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An Unquiet Pedagogy for Unquiet Students: Reducing Anxiety and Depression with Critical Pedagogy

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Pedagogy

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Abstract

This project studies critical pedagogy in the writing classroom as a way to support students who struggle with anxiety to be successful, in and out of the classroom, as thinkers, writers, and citizens. I argue that it is important to recognize that educational inequalities and hierarchies contribute to anxiety, and suggest how critical pedagogy (rigorous and critical interrogation of texts and ideas by readers, a community of learners working together to make meaning, and a commitment to action in the world) can reduce anxiety in the school setting, in particular, and set students up for academic success that creates powerful, active learners in and out of the classroom. The US has a history of inequality in education, functioning, as it often does, hierarchically, creating classrooms that disempower students, removing them from agency in their own education. Among the many reasons students struggle with anxiety, both those students who are clinically diagnosed as well as students who experience, at various times, less easily defined anxiety, one such reason, according to Paulo Freire, is a sense of powerlessness over circumstances, including their ability to succeed academically. Learned helplessness towards academic success further compounds these feelings of powerlessness. Critical pedagogy as outlined by the educators Paulo Freire and bell hooks, attempts to reposition power in the classroom from the teacher to the students through praxis, which requires rigorous interaction with and interrogation of texts broadly defined, and promotes healing and learning among students who struggle with anxiety.

Introduction
"For learning has brought disobedience, and heresy,"

In Jonathan Kozol's *Illiterate America,* he references seventeenth century Virginia governor, Sir William Berkeley. Berkley writes "I thank God there are no free schools nor printing [in this land]. For learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing hath divulged them...God save us from both" (93). Berkley's statement followed a revolt led by Nathaniel Bacon, a wealthy English farmer who settled in Jamestown. The revolt was caused by Berkley's opposition of the decision to attack the Occoneechee Natives. Berkeley opposed fighting with the Native Americans not because he cared about them,

but because he feared them uniting against those in power. Bacon, on the other hand, was against Berkeley's strategy of dealing with the Occoneechees; he united working poor whites and African American slaves to kill Occoneechee Natives and to set Jamestown--and Berkeley's house--on fire.

Although the uprising did not unfold in a particularly just way (the slaughter of one oppressed group in the service and rise of another), for a short period of time, it brought power and control to the working class and enslaved, something that they have never had before. It was with this control that they learned how to unite and work together for a cause. Once the revolt ended, it was not his burned home or the fact that hundreds of Occoneechees had perished that scared and angered Berkeley; it was the possibility that the enslaved and poor could wrest power from the ruling class. He worried that if the working poor and enslaved could unite against a tribe of Occoneechee natives there was nothing to stop them from uniting against the rich. In response, the wealthy, land-owning elites transformed their fears into policy that essentially kept the poor from obtaining power by limiting access to education. Costs were added to attending schools, making it harder for working class whites to go to school, and the enslaved were not legally allowed to attend school at all. But why education? Why books? It would seem more logical to keep guns away from these "radicals," but instead, Berkeley attacked literacy instruction. Education, as evidenced by Berkeley's words above, was something in particular that the elites wanted to keep out of reach from the poor. As the overused yet accurate saying goes, knowledge is power. Rather than guns and other physical weapons, Berkeley saw knowledge, education, and literacy as weapons that were far more dangerous to the ruling class. He

instinctively understood how education could pave the way for poor and enslaved peoples to secure power, and that power could then topple the system that kept the poor and enslaved at bay.

These kinds of policies, though not so obvious as they were in Berkeley's time, can still be seen in the United States today. Unequal access to quality education is directly affected by socioeconomic inequality in US. Consider, for instance, the use of property taxes, a significant factor in how much funding a given school district will get and one that can determine the quality of educational experience some students will get. Relying on a funding structure like property taxes to fund public education creates structural inequality and speaks to issues of access since students who go to schools that are better funded tend to have a better education than those who live in school districts that are not.

The curricular design of many US classrooms emphasizes that inequality. For example, in most US classrooms there is a large power gap between students and teachers. Teachers will lecture about a topic, and students are to memorize and regurgitate information rather than engage with it. Students will sit, write notes on what the professor has to say, study those notes, maybe take a pop quiz, maybe do a worksheet, and then will dump all of the information onto an exam. None of these assignments and teaching styles allow for students to engage in what they are learning, and, in that way, do not give students access to the agency that Berkley feared--US education shores up existing ideas about how the world works, about who has power and is able to use it.

Critical pedagogy, however, aims to dismantle the curriculum that supports inequality. Ann George defines critical pedagogy as an educational system with a set of practices intended

to engage "students in analyses of the unequal power relations that produce and are produced by cultural practices and institutions (including schools), and it aims to help students develop the tools that will enable them to challenge this inequality" (92). To unpack George's words, students within a critical classroom are asked to engage in "analyses of unequal power relations" in order to overcome and, in many ways, liberate themselves from that inequality.

This empowerment, however, does not happen merely from a progressive curriculum. Teachers *can* have a curriculum that focuses on, say, racial inequality, but critical pedagogy focuses more on creating a classroom environment that reflects what equality looks like. A critical environment is created by assignments, such as reading journals, mapping assignments, original research, and community engagement that give students the power to engage in their own understandings of the subject matter. This environment is also created by a form of assessment that gives students more control over the grade they earn. For example, rather than a classroom that measures student knowledge on the basis of a test score, critical pedagogy provides a number of assignments that measure what the student has learned, rather than what the teacher wants them to know. Thus, every aspect of critical pedagogy, from assignments to assessment, is designed to give students more choice and control in the classroom, modeling for them what equal access might look like and potentially allowing students to feel power in the face of the inequalities they may encounter outside of the classroom.

A Brief History of Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy was first developed by Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire in the early 1960's. During this time (1964-1985) Brazil was going through a military dictatorship lead by Magalhães Pinto, Adhemar de Barros, and Carlos Lacerda. The military regime resulted in the rise of nationalism centered around the promises of economic growth, and the prevention of Communism and Socialism. As one could imagine, the regime created extreme socioeconomic inequality in Brazil (hinted at by the elimination of communism and socialism-- economic systems founded on equality) and caused for the exile of anyone who resisted the regime, including Freire. However, inequality in Brazil's education system predated the military regime. According to Marisa Bittar and Amarilio Ferreira Jr.'s article "The History of Education in Brazil," Brazil entered the 20th century with an illiteracy rate of 63.5% among people over age 15 (Bittar & Ferreira 66). The reason for that absurdly high statistic is because Brazil's education system had not changed much from the system Portugal created when they colonized Brazil. After Brazil gained independence in 1822, according to Bittar and Ferreira "the ruling elite established the monarchy which preserved the structural trappings of the colonial past: landed estates, a monoculture and slavery. Against this background, schools were destined for the children of the white elite and landed estates" (66). White elites in Brazil made up a very small percent of the population, meaning that a majority of people were left illiterate and impoverished.

In the 20th century, the military regime infused nationalist propaganda into Brazilian classrooms. In opposition to this, Freire taught nearly 300 sugar cane workers (individuals who

could not afford an education) how to read and write during the military occupation. Freire taught the workers two kinds of literacy: "reading the word" and "reading the world." Reading the word refers to what literacy is traditionally thought to be: learning how to decode words on a page. "Reading the world," a more powerful form of literacy, is when the workers would connect what they read to the world around them-- helping them to better understand how they have been oppressed. Freire developed literacy skills via *praxis*, which he defines in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (126). In order for individuals to become powerful, and to be able to "transform" the structure of inequality, Freire argues that students must endure the process of reflection, action, and then a return to reflection. It is an "iterative" process, by this I mean that it happens over and over. I use the word "endure" because this process, praxis, is hard work. Freire had the workers learn how to read (reflection), then learn how to write (action), and then discuss what they wrote with their peers (reflection). I am a senior English major who is experienced in reading, writing, and discussion, and let me tell you-- it is exhausting. However, it was the rigorous process of praxis that lead the workers to gain some control over their lives-- something those in power always prevented them from having.

