s struggles; resentment by some students of color for feeling that they were expected to disclose “more” and once again take the burden of doing the pedagogic work of educating White students/professor about the consequences of White middle-class

privilege; and resentment by White students for feeling that they had to prove they were not the enemy. (p. 316)

Such complex dynamics show the less than unifying effect applications of critical pedagogy can have if they are inconsiderate of such relationships. They also show how working against injustice, even if it is a cause as universally accepted as anti-racism, does not in and of itself eliminate existing relationships of oppression. Nor does it automatically create the trust necessary to talk about issues that are very sensitive, and for some, very personal.

This critique does not seek to condemn critical pedagogy. Later in the same essay, Ellsworth goes on to suggest methods for overcoming these flaws, in hopes of creating a truer, more authentic approach to liberatory education. What Ellsworth's essay does do, as any good critique should, is help to keep critical pedagogues honest. In making her critique, Ellsworth forces critical pedagogues to look inward, to be reflective and critical of themselves and the practices and worldviews they endorse in their writing and their classrooms. Her essay has become essential reading for anyone interested in critical pedagogy, and represents a watershed publication for the direction of the field.

### *The theory-praxis gap*

In 1979, Michael Apple (1979/2004) was already cognizant of the large body of critical theory that was amassing without much corresponding

documentation of praxis. Apple saw this as one of the biggest challenges critical pedagogues would face moving forward, a challenge which would mark the difference “between ‘merely’ understanding the world and changing it” (Apple, 1979/2004, p. 96). Two decades later, the theory-praxis gap still existed, and in the process was gathering a chorus of scholars who doubted the ability of critical pedagogues to overcome it (Wardekker & Miedema, 1997). Elaborating on the work of other post-modern scholars, Wardekker and Miedema questioned whether critical pedagogy was capable of anything other than critique. Furthermore, if critical pedagogy did possess an “incapacity to bridge the gap between theory and practice” (p. 56), did this make the notion of emancipatory action a “counterfactual ideal?” (p. 50). Critical pedagogues have pushed backed on this notion, but have also acknowledged that the theory-praxis gap continues to pose a problem in the justification of critical pedagogy. As recently as 2008, Evans wrote about how even a half-century after its inception, critical pedagogy remained “largely a theoretical stance [with too much] left unclear regarding the meaning of critical pedagogy for teaching practice” (p. 6). Evans cited the rarity of critical pedagogy in schools, and the even more rare studies that documented its practice. This would leave teachers interested in the teaching of critical pedagogy largely to their own devices, helplessly caught between “the gulf of theory and praxis,” and left alone to wrestle with the challenges, constraints, and limitations produced by the culture of standardization so prevalent in schools

today (p. 7).

The theory-praxis gap is clearly a major problem in critical pedagogy, a problem that many aspiring critical teachers like myself become aware of long before they encounter the articulation of it in the literature. That being said, there are various helpful resources available to the critical teacher who is willing to look for them. Perhaps the most direct attempt at bridging this gap comes from Ira Shor's (1987) book entitled *Freire for the Classroom*, which seeks to adapt Freire's liberatory pedagogy to the North American classroom. In educational research, there are numerous examples of studies that explore the critical. There are descriptions of individual lessons such as Marchman's (2002) critical exploration on homophobia. There are studies of individual teachers exemplified by Camp & Oesterreich's (2010) piece on "uncommon teaching," and Seltzer-Kelly's (2009) reflective essay on her own attempt to "hold Freire's feet to the fire." There are studies of social-justice-oriented schools, such as Apple & Beane's (2007) book *Democratic Schools*. And there are suggestions for critical reforms in teacher education, such as Ukpokdo's (2003) essay on a "transformative and social reconstructionist framework" for social studies.

Outside the world of educational research, there are books such as Howard Zinn's (1980/2003) *A People's History of the United States*, and the subsequently formed Zinn Education Project, which seeks to assist teachers interested in bringing Zinn's work into their classrooms. There are social justice advocates

like Bill Bigelow who have opened up critical spaces in education through publications like *The New Teacher Book* (2004) and the quarterly magazine *Rethinking Schools*. And there are various websites, such as Paul Gorski's "Multicultural Pavilion" and the Kincheloe founded "Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy," which have materials, blogs, and forums available for any interested peoples.

All these works represent progress in bridging the theory-praxis gap. However, the body of research needs to grow significantly before it can be said that there is a wealth of resources for aspiring critical pedagogues to draw from. That is the focus of this study: to add a theoretical arch to the growing theory-praxis bridge. In doing so, I hope to deepen my own understanding of critical pedagogy, to gain vision of what it might look like in the classroom, and, in reporting my findings, to create something useful to readers with similar aspirations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Research Design*

The methodological framework for this study was primarily grounded in the work of Robert Stake (2003) and Robert Yin (2009). I structured my research based on a "multiple-case study" design, simply meaning that rather than focusing on a single case, I focused on multiple cases (two) from which I could draw cross-

case conclusions (Yin, 2009, p. 20). Stake (2003) has said that by choosing a case study, a researcher is not making a methodological choice, but a choice of what is to be studied (p. 134). This applies to both my cases, with each case focusing on the pedagogical practices of an individual teacher.

In both my cases, the “case” is represented by the teacher, who serves as the primary unit of analysis. This is an important distinction, as it gives my cases “boundedness,” an essential component of case studies. Boundedness recognizes that every case exists within a larger environment or context. By bounding my cases within the teacher, I made a methodological decision to exclude other factors within my research environment, such as student learning, school policies, etc. These boundaries define the case and focus the study on the object of analysis that I believed would give me the greatest understanding of my desired phenomenon of study. However, as Stake (2003) points out, the interpretive nature of qualitative research means it is not always clear where the case ends and the environment begins. Yin (2009) illustrates this same idea using a graphic that shows the case and context separated by a dotted line, demonstrating the ambiguity by which boundedness is complicated (p. 46). Nevertheless, boundedness remains essential in case studies, and it is important that researchers maintain cognizance of it during data collection and analysis.

A multiple-case study design made sense for my research because of my exploratory ambitions. Going into my study, my goal was to see critical

pedagogy, or elements of it, in practice. I did not declare any propositions, and was not seeking to make profound generalizations. Many academics would frown on this practice, as they expect successful case studies to provide findings that are generalizable. However, less positivistic researchers have deemphasized the value of generalizations in some case studies (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Simons, 1980; Stake, 2003). In fact, Stake has even said that too sharp of a focus on generalizations may actually prove damaging to a researcher's ability to gain an understanding of the case in its own world. Therefore, I chose to pursue what Yin (2009) calls an *exploratory* study. This differs from the more prominent *explanatory* study as it does not seek to explain a phenomenon, but simply explore it. The phenomenon I explored was critical pedagogy in the social studies classroom in hopes of contributing to the eradication of the theory-praxis gap on both a smaller, personal level, and a larger, academic level.

### *Participants & Context*

My study took place between two different schools from two different districts. Both schools were located in the metro area of Jefferson Park, a large city located in the upper Midwest. One school resides in a southern, residential area of the city. The other is located in a suburb about twenty minutes south. In the Jefferson Park school, I observed two, 10<sup>th</sup> grade World History classes. In the suburban school, I observed two, 9<sup>th</sup> grade Human Geography classes. For

each respective case, I observed the same lesson back-to-back for each of the nine days I was present. This meant I was essentially able to analyze each lesson twice. Also, each of the lessons I observed existed within one cohesive unit, with the world history classes studying the roots of inequality and the geography classes studying population geography.

Ms. Brooks, more popularly known as Ms. B, taught the 10th grade World History course. This was Ms. B's seventeenth year of teaching, three of which have been at her current school in Jefferson Park. The best analogy I can draw to Ms. B's style of teaching is to compare her to a tough-love coach, her team represented by the students in her class. Ms. B expects her students to work hard, to come to class every day prepared and ready to learn, and if they do not, she lets them know about it. "Don't make me have to come over there and tell you about yourself," she might say to a loafing teenager (Field Notes, 10/13/12). But all the while, Ms. B also demonstrates a deep love and respect for her students as people. She greets them by name as they walk in the door. She talks with them about their extracurricular activities, about their weekends, and about their lives. She's open, honest, passionate, humorous, and carries a certain attitude with her that lets her students know that she takes their learning very seriously. The students reciprocate this respect, even when the Ms. B's high expectations leave them frustrated. "They may not love me everyday," says Ms. B, "Some of them love to hate me cause I'm pretty strict on some things. But the bottom line is they know

that they're learning and it makes sense to them and it's meaningful" (Pre-Interview). All in all, this creates a classroom atmosphere that is both rigorous and enjoyable, where expectations are clear, where school can be fun, and where students and teacher work together to learn from each other and to engage with world history content at a high intellectual level.

