A Quest for Re-Scripting the Narrative of Education Failure: Initial Steps in a Journey

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Abstract

This paper describes the experiences and reflections of two scholars as they began an ethnographic research project attempting to rethink and re-imagine possibilities of learning/teaching with highly vulnerable students in an inner city high school. The work is rooted in critical theory and presents ongoing reflection and action regarding the students' as well as the researchers' mindsets, practices and interactions. Analysis of the data promoted the realization that voice in underrepresented groups resides in counter-narratives that must become part of the educational discourse in order for disenfranchised students to embrace school learning.

   Keywords: inner-city youth, literacy, counter-narratives, agents of care, trust, sharing of stories, critical theories.

Thirteen male and one female 9th grade students in the classroom were floating in their own world, busy with their immediate agendas: some were walking around the room from the lockers to their desks or to the door, peering through the small window to the outside hallway, banging locker doors, drumming on tables, talking loudly, teasing or whispering with peers; several students rocked back and forth in their chairs, chewing gum or sucking a lollipop while others had their heads down on their desks covered by their ubiquitous hoodies. One

child, breathing deeply in the corner, was sound asleep. The students all had their backpacks on their backs on top of their jackets on top of their hooded sweatshirts, in a stifling hot room. Throughout this mayhem, three teachers were walking around, asking the students to "settle down", "pay attention", "show respect" since they had "very interesting and important" content for that day's lesson…

This scenario describes us (two of the three teachers) at the scene of our study: one of two English language arts (ELA) classes in an inner city Impact (considered most dangerous) school in New York City. This school had special classes for 9th grade students with histories of missing credits, multiple absences, and behavior issues. These students were marked for failure and considered almost hopeless academically. Although they had some good teachers who cared and wanted to help, nobody had the time and wherewithal to stop the race for grades and standards to deal with the unique needs these students.

Learning of this population of students prompted us to put our research and teaching theories into action. We conceptualized an ethnographic research project aimed at effecting change in the students' self-images and awareness of being able learners. Our goal was to recognize the students' starting point, to provide critical tools for revaluing themselves as learners and for raising their voices in self-defense and empowering actions, in pursuit of possibilities for their own success in school. Through dialogue and reflection we focused on the interactions and responses in the situated environment that we all shared and in which all of us - students, teachers, principal and researchers - were agents negotiating to spread our agendas, ideas and aspirations and to achieve multiple and possibly conflicting goals (Zuiderent-Jerak & Jensen, 2007). For example, the student sitting in the back of the room refusing to join in class activities or the researchers who bring in "interesting" material to motivate learners.

Theoretical Framework

The classroom scene in the beginning of this paper chronicles a situation in which dominant narratives exclude the counter-narratives of students considered at high risk of failure at school. These students are shackled to their past failures by cut-in-stone educational ideology and

practices hindering possibilities of their academic success and pointing them toward the same failure foretold. The intention of our interventionist educational research was "getting real" (Zuiderent-Jerak & Jensen, 2007) for the purpose of ushering in changes that would increase the likeliness of academic success for these students and allow marginalized students at large access to lifesaving voice and agency in schools.

For years the ideologies and pedagogies of the educational institutions were exclusively rooted in a Western/traditional/Cartesian paradigm, reinforced by a one-size-fits-all narrative (Markova, 1982). This narrative focused mainly on a canon (from traditional Western texts), behavioral pedagogies (rewards and punishment as motivators, success and failure defined by comparison to one grand, outside standard, etc.), an instructional approach (teaching curriculum rather than children) and allowing in only content deemed "suitable" for education. Our theoretical framework was instead rooted in critical theories that question these generalizations, meta-theories and we challenge the "averagidization" of students - the practice that reduces students to numbers averaged in relation to set standards - for facilitating the system's control over young minds and lives.

Critical theories view individuals as separate functioning entities (not an "average") yet part of the groups that make up society. This holistic, rather than reductionist view of human behavior, considers multiple variables that effect students differently such as gender, social status, economic positions, race and local circumstances (e.g. is it too early or too late in the day for a student to be focused in class? Is the room too hot, or is the snow piling up very rapidly outside affecting students' attention to learning? Is an approaching test increasing anxieties? Is the student hungry, afraid of bullies, rejected by the 'popular' group, etc.?) All human understandings and actions are contingent upon the context and the unique interactions that develop in a specific time and place, including the hierarchical power relations in any distinct environment (Apple, 1990, 2008; Ashley & Orenstein, 2001; Chen, 2010). For example, if students are required under threat of a poor grade to read a certain book, most likely they will be annoyed, will find the book "boring", will resent having to "waste their time" reading…But if a peer suggested they read the same book, their reading experience may be very different.