Why Critical Pedagogy Belongs in the US Classroom: Chronic Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

As its main goal, by giving students more control and power over their education, Freirean critical pedagogy wants to dismantle unequal access to power that hurts students' abilities to be successful in and out of the classroom. However, many scholars of rhetoric,

composition, and pedagogical theory have suggested critical pedagogy won't work in the US

Classroom. It is hard for scholars to envision ways to adapt critical pedagogy to classes that are

not filled with sugarcane workers from war-torn countries. I want to argue that critical pedagogy

belongs in the US classroom for many reasons, but the one that I am most interested in at this

moment, and what this thesis is meant to explore, is the ways critical pedagogy might support

those students who struggle with anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 38.0 percent of female and 26.1

percent of male adolescents suffer from some sort of anxiety disorder. This means that

approximately 63 million teens have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder in the United

States. Stanford neurologist and primatologist Robert Sapolsky discusses the intersection

between poverty (which includes being placed in poorer schools) and chronic stress. "Chronic

psychological stress" is defined by the American Psychological Association as a "long term form

of stress, derived from unending feelings of despair/hopelessness, as a result of factors such as

poverty, family dysfunction, feelings of helplessness, and/or traumatic early childhood

experiences" (APA). Chronic stress, especially the kind that is created by poverty, revolves

around worries of, for example, not having enough food to eat, not having enough money to pay

bills, not knowing where they will sleep the next night, etc. As I will talk more about in chapter

one, Sapolsky and other scholars argue that encountering chronic stress can make one more

susceptible to being diagnosed with an anxiety or depressive disorder. I, therefore, argue that

these instances of poverty, along with being pushed through an unequal school system, can work

to create and exacerbate symptoms of stress, which can lead to symptoms of anxiety, depression,

and trauma. Students who suffer through instances of poverty may already be disassociated from school; the pressing worries of food insecurity and homelessness can make school less of a priority, and the classroom experience can turn into a place that provokes even more worry and hopelessness. I argue that critical pedagogy can help to reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma by structuring the classroom in ways that promotes students' sense of their own power to control their education and their lives. The only possible way for students to feel they control their stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma is if the classroom grants students agency, choice, and control within their learning, and allows students to engage in analyses that connects their education to the worlds they live in.

Overview of this thesis

My thesis will be broken up into five chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter will explore how poverty and unequal school experiences can cause one to experience chronic stress, which can make one more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety and depression. The second chapter will attempt to further define critical pedagogy by discussing what it is not. To do this I will consider "false critical pedagogies" like progressive authoritarianism and what I call a "rigor-less" pedagogy. I will unveil the differences between these false pedagogies and true critical pedagogy. The third chapter will be about how critical pedagogy can reduce learned helplessness. I will explain what learned helplessness is, how it can lead to depression, its relationship with standardized testing, and how critical pedagogy can work against it by giving students more control and choice within the classroom. In the fourth chapter, I will discuss how the process of praxis can possibly heal anxiety, depression, and trauma that is caused *within*

unequal school structures. I will use the insights of several scholars, and also my own experiences, to expose how students can become liberated through praxis. The fifth chapter will cover how critical pedagogy can help relieve the "outside" trauma, anxiety, and depression that is brought into schools. I will discuss how critical pedagogy is used to create a brave space rather than just a safe space. Lastly, in the conclusion, I will turn to Freire's book *Politics of Education* and Hephzibah Roskelly's article "Untested Feasibility: Imagining the Pragmatic Possibility of Paulo Freire" to discuss using critical pedagogy within US education in ways beyond what was originally thought, such as to prevent anxiety and depression.

Chapter 1

Exploring the Intersection Between Poverty, School Inequality, Chronic Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

The introduction to this thesis identifies "chronic psychological stress," or the ongoing stress that can be a result of living in poverty, or through traumatic events, and feelings of helplessness. Robert Sapolsky's research touches on the important link between stress, anxiety, depression, and poverty. In this chapter I want to consider the link between poverty, unequal school structures, and chronic stress. I will reference statistics on poverty in the US and will then tie these facts to stress, and how it can manifest within the classroom. I also want to cover how chronic stress differs from, yet connects to, anxiety and depression. The effects of poverty and oppressive classroom experiences can lead to chronic stress, and chronic stress, potentially, can lead to the diagnosis of anxiety and depression. I then want to end the chapter by bringing it back to critical pedagogy to identify how it can mitigate the effects of chronic stress, anxiety, or depression.

According to poverty research done by The University of California, Davis, 12.3 percent of Americans live below the poverty line, meaning that roughly 39.7 million Americans live in poverty (UCD 2017). Access to high-quality education is one byproduct of living in poverty. Socioeconomic inequality has affected public education in the US education, bringing stress, anxiety, and depression into the classroom and, also, allowing these disorders to be created within the classroom. Ann George writes in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* that US "schools function as 'sorting mechanisms' to maintain inequality" (94). What George means by schools working as 'sorting mechanisms' is that kids are often placed into better or worse quality schools based on how much money and power their family has.

In an NPR report, Cory Turner and his team of researchers reported on the link between property tax and schools across the United States. They compare two school districts in the Chicago area-- the Chicago Ridge school district, which is only able to spend roughly $9,794 per student each year, and the Rondout District, which spends $28,639 on each student every year. The key reason for why both of these school districts, along with thousands of other school districts across the country, have more or less money is because of property tax. Turner argues in the report that "the problem with a school-funding system that relies so heavily on local property taxes is straightforward: Property values vary a lot from neighborhood to neighborhood, district to district. And with them, tax revenues" (Turner 2016). Thus, schools in districts where many live below the poverty line have less money since the property tax is lower in these areas.

But how does all of this contribute to the influence chronic stress has on one's education? In her article "How US. Laws and Social Policies Influence Chronic Stress and Health Disparities," Holly Avey writes:

> When children of parents who have not had access to quality education, good-paying jobs, or affordable housing are grouped together in a school system that is under-funded and overwhelmed--pessimism, resentment, and subsequent disciplinary problems emerge at a higher rate than what would be expected based on the individual backgrounds of the youth (Avey 12).

The pessimism and resentment Avey references above is generated by chronic stress--and is not only generated within students but also teachers. Teachers in schools that are underfunded are

generally underpaid and overworked due to budget cuts--which undoubtedly causes them a great deal of chronic stress. Therefore, if teachers are stressed, it is likely that the students are going to be stressed as well, increasing the likelihood that students will dropout, score lower on tests, and believe that they are not intellectually capable. Also, the fact that impoverished students and teachers are "grouped" together in schools based on the district, town, or city they live in connects to George's "schools as sorting-mechanisms" argument. When those in poverty are all lumped together in the same place for 8 hours a day, everyone's stress begins to feed off each others, decreasing the amount of learning that can happen.

Before getting into how chronic stress can be linked to the diagnosis of anxiety and depression, I want to explain how anxiety and depressive disorders are *separate* from chronic stress. Anxiety and depression are mental disorders that have to be clinically diagnosed by a psychiatrist or a psychotherapist. Chronic stress is not something that is diagnosed. One way to distinguish between chronic stress and anxiety is to consider how a person feels when stressful situations are *not* present. Let's say a student is failing their history class and has been worrying about it all semester. Here, the student is suffering from chronic stress, since there is an ongoing stressor that is causing the student to feel prolonged worries. However, if next semester the same student is doing a lot better, yet is still in a constant state of worry, then that student is suffering from "free floating" anxiety, which, if persistent over 6 months, can lead to the diagnosis of a Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

An example of how chronic stress could lead to depression could be if after a student failed a history test and he or she began to stop caring about the work due to doubt over the possibility of success. Thus, chronic stress is worry caused by real, ongoing stressors; anxiety is

the ongoing worry of non-existent stressors or stressors that have not happened yet, and depression is the long term helplessness that comes after a stressor.

