

AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS MAINSTREAM EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND
PRACTICE APPLICATION HAS ON STUDENT LEARNING AND IDENTITY
DEVELOPMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

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An Examination of the Effects Mainstream Educational Policy and Practice Application has on Student Learning and Identity Development

Thesis directed by Professor Joseph L. Polman

In this thesis I used the lens of critical educational psychology to examine the effects of the application of mainstream educational practices on my personal school experience, the experiences of my family, and on the learning and identity development of children more broadly. I reflect on how my personal education experiences have transformed my identity as a student, educator and parent. I used critical historical inquiry to question how the shared policies, practices and values such as standardized testing and self-regulated learning programs in American public schools aim to shape specific types of persons with the specific purpose of fulfilling a capitalist agenda and perpetuating social stratification. I suggest educational psychology has helped to create an ideology that influences educator's values, practices and personal assumptions concerning students. These applications in turn directly impact student identity development and create unequal learning opportunities that influence a student's academic trajectory towards success or failure. Suggestions for an alternative approach are made.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW.....	9
	History of educational psychology and compulsory schooling.....	9
	The scientific method paves the way for standardized testing.....	10
	Failing schools.....	13
	Self-regulated learning.....	14
	No excuse schools.....	16
	Social-emotional learning.....	17
III.	CRITICAL REFLECTION.....	22
IV.	DISCUSSION.....	35
V.	REFERENCES.....	40

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Educational psychology has, since its introduction in the field of science, focused on implementing best policy and practices in the classroom that are research based and designed to provide the most effective learning opportunities for students. Educational psychology serves to study children and how they learn while “promoting the development of personality, talent, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential through collaborative work with individuals, families, schools, educational managers, and other agencies” ("Understanding Educational Psychology", 2019). Educational psychologists investigate memory, conceptual processes, individual differences and how children process and react to emotional, social and cognitive stimuli to formulate new strategies for learning. Although it is considered a newer field, educational psychology had been in practice for quite some time.

The beginnings of educational psychology can be traced as far back as Plato and Aristotle who believed knowledge is innate at birth and that "association" among ideas facilitates comprehension. John Locke's work in the late 1600's provided the conceptual framework for testing the validity of knowledge. Both Rousseau's theory that knowledge is acquired through experiences in the 1750's and John Dewey's beliefs in the late 1800's concerning individuals and how they respond in their environments also encouraged the field of educational psychology to develop. Edward Thorndike is often referred to as the founder of modern educational psychology. In 1903 he applied associative learning to humans and education and suggested rewarded behaviors increase more frequently. This directly challenged the educational doctrine at this time of disciplining behavior to encourage desired outcomes.

Educational psychology has evolved over time from Thorndike's behaviorist approach, and now, the dominant perspective used to understand learning focuses on taking a cognitive one of discussing mental models over stimuli and responses. Educational psychology has made many positive impacts on educational doctrine, citing evidence based research that in turn has influenced educators' understanding of how children learn and how to teach most effectively (e.g., Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

One achievement worth noting is how educational psychology has contributed to understanding reading processes. Focusing on decoding and listening comprehension in early reading instruction was discovered to enhance a child's reading ability. Understanding how students learn to read has provided valuable reading instruction strategies in classrooms across the country. Educational psychology has also contributed to the interpretation of learning and memory. Comprehending memory storage strength and memory retrieval strength has provided the "most effective student self-study strategies" such as highlighting, rereading, practice testing and re-studying. In a 2006 study by Roediger and Karpicke, students who repeatedly studied before the test administration performed the best, but the students who only studied the text once and then were tested three times after learned the most. It was observed the students who had to retrieve items from memory increased memory retrieval and resulted in the re-study strategy as a more effective tool for learning retention.

Because educational psychology has molded the foundation of education, the teaching philosophies and practices of American public schools directly reflects the current trends that foster particular values and educator perspectives. However well intended educational psychologists have been, these values and perspectives have not always resulted in positive

outcomes for all students. Progress has been minimal on closing gaps in student achievement, based on differences in income, race and ethnicity. “Closing achievement gaps” has been intended to ensure equitable access to education, but remains a serious issue that not only affects students today but also subsequent generations. Some argue that using the term “achievement gap” is problematic in that it identifies students only by academic skills. Findings that suggest lower-income students do not have equal learning opportunities to their peers have led leaders in education to coin the term “opportunity gap.” Although many policies are aimed to provide equal opportunities for all students, many policies and practices recommended by educational psychology overwhelmingly focus on the individual student’s qualities. Emphasizing individual responsibility for learning has unfortunately undermined the ideals of community and diversity, as I will elaborate.

There is a circular logic to the process of raising children in an environment that combines self-interest and the “greater good” set by societal and economical ideals. This practice directly challenges the values of community, lessens equal learning outcomes and supports individual ambitions. According to critics Martin and McLellan, students are convinced to self-regulate and “fall in line with existing education, corporate, and governmental agendas, all for our own good, which also is the good of our society and nation” (2013, p. 162). They go so far as to liken the abusive nature of the current education situation to a prison where authoritative figures observe and influence learning opportunities without consent or knowledge of the student being observed. Because of the severity of these accusations many critics have formed a movement to bring change about how educational psychology focuses its research.