Critical theories allow for deconstructing and critiquing epistemologies in order to explain the daily and increasingly complex social interactions and activities that occur in a dynamic space such as a classroom (Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999). This perspective allows us to view reality as subjective and context-dependent while questioning the legitimacy of all forms of knowledge since they are situated in power relations and tend to change with them(Cook-Gumperz, 2006; Street, 1995; Vygotsky, 1987).Our theoretical framework drew mainly from critical pedagogy and critical literacy theories as they directly related to our study.

Critical pedagogy deals with the interrelationships between sociopolitical structures and school pedagogies. The traditional power division between the dominant center and undervalued margins gave rise to the practice of dominant culture reproduction in schools. Consequently, on the peripheries we find students who finish school as "semiliterates" who"…can read the words [mostly] but not the world" (Macedo, 1994, pg. 21).The instrumental approach to literacy, as in skill-and-drill practices, anesthetizes minds and impedes interest and motivation while sanctioning questioning. This covert agenda upholds the social status quo and limits the academic development of some groups of students.

A major component bolstering the status quo of cultural reproduction in schools is the concept of White privilege ("Whiteness"), which is *not* a biological marker, but a social construct used in the process of assuming power over groups of people by viewing them through a deficit lens (Fine, Weis&Wong,1997; Kivel, 2005; McDonald, 2009; Sammel, 2009; Valencia 1997). This way of interacting has been naturalized in the dominant culture to the point that many of us, even with the best intentions, are not aware of holding this position or of its demeaning byproduct of "othering" (Rose& Paisley, 2012 pg.35).For example, a teacher may have an "arrogant perception" of being better than some students, or a curriculum rendering some groups of learners invisible might discourage students from seeking belonging and voice in school environments. In extreme cases this leads to "literacy shut down" where students actively resist learning (Key, 1998 p. 7).

Our own learning journey unwittingly, began from an arrogant perspective. We told the participants that we were college professors who were there to learn how to teach them so they

would do better in school, and that we would conduct the class like our college classes (e.g. sitting in a circle, discussing issues, learning from each other). We invited them to call us Professor B. and Professor V., reasoning that the association with college would promote students' self-esteem and cooperation. Only two months later did we realize our *faux pas* when we reflected on some students' resistance to learn from us.

In reaction to the politicization of pedagogies and the automation of cultural reproduction we embraced a pedagogy based on a Learning Paradigm, the objective of which "… is not to transfer knowledge but to create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, pg. 16). This stance views all teachers and students as learners in a collaborative exchange of knowledge and perspectives. The teacher guides the students (rather than "instructs" them) on their own learning journeys in a process that allows every student to be counted as able and motivated to learn relevant content.

A critical pedagogy approach allows us to validate *all* students' learning abilities by situating learning in the students' experiences while defining learning as a collaborative exchange of perspectives. This offers students the prospect and power of agency, enhanced by repositioning ourselves at the students' eye-level. From this relativistic perspective we realized the empowering aspects of, for example, their refusal to cooperate with the system as it currently exists or the agency they achieved when access to success was redefined to include their knowledge, values and experiences (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Lewis, Enciso & Moje, 2007; Pritchard, 2006).

Based largely on Freire's ideas, critical literacy addresses knowledge construction emanating from dialogue and interaction. It also includes problem-posing education for liberation and transformation of students' lives and, teaching students to inquire into and deconstruct social issues including those of power, oppression, language and silencing in their lives (Fraser, 1997; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor, 1999). By critically examining texts - both traditional and multimodal, and by studying language use as a social construct imbued with power and contingent upon time and place, we raise awareness about how texts convey meaning.

This approach focuses learners on recognizing exclusion, silencing and omission in social and educational words and worlds creating opportunities for students to attain voice in order to better represent themselves and become agents of their lives and communities (though these may be different from the thoughts and feelings of others i.e., How is being a member of a gang good for me? Am I making a statement by failing school?) (Baxter-Magolda, 1999; Gay, 1995; Kincheloe, 1997; Nieto, 2002; Shor, 1999).The process provides students with a tool for critically constructing their identities and personal narratives.

We grounded our pedagogy in Neo-pragmatism that argues for the utility aspect of research as replacing"…an unsatisfactory present with a more satisfactory future, thus replacing certainty with hope" (Rorty, 1999, p. 32). Since language shapes our world and our understandings of selves within the world, we can change the language in and of schooling to enhance learning for all. For example, by replacing the dichotomous educational concept of "success/failure" on which so many students stumble, with a "success/ success" concept where every learner succeeds in something, schooling can be less painful and more satisfying for more learners (Rorty, 1999; Varenne& McDermott, 1999).