While chronic stress is not the same as anxiety and depression, chronic stress can make one more susceptible to being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. In a study called "Stress and glucocorticoids promote oligodendrogenesis in the adult hippocampus," Sundari Chetty et. al looks at the effects stress has on the brain (particularly the hippocampus, which regulates short and long term learning). As a result, Chetty writes that "current models for stress-induced emotional disorders suggest that previous stress experiences create a persistent vulnerability to mental illness that lasts many years beyond the stressful experience" (Chetty 8). The unrelenting effects of ongoing stress can make one more susceptible to mental illnesses like anxiety and depression. Sapolsky also gives some insight on how chronic stress negatively affects the brain. Similarly to Chetty's findings, he states that chronic stress shrinks and takes the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex, the parts of the brain that produce learning and productiveness, offline, and allows the amygdala, the part of the brain that distinguishes fear, to grow and to work better (Sapolsky). Therefore, chronic stress literally changes the shape of the brain, tightening the link between poverty induced stress, anxiety and depressive disorders.

As one can imagine, there are a variety of stress-inducing situations that connect poverty and the educational experience: not having lunch money, worries of being shot when walking home, failing a test, homelessness and near-homelessness. Considered together, the connection between socioeconomic inequality and bad school experiences becomes clear: it is easy to understand how chronic stress produced from poverty can lead to more people being diagnosed with anxiety and depression.

Ann George identifies the way students in the critical classroom are asked to engage in "analyses of unequal power relations" in order to overcome inequality in other parts of their lives. This empowerment, however, does not happen merely from a progressive curriculum *about* inequality; critical pedagogy demands that the very structure of the class embody equal access. This is very different than a curriculum where the content is focused on inequality. Teachers *can* have a curriculum that focuses on, say, poverty in the US, but, as I have argued, critical pedagogy focuses more on creating an education environment that models what equality should looks like. Thus, bringing critical pedagogy to the US is about creating equality within the classrooms despite an education system that is too often unequal in quality and access. Once students *see* equality, *engage* in it, and *understand* it, students can possibly seek ways to liberate themselves from the poverty, stress, anxiety, and depression that has trapped them.

Chapter 2
What Critical Pedagogy is and What it isn't: Critiquing the Critiques of Critical Pedagogy

In his article "Practicing Radical Pedagogy: Balancing Ideals with Institutional Constraints," Stephen Sweet argues that with critical pedagogy, "the teacher student relationship [is reordered] in such a way as to mirror and facilitate the creation of the idealized social relationships asserted by radical theory" (Sweet 101). What Sweet means here by "mirroring idealized social relationships" is that critical pedagogy works to reorder the classroom to create the reciprocity of power between teachers and students. This restructuring is done by incorporating a few different things into the classroom. One way is through the design of assignments that require students to analyze and criticize rather than simply summarize information. Additionally, assignments in the critical pedagogy classroom typically ask students to apply what they've learned to their own life experiences and to the wider world.

Another even more important way critical pedagogy reconstructs the classroom is by incorporating critical assessment, a form of assessment that gives students more control over how they will earn a grade, even over how they will be evaluated entirely. In his book *Antiracist Writing Assessment,* Asao Inoue writes:

> assessment as an act is at its core an act of reading. It is a particular kind of labor that teachers and students do in particular material places, among particular people. This means that the nature of any kind of judgment and the institutional pressure present is contingent on the ecology that produces it and the ecologies that surround that ecology (Inoue 15).

What Inoue means here is that assessment is a form of reading that should be done by the teacher and the student. However, what is being read and assessed, along with whether or not the student has a role in their assessment, is contingent upon the "ecology" of the classroom. Thus, critical assessment requires assignments that allow for students to exert, in their own words, what they know, to demonstrate what they've learned overtime, and to revise their work to demonstrate that learning. Critical pedagogy can involve teachers and students working together to determine what will be learned and how that learning will be measured.

Therefore, every aspect of critical pedagogy, from assignments to assessment, is designed to give students more power and control in the classroom, modeling equality, and allowing students to engage in rigorous practices that may work to liberate students from the stress, anxiety, and depression in their lives--both school and home. Yet, as argued in the introduction, critical pedagogy has been largely critiqued by scholars of rhetoric, composition, and pedagogical theory for a variety of reasons. Some scholars say it's too difficult to implement; others suggest it is not rigorous enough; still others accuse it of doing the opposite of what is intended: for producing authoritarian classrooms.

These critiques, however, tend to be aimed at pedagogical practices that appear to be "critical pedagogy" but do not actually reflect the practices and purpose of critical pedagogy. At its root, critical pedagogy is based on modeling equality and maintaining rigor, and these "false pedagogies," as I will call them, do not operationalize one or both of these essential parts of critical pedagogy. In the remainder of this chapter, I will critique two of these false pedagogies-- progressive authoritarianism and, what I will call, the rigor-less pedagogy. I will explain what

these false pedagogies do, and how they work to keep control, choice, and power out of the hands of students, possibly causing stress, and the diagnoses of anxiety and depression.

Progressive Authoritarianism

In her book *Teaching to Transgress,* bell hooks writes that "many teachers who do not have difficulty releasing old ideas, embracing new ways of thinking, may still be as resolutely attached to old ways of practicing teaching as their more conservative colleagues" (hooks 142). What hooks is referencing here is "progressive authoritarianism," a style of teaching that produces a "radical curriculum" but that keeps the teacher as the sole source of power in the classroom. For example, let's say a group of students are taking a cultural anthropology course. Throughout the course, students are *lectured* to about issues of racism within the culture of the United States. They are asked to take notes during the lectures, and then they regurgitate all of the information they memorized onto a test. While these students are being lectured to about progressive ideas, this hypothetical anthropology class does not practice critical pedagogy: the structure of the class itself maintains the unequal power structures that are being lecturing about.

Freire, in *Pedagogy of Hope,* critiques progressive authoritarianism, especially when he writes about his experience at a conference he attended in Fiji. At the conference, Freire comes along a number of posters, made by progressives, that contain essences of authoritarianism. One of the posters said "Quem sabe, ensina a quem não sabe (The one who knows teaches the one who knows not)" (Freire 176). This poster obviously depicts progressive authoritarianism, and it also puts on display the prevalence of what Freire calls "The Banking Concept of Education." In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire uses banking as a metaphor to describe a system of education

that represents students as "jars" that the teacher fills with knowledge. The banking concept of education is an apt description of what is wrong with progressive authoritarianism: the teacher is the keeper of knowledge in the classroom. It assumes that the students know nothing and that the teacher must open their heads and pour their progressive knowledge into the students' brains. Even if the teachers knowledge is full of progressive and truthful content, the act of "giving" this information to students, as if they are brainless, makes the teacher authoritarian.

What has been made clear, especially by hooks, is that many teachers in the US are having a hard time letting go of old, traditional, authoritarian styles of teaching. There are many reasons for why this could be, but one is that some teachers do not understand the difference between *authority* and *authoritarianism* within the classroom. In his article "Putting Critical Pedagogy in Its Place: A Personal Account" Bill Johnston, without understanding *true* critical pedagogy, argues that it gives students too much power and the teacher not enough power resulting in less empowerment to happen in the classroom. He writes "students can be more or less empowered--for example, they can be given more responsibility for their own learning, they can take part in the design of their own courses, and they can be given more meaningful and less competitive assignments--teachers still retain authority in the classroom." (Johnston 560). Unknowingly, by giving students "responsibility" for their learning, and by giving agency to partake in the design of the course, Johnston is practicing *true* critical pedagogy. Johnston has fallen into the trap that many scholars have fallen into: they
believe that by giving students too much say, critical pedagogy doesn't give the teacher *any* control in the classroom.

To counteract Johnston's misunderstanding of critical pedagogy, Freire argues "dialogue does not *level* them [teachers and students], does not 'even them out,' reduce them to each other. (...) On the contrary, it implies a sincere, fundamental respect on the part of the subjects engaged in it, a respect that is violated, or prevented from materializing, by authoritarianism" (Freire 107). Freire argues that the teacher needs to maintain *authority* in the classroom. What this means is that the teacher plays the crucial role of the facilitator, guiding students through their engagement and designing assignments that allow for students to create fruitful dialogue that build on their existing knowledges. Thus, unlike a classroom that is authoritarian, where the teacher demands respect from the students, a classroom where the teacher has authority creates a classroom environment that is based on mutual respect between the teacher and the student. This ecology of mutual respect enhances the structure of equality that critical pedagogy works to maintain.

