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LIMITED BY DESIGN: EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF SCHOOLING POLICIES  
FROM DEMANDED PASSIVITY TO TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

by

Natalia Tartari Carvalho-Pinto

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
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Western Michigan University  
December 2018

Thesis Committee:

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Jill Hermann-Wilmarth, Ph.D.  
Paul Farber, Ph.D.

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2018

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Growing up, I was taught that our successes and failures, our opportunities and challenges are based on our own choices. I was socialized into thinking that we only learn through our mistakes. Portia Nelson captures this ideology beautifully in her poem “I walk down the street”

“I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost... I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same place.  
But, it isn't my fault.  
It still takes me a long time to get out.

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in. It's a habit.  
My eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It is my fault. I get out immediately.

walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

I walk down another street.”

I was socialized into believing that our successes are our own and that we fail and overcome failure on our own. I grew up in a meritocratic and individualistic society that diminished the

### Acknowledgments—Continued

value of community in my life and learning, and the role of systemic inequality in the opportunities I received. We are often told to look out for ourselves and ensure we make it. We're rarely told and taught to fix the holes in our systems. We may learn our lessons and be privileged enough to have access to a different street, but we continuously allow others to fall in the same holes and walk down paths that have already been damaged. I was lucky to have educators in my life who taught me how to see the holes where I walked and gave me the maps to all the streets in the neighborhood; and I was lucky to become part of a community that was always there to help me out of the hole.

I dedicate this paper to all educators who recognize the holes in our system and actively work to keep our students from falling into them. Those who barricade them and teach us to see them. I would like to thank our community of activists to refuse to be passive about the existence of such holes – who instead of walking down a different street, demand that we fix the streets our communities live in. I've been fortunate to meet so many such educators and community leaders who have given me the hope and energy to continue their work.

I thank my Socio-Cultural Studies professors and committee members, Dini Metro-Rolland, Jill Hermann-Wilmarth and Paul Farber, for providing me with the tools I needed most to do this work, and for supporting me throughout this journey. What I learned in their classrooms has changed the trajectory of my life. Thank you to Khalid El-Hakim for always pushing me to be a better educator. I wouldn't have been able to complete this project without the support and guidance of Francisco Villegas. Francisco is a true educator who challenges and transforms any classroom he inhabits, who uplifts, supports and mentors his community, and whose guidance, kindness and thoughtfulness has played a key role in ensuring I complete this paper. Finally, I

### Acknowledgments—Continued

must acknowledge my daughter, Giuliana – who gives me a reason to have hope and to push for change every day. I hope this work makes you proud.

Natalia Tartari Carvalho-Pinto

# LIMITED BY DESIGN: EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF SCHOOLING POLICIES FROM DEMANDED PASSIVITY TO TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

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Western Michigan University, 2018

Schooling is often imagined as the great equalizer and the primary venue towards personal and collective liberation. However, hegemonic ideals and practices have limited the ability for educators to craft and utilize policy in a way that best benefits their students. In this thesis, I utilize the state of Michigan's Common Core curriculum to examine the limits beyond policy and practice. Specifically, I argue that the demands for student passivity and institutional measurable as signs of success, prohibit student growth. Throughout the document, I describe hope in the ability to instill a variety of transformative educational theories and practices that re-center students and their communities.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1954, Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*— which ended school segregation – Justice Warren wrote that education was “perhaps the most important function of state and local governments” (US Courts, n.d.). I believe that education is the best chance for people to change their lives. Yet, today’s education politics (in this era of standardization, heavy educational budget cuts, privatization, testing and accountability that’s geared towards teachers and students) continue to reflect the social inequities of the U.S. and fail to provide equal opportunities to all students in society, particularly through the intersections of race, class, cultural and linguistic background, or sexual orientation.

Education law and policies have shifted across time. They have gone from acknowledging – in 1954 – that the “separate, but equal” approach to systemic education was in fact unequal; to recognizing the importance of multicultural education; to developing goals for our educational system and institutions that include a focus on diversity and inclusion and a need to understand other perspectives and cultures. However, most schooling legislation and educational plans of the last decades that aimed to address educational and systemic inequities have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality; seldom taking into account the students (and their social and economic backgrounds, rearing, learning styles, language, etc.) to whom their programs were directed towards.

I have worked as a higher education administrator for the past thirteen years and have spent the majority of those years working with underrepresented students – including students of color, veterans, international and immigrant students, and low-income students. I have observed that many of my students become disenfranchised from schools early in their lives. They enter

higher education carrying trauma from years of microaggressions (by school officials, classmates and teachers), feeling insecure and doubtful about their belonging in academic spaces, and most often seeing themselves as mere consumers of education as a finished product. Although most higher education institutions have developed goals for diversity and inclusion on their campus and created programs to support their underrepresented students, the majority of students I've encountered still don't see themselves at the center of their educational experiences. Many educators argue that the reforms of the last generation have done little to improve American education (Walker and Soltis, 2009, p. 95), and that they have become "institutionalized and thus less effective in bringing about change" (Walker and Soltis, 2009, p. 84). Simply put, even when schooling institutions have created policies that acknowledge the social and racial change in student demographics throughout the educational system and aim to address the creation of culturally relevant pedagogy and programs, their successful implementation is limited by hegemony and the inability of administrators, educators and school officials to imagine pedagogy and practices outside the status quo.

Throughout my years as an educator, I have served in countless committees designed to increase retention of students of color; improve graduation rates for first-generation college students; increase campus diversity and inclusion; and implement programs that increase students' "sense of belonging". Yet, I have seen many of these initiatives fail to accomplish their goals, because their implementation seldom considers students' lived realities, environments and identities. For many years, I have tried to understand why implementing change in my university environments was so difficult, and why the implementation of otherwise well-meaning and well-designed goals was so often problematic in the ways that it contributed to my students' further disenfranchisement and passivity. I have come to understand that by the time students

and administrators reach the 13-16 schooling system they have already been socialized into a system of standards, passivity, non-questioning and hierarchy of knowledge – hence restricting the possibility for change and transformation in higher education spaces as well. I find difficulty in teaching my college students critical thought, as we have socialized and expected them be passive throughout the K-12 system. I find difficulty in creating systemic change, as my fellow administrators' implementation methods and assessment tools continuously model their hierarchical and monocultural socialization.

I was taught that education is a tool for personal freedom and transformation. Freire (1970) argued that education is a tool for liberation – as people can only achieve true freedom from systemic oppression when they understand and engage with their own realities in order to transform them. Yet, I believe that we have created an educational system that removes students from their own educational process, and inhibits their ability to see themselves as active creators of their own realities. Given the presence of a school system that rewards student passivity and the repetition of information, my students often display limited abilities to develop proactive solutions to their problems, particularly those that demand collective imagination and action. Through the schooling process, many students excel at learning overarching theory but receive little attention when it comes to critical application. This means that several of the issues they face in K-12 schooling end up replicated through the spaces they (and I) inhabit in higher education. That is, students can recognize injustice but seldom the pathways towards justice. While this may paint a bleak picture, I also recognize that the schooling system is a social construction, thus up for reconstruction, and as such, hope can still be found through the inclusion of transformative action and theory.

In this paper, I use the Michigan K-12 Common Core Standards as a tool for analyzing the ways in which our goals for education become corrupted through their implementation process. The common core here serves as an analytical means to examine the limits of standardizing educational goals that require complexity. That is, ideals that expand beyond static measurables are often difficult to consider given the neoliberal context of schooling. Through this research, I seek to find answers as to how my now-college-students learned disenfranchisement and passivity throughout their schooling process, so that I can better serve them on their path of liberation. I recognize that I must look at how their realities were constructed – in relation to their own education – in order to support them in questioning and deconstructing it.

