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Central Park East Secondary School: Teaching and Learning through Freire

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As part of our preadmissions outreach at the New Community College at CUNY (NCC), we invited local high school students to sit in on a practice class to get a taste of courses at NCC. Toward the end of the class, we had the chance to discuss a quote from Paulo Freire:

> Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire [1970] 2003, 72)

I chose the quote because the idea that most educational systems operate by depositing information into students and expecting them to recall it on demand, rather than engaging with the students, is something that I had found interesting in my own educational experience and I believed would be similarly relevant to these students. Freire's insistence that students must

be involved in inquiry in order to understand the world around them was also a concept that students had likely noticed in their own lives—whether through its presence or absence.

After presenting this quote, we asked the students to share their impressions. One student raised her hand and explained that she thought it was accurate. "When you're in a classroom," she told us, "you can sometimes feel like the teacher is just telling you stuff and you just have to take it." Another student added, "Classes might be better if we could do some of the teaching or have more input into what is being taught." We then asked students to elaborate and provide examples of what it might look like to have a classroom, or a school, where students were given power and were no longer simply receptacles of knowledge but were the producers, directors, and distributors of it. The students began with the idea of student-led discussions and returned to the opportunity to input their own ideas into the curriculum. The students followed the train of thought that eliminated the often suppressive power of teachers in a classroom and landed at the notion of a new type of grading system or no grades at all. We then asked the students what they thought about the applicability of Freire's model to our educational system. The students were silent as they began to consider the implications. If students were taught a unique curriculum, how could they transition into college? If students didn't receive grades, how would colleges be able to rank them and/or select them? By the end of the class, they had completely abandoned the idea that such an educational formation would be possible in an American education system. While we did not have time during this abridged model class to pursue the issue further or explore existing examples, we left them with this question: what if there were a place for this kind of education within our system?

Following this class, I begin to reexamine the possibilities of this educational model in creating critical thinkers and fighting against oppression. Even with my belief in the possibilities and general structure of Freire's work, much of the Freireian model had seemed unattainable in American education. However, this teaching moment brought me back to my research on Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), a small school in East Harlem, New York, and I found myself wondering if it was an example of what we had discussed in class. When asked, CPESS teachers were not explicit about their use of Freire. Former CPESS humanities teacher Clarissa Edison (all names, except for Deborah Meier's, are pseudonyms), in describing the structure of her teaching, explained: "Freire was particularly important in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He talks about what was lacking. And so everything that was taught [in my classes] . . . came from the notion of what

can I fill in, or how to approximate a background that will allow people to express or to learn more—to learn the subject but also to express themselves through it." My own research on CPESS had discussed Freire; however, as a sociologist, I had made stronger connections to Pierre Bourdieu than I had to Freire. While I believed that CPESS was built on a Freireian foundation, I had never looked seriously at the elements of Freire's pedagogy and examined the ways in which the structure of CPESS aligned or failed to align with them. This class exercise returned me to my research, Freire, and the connection among them.

Critical Pedagogy

As I reexamined my research on CPESS, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire [1970] 2003) became something tangible, and I came to understand where connections to it were useful and where they were more problematic. Freire's model, the basis for what we now refer to as critical pedagogy, is detailed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire [1970] 2003) and elaborated in many of his works and those of others. The foundation of critical pedagogy is the idea that most educational systems are constructed to maintain and reproduce unequal relationships and the resulting injustice. Students are often taught to accept and not challenge the status quo as the school presents particular aspects of curriculum or knowledge as the only legitimate perspective and devalues other information, such as that from subordinated groups. Students who are educated through a critical pedagogy learn not only to recognize the conflicted foundation of our educational system but to address and not reproduce it. This allows space for individuals to occupy multiple positions in society rather than stay in a position determined by their birth or the position of their parents.

Freire's version of this model of education consists of two general attributes—the relationship between its members and the structure and content of the curriculum. It calls for strong bonds among members of the educational community who might occupy different status groups or positions. While the status quo calls for a separation between individuals—such as between teacher and student or among members of different races or economic classes—Freire's model emphasizes the importance of unifying these groups, as critical education cannot exist if students are oppressed or oppress each other.