Our critical practice and reflection process aims to open possibilities of a better future for *all* children. Critical postmodern feminist pedagogy summarizes and frames guiding principles for creating the inclusive, learning-centered classrooms we seek: by incorporating the students' experiences and presenting a language of critique, students can imagine different relationships between centers and margins; by establishing safe learning spaces students can find voice and investigate taking action in their lives; in such settings students can acknowledging and explore multiple ways of being, of reading the world and resisting oppression (Brady & Dentith, 2001; Greene, 2001).

The Project: Teach Us to Teach You

Our pedagogy posits that all children can learn and want to learn and we can facilitate their process by including them *and* their counter- narratives as foundations and sources of agency for their own success and power in learning. This requires a commitment to educating for wellbeing

and active change, acceptance of cultural diversity and political enfranchisement. The approach also aids in developing greater self-understanding, positive self-concepts and pride in one's identity, opening doors for academic inclusion, interest in and motivation for learning. We wanted to provide learners with the right guidance and support, with interesting and relevant curriculum and flexible teaching methods adapted to their abilities, passions and learning styles (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012). We envisioned this project as the creation of a safe educational space where learners could open up and appropriate curiosity and motivation for their own learning processes; where we would learn with them in a co-creative process (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012).

The research project lasted from October 2012 to June 2013. Our first step was to get to know the students, their strengths and interests. From there we would try to encourage academic learning and transformative thinking while coaching them to discover their voices through personal narratives (Ben-Yosef, 2008, 2009; Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009; Pinhasi-Vittorio & Martinson, 2008; Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2008).

Participants

Participants in our study were two 9th grade groups of African American and Hispanic students with histories of academic and/or behavioral failure. Class1 included 13 boys and 1 girl with histories of disruptive behavior. This was a "lock-down" classroom with doors locked from the outside and a guard sitting by throughout the day. The hallway outside the classroom was closed to other students. Lock-down students could not leave the classroom except to the bathroom across the hall, when they were escorted to a meeting with a counselor, or for lunch in a roped-off area in the cafeteria. Teachers stayed in the classroom until the next teacher arrived. We were given one 42 minute morning period twice weekly for working with this group.[2]

Class2 included 12 boys and 8 girls. These students came from middle school with few or no credits with the main issue here being low academic achievement and truancy. This class was supposed to have computers for students to catch up on work they had missed, but the computers never materialized so the students plodded along no differently than they did in middle school. We worked with this group twice weekly in an 80 minute double period after lunch.

Our roles in the study were as participant researchers (Glesne, 2012). One of us, Professor V., is of Israeli-Persian descent. Professor B. is Caucasian. We both grew up in Israel and spent our adult and academic lives in the United States. We both have PhDs in literacy studies and have been teacher-educators and researchers for more than a decade. In this project, we considered ourselves as outsiders. Hence, we reflected on, read about, and talked with students, teachers, administrators, and counselors to find a common language that would allow us all to communicate and create a congruous narrative.

The Process

After closely observing the participants for several sessions with other teachers, we noticed that the consequences of their former choices appeared to limit their academic success. Since we believe that educators have the responsibility of getting to know their students to lead them toward agency, we looked for a text that would serve both purposes. The first text chosen was *The Road Less Travelled* (McCallum, 1999) - a poem about choices and decision making, the difficulties of making choices and the importance of finding the clarity and power to choose an appropriate and forward-looking path.

Students in both classes cooperated well in this activity, responding verbally and in their journals. Jerome (class1) told of an afternoon with his friends when he discovered that they were planning to rob someone. He made a choice to leave them and go home. In his reflection journal he wrote, "I learned that only I will control my actions and my life. I also learned that whatever you want to do in life always think before you act." After a class conversation regarding possibilities of keeping one's own voice while being a member of a gang, Carmino (class1) wrote, "[a]ny decision you make its [sic] your choice. No one should be able to judge you except for yourself" - possibly reflecting on his recent decision to join a gang. Patricia (class2) acknowledged the difficulty of making decisions but included a hopeful note, "making a certain decision will be hard but with further experience you'll see that it will get better". Although most of the students agreed that they had the power to make choices in their lives, Whitney (class2) was skeptical, "[a]t first I didn't agree with what they said about you making your own decisions, but then I realized that it was true. So I erased my thoughts and saw that I did [make

my own decisions].” Whitney’s writing provided a glimpse into an emerging critical reflection. It is interesting to note that she never chose to speak in class and when urged to respond, would whisper, hiding under her hood and covering her mouth with her sleeves.

