

Student Engagement & Democratic Values: Challenges and Possibilities

**Reimagining Learning Conference
Educate Together
Limerick, Ireland
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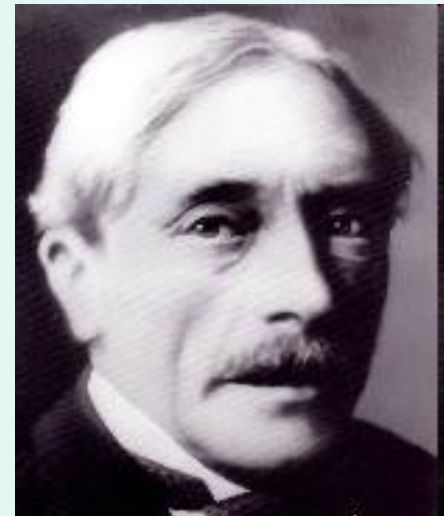
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1. Introduction
2. Critical-democratic framework
3. Student engagement
4. Challenges: Neoliberal myths
Deficit Thinking
5. Curriculum of Life

***There is no theory, that is not a
fragment, carefully preserved of
some autobiography***

Paul Valery
(1871-1945)



stagnant water
mosquitoes multiply
in silence

the birds took off
without visas or passports –
clandestines?

fall arrived

the ducks standing on one foot

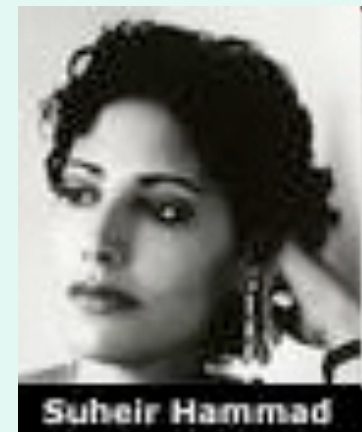
half of them gone

hollow words –
planning a future
already determined

marketed men
so enchanted by rigour
even *rigor mortis* ?

**If I say nothing I am complicit
If I say something I am isolated as
extreme
As a theorist in conspiracy
As if war is ever a coincidence
As if genocide simply happens**

Suheir Hammad



- Alternative Literacy Assessments in Nova Scotia (1996 -1997)
- **Student Engagement in Learning and School Life (national study, 1996-1998)**
- Ontario Teacher Qualifying Test: Critical Examination, 2001
- **Pre-service students' responses to "White Privilege" (2002)**
- Toward an Equitable Education: Poverty, Diversity, and Students 'at-risk' (national study, 2001-2007)
- **Teacher Induction Program in Ontario: Stakeholders' Perspectives (2002-2008)**
- Pedagogies at Risk: Just Schooling and Accountability Discourses (national study, 2005-2009)
- **Educational Equity and Inclusion in Neoliberal Times: Policy Webs and School Practice (2008-2012)**

Critical-Democratic Framework: Principles, Beliefs, and Values

THEORY AND PRACTICE

■ **Traditional conception of theory/practice**

- rigid dichotomy between theory and practice
- one-to-one correspondence between theory and practice
- to predict and control
- universalize (irrespective of context)

■ **Critical conception of theory/practice**

- Theory <---> practice: praxis
- Raise critical awareness
- Develop intelligent and responsible decisions and actions
- Difference in contexts – taken into account
- Human agency and creativity

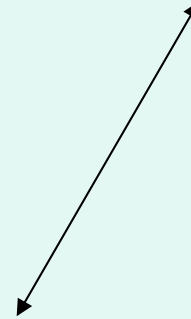
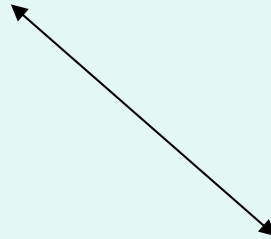
BELIEFS

(human beings,
politics, religion,
language, the world
etc.)

UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEXT

DECISIONS

ACTIONS



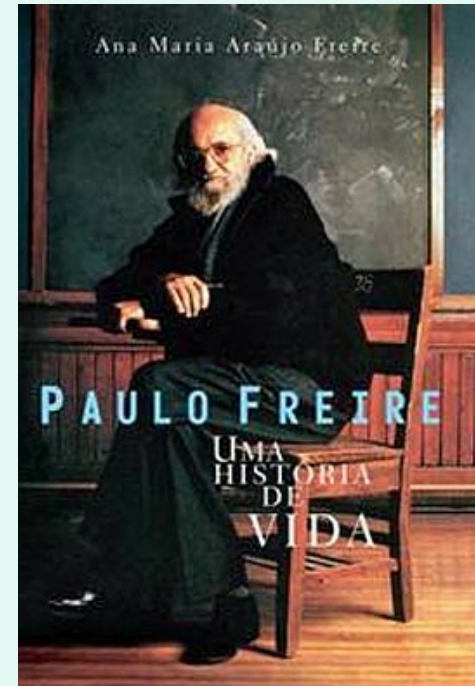
PRE-JUDGING

Professionalism implies:

- A degree of autonomy
- Intelligent judgement
- Understanding of major issues and positions
- Critical reflection on beliefs, actions, field

Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply 'blah, blah, blah' and practice, pure activism.

Paulo Freire



CONCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

- Different ways to conceive of democracy: constantly being re-constructed. BUT...
- Is democracy anything we wish?
- Can we define democracy in any way? No limits?

Different conceptions of democracy

- **Minimalist**
- **Market**
- **Participatory**
- **Critical**
- **Deliberative**
- **Liberal**
- **Radical or substantive or robust**

Justification of Democracy

- What are the reasons for supporting democracy rather than a dictatorship, or other forms of political associations?

DISTINCTIONS

Democracy as a form of governance

vs.

Democracy as a way of life

Procedural aspects

vs.

Substantive aspects

Real test of democracy:

- **Not afraid of disagreements and differences**
- **Rather than crushing or hiding disagreements and differences, the democratic attitude meaningfully engages with disagreements and differences**
- **When the level of FEAR increases, the degree or intensity of democracy decreases.**

Critical-democratic perspective

- **democracy as a way of life**
- **critical inquiry**
- **dialogue and discussion**
- **open to different views**
- **free and reasoned choices**
- **public participation**
- **equity**
- **community**
- **creativity**
- **taking difference seriously**

Critical-democratic perspective

Focuses on critiques, possibilities, and hope by asking:

- 1. In whose interest?**
- 2. Who benefits?**
- 3. Who is marginalized?**

Education and Notions of Success

- Education and success are contested concepts
- Important to clarify both concepts: one's views about education and success will determine one's conception and practice of student engagement
- What kind of education? What kind of success?

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Success

- Relational term
- Meaning depends on the aims and criteria used to determine whether success has been reached
- Example from literacy
- To determine success we need to focus on 3 aspects:
 - Aims/criteria: what values/norms are used to determine success?
 - Performance: does the students' performance match the aims?
 - Opportunities to learn: What support do the students/teachers/schools get?

- **Different and competing notions of success**
 - Academic success
 - Public achievement success
 - What counts as a “frill” and “distraction”?
- Democratic perspective allows/demands a **variety of notions of success** to operate at the same time rather than an insistence on one set of standards (one size fits all)
- **A narrow notion of success yields a narrow notion and practice of engagement**

Student Engagement

Student Engagement in School Life and Learning

- National study: 10 schools; 5 provinces
- Objectives:
 - What are the different meanings and forms of student engagement?
 - What are the conditions that enhance or restrict student engagement?