There is a present call to action in the education community to challenge “the overwhelming focus in research on individual students’ pathology rather than on the ways that

our society organizes for the success of some and the failure of others” (Nasir, 2011, p. 8). When students fail, the blame is being placed on the individual, rather than the policy and practices of the school system. Focus on the individual draws the person away from working towards the community, and more towards individualistic goals even when actions are situated within society and a community. Only addressing the individual self, and building narcissism, resists a communal aspect of the world.

Schools provide the setting for students as they navigate their learning experiences and form social identity and agency through the school’s environmental influences. Therefore, schools and educators have a strong effect on student identity development. These student identities are the foundation for learning experiences and influence an academic trajectory composed of opportunities for access to learning both within school and outside of school.

Attempts at providing responsible citizenry such as character education and recognition of emotional intelligence have been integrated and adopted into mainstream instructional curriculum, but the results have not proven as beneficial as intended (Cohen, 2001). Social and Emotional Learning has emerged as an answer to disparities in the present education system. This movement focuses on fostering skills in children and adults necessary for managing emotions, showing empathy and effective decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2019). Even ancient education included the importance of emotional learning as an integral piece to the formation of a responsible citizen. Unfortunately, the reality for social and emotional learning is that it is not a perfect solution. Attention continues to be on the individual, consigning accountability for learning to the student and expecting the student to be able to control behavior. In addition, the time required for teacher training and

instruction in this program for many schools has been trumped by learning standards and standardized testing instruction.

This critical analysis and personal reflection explores how educational psychology has shaped the American school system including specific policies and practices and how administrators and educators perceive student academic achievement and identity through two means. First, I will present a critical literature review focusing on practices adopted in schools such as standardized testing, self-regulated learning, no-excuse schools, and social-emotional learning. Second, I will provide a personal reflection of the affects the application of mainstream educational psychology practices in the United States had on my identity as a student, educator, and parent. I reflect on how my identity shifted from a student who resisted attending elementary school, to a teacher who practiced educational psychology's most effective teaching practices to a parent who preserved those values instilled in me as a student in my own children.

In addition to my personal reflection, I will argue that a teacher's classroom values, practices and personal assumptions concerning students directly impacts identity development and can create unequal learning opportunities that influence the student's academic trajectory towards success or failure. I use the lens of critical educational psychology and the practice of critical historical inquiry to question how the shared policies, practices and values in American public schools aim to shape specific types of persons with a specific purpose.

In this study, I intend to discuss the role of the compulsory schooling in the development of students, the role of psychology in education, the assumptions educational psychology makes, and the implications these assumptions have. How this study contributes to the education of self is analyzed and presented using a theoretical perspective of critical socio-cultural educational

psychology. A critical historical inquiry was used to explore the ways social historical practices shaped our current educational practices.

I used disciplined inquiry in this study to provide direct evidence of the negative effects mainstream educational policy and practices have on identity development and learning through personal recollections as a student, teacher and parent. Examples from literature are provided to support the stance that educational psychology should shift from focusing on individual student pathology and instead use a critical psychological lens to direct the future of educational policy and practices. This thesis also intends to provide evidence through literature citations that supports the claim that the policy and practices adopted in the American school system reflect a capitalist agenda, and foster the continuation of social class stratification. Instruction practices that provide authentic learning experiences and ample resources in schools is suggested as an alternative direction towards education. A cultural-historic approach to theory and instruction is suggested as an alternative.

The limitations to this study include methodological ones such as limited sample size. Because of time constraints and limited access to participants, my personal experiences as a student, educator and parent are the only reflections provided. Using self-reported data carries limitations including reporting selective memories, exaggeration of the experiences shared and attributing cause of outcomes incorrectly. In the future a more exhaustive study including daily collection of observations, activities, interviews, and reflections from a variety of educators could be analyzed to expand a broader and statistically significant response to the research question.

Included in the research are references to learning and human development. Learning is defined as “shifts in ways of understanding, thinking about concepts, and solving problems and

closely related shifts in ways of doing or participating in activities” (Nasir, 2011, p. 17). Rogoff states “human development is a cultural process” and that individuals “develop through their changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities, which also change” (Korbin, 2011 p. 1). Identity is also discussed, which Nasir (2011) defines as “a sense of self, constructed from available social categories, taken up by individuals and ascribed by cultural groups and social settings” (p. 17). Identity and learning are dependent on the context in which they develop. Individuals identify selves through the cultural practices of their daily lives including social interactions and communication (Nasir, 2011).

I also cite critical educational psychology, which uses a theoretical and socio-cultural perspective to examine how educational policies value particular characteristics of students and influence their identity development based on academic performance. Critical educational psychology refers to multiple perspectives examining how “social, historical, and cultural arrangements produce different opportunities and advantages” (Vassallo, 2013b, p. 2). Vassallo (2013b) defines critical educational psychology as “a commitment to draw from inter- and intradisciplinary perspectives and methodologies to examine ethical, political, practical, and ideological contexts related to educational psychology phenomena” (p. 2).

A cultural-historical approach to education is mentioned as a means to disprove the assumptions that “regularities are static” and move towards a focus of group and individual experiences and not on variations of cultural groups are situated within the individual (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 19). In the desire to maximize student learning, many schools have practiced assigning cultural learning styles to individual students to match a specific teaching strategy to complement it. These assumptions have led to learning approaches underserving certain student groups.

Social and emotional competence refers to the capacity to understand, process, and express the social and emotional aspects of our lives. These competencies represent a mode of intelligence. Intelligence is defined as

a set of skills of problem solving—enabling the individual to resolve genuine problems or difficulties that he or she encounters, and, when appropriate, to create an effective product--and must also entail the potential for finding or creating problems -- thereby laying the ground work for the acquisition of new knowledge (Gardner, 1983, p. 60).

CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW

History of educational psychology and compulsory schooling

It is hard to ignore the trends in educational psychology research through the last half of the twentieth century that largely focus on inner psychological functioning of the private selves of students. Assigning learning disability labels, learning types, student ability tracking and rationalizing under-performing standardized tests scores to self-efficacy, motivation and behavior issues redirects the focus of blame for academic underachievement from the educational institution and places it directly on the individual student. What events led to the present reality where standardized testing scores are the deciding factor for different learning opportunities for students, unequal resource allocation to schools, and performance-based teacher salary? What types of student identities are developing given the current instruction conditions students are experiencing in schools?

These questions can be addressed by critically examining the history of compulsory schooling. Beginning in the early 19th century, compulsory school attendance laws began to appear throughout The United States. Poor children were the target, as they were less likely to attend, with the aim to equal education to all children (Rauscher, 2016). But a hidden curriculum existed that upon examination painted a more sinister aim including regulating immigration, separating the child from his/her parents and perpetuating a socio-economical class system. As Bowles and Gintis (1976) stated, “public schools are not characterized as a means to level the academic playing field for all. Their goal is to continue social order and stratification” (p. 265). The educational system aimed to engrain American culture into immigrant children and molded American children into model citizens to produce an effective workforce required for a capitalist

economy (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Expression, independence and negotiation were skills taught to students from privileged classes while rule compliance and rote behavior were the focus of low-income students (Golann, 2015).

Differentiating instruction based on economic status to prepare students for a capitalist society, addressing the large amount of immigrants entering the country and identifying the “feeble-minded” through compulsory schooling, public education was viewed by many as the solution to all social and economic problems. If the child is properly educated there is no need to reform the adult (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Adopting this ideology that education is the solution to society’s problems led schools to lose any educational focus they had. The educator’s responsibilities unknowingly evolved from equal academic curriculum instruction for all students to using cost-benefit analysis to weed out those that would not serve the purpose of a capitalist economy and propel those students deemed capable of success in a competitive market. For example, teachers and administrators routinely practiced categorizing and labeling students as having academic potential, or not having academic potential based on observation and then students were tracked into classes accordingly. As Tyack and Cuban observed, “it’s easier to offer a course than remedy inequities in employment and gross disparities in wealth and income” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). How were schools able to justify their direct influence on student placement and academic trajectory without resistance from parents and students?

The scientific method paves the way for standardized testing

With the advent of the scientific method in the 19th century, a revolution of using a process of principles to follow a set of methods to rationally explain inquiry emerged as the standard form of performing science. Just as Francesco Redi and Louis Pasteur were able to

disprove the theory of spontaneous generation using the scientific method, educational psychologists now had a means to explain the phenomena of differences in student learning outcomes. As Martin & McLellan put it in their (2013) work, “The Education of Selves: How Psychology Transformed Students,” educators now had a “scientifically credible yet individually sensitive way of reconciling conflicting demands for the institutional socialization and personal development of children and adolescents through education” (p. 58).

This scientific credibility resulted in a wave of intelligence tests emerging at this time including the Binet Scale, the Alpha and Beta tests, Terman’s tests and the Otis’ Group Intelligence Scale, all designed with the goal of testing and ranking individual intelligence. Attitude measurement after World War II built the foundation for assigning particular personality types to the individuals, again to scientifically explain unwanted behavioral traits. It was believed through testing that individuals held the self-governing ability to alter one’s behavior to attain desired state, or practice technologies of the self.

Inevitably, intelligence testing made its way into the public school system. Educator testimony of student learning was no longer an efficient means to gauge intelligence. As Terman described, calibrated testing provided a “more reliable and more enlightening estimate of the child’s intelligence than most teachers can offer after a year of daily contact in the schoolroom” (quoted in Kamenetz, 2015, p. 49). Using tests to rank students against each other created a hierarchy in the school system where opportunities were not evenly dispersed between students. Testing was a tool used to identify the potential for social mobility through education. Underperforming students were denied educational opportunities as a direct consequence of intelligence testing through classroom placement and tracking.

Mass testing and student tracking continued to grow through the twentieth century. By 1940, The Iowa Tests, California Achievement Tests and Stanford Achievement Tests were administered throughout the country. Testing caused administrators, parents and teachers to rely on educational psychologists for student development theory and best instruction practices. Educational psychology provided the means for schools to assign students into different categories such as learning disabled, gifted, or vocational (Martin & McLellan, 2013).

Psychometrics in education resulted in attributing behaviors viewed as concerning to the individual student and then tracking them into learning categories without taking into consideration the “broader social contexts in which individuals live their lives” (Martin & McLellan, 2013, p. 5). Using the scientific method in educational psychology reflects relationships between dependent and independent variables and eliminates the subjective meaning of the given situation the student is in. Lagemann “claims that educational research has failed to take into account the social processes and personal experiences that affect teaching and learning, and policy and governance of schools” (Gottesman, 2009, p. 4). This methodology provides a purportedly scientific explanation for individuals responding under the influence of different variables, but it also reflects a perspective of individuals and not members of a social group. Critics of this traditional approach to educational psychology testing claim that it ignores the “social, cultural, historical and political context of human experience” (Martin & McLellan, 2013, p. 6). This activity diverts focus from sociocultural context, and fails to include a holistic perspective of the learning experience of the student.