When I entered Ms. B's classroom, she and her students were midway through a unit on the roots of inequality. Prior to my arrival, the students had watched the National Geographic documentary *Guns, Germs, & Steel*, a film based on the best selling book by Jared Diamond (1999/1997). The movie explores inequality based on its historic roots, how certain parts of the world gained power, wealth, and technology, while other parts seemed to be trapped inside a primitive bubble, leading to their eventual domination by people more rich and powerful. At the end of the film, Diamond concludes that such inequality resulted largely from geographic luck, from the environmental conditions that allowed some groups to develop advanced technologies, and immunities to terminal diseases where others could not. To supplement this study, the students also read several articles that both supported and critiqued Diamond's theory, recording annotations as they went along. When I arrived, the students had just begun work on the unit's main project, a board game that required them to incorporate numerous concepts from the unit. This activity would carry the class through much of my observational period. To close out the

unit, the students used several days to make preparations for their summative assessment, two five-paragraphs essays on the major themes of the unit. They wrote these essays on the last day of my observation.

Mr. Palamino taught 9<sup>th</sup> grade Human Geography. For Palamino, this was his thirteenth year of teaching, all of which have been at his current suburban location. Palamino is a very humble, down to earth guy. Most days, he is adorned in jeans and a t-shirt. He is approachable, easy to talk to, and is well-liked amongst his students. His classroom reflects his personality. Contrary to many traditional classrooms where desks are arranged in rows and classroom décor is limited to generic school-supplied posters, Palamino arranges his desks in groups, half of which have inflatable aerobic balls instead of chairs. On the walls hang posters with figures from pop culture, like Denzel Washington and Mohammed Ali, sports memorabilia from his alma-matter UCLA, and pictures and projects of students from years gone by. During instruction, Palamino will often be leaning on a hockey stick or dribbling a soccer ball, a practice imitated by some of his students as they engage in the day's activities. None of this should be mistaken for a lack of professionalism. Palamino takes his work as an educator very seriously, continuously devoting deep thought and reflection to a curriculum he helped to create seven years prior. Our interview transcriptions are littered with examples of tweaks and adjustments Palamino has made in the interest of creating a better learning experience for his students. Both his

personality and his classroom communicate the message that learning and fun do not have to be mutually exclusive phenomena, and that being a teacher and a learner is much more about how you carry yourself than simply looking the part.

Throughout my stay, Palamino's class was studying population geography, a unit that included population density and distribution, and movement and migration. I saw a variety of activities while I was in Palamino's room. When I arrived, students were learning the ins and outs of the democratic transition model and the numerous implications associated with the different shapes of the graph. This led to discussions of several potentially critical issues including gender discrimination, poverty, and overpopulation. About halfway through my stay, the class moved into studying migration. This was highlighted by a video that showcased both sides of the illegal immigration debate in the United States. The video revolved around a vehemently anti-illegal immigration man named Frank who spent 30 days living with a Mexican family who came to the United States illegally. After watching the video and filling out a viewing guide, Palamino had the students participate in an activity he called Agree-Disagree-Neutral. In Agree-Disagree-Neutral, three signs were placed at different points in the room, one for each respective stance. Students then physically positioned themselves next to the sign that most corresponded with their position on a given political statement. The statement relative to the video read as follows: "All illegal immigrants currently in the United States should be sent back to

where they came from” (Field Notes, 10-31-12). The students spent several days on migration related topics, and much like in Ms. B’s room, spent the last day of my observation completing a summative assessment that incorporated everything that was covered in the population geography unit. I should also mention that aside from population geography, the class did daily current event activities based on a BBC broadcast, and did an Agree-Disagree-Neutral discussion on gay marriage and healthier school lunches.

#### *Data Collection & Analysis*

I used the same data collection methods in both Palamino and Ms. B’s classrooms. In an effort to enhance my study’s validity, I employed Stake’s (2003) method of *triangulation*, seeking to use multiple perspectives to clarify meaning as well as finding different ways to see the phenomenon being studied. The first of these data collection methods was classroom observation accompanied by rigorous note taking. The second of these was gathering relevant classroom documents. This included handouts from days I was present, as well handouts from days prior to my arrival that were relevant to the lessons that I observed. I also printed off a copy of each teacher’s syllabus. The third data collection method I used was pre- and post-observational interviews with each teacher. Though the interviews were structured more as conversations, a list of tentative questions was still provided to each of the teachers at least a day in

advance (See Appendix A.) All interviews were fully transcribed.

Once all data had been collected, I began coding. Many of my codes corresponded with the characteristics of critical pedagogy that I described in the literature review, but I also created several additional codes for trends that appeared in the data. Because this was an exploratory study, I was not interested in establishing “causal relationships.” Instead, I sought to code the data in a way that would demonstrate overlap between the operational definition and identifying characteristics of critical pedagogy that I described above and the data I collected during my research. In writing up my findings, I heeded the advice of Stake (2003) and tried to let the data tell their own story. However, I was also cognizant of my own role as the researcher in deciding how that story would be told, and realize that the way I structured, highlighted, connected, and embedded this information is unique to me as a subjective and interested person, and that each of my readers will also structure, highlight, connect, and embed this information in their own unique way.

Before moving forward, I want to note that I did not go into Ms. B or Mr. Palamino’s classrooms to evaluate them as educators; I went in to learn from them. In this sense, both of them delivered, providing me with an invaluable learning experience from which I grew both personally and professionally. I must also note that neither Ms. B nor Palamino claimed to be critical pedagogues, nor

were they attempting to implement any form of critical pedagogy in their classrooms. Both were unfamiliar with the body of literature I previously reviewed, and were also relatively unfamiliar with the concept of critical pedagogy in general. This is not unusual as the prevalence of the theory-praxis gap demonstrates, and has no bearing on my opinion of them as educators. Furthermore, their lack of familiarity with critical pedagogy was not necessarily apparent when observing or talking with them, as many of the things both of them said and did were congruent with the critical characteristics I described above. It is to these congruencies that I will now turn.

## **FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

There is no such thing as a “pure” critical pedagogy. To say that such a thing exists undermines many of critical pedagogy’s defining beliefs: that construction of knowledge is unique to individuals and groups, that understanding of the word and the world is inseparable from one’s own subjectivity, and that all pedagogy should be self-critical. To say that such a thing exists is also dangerous and runs the risk of reducing critical pedagogy to an unreflective dogmatism. Critical pedagogy exists in shades of grey. Its definition is dependent on the interpretation of the teacher, the observer, or the researcher who is doing the defining. The pedagogy may be evaluated as a whole, or it may be evaluated in parts. Some aspects of a pedagogy may be highly critical, while other aspects of

it might not be critical at all. In my own analysis, I was not so much interested in defining whether or not the teachers were implementing a critical pedagogy, especially considering the fact that neither of them held this objective. What I was interested in is identifying aspects of their instruction that resembled the identifying characteristics of critical pedagogy that I described above. Hence, I will begin my analysis there, examining each of the identifying characteristics I elaborated in the literature review, and determining how these features were demonstrated in the data.

*Critical pedagogy makes teaching for social justice its primary purpose.*

Because neither teacher was attempting to implement critical pedagogy in their classroom, it was not surprising to find that teaching for social justice was not at the top of their educational agendas. That being said, when I asked them what they considered the primary goal of social studies education to be, they both provided answers that resembled aspects of critical pedagogy.