Rigor-less Pedagogy

Rigor-less pedagogy is a form of teaching that does not include any practices or assignments that involve the rigor of true critical pedagogy. The difference between the rigor-less pedagogy and progressive authoritarianism is that the rigor-less pedagogy does not have to be authoritarian. I would make the argument that, in some ways, authoritarian styles of teaching *are* a form of rigor-less pedagogy, since memorizing and then regurgitating information onto a test is less rewarding than the rigorous engagement of praxis that is involved in true critical pedagogy.

However, while authoritarian classrooms *can* be considered rigor-less, rigor-less

pedagogies do not necessarily have to be authoritarian. A rigor-less classroom can be structured

in a way that maintains equality, which is good, but it can leave out the rigor that is needed for it

to be considered *true* critical pedagogy. Too often, the simple addition of class or group

discussion is positioned as critical pedagogy. These kinds of classes can contain a lot of

discussion that focuses on how the students *feel* about a book, rather than having the students

engage in what the text says, how it says it, what the context surrounding the text says about how

we might read the text, and how the meaning of the text connects to the lives of the reader. These

classes also have the tendency to push students along without having them really learn and

without giving students the tools needed succeed in life. I argue that because of this, students are

more likely to become stressed, and to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety later on in life--

since these classes do not adequately engage students in control and choice.

In her article "Dialogue, Knowledge, and Teacher-Student Relations: Freirean Pedagogy

in Theory and Practice," Lesley Bartlett writes about how the teachers at popular education non-

governmental organizations (NGOs) in Brazil attempted to use critical pedagogy. Based on the

experiences of the educators in the NGO's, she argues that building a strong student-teacher

relationship and loading the class with meaningful dialogue influenced the students the most. She

argues that critical pedagogy ameliorates "the student's sense of shame over their reading,

writing, and, in particular, speaking abilities" (Bartlett 354). Bartlett continues "through

conversations, the teachers explained to me, they worked to incite in the student the sense of

having something worthy to say and also of being capable of saying it" (Bartlett 354). It is clear

that the teachers in the NGO's worked to build reciprocity between themselves and the students

by creating a lot of dialogue. This dialogue helped to build the students courage to participate in a discourse that the class was focusing on, as well as helping to cultivate avenues for students to voice what they want to say. This agreement is an important foundation of critical pedagogy, and it is great that the NGO's are successfully helping students to voice their thoughts.

However, while teachers in the NGO's helped students to find their voice, Bartlett also reveals that the discourses the students were engaging in did not contain the rigor of true critical pedagogy. Bartlett writes "the teachers in these programs were reducing Freire's complex notion of dialogue to a more simplistic ideal of egalitarian classroom discussion" (Bartlett 356). Of course it is important to have dialogue that revolves around how the students are doing as these discussions work to "humanize" school and makes students feel more comfortable in school. However, a critical pedagogy requires more than just discussion. It needs to engage students in the rigorous reading and writing assignments that help students to translate what they have learned from the text to the world. Bartlett also admits that "On occasion, a teacher's celebration of 'popular knowledge' seemed gratuitous or even patronizing" (Bartlett 357-358). Again, it is certainly okay for teachers to, once in a while, conduct casual discussions with their students about how they are doing, and about things that are not related to class. However, these conversations become a problem when they become the only things that are being discussed in class. That's when these conversations become "patronizing," as they make it seem as though the teacher has no faith in the student's ability to engage in rigorous dialogue on their own.

In his book *Emotion and Traumatic Conflict,* Michalinos Zembylas gives a critique of critical pedagogy while he is advocating for *critical peace education.* Zembylas identifies critical peace education as pedagogy to help participants heal the devastating emotions of trauma in war

torn countries. Critical peace education *appears* to be identical to critical pedagogy, defined by

Zembylas as "the approach to peace education that pays attention to issues of structural

inequalities and aims at cultivating a sense of transformative agency both individual and

collective to advance peace building" (Zembylas 4). Critical peace education is like critical

pedagogy because it works to engage participants in the power dynamics of war-torn Cyprus in

an attempt to diminish the "us v.s them" narrative between the Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-

Cypriots. Another similarity between critical pedagogy and critical peace education is that they

both can work to heal students from the trauma and high-level chronic stress that comes with,

say, living in a war torn country.

    However, despite their similarities, Zembylas is a critic of critical pedagogy and Freire's

dichotomy of the "oppressor and oppressed." He argues:

> critical pedagogues need to be more critically aware of the emotional consequences when
>
> they categorize individuals into 'oppressors' and 'oppressed'; failing to understand how
>
> student's emotional attachments are strongly entangled with traumatic historical
>
> circumstances and material conditions will undermine teachers pedagogical interventions
>
> (Zembylas 36).

Zembylas's main concern with the dichotomy "oppressor and oppressed" is that it creates

another "us v.s them" situation. In the terms of education, he worries that the dichotomy will

harm students emotionally, and will create more division between teachers and students.

However, I argue that Zembylas misunderstands Freire's student/teacher relationship when he

describes it as a "oppressor and oppressed" dichotomy and misses critical pedagogies appeal to

emotion. The dichotomy is not meant to position any one thing as the oppressor or the oppressed, but rather, critical pedagogy explores who has power, period. Zembylas, at times, forgets that it is the people in high political and institutional power who are causing the divisions among groups, not the groups themselves. Therefore, the "oppressor and oppressed" dichotomy does not categorize people as one or the other, but asks students to investigate why oppression exists and the infrastructure of hierarchical institutions of power (which translates into schools, prison systems, etc.). Dismissing a critical understanding of who has power and how that relates to oppression is dangerous, and, therefore, turns critical peace education into a rigor-less pedagogy. One of the foundational aspects of critical pedagogy is allowing for students to engage in analyses of power structures. Once they understand these power structures, students, potentially, will better understand them, and can feel empowered to work against them. Because Zembylas does not adequately stress this in critical peace education, he is taking the rigor out of his pedagogy.

Zembylas's argument that critical pedagogy does not focus on the emotion towards lived historical trauma exposes that he has not read the work of Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope,* nor hooks *Teaching to Transgress*. Both of these works identify how praxis, and the rigorous analysis of unequal power structures can draw an important parallel between true critical pedagogy and the healing of anxiety, depression, and trauma. This is my argument for why critical pedagogy is useful within the US classroom. Many scholars of critical pedagogy have pushed against importing critical pedagogy into the US classroom. This is in part because of the myths that surround critical pedagogy. However, if imported to the US, and done correctly, critical pedagogy can give students ownership over their education, something that they may not have

had in the past. This, then, can allow students to become empowered, and to eventually heal from the stress, anxiety, and depression that has come from the various sources, in school and out of it, that contributes to these feelings and disorders.

Chapter 3

How Critical Pedagogy can Reduce Learned Helplessness

In the previous chapter, I discussed the problems that arise with "false pedagogies," such as progressive authoritarianism and a rigor-less pedagogy, and how they are different from true critical pedagogy. In this chapter, I want to discuss learned helplessness that is derived from unequal school structures, and how, specifically, it can make students more susceptible to depression. I will discuss how testing, a hallmark of progressive authoritarianism, works as a leading factor for the cause of learned helplessness, as it does not give students a lot of control or choice in their education. I then will argue that critical pedagogy can help to reduce learned helplessness in the classroom through bring more power to students.

Psychologist M. E. P. Seligman, the man who first discovered learned helplessness, argues that it is brought on by "individuals believing that their reactions have no influence on a happening or event" (Ulusoy 1440). Learned helplessness, he then argues, is correlated with the diagnoses of depression. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, depression can be diagnosed after "a period of two weeks or longer during which there is either depressed mood or loss of interest or pleasure, and at least four other symptoms that reflect a change in functioning, such as problems with sleep, eating, energy, concentration, self-image or recurrent thoughts of death or suicide" (NIMH). Thus, learned helplessness is known to cause low self-esteem (which can be a lack of belief in one's ability), poor mood, and a loss of interest in doing work that one once did. All of these symptoms of learned helplessness, combined with symptoms of fatigue, sleep deprivation, loss of energy, change in food consumption, etc. can lead to a diagnosis of depression.