The strengthening of the relationship and the flattening of the hierarchy between teachers and students is made visible in a school curriculum through the removal of the banking method of education, which denies students the

power of their own knowledge and instead treats them as an empty vessel that needs to be filled. Rather, the school should give students a voice in the creation of their education as well as its implementation and evaluation. Including space for the often subordinated cultures to which many of the students belong, and letting these cultures drive the curriculum, also shows respect for the lives and knowledge of the students.

As a result of the emphasis on strong and equal relationships and support for curricular alternatives, the Freireian model intends to create thinkers who are critical of their environment and the systems that function within it. For Freire, this is the type of praxis that turns critical thoughts into action and change. This communication allows true learning and permits real change to occur. For Freire, this transforms not simply education but the world. It is this model that found space in CPESS.

Central Park East Secondary School

As a student in what was then called an alternative school, I was never fully aware of the uniqueness of my primary and secondary education at Central Park East 1 and CPESS. However, my memories of playing games and building robots in my elementary school class remain fond, and I was recently reminded of the opportunity several of my friends and I had in the fifth and sixth grades to write and star in a play about the Mayans. I remember how much care we put into writing songs and making a papier mâché version of the deity Quetzalcoatl. In high school, I selected Somalia out of all the African nations to study because it had my name in it, and it looked like a jet ski on the tip of Africa. To me, this freedom to find your own place in a flexible curriculum—the ability to learn as we best learned—was normal.

It was not until I attended school in Paris during my senior year of high school that I truly recognized how different my educational model was from others. In math class on my first day at that school, my presence was unacknowledged, and I was given a worksheet with mathematical concepts I had never seen. After several attempts, I was able to complete the set of problems, but this and subsequent educational experiences made me well aware that for too many students, this was what education meant: a list of problems drilled into your head and a subsequent struggle to make meaning of them and export a solution. I knew then that I never wanted another educational encounter like that, and I knew I wanted to make sure that others could also avoid it.

My experiences in elementary and secondary school led to my need to understand what had occurred at CPESS and what it meant. I had noticed that most of my friends from the school had entered jobs that allowed them to

work with kids—in schools, after-school programs, or summer camps. I felt there was something about the school structure and culture that led to this. The questions I asked of former students, teachers, and administrators in interviews and surveys were initially intended to uncover the potential connection between the school and the teaching profession. However, as the research proceeded, other questions emerged, including those about graduation and degree attainment, engagement, values, attitudes, and students' overall impressions of the school, as well as the relationship between the school and larger educational philosophies. These were the elements that seemed most connected to Freire.

My education at CPESS began in 1988, three years after it was founded by MacArthur grant winner, Deborah Meier. With an enrollment between 500 and 600 students, the junior high and high school was built on the idea of a voluntary community of enthusiastic students and teachers (Bryk et al. 1993). To maintain its small size, even as it grew larger, it was divided into three divisions—division I (seventh and eighth grades), division II (ninth and tenth grades), and the senior institute (eleventh and twelfth grades). At the high school level, CPESS had 340 students and was 5.5 percent white, 41.5 percent black, 50 percent Hispanic (Hispanic is the category used by the Department of Education), and 2.9 percent other. The students of the school were generally low performing—with 77 percent of the students eligible for resource room services—and low income—with 42.5 percent of students receiving free or reduced fee lunch in 1995 (Division of Assessment and Accountability 1996).

During graduate school, I was able to survey 78 students from the graduating classes of 1991–95. Of those, 63 percent were female; 13 percent were white, 40 percent black, and 22 percent Latino; and they had an average age of 30. I also spoke to 21 students, eight teachers, and one administrator. The teachers and administrators interviewed were predominantly male (63 percent) and white (75 percent). On average, they had taught at CPESS for 11 years and were 53 years old at the time of the interview. Most of the teachers in the sample were middle class (75 percent). The remainder classified themselves as upper middle class.