I use literature and personal narratives to analyze and discuss the implications of current educational academic policies (that govern our schools and systemic education) on students with marginalized identities, and provide an analysis on how such policies and daily schooling practices contribute to broader systemic inequalities, social disengagement and passivity and the disillusion I often see in students. I also discuss how schools privilege the dominant culture, and – what I believe are – ways in which we can improve the dynamics and conditions that affect marginalized students. I argue that marginalization of students happens as a product of school and society, and therefore, requires action in those arenas. The responsibility to create learning and achievement, especially amongst oppressed groups, should lie with educational institutions as well as governments (as suggested by Justice Warren), not the child (Cross, 2007, p. 248). I feel that we – as educators – have let our students down. Through this analysis, I'm interested in generating a broad understanding of the ways we have failed to meet our own educational goals,

and instead created a system that focuses profoundly on quantifiable academic measures, and neglects critical thought, social engagement and the holistic education necessary for liberation.

Finally, this analysis provides a review of literary tools I use to show that transformation is possible. Transformation requires that we don't remain "straightjacketed" by the conventional meanings (Crotty, 1998, p.50-52) we have been taught to associate with schooling. Hence, I look at how educators can use existing educational pedagogies that address systemic inequalities, caring, and promote liberating education to reach the educational goals we have set for our students and society. While all researchers cited here provide different perspectives and philosophical approaches to education, they all agree that human development is complex, and education must encompass that complexity. There's no single way to teach a child, and students must be at the center of educational practices. When we do this, we develop human beings that are able to engage critically with issues and their realities and seek change and solutions. The researchers and educational philosophers cited throughout this paper inform the lens through which I've been able to promote change (social, cultural, and in daily practices) in my work spaces and classrooms in higher education. Throughout my work, I have learned that there are three major ways through which we can bring about change to institutions: through conscious navigation, through the creation of spaces of disruption and through activism that leads to transformation. Learning about and engaging with our current realities and society is necessary for change. The literature reviewed here aims to provide the tools that can be used to bring about transformation to otherwise hegemonic institutions/spaces.

## CONTEXT, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND POSITIONALITY

### Disconnected Objectives: The Goals and Practices of Schooling

Since the 1954 ruling, our governing bodies and education administrators have included “diversity”, “cultural understanding”, “equity” and “critical thinking” as part of our educational goals throughout K-12 and Higher Education. Such goals are listed as core “capacities of the literate individual” in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, n.d., p. 7) and as Core Values for most public universities in Michigan. Yet, I have found that there is disconnect between our educational goals (as set out by educators and framers of our Common Core Standard goals, and our higher education administrators) and current practices.

In an 1897 article titled “My Pedagogic Creed,” published at the *School Journal*, John Dewey warns us that the “educational process has two sides – one psychological and one sociological; and that neither can be subordinated to the other or neglected without evil results following” (p. 77). He believes that knowledge “of social conditions, of the present state of civilization”, is a necessary part of education, as it allows children to properly understand their own instincts and tendencies, and translate them into their “social equivalents” (Dewey, 1897, p. 77). He advises that extensive social intercourse and conversation are what enables us to properly deal with that instinct and that the “deepest moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in unity of work and thought” (Dewey, 1897, p. 79). However, according to Dewey (1897) education through schooling fails because it neglects to address that school is a form of community life, and that social and community engagement is necessary for development of all human capacities. He believes that if our educational system neglects this unity of work and thought, then genuine moral training is

not possible. Further, Dewey (1897) argues the psychological and social sides of human development are naturally related and that education fails if it creates a superimposition of one upon the other or neglects either (p. 78). As he puts it:

We are told that the psychological definition of education is barren and formal – that it gives us only the idea of a development of all the mental powers without giving us any idea of the use to which these powers are put. On the other hand, it is urged that the social definition of education, as getting adjusted to civilization, makes of it a forced and external process, and results in subordinating the freedom of the individual to a preconceived social and political status (Dewey, 1897, p. 78).

Even though this essay was written over one hundred years ago, U.S. schools are still failing to engage students with the issues and realities that make us full human beings, denying students the opportunities to understand social dynamics and engage with social issues, address child-rearing gaps, and promote the overall flourishing of all persons and society.

After the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, we saw an increase of racist, classist, xenophobic, homophobic and hate speech and actions throughout educational institutions. Incidents of racist, anti-immigrant and anti-gay speech and crimes were recorded from elementary schools to colleges and universities across the country. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) recorded over 2,500 specific incidents of bigotry and harassment in schools throughout the country just in the month of November of 2016 – following the presidential elections (Costello, 2016). Such incidents included racist, xenophobic and Nazi graffiti, assaults on students and teachers, property damage, fights and threats to violence – all of which happened within school and college buildings (Costello, 2016). Additionally, a survey conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center, and answered by 25,000 educators (at all levels of the US-

educational system) reported that four in ten educators also heard derogatory language directed at minoritized students – including Students of Color, Muslims, immigrants and LGBT students (Costello, 2016).

At the same time, approximately half of the survey respondents didn't think that their schools/educational institutions had appropriately addressed, or have the right tools/"action plan" to address, incidents of hate and bias, and "because of heightened emotion, half (of survey participants) are hesitant to discuss the election in class" (Costello, 2016). According to the SPLC, surveyed educators also reported that K-12 teachers were being told – by principals and administrators – to refrain from discussing or addressing the election in any way (Costello, 2016). While Dewey's educational philosophy encouraged us to think about schools as the major platform through which humans could learn to have self and social-awareness, self-management and responsible decision-making, as well as develop and build relationships, our current educational system of "monoculturalism" within curriculum, standardization, accountability and single-purpose schooling have neglected both sides of the educational process that John Dewey argued as essential to human development; and I believe we are experiencing the "evil results" referred by Dewey (1897). Curriculum developers, school leaders and education-administrators have failed to recognize that the "social life of children is the basis of concentration, or correlation in all their training and growth... and that the true centre of correlation of school subjects is not science, history or math, but the child's own social activities" in connection to the subjects (Dewey, 1987, p. 80). Hence, ignoring present social dynamics deprives students from engaging with them, and traps us in a primitive state of "unconscious unity of social life" (Dewey, 1987, p. 80), just as ignoring the existence of racism and other oppressive systems does not make them go away. Naming, acknowledging and



engaging with different life experiences and our social lives is the first step towards breaking down binaries and hegemonic cultural dominance.

I feel that the aims of society and aims of school are mismatched: one of the primary aims of society is democracy; however, if schools and curriculum don't provide choices, reflect democratic values, or engage in intentional democratic practices (such as meaningful dialogue and discussions, and opportunities to address social realities that make up a democracy), then how can democracy be accomplished? In the book *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, author Nel Noddings (2005) argues that "school, like family, is a multipurpose institution" (p. 63). She believes that the "single purpose view" is not only a moral mistake, but also impractical and technically wrong, as schools "cannot accomplish their academic goals without attending to the fundamental needs of students for continuity of care" (Noddings, 2005, p. 63). Therefore, all educational practices – including pedagogy, access programs and educational services should also be multipurpose. One hundred years earlier, John Dewey (1897) had argued that the school is primarily a social institution (which teach children how to form community life), and that education is a social process through which children can share in the "inherited resources of race" and learn how to use their powers for social ends (p. 78). However, our pre-occupation with standardized testing and test scores has left us no room in education for imagining a different way to do things, for taking time to understanding the world as we seek autonomy and freedom. Consequently, as education became standardized, and schools "single-purposed," society has come increasingly under centralized control, lessening the importance of individual family and community (Gatto, 2005, p. 13). In the book, *Dumbing us down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*, John Gatto (2005) – a veteran school teacher – argues that that "school takes our children away from any possibility of an active role in community life,"

and hurts communities by transferring the training of children to the hands of certified experts (p. 13). In doing so, “it ensures our children cannot grow up fully human” (Gatto, 2005, p. 13). Today’s schooling, Gatto (2005) says, functions as a system that deliberately deprives students (citizens) of the power to make choices for themselves. As exemplified by Costello (2016) in the 2016 Southern Poverty Law Center Report cited, students who don’t belong to the dominant / majority group suffer the most. The inequality our school systems create (through policies, standardizing, bias in curriculum, school dominant culture, and a lack pedagogical approaches that tend to psychological and social human needs) and sustain are not easily visible, and thus continue to be unrecognized. As Annett Lareau (2011) puts it, “schools play a powerful, sometimes overwhelming role in shaping students’ life chances” (p. 265). However, in the U.S. the idea of competition and meritocracy, suggests that both fair play and deserved outcomes exist for all. To Lareau (2011) “Our culture’s nearly exclusive focus on individual choices renders invisible the key role of institutions” (p. 343), but I argue that such concept blinds us to the reality that our educational system is not neutral, nor does it give all children equal opportunities.