In the school setting, I argue that learned helplessness (especially in high school and college) is caused by two things: a lack of choice, and a lack of control. One practice in schools today that limits student choice and control is testing. Jennifer Green et.al conducted a study titled "School Functioning and Use of School-Based Accommodations by Treatment-Seeking Anxious Children" that identifies test taking as a situation in school that is the most likely to cause students stress-- which can then lead to the diagnosis of anxiety and depression. The build up to test taking usually begins with a lot of worry. For example, prior to the test, many students will study frantically. They will read their notes over and over again to memorize the specific concepts, definitions and examples that they need to remember, all while contemplating whether or not they will do well on the exam. Then, these students take the exam, the professor grades them, and hands back their scores. Some students do well, while others do not, and those who do not will begin to feel more stress. For the next exam, those students will (potentially) study harder, though perhaps not better, and will try memorize more in an attempt to get a better grade. However, if they do not get a good grade after studying harder on this next exam, then those students may begin to feel discouraged, particularly because they cannot locate the cause of their failure. This is where chronic stress caused by schools can turn into learned helplessness: after failing so many times, students may begin to feel that they have no control over getting a good grade.

In his essay "Education and Learned Helplessness," William McCarter writes particularly about the issues of standardized testing, arguing that in middle and high school, teachers are more concerned with getting their students to pass these tests rather than to learn and to critically think. He writes "because of the high stakes testing that has accompanied the NCLB legislation;

high school teachers cannot allow students to fail these exams. As a result, instead of providing students with problems to be solved, these high school teachers are forced to tell students what they must learn" (McCarter 69). McCarter connects his argument here to Freire's "Banking Concept of Education." The problem with the banking concept, and standardized tests, is that they structure education in a way that does not give students any control or choice in what they learn and how they are assessed. Since Seligman's very definition of learned helplessness argues that it is produced by a lack of "influence" over a situation, it is easy to see how learned helplessness can manifest in a banking classroom.

Another issue with the banking concept, along with standardized testing, is that it leaves students unprepared for the critical thinking that happens in college. McCarter argues that everything high school teachers provide assignments that are "designed to 'help' the student – the outlines, the study guides, etc. – but that this only further inhibits any thinking that the student may have to do for themselves. This is the 'thinking' that the student expects to be done by the teacher when the student gets to college" (70). Many students who enter college are used to the teacher working and thinking for them. When students are asked to write, work, and think for themselves in college, they may struggle. This lack of preparedness may lead students to succumb to learned helplessness in college, since their lack of preparedness may cause them to believe that they have no control over their achievement in college.

I argue that critical pedagogy can work to counteract learned helplessness at all grade levels. Sapolsky talks about the powerful effects of a classroom that grants control to students, such as how it can help to decrease stress and learned helplessness. Sapolsky does not talk much about choice, but I would make the argument that choice and control are interconnected, since

with control comes their ability to choose. Sapolsky discusses the benefits of having control over low stakes situations. Of course, granting control to students, even if it is low stakes, can cause some students stress. Many students do not have a lot of experience in having control over their education. This exposes the importance of implementing critical pedagogy into classrooms as early as possible. Critical pedagogy tasks students to make knowledge for themselves and gives students more control in navigating their learning and their education. Thus, prior to college, the more experiences students have with critical pedagogy, the less likely they will succumb to learned helplessness and depression.

Chapter 4

How Critical Pedagogy Can Heal: A Look into "The Mundane Catastrophe" Freire's Pedagogy of Hope, and My Own Personal Experiences

In previous chapters, I discussed the intersection between unequal school structures and the possibility of being diagnosed with depression and anxiety. Particularly, the last chapter identified the effects of learned helplessness caused by specific school practices (such as standardized testing) and how that can potentially make students more susceptible to depression. However, in the next two chapters, I want to discuss the effects of trauma. In the terms of this thesis, I will be discussing two kinds of trauma, trauma that is derived from within unequal school structures, and trauma that is brought into the classroom by the traumatic lived-experience of students. In this chapter, I will be discussing the former, and will begin by giving a brief description of the different kinds of trauma, including what is known as the "mundane catastrophe." I will then use the experiences of Diego (a 10th grade student referenced in Elizabeth Dutro and Andrea Bien's "Listening to the Speaking Wound"), Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and my own personal experiences to expose the possibility of critical pedagogy, and praxis, as a way to heal trauma, anxiety, and depression in the classroom. Of course, the four experiences that I will be discussing in this chapter are not enough to prove critical pedagogy as the ultimate cure for school-caused mental disorders. However, through explaining and unpacking these experiences, I want to identify how praxis, the rigorous process of engaging, interrogating, and understanding texts, reflects the processes one may take in overcoming anxiety, depression, and trauma. Through the practices of application, persistence, and allowing students to understand Freire's concept of "the why," I argue that praxis provides a model that students can use to guide them into finding ways to cope with anxiety, depression, and trauma.

Trauma is often thought of as a disorder that is caused by highly intense, life-threatening external experiences (such as high-level chronic stress). PTSD, for example, is defined by the American Psychological Association as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster" (APA, 2019). Representations of PTSD are everywhere, such as from documentaries about soldiers coming home from war, or news articles that share the stories of women who survived abusive relationships. However, we hear much less about a kind of trauma that is known as the "mundane catastrophe," a constant build up of stress, caused by the everyday life experiences of living in poverty, which can possibly lead to symptoms of trauma. In his article "Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form Narrative" Greg Forter explains what he means by "mundane catastrophe:"

> I am speaking here of the trauma induced by patriarchal identity formation rather, say, than the trauma of rape, the violence not of lynching but of everyday racism ..... Such traumas are also so chronic and cumulative, so woven into the fabric of our societies, that they cannot count as "shocks" in the way that Nazi persecution and genocide do in the accounts of Caruth and others. They are emphatically social disturbances, but have been thoroughly naturalized in ways that make it necessary to excavate and "estrange" them in order to see them as social traumas (Forter 260)

As depicted by Forter, symptoms of trauma can be caused by the everyday stressors that are embedded within unequal, institutional structures and systems. An example of one of these mundane, everyday stressors can be where the teacher is positioned in the classroom. Bell hooks

in *Teaching to Transgress* discusses the "positioning of the body" within the classroom and how it models who has power and who does not. In terms of teacher position, she writes "this really is about power. I really do feel more 'in control' when I'm behind the podium or behind the desk than when I'm walking towards my students, standing close to them, maybe even touching them" (hooks 138). Hooks, by doing something as minor as standing in front of a group of students, felt a shift in power to herself, while simultaneously feeling the power shifting away from her students. The positioning of the teacher within a classroom may *seem* insignificant. However, stressors like teacher positioning work like grains of sand on a beach: individually they are hard to see, but together, they make up a long and visible shore line.

In their article "Listening to the Speaking Wound: A Trauma Studies Perspective on Student Positioning in Schools" Elizabeth Dutro and Andrea Bien expose how trauma, caused by mundane catastrophic events, can affect students in school. They argue in the article something I have argued a consistently throughout my thesis, that schools in the US tend to mimic socioeconomic structures that maintain inequality. Therefore, I argue, as do Dutro and Bien, that schools have become places that foster inequality that can cause or exacerbate symptoms of trauma. Schools maintain inequality by modeling it, whether it be by placing the teacher at the front of the classroom, zoning kids from poorer neighborhoods into poorer schools, or by placing poor and minority students into remedial classes. If experienced over a long period of time, such as over the twelve or thirteen year course of one's education, then these experiences can cause students to feel powerless, withdrawn, voiceless, and fearful in and out of the classroom. This is what mundane trauma looks like. It is the kind on trauma that is subtle at first glance but has major impacts.