Community Relations

Individuals at CPESS prided themselves on the cohesion of their community. As students, CPESS taught us to feel protective of each other and, while the world outside sought to separate us, CPESS strove to bring us together. This runs counter to what one might find in the typical high school, where

students can be divided according to race, social class, gender, or athletic and intellectual prowess (Barber et al. 2001; Eckert 1989; Metz 1983; Ortner 2002). For Freire, the way in which this is encouraged, or at the very least not acknowledged, by schools and the educational system leads to discord among the groups and can assist in maintaining the status quo. He explains: "As the oppressor minority subordinates and dominates the majority, it must divide it and keep it divided in order to remain in power. The minority cannot permit itself the luxury of tolerating the unification of the people, which would undoubtedly signify a serious threat to their own hegemony" (Freire [1970] 2003, 141). The structure of CPESS was intended to foster unity with the understanding that the collaboration of students can create the foundation on which students become critical thinkers and learn to identify and resist oppressive systems. Despite the differences between the student and teacher populations, teachers built strong relationships with their students, through a knowledgeable trust and confidence, and encouraged them to do the same among themselves. "[Students] need to feel that their teachers believe in them and will buoy them if they start to sink," Meier explains in a response for the *Harvard Education Letter*, and he goes on to say:

> The teacher who goes the extra mile to earn a child's trust, who offers a nuanced response to each learner and each classroom, may account for far more variation in children's performance than the exact method of instruction used. Relationships are the non-interchangeable part of teaching—a factor no study can control for. . . . Part of what made the experiment succeed, however, was the students' awareness that we were a community of caring adults who demanded the same things of ourselves that we did of them. . . . We had a deep personal investment in our students and they knew it, and as a result they gave us their best work and signed onto our grand experiment willingly." (Meier 2005, para. 7–8)

At CPESS, this trust and relationship building began in advisory.

The Advisory System

The advisory system at CPESS was one way in which the school sought to disrupt the formation of insular groups and build relationships at various levels. Advisories at CPESS, as in other similar schools, were groups of approximately 15 students and a teacher who shared a close relationship over two years. Distinguished from what would be called homeroom in other schools,

advisories were structured around relationship building, advising, and sometimes even counseling. In *Designing Small Schools*, Meier explains that the importance of the advisory is "to have one adult who truly knows each kid AND family well and can make the needed connections, adjustments [and] course-corrections as kids maneuver their way through school and into life. It's also a place for kids to create a group that includes various different strands in the school—that cuts across kids' usual cliques" (Meier 2003). It was a place where students could learn and explore the respectful and inclusive nature of the school. When I spoke to students, they generally agreed with Meier, as few had anything negative to say about their advisory experience.

In fact, when I asked student to describe their first memory of CPESS, many of them spoke about their advisory group. It was within that group that students formed the strongest bonds, some of which lasted long after advisory had disappeared from their lives. Far from being homogenous, advisories were generally composed randomly, and as a result there were diverse groups of students in each advisory who got to know each other in a way that might have been unlikely in a more traditional educational institution.

Advisors further encouraged interaction and support among their students during advisory trips, where seventh through tenth graders in two advisories would visit a city located within an hour's distance of at least one college or university. Often the students participated in planning their own trips, and at other times advisors planned the trips. These three-day trips were additionally important for students of color and those who came from low-income families—some of whom had never left the city or considered college. For former student Booker Percell, whose parents both terminated their educations after high school, the college visit was extremely significant. "That level of exposure to the college life at that age is not something that I would have gotten otherwise," Booker explained, "and I'm sure a lot of other kids from our community would not have gotten otherwise. . . . I don't think that I had ever been outside of the city overnight until the first advisory trip." Advisory trips, while providing the opportunity for the deepening of social ties, also planted a college seed in students as young as age 12. For the first four years, these trips exposed students to a different college environment every year—staying on campus or at a local motel—as well as to a different group of students.

Heterogeneous Groupings

CPESS frowned upon tracking—which often additionally serves to divide middle- or upper-class students from their lower-class classmates—and

practiced inclusion even with students who might have been classified as in need of "special education" in other schools. By not ranking students by race, class, or ability, the school emphasized an egalitarian perspective, which was reinforced inside the classroom by teachers and students.