#### The Interconnected Classroom: Schools as Sites of Problem-Solving and Justice

I read Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* for the first time when I was fifteen years-old. I was already attending a Freirean High School in Braganca Paulista, Brazil, at that time. Paulo Freire’s classroom pedagogy consists of: investigative thinking, dialogue, problem-posing with emphasis on critical knowledge of reality, and acts of cognition (not transferals of information) – where students and teachers must both be “Subjects” in unveiling reality, coming to know it critically and recreating that knowledge together, and where “Teacher-Student” and “Student-Teacher” are jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. The purpose of his educational methods are to teach students how to think critically about what they’re learning,

connecting these ideas to the issues they care about, and help them reflect upon their reality with the purpose transforming it.

Our curriculum recognized the need to link “disciplines” in understanding the world rather than treating them as discrete entities. One of the most discussed themes throughout my high school years was Social Justice, and systems of oppression and inequality, which we discussed throughout most of our History, Geography, Economics and “Government” courses, as part of the curriculum. We also talked about environmental issues (such as global warming, the preservation and extinction of certain species – such as honey bees – as they relate to the overall health of the planet and humanity, the preservation of forests, etc.) and human health (including discussions of genetically modified food and seeds) during Biology and Chemistry courses, as well as morals and morality and culture (e.g.: how does societal ideologies impact certain groups of people?) in our Social Competencies class. I realize now that my schooling, under Freire’s educational philosophy, contributed not only to my academic development, but also to the development of dialogical and communication skills, including an increase in vocabulary and knowledge of social dynamics, science and politics, and to my creative and critical thinking skills. The experiences described here highly influenced my desire to become an educator and have informed my approach to education.

For the past fourteen years, I have held several administrative positions at three different institutions of higher education in the US. Yet, I chose to focus this particular study on the K-12 schooling system, because I noticed that the majority of students and administrators I’ve met throughout the higher-education system lacked the foundational skills, critical knowledge, creativity and moral education necessary to promote change in their own spaces. I believe that educators and college students often lack the foundational tools to implement liberatory practices

in schools of higher education; hence reproducing many of the same issues that we face in the K-12 schooling system.

Educational institutions such as K-12 schools and universities play a critical role in the socialization and growth of people in our society, and therefore have the power to either reproduce or analyze, critique and transform the ways we construct and engage with the world and our realities. However, education reforms of the last two decades have focused on harsh accountability policies that are restricted to quantifiable improvements in reading and mathematics (Ravich, 2010, p. 76-78), therefore eliminating the need for school districts to invest and fund subjects such as the humanities (philosophy, civics and ethics, social sciences and history), the arts and physical education – which foster reflective thinking and social engagement with peers. I feel that students in the current American public educational system, however, are not given the opportunity to address and learn about politics, social problems, equality, cultural acceptance, etc., in an educational (non-biased) setting (such as classrooms), with a “facilitator” (teacher) who has received training on areas of cultural competence and inclusiveness. Currently, schooling and formal education educate and train students on several aspects of society, including job preparation, capitalism, entrepreneurship, trait skills, but leave out other important social aspects and dynamics. These topics often also remove the “human” and environment from schooling, focusing on individuality and personal profit. Furthermore, schooling has become embedded in a punishment complex that deploys punitive consequences as methods of “personal accountability” including zero-tolerance policies and the school to prison pipeline. In these ways, the goals of educating the human diverge from the lived reality of students. I believe that all education has to promote the addressing of social problems and that schools must create individuals that can solve problems. Freire (1970) argued that true liberation

comes from an education in which students are taught to think critically about their realities in order to transform them, while John Dewey (1938) believed that the most important freedom for a person is freedom of intelligence – that is, “freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile” (Dewey, 1938, p. 61). Hence, I argue that institutions, policy makers, test-makers and curriculum leaders should be responsible for providing students with a curriculum that emphasizes such principles.

I have observed that my students often arrive on campus with the idea that college is where students attain their freedom, when in reality they are still stuck in a very structured system that continues to remove them from the equation. Many of the students I’ve encountered throughout my career have become accustomed to a standardized and structured system that positions them as passive customers of education. In connection to my own social location, I analyze the K-12 system as a site of learned passivity and disengagement to navigate the tensions between my understanding of schooling and the difficulties encountered by my students. I use the following sections to comprehend the ways that common core has been deployed against its values and to discuss the results of disenfranchising students through testing and standardized policies and practices. Additionally, I utilize critical theories to disrupt the current understandings of schooling and describe Freirean pedagogy as a space of possibility that includes the ability to imagine alternate methods of educating – all of which inform my work with students in higher education.

### The Role of Theory: Pedagogy and Liberation

Crotty (1998) suggests that it is “important and liberating to distinguish theory consistent with experienced reality from theory that is not” (p. 44). He describes constructionism as the philosophical view that all knowledge is subject to human practices, and therefore all meaningful

reality is “construed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world” (p. 42), and always created and transmitted within cultural and social context. Constructionists argue that “meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). People create meaning through the consciousness they gain through their own socialization, and consciousness is only gained through social engagement and interaction, and therefore it is subjected to culture and cultural and social differences.

Because consciousness is gained through culture and socialization, constructionist views claim that there is no singular true or valid interpretation, however, interpretations of reality often belong to a dominant culture and prove oppressive to marginal groups. As Crotty (1998) puts it:

Social constructionism emphasizes the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see and feel things, and gives us a quite definite view of the world. This shaping of our minds by culture is to be welcomed as what makes us human and endows us with the freedom we enjoy (p. 58).

However, while the notion of culture (which includes one’s cultural and social values, behavioral and societal norms and expectations, racialization, etc.) is often seen as fully human and necessary for social life, they must also be called into question. Socialization, according to constructionists, often tells us that the way humans ‘make sense of things’ is simply ‘the way things are’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 59). However, power and power differentials play an important role in which ideas become hegemonic as well as the consequences of straying from the norm. Understandings of society (including social norms, education and schooling, cultural values, notions of right and wrong, etc.) are often inherited (or received) through prevailing and dominant culture, and hence hinders us from seeing reality (Crotty, 1998, p. 59). Therefore, as

Rose Ylimaki (2012) points out in the article *Curriculum Leadership in a Conservative Era*, the meaning of curriculum “extends beyond teaching practice, to the sociocultural and political aspects of education content decisions: what is taught, to whom, and by whom.” (p. 305). “Curriculum is an inherently political matter” (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 119), and curriculum theorists and curriculum leaders “who are grounded in understandings of cultural politics, recognize curriculum as complicated conversation and curriculum decisions as political acts” (Ylimaki, 2012, p. 305). In the book, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode (2012) argue that pedagogical transformation is necessary if we believe that the aim of schools should be to prepare young people to become “productive and critical citizens of a democratic society” (p. 122). The policies and curriculum we are following today are unlikely to improve our schools or the lives of children.