Palamino felt social studies teachers should prepare students to be “thoughtful citizens” (Pre-Interview). His vision of a thoughtful citizen was twofold, involving the notions of societal and democratic participation on both a national and global level, as well as teaching the thinking and writing skills necessary to carry out such participation in an intellectual manner. Ms. B saw the central goal of social studies as being able to “connect with students on a human

level” so that they can connect with and understand the history of their realities (Pre-Interview). Much like Palamino, she thought this was important to ultimately prepare students to be productive and empowered members of society.

Such notions of democratic participation, citizenship, and the exploration of authentic realities are central tenets of critical pedagogy. Where such conceptions differ from those of a critical pedagogue is the degree to which they are inspired and guided by interests of social justice. To be sure, social justice was a component in the curriculum and a goal of both these educators, but it is probably not accurate to say that it is what drove their curriculums. Nevertheless, such lofty objectives are encouraging to encounter, as they demonstrate that like-minded educators are finding success at achieving such goals, at least to a certain degree.

*Critical pedagogy combines a critical intellectualism with morality.*

To reiterate, this aspect of critical pedagogy refers to the twofold process of “unveiling” the world through the cultivation of a critical consciousness combined with the development of academic and intellectual skills in reading, writing, thinking, and communication. The latter part of this process was especially evident in Ms. B’s classroom. In many ways, Ms. B’s World History course was as much about the process of learning as it was about the actual content. This is emphasized in her class syllabus which calls for students to be

“Inquirers,” “Thinkers,” and “Communicators” (Class Document). It is also emphasized on her classroom’s “academic word wall,” a wall that is not reserved for content, but for words such as “evaluate,” “synthesize,” and “metacognition” (Field Notes, 10-22-12). Students engaged in the use and practice of such vocabulary every day that I was in the classroom, most often in their daily journaling activities. This often functioned as a metacognitive exercise for the learning the students would be engaging in that day. Two examples from the daily journals serve to illustrate this process:

Warm-up: What does the academic word *evaluate* mean? Why is it important to evaluate your own performance on something? (Field Notes, 10/25/12)

Summative Assessment Reflection: Explain how this summative assessment allows you to demonstrate what you know about geographic luck, domestication, specialization, and the roots of inequality. (Field Notes, 10/22/12)

These journal prompts do not focus on content. Content is involved in the latter prompt, but both focus on the *process* of learning, on the metacognitive act that the student is engaging in *to* learn the content.

When I asked Ms. B about her obvious emphasis on the learning process, she said that although students are “naturally inquisitive,” “they don’t come in naturally knowing what to do with content.” She equates these journaling exercises with checking a “road map.” The students know the final destination (the learning target), but sometimes along the way they need to pull out the map

and check to see where they are:

You step out of your learning long enough to just say, “Okay. This is the end goal where I need to be, this is my journey so far, and this is kind of where my learning is at,” and then, “This is how it affects me as a person,” you know, “What does it mean when I go home at the end of the day?” (Pre-Interview)

The ultimate goal in this endeavor is to turn students into skilled life-long learners. Years from now, students may not remember the specifics of Jared Diamond’s theory, but what Ms. B is hoping students will retain is the metacognitive ability to understand how learning happens, to be able to analyze, evaluate, and be critical of information they receive in their everyday lives. Ms.

B explains:

So down the road, when they’re twenty-five years old and they’re watching something on TV, and they’re watching a presidential debate or a speech...they’re taught to be thinkers. Don’t just receive it blindly...[Have] the skills to be a thoughtful, informed learner, so that as a voter they would take the same approach to an issue...That they really weigh in and process the whole, all those elements. (Post-Interview)

The other piece of this aspect of critical pedagogy is the cultivation of a critical consciousness, looking into issues of power and justice and evaluating them morally and ethically. This piece was less present in my data, but elements did emerge that seemed to resemble a critical unveiling. Ms. B’s whole unit was largely built around the question, “Why is there inequity in the world today?” (Pre-Interview) This is a loaded question with potential for use in a Freirian problem-posing model, not only studying the origins of inequity, but also

attempting to combat it with some form of transformative action.

In Palamino's class, moments of unveiling seemed to emerge in more of a piecemeal manner. During the activity on local immigrants, there were several instances of myth busting when prevailing conceptions of groups were challenged with facts (e.g., 60% of Latinos are native born; most Hmong are 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation U.S. citizens, etc.) (Field Notes, 10/30/12). In the Agree-Disagree-Neutral discussion, students themselves were presenting arguments that problematized and challenged their fellow students' thinking on issues such as immigration and gay rights. Palamino also told me about an activity he once facilitated involving the concept of authority. In this activity, Palamino would begin by showing students pictures where authority was being exercised (police making arrests during the Civil Rights movement, tanks in Tiananmen Square, etc.) and then have the students decide who had the authority in that picture, where it came from, and whether or not it was a "moral authority" (Pre-Interview). This, again, resembles Freire's problem-posing model, particularly due to Palamino's use of pictures, a tactic often employed by Freire when he was working with South American peasants. To be sure, Palamino did question how much these activities really impacted the way his students viewed the world. "I don't think there's a real awakening in any of these kids at 9<sup>th</sup> grade," said Palamino, "I think kids that have that were on that path already, and maybe I facilitated them getting there a little faster" (Pre-Interview). This is probably half

true and half modesty, but either way it is encouraging to see elements of unveiling taking place in social studies classrooms.

*Critical pedagogy seeks to empower students with agency so they can transform their realities.*

I do not think that my data revealed any examples of Palamino or Ms. B facilitating action that could be called “transformative.” Again, this is not surprising, as neither teacher was attempting to implement a critical pedagogy. However, my interviews certainly suggest that both teachers felt that their curriculums had potential to *inspire* transformative action, that the new realizations and understandings their students acquired during their studies would empower them as agents of change. When I asked Ms. B what understandings she hoped her students developed from her inequality unit, she said that she wanted her students asking themselves, “And how did inequality start? Are we predestined then to finish our existence in this reality as just an unequal society, or do we have the ability, now that we understand how it developed...to change it?” (Post-Interview). Speaking of her curriculum more broadly, she further explained:

I also think there’s a bigger spectrum that when you step outside of the content, you’re wanting your students, I’m wanting my students anyway, to do something with that. Besides making sense for them personally, it’s having an impact on society. So whether that’s, you know, taking political action, or even being well-versed

in questioning or challenging, even political campaigns, right, as a voter down the line...And I think that, truthfully, that goes to the core of that element of critical thinking, because then they're educated voters, then they're informed citizens, because they can still question legislation, they can still question programs or decisions that are made that affect them, and know what to consider, or at least what to sort of ponder, that might not be presented by some politician or program. (Pre-Interview)

Palamino expressed similar sentiments. In his class, there were a few activities that had students interacting with elements outside of the classroom. These included the use of information pamphlets from a local immigration advocacy group, and an activity where his class made microloans to struggling peoples in under-privileged nations. These exercises gave students brief touches with transformative activity, but ultimately Palamino felt that his role was largely to equip students with knowledge and skills. "I don't think I've got kids that are going out and actively becoming citizens in the community or doing anything like that [during class]," said Palamino, "But hopefully it's just a push in the right direction" (Pre-Interview).

*Critical pedagogy considers all education to be ideological.*

Both Palamino and Ms. B found the idea of educational neutrality dubious. "I don't think that you can entirely offer a neutral and objective piece because we're not a machine, and even machines are programmed by humans...So it's still gonna go back to the fact that we're all thinking, feeling, morally valuing

and judging creations,” said Ms. B when asked about the subject (Pre-Interview). Palamino concurred, and not only felt that teachers *cannot* be objective, but that they *should not* be objective:

I don't think educators should be neutral and objective. I think they should try to keep their bias out of the way, but I think they need to understand the bias, and even tell the kids what their bias is, and make it clear that, “Look,” you know, “I may think this, but I just want you to be thinking about it. So, sure Palamino might be for allowing gay marriage, but I want you to think about it and discuss with each other and figure out why it is that you're against it and understand both sides of the perspective.” (Pre-Interview)

In class, I had the opportunity to see this dynamic play out during the Agree-Disagree-Neutral discussion when a student asked Palamino about his stance on gay marriage. He revealed that indeed he supported it, but then proceeded to respond much as he said he would in the interview, assuring students that his opinion was but one in a classroom of many, and that the activity was not necessarily about what *he* thought, but about what *they*, *the students* thought.