Each class module, which often culminated in a presentation or a project, included both individual and group work that was observed and evaluated by the teachers and other classmates. Course assessments included individual contributions as well as a student's ability to work well with the other group members. Students frequently evaluated each other's participation and involvement in group projects. Therefore, we had to learn to work with others, whoever they were, and to respect our classmates, if for no other reason than that we were likely to work together again.

While the small groups were important in creating community and providing the opportunity for students to ask questions and work through problems on a much smaller stage, teachers sometimes noted that such groups could also be detrimental, as the smaller audience could foster distractions. For example, in her division I classroom, Cecilia Brandt received the following note in reference to her group work: "Cecilia did experience some difficulties working in her cooperative group, and at times was easily distracted by her peers. As a result, the level of work that she produced has declined."

However, students I spoke to generally reported that their experiences in small groups were invaluable. Former student Shane Rayburn, who now works in the corporate world, explained: "The groups were set up so that people were working together. There was a lot of working together at CPESS. . . . They were building a collaborative effort before that was mandatory so people didn't really have to start later in life working with people." Students recognized that they would need to be able to work with others in their later schooling and in the life experiences that followed, and they found that their experiences with collaborative work in CPESS was a good precursor to that practice.

Moving Up and On

In addition to advisory and the emphasis on group work, CPESS had other structural elements that supported unity among students. At the end of each year, there was a recognition ceremony, referred to as "Moving Up Day." All students participated, but the day took its title from the process of moving from division I to division II or division II to the senior institute. Other students referred to it as "Trophy Day," as it was also the day that athletes and scholars shared a stage and were recognized for their achievements

with trophies and certificates. Some of the students in the more academic group joked that as the athletic trophies had grown larger over time, the academic ones had gotten smaller. While this may have indicated a school culture where the achievements of athletes were valued above those of others, one student hypothesized that the trophy disparity was more a result of the one individual who purchased the athletic trophies rather than reflective of the beliefs of the teachers or other members of the school community.

Finally, graduation, perhaps to the chagrin of some parents, continued to reinforce the egalitarian and unified structure of the school. CPESS had no valedictorians or salutatorians, and, with the academic and athletic accolades given out days before, parents and families received no indication to mark their children as different in any way from each other. Every student who so desired could make a speech, which was often tearful for students, as their accounts spoke of overcoming immense obstacles, including grave illness or the death of caretakers. These were emotional occasions for the students and their families.

On the Other Side

Despite CPESS's emphasis on creating a unified classroom in the spirit of Paulo Freire's model, CPESS was not without the problems of adolescent social relationships. It is difficult to completely remove adversarial relationships from a school system, and several students shared reports of the usual teasing and bullying that goes on in most other schools. Most students described their social problems as declining after junior high school; few of the problems lasted through the ninth grade—the freshman year of high school. To some extent, the heterogeneous grade groupings could serve to both decrease and encourage social division. As students moved from one division to the other, they were first in the younger—and often less popular—group, but by the next year they were part of the older—and often more admired—group in the division. Former student Joy Vernon, who described herself as shy, elaborated on this: "I guess because CPESS was organized in those heterogeneous groupings, you had the good year when you were the older group . . . [In the] seventh and then ninth grade and then eleventh grade . . . you're sort of on the bottom." She explained: "And you kinda feel like you move back and forth between those two positions, and it does kinda change the way you are viewed by other people and the way you see yourself, and I think that when I was at the top, I felt like I had a much more positive experience than when I was at the bottom." For those students who reported conflicts with others, the conflicts generally occurred when they were part of

the younger group. The only group that did not report these problems consisted of those in the first graduating class who, according to former student Lynette Saadiq, "couldn't have been any more senior than [they] were."