Cole’s work highlighted the “logical problems of inferring ... when psychological tests and educational practices developed in the Euro-American tradition were used as standards of

evaluation in alien cultural surroundings (Glăveanu, 2011, pg. 8). Martin and McLellan (2013) also critique the promotion of an expressive, enterprising and entitled self, created in schools and by educational theory. They suggest the future direction of education to reflect a more critical and civic-minded way of being.

In addition, critics claim that using measurement to operationalize a trait emphasizes the association between success and individualism while ignoring the social and cultural context and interactions with others. Skeels noted that intelligence tests are limited to indicate the individual's situation at that given point in time (Kamenetz, 2015). His suggestion that these intelligence tests only have the ability to serve as a benchmark for educators was not a popular opinion in a society desperate to identify and distinguish outliers. A report that did gain popularity, though controversial in its findings, called for more standardized testing administered in schools to combat the wave of academic underperformance in public schools. I now turn to that report.

Failing schools

A consensus that schools were failing and testing could provide the answers was the focus of the 1983 report: *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983). This report implicated a decline in standardized test scores, posing a “rising tide of mediocrity”, although the overall trend the study reported showed scores remained the same or increased during the time tested. This triggered a cyclical pattern in the school system in which tests were used to measure the school's performance and then the test posed the solution to the problems: administer more tests more often. The standardized testing trend shifted from using tests to classify student learning potential to now

being used for grade promotion and graduation. High-stakes testing scores awarded resources to high performing schools and shut down or restructured underperforming ones. Not only were students and schools directly affected by the new use of standardized test scores, but also teacher salaries and performance incentives initiated by the 2002 No Child Left Behind legislation, a bipartisan bill launched by George W. Bush and championed by the Democratic Senate leadership.

No Child Left Behind added more pressure for students to perform highly on standardized tests. It established a market-oriented approach to address the issues in the field of education and narrow the achievement gap by increasing the amount of testing administered and giving consequences for not meeting “adequate yearly progress” such as lower or no funding. Teaching in the classroom evolved to educators “teaching to the test” through educational psychologically endorsed instructional practices such as self-regulated learning (Kamenetz, 2015).

Self-regulated learning

Self-regulated learning is a renowned practice that touts empowerment of students and develops what proponents describe as necessary and universal characteristics to compete and function in the 21st century through teacher-directed instruction. Findings reveal self-regulated learning helps regulate positive emotions in students and therefore fosters academic achievement. Providing students self-regulated learning skills is purported to prepare them to rise to the occasion when faced with failure, use the strategies learned and attain higher test scores. Proponents of this instruction program report extensive studies suggesting students enrolled in self regulated learning programs outperform those in a control group. Students versed in self-regulated learning are able to identify when different strategies would be more effective and can

flexibly apply the approach in different situations (Dent & Koenka, 2016). But, Vassallo, in “Self-Regulated Learning: An Application of Critical Educational Psychology” (2013b), argues that self-regulated learning is instead politically charged and results in student disempowerment and oppression.

Vassallo critically examines self-regulated learning and explores different perspectives of the consequences of this practice that contradict popular notions. A critical educational psychology perspective is used to examine all factors that influence educational psychology practices. As Vassallo argues, teaching self-regulated learning in schools disempowers and oppresses students as it provides culturally and ideologically specific ways to be, think, and act. It complements neoliberalism and validates middle-class conventions contrary to its reported intentions of leveling the educational playing field and empowering students. Also, self-regulated learning actually prepares students for the career field that best reflects their current socio-economical class. When students do not adopt self-regulated learning strategies, more standardized testing is administered and interventions are utilized to address the non-conformity issue (Vassallo, 2013a, 2013b).

The importance placed on students to adopt self-regulated practices in order to control student learning is evident when the outcomes of student learning are examined. Despite the name, these strategies encourage students to depend on their teachers for the scripts to succeed while suppressing self-production. The scripts provided promote the student to rely on an existing order as well as teach them how they should behaviorally engage in different environments (Vasallo, 2013a). Students, the oppressed, therefore depend on the teacher, the oppressor, for independence and emancipation. “If teachers, for example, are thought to possess the types and forms of knowledge that are deemed necessary to ‘escape’ conditions of

oppression, then students must depend on teachers to acquire the knowledge for their empowerment” (Vasallo, 2013b, p.4).

Although scientifically found to produce the academic needs of the present, such as increased testing performance, self-regulated learning as taught through these programs rarely leads to desired characteristics of our future citizens such as civic virtue and community; rather it leads to self-interested, individualistic and committed to self-advancement individuals that are disconnected from communal interactions (Vassallo, 2013b).

No excuse schools

In some cases educational reform was not limited to classroom instruction and practices, but school-wide initiatives administered to address underperforming test scores. Samuel Casey Carter’s (2000) book *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools* set the stage for “no excuse” educational reform that applies executive-style leadership, and competition. This movement claims that if students work hard enough, they have the ability to become high performers. Psychologist Angela Lee Duckworth’s newly defined term “grit” complements this rhetoric that if children can persevere, they can succeed. A passion for long-term goals even after repeated failure indicates a student’s success rate in schools (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).