In her interview, Ms. B went on to connect her thoughts on ideology with the idea of social justice. Though Ms. B did not believe in ideological neutrality, she was apprehensive about the political agenda of some forms of social justice education and contributed valuable insight on how she thought social justice should be defined.

My definition of social justice is to equalize the playing field, not to prove a political point or to brainwash the kids...What I believe is just give all kids access to rigor. Give all kids access to meaning within, in this case, social studies, and hopefully feel that all kids

had some encounter where their perspective or their voice was in what we were learning about. (Pre-Interview)

She elaborated on this idea when discussing a Spanish film she shows about the Conquistadors, a film where the primary language is Spanish. “My intent in showing it is not, “Now you know what it feels like to be an ESL student who speaks Spanish!” she said impersonating a scolding tone. Instead, she shows the film because it’s “good history.” She tells her students, “I didn’t make the movie. He was a Conquistador. He was from Spain. It’s going to be in his language...This is what would’ve been in Columbus’s journals. They’re not gonna be, you know, in English for you” (Pre-Interview).

In another example, Ms. B talks about the “ethnocentric” tendencies of her school’s prescribed curriculum, and how she uses her conception of social justice to counter what she describes as “a hindrance to [her] kids having an equitable experience”: “I don’t have a problem teaching about Britain, Italy, Germany, and France’s involvement in World War II,” she said, “What I do have a problem with is what’s left out, so it’s my job to bring it all forward” (Pre-Interview). What’s left out, of course, is the narratives of African and Asian peoples whose experience in the War were just as real as those of the peoples from Western civilizations. In bringing these perspectives into the mix, Ms. B is waging a social justice campaign of sorts, challenging the curriculum of her school, giving voice to historically marginalized groups, and providing a more authentic

experience for students in her classroom from non-European backgrounds.

*Critical pedagogy considers all knowledge to be constructed, complex, and contextual.*

The data I collected suggest that both teachers I observed hold epistemological beliefs about knowledge similar to those of critical pedagogues. During my first interview with Palamino, he used the term “constructed knowledge” several times when speaking about the way his students learn. When I asked him to elaborate on this, he gave a thorough explanation of how he viewed the constructed nature of knowledge:

The way I kind of see it, is it's like everyone has their own perspective on issues and content. So I may be teaching them about suburbs in the urban unit, but my knowledge is based on a lot more than what their knowledge is based on, different perspectives. So they're basically constructing what they see as what a suburb is, and maybe I'm giving them the basic skeleton of what it should be, but they're adding all their own ideas based on where they grew up, and their experiences in the Jefferson Park area. I grew up in a suburb in California, so what I'm teaching them is heavily informed by that. I've also read a lot about it, and seen a lot of movies that they haven't seen, but basically they're going to be coming at it from their own angle, and they're going to be, when you say suburb, it's in their mind, they're constructing what they know about it. Hopefully, they're using a lot of what I'm giving them...I can give them facts, but they're putting those facts in their own little shape, and it's, in their mind, differently probably than the kid next to them. So I think, when I think of constructed knowledge, it's sort of like the kids are going to build their own understanding of this stuff based on what I give them, but mostly also based on what they bring to the table and what their thought process is during it. (Pre-Interview)

Every lesson and activity I saw did not necessarily reflect this description. There were certainly activities that could be described as rote, though both teachers held dubious beliefs about the educational power of such activities. However, I also witnessed activities where students were able to engage in learning more creatively. Palamino definitely felt that the aforementioned “30 Days” video followed by the Agree-Disagree-Neutral activity allowed students to see “the complexity of the entire situation,” that situation being U.S. immigration, and also that “there isn’t necessarily a right answer” to complicated questions. I also felt that Ms. B’s essay questions for the summative assessment of the Guns, Germs, & Steel Unit allowed students ample room to use their own voice and creativity. Questions such as, “Which factor among guns, germs, and steel has been the most influential over time?” and, “To what extent do you believe Jared Diamond was correct in claiming that the root of all inequality is geography?” gave students opportunities to wrestle with content in an authentic and evaluative way (Class Document). Questions like these again demonstrate that messy situations are not usually conducive to “right” or “correct” answers, and challenge the notion that rote regurgitation is the best method to assess students’ knowledge on such content.

*Critical pedagogy challenges the status quo.*

Both Palamino and Ms. B challenged the status quo in their own ways. In private conversations, Ms. B would often share with me the stress she felt from all the external, standardization-related pressures she faced on a daily basis, pressures she referred to as “the crux of her existence as a teacher” (Pre-Interview). These pressures ranged from universal standards orchestrated in the nation’s capital, all the way down to the administration-prescribed policies of the Jefferson Park school in which Ms. B taught. In order to meet these assigned requirements, Ms. B often found herself having to make less than desirable alterations to lesson plans and daily schedules; however, she also found herself pushing back. As I mentioned above, students spent several days during my observational period preparing for their unit’s summative assessment: two 5-paragraph essays related to the Guns, Germs, and Steel unit they were wrapping up. During this time, students were working in groups, creating outlines for each of the five questions, outlines that they could then use during the final. Ms. B received a lot of “flak” from colleagues for this practice (Field Notes, 10/30/12). Most teachers at the school did not give students class time to prepare for finals, nor did they allow students to use notes. This was also not a strategy endorsed by administrators, whose primary concern was the academic success for the school as a whole, success that was represented by higher scores on standardized tests. However, Ms. B felt that her assessment process gave students a greater opportunity to demonstrate their learning than the avenues employed by many of her colleagues.

Speaking more broadly about the culture of standardization in schools everywhere, she said:

My pushback to the whole scenario would be what culture of power determines the right to...define the standard?...And I don't mean standards like content standards, I mean whatever standard you're measuring them to...There could be any number of ways that a student is able to demonstrate [their learning]. (Pre-Interview)

In other words, Ms. B does not feel that top-down standards are conducive to the success of many of her students. In response, she uses the power she holds as a respected educator to push back against unfair and ineffective policies that she feels are a detriment to her students' learning.

Palamino shared similar frustrations with top-down requirements. During my time in his class, he specifically struggled against a district-wide formative assessment he was directed to administer. The assessment dealt with population pyramids and was created by a colleague of his who taught at another school in the district. It mostly consisted of multiple-choice questions, but also had a "constructive" portion where students were asked to illustrate and label the demographic transition model. I was present the day students completed this assessment, and actually helped to grade them. Prior to its administration, Palamino was concerned about how students would perform on an assessment that he did not create. The results proved his concerns were not unfounded. Students performed very poorly, leading to Palamino's next-day promise to

students that he would not let the assessment hurt their grade. Reflecting on this episode later, Palamino ultimately decided that, required or not, this formative assessment did not have a place in his curriculum:

Sure it's a formative assessment, we're all supposed to give it, but if it's like basically ruining my unit, I'm not gonna do it. And if they come in and tell me I have to do it, fine, then I'll do it, but until someone comes to my classroom and makes me do it, I'm not gonna do it. (Post-Interview)

Like Ms. B, Palamino recognizes the power he holds as an individual educator, even when he is up against the district, not to mention state and federal, powers that be. Neither of the cases presented here are meant to resemble revolutionary rebellions, but they are certainly examples of challenging the status quo.

*Critical pedagogy views issues through multiple perspectives.*

Perhaps no aspect of critical pedagogy was more prevalent in these two classrooms than that of teaching through multiple perspectives. For Ms. B, this goal is evident in her syllabus, which pushes students to develop several perspective taking skills. Examples of these are “open-mindedness,” which asks students to be “open to the perspectives, values and traditions of other individuals and communities,” “risk-taking” which asks students to “approach unfamiliar situations and uncertainty with courage and forethought, and have the independence to explore new roles, ideas and strategies,” and “intercultural awareness,” which gives students practice in “identifying and analyzing the

impact of a cultural lens” (Class Document). Another example emerged during the pre-interview, when Ms. B described the next unit of study following the unit I was observing. This unit would focus on identifying the aforementioned “cultural lens.” The whole point of the lesson,” said Ms. B, “is to identify what a cultural lens is, and how...ethnographers and anthropologists and historians oftentimes interpret what we observe and what we record and what we value in an event” (Pre-Interview). The lesson she is talking about revolves around an article about the “Nacirema,” a North American group of people who reside between “the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles” (Miner, 1956). Ostensibly a study of a remote, less than civilized tribe, this article actually provides a description of the people of the United States presented through the perspective of a cultural outsider (“Nacirema” is “American” spelled backwards). By painting traditional American practices, such as body piercing and teeth-brushing, in a strange and ritualistic way, the article attempts to demonstrate the significant role one’s own culture can play in perceiving the culture of others, as well as the tendencies that one has to normalize his or her own culture.