In their article, Dutro and Bien tell the story of Diego, a 10th Grade Latino student from a predominantly white town in California. Diego has felt the effects of mundane catastrophic stressors, and therefore symptoms of trauma, while going through the school system. Lauren (Diego's history teacher) explains that for students of color transitioning into high school: "you come [here] and automatically you walk through those doors, and you are the lower class of the school" (Dutro & Bien 19). The US school system is set up in a way that puts poor students of color at a disadvantage. Upon entering high school, and college, students are placed into courses based on many different factors: the scores of placement tests, SAT's, and other standardized tests. Due to the stress and obstacles of living in poverty, along with the fact that standardized tests do not accommodate different cultures, poor and minority students typically do not do as well on standardized tests. Thus, students like Diego are typically put into remedial classes. These experiences may not necessarily be extreme life or death situations, but they are chronic, and over time they can lead for students to feel symptoms of anxiety and trauma.

Lauren, a teacher at Diego's school featured in Dutro and Bien's essay, is working to combat inequality within schools. She created a tutoring program at the school that not only allowed her to really pay attention to the students' work, but also to the students' lives. This made a tremendous difference with students like Diego, as the simple act of one teacher caring about him allowed for him to care about the class and what he was learning. In the article, Lauren argues:

> All it takes is to sit down next to one of them, and say that you care about them
> succeeding. And a lot of times they will blow you off and they'll say, "No you don't,"
> and you say, "Okay I'm going to sit here until you answer this question," or "I'm going to

sit here until you get this concept." And it's persistence, but it's personal persistence. It's

not, like, you need to go work on that and bring it to me when you're done. It's I am here

for you.

In my life, I have lived in the shoes of the tutor and the struggling student. My tutor self, which

is my current self, knows the exhaustion of persistence. Sometimes I feel as though I am not

doing enough to help my students. I will have those students who reek with an energy of just not

wanting to meet with me, and I struggle with ways to keep them engaged in our sessions. I worry

that those students are getting nothing out of our meetings, and that I am failing them.

However, what helps me as a tutor is remembering Freire's concept of "the why" and

how that is used to liberate students. In *Pedagogy of Hope,* he writes "in seeking for the deepest

'why' of my pain, I was educating my hope. I never expected things just to 'be that way.' I

worked on things, on facts, on my will. I *invented* the concrete hope in which, one day, I would

see myself delivered from my depression" (Freire 22). Freire treated his depression as an object

that was separate from himself. He studied his depression, he observed it, he read it, he reflected

on it, and eventually, he began to learn the *why* of his depression. Freire, thus, engaged in the

work of praxis to understand and defeat his depression, and I argue here that Freire is modeling

how the processes of praxis used in the classroom can be applied elsewhere. When one thinks of

praxis, what is usually being reflected upon and interrogated is a reading that is assigned in a

classroom. However, the process of praxis can be applied to other objects or texts, such as

anxiety, depression, and trauma. Thus, by engaging in the interrogation of and reflection on their

experiences, students can see that they, as subjects, are not the objects of their disorders.

Students then can seek the "why" of their disorder, and through the understanding that comes

with the discovery of the why, I argue that students can become liberated from their anxiety,

depression, or trauma.

As a tutor and a student, I find it valuable to study and reflect upon Freire's ideas of

praxis; they have resonated with me as I consider my own experiences in the classroom.

Throughout most of my education, I was shuffled along from class to class and from grade to

grade. Particularly in elementary and middle school, I did have some teachers who made it clear,

either through body language or through actual conversations with me, that they did not care

about me. Those experiences, for a long time, lead me to believe that *all* of my teachers did not

care for me, causing me to feel stupid, and therefore lead me to feel a great deal of anxiety within

the classroom. Now that I am older, and have a more nuanced view of education, I realize that it

was not that all of my teachers did not care for me. My teachers are a product of an education

system that is exhausting, one that not does not pay well and that puts a lot of stress on teachers

to produce high test scores and to perform at their peak. They are a part of a system that values

Freire's "banking concept of education," which, rather than having students build upon and

apply their creativity and knowledge, teachers feel forced to have students memorize information

for tests. Therefore, it is not that these teachers do not care, or do not value rigor, but it is that

they are within a system that makes it hard for them to do those things.

It was not until college, a place where the pressure of standardized testing is not as

present, where I found professors that lead me to believe that I had valuable knowledge that I

could apply to my classes and also to the world outside of my classes. Persistence was certainly a

tool used by many of my professors, particularly my first-year writing professor. She stuck by

me, and was definitely the driving force behind me becoming an English major. However, persistence was not the only tool used that lead me to feel liberated in the classroom. My first-year writing professor, along with other professors, allowed me to seek out and enhance my skills in reading and writing by engaging in processes that were similar to Freire's praxis. I analyzed the readings, built a concrete understanding of them, and then was able to participate in a rigorous dialogue with the texts through writing about them and talking about them in class. Through these processes, I learned a lot about the world, and myself. From class to class, and from year to year, I learned that I had the knowledge to succeed in college and to find my way through life, allowing me to see my anxiety experienced in the classroom as an object, separate from myself, that prevented me from doing well in school, but also something I could have control over in order to change the outcome.

Considering my own story, along with the story of Lauren and Diego, I want to emphasize that while persistence is an important part of critical pedagogy, it is not, and cannot be, the only strategy used to heal the wounds of trauma, depression, and anxiety. If it were the only strategy, then classes, along with one-on-one meetings with teachers and tutors, would merely be therapy sessions, not interactions that foster rigorous learning and critical thought. From my experiences as a tutor, I know this to be true. Many of the students that I work with are stressed and anxious, or, really, just do not want to be at the meetings with me. I like to give my students some space to vent and to talk, and I like to reassure my students that they will make it through the semester and that I am in their corner. However, the persistence within my fellow meetings needs to be balanced with work and rigor. I always give my students choice in what they want to work on, whether it be brainstorming ideas, creating an outline, editing a paper, or

producing writing. I find that giving students choice in our meetings sets the tone of the conference as a rigorous space; students are tasked with managing a lot of the session. Choice also works to empower my students which, alternately, usually eases the anxiety that is always brought to my meetings.

In *Teaching to Transgress,* bell hooks addresses the importance of rigor within the classroom. She writes:

There are times when I walk into classrooms overflowing with students who feel terribly wounded in their psyches (many of them see therapists), yet I do not think they want therapy from me. They do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences (hooks 19).

By acknowledging that students do not want "therapy" in their education, hooks is suggesting that students, especially those who are oppressed, and who suffer from anxiety, depression, and trauma, want rigorous classroom experiences. They want an education that makes them powerful, that brings them choice and control in their classrooms and in their lives. In the classroom, students want to be given the choice of not just reading the word, but also reading the world. They want to connect what they learn from a text to their own lives. It is in this way that the critical pedagogy classroom can allow for the healing of their anxiety, depression, and trauma. If they gain a clear understanding of what is causing their poor mental health, learning

the "why" of it, students are more likely to fight against it in an attempt to take back control of their education and their lives.

Freire writes in *Pedagogy of Hope* "a more critical understanding of the situation of oppression does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction. Now the person who has this new understanding can engage in a political struggle for the transformation of the concrete conditions in which the oppression prevails" (Freire 24). Here, Freire admits that the processes of praxis, a process that allows students to discover for themselves the circumstances of their oppressions, is not enough to immediately liberate the oppressed. He admits that it, by itself, is not enough to relieve the wounds of trauma, anxiety, and depression that has come from being oppressed in and out of the classroom. However, Freire cautions that mere understanding, or, as he puts it, "revelation," is one powerful step in the direction towards healing and liberation. My experiences in my English courses revealed to me that I, myself, have the power, control, and knowledge to make it through college. This experience was a powerful revelation, but it took a number of revelations, big and small, to allow me to realize that anxiety about the classroom experience was a separate entity that did not need to define me. To this day I struggle with classroom anxiety, but the difference between me now and me when I was in high school, is that I have a better understanding of how my anxiety works. This understanding has not eliminated my anxiety, but has allowed me to manage it and has made me feel more powerful and secure in the classroom.