No excuse schools focus on “gritty” practices that include extended instructional time, frequent standardized student testing, an extensive rewards and consequences system, and a highly structured disciplinary system that results have shown to dramatically improve standardized test scores of low-income minority students. The strict environment created at “no excuse schools” may succeed in improving test scores, but critics argue that student identity is

undermined and does not promote student social mobility. The skills emphasized do not promote higher levels of learning, independent management of workload, or interactional skills. Students are prepared for docile working-class jobs by focusing on self-control traits such as obedience, punctuality, and rote behavior (Golann, 2015).

No excuse schooling and self-regulated learning have in common that they both emphasize that the individual student has the ability to control one's behavior and emotions while disregarding the context for behavioral experience. They both encourage student dependence on the educator and school system while suppressing self-learning and life-long learning. They encourage so-called resilience, self-control, opinion suppression and self-monitoring and not the skills needed in a flexible work environment. Negative consequences of these practices include inadequate skills to be productive workers in the 21st century, impediment of social mobility, a narcissistic identity and a disconnection from community values.

Social-emotional learning

The negative consequences of self-regulated learning, no excuse schooling, and standardized testing have resulted in calls for educational psychologists to find a more effective curriculum and practice that not only yields high performance on test scores, but also supports the skills necessary to perform in society after graduation, the opportunity for social mobility, creates positive identity development and supports communal values. Current research explores the cognitive processing of emotion and suggests possessing strong social-emotional learning capacities results in long-term success. Studies propose emotional intelligence is a stronger indicator of success than IQ and higher emotional intelligence gives the student an “edge” in their personal and professional lives. Teachers provide the roadmap through direct instruction to ease student frustrations, build positive character values and increase academic performance.

“Social-emotional learning” is a relatively new word to define a process that addresses basic life skills that is still growing and being explored. Social-emotional learning is defined as a process of developing emotional competence of one’s self and others through reflection, decoding, and other practices and strategies to achieve optimal individual biological potential for relationship building, self-management, cooperation, communication, emotion regulation, problem solving, mediation, and decision making (Cohen, 2001).

Findings from studies also imply social-emotional learning reduces negative outcomes such as emotional distress and conduct problems (Cohen, 2001). Benefits associated with social-emotional learning include positive effects such as communal and responsible members of society educated in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. The premise is that ensuring students are taught appropriate emotional intelligence skills leads to “happier” citizens with greater long-term success. When students feel good about themselves they have more positive relationships that encourage a positive learning environment at school where students can performance most efficiently on a standardized test (Elias, et al., 1997). Even teachers report a sense of empowerment when faced with situations in the classroom they would otherwise view as challenging after following the instruction of social-emotional learning programs. Social-emotional programs address the social-emotional competence of the caregiver. A variety of reflection exercises are provided as well as strategies for examining and reframing reaction behaviors. Many believe this path is the most effective solution to closing the achievement gap and producing model citizens, there are many that criticize its focus and implementation (Cranston, 2016).

Critics of social-emotional learning argue that shifting focus to cognitive processes of emotions may not best serve our students. They point out the absence of recognition of cultural

diversity in social-emotional programs adopted in schools across the countries. Not all cultures experience, approach and express emotions in a uniform way. Universalizing emotional expression scripts for all students does not suit the non-middle class White students. Cultures vary in how they express in the core emotional areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Ignoring cultural differences ensues negative consequences for student learning and performance. Although the negative outcomes are less severe than self-regulated learning and no excuse schooling, their foundations share a common view of the student with individual deficits that need to be rectified.

When compared to self-regulated learning, social-emotional learning perpetuates the lens of assigning blame for academic underachievement on the individual and attempts to “fix” the student by explicitly teaching a script of appropriate talking points and practicing self-regulating emotional exercises. The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning provides many resources for parents and educators including training tools, videos, and scripted stories for social situation practice. Although these resources are designed to support social-emotional competence, systematically controlling the student’s emotions to promote self-control solves classroom problems in the short run, just as self-regulated learning helped to increase performance on standardized tests, but failed to prepare students for post high school graduation tasks. The similarities between these two programs extend well beyond their foundations and shortfalls.

Social-emotional learning programs are also similar to self-regulated learning in that they both systematically teach a set of skills to students that can then be psychometrically tested and measured. Students are forced to rely on the teacher to provide the scripts needed to succeed. Although community and relationships are at the center of the social-emotional learning the

focus is still ultimately on psychometrics, making for a less genuine learning experience. The individual student is still viewed through a neo-behaviorist lens as individually accountable for his/her behavior and by rewards and consequences their behavioral and academic problems can be addressed. The teacher controls what emotions can be expressed, how they can be expressed and under what setting. Using a constructivist perspective in schools denies humanity to students when they are taught to change themselves to fit the reality. The idea that humans possess the ability to transform their world on their own ignores cultural and social influences and interaction (Vassallo, 2013a, 2013b). Only addressing the individual creates a narcissistic identity and resists a communal aspect of the world.

Adopting a curriculum that individualizes the student and places pressure to conform to certain practice reflects a capitalist agenda, and fosters the continuation of social class stratification. These critical discoveries support the need to investigate how educational curriculum and programs can most effectively be implemented in our common school system to accomplish the long-standing goal of equally preparing our students to be productive and responsible citizens. How to teach children to deal with emotions creatively and employ intelligence in a beneficial way is a mission education advocates intend to address.

Schools provide a setting for students as they navigate their learning experiences and form social identity and agency through the school's environmental influences. Therefore, schools and educators have a strong effect on student identity development. These student identities are the foundation for learning experiences and influence an academic trajectory composed of opportunities for access to learning both within school and outside of school. Students bring their subjective experiences to school where they are reconfigured within the norms and ontological structures to be determined if they are valid or not (Martin & McLellan,

2013). Therefore, this critical analysis aims to responsibly address community, culture, and identity.