One day a “new” student appeared in class2. Cal sat alone in the corner and shook his head in refusal to all requests to join our “conference-table” setup. When the rest of the class broke into planning groups, Prof. B. sat by Cal and tried to engage him. Within a few minutes of a halting conversation, he said, “You don’t want to know me, Miss. I’m bad”. Evoking our belief that all children can learn if relating to their strengths and abilities, and continuing with the same two themes of getting to know our students and letting them realize their own capacity for agency, we introduced “*The Danger of a Single Story*” (Adichie, 2009).

The video discusses how seeing a person from only one perspective leads to stereotyping. We asked the students to write about themselves from the perspectives of three different people: a family member, a teacher, and a friend, so they could experience that very different stories can be told about one individual. The activity highlighted the multifaceted nature of human beings who deserve to be known through multiple stories. Jayden (class1) wrote that his mother would say, *“*my son is a pain. He acts bad [sic] because he doesn’t know better. Jayden is very smart and no matter what he always will look out for me and love me with all of his heart and I will always love him.” His teacher, on the other hand, would say “My student Jayden is always playing and goofing around. He barely does his work. He is smart and just needs to hang out with a better crowd.” And his friend would say: “My mans [sic] Jayden. He mad cool. He always looking out for me. He treats me like his sister. I will always love him. My brother for life.”

The idea that all of us have multi-storied identities composed of many shifting narratives related to our individual nature and experiences and contingent upon the storyteller, was found in the poem “*Every Person Has a Name*” (written over 100 years ago by the Russian poet Zelda). The poem explores the many sources of developing identity, such as heredity, native landscape, friends, enemies… - some narratives we create for ourselves, some are created for us by others. We asked the students to use this as a mentor text and to add a stanza of their own. Most of their ideas updated the original poem to 21st-century, American culture as they wrote that we are

given names: "…by our life style… by our teachers… by our size and our looks… by our culture and our nationality." "Everywhere we go we get a name", wrote Allegra (class1).

The Great Divide

As we continued meeting with both groups, behaviors began to change. Upon close inspection of our field notes we realized that students in class1 were being disruptive with increasing frequency and intensity to the point that conducting any activity became increasingly difficult. We also noticed that we were paying attention to the disruptive kids trying to calm and engage them, while ignoring those behaving well. In class2, for the most part, participants appeared to be involved in class activities, except for those students who chose to remain on the sidelines, sleeping or otherwise detached. Although distractions were minimal, overall class engagement was weak.

We decided to bring in materials that would grab everybody's attention, but they did not. We shared YouTube clips and short articles on social issues such as child labor, slavery, trafficking of young girls. We discussed the silencing and powerlessness of these children, juxtaposed with stories of children who became empowered to create change in their lives. Our goal was to encourage discussion about taking initiatives, but many of the kids were "unavailable for learning" the material that we presented (Ben-Yosef, 2003).

- Why would Tyron focus in class if he had just come out of a week in juvenile detention and had been placed in foster care for the holidays?
- Why would Alexandra come to school at all if she could not see the blackboard and could not get glasses to alleviate the constant headaches?
- Why would Bobby lift his head off the desk where he was thinking about his very best friend who was shot and critically wounded while blaming himself for what happened?
- Why would Gerri even try to think about adjectives and pronouns if she was obsessing about her parents' constant fighting, fearing her dad would leave themagain as he keeps threatening to do?

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- Why would Samuel not be shut down and unresponsive after someone called child services regarding ongoing abuse at home and he was incessantly envisioning his parents arrested and jailed while his brother and himself are placed in foster care…

At this juncture we realized that if we really wanted to get to know the students, *they* would have to tell their own stories as *we* focused on pedagogy and connecting their stories with the curriculum. We asked the classroom teachers (who were with us at all times and became our partners working with the children) to conduct a reflection session alone with their class regarding our work and how they would like to continue.

The most important information from these reflections was that class1 students resented our presence and our college connection. "Who are these people?" they asked their teacher, "They're not our teachers", "Why do we need to call them professor?", "Who said they could come in here and teach us?" Their points were valid, particularly because we did not look or speak anything like them and shared little of their cultures and experiences. We were blindsided by our "whiteness" and this was a strong wake-up call.

Other issues were raised regarding content and teaching methods. Class2 asked for music, class1 wanted sensational stories, beginning with anything about the Illuminati. Methodologically, they asked for more variety in interacting: more group work, more art and more video. There was much bright-eyed excitement tied to being able to ask for anything they wanted and it seemed we had found a way to engagement. When we continued, we brought in different content to each class..