As a tutor, I try to incorporate as many situations in my meetings as possible so that my students to have the revelations that I did. Yes, I show my student that I am there for them. I always trying to build open and honest relationships with my students that allow them to feel

comfortable. But more than all of this, I make sure my fellow sessions contain rigor. I do not just tell my students the answers, nor do I write for them. Rather, I ask them questions, have them write about and share what they have brought to the session. I give them as many opportunities as possible to share their knowledge and to at times engage in praxis. While I know that my work with students is probably not going to rid them of their negative relationship to school, I hope they begin to learn how to manage their disorders. I know that my sessions are not going to bring immediate liberation to my students; however, with all of my heart, I hope that their experiences with praxis throughout their college career helps them to feel the same empowerment that I eventually felt.

Chapter 5

The Importance of Critical Pedagogy, Representation, and the Brave Space

In the previous chapter, I discussed how anxiety, depression, and "mundane catastrophic" trauma can arise within classrooms that model unequal power structures and how the processes of praxis and critical pedagogy can help students to manage their disorders. I mentioned several concepts, such as application, persistence, and Freire's understanding of "the why," which all work as important tools in empowering students in the classroom. However, in this chapter I want to uncover how critical pedagogy and praxis can work to aid "outside" trauma that is brought into the classroom. While "mundane catastrophe" refers to small yet cumulative traumatic events that can cause negative repercussions over time, trauma that is brought into the classroom is usually a form of PTSD, and is caused by circumstances of poverty or life threatening events such as war, rape, sexual assault, shootings, bullying, disease, etc. Therefore, PTSD brought into the classroom is caused by a single event, or events, that can bring students a lot of terror all at once, causing symptoms to be much more severe. While the classroom is limited in the ways it can help students with such extreme trauma, I argue that a way the classroom can liberate students from "outside" trauma is to incorporate a balance of representation and praxis. Students need to feel represented in the classroom through texts that accurately depict their lives, and the classroom also needs to be structured in a way that gives students the opportunity to voice their trauma, through reading, writing, and discussion, in order to heal.

In her book *Literature as Exploration* Louise Rosenblatt argues that "literature provides a *living through,* not simply a *knowledge about*" (Rosenblatt 38). To expand on this idea, she

writes "our own problems and needs may lead us to focus on those characters and situations through which we may achieve the satisfactions, the balanced vision, or perhaps merely the unequivocal motives unattained in our own lives" (Rosenblatt 38). What Rosenblatt is saying here is that when one reads a text, they put themselves within the shoes of the characters in search of finding and connecting meaning from the character's lives to their own lives. When Freire writes about a reader having a dialogue with the text, this is partially what he means (making connection between the text and the world around them). The problem, however, comes when students cannot connect to the text, nor make connections from the text to their world, because the text does not represent their lives. The problem with a lack of representation within the assigned literature, and therefore in the class, is that it works to take away students' agency not just in the classroom, but in other aspects of their lives. Thus, if the text does not represent students, then it makes it hard for students to talk about and write about their personal experiences since they simply cannot connect them to the text.

I am not trying to argue that trauma is not represented within texts assigned in the literature classroom. Countless books popular in American middle and high school curriculums-- including Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye,* Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried,* etc. all provide stories filled with traumatic experiences. However the issue is *not* about trauma being underrepresented, the issue is *who* is being represented in these stories of trauma, and *what* instances of trauma are not being exposed in the classroom. For example, in "Challenging Texts: 'Just Don't See Myself Here': Challenging Conversations about LGBTQ Adolescent Literature" P. L. Thomas et.al talks to an openly gay student about representation and, referring to two tables covered in LGBTQ books, asks the

student if the inclusion of these books would make a difference in his life. The student responded by saying "You've got to understand. I'm betting almost everything available featuring gay characters in books for kids and teens is here, and they fit on these two tabletops. You'd need all the rooms in this building, and more, to fit the books that feature heterosexual kids and their families. They have a much better chance of finding themselves" (Thomas 76). Therefore, it is not only the situations of trauma that need to be represented, but the characters need to represent a diverse community. There are plenty of books that represent the lives, struggles, traumas, and experiences of minorities, including the LGBTQ community, but these books are often overpowered by literature that only uncovers the lives and traumas of white, heterosexual, cisgendered, males and females. Therefore, for minority students suffering with trauma caused outside of the classroom, a lack of representation within a text can cause students to feel more isolated, leading them to feel that they are the only ones suffering, and without any strategy to overcome their trauma. This, therefore, can keep these students without power in the classroom.

Taking the advice from Louise Rosenblatt and P.L. Thomas and providing more texts within a curriculum that adequately represents a diverse group of students suffering from anxiety, depression, and trauma is *one* important aspect of critical pedagogy. However, *merely* incorporating these kinds of texts into a curriculum is not critical pedagogy. Progressive authoritarianism only incorporates *content* involving privilege, power and inequality, whereas critical pedagogy requires classroom structures that embody practices that places each student in the powerful role of determining their own success in the class. Students, especially those who suffer from trauma are not going to feel powerful in the classroom if they do not have control over their assessment and their learning. Thus, I argue that all students, and particularly those

students who suffer from trauma need both the control and power granted to them by critical

pedagogy, and also a curriculum with texts and assignments that embrace representation.

In "Listening to the Speaking Wound" Dutro and Bien expose how critical assessment,

assignment design, and representation can help students like Carlton, a second grader suffering

from cancer and who was abused by his meth addicted foster parents. Prior to his experiences

with his teacher, Christine, Carlton did not experience classroom space that allowed him to

critically analyze his lived experience. In contrast, Dutro and Bien write "if a child's wounds

must be hidden upon entering, it seems unrealistic to expect that child to forge deep ties to

school" (Dutro & Bien 23). Thus, Christine decided to create a unit based around the children's

book *The Lemonade Club,* which is about a child who was diagnosed with Leukemia and was

supported by her classmates and teacher. She then had the students write small essays and poems

to further engage the students in the reading. Prior to the unit, Carlton was never engaged in

writing and never really cared about school in general. Yet, by inviting him to think about the

trauma that was affecting him through the lens of a text that mirrored both his experiences and

his identity, he became more engaged not only in that assignment, but in the class as a whole.

Earlier in this thesis, I referenced and critiqued Michalinos Zembylas's theory of

"critical peace education," where he discusses critical peace education. While at times critical

peace education does not bring a whole lot of rigor to the classroom, it does recognize how

representation, critical assessment, and assignments can be healing among students suffering

from anxiety and trauma. In Chapter 8, he discusses how literature has been used in schools as a

tool to reduce the "us vs. them mentality" that is prevalent in war-torn Cyprus. Sharon, a writing

teacher in the Cyprus school system, states "we work on a text and we go through the moments

in which there have been exclusion or inclusion and we discuss how we, as readers, respond to these situations. Students do respond to these and I ask them to relate those situations to their personal experiences" (Zembylas 149). Since Cyprus is so full of division, teaching texts that demand discussion of inclusion and exclusion in a literature curriculum allows students to empathize with the characters who are suffering from the traumas of being divided and oppressed. These texts are also representative of the lives of these students, and since they contain characters who model the struggles of the Greek and Turkish Cypriots students, reading these texts may allow them to seek power and strength through understanding the characters method of dealing with and overcoming their trauma.

Zembylas also uses praxis in critical peace education to allow students to make connections between what is going on in the assigned books to what is happening in Cyprus. This process of reading about the conflicts in Cyprus, then writing about them and discussing them, allows the students to better understand the Cyprus conflict, and to empathize with the group they are against. As mentioned earlier, my critique of Zembylas is that he does not identify the ways critical peace education helps individuals identify societal forces that control their lived experience, but critical peace education does, in fact, invite students to examine the causes of their trauma in warfare, and, in that way, cannot avoid helping them to consider the forces responsible for war and the ensuing trauma. By incorporating texts that represent student trauma, along with allowing them to engage in praxis, the students are not only beginning to heal from their traumas, but they are learning to understand and empathize with the group they believe they are fighting against.

A real example of an assignment that created healing among students suffering from trauma in Cyprus was explained in Chapter 9 of *Emotion and Traumatic Conflict.* For the project, students were asked to interview their extended family about "1974," the year the Turkish invasion was at its height. While it was the students' elders that experienced first hand the height of the Turkish invasion, the repercussions of the invasions still caused students to experience similar effects of trauma that their parents felt. In one section of the case study conducted by Zembylas, a Greek-Cypriot girl named Nikki gave the class a full paper written by her mother on her grandmother's experiences with the invasion. She explained how Nikki's grandmother married a Turkish Cypriot (which caused a lot of anger within her family) and how she was actually separated from her family and husband for several years because of the war.