Palamino’s goal of cultivating “full-fledged citizens of the world” is guided by a heavy emphasis on multiple perspectives (Pre-Interview). The aforementioned “30 Days” video and Agree-Disagree-Neutral activity both allow students to wrestle with divergent views on controversial issues. In addition,

Palamino daily shows a one-minute clip of the BBC World News, an international program that covers stories often marginalized or neglected by media in the United States (the Ukrainian presidential elections, opium production in Burma, and misspending in Japanese tsunami cleanup are examples of stories that were covered during my observations). Palamino also told me about a lesson he facilitates on cultural relativism in which students explore cultural practices that are very different from most cultures in the United States, e.g. the eating of dog meat in Vietnam. Palamino feels that looking at multiple perspectives is an essential component of critical thinking, and even referred to perspective taking as “the first step in transformation” (Pre-Interview). The data provide some support to this claim, as many of these perspective taking activities seemed to lead into other aspects of critical pedagogy for both teachers, aspects such as challenging the status quo and engaging in various forms of critical unveiling.

*Critical pedagogy explores phenomena thematically.*

Both teachers organized their courses thematically. In Ms. B’s World History course, the seven units were titled as follows: “The Tuloozi Case,” “The Art of Being a Historian,” “What about the Nacirema?,” “Guns, Germs, and Steel,” “Rise, Decline, and Collapse,” “Revolution!,” and “Where is your voice in History?” (Class Document). Each unit was guided by several essential questions, some of which definitely appeared to have potential for critical inquiry.

“Is there truth in history?” and “Why do some groups of people have more material wealth and available resources than others?” both resemble questions that are congruent with critical themes.

In Palamino’s Human Geography course, he had six units: “Population,” “Political,” “Cultural,” “Urban,” “Economic,” and “Environmental,” all followed by the word “Geography.” The syllabus did not provide essential questions, but rather short descriptions of what each brand of geography entailed. Again, the content matter appeared to have critical potential, including such subjects as “how humans affect nature” and “cultural diffusion” (Class Document).

Because I was not in the classroom long enough to observe a unit in its entirety, it is difficult to say how much these thematic organizations contributed to the level of criticality in the classrooms. I believe that it is safe to say that neither resembles what Freire (1971/2000) described when he discussed generative themes, although there are some similarities to what Evans (2008) described as issue-centered teaching. However, I also believe that the organization of these courses, along with the data I have presented throughout this paper, demonstrates that these two thematically organized courses leave room for critical activity, and perhaps could even be molded into something that more closely resembles critical pedagogy by a teacher with such an orientation.

*Critical pedagogy promotes democratic solidarity.*

Democracy, like critical pedagogy, exists in shades of grey. It is an ideal for which no pure example exists. To be sure, we can certainly label specific classroom practices “more” or “less” democratic than others, but evaluating how democratic a classroom is as a whole is much more complicated. Like critical pedagogy, it is easier when broken down into different aspects.

Both Ms. B and Palamino offer examples of such aspects in their classrooms, and provide ideas to critical pedagogues and other like-minded educators looking to enhance the democratic nature of their teaching practices. One example is their seating arrangements. Rather than desks, Ms. B’s room had five, hexagon-shaped tables. Palamino had desks, but they were also arranged into tables of four and six. Upon entering each classroom, I noted that perhaps these arrangements were indicative of regular group work, a hunch that was realized during my observational period. The two primary activities I witnessed in Ms. B’s room, the board game and preparation for the summative assessment, were both conducted in small groups. Likewise, Palamino’s classes consisted of some sort of group work nearly every day I was present. Even when work was assigned individually, Palamino still encouraged students to work together on the assignment and to help each other. Palamino explained his partiality to group work in this way:

There are days where I hate this set-up [seating students in groups], but I will never change it...It’s like I’m fighting against myself, but there are days where I’m like, “I wish these kids were in rows and

I could just deal with them.” Putting them in groups, they start talking right away, but the idea is, the traditional classroom is in rows, you got a textbook, I’m giving you notes, you’re gonna write everything down, [and] the only discussion we have might be discussions for deeper understanding of the topics. As opposed to more of a critical classroom where there’s gonna be much more discussion, much more higher-order thinking, the teacher isn’t always going to be right, I won’t be giving them all the right answers. I’ll just be giving them some facts. There will be a lot more student-added information. There will be a lot of discussion. (Pre-Interview)

The above quotation touches on another important aspect of democratic classrooms: the diminished authority of the teacher, or, as Palamino described it, “less of the teacher-centered model” (Pre-Interview). Critical pedagogy warns against the destructive tendencies of authoritarian teaching (like Freire’s descriptions of banking education), and Palamino seems to agree:

I think [as] kids, in general, you’re taught not to think in school...You’re taught not to challenge things. In the hallway, you don’t challenge adults; you don’t question adults...Some of these kids don’t even think to ask the question cause they’re just yelled at all the time. (Pre-Interview)

In a democratic classroom, students are empowered as decision-makers and knowledge creators, not reduced to obedient receptacles like the products of authoritarian banking models.

I observed ways in which both Ms. B and Palamino empowered their students. During the creation of their board games, Ms. B facilitated a peer-evaluation activity during which students critiqued and evaluated the work of their classmates. This activity communicated to students that the teacher was not

the only one in the room who could provide valuable feedback. Additionally, it created a skill-building opportunity where students could practice evaluative techniques that will help them to assess their own work throughout their school experience. Ms. B also believed that her emphasis on discussion and cooperative learning increased student confidence when expressing a belief or opinion, even when that opinion was a dissenting one:

I think there's a safety in the classroom that they can disagree and that's okay...If they feel strongly and their table partner is like, "Well, that's not how I answered it at all," it's fine...I don't really see them trying to coerce each other to one pattern of thought or the other. (Post-Interview)

Palamino, too, felt that discussion could have an empowering effect. On his desk sits a framed copy of an autobiography written by a former student of his. In the paper, the student recounts how she had really been struggling in Palamino's course until an epiphany-like moment during the Agree-Disagree-Neutral activity changed her outlook. Palamino recalls the student writing how the Agree-Disagree-Neutral activity was "the first time she ever had students in her class...listening to her, and listening to her ideas, and that she was so nervous, but when she spoke, she saw people...shifting over to her side, and it was like this big breakthrough" (Pre-Interview). Moments like this can only happen when students are allowed opportunities to create and to share, opportunities both Ms. B and Palamino regularly provide.

*Other Findings*

The previous pages illustrate relationships between the body of literature on critical pedagogy and the data I gathered over the course of my study. However, I also found several other trends in the data that I believe are relevant to this study, even though they are not as prevalent in the literature on critical pedagogy that I have encountered. I will now turn to these trends, and discuss how I believe they relate to this particular study, as well as the larger field of critical pedagogy.

*High Expectations*

“Today, I’m pushing you” (Field Notes, 10/24/12). This was how Ms. B started her third period class on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012. The class had a full agenda that day, and Ms. B wanted her students to know that they would need to be focused, determined, and engaged. This day was hardly an anomaly. Throughout my observational period, I regularly noted Ms. B holding her students to high expectations. It reminded me of an article I had read in a Multicultural Education course I had taken a few semesters prior. In the article, Brown (2004) studied the effects of culturally responsive teaching in urban classrooms, and found that among other things, successful urban educators established “business-like learning environments,” demonstrated “assertiveness,” and utilized “clearly stated and enforced expectations” (p. 266).