Concepts associated with SE

Connections,
relations,
promise,
belonging,
inspired,
motivated,
attachment,
concentration and effort,
authenticity and responsibility

connectedness,
commitment,
closeness,
involvement,
interested,
ownership
integration,
empowerment,

Student Engagement

- For students to engage is not what is usually called 'time on task': responding to work-sheets, recalling facts or dates, or reading chapters of a text and answering questions at the end. **I want students to engage the way the clutch on a car gets engaged**: an engine can be running, making appropriate noises, **burning** fuel and creating exhaust fumes, but unless the clutch is engaged, nothing moves. It's all sound and smoke, and nobody gets anywhere.

Robert Fried, *The Passionate Teacher* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, p.2)

Concepts associated with disengagement

- alienation
- isolation
- separation
- detachment
- fragmentation
- boredom

Qualities of student engagement

- Not always observable
- Involves a relationship
- Implies hope, commitment and possibilities
- Takes time to develop
- Dependent on context

Importance of S.E. is self-evident:
who wants to argue against
engagement?

BUT:

**Engagement in what
and for what?**

Conditions that hinder SE

- Deficit mentality
- Negative self-image
- Low academic expectations
- Bureaucratic structures.

Conditions that enhance SE

- **Ensuring positive and appropriate representations of students by others**
- **Facilitating student construction of positive self images**
- **Developing engaging pedagogies**
- **Creating democratic communities**
- **Enacting a curriculum of life**

Three conceptions of student engagement

- Some identify SE with the observable: students being on task, doing what the teacher demands and in the manner the teacher prescribes. From this behaviourist perspective, SE is equated with a *set of techniques and strategies*.
- From a perspective that focuses on individual growth, SE is equated with the *active participation of students* in projects and ideas relevant to them.
- From a critical-democratic perspective, SE is much more than technique, strategies, and participation. It is a *way of being* that grounds the curriculum and pedagogy in the students' lived experience (individual, social, academic, and political) and *enacts equity and social justice*.

Equity Strategy 2009

Inclusive Education: Education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in the curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected (EquityStrategy, 2009)

Diversity

The presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to ancestry, cultural, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation and socio-economic status.

Challenges:

- **Neoliberal Myths**
- **Deficit Mentality**

Two major liberal principles

- Individual rights
- Freedom (choice, autonomy)

Negative freedom: removing restrictions from individuals to be able to do what they believe in as long as they do not interfere with the rights of others – **basis of liberalism**

Neoliberalism

- Economic and political theory that has implications for education
- Hardly any proponents of what has been identified as neoliberalism use the term 'neoliberalism'
- Thatcher, Regan, Bush, New Labour
- Friedman, Milton *Capitalism and Freedom*. 2002
- Friedman, Milton *Free to Choose*. 1990

Pragmatic Neo-liberalism

- Excessive individualism
- Excessive competition
- Narrow accountability & reductionism
- Standardization
- Narrow notions of usefulness
- Assumed neutrality
- Cynical fatalism
- No room for dreaming (utopia, vision)

Neoliberal myths -- I

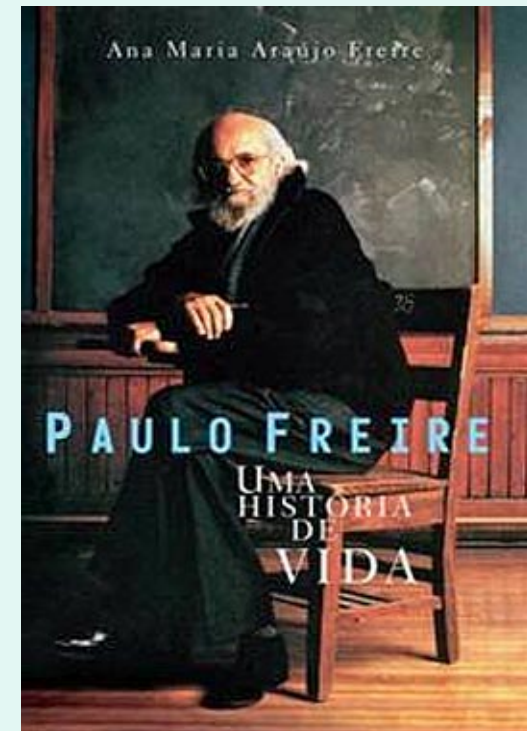
- 1. Education is not political**
- 2. Neutrality is possible and desirable**
- 3. Unless one sits on the fence one is a fanatic**
- 4. Balance = neutrality**
- 5. Being explicit and critical amounts to being unprofessional and offensive**

