

Critical Pedagogy

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I have a T-shirt from a Coalition of Essential Schools Fall Forum. On it is the question: What is Essential? This is a question asked by a number of people. I believe that in our urban high school classrooms, what is essential is not being addressed, questioned or taught. We ask the wrong questions. We ask how we can close the achievement gap. We ask how can we get reluctant high school students to read or, at the very least, we ask how can we get the reluctant learners engaged in learning. The real question is: what does each high school student in America need to know and be able to do to live in a racially and economically divided global society? We need as educators to focus the learning of poor teens and teens of color on the dynamics of the realities of their lives. We need to be critical friends who engage in critical pedagogy with our urban, and I would venture, suburban youth.

At this stage in my journey as an educator, facilitator, school coach, and technical assistance provider, I work in a variety of contexts. My most rewarding work is working and interacting with high school students from around the country. Whether I am working with or interacting with Matt Brown, a student at The High School for the Recording Arts in St. Paul, Minnesota, or Jermina, Ashley or Batelle, students at CEO Leadership Academy in Milwaukee, there are consistent practices that engage each of these students in critical and crucial ways. The educators who engage, teach, transform, support and help to develop these students and students like them engage in critical pedagogy. It is by understanding critical pedagogy; it is by developing a critical pedagogy stance as an educator; and it is through the consistent application and practice of critical pedagogy both in and outside a classroom setting that an educator or any conscious adult is able to build bridges across generational difference, across gender difference, across differences in life experiences to transform the lives of marginalized, disengaged high school students.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, defines critical pedagogy as a teaching approach which attempts to help students question and challenge

domination and the beliefs and practices that dominate. If educators around the country were to engage poor teens and teens of color in academic work that helps each student achieve a critical consciousness of the reality in their lives, then we would have less of a challenge engaging students in learning. I put forth that our urban youth, through the messages on the streets, through messages in their music, and through the realities of their young lives, have a BS meter that tells them that what we are offering them in the four walls of most of our so-called educational institutions is not worth their attention. The challenge for us is to flip the script. Instead of begging and skillin' and drillin' them to death, let's engage in open and honest conversation. Start by telling and explaining to our students that the state tests, the SAT and the ACT are constructed so that they are unlikely to do well. Their challenge, should they undertake it, is to beat the odds and, with your help, achieve the markers of success set forth by the dominant culture in the game of education. But first they have to want to take on the challenge.

Caring is not enough to help urban high school students beat the odds. Beyond caring, our challenge as educators is to be conscious adults who can analyze our own belief systems and assumptions and think critically about the purpose of education in a democratic society. Once we have gotten a clear picture of the realities of public education in America, our job is then to help each student think and look critically at their lives and begin to craft

their personal agenda on how each is going to define excellence, use their education to further their own development as individuals, and how each is going to use the knowledge, will and skills to strengthen his or her community. The question is not "how do we close the achievement gap." Underlying that question is the assumption that if urban kids scored at or above the scores of white suburban kids, everything would be all right. The question is, how do I build a relationship with each individual poor and historically oppressed teen so that he or she gives me permission to

(continued on page 17)

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We are fortunate to work in a school system that has the resources and the community support to enable us to take on these challenges. Our work is both incredibly challenging and incredibly important. I feel more strongly than ever that we are the right group of people to take on these challenges together. Let's get started. ■

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The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

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The National School Reform Faculty is rooted in four beliefs:

- School people, working together, can make real and lasting improvements in their own schools;
- Teachers and administrators must help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning;
- The key to this effort is the development of a "learning community" based on public, collaborative examination of both adult and student work;
- To create this community, practitioners need high-quality training and sustained support.

teach him or her? How do I engage each student in critical pedagogy that allows each student to see education as a practice of freedom and a place where he or she can grow intellectually, spiritually, and physically in order to help themselves and their communities thrive in an uncertain, global world.

The principal of Harambee, a successful African-centered K-8 school in Philadelphia, told me yesterday that he engages his students in "naked" math. He explained naked math as having a variety of contexts based on origins, civil rights or the practice of freedom. He provided the following example of "naked" math with this problem: Rosa Parks initiated a bus strike that meant that ten-thousand African-American people who rode the bus twice a day did not ride the bus for a year. The bus fare at that time was twenty-five cents. How much money did the bus company lose? (The success of Harambee is partially evidenced by the fact that it has received an award for making Annual Yearly Projection for each of the last two years.)

Critical pedagogy for any urban male at this time would have to center around the incident of the fifty shots fired by New York City under-cover cops that resulted in the murder of Sean Bell. I would have students think critically about this incident and I would use Papoose's rap *50 Shots* as text.

My friends, allies, colleagues, and others who use the CFG structures to collaborate, I challenge us to use critical pedagogy with each other and in our CFG groups. I challenge us to lose our fear and confront each other in ways that push us to be more effective and relevant to the lives of our urban high school students who are least engaged in public education. Perhaps we could begin by engaging in an ongoing, online conversation initiated by Debbie Bambino on the book *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* by Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton. If we cannot be critical with each other in our work together, then we cannot work to help end the failures of large numbers of African-American, Latino, and poor urban children in our American public high schools. Do we have the courage, will and skill? ■

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