This seemed to resonate with the ideas I had encountered in Freire (1970/2000). As I recalled, a stumbling block educators often ran into when trying to “save” the oppressed was the educator’s own misguided perceptions of the people they were trying to help. Rather than viewing the oppressed as potential fountains of knowledge, these well-meaning but misguided educators viewed them as stupid, ignorant, and/or unskilled, while viewing themselves as intellectual saviors. While such opinions were not expressed explicitly, the oppressed received the message, in turn meeting the low expectations that were set for them and receiving an educational experience that was less than transformative. This is also a phenomenon that I had seen in the schools where I taught. Underperforming students were placed in special classrooms under the assumption that their poor performances in mainstream classes were due to a lack of skill or intelligence. While these special classes were meant to help the students “catch-up,” they often had the opposite effect, lowering the bar to goals the students could easily meet, and further reaffirming the untrue notion that these students were somehow less capable or talented than their peers. Rarely was it considered that their underperformance was due to a curriculum that was less than meaningful, or that perhaps these special courses functioned more as a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than actually assisting the struggling students.

Holding students to high expectations shows that the teacher does not view them as stupid. Instead, it sends a message that all students are capable,

knowledgeable, and valuable members of the classroom community, and will be expected to demonstrate it. I observed both teachers pose such uplifting challenges to students during my time in their classrooms. “I’m doing it cause I love you and you’re just gonna have to get over it,” said Ms. B one day as students painstakingly trudged through the process of outlining their 5-paragraph essays (Field Notes, 10/29/12). “You are 9<sup>th</sup> grade freshmen. This may seem like a lot of work, but this is what’s expected of you,” said Palamino to his students as they hustled to organize their portfolios at the end of the unit (Field Notes, 11/1/2012). Holding students to high expectations seemed crucial to both these educators in helping their students to attain success, and it seems like it should be a vital component of any teacher trying to implement a critical pedagogy, particularly one who is working with students from traditionally marginalized groups.

### *Code Switching*

Holding students to high expectations was not the only trait Brown (2004) found common to successful urban educators. He also found that successful urban educators used “culturally and ethnically congruent communication processes” (p. 266). Numerous other studies have documented the way communication processes affect the quality of relationships between teachers and their African, Latina/o, Native American, and immigrant students (Gay, 2000;

Ladson-Billings, 1994; Obidah & Manheim Teel, 2001). Teachers who are not aware of and practiced in different modes of communication such as the “call-and-response” style of communication common in African American communities and the use of “ritualized laughter” by many Asian cultures, may have trouble communicating with many of the kids in their classroom, and risk misinterpreting both spoken and unspoken acts of communication in ways that can hurt students. Teachers who do understand and employ culturally relevant methods of communication are much more likely to have success in building relationships with those students, especially students who really struggle in using the dominant White form of communication that most schools coerce students to adopt.

Ms. B is an effective communicator. This was especially apparent to me as I transcribed our interviews, as her thoughtful use of the English language made transcribing her voice relatively easy when compared to my own disorganized ramblings. So I was quite surprised during my first observation when I heard the different voice Ms. B used during instruction, a voice more comparable to that of her urban students than to the teacher I had interviewed a few days prior. The language was heavy in slang with words arranged in a manner that few would consider “proper English.” This was not the language students studied during their English classes, and if written on paper, would hardly pass beneath the correcting pen of a scrupulous English teacher without at

least a few grammatical suggestions. But as a form of effective communication (which really is the true purpose of any language), the language of instruction chosen by Ms. B seemed to resonate with the diverse student body that made up her classes. Her ability to relate to her students, to speak to her students in their language, gained her a level of credibility difficult for white-skinned teachers to obtain amongst a school full of students of color.<sup>1</sup>

What was most interesting about Ms. B's approach to communication was her ability to code-switch, to navigate between the differing languages of academia and urban youth in almost a seamless manner. To hear words like "synthesize," "evaluate," and "metacognitive," expressed within a language so beautifully "imperfect" seemed like it should be empowering to students who are more likely familiar with having their speech corrected rather than validated. This practice also did not mean that "proper English" was frowned upon. In fact, it was encouraged when students were organizing their five-paragraph essays. However, it does show that "proper English" is not the only effective language of instruction, nor the only language in which learning can be expressed. The validation of alternative languages not only elevates the chances of academic success for students with marginalized tongues, but also validates marginalized cultures in a society that all too often refuses to recognize any form of knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "white-skinned" rather than "White" because although her skin was "white" in color, Ms. B proudly embraced ethnic ties to the Cherokee, a fact that I am not sure if her students were aware of, or if it made a difference in the way they perceived her.

that is not a creation of White Europeans.<sup>2</sup>

*Obstacles to critical pedagogy*

During my observations, I usually spent the last few minutes of class reviewing my field notes for that period, making elaborations and looking for connections. On one particular day, we had just finished watching the “30 Days” episode on illegal immigration, the video Palamino showed his students to try to illustrate both sides of the immigration issue in the United States. As I was reviewing my notes, I noticed there was no warm-up activity, no follow-up discussion, and the episode itself was cut short due to a lack of time in the period. It was clear to me that Palamino felt rushed, that he wanted to do more with this video and this issue, but that he did not have enough time in the day nor space in the curriculum to give this complex issue the in-depth exploration it required. What was most interesting about this occurrence is that as I was putting this very thought into writing, Palamino approached me and expressed this exact sentiment. He said that in past classes, he had usually devoted a day-and-a-half to this movie, but due to the new district-mandated formative assessments (which took place the day prior) he was forced to “crunch.” This is but one example of many in which I witnessed the teachers encountering obstacles to critical pedagogy.

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to gain permission to record the lessons I observed via audio or video limiting the specific examples I was able to gather of Ms. B’s use of code switching.

As I have mentioned several times, neither of these teachers were attempting to implement a critical pedagogy. However, if we were to reduce critical pedagogy to the western-pole on a linear spectrum with the banking model occupying the east, both these teachers would lie left of center. To be sure, over my stay in the classroom I did witness many teaching practices that were less-than critical: fill-in-the-blank worksheets, multiple choice quizzes, etc. However, for the most part, I saw both teachers delving into content matter that had enormous critical potential. I use the word “potential” here for two reasons: 1) The fact that something has potential *to be* critical does not in and of itself *make* it critical (a subject I will further explore in the next section), and 2) An attempt to do something more critical can be hampered or limited by both internal and external obstacles, thereby rendering it less critical than intended.

The above example of Palamino’s “30 Days” video illustrates an obstacle produced by an over-crowded curriculum, which forces educators to favor breadth over depth in the coverage of content. The immigration issue is a subject so complex, so multi-faceted that it could take 9<sup>th</sup> grade students days, maybe even weeks, of wrestling, reading, thinking, and debating to even begin to develop an understanding of any sophistication. But just in the nine days I was present in Palamino’s classroom, he also had to cover population pyramids, the demographic transition model, world migration, local migration, Ellis Island, and current events. Throw in the pressure to meet state standards and comply with district

and school policies and it is no wonder teachers are feeling pressured to shorten or cut in-depth, critical exploration.<sup>3</sup> Palamino explained his situation this way:

They're giving us all of these formative assessments and quizzes that we're supposed to be doing across the district, so the easiest thing to get rid of is something like a discussion, because it's...not hitting any of the standards...I can't put it on a quiz...The quizzes are all pre-written, and I'm teaching to [the students] what's in the formative and summative assessments. So something like [a discussion] is the easiest thing for me to say, "Eh, I don't have time for it." (Pre-Interview)

Eliminating a discussion here or an activity there may not sound like much, but Palamino argues that a small piece can make a huge difference. He compared it to cutting a short scene from a long movie. By itself one scene may not seem that important, but looking at the movie in its entirety, the scene could serve an indispensable role in tying together the whole plot. Bringing the analogy back to the classroom, this "scene cutting" could result in the removal of foundational understandings or missed opportunities for students to come to transformative realizations.