CHAPTER III

CRITICAL REFLECTION

When I was a little girl, I remember people always asking me, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I knew to answer, “I want to be a doctor” because that is the career path my mother always encouraged me to pursue. I thought that if I said, “I want to be a doctor” enough times, it would help change the answer my heart instead wanted to give, “I want to be a teacher.” You could say I have teaching in my genes. All four of my aunts and uncles were teachers. My mother was a teacher and also an administrator. It just made sense that I would follow the same path. I remember as a little girl how much I enjoyed helping my mother in her classroom to get ready for the new school year. Reading through the student class list to label notebooks and folders, I pretended that it was my classroom and that I was in fact the teacher. Many of my childhood memories are about my pretend play as a teacher at the school my mother taught at or my home.

I remember spending my time after elementary school and on the weekends pretending to be a teacher with my dolls, stuffed animals and even my dog. There is a picture of me when I was only three years old teaching math facts to our Great Dane, Caesar. I can still picture sitting on the cold floor of our kitchen, a huge dog sprawled on the floor beside me and me flipping through my flash cards believing I was teaching our old dog new tricks. Even when I was young there was something about helping others that I was drawn to, something about seeing the process of starting with a new concept and guiding someone to the point of understanding that gave me a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction. I continue to feel the same way after all these years. What has changed though is my perspective of mainstream educational teaching

practices, my personal teaching philosophy and my values as a mother that I have for my own children regarding learning and identity development.

Observing my career as a student, you may not have guessed that I wanted to be a teacher. I dreaded going to school and cried every morning all the way through second grade. It wasn't until my teacher, a nun, set me straight and ended my long-standing resistance. We were alone in the classroom and I was packing my book bag to go home early. A common practice of mine was to pretend to be sick and ask to go to the nurse. The nurse always called my grandfather to come pick me up and this allowed me to escape school for a few hours. My excitement for an early departure was replaced with anxiety when I heard her timber voice, "Come here, Jamie." I walked over to my teacher, a small elderly nun wearing a dark blue habit. She placed her wrinkled hand on my shoulder and looked right into my eyes. "This is enough, Jamie," she said in a stern voice. "You need to grow up and stop pretending you are sick to get out of school." My eyes widened and I could not say anything back. I was shocked and ashamed she knew my secret. All my other teachers never said a word about my 'sickness'. I realized then that I could no longer escape my days at school. After this encounter with my teacher I started going to school without crying, without resisting. Something changed that day that created for me a new personal perspective of school.

I learned to see the time I spent at school was not all that bad. I enjoyed reading, playing with friends, and I especially enjoyed math class. I liked all my teachers and playing organized sports including basketball, cheerleading, and volleyball at my school. I participated in extra curricular activities such as student council, school plays and I was the co-editor of the school newspaper. Although I was active in many activities, I was not always the best 'student'. I tended to forget to complete assignments, forget my homework at home, and failed to recall to

study for tests. I'll always remember the look my eighth grade teacher gave me when I forgot to write my article for the school's newspaper. "Where is your article, Jamie," she asked. "I'm sorry, I forgot to write it," I managed to say. She took a deep breath, turned and walked away. My teacher did not look or talk to me for days after that. It is not that I did not want to do the work, I just lacked something that allowed me to keep track and remember all of my assignments and due dates. I decided if I could be a teacher when I grew up I would be a teacher that: 1. does not assign homework and if I did it would be optional and 2. helps students with organization through color-coding systems and agendas. However, I could not spend too much time contemplating my future teaching philosophy because I needed to get on track for medical school.

My student performance improved somewhat through high school. I was active in basketball and volleyball and I was taught self-responsibility skills such as keeping an agenda, a binder with folders for each subject, outlining text and best test taking practices. There were times I forgot to finish homework, but for the most part I stayed on track with my assignments. My parents were always there when I needed help with any homework or writing assignments. I remember it was a Thursday and my English teacher announced at the end of class, "Since Mary is out sick, Jamie, you will present your speech tomorrow instead of Monday." "Tomorrow?" I asked. "But I was planning on working on it over the weekend." My teacher looked at me and replied, "You will present your speech tomorrow." That night I went home and I cried to my parents about having to write, memorize, and present a three-minute speech the next day at school. They dropped whatever they were doing to write the speech and help me memorize it. My parents always did that. They would bail me out by writing my papers for me and I would turn them in as if I was the author. I always rewrote or typed the words so I could justify that it

was in fact my own work. No wonder I had such a difficult time adjusting to college writing assignments even though I took classes designed to prepare me for a path in the medical field. I discovered what critical educational psychology would have said all along: neither my own school work, nor that of the other students in my classes were the results of individual, isolated, psychological achievement; rather, my work was supported by my context. When I went to college, what was missing was the easy access to my parents' writing skills.