Constructionists argue that all meaningful reality “is contingent upon human practices” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42), and developed and transmitted through human interaction and social context. Therefore, reality can be altered by altering human interaction and the social means (systems) through which we engage with reality. Through my formal education at a Freirean school, I have come to understand education as the way (through processes, structures, choices and strategies) in which individuals and communities come to know and understand the world, to act within it (Freire 1970), and as Dewey (1897) put it, as “a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 78). Although I do not believe that human beings become educated only through schooling and schooling practices, schools and higher education institutions play a major role in creating a path to human education, and defining our views on what we formally consider “education” and educated individuals and communities. Noddings

(2013) argues that, “To provide equal opportunities for all children, public schools must be preserved and strengthened” (p. 37). Hence, “schooling” and formal US educational institutions are central to this discussion. I use the terms “schools” and “educational institutions” interchangeably to refer to the governed system that defines “formal education” in the US. We have constructed a formal educational system (through schooling and the policies and practices that govern how we “do” schooling) that I believe does little to engage humans in a holistic educational process – as defined by Freire and Dewey. John Dewey’s educational vision challenges the construction of our existing educational system, and dares to propose an educational philosophy that tends to all aspects of human development, while Freirean pedagogy teaches us the tools to transform existing systems.

K-16 educators, school administrators and policy makers have spent years developing core standards and core values that inform the goals and aims of American education. I have found that the successful implementation of such educational and academic goals is hindered by the dominant – often racist, classist and sexist – constructions of reality that serve as the dominant paradigm for interpreting and implementing such aims. Simply put, when we look at our current educational metrics (that inform accountability policies, curriculum implementation and teacher/faculty training), we’re not appropriately measuring (or holding our formal educational system accountable for) our proposed ideals.



## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical lens used in this analysis derive from Paulo Freire's (1970) pedagogy (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), and educational theories in curriculum development and implementation; Maxine Greene's (1998) *The Dialectic of Freedom*, as well as Edward Taylor, David Gillborn and Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2009) *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*. While other works and theoretical approaches are discussed and examined throughout this educational study, the work of Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene and Gloria Ladson-Billings inform the academic lens through which the analysis presented here is conducted.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire describes oppression as an unnatural state of "living death", where human beings are denied their fullness. He argues that society and institutions (including schools) function through a system of oppression, which dehumanizes not only those who are oppressed, but also those who oppress. To overcome oppression, people must first learn to critically recognize its causes, and reflect upon them, so that – through transforming action – they can create a new situation and change their reality. Hence, Freire (1970) argues that education (through problem-posing, dialogical and reflective methods) is the vehicle for liberation. Liberating education consists in collaborative and dialogical learning, not the traditional "banking model" of education, where students are considered an "empty object" to be filled with knowledge the teacher bestows upon them. Students and teachers must both be "Subjects" (both are simultaneously teachers and students) in unveiling reality, coming to know it critically and recreating that knowledge together. By tackling the myths of an unchangeable reality – which are carried out by the oppressors – and gaining critical knowledge of their reality, the oppressed can act to challenge and change the structures of society.

While the praxis of domination is antidialogical and composed of manipulation and myths, sloganizing, “depositing”, regimentation and prescription, where the oppressor class denies people the right to say their own word and think their own thoughts; the praxis of transformation is dialogical and cooperative. In praxis of transformation, action and reflection occur simultaneously. The oppressed gain critical awareness of their role as “Subjects of transformation” as they reflect and participate in revolutionary process. Freire (1970) believes that for true liberation to happen, educators and educational leaders cannot think without the people nor for the people; but must always think, act and learn with the people.

Whereas constructionist views ask humans to engage with and understand constructed meaning (Crotty, 1998), Freire’s (1970) approach requires that education be transformative – it should help students understand their realities and the systems of oppression that affect their realities, in order to transform it – and serve as a means to humanize all in society. Therefore, schools and curriculum should make explicit connections among identity, differences, power and privilege in order to move education toward such transformation and humanization (Freire, 1970).

One of the ways freedom is achieved, according to Maxine Greene (1998), is when individuals make decisions they believe to be fully their own (p. 101). Hence, freedom is unthinkable without an understanding of the lived world (Greene, 1998, p. 104). Further, Greene (1998) argues that the road to freedom can be opened only when individuals become aware of alternative possibilities for themselves (p. 72). According to Greene (1998), however, our educational systems don’t allow for true freedom. She believes that we are chained to a system that dictates what’s acceptable, and how we should learn and live – and that systemic education does not teach students how to pursue true freedom. Greene (1998) argues that we’ve created a

system of “instrumental rationality”, where our actions are governed by efficiency, instrumentality and “rules based on empirical knowledge” (p. 54). She explains that educational systems have become regulated, not by what educators may conceive to be worthwhile, but “by calculable results, by tests of efficiency and effectiveness” (Greene, 1998, p. 54).

By focusing on “instrumental rationality”, not only do we inhibit dialogue and take away spaces where we should promote freedom to talk, we also learn not to see passed a set of aims – and consequently, not to focus on the educational needs of individual students. Finally, Greene (1998) believes that we should educate individuals to be public and active contributors to society. To do so, we must help students find meaning in their lived experiences, and realize their freedom to alter situations by “seeing oneself as a person in a new perspective” (p. 90).

Like Freire, Greene’s approach to education is grounded in the belief that prior experiences of students, as well as the concerns of their communities, should be the starting points in building curriculum and teaching, as educational experiences do not take place in a vacuum, “only in a real context – historical, economic, political, and not necessarily identical to any other context” (Freire, 1985, as cited by Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 17). Freirian pedagogy also maintains that curriculum that is truly transformative is designed locally, to consider – and capitalize on – the skills students already possess through the way they were raised and engage with their communities and every-day tasks, in order to teach them the additional human capacities they lack – academic skills, as well as social and critical thinking skills, thereby culture and socialization to schooling. Further, the Critical Pedagogy for liberating education described by Greene encourages critical thinking, reflection and action. It advocates for creating a democratic setting within the classroom where every individual feels important and responsible for contributing to the learning process.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a scholarship of critical inquiry that begins by identifying the “relationship between knowledge construction, naming, and power” (Taylor, 2009, p. 4). It recognizes that assumptions of White superiority are so rooted in institutions and the legal, political and educational structures that govern U.S. society, that they are almost unrecognizable. The scholarship of critical race theory is grounded in the reality that reflects the distinctive experiences of people of color – which are usually characterized by oppression. Critical Race Theory contests that the experiences of “Whites” in the US are the standard for all experiences (Taylor, 2009, p. 8). Furthermore, it “openly acknowledges that perceptions of truth, fairness and justice reflect the mindset of the knower” (Taylor, 2009, p. 8), and uses narratives, observations and story-telling to bring to light a counter-story to the dominant narrative (or dominant views of reality).

Based on historical context, as Edward Taylor (2009) puts it,

Non-white access to education has never been a *de facto* legal or social right...

... All too often, we avoid discussing the historic reasons that Whites and people of color have had separate and unequal educations. What this gains is a release from the complexities of historical and politic understanding whereby problems such as the academic achievement gap between Whites and children of color, or of immigrants, or the poor, can be rendered as new problems, rather than expected outcomes of intentional policies and practices. It thus inhibits the formulation of new strategies (Taylor, 2009, p. 7).

In education, Critical Race Theory is used to create understanding on the existing educational barriers for low income students and students of color, as well to explore ways in which students and educators are able to resist and overcome such barriers. In *Critical Race Theory in*

*Education*, Edward Taylor (2009) argues that “challenging Eurocentric epistemology and questioning dominant notions of meritocracy, objectivity and knowledge have particular application to the field of education” (p. 10), and further advocates for liberatory pedagogy that uses counterstorytelling and narrative to create a better understanding of the lived experiences of marginalized students, and encourage inquiry, dialogue and participation from a wide variety of constituents. Hence, Taylor (2009) contends that Critical Race Theory can inform educational approaches and policies by giving voice to otherwise unspoken truths (p. 12).

Freire’s, Greene’s and CRT scholarships guide us through transformative ways of engaging with educational practices and addressing the critiques of schooling Dewey (1938) had warned us about last century. When classroom power-dynamics are challenged through dialogical pedagogy, critical race theory offers a platform through which students can start to form the correlation between subjects and their own social activities (Dewey, 1938), and engage with alternative possibilities for themselves and society.