If CPESS can be said to have had any significant social divisions, it was the distinction between the boys' basketball team and the rest of the school. This team was the only group of students that some respondents labeled as a strictly bounded group. None of the other sports teams (CPESS had both boys' and girls' basketball, coed softball, boys' volleyball, and even bowling and track teams for a limited time) were specifically described in those terms. Perhaps this distinction was due to the fact that the boys' basketball team might have been the most homogenous of all the social groups in the school.

Additionally, while members of the basketball team seemed to easily move among groups, some also perceived the highest levels of group exclusivity. Shane Rayburn, who was on the basketball team for several years, described observing several divisions: "It wasn't homogenous. People had quirks and they made alliances based on the quirks." But he added that he "hung out with everybody. They had different lives and I was interested in everybody different. . . . There was a sports crew, a nerd crew, an awkward crew, a wrestling crew, there was a handball crew. . . . There were the fighters. There were the people who couldn't fight so I defended them. I hung out with everybody."

Other students elaborated on their ability to overcome the often rigid boundaries between jocks and others (Kinney 1993) and to participate in such activities as athletics. Kenneth, one member of the small population of white students, does not consider himself to be athletic, but he stated:

> Because of the sort of warped universe that we were living in, it seemed totally normal that I would be [on] the volleyball team . . . which still strikes me as hilarious, but it was great because I felt like it was the first time that I felt like I could do something physical and actually have it be meaningful and that being athletic could actually make me happy. . . . Being on the volleyball team was one of the first ways that I realized that my body was really important to me and that I wasn't just a brain and that my intellect wasn't the only thing that was valuable in myself.

According to the students, the malleability of these groupings added to the mutual respect and community bonds because students felt they were recognized for who they were rather than who they associated with.

Teacher-Student Dichotomy

The teachers who encouraged and developed respectful and egalitarian relationships among students at CPESS also extended the respect to their own relationships with the students. In an attempt to foster mutual respect, students referred to their teachers by their first names—a tradition that continued in the high school where I went on to teach, as well as in many of the other "critical small schools" in the system today (Hantzopoulos and Tyner-Mullings 2012). This informality also signaled opposition to the banking method of education, which is inherent in the dichotomy between teacher and student—teacher as depositor, student as bank. As Freire notes, "The raison d'être of libertarian education . . . lies in its drive toward reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire [1970] 2003, 72).

CPESS embraced the idea of libertarian education by attempting to resolve the contradiction between the teacher and the student. One of the 10 common principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES)—many of which were considered in the creation of CPESS—placed the teacher in the position of the coach who assists the student through his or her education rather than someone who holds all the knowledge to distribute to students as deemed necessary. "Kids were working on projects and . . . a useful metaphor that I used was 'teacher as coach,'" humanities teacher Dan Patton described to me, explaining how he used the concept of teacher as coach. "And so I was very often introducing materials [and] helping kids going forward with their projects. But the exhibition process was all individualized." As described by this teacher, students are taught to think for themselves as they are given control over what they create in their educations.

For students, this individualization was possible because of the responsibility given to students to create their projects. Joy, a former CPESS student, describes how, even in a course like math, she could make any project her own: "We were doing predictions using linear equations, and I remember that I created this character who was this absent-minded woman who worked for some company, and she would just go around to people's houses making presentations on different things, and she was trying to explain to people why they should move before the dam exploded. . . . I used her in three or four different [math] projects that I did."

Former student Kenneth Edward added that giving students' power over their educational process conveyed the view that "each of us as students had a real value and a real role in the school and I think as a result of that that we

were each capable of doing amazing things. I think there was sort of an interesting self-help component to the school where we were really told over and over and over again that we were good people and that if we wanted to do something we could do it." This empowerment allowed students to share the role of teacher, to some extent, selecting the educational method best suited to them.

As this type of educational model prioritized the students, they often reported that CPESS gave them a voice and that it communicated respect for their abilities and values. For Freire, education includes "creativity and stimulates true reflection" ([1970] 2003, 84), and CPESS students—often required to write self-evaluations—practiced reflection and included their own voice in the evaluations that went home to their families. They had the opportunity to discuss their progress, or lack thereof, their work, and their strengths and weaknesses.