I was accepted to a local college where I started my studies to be a doctor. I struggled through my courses for the first two years. I had been so reliant on my parents helping me with writing papers that I spent hours staring at the computer screen not knowing where to start. Weekly Biology and Chemistry lab reflections and literature reviews on top of all my other course work became so arduous for me that I finally found the strength to tell my parents how I felt all along. "I do not think this is the right major for me, Mom," I said as I handed her my grades. She looked at the paper with a D in Chemistry and D- in Biology and I could see tears starting to form in her eyes. "Well then, what do you plan on majoring in?" she questioned, with her eyes fixed on my grades. I shrugged and looked away. The next day my mother drove me to our county community college where I met with a career advisor. I filled out the lengthy form that asked questions about my likes and dislikes. The results told me what I knew all along. My scores were most compatible with being a teacher. Maybe my mom knew that teaching was my destiny, but being a teacher herself, she needed the proof through the results of a standardized career test.

It did not take my mother too long to jump on board with my new college path. That fall I started at a new school, majoring in Psychology with a certificate in Elementary Education. I was so excited to start anew and for the first time in my life, I honestly enjoyed going school. I never

missed a class, I participated fully, and I always completed my assignments, with a few rare instances where I read the date wrong on the syllabus and was late submitting. I was inspired by the pedagogy I studied in Psychology, I was up to date on the latest teaching practices educational psychology had to offer and by the time I graduated I was ready to mold the young minds of my students.

As always, my parents played an integral part getting me hired as an elementary school teacher. I remember on my first day at my school my principal admitted, “I don’t know what kind of teacher you are, but your mom is a principal and all principals’ kids make good teachers.” I was very grateful that he took a chance with me and that I was teaching at one of the best schools in the county. I lived up to my principal’s expectations as well as my own intentions by assigning minimal homework, color coding folders by subjects and providing take home folders, writing journals and agendas to each student. I was a good teacher. I taught the learning strategies I practiced as a student such as completing work on time, raising your hand, talking only when called on, neat handwriting, and silent reading and writing. I focused on all the important traits that make a good student that I learned when I was younger. I loyally followed the curriculum and the objectives and practiced small group reading instruction based on the results of the assessments I administered. I ability grouped to meet the individual needs of my students, created meaningful centers, performed daily read alouds and focused on writing activities. I watched my students grow academically each year. I fondly remember teaching first grade. That was the year the students came to me knowing only letter names and sounds and by the end of the year they were reading and writing paragraphs. To witness student growth as I did was rewarding and solidified my teaching philosophy of developing life long learners through

classroom management, student accountability, student self-awareness, and adhering to the academic standards.

As the years went on I became an even better teacher. My time management and classroom management improved. I became stern in my teaching approach by limiting personal student talk in order to cover the continuously changing standards and objectives through the given curriculum. I started to hold my students more accountable and assignments that were not completed in class were sent home for homework. I created and utilized an assignment log to track completion of student assignments after talk of teacher pay based on performance started to circulate. I even started giving daily homework assignments, driven by the desire for high performance on the end of the year state assessments. My students scored well on all the tested subjects: reading, writing and math. I saw some of my student test scores increase dramatically and I really believed I had done well as their teacher.

I remember our school's Occupational Therapist who worked with a student of mine was so disappointed when I shared that I would not be returning to teach the following year. I was eight months pregnant and decided it would be best to take care of my baby full time. "I was going to request you for my daughter's teacher next year. I see many classrooms, but yours is where I wanted my daughter be. Your classroom management is very good and your students are always quietly working." Hearing her words was even more reassuring to me that I was a good teacher. I could leave the school knowing I had done all the right things to ensure learning occurred in my classroom. It was now time for me to focus on my own children's learning as a mother of four.

It was fairly easy to carry over my teacher traits to motherhood. Daily routines, schedules, night time stories, more routines, providing talking paths, talking about regulating

emotions were all common practices in our house. It was important to me that I guaranteed my children had the skills necessary to succeed in school. I wanted my children to enjoy going to school and not struggle as I did when I was young. We practiced “school” every weekday in our playroom where I constructed a small classroom in the corner. We practiced days of the week, counting, weather, writing, and reading. I enjoyed our time in our ‘home-school’ and it felt like I was preparing my children to academically succeed. I was very relieved when my daughter started Kindergarten and loved it.

My daughter attended half-day Kindergarten at a school close to our home. She loved her teacher, her friends, and never complained about going. When she walked into her classroom, her teacher greeted her with open arms. During conference times, her teacher reported on my daughter’s well-being, her relationships with other students and how she was growing as a member of her class community. She touched on academics such as how my daughter was learning letter names and sounds, counting, and writing, but I got the impression her focus was more on the children’s emotions and relationships than academics. I volunteered weekly in the classroom and I was surprised to witness a classroom with students talking to each other, talking to the teacher all while completing the given assignment. I observed the teacher’s kindness and caring nature to her students.

I remember picking my daughter up from school one day and her teacher was waiting with her. She told me how she felt so bad for the way my daughter’s friends were treating her. She had tears in her eyes when she said, “Kids can be so cruel. It’s very hard to be the third wheel, but I will make sure your daughter will be surrounded by loving friends tomorrow.” I could not help but be a little surprised by her demeanor. As a teacher, I never took the time to talk to a parent about anything other than academic performance. There were a few behavior

issues I made parents aware of, but only severe incidences such as hitting or verbal bullying. It made me wonder why I did not recognize minor relationship issues in my classroom. There was not enough time in the day to address every time a student was 'mean' to another student. I always told them to ignore it and keep on working. Whatever classroom practices my daughter's teacher was practicing worked. My daughter was academically on grade level and was confident about her learning at school.