Class2 responded strongly to the song *Family Portrait* by Pink, a song dealing with a dysfunctional family and its effect on the daughter/singer. We presented a YouTube video with the lyrics as a literary text. The words and melody evoked a conversation and elicited related personal stories. Even the kids regularly parked in the corners took part and were able to make some text-to-self, text-to-text and text-to-world connections, bringing up thoughtful issues bearing upon having or not having voice. Many tied these ideas to the "self-portrait" art project

they had created with us a month earlier and asked us to bring in the art materials again so they could enhance their portraits with new understandings. Curiosity and motivation were budding.

Class1 was initially excited when we brought in texts about the Illuminati, although these posed a significant challenge for us due to the confusion of superstition, mysticism and conspiracy theories embedded in the topic as it appears on the media. Upon reflection, we decided to use the case as a stepping stone into critical reading and brought in two different texts: one with the historical information from Wikipedia about the original illuminati in Austria (1776-1785) who united to oppose abuses of power by the state and to promote mindful enlightenment; The other texts were examples of recent concoctions regarding a secret society that is allegedly planning a military/ financial/ homosexual/ Aryan/ Jewish… takeover of the world - the sensationalism that caught the students' attention in the first place. Despite the initial buzz, attention soon dissipated and the classroom imploded.

Reflection and Analysis

What were we doing wrong? We had listened to the students in both classes, followed their ideas, changed the content, changed our methods and yet succeeded only with one class while failing with the other. Bewildered, we retreated to our data, to the field notes, the conversations, artifacts, journals, the students' art and writings. Reflection pointed to the key that opened the door for change in class2 while locking us into failure in class1.

The diverse environments of the two classes greatly impacted the different interactions and learning dialogues that evolved. Class2 had roughly the same number of girls and boys while class1 consisted mostly of boys. Students in class2 were willing to sit and face each other around a large central table formed from their desks. In class1, the students were reluctant to move their seats, desks or to face each other in a power-sharing formation, holding on to what was "theirs" and controlling - at the very least - their proximity and sightline of others. In class2, we spent 80 minutes together providing enough time to talk, move around, learn, engage, whereas in class1, by the time most kids calmed down enough to face another day in their lock-down environment,

only a small window of opportunity remained to interact and engage. In both classes the teachers cooperated with our work and connected it to the larger curriculum.

Consequently, in class2 we were able to soften the walls of unavailability and reach a safe space of trust and mutual engagement. The breakthrough came with a music clip of *Family Portrait* by Pink. After listening to the song and watching the lyrics on video, we asked the students for feedback - any thoughts, connections, and feelings they wanted to share. Total silence ensued. The kids looked around, down, waited...Professor V. decided to model and lead the discussion by sharing her own story, revealing that as a young girl she became very stressed whenever her parents argued. She was afraid that her family would shatter at any moment and that she would be left alone in the world.

The class was silent. Then Gerri began speaking in a low voice. She said that she too was afraid that her family would break apart, worried that her father would leave them. Tears began rolling down her cheeks. She compared herself to Pink: like her she felt responsible for keeping the peace in her home and like her, she felt ineffectual.

Hortencia, who usually sprawled on the desk, facing the wall, raised her head and spoke her painful story of a father who ignored her and has refused to acknowledge her existence. Hortencia was speaking softly while the class listened and she revealed that as result of the constant pain and humiliation she engaged in cutting herself. Laquan, who sat in the corner by the window rocking on the back legs of his chair, said that his father ignores him, as well, and he knew that his father did not love him, that he loved only the children from his other wife… But, he claimed, he did not care. He was not going to let his father get him upset..., his voice trailed off.

A community was developing here and from session to session the trust and comfort in class2 strengthened. We shared stories about kids, husbands, parents and siblings, and they shared theirs through conversations, writing and arts. Every time we entered the classroom we were welcomed with smiles and found ourselves looking forward to the sessions. The sideliners chose to join the group and participate more often than not. We offered Hortencia the book "When I

was Puerto Rican" by Esmeralda Santiago which she read and loved. This prompted a conversation about the author, during which she was more talkative and animated than before.

Yet class1 continued to resist, were reluctant to participate and were either disruptive or passive observers of the chaos. Leaving the classroom after 42 minutes was a relief but we were no closer to getting to know the students. There was no trust between us. Combing through the events, processes, and our data, we noticed that there was very little work or reflection in this class. It would be easy to blame the kids for not writing, participating or telling their stories, but we could not deceive ourselves: we had not created a safe environment for the students of class1.We did not reach them in a meaningful way to establish mutual trust and respect. We capitulated to their disruptions instead of recognizing their exceptional abilities and needs. Ultimately, we realized, we were acting in parallel narratives.