In her book, *Freire, Teaching and Learning*, educator Mariana Souto-Manning describes the use of Freire’s Critical Pedagogy in her curriculum and in the classrooms she taught (which ranged from first grade to adult and teacher education). Souto-Manning (2010) describes Critical Pedagogy as an educational process “which situates school within societies and considers structural forces which influence and shape schools” (p. 10); therefore recognizing that learning is influenced by culture and by the context which it takes place, and challenging the idea that learning is “culture free” (p. 10). She believes that because learning is co-constructed through social interactions, students enter school with “specific bodies of knowledge that are socioculturally and historically located” (p. 11). Hence, curriculum must consider students individually, as well as their culturally shaped backgrounds.

According to Souto-Manning (2010), Critical Pedagogy exhibits four key aspects:

It is grounded in a social and educational vision of justice, equality and the belief that education is inherently political.

It is dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering, takes first-hand knowledge into consideration, and prevents students from being blamed for failing.

It is based on generative themes (which are generated from the experiences of students, their families, and communities).

It positions teachers as researcher – as learners. Authority is dialectical and focuses on facilitation and problem posing (p. 12-13)

Critical Pedagogy values diversity and encourages critical thinking, reflection and action. It advocates for creating a democratic setting within the classroom where every student feels important and responsible for contributing to the learning process (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 14). Through this process, students are empowered both individually and collectively to become active learners.

The approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and educational practices I offer throughout this examination of the US-educational system are grounded in the belief that prior experiences of students, as well as the concerns of their communities, should be the starting points in developing effective educational policies and practices and structuring curriculum, as educational experiences do not take place in a vacuum, but belong to broader socio-political systems.

## DISCUSSION

Keeping in mind the analytical perspective discussed above, I now mobilize it to discuss Michigan's K-12 Common Core Standards. I pay particular attention to the divergence between desired outcomes and material practice. Through such an analysis, I argue that unlike previous framings of Common Core, they are not inherently problematic, and instead have liberatory potential. The problem at hand instead lies in the implementation of these goals given the demands for quantitative measurables defining success, monoculturalism present in schooling practices, and the assumptions present between the roles of "instructors" and "learners."

Educational Goals Vs. Practice: Analyzing our Common Core Goals and how Educational Policies and Practices Impact our Capacity to Reach Them

The Common Core Standards begin with identifying "anchor standards," – or basic skills and abilities that students should be expected to gain – which are then subdivided by grade level to identify the specific abilities and skills that every student should master at the end of each grade. I focus my analysis on Michigan's K-12 ELA (English Language Arts) standards.

According to Michigan's Common Core State Standards (CCSS), "Michigan's K-12 academic standards serve to outline learning expectations for Michigan's students and are intended to guide local curriculum development" (CCSS, n.d., p. 1). While the "anchor standards" of the CCSS are very general, its creators claim to "lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century" (CCSS, n.d., p. 3). That vision is described in a section of the document titled "Students Who are College and Career Ready in Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Language," which, as stated, "offers a portrait of students who meet the standards set out in this document." (p. 7). The document further claims that "as students advance through the grades and master the standards in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language, they are able to exhibit with increasing fullness and regularity these

capacities of the literate individual” (p. 7). According to the CCSS the “capacities of the literate individual” include:

- They demonstrate independence
- They build strong content knowledge
- They respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline
- They comprehend as well as critique
- They value evidence
- They use technology and digital media strategically and capably
- They come to understand other perspectives and cultures

(CCSS, n.d., p. 7)

In this analysis, I look at some of the key areas that (due to its general nature) the Common Core State Standards failed to address; and which impair the ability of students to reach the vision described (above) by the document. I focus on three of the seven goals of the Core Standards (or “capacities of the literate individual,” as the document calls them): “they comprehend as well as critique”, “they use technology and digital media strategically and capably” and “they come to understand other perspectives and cultures”; and look at how the existing gap between the reality of standards implementation and its desired outcomes described here impacts students.

#### They Comprehend as well as Critique

*“Students are engaged and open-minded – but discerning – readers and listeners. They work diligently to understand precisely what an author or speaker is saying, but they also question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and premises and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning” (CCSS, n.d. p. 7).*



While this is a noble “capacity of the literate individual”, as the CCSS puts it (p. 7), it fails to address the power structures, accountability laws and mandated assessment policies that prevents students from reaching this goal. A major problem with the written CCSS is that it fails to acknowledge that in order to “question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and premises” (CCSS, n.d., p. 7) and become informed and active participants in a democratic society, “all students need to understand multiple perspectives and not only the viewpoints of dominant groups” (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 56). Unless they do, “students will continue to think of history as linear and fixed and to think of themselves as passive and unable to pose questions or make changes in their communities and the larger society, or even in their personal interactions” (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 56). Nevertheless, standardized tests – which every student is required to take, and every teacher is held accountable for ensuring students pass – give students only one way of seeing the world. When reality is presented as static, finished, and flat – as they are in standardized tests and curriculum designed to meet test scores – the dialogical, problem-posing, critical thinking-based education that is required to meet the Core capacity described above, disappears. Classrooms are currently dominated by “narration sickness” (Freire, 1970, p. 52), with most student-teacher interaction consisting simply of transferals of information (from teacher to student), versus dialogue, questioning and reasoning, as this CCSS student capacity suggests.

State-set standardized tests and assessments define what is considered important for students to know and what should appear in each school’s curriculum. Therefore, schools are fundamentally not politically-neutral. As Nieto and Bode (2012) point out, since “only a tiny fraction of the vast array of available knowledge finds its way into state curriculum standards and frameworks, district guides, textbooks, and teacher’s instructional manuals, it is obvious that

curriculum is never neutral” (p. 119). Those in power – states and testmakers – determine the knowledge, attitudes, and traditions valued in a particular society. By defining the knowledge that everyone is expected to have, testmakers, policy-makers and curriculum developers “confer special status on that knowledge which is important to the dominant interests, while neglecting and denying this status to knowledge that may be equally or more important to other segments in society” (Walker and Soltis, 2009, p. 73), hence “reproducing in each generation the social patterns and power relations of the prior one” (Walker and Soltis, 2009, p. 72). What is taught in schools is aligned with the beliefs of those who created the metrics, and what is tested has to align with what is taught, therefore making it nearly impossible to reach the Common Core Goal described. How can students “question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and premise and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning” (CCSS, n.d. p. 7), when the curriculum they are taught is tested as truth? Furthermore, what does the construct of such knowledges as truths do in considering other forms of knowledge? Specifically, conveying dominant knowledge as “truth” can as a result defines other ways of knowing as “false” and “invalid.”

In a section titled “Key Design Considerations” of the CCSS document, its authors claim to value “*A focus on results rather than means*” (p. 4). The document states that “by emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed” (CCSS, n.d., p. 4). The problem here is that states are left with the power to determine how they will assess “the results” – and they have determined that the only way to assess students is through a set of standardized tests. Thus, the “required achievements” are operationalized as quantifiable and determined through a single evaluation method.

The claim that teachers have space to determine learning of the Standards belies reality. In the current American education model, which must produce test scores by threats of punishment and promises of money, teachers aren't treated as professionals who think for themselves (Ravitch, 2010, p. 67). Instead, they must follow pre-determined learning objectives (regardless of the interests and learning aptitudes of their students) in order to achieve required test scores mandated by the state. Additionally, as noted by Nieto and Bode (2012) in *Affirming Diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*, No Child Left Behind mandates have "funneled professional development funding away from any goals that are not test-score driven, further eroding opportunities for teachers to learn about or expand multicultural goals" (p. 34). In this way, creativity is eroded in pedagogy and curriculum given the continuous risk of missing the necessary test scores.