Undermining Divisions

According to teachers and administrators, these structural and pedagogical components were deliberate attempts to undermine the traditional and hierarchical social divisions common in other schools. Embracing the Freireian notion of unity, most CPESS students occupied more than one social category. So, Joy, who considered herself "a nerd, " also acknowledged "it was like there was a doughnut and the popular group was the doughnut and the nerd was in the middle so it was a nerd group in the middle of this popular group and I was the only person in the nerd group."

Former student Vicente Ortega adds to the idea of expanded groups of friends in explaining his relationships with different types of people at CPESS: "They didn't reinforce the typical sectioning off of groups. You know, this group does this and that group does that and these two groups don't mix, you know, it wasn't like that at all. . . . I was friends with a lot of the guys on the basketball team and I was friends with a lot of students who were academically goal orientated, and there was no difference between us. Depending on what your project was, we interacted just fine without showing any differences." This lack of recognition of a hierarchy and the crossing of social boundaries at CPESS was a normal part of life for students as they felt as though they were a part of many social circles and could freely move between them.

Students discussed their ability to overcome the boundaries between students. "I had a very diverse group of friends," former student Booker explains. "Racially and ethnically. I'm sure to a degree socio-economically, al-

though you don't know in high school. . . . It wasn't until I got to CPESS that I had this educational experience, which is racially mixed in any significant way. Hispanic, black, white, Asian, a few international students sprinkled in there. So, that was important too because by the time I got to college, the prospect of going to a predominantly white school didn't faze me at all. I knew how to interact with people of different cultures and backgrounds and I think that's something that a lot of students struggle with when they go from high school to college." As Booker explained, though individuals brought distinct cultural experiences with them into the school, they were able to discover similarities through them. The structure of the school encouraged the sharing of human and cultural capital.

The Structure of the Classroom

While creating a sound environment is important for education, especially that of low-income and minority students, the content of the education the school provided was also important to the creation of critical thinkers and the support of a Freireian model of education. Through the use of a culturally relevant curriculum and Freire's problem-posing education, CPESS created a strong educational foundation for students.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum

Near the end of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire explains "one last fundamental characteristic [of antidialogical action]: cultural invasion, which like divisive tactics and manipulation also serves the ends of conquest. In this phenomenon, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter's potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression" (Freire [1970] 2003, 152). Freire's contention is that oppressive education serves to downgrade or devalue the student's culture by limiting their exposure—black history for one month, for example—or not giving it any place in the curriculum (Smith-Maddox 1998). These curricular choices, such as teaching European history and ignoring Latin American and African history, or limiting the scope of literature to European or other white writers, selects those cultural arbitraries deemed important and denies access to others (Bourdieu and Passeron [1970] 1990). CPESS embraced alternative curricula, choosing to deemphasize some of the more traditional subjects and instead teach what were traditionally thought to be more marginalized areas.

Science and math were somewhat more traditional than the humanities but still maintained some alternative aspects, which additionally emphasized non-European cultures. "And math, and having it all combined [into one math/science class]," states former student Olivia Wright as she describes a math curriculum that was able to embrace an alternative to more traditional methods: "No other kids I knew were learning about Mayan math because they were learning Mayan civilization. Do you know what I mean?" The first four years of the CPESS curriculum included not only traditional American history, emphasizing the American Revolution and the Civil War, but also topics such as the civil rights movement, Taino and Navajo culture, Central America, and immigration and migration. These topics were considered to be as important as, if not more important than, the more traditional subtopics generally taught in American history.

The eleventh and twelfth grades, where students could select their own schedules and where humanities was broken into smaller subject blocks (as described below), provided more content-based options for students. In addition to the college course that the school required that each student take, there were such courses offered as Rethinking Columbus, The War in Vietnam, and South Africa. English courses were more traditional, including *Hamlet* and *The Theban Trilogy*. However, many students, especially African American women, spoke extremely fondly of a course on Toni Morrison—where students read and discussed *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*. Olivia remembers "being introduced to the writings of Toni Morrison by Pat Wagner . . . that was profound for me. Toni Morrison is now my favorite author and taking that class truly inspired me to write."