A thought occurred to us at this junction: Indeed, we were feeling more comfortable in class2 and noticing the development of trust and community. Could this be attributed, in part, to the higher number of female students in class2? Could their presence have contributed to the general atmosphere permitting us to share stories and, eventually, enabling the students to trust us and open up?

Why would the students in class1write? Why would they share? As Jacob told us, "You want me to tell you about my life, Miss? You want to hear my story? Hell, no!" Why would Jacob risk sharing his stories with us, two upper-middle-class privileged women with ample social capital, so seemingly different from him and his peers? We did not know enough about the "savage inequalities" in the lives of these young (mostly) men (Kozol, 1991). Tatum (2005) discusses the multiple challenges that black (and in our case also Hispanic) males face on a daily basis, such as: "What does it mean to be a Black male in America? …to be racially profiled? …feared? …stereotyped as a criminal? …praised for speaking standard English? What does it mean to have to fight upstream? …to overcome? …to have to justify your presence and defend your rights as a human being? ... What does it mean to be endlessly judged and evaluated by European standards?" (pg. 46-7).

We were unaware of the layers of defensive armor our students constructed around themselves to allow them to survive in an environment that wrote them out of history (with the exception of "Black History Month" when *some* of the students' history was included, as tokenism, in the curriculum) and devalued whatever it was they represented.

Appropriating a critical perspective of the interactions in our classrooms empowered us to re-examine our "Whiteness" and everything that it indicated (e.g. power relations, worthiness, social status, holder-of-the-only-truth…). This led to an acute realization that we were not neutral in our interactions and that our agenda was as political as that of the students' "refusal to learn" and finding power in the autonomy over their choices (Kohl, 1995).

Although we had the best intentions, we were caught in a dominant narrative of "repairing" the students' attitudes and school achievements. We should have started by validating *their* narratives. Adichie (2009) refers to this "…as the part where you begin telling the story from 'Secondly'…" disregarding the historical and cultural, past and present contexts of lives that influence thinking and behavior in school and out. We almost fell into this trap of "a single story" that sways one towards pity and judgment rather than appreciation and respect. Additionally, the school was steeped in a "bureaucratic culture" where "… teachers conduct their work in isolation, have narrowly defined roles and responsibilities, and curriculum is highly prescribed and regulated. Rather than [the school] being responsive to individual needs, students are expected to conform to what the school is able to provide" (Patterson, Hale & Stessman, 2007/2008 pg. 7). Outside pressures left no time, no space and no energy for faculty and staff to seek and imagine possibilities for the students.

We contributed to this culture unintentionally by using dominant scripts and our White privilege. We didn't open up and share in class1 as much as we did in class2; we were defensive: how could we teach if they were misbehaving? They were a much more challenging group, but we were comparing them to class2, noticing the "dysfunction" (dominant narrative) rather than the purposeful engagements (counter-narratives) that were being played out (Comer & Emmons, 2006). Reflecting on content and methodology, we noticed that the texts that we brought in were mostly those that *we* believed were relevant. These included stories of children around the world

who were marginalized, silenced, or treated unfairly. We thought these topics were important based on *our* lived experiences and we expected the students to react, respond, and want to make changes in their lives, but mostly, they did not. Instead of eliciting their stories, we were imposing ours.

In our blindness, we also missed the point that there could be no community in class1 at that time. The classroom could not be a safe space because the boys were fighting each other to secure status and boundaries from the beginning of the school year. Placement in the lock-down room at a new school immediately stigmatized them and their first concern was establishing dominance. This resulted in intense teasing and bullying, behavior that preempted learning and prompted the removal of several students for their own protection. We finally realized that it was contextually misguided to expect them to relate to issues so removed from their immediate experiences. Time and again these 13-16 year old boys told us they think of death often and they "know" that they will most probably die young… these bleak ruminations needed to be addressed first.

We needed to create a safe space in the classroom, a space that would welcome and include every child, every voice and all stories; a space where minds could change from being in survival mode to learning mode; a space safe for risk-taking, experimenting and self discovery; a space that is the pre-requisite to learning and growth (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012; Zull, 2002).

Discussion

A space becomes safe when all members of a community feel comfortable enough to share ideas, open up and take risks and responsibilities for learning. There were two intertwined questions to consider here: How could we create a safe space in a classroom and in a school and was it feasible under the current school conditions?