Laws mandating competency test and accountability for those who fail to meet pre-set guidelines cause "teachers to teach to the test and stress the 'basics'" (Tyack and Cuban, 1995, p. 62), which, in turn, results in "inattention to complex thinking skills and to the challenge of fitting the curriculum to the cultural background of the students" (Tyack and Cuban, 1995, p. 62). Deborah Meier (2002) also explains in the book *In Schools We Trust*, that adopting such a system (of teaching to the test and stressing only the "basics" being tested) means that "curriculum related to children's interests or contemporary or spontaneous events must be ignored – or at best noted only in passing – in order to cover the standardized test-driven fare" (p. 129). Furthermore, she notes that everything not being tested in schools today – like music, dance, hands-on experiments, subjects that emphasize civic life (such as social justice education and serve-and-learn projects) – are being driven out of the curriculum and losing focus within

education (Meier, 2002, p. 129). Hence, tests serve a political purpose in defining what policymakers define as valuable knowledge.

In his book, *Measuring Up*, Daniel Koretz (2008) explains some of the dangers of relying so heavily and exclusively on standardized tests and test scores to measure our educational system. He believes that current policies are interested only in whether students have mastered what it takes to reach the proficient standard set out by policymakers, not taking into account that “proficient” is merely an “arbitrary point on a continuum of performance; it does not indicate mastery of all of a discrete set of skills” (Koretz, 2008, p. 29). Standardized tests typically ignore changes in context that should shape the interpretation of scores (such as trends in the mix of students). Additionally, “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor” (Koretz, 2008, p. 237). Therefore, he argues that test scores provide limited information about students, teachers and even schools.

Although the CCSS document further states that teachers “are free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals of the standard” (p. 4), that “the Standards focus on what is most essential, but do not describe all that can or should be taught...[and that] “a great deal is left to the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers” (CCSS, n.d., p. 6); many teachers feel pressured to “cover the material” that will be on the tests – at a pace set by exams dates, not necessarily by students’ learning curve. Therefore, topics relative to children’s lives, such as racism, classism, social and gender inequalities, as well as community activism and social justice, are not included with the “standard” curriculum. This sends students a message that knowledge in their families and work in their communities (and of their community members)

have no value or prestige within educational settings and institutions of power (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 120). Our overreliance on quantitative metrics erases any chance for students to make connections between curriculum (what is taught and what is deemed important) and their lived experiences, hence deterring from the Common Core Goal described here, which requires questioning and reasoning.

Through my formal education under Freire's pedagogy, I came to understand education as the options, strategies and structures through which individuals and communities came to understand their lived realities and act within them (Freire, 1970). Such act required time for reflection and making connections between what is taught and "what is lived", resulting in understanding "precisely what an author or speaker is saying," and questioning "an author's or speaker's assumptions and premises" to "assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning" (CCSS, n.d. p. 7). While Freirean pedagogy gives the educator "the freedom to engage in curricular practices without the strict fidelity to implementation; to do what teachers do best – adapt, borrow, and re-create what will be most beneficial to individual students and/or groups of students in particular settings" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 34), the oppressive, political nature of the currently used monocultural curriculum and assessments, not only narrows curriculum and fails to acknowledge the potential, creativity, ingenuity, resourcefulness and accomplishments of marginalized populations (Gay, 2013, p. 54); it also silences dialogue, which is crucial to transformation (and to meeting the "capacity of the literate individual" described here).

They Use Technology and Digital Media Strategically and Capably

*"Students employ technology thoughtfully to enhance their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language use. They tailor their searches online to acquire useful information*

*efficiently, and they integrate what they learn using technology with what they learn offline. They are familiar with the strengths and limitations of various technological tools and mediums and can select and use those best suited to their communication goals” (CCSS, n.d. p. 7).*

There are two fundamental questions that must be asked regarding the implementation of this directive, particularly given the assumptions present within the statement presented above: What if the child’s school does not have enough computers? What if the child does not have access to technology at home? Unfortunately, issues of access and equity in education are not addressed by the Core Standards.

Curriculum, as Nieto and Bode (2012) note “is the organized environment of learning. Curriculum concerns what should be learned and under what conditions it is to be learned” (p. 119). The successful implementation of Common Core State Standards, as written, assumes and expects that learning conditions are equal: that all students – regardless of where they live, what language their parents speak, how many meals they eat per day, how many books and other resources (if any) their school has, etc. – will meet the exact same Standards through learning the essential skills highlighted by the CCSS. Instead of creating policies to alleviate racial, linguistic, and class subordination/discrimination (Cross, 2007, p. 251), its implementation does not take into consideration the difference in opportunities and inequalities of the school system.

By creating an expectation that all students will meet the exact same “capacities of the literate individual,” at the same time, without consideration of students’ socio-economic status, or resources available to them and their schools, we have “inserted a cultural explanation – called Achievement Gap – for a societal problem (apartheid education based in structural race, class, and linguistic inequities)” (Cross, 2007, p. 252). While the CCSS nobly determines that every child needs to acquire these skills, it fails to point out – and make the determination – that the

responsibility to create access to resources and opportunities for success (and goal-attainment) belong with the institutions in power, not the student. Until we have recognized the inequity of our schooling system, we will continue to see a gap in attainment of such CCSS goals.

“Equitable school financing is central to student learning” (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 109). Schools, particularly urban schools – which serve predominantly students of color – are too often underfunded. Studies show that there is a significant relationship between funding and academic achievement (Bao, Romeo and Harvey, 2010, p. 344). “Many richer districts have modern gymnasiums with pools, computers available for each student, sports teams, music, language, and art classes starting in kindergarten” – which are not available to poorer schools (Bao, Romeo and Harvey, 2010, p. 345). Because of these disparities, children in poorer districts “have fewer opportunities to socialize and access facilities provided by the entire community, resulting in negative effects on academic performance. Poorer districts have more needs and less money” (Bao, Romeo and Harvey, 2010, p. 345). Therefore, I believe it is safe to point out that states will never educate all students to high standards – to meet their Standard goals and literacy capacities – unless they first fix the finance systems that support America’s schools (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 109). School inequities stem well beyond access to technology, however, the CCSS posits said access as a given and neglects to recognize the ways the availability of such goods are unequally distributed across a stratified society. It is interesting that in a document describing a goal of excellence in education for all students there is little mention of access to physical books, meals, heating, and transportation. In this way, while describing a need for students to become technologically savvy, structural inequities remain unaddressed. That is, the assumption of a meritocratic society that rewards students based on talent and hardwork is betrayed by systemic barriers determined across intersectional power dynamics.

## They Come to Understand Other Perspectives and Cultures

*“Students appreciate that the twenty-first century classroom and workplace are settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together. Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively. Through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures and worldviews, student can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own” (CCSS, n.d. p. 7).*

## *Monocultural Common Core or Monocultural Curriculum, Assessment and Policies?*

According to Paulo Freire (1995), literacy should be a tool for personal transformation and social change, and in order to be so, what students are learning must directly relate to their lives. Furthermore, as Souto-Manning (2010) states, “Education and knowledge have value only if they help people free themselves from oppressive social conditions” (p. 17).

Even though the Michigan Common Core State Standards (CCSS) state within the “essential capacity of the literate individual” described above, that students who are college and career ready in reading writing, speaking, listening, and language must “come to understand other perspective and cultures,...” “...actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening,” and be able to “communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds and evaluate other points of view critically and constructively;” according to Walker and Soltis (2009), many educators have reported that since the passage of No Child Left



Behind, they have felt the effects of “direct federal power in a narrowing of the school curriculum to conform to mandated tests” (p. 91). Michigan’s CCSS also states that “through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of period, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own.” Therefore, multicultural curriculum and critical pedagogy should be considered just as indispensable to Common Core Standards as its focus on reading, writing, math and computer literacy. However, multicultural education is instead viewed as peripheral to the core curriculum and often as an “optional-only” criteria, and therefore it is perceived by many curriculum leaders as irrelevant to basic education.