Critique of neutrality

No one can be in the world, with the world, and with others and maintain a posture of neutrality. I cannot be in the world decontextualized ... If education were neutral, there could be no difference between people in their individual or social contexts, whether that be their style of politics or other value systems. ... if education were not essentially political, it would mean that the world would not be really human. ...

What is my neutrality, if not a comfortable and perhaps hypocritical way of avoiding any choice or even hiding my fear of denouncing injustice? To wash my hands in the face of oppression?

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (1998) p. 73, p. 101.



***If any of you happens to see an
injustice, you are no longer a
spectator, you are a participant.
And you have an obligation to do
something.***

June Callwood, 1924-2007



- **The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.**

Dante (1265-1321)

Neoliberal myths -- II

- 6. Evidence = Only empirical evidence**
- 7. Focusing on procedures will solve substantive value differences and problems**
- 8. Providing strong, convincing and moving (passionate) arguments is equated with being irrational and biased (as long as you do not adhere to liberal etiquette)**

Neoliberal myths -- III

9. Equity = Standardization, one size fits all
10. Equality of opportunity is sufficient
11. Equity = Bridging achievement gap
(= Testing gap)
12. Equity hinders or dilutes excellence

Neoliberal myths -- IV

13. Accountability = excellence

14. Accountability → equity

15. We have a meritocratic society; those who do not succeed just do not work hard enough or they do not deserve to succeed

- A liberal democracy that focuses **only** on equality of opportunity without questioning the criteria used to determine merit and success is a **bankrupt democracy**

- **Strong myths:** there is a lot of evidence to support the reality of these myths.
- **Dangerous myths:** they contradict and eliminate the critical-democratic values

DEFICIT MENTALITY

Some examples of deficit thinking

- East Asian student who excelled in writing
- M.S. experience with gym teacher
- A.L. experience with colleague
- My own experience with my daughter's math teacher
- Man in white suit

- Deficit thinking is a very common way of thinking which affects our general way of being in and constructing the world.
- Differences from the 'norm' are immediately seen as being deprived, negative, and disadvantaged.

- It never questions the legitimacy of what is deemed to be normal nor does it consider that differences may actually go beyond expected norms.
- It discourages teachers and administrators from recognizing the positive values of certain abilities, dispositions, and actions.

- Deficit thinking leads to stereotyping and prejudging
- It marginalizes certain people on the basis of misinformation and misconstructions

Deficit thinking has changed forms over time, but remains distinct from other forms of thinking because it ***places the blame for student failure squarely on the shoulder of the student*** and student's lack of the traits necessary for academic success. This type of thinking leads to policies designed to instill those desirable traits/behaviours in students or in students' parents. But people who practice deficit thinking often ***fail to pay attention to those aspects of the student's life experience and family that make him/her unique and resilient.***

Buck Cooper, 2009.

Deficit Mentality

- Descriptions of young people – as at risk/ deviant/victims/young offenders – are negative constructions which produce negative effects. And not surprisingly it is more likely to be young people living in poverty or young people from cultural minorities who are represented in deficit ways

(Thompson & Comber, 2003)

Characteristics of Deficit Thinking

- Focuses on individual shortcomings
- Failure is the result of internal deficits (e.g. single parents, poverty, ESL, etc)
- Places responsibility in the student while overlooking social and systemic contexts
- Often used by educators to explain & predict failure among minorities and students from low S.E.S
- Individual agency is denied