The dilemma Palamino is facing here is a direct result of the culture of standardization, the same culture that Ms. B described as "the crux" of her existence (Pre-Interview). While I was in her room, Ms. B and I often discussed how administrative policies, uniform standards, and one-size-fits-all testing

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<sup>3</sup> See Newmann, F.M. (1986). Priorities for the future: Toward a common agenda. *Social Education*, 50(4), 240–50., for more on the destructive tendencies of content coverage in the social studies.

negatively impacted her life as a teacher as well as the education of her students. Ms. B. described her school's standardized testing as something students neither enjoy nor learn from, but "something they endure" (Pre-Interview). She also took issue with the regular administrative evaluations teachers at her school were subject to, not so much because of the actual practice, but more as a result of the fundamental differences in epistemologies between her and her evaluators. "What does learning look like?" asked Ms. B rhetorically, "How are administrators making their evaluations?" (Field Notes, 10/25/2012). In other words, are the administrators making their evaluations based on *if* students are learning or *how* students are learning? Are they making their evaluations based on how well Ms. B *is* teaching, or how well Ms. B is teaching what she *is supposed* to be teaching?

In spite of such frustrations, both Palamino and Ms. B seemed content with their current employment situations. However, both also at times seemed uncertain of what their futures may hold if the trend towards standardization continued. For Ms. B, this future was not that far off, as the following school year would usher in a new curriculum, a curriculum much more prescriptive than the one Ms. B has been teaching since her arrival in Jefferson Park. The new curriculum was grounded in good intentions. Jefferson Park has a transient population. Many students switch schools multiple times throughout a given school year, and this new, uniform curriculum is meant to ensure that these

students can pick up at a new school where they leave off at the old one. However, Ms. B maintains a strong skepticism, a skepticism that was understandable considering it was not a curriculum she helped to create. “I don’t know what my curriculum is going to look like,” said Ms. B, shrugging her shoulders, “I don’t like teaching something that doesn’t really speak to my students...I can’t assume that it will, I can’t assume that it won’t...I haven’t seen it yet” (Pre-Interview). Although, Palamino did not have a new curriculum on the horizon, he still held similar concerns about the direction in which his district was moving, particularly the trend toward district-wide formative and summative assessments. Like Ms. B, Palamino sounded disempowered by the idea of teaching something he did not help to create. “It’s like I’m no longer really teaching,” said Palamino, “I’m just sort of like a presenter.” This deprofessionalization of teachers presents tremendous challenges to aspiring critical pedagogues, as the power to make decisions about one’s own curriculum is one of the most important factors in being able to implement a critical pedagogy. Both these cases demonstrated how top-down policies and procedures can place roadblocks on the left side of the critical-banking spectrum I described earlier, and in some cases even force teachers to move their curriculums to the right. The culture of standardization represents a major obstacle that most critical pedagogues will face throughout their careers, an obstacle that will only get more difficult to overcome as it continues to become more and more embedded in the

culture of U.S. schools.

The above examples illustrate external obstacles, obstacles that come from outside the immediate realm of critical pedagogy. In the right environment, many of these obstacles can be avoided, especially if you have a school and/or district that is on-board with social justice-related initiatives (see Apple and Beane's (2007) *Democratic Schools* for such examples). However, external obstacles aside, there are also internal obstacles to critical pedagogy, the most prominent being this: critical pedagogy is difficult to teach. Perhaps this is part of the appeal of positivism. Its straightforward, black-and-white approach to knowledge certainly makes the job of the teacher much easier. Just expose students to information and they will absorb it. Powerpoint lectures are easy to present; multiple-choice quizzes are easy to grade; the complex, messy world of multiple intelligences, perspectives, and constructions of knowledge can be traded for an epistemology that is much more simplistic. If this is what administrators want, why not just give it to them? Why even toy with the idea of a critical pedagogy that, along with upsetting parents, principals, and district administrators, will be so much more difficult to implement than standard banking models of education?

Palamino expressed this very sentiment in one of our interviews. When I asked him about difficulties he has experienced in implementing critical teaching methods, he said "You get some classes where, if it doesn't work, it's a pain. It is very tempting to just give the kids a worksheet and have a day where you can just

catch up on grading” (Pre-Interview). The idea that critical pedagogy might “not work” is a reality that Palamino has experienced. He described to me several activities that he created that he really thought would “get kids thinking,” but in the end fell far short of their objective (Pre-Interview). Ms. B also talked about activities she had seen fail due to questions that were overly “esoteric” or lacked adequate “scaffolds or support” (Pre-Interview). These internal obstacles may be especially intimidating to critical pedagogues because they continue to exist even in environments where external obstacles are minimized. They result from the complex nature of critical pedagogy, and all the challenges that come with trying to package its abstract ideas and tenets into concrete lessons and units. However, it is my hope that studies like mine will assist teachers in overcoming these internal obstacles and help to strike a few items from the long list of challenges inherent in the teaching of critical pedagogy.

### *Critical potential*

Thus far, this paper has discussed critical aspects present in the pedagogies of two high school teachers. As the data show, both these teachers touched on many aspects of critical pedagogy, despite their lack of familiarity with the field. However, what these teachers’ pedagogies possessed in criticality pales in comparison to what their content possessed in theoretical critical potential. At the risk of sounding redundant, I would like to state one last time that these teachers

were not attempting to implement a critical pedagogy. I would also like to reiterate what I discussed in the previous section, that the critical potential of many of the lessons I witnessed were limited by obstacles both internal and external. That being said, the primary goal of this study was to see aspects of critical pedagogy in action, and with that comes what I did not see, particularly the instances in which I believe these educators may have missed opportunities to increase the criticality of their lessons and units.

Throughout my field notes, I regularly noted activities I felt were on the “cusp” of critical. Students were often brought to the doorstep of wrestling with issues of ethics, morality, and power, but did not always cross the threshold. I often found myself asking questions like, how could this standard be slightly manipulated to fit into a critical framework? Or, how would Freire organize this content for presentation in the problem-posing model? Take for example the population pyramids students were studying in Palamino’s class. At several points in the lesson, Palamino noted how certain assumptions could be made about the social state of a country by looking at the shape of its pyramid. These included the access women have to birth control, the ability of the healthcare system to allow people to reach older ages, the country’s developmental “stage,” and some idiosyncratic features of specific nations such as abortion and infanticide of females in China. These issues are certainly *controversial*, but controversiality alone does not equate with critical. In fact, controversial issues

can be anti-critical if presented in a positivistic manner, which in this example could lead to the thinking that a country's oppressed state results from some sort of celestial determinism rather than the decisions and actions of human beings.

Once I designated something as having critical potential, I then tried to envision how it might be presented within a critical pedagogy, specifically within Freire's (1970/2000) problem-posing model. For population pyramids, I noted the following consideration: What if the skill of reading a population pyramid was part of the larger task of addressing a social problem? In other words, instead of making the skill of reading a population pyramid the focus of the lesson or unit, it would be embedded in the larger task of addressing a social issue of concern to the students. This could involve addressing inequality between nations, addressing a social problem unique to a specific nation, or a critique of the very idea of the population pyramid, a device which could be described as a product of Western imperialistic thought with its labeling of non-Western nations as works-in-progress ("developing"), while elevating its own nations to the ideal other nations should aspire to achieve ("developed").

Ms. B's board game activity had similar potential. The game was both creative and integrative, and likely challenged students to wrestle with the content at a high intellectual level. However, while it bordered on the realm of critical, this might be a place where Ahlquist (1990) or Paul (1984) would distinguish between "weak sense" and "strong sense" critical thinking, the latter needing a

“moral or ethical component” accompanied by transformative aspirations (p. 54). The game certainly required students to think about *how* and *why* inequality developed historically, and it did delve into the realm of moral and ethical reasoning in the summative assessment. However, if taught through the lens of critical pedagogy, a teacher would likely take a different approach. To again refer to Freire’s (1970/2000) problem-posing model, a critical pedagogue might first pose a content-related problem to the students, perhaps a picture of a crowded school lunchroom in the United States next to a picture of starving children in Somalia, or a picture of a thriving metropolis next to a picture of a remote Andean village. The class would then follow up by generating knowledge around these dichotomous photos, making observations, asking questions, culminating in the creation of a central critical question on which to focus the unit. Diamond’s theory could still function as a supplemental piece, helping students to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of inequality, but the ultimate goal would be the creation of a transformative plan to alleviate inequality with some sort of meaningful action.