As a result, targeting and harassment – particularly of immigrant students, LGBT students, Muslims and kids with disabilities – within schools has been steadily rising for the last decade and, according the Southern Poverty Law Center, skyrocketed by the end of 2016 – following the presidential elections (Costello, 2016). The atmosphere of the home is prolonged in the school (Freire, 1970, p. 136), and as John Dewey (1897) puts it, “it is the business of the school to deepen and extend children’s sense of the values bound up in their home lives” (p. 79). One of the precepts of currently-used “success” metrics (through mandated standardized tests) is to not think critically about what’s being said/taught or valued in their answers. Therefore, not only have we hindered the likelihood that students will “actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening” and learn to “evaluate other points of view critically and constructively” (CCSS, n.d., p. 7), we have also created unsafe and traumatic learning environments, particularly for students with non-normative identities.

Despite the goals of the CCSS, education on cultural diversity and multicultural perspectives is left to the discretion of teachers – who may want to teach cultural relevance or

not; who may not have time to teach it; or worse yet, who may be told not to teach it by their principals and schools administrators (Costello, 2016). According to Nieto and Bode (2012), even when schools offer cultural literacy courses, much of what is taught is still heavily male-oriented and European, therefore “the significance of people of color, and those who write in other languages is diminished, unintentionally or not” (Nieto and Bode, 2012, p. 55). Nieto and Bode (2012) explain that this is because history is generally written by the “conquerors, not by the vanquished or by those who benefit least in society. The result is that history books are skewed in the direction of the dominant groups in a society” (p. 55).

In higher education, “Diversity Officers” are frequently charged with maintaining a comfortable level of diversity on campuses without questioning common practices and knowledges. Cultural events, anti-colonial and anti-racist courses and programs that teach social justice leadership are usually “extra-curricular” and therefore peripheral to the goals of attaining a higher degree. As Rose Ylimaki (2012) points out in her article *Curriculum Leadership in a Conservative Era*, “the role of politics and the effects of cultural political shifts still dominate much of the thinking and practices related to curriculum” (p. 344). Our country’s population, and hence our students, are becoming more and more diverse (culturally and ethnically, socio-economically, generationally, racially and gender), however, we have failed to build curriculum that allows us to understand such diversity and changing demographics, and therefore students arrive at institutions of higher learning without having practiced problem-solving and communicating across difference. They know how to show discontent, but lack the vehicles to understand one-another and come up with solutions together. Why is our society often surprised at instances of discrimination when we are schooled to understand domination as normal and hierarchies of knowing and belonging as natural?

## How can Practical Applications of Freirean Pedagogy Meet Common Core Standards? Souto-Manning's Use of Culture Circles and the Common Core Standards

Both Freire's (1970) approaches to curriculum are grounded in the belief that prior experiences of students, as well as the concerns of their communities, should be the starting points in building curriculum and teaching. Dewey (1938) further argues that true education is found in life-experience, and hence curriculum can be guided by "educative experiences" that are based on students' lives (p. 51). This approach to education serves as theoretical foundation for Souto-Manning's (2010) teaching method of *culture circles*. While the exact curriculum used in the implementation of culture circles varies (to adapt to the interests and realities of each group of students), the purpose of culture circles is to build knowledge through inquiry, problem posing, dialogue, problem solving and transformative action. Culture circles participants (including the teacher) learn from each other through dialogue and by being exposed to multiple and diverse viewpoints, and recognize that "no one knows everything, and no one is ignorant of everything" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 61).

In chapter 3 of her book, *Freire, Teaching and Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts*, Mariana Souto-Manning (2010) describes her use of Freirean culture circles in her first-grade public school classroom. She describes having a large and very diverse first grade classroom, where many of her students had been socialized into "the knowledge as truth paradigm (e.g. 'my way is the right way' and 'this is how you do this')" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 59). Because the "truth paradigm" supports White perspectives, children of diverse backgrounds are often silenced and not acknowledged for their knowledge and experiences in American classrooms (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 59). She felt that assumptions and beliefs often exposed in the classroom disrespected the diversity that was present, and that without reaching a

place where students respected diverse options and problematized assumptions, she would not be able to “form a collaborative learning community that provided access to diverse students” (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 59).

Souto-Manning identified a generative theme often brought up by her first-grade students: “fairness”; and sought to challenge the “banking concept of education” (Freire, 1970) by fostering critical dialogue within her classroom (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 56). Dialogically, her students were able to identify historical, cultural and social issues that shaped their own lives and classroom. She saw her role as a “facilitator”, responsible for “creating a community of learners, a sense of trust, and a respect for differences” that would allow them to engage in hard conversations (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 57). She selected books and reading materials that helped represent issues identified within the context the classroom or school, while still meeting required state standards. She believes her reading selection served as “codifications for generative themes” (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 57) for her class. The paragraph below describes how she approached state required lessons on the civil rights movement:

I read and discussed multiple texts about the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks. These civil rights leaders were included in the state standards for first-grade, mandated after the No Child Left Behind federal legislation which sought to make educators and schools accountable for learning outcomes. Nevertheless, we went beyond the unit of study presented in our textbook and the typically happy endings portrayed in most children’s literature to include media reports of discrimination in airports as more Blacks were stopped at security points, articles about unemployment rates, housing, and educational opportunities, and multiculturally-oriented children’s literature about civil rights and racism. By bringing multiple texts to serve as situated representations of our previously identified generative theme, I sought to provide the children with plenty of opportunities to problematizing the issue. As a result, they came to realize how prevalent issues of equity and access (or lack thereof) were in their immediate and not-so-immediate surroundings (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 57-58).

Souto-Manning (2010) used the “read-aloud time” in her classroom to read books that told the same story from different perspectives. In accordance with the Common Core goals of

coming to “understand other perspective and cultures,” “actively seeking to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening,” and “communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds and evaluate other points of view critically and constructively” (CCSS, n.d., p. 7), Souto-Manning (2010) wanted to “promote the importance and validity of multiple voices in the classroom, and thought that starting with books authored in multiple voices would be a good beginning” (pg. 61).

She describes reading Paul Galdone’s 1970 version of *The Three Little Pigs*, as well as James Marshall’s 1989 version of the same story. The pictures below show the dialogue that Souto-Manning (2010) describes followed between her students after reading both books. It shows that students started theorizing from their experience (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 63), as they met ELA Common Core Curriculum Standards for Reading for Literature – by “Acknowledging differences in the points of view of characters” (Anchor Standard 6, Grade 2), “comparing and contrasting two or more versions of the same story by different authors by different cultures” (Anchor Standard 9, Grade 2) – and for Reading for Informational Text – by “asking and answering questions about key details of the text (Anchor Standard 1, Grade 1) and “identifying basic similarities and differences between two texts on the same topic” (Anchor Standard 9, Grade 1).

Kary:	I get it...even when we read the same story, we can understand it differently!
Derrick:	Yes! Did you see the pictures? They were so so so different.
Alexus:	Yeah...but the story was the same.
Kasey:	Almost, not really.
William:	When you is readin’ somethin’, the pictures in your brain is different from pictures in my brain.
Kianna:	But...which is the right one?
Teacher:	Right one?
Kianna:	Yeah...
Teacher:	What do you think? Is James Marshall right? Is Paul Galdone right?

(Undecipherable talk)

Alexus: I think they are all right.

Teacher: Yes. Just because their stories are different, it doesn't mean that there is a right one and a wrong one.

William: That just mean they chose tal' different way, like sometime we was speakin' different in class

Sanquita: Like the way we speak at home? [referring to African American English]

William: Yeah...ya know.

(Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 62-63)

Souto-Manning then describes reading Jon Scieszka's *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* with her students. This story, which is narrated by the wolf, challenges previous assumptions of this widely popular children's story, by telling a side of the story people aren't usually told or had heard about: the wolf's side. The picture below shows the class dialogue, as Souto-Manning (2010) describes, following the reading.