Nicki's paper and presentation on the story of her grandmother sparked a great deal of empathy and unity among her classmates, initiating a process of healing among them. One of the Turkish-Cypriot girls (Gloria) said to the class "I feel pain in my soul for all the people who lost their homes in Cyprus and fear for their lives. It doesn't matter if its Greek Cypriots or Turkish Cypriots. They are humans too--they carry wounds and traumas from the war" (Zembylas 173). Gloria's words here expose her growing empathy and sense of unity, something that is not prevalent at all among Greek Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots. Her reaction suggests that not only did this assignment allow for students to heal in post-Turkish Invasion Greece, but it unveils how assignments that represent the traumas in a particular context can help students to understand and heal from their own traumas. For example, this same assignment could be used in the South Side of Chicago. Rather than having the students read, write and present about "1974," the students could focus on the effects of street violence, redlining, or intercity poverty. These assignments

are not meant to remind students of their trauma, but rather, by looking at it through a different lens, it brings the students a more nuanced understanding of their situations which may allow them to heal.

As made clear by Carlton, along with Gloria and Nikki from Zembylas's text, students who suffer from out-of-school trauma benefit from readings and assignments that represent their personal experiences and invite them to interrogate those experiences from a range of perspectives beyond their own. Students cannot be powerful if they are broken. They cannot soulfully engage in a class if they feel as though their experiences do not matter. Thus, teachers need to incorporate praxis to engage students in an analysis of the traumas they are going through. The readings will allow the students to associate themselves with the character(s) who are suffering with trauma. They will allow for the students to learn more about their own traumas and to recognize ways they can cope with their trauma as well as to recognize and develop the capacity for compassion for the trauma of others. Such a rigorous exploration of trauma positions the classroom as a brave space rather than just a safe space.

A "safe space" is an environment where students do not have to worry about being taunted, ridiculed, or judged based off of their race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. Creating such environment is important for the classroom since, of course, it would be impossible to foster learning in an environment where students are being blatantly ostracized. However, creating a classroom that is merely "safe" is still not doing its students a great deal of justice. bell hooks critiques the safe space, arguing "many professors have conveyed to me their feeling that the classroom should be a "safe" place; that usually translates to mean that the professor lectures to a group of quiet students who respond only when they are called on" (hooks 39). Earlier on in this

section, I talked about the importance of incorporating texts that accurately represent the student's lives in order to alleviate their trauma. However, representative texts are only one factor in a critical classroom, and in order to potentially heal trauma, students must be granted the power to engage in the process of praxis with the texts. As bell hooks suggests, a class that is just a safe space would have the students read texts that represent them (making students feel safe), but the students would not be asked to write about and discuss the texts in class. Thus, a safe space can quickly turn into a classroom that harbors progressive authoritarianism. That sense of safety can too easily encourage silence and disengagement among students, taking away, not fostering, student agency.

A "brave space," on the other hand, is a setting where students are encouraged to voice their thoughts, knowledges, and emotion. It is a classroom setting that not only provides a curriculum of books that represent students, but it also grants students the authority to voice their knowledge of the text and of their world, in class. There is a need for safety in a brave space, especially for those who suffer from trauma, anxiety, and depression. However, the difference between a "brave space" classroom and a "safe space" classroom is that it is impossible for a brave space to promote progressive authoritarianism. The brave space is the aspect of critical pedagogy that helps to cultivate powerful and fearless student voice-- something that is never accomplished in a classroom of progressive authoritarianism.

Conclusion

Scholars of rhetoric and composition, education theory, and critical pedagogy continuously link the US's high illiteracy to why students are failing and dropping out of school. This correlation is undoubtedly true, but what is often left out by these scholars is *what* contributes to student's high illiteracy rates that cause for students to drop out. I have told you about the research done by Robert Sapolsky on the effects of chronic stress contributing to the diagnoses of anxiety, depression, and trauma, which therefore can lead to students struggling and dropping out of school. I have told you about the effects of learned helplessness, and how the long standing effects of students failing in school, and failing in other aspects of life, can lead students to believe they do not have what it takes to be successful in school and beyond. While these bits of evidence expose the causation and exacerbation of stress and mental disorder within schools, I also want to provide some of my own first-hand account of how prevalent chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma is in schools.

Of my high school friend group, I was the only one who went to college. All of us meet in middle school, and despite the occasional flare-ups of adolescent drama, we somehow all remained friends throughout high school. We were outcasts, pieces of a puzzle that never seemed to fit in with the picture of high school. I, for one, was the puzzle piece that actively tried to fit in with the picture, acting like the little kid who jams mismatched puzzle pieces together in a attempt to make them fit. My friends, however, never even tried to fit in to the puzzle. It's not that they didn't want to fit into the picture; it's more that they just did not see the point in doing so. Being an outcast in high school brings a great deal of anxiety, depression, and trauma. There is the bullying and ostracization by other classmates; teachers treat you differently as well. As mentioned earlier on, I have had a slew of teachers who just sort of pushed me along-- never

truly caring how I was doing in school. I could see teachers doing that with my friends too, since, of course, once one is labeled as an outcast in, say, kindergarten, that follows the student all the way until the end of high school.

However, a huge factor for why I ended up going and succeeding in college, and my friends did not, was definitely our living situations. My homelife was never perfect. My parents argued often, and we moved around quite a bit, but at the end of the day my parents loved me unconditionally and always had enough money to support me. My friends, however, were not so lucky. All of them grew up poor, and most of them had parents that were rarely around because they worked long hours or because they succumbed to drugs and alcoholism. On top of school, most of my friends worked an additional 40 hours a week so they could not only provide for themselves, but so they could provide for their siblings and even their parents who did not have adequate paying jobs. Some of my friends were also abused, physically and sexually, causing them to suffer from a great deal of trauma.

Looking back now, I wonder how different my friend's lives would have been if critical pedagogy had a bigger influence of their education. I undoubtedly suffered the kind of trauma that is caused by existing school structures-- as I was left behind and did not recognize my intellectual worth until I got to college. However, my friends suffered not only from in school trauma, but also out of school trauma. While I at least had some family support, they had no support from family nor faculty. While I was able to make it to college, my friends did not, and were never able to truly discover their potential. Yes, it was their outside trauma that caused for them to not be engaged in school, as they had so many things going on in their lives that it made it difficult to put any focus towards school. However, what certainly factored into their trauma,

anxiety and learned helplessness towards school, was the lack of purpose they felt towards being in school. Teachers never really gave us the opportunity to engage in a rigorous form of praxis. We never got the chance to connect what we learned about and read in school to our lives outside of it. We were, therefore, never granted the power to heal from our anxieties and traumas within the classroom. It is hard to predict what would of happened, because we never really know-- but if my friends were given the opportunity to engage in critical pedagogy, which would have brought them purpose, and healing, it is possible that their lives would be different now.

Thus, the scholars who argue that critical pedagogies mere purpose is to reduce the high illiteracy rates in the US need to take in these words from Freire's *Politics of Education*: "it is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please, tell your fellow Americans not to import me. Ask them to recreate and rewrite my ideas" (Freire xiii). What Freire means here is that the original problems and ideas he once proposed should not be set in stone. As time moves forward, more issues in the classroom arise, and therefore Freire's ideas of critical pedagogy must evolve in order to reduce these newfound issues. Therefore, while critical pedagogy is seen merely as teaching strategy to reduce illiteracy rates, I see it as something bigger than just that. I see it as a way to reduce the stress, anxiety, trauma, and learned helplessness that may cause those illiteracy rates. I see it as a way to make the classroom not just safe space, but a brave space where students have the power to speak out their knowledge and experiences. I see it as a way to bring students agency over their assessment, giving students the opportunity to learn what they want to learn, rather than what the teacher wants them to learn. I, along with Freire and hooks, ultimately see it as a way to bring healing and hope as central to education.

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