Failures of Deficit Mentality

- Fatalism
- Inescapable cycle of low expectations
- Objectifies and reifies students, their families etc. into fixed positions
- Difficult to overcome once labeled as such
- Reproduces social inequality
- Based on superficial and racist labels
- Not empirical- pseudoscience

Alternatives to Deficit Thinking

Mentality of hope and possibilities

a shift from a *deficit-thinking model*

(that feeds on fatalism and lack of hope, and disregards systemic inequities)

to a mentality of hope
and possibilities

Mentality of hope and possibilities

- Student at riskness is systematically produced
- No student need be at risk if proper support, programs and way of thinking are in place
- Challenges can be changed through proper action: engaged pedagogy, innovative curricular and co-curricular programming, additional resources
- Proactive mentality: at riskness can be challenged and changed

Curriculum of Life

Curriculum of Life

- **Appropriate metaphor: not implementing or covering or delivering but **enacting, living.****
- **Curriculum of life takes substantive and controversial issues in the students' personal, social and political lives seriously – it does not shy away from the controversial. It does not hide behind the pretence of neutrality.**

- **Grounded in the immediate daily worlds of students as well as in the larger social and political contexts of their lives, curriculum of life breaks down the walls between the school and the world. It is an approach that presupposes genuine respect for children's minds and experience – without romanticizing either. It is an approach that is inconsistent with a deficit mentality common in many schools. (p. 38)**

Curriculum of Life

- By "curriculum of life" we mean a central, organizing stance that informs pedagogy, knowledge, school and classroom procedures and dispositions, evaluation, and how students, teachers, administrators and staff engage in the school. **Students and curriculum in this approach are not "managed" or "controlled" but "engaged."** Curriculum of life is an approach to pedagogy that informs and gives coherence to often disparate aspects of school life.

Curriculum of life

- **Social studies, language arts, mathematics, science, and art become “disciplines” in the sense that they are disciplined ways of thinking through important questions and concerns. The curriculum of life is rooted in the school and community world to which the students belong, addressing questions of who we are and how we live well together; it extends into the larger world of possibilities beyond school and community bounds; and it addresses directly questions about the larger social and political contexts in which these worlds are embedded.**

- **It's impossible to talk of respect for students for the dignity that is the process of coming to be, for the identities that arise in the process of construction, without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience, which they bring with them to school.**

Paulo Freire

Curriculum of Life

- Curriculum of life takes **substantive and controversial issues** in the students' personal, social and political lives seriously – it does not shy away from the controversial. It does not hide behind the pretence of neutrality.
- Curriculum of life is **incompatible with the objectification of students**. It encourages and supports “epistemological curiosity” and “**rigorous searching**” (Freire, 1998).
- Curriculum of life **discourages a deficit mentality** of students and human beings; it believes in human possibilities of students without falling into the trap of romanticizing students to the extent that whatever students choose is acceptable.

- On the basis of three national studies in which we surveyed and interviewed hundreds of educators and students, it is very clear to us that educators and students are telling us that the curriculum of life is becoming more and more the irresistible content of the classroom. There are different ways how we can live a curriculum of life.

The Rose that Grew from Concrete

Did u hear about the rose that grew from a crack

In the concrete

Proving nature's laws wrong it learned 2 walk

Without having feet

Funny it seems but by keeping its dreams

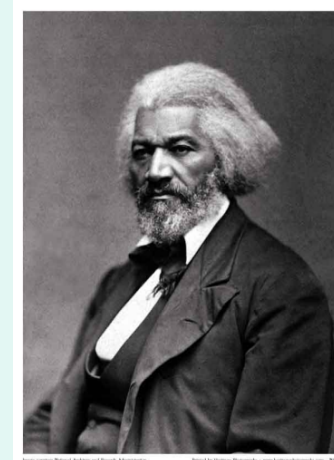
It learned 2 breathe fresh air

Long live the rose that grew from concrete

When no one else even cared!

- **Those who profess to favour freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has and it never will.**

- **Frederick Douglass**



Thank you!

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