Souto-Manning (2010) believes that readings such as this helped her students question previous assumptions of right and wrong (which according to Freire, 1970, is key to transformative education), recognize the importance and validity of multiple perspectives, and understand the importance of authentic dialogue (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 64). The result was that not only did multiple perspectives become a "valid concept in the classroom and children sought to learn from each other and how their peers experienced school" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 64), but also Souto-Manning's first grade class met every one of the six CCSS Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for their grade – including "participating in collaborative conversations with diverse partners, peers and adults" (Anchor Standard 1, Grade 1), "expressing ideas and feelings clearly" (Anchor Standard 4, Grade 1), and "producing complete sentences" (Anchor Standard 6, Grade 1), amongst others highlighted on page 23 of the CCSS document.

William: I like this one the most

Kasey: I think that we ever got to hear the wolf's voice before.

Teacher: Yes, he offers us another perspective.

Luz:               Pers-pective?  
Teacher:       Yes. Another point of view; a different telling of the same story.  
Alexus:       So, it's not about right and wrong stories. It's about who writes it.  
Shaniece:      It's nice to know how the people, I mean the animals, see what happened.  
Kary:           This is very helpful.  
Teacher:       How so?  
Kary:           Now I think I get it. Now I get it. Just because someone does something in a different way, it doesn't mean that it is wrong. We should still listen to it, and understand, or at least try, how a person understands something. Like in the books we read.  
Derrick:       Yeah...the pigs and the wolf told what happened in very different ways.  
Taylor:       And we can't even know what the two pigs who were eaten thought because they are dead.

Figure 2. Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 64.

Through such curriculum approach, Souto-Manning's students met several of the required Common Core Standards, and "came to understand other perspectives and cultures" (CCSS, n.d., p. 7). Furthermore, Souto-Manning (2010) was able to build a strong and supportive classroom community, where, according to her, issues of social justice and fairness also became important to first-grade students (p. 54). She believes that by "creating critical spaces in the classroom and facilitating their dialogic exchanges helped them move from being discouraged by the lack of fairness, to holding hands with friends to fight injustices to change their worlds together" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 54). Had Souto-Manning (2010) decided not to create a space for problem posing and dialogue; the conversations that addressed cultural issues and fairness, and included broad perspectives "would have remained in the periphery of the classroom" (p. 53).

I believe that Freire and Souto-Manning would conclude that for Common Core Standards to work as intended, to achieve its outlined goals, educators have to create living curriculum that is sensitive to what's going on in the students' worlds and understands what's

important to them. However, what I found through this analysis is that the major flaw with the Common Core Standards does not lie within the “anchor standards” or the Common Core themselves, but within the monoculturalism of mandated educational policies, such as No Child Left Behind, which holds teachers, students and schools accountable for meeting only the core standards deemed important by a set of standardized tests – that are designed by the “conquerors, not by the vanquished or by those who benefit least in society”(Nieto and Bode, 2010, p. 55). It goes beyond schools simply ensuring that their students’ meet certain common standards. It is about policing curriculum and assessment, so that there is only one acceptable way to achieve such standards. Those policies tell us that everyone, regardless of cultural background, language, opportunities and resources should arrive at the exact same results by following the exact same path. As such – and opposite to Freire’s pedagogy and Souto-Manning’s approach, – they focus upon learning outcomes and materials, with little regard for the need to adapting learning to students’ context.



## CONCLUSION

Sonia Nieto (2012) argues that “in our multicultural society all good education needs to take into account the diversity of our student population. Our world is increasingly interdependent, and all students need to understand their role in a global society, not simply in their small town, city or nation” (p. 58). I will further argue that democracy in such a multicultural society requires that students learn how to listen to, value and learn from one another. Therefore, curriculum design should be local and meaningful to the particular set of students that will use it; not “common,” monocultural and standardized by those in power.

While the Common Core Standards document is not in itself oppressive, and would allow for implementation of a wide range of pedagogical theories (including Freirian theory) and curriculum approaches (including Critical Pedagogy methods and culture circles as exemplified in this paper), in looking through the common core more critically, and through Freire’s and Souto-Manning’s lens, I found that there’s an unmovable gap between the flexibility of the Common Core Standards as written, and the rigidity of the currently used standardized curriculum and standardized assessments.

I believe Diane Ravitch (2010) is right in stating that:

The policies we are following today are unlikely to improve our schools. Indeed, much of what policymakers now demand will very likely make the schools less effective and may further degrade the intellectual capacity of our citizenry. The schools will surely be failures if students graduate knowing how to choose the right option from four bubbles on a multiple choice test, but unprepared to lead fulfilling lives, to be responsible citizens, and to make good choices for themselves, their families and our society. (p. 224)

Schooling must encompass more than the ability to echo dominant ways of knowing, being and belonging. In true Freirean fashion, it must facilitate the liberation of all individuals towards

collective actualization. In that way, to fulfill its true democratic potential, schooling must facilitate not only the questioning of our social structures but also the ability to reimagine alternate configurations. Given the increased demands to define success across terms steeped in individualism and greed, we must reconsider the school site as the location that can facilitate discussions of equity and collective responsibility. As Giroux reminds us, “education is not only about issues of work and economics, but also about questions of justice, social freedom, and the capacity for democratic agency, action, and change, as well as the related issues of power, exclusion, and citizenship” (p. 197). Achieving this ideal demands the ability to think about Common Core beyond a set of guidelines to produce a prepared workforce and instead the need to co-create critical members of community. Liberation in this sense, would then demand that we tackle societal issues rather than invisibilize problems; demand recognition of mutual humanity instead of translating lives into dollar signs; and develop consensus through a participatory model. While these ideals may appear utopian, there are important inroads present around the world and they serve as valuable models to emulate and advance.

In the book, *The Flat World and Education*, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) describes the successful public education systems from Finland, South Korea and Singapore and how government and education policies helped generate such success. She states that “one of the great triumphs of post-colonial education policy in Singapore was its successful use of the school to create greater equity and social cohesion among disparate groups, including minorities who had been poorly educated, while strengthening civic loyalties” (p. 184). According to Darling-Hammond (2010), Singapore’s triumph was due to government efforts to distribute educational funds equally across schools, design curriculum that engages students in projects that encourage creativity, independent and inter-dependent learning; as well as to create “thinking schools”

where “syllabi, examinations and university admission criteria were changed to thinking out of the box and risk-taking” (p. 185).

In describing the Finish education model, Darling-Hammond (2010) observes that teacher education programs in Finland are research-based, in order to teach teachers to think pedagogically, develop their own research-based, problem-posing and experiential lesson plans and “thinking curriculum” for all students (p. 165-173). I believe we have much to learn from Finland’s and Singapore’s educational policies. I believe that Meier (2002) is right in arguing that we should trust our students’ drive to learn (p. 19).

Innovation must incorporate societal goals and the entirety of each learner across an equitable schooling space. Our students cannot learn technology when they are hungry or lacking the necessary educational materials. They cannot comprehend theory when the curriculum ignores their and their communities’ positionality and daily experience. While the Common Core is often vilified, we must recognize that the problem is not that it serves as the foundation of our schooling system and instead consider the scaffolding implemented to realize it as the primary problem. The goals presented by Common Core are valuable and could provide an informed and critical populace, however, the demand to teach a singular and hegemonic perspective, quantify knowledge and ability, and test according to one’s ability to replicate dominant information, betray these ideals.

Within my work in higher education, I found that I can create spaces of liberation through programming and within the intercultural center I run. While, as a single administrator I can’t enact immediate institutionalized change through policy; as an educator, I can create spaces of centering, mattering, dialogue, and hence, liberation. Such praxis, in turn, functions to disrupt the existing status-quo, and promote dialogue, collective learning, questioning and thinking

through transformative actions, as Souto-Manning (2010) did through *Culture Circles*. I often tell my students that we must understand the systemic issues that impact our communities and spaces, and at the same time, we have the moral responsibility to engage with issues we can impact. To build a more democratic country our government and policy-makers must make investments to create an equitable educational system, and teachers, educators and students must be at the center of policy-change. In the meantime, however, part of the answer may lie in reformulating the framework and methods under which we operationalize educational policies and center freedom as the desired endgoal.

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