By including options such as these in their curriculum, CPESS administrators and teachers consciously presented an alternative to the cultural perspectives presented in other institutions, as well as gave value to the viewpoints, values, and cultures of the minority students who made up the majority of their population. This provided students with the tools needed to begin to understand the world as critical thinkers.

One of the reoccurring themes in CPESS's alternative structure, as described by the students in my sample class, was the difficulty the school confronted in relating to the traditional system within which it existed. The curriculum was an aspect of this disconnect for some students as is the general diversity of even the extremely segregated New York City Public Schools system. As students, we generally knew a great deal more about marginalized cultures than many of our counterparts from other schools, but we did not have a similar depth of knowledge of European or even "mainstream" American culture. For many former students, knowledge of traditional lit-

erature topics, such as Shakespeare, was also limited. Former student Linus Ford, who has completed a graduate degree, explains how this was dealt with in his household: "[My parents] felt that the tilt that CPESS gave toward not studying the classics was above and beyond. . . . They came from a very classical education that had been pretty British in its orientation. So they thought that some sort of supplementing was needed to get things like Greek history, things like that. Things that would be taught in traditional history classes, but that CPESS didn't have." For many, this may point to a limitation in implementing Freire's model in an American public school, which includes individuals from many cultures. If you give equal attention to everyone, you are often unable to give enough attention to anyone. This problem is not easily solved beyond creating culturally segregated schools. However, by broadening the educational focus at CPESS, more attention was able to be paid to educational perspectives from marginalized groups, which, at some level, avoided the disrespect of any one group or their "potentialities." However, as the world outside of CPESS still emphasized a more traditional education, not all students were satisfied with this structure (Tyner-Mullings 2012).

Problem-Posing Education

For Freire, the imposition of problem-posing education and the abolition of the banking method creates critical thinkers prepared to resist and change an oppressive society. He describes liberation as not a single action but a "praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it. Those truly committed to the cause of liberation can accept neither the mechanistic concept of consciousness as an empty vessel to be filled, nor the use of banking methods of domination (propaganda, slogans—deposits) in the name of liberation. . . . They must abandon the educational goals of deposit making and replace it with the posing of problems of human beings in their relations with the world. 'Problem-posing' education, responding to the essence of consciousness—intentionality—rejects communiques and embodies communication" (Freire [1970] 2003, 79).

   In CPESS, this change in educational methodologies was achieved through the focus of courses around essential questions and habits of mind rather than particular content. Essential Questions provided students with the opportunity to learn about themes of inquiry and various historical events related to those themes: the problem-posing education emphasized by Freire. Themes and subjects were chosen that resounded with the culture

and experiences of the student population. Themes like justice, identity, power, and worldview were manifest in a question such as "What is an American?" to develop in students the ability to use a variety of viewpoints and evidence to illustrate particular concepts.

Additionally, the five habits of mind were used across subjects and grade levels. Students were not only presented with the habits of mind—connections, perspective, evidence, speculation, and significance—but the school sought to demonstrate how they were used and to provide the space and encouragement for students to use them. Humanities teacher Ellen Donald recalls the ways in which she came to understand the habits of mind:

> The habits of mind were [a] really strong intellectual tool for me as not only a teacher, but I remember I was going to graduate school at that point in time, and going, "Oh! These are the thinking skills that you need to use to apply to just looking at [a subject], whether it was sociology or women's studies." It just gave me a real clear sense of what it was, how to approach any book, any topic, and be able to dissect it in a clear kind of way. . . . Once I kind of got my feeling about how I was going to use [them], I was able to use them as a humanities teacher to break down, let's say, an essay. Or how to approach primary source material. Or secondary source material. How to use it to improve kids' understanding of social studies.

Similarly, students were taught the habits of mind as a tool for understanding any problem. Rather than a focus of the content of a humanities course, the topic—such as justice, for example—would be examined through the habits of mind. Using the habits of mind, a student might consider justice with a series of questions: How is the definition of justice connected to other aspects of a society? Who decides what is just, and does it change depending on the society or population? What evidence supports this perspective? Why is justice important to individuals or society as a whole? What if the definition of justice changed?