We first focused on establishing a safe space in the classroom by building trust and promoting the development of a community of learners. Trust can emerge between children and adults in schools when authentic care for the learners propagates a sense of belonging and inspires

feelings of physical and mental safety. Thus, we attempted to create a common classroom space where all voices were allowed, heard, respected, and validated. This could affect the development of emotional and cognitive safety, potentially opening a platform for significant learning (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012; Massa & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009; Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2009, 2011).

   How could we actually create such a polyvocal environment if we were captives in belief networks that tend to color our perceptions as we create meaning of the world? Davis (2003) reminds us that the world we recognize is *just one model of reality* (author emphasis), one set of interlocking narratives. So we needed to be clearly aware of the tensions between the narratives we come in with and what was actually occurring in the classroom. To allow multiple voices and diverse narratives to check in, we had to engage with our ears, our eyes, our hearts and our minds. We practiced deep noticing, or paying attention to the general as well as to the nuances of the unfolding events in the room affecting our students' and our own practices (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013).

   We looked closely at students' behaviors, facial expressions, and body movements. We listened carefully to what they did and did not say. We looked each student in the eyes and noticed whether they were available for learning. This process of carful, "guided noticing" indicated authentic care, sensitivity to others and openness to different voices, gave us access to the students' lives. The process took time and we continued patiently until results were manifested in the students' writing, which we will document in our next paper.

   These are stepping stones toward the establishment of a safe space for enacting change in students' attitudes, motivation and participation in school. When students can relate to us and to their peers as fellow decent human beings who similarly experience losses and victories, sadness and joys, hardships and challenges, when we care for each other, we become a community.

   The second layer in creating a safe space is promoting the development of community through sharing stories, a process indicating consideration of and respect for others. On this foundation an inclusive pedagogy rooted in the counter-narratives of our students was constructed. An

example of the process is Gerri's written reflection to a lesson in which students shared personal stories for the first time: "[T]oday's lesson was very emotional. Everyone was expressing feelings and talking about their past life. It made me sad and emotional to hear other peoples' stories. It made me look at other people differently."

Safe community spaces should include "pushing, understanding the double image and raced talk" (Seidl, 2007). Pushing is the practice of working against institutional and cultural racisms through consistent high expectations for academic and behavior achievements. These expectations will be based on a detailed knowledge of students' challenging lives, yet they exclude pity or excuses.. The message to the learners is political "While the outside world may set you up to fail, may actually expect little from you, here you will not be allowed to do anything but your best" (pg. 172). Time and again in our work we found students whom were "allowed to fail" labeled as reluctant to "rise to the challenge of academic learning" (the dominant narrative). It was imperative to always include the counter-narrative of "What's in it for me?"

The realities of their lives had to be part of the dialogue. This reality included the issue of double identity. Double identity is the experience of many people of color, who are judged first by their race and then their individual merit. In contrast, most Whites are judged first on individual merit and then as members of specific groups. This social practice, which is a component of the invisible "White privilege," makes identity construction much more difficult for people of color, especially adolescents, who are still establishing themselves. This realization should lead to "raced talk" to break the silence about White privilege, race, and racism and their effects on opportunities in society and schools (Seidl, 2007). However, pushing blindly with high expectations in schools cannot work if additional support, including structurally established and consistent follow-up, is not in place. However, pushing blindly with high expectations in schools cannot succeed if additional support, including structurally established and consistent follow-up, is absent.

Consistent Follow up involves educators, school counselors, social workers and all others working with the students to be in touch with one another regarding the students' well being and

taking responsibility for providing the necessary support. "We are beginning to realize that… many of the problems observed in our schools are acute social problems that cannot be solved by schools – or any one agency –working alone. Collaboration has become a necessity" (Noddings, 2013, p.6).School counselors described a compelling need for cooperation among all those responsible for the children, including parents, community members, and teachers, to create a tight safety net for the kids.

Counselors were supposed to address these problems, but their caseloads were overwhelming. They did not conduct home visits, which was the responsibility of another agency. Another office dealt with absences by making phone calls, which were often wrong numbers, unanswered, or not returned.

Establishing trust and community must include ensuring the kids that we are paying attention to them. But since high-school students moved from one subject teacher to another, there was little or no communication among the teachers, counselors, and other service providers regarding the comprehensive needs of each child.