These suggestions for critical adaptation are not meant to say that the presentation methods chosen by Palamino and Ms. B did not lead to valuable learning experiences. They did. But because this is a study for aspiring critical pedagogues, it is important to think about how these lessons could be presented with a more critical orientation. The above suggestions are nothing more than

that: suggestions. They do little to bridge the theory-praxis gap because while I think they are interesting ideas, they are still just ideas, and therefore lie in the realm of theory themselves. I believe this study makes a contribution to the literature in terms of addressing the theory-praxis gap, but it is far from an end point. So that begs the question: Where do we go from here?

### **IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION**

*"Even the smallest victory is never to be taken for granted. Each victory must be applauded, because it is so easy not to battle at all, to just accept and call that acceptance inevitable." - Audre Lorde*

I stumbled upon this quotation in an essay by Ayers, Mitchie, and Rome (2004). These authors run a teacher-education program in the Chicago area that is grounded in critical theory. Their study documents the experiences of several of the teachers enrolled in their program as they attempt to turn that theory into practice. The practices of the teacher are moderate endeavors when compared to the ultra-radical notions often expressed in prominent critical literature, but they also represent a significant departure from more traditional methods of social studies education, a departure that the authors argue "is 'critical' in more ways than one" (p. 128). This study and studies like it have encountered harsh criticism from more radical scholars in the critical community, who dismiss such endeavors as too watered down to represent meaningful progress. The authors take issue

with this criticism, and in crafting their defense, articulate an argument I believe needs to be received if critical scholars are to make significant inroads in bridging the theory-praxis gap:

We're not suggesting that every teacher who simply hangs up a picture of Rosa Parks in February should be lauded as a "change agent"...[But] if we insist on measuring our work solely by how radically it moves us towards overthrowing our present system of schooling--and write off all more modest efforts as insufficient or unworthy--then we handcuff ourselves...At times, the steps we take with our students toward our vision of a more just world seem small indeed. But as Audre Lorde once wrote..."Even the smallest victory is never to be taken for granted. Each victory must be applauded, because it is so easy not to battle at all, to just accept and call that acceptance inevitable." (pp. 128-129)

This quotation speaks to all of us who have ever felt powerless in an immense and indifferent universe. It also speaks to my study. My study is not groundbreaking. It is not a modern day application of the words of Paulo Freire. In many ways, it is not even critical pedagogy. However, it is a step in the right direction. It represents progress. And it can, I hope, provided inspiration for aspiring critical pedagogues like myself who have found themselves lost in the theory-praxis abyss.

My study also represents a possible starting point of something that can be built upon. Using these data as a reference point, we can continue to ask questions such as, how can we become more critical? How can we push the envelope a little bit further? How can we challenge the status quo a little more directly? And, how can we begin to incorporate transformation? In exploring

questions like these, studies will naturally become more radical and gradually begin to address the criticisms of those who hold progress to a higher critical standard. This does not mean that radical criticism, or any criticism for that matter, is not welcome. Advocates of critical pedagogy should always remain reflective and open to critique. But critics must remember that their perceptions of critical pedagogy are as subjective as any other, and that to insist on some sort of “pure” critical pedagogy is a dangerous demand.

One possible next step would be to conduct a similar study using teachers who have a more critical orientation. Both Ms. B and Palamino incorporated numerous aspects of critical pedagogy into their teaching despite having little-to-no background on the topic. This was an encouraging thing to see, but begs the question of what a more critical educator might have done in a similar setting. This study could also be in the form of a critical action study, with the researcher treating his or her self as the case.

Bridging the theory-praxis gap will be a long, hard road. Any one study can only contribute so much in the big picture of things. Nevertheless, each study still plays a part in working to make critical pedagogy a more common practice in our schools. The emergence of one critical classroom, the employment of one critical teacher, can influence hundreds of students, exposing them to a school of thought that may otherwise be completely absent from their educational experience and their lives in general. One small study or essay can have a domino

effect, inspiring countless other scholars to pursue work in critical pedagogy, much in the way scholars like Ron Evans, Roberta Ahlquist, and Deborah Seltzer-Kelly inspired me. It is easy to fold when it feels like the whole system is stacked against us. In many ways, the whole system *is* stacked against us. But we cannot forget the tremendous impact our work can have in our individual classrooms, schools, universities, and communities. It is perhaps only after these smaller scale transformations that any potential for true systematic overhaul can ever be realized. *This* is where we go from here, continuing to work both individually and collectively to chip away at the status quo arrangements of power, to assist students in the unveiling and the transformation of their worlds, unwaveringly clinging to the belief that social justice is and should be the primary purpose of education. If we can carry out such tasks with commitment, determination, and a little bit of radical hope in our hearts, then we will slowly but surely, study-by-study, lesson-by-lesson, continue to expand the influence and acceptance of critical pedagogy in U.S. schools and bring real changes to real people.

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**APPENDIX***Pre-Interview Questions*

- 1. What do you feel should be the primary goal(s) of social studies education?
- 2. How well suited is the subject of social studies for the use of critical teaching methods?
- 3. What does it mean to teach critically?
- 4. In your opinion, what would be some primary differences between a “critical” social studies classroom and a “traditional” social studies classroom?
- 5. In the courses you teach, what are the topics/issues you believe to possess the most critical potential?
- 6. Describe in detail a lesson/unit you have used which you would describe as critical in nature.
- 7. Describe some success and failures you have experienced in using critical teaching methods.
- 8. How can teachers negotiate the desire to teach critically against the culture of standardization and high-stakes testing so prevalent in schools today?
- 9. One obstacle scholars have described in implementing critical teaching methods is a lack of support from administrators and fellow teachers. How have your teaching practices been received by your colleagues and administrators?
- 10. Describe any other challenges/difficulties you have faced in implementing critical teaching methods.
- 11. Scholars have describe critical pedagogy as having a moral or ethical component, which seeks to teach in the interest of social justice. Opponents of critical pedagogy have labeled it as “indoctrination,” and think educators should strive to be neutral and objective. Where do you stand on this debate?

Follow-up: Can teaching ever be apolitical?

- 12. Is “transformation” an essential component of critical pedagogy?

*Post-Interview Questions: Mr. Palamino*

- 1. What are the main understandings you hope students now have as a result of watching the 30 days video?
- 2. What are the main understandings you hope students now have as a result of reading the “Immigration in Jefferson Park” packet?
- 3. What are the main understandings you hope students now have as a result of participating in the Agree-Disagree activity?
- 4. In what ways, if any, do you think students engaged in critical thinking over the past two weeks?
- 5. Describe a change/improvement you might make to one of these lessons if you were to do it over.
- 6. On several occasions, you mentioned to me your wish that you could spend more time on some of the lessons I witnessed (e.g. 30 Days video, Armenian Immigrant dude, Agree-Disagree activity.) Would you elaborate on how these time-related pressures have effected your curriculum?
- 7. What else would you like to share with me about your experience? Have there been ‘aha’ moments for you?

*Post-Interview Questions: Ms. Brooks*

- 1. What are the main understandings you hope students now have as a result of the Guns, Germs, and Steel unit?
- 2. Would you tell me more about the resources students used in constructing their five-paragraph essay, such as the “video viewing guide” and their annotations?
- 3. How did the students’ essays turn out?

- 4. Describe a change/improvement you might make to one of these lessons if you were to do it over.
- 5. In what ways, if any, do you think students engaged in critical thinking over the past two weeks?
- 6. When teaching your world history course, what value do you see in teaching thematically based on ideas and issues as opposed to teaching chronologically, making use of different cultures/civilizations in sequenced time?
- 7. In my observations of your class, I noticed that you pay significant attention to the *process* of learning. Examples include: daily warm-ups, peer evaluations, class time devoted to the art of writing a five-paragraph essay, “academic” word wall, etc. Describe the function of these activities within your classroom and how they relate to the goals you have for your students.
- 8. It seems you hold all students to high expectations in your classroom. Is this an accurate statement? If so, explain how it fits in with your teaching philosophy.
- 9. What else would you like to share with me about your experience? Have there been ‘aha’ moments for you?