In line with Freire, the habits of mind provided students with a tool to interrogate the society in which they live and to not be passive receptacles of information. The habits of mind are an essential element of problem-posing education as they develop in students the ability to ask questions, to be critical, and to consider alternatives. Additionally, these same tools could be applied in a math or science class to dissect a problem, to check the accuracy of work, and to try other methods. This consistent reinforce-

ment emphasizes the importance of posing questions to understand problems and inculcates those behaviors in the students.

Teachers across disciplines believed that the selection of "specific kind[s] of flashpoints in history" in collaboration with the essential questions and habits of mind encouraged critical thinking in their students. Similarly to the use of culturally relevant curriculum, when teachers organize their classroom around themes or problems, there are some content areas that are sure to be missed. The question for many remains whether an engaging education is worth what some may consider a great sacrifice—the absence of more "significant" historical flashpoints.

Conclusion

If our goal in education is to create critical thinkers who can fight against oppression, Freire's model is quite relevant. He explains that "only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication and without communication there can be no true education. Education which is able to resolve the contradiction between teacher and student takes place in a situation in which both address their act of cognition to the object by which they are mediated" (Freire [1970] 2003, 93). The former CPESS students' responses to the survey question about the strengths of the school were fairly uniform: the strong social relationships—many between students who might not have been friends otherwise, the fostering of community and cooperation, the body of work they created, and the subjects they learned that friends in other schools did not.

More important to many educators was perhaps what happens to these 14–20-year-olds outside of the walls of their school once they have moved on. Ten to 15 years later, when I got in contact with them, I found that students generally had positive feelings about the school despite the disconnect between the alternative methods of the school and the more traditional methods in the schools most students attended. Eighty-nine percent of those students I surveyed went to college; 48 percent of those graduated in four years, and 84 percent did so in six years or less. Many of the former students are now involved in a variety of occupations, and some participate in community work within and outside of their employment. Most of the students (66 percent) informed me that they had continued to participate in community service since graduating from high school. Additionally, students shared values common to the Freireian model of education, with the majority (66 percent) agreeing that influencing political struc-

ture was at least somewhat important, and almost all of the former students (84 percent) had the same perspective on influencing social values (Tyner-Mullings 2012).

Former CPESS students also cited their relationships with other students and teachers at CPESS as one of the most important things about the school. They point to the community of friends created at CPESS as contributing to the social groups within which they now exist. Most students who participated in the survey, myself included, still maintain some level of contact with friends from their CPESS primary group, which was often relatively heterogeneous by class and race. Several students interviewed indicated that they are still in contact with one or more teachers from the school or former students outside of their primary group. Shane sums up this relationship well: "The brothers were my brothers and the sisters were my sisters. . . and the people who I was close with, I was tight with, I'm still tight with today. . . . When I walk up to somebody on the streets from CPESS, we hug and we have conversations as if we was in CPESS."

Although those involved in contemporary public educational institutions today are unlikely to claim that their school functions to oppress students by reproducing inequalities, schools such as CPESS take specific measures to address the problems created by divisive structures and banking education. Those who worked at CPESS attempted to introduce problem-posing education and to organize the curriculum around community concerns, taking a page from Freire ([1970] 2003).

My own experiences within and outside of CPESS provided me a lens through which I could examine the educational system and its challenges and triumphs, and I came to understand how CPESS transformed the more traditional forms of structure, pedagogy, and curriculum to attempt to undercut the rigid social structure supported by most schools. While there are aspects of the Freireian model that have been proven difficult to implement within a system that will not adjust to it, the faculty and administrators at the school still endeavored to create a space for students to escape the hierarchy they faced outside of the schools. The students in my model class were not wrong in their assertion that the model may be incompatible with our larger school system. However, as with so many educational reforms, there are ways in which the best pieces can be implemented. While they will not eliminate inequalities in American society, models that find a place for Freireian education, such as that which existed at CPESS, produce students who are prepared to make those changes.

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