Nicole's story illustrates a case in which follow up did not occur, endangering the welfare of this 14-year-old child. She was transferred into class1 due to behavior issues. Within a week she was exhibiting sexually inappropriate behavior that attracted and distracted the boys in class. Overt and covert conversations, jokes, whispering, notes, facial expressions and even in conspicuous touching throughout the day created disruptive commotion impeding the little learning that could have occurred in the classroom. The teacher attempted to control these behavioral issues and "solve the problem of Nicole" by moving her to a different class, and indeed, class behavior improved. But what happened to Nicole? Who attended to her personal issues? Who was accountable for her learning in school and who should have been accountable for her wellbeing?

We address the second question of whether this kind of caring and sharing is feasible under current school conditions with a multilayered response. The purpose of most schools is to disseminate information, rather than to encourage inquiry and discovery. Standardization, high-

stakes testing, uniform curriculum requirements, and teaching demands preclude questioning, imagination, creativity, and artistic expression. The "one truth" doctrine excludes all other truths, perceptions, beliefs, and ways of knowing and being without exception, even if lives are at stake (Nicole, for example). Everything is geared towards high-stakes, performance-based tests, which create stress and limit opportunities. This perpetuates an environment that contradicts the notion of safe space (Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012).

The concept of standardization and competition in learning is antithetical to the understandings regarding the schooling and education in the 21st century. Collaboration, dialogue, interdependence, and creativity are now recognized as cornerstones of future development (Gardner, 2008; Noddings, 2013; Robinson, 2010, 2011). Standardization and high-stakes testing hinder the development of these behaviors and shut out diverse ideas and understandings, because they eradicate local languages and outside voices. The dominant narratives consistently trounce the counter-narratives, possibly to the detriment of our future achievements.

We think it is possible to establish safe spaces in schools, despite the contradictory evidence mentioned above, by using literacy to create a shared awareness regarding students' strengths and needs. Schools and educators can move from educating *about t*opics to teaching *with* and *within* the community, culture and society, We can include dominant and vernacular narratives. We can learn *alongside* our students, "learning from them and with them…over time where trusting and mutually respectful relationships are built" (Michie, 2012, p. 48). Learners must be allowed to approach learning and make meaning through their own experiences and lenses. Educators can challenge their own narratives as they permit other voices to arise and enrich the educational discourse.

Getting Real: Our Suggestions

After five months of research at the high school, we found that a significant component of academic success was missing for these students. They needed "agents-of-care" with comprehensive knowledge about their strengths, weaknesses, family and home circumstances, challenges, and needs. The caring adults could advocate for the students and guide their choices throughout the school day and year. They could follow up on attendance, test performance,

behavior, learning issues, and so on. An agent-of-care could significantly improve a child's life. Even teachers with the best intentions are overwhelmed by the system's mandates and requirements. They cannot manage the students' lives as well. For example, it took 10 days for the classroom teacher to find out that Tyron was absent because he was in juvenile detention. It took more than a month to realize that Darrell was supposed to be in one class and not moved to another because of bullying.

Our constructive suggestion is to allow care agents to be in the classroom with a group of children for 20 minutes at the beginning (and ideally, 20 minutes at the end) of the school day. A "homeroom" teacher may fulfill this role. These 20-minute chat sessions may address any issues that are pertinent to the students' performance. Students can submit a written note to the care agent if privacy is an issue. A similar process can take place at the end of the day for students who were late and to sum up the day's performance and plan for the next day or for the weekend. Between these two sessions, care agents can visit homes, coordinate community agencies and services, meet with students individually, plan interventions, write reports, and update student files. The goal of this program is to convince students that the school cares and that it is trying to resolve problems so that they can focus on learning. "When you care for the special needs of each child…and the child feels that even if you were unable to solve his problems today, you may solve them tomorrow...The more you deal with and diminish the child's problems you increase his prospects and possibilities in school" (Ben-Yosef, 2003, pg. 136).

To begin re-scripting the narrative of education failure, we must first build a foundation of authentic and consistent care for all students. Some may question the additional funds required for agents-of-care. We perceive it as a worthy long-term investment that can reduce the future expense of managing youth who drop out of school and are at high risk of incarceration. The cost of housing an inmate in New York City's prisons for one year is $167,731, which is about the same as four years of Ivy-league education (Pearson, 2013). By increasing the current investment in marginal schools' resources, we can significantly decrease the future cost of students living in poverty who drop out of schools (Cohen, 1998; Krisberg et al., 1986). Reconsidering our social priorities to value all students, rather than abandoning some to poverty and prison, makes

economic and social sense. Taxpayer money can contribute to educational programs for vulnerable students in underfunded communities, rather than to prisons.

Endnotes

[1] The school population was approximately 4,000 students.

[2] This time slot was reflected in a smaller group due to many students arriving late and being held up at the front door to school.

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