Unfortunately in the next year her attitude towards school changed when she started first grade. After a few weeks into the school year she started crying in the mornings saying she did not want to go to school. I was confused because she had been looking forward all summer to starting back. As she was crying one morning I asked, "What is wrong? Why don't you want to go to school?" With a shaky voice and tears streaming down her face she replied, "I just don't want to go. What if I don't know what to do?" This was her consistent excuse, 'What if I don't know what to do?' I could not understand why a first grade student would be so worried about knowing what to do. I reassured her that she was in first grade and her teacher would help her and show her what to do. When I started volunteering in her classroom I started to understand the pressure she felt and the anxiety that ensued.

I volunteered weekly in my daughter's first grade classroom. It was one of the ways I could get her to go to school without a complete breakdown. I observed her teacher's instruction and interactions with the students. The teacher's strict values for academics and rules were evident. Her demeanor was stern and calculating and the classroom environment was a direct result with everything perfectly labeled and in order. Following her schedule was important and deterring from the planned curriculum was not an option. Everything needed to be done right the first time and spelling errors were unacceptable. When gluing, it had to be done a certain way--

dot, dot, dot, dot and a big fat “x”. The students were not allowed to hold the door open for each other. The teacher would say, “Catch it for yourself”. When I volunteered, I preferred working with the students usually reading in the media center in a small group. My heart raced when I saw a stack of paper to cut, or student work to glue. I was so nervous I would make a mistake and this teacher would not approve of my performance. If I did not perform to her standards perhaps she would say I was not allowed to volunteer anymore. One time she wanted me to cut four by four inch squares from different colored paper. She told me that if they were not cut perfectly she would not be able to use them and they would just be thrown in the garbage. I now understood the stress my daughter felt and how hard it was to try to adapt to this kind of environment. I comprehended the dread of going to school every morning and the fear of not ‘knowing what to do’.

I will always remember walking my daughter to her classroom one morning. She had tears rolling down her face as usual. I gave her a hug and said, “Goodbye”. She turned and walked towards her teacher standing outside the classroom door. I was sure the teacher would put her arms out, console my daughter and let her know that everything would be ok. I waited to see this interaction so I could leave knowing my daughter would be taken care of. Instead, the teachers’ eyes never looked down at my daughter. Her stare at the wall behind me never wavered as my daughter walked past her and into the classroom. My heart broke for my daughter that day. I started to seriously consider taking a different approach to help my daughter feel less anxious about going to school. I contacted the school counselor who helped, but never seemed to recognize the teacher’s responsibility in my daughter’s anxiety. I never directly pointed to her teacher’s conduct as the cause, or asked for a transfer to another first grade classroom remembering how my mother told me it is important for children to learn from different types of

personalities. The school counselor met with my daughter on occasion and the individual attention she received seemed to help my daughter accept her situation.

Although less intense, my daughter continued to cry every morning throughout the school year. She stopped resisting, instead quietly cried while getting ready and silently looked out the window on the car ride to school. She stopped asking to stay home, she did not fight to get out of bed, and she stopped asking me to volunteer in her classroom. We were all looking forward to the end of the school year. Towards the end of the year a parent volunteer and friend witnessed my daughter crying as she came into the classroom. She confided in me that her teacher looked at my daughter and said, “Go to the restroom and clean yourself up. When you are ready to act like a first grader, you can come back.” I shuddered hearing this story as I pictured my little girl walking alone to the restroom, splashing cold water on her face, seeing her swollen eyes in the mirror, taking a deep breath and then walking back into the lion’s den. It brought me back to the similar encounter I had with my second grade teacher. The stern words used to make me conform to a system I did not feel I fit in. I thought about the way I felt and it made me realize how some part of my identity changed that day and I wondered how some part of my daughter’s identity had changed through that year’s interactions with her teacher.

I also thought back to my students and how I valued academic performance above anything else. As their teacher, how did I impact their identity development through my teaching practices? I thought about the boy who did not meet criteria for promotion in my class. I failed him somehow. I wasn’t able to make a connection with him and I did not give the time to figure out what he needed to succeed. His lack of understanding was a distraction to my curriculum instruction. I thought about my student that was so anxious about his mother not picking him up from school that one day she was late and he tried to walk home. He was found about a half mile

from the school walking alongside a major highway. I did not try to build a relationship with his parents or try to understand the origin of his fear. His behavior to me only caused interruptions during my read alouds at the end of the day and nothing more. I thought about the boy who for some reason did not view me as any type of authority figure. When he would not listen to my instructions and hide under the table, it was time taken away from my teaching, a nuisance. Did I ever try to connect with these students or learn more about their families and their values? I thought that I tried to get to know my students. I liked to sit with them at lunch and talk with them at recess. I loved hearing their stories and learning about their personalities, but was this enough?

Looking back on my years as a teacher I know I witnessed my students ‘learning’ through ‘growth’ in improved test scores. Even with those positive memories I feel there was something missing from my instruction. There was something that I could have done better to ensure my students were becoming life-long learners and not just “in the now” learners. When I think back to my years as a teacher, I feel guilty for not being able to talk more with my students. Time just did not allow it. I remember having to say, “That’s nice, but we have to do x, y, z now and maybe we can talk later.” All the students wanted to do was talk. Talk to me or talk to each other. All day long I was quieting them; no talking during teacher instruction, no talking during circle time and raise your hand if you want to share and maybe there will be a chance I can call on you. Maybe there is something to be said about language and relationship building that is more important than standardized test scores, meeting objectives and standards through prefabricated lessons and placing the responsibility for learning on the individual student.

My course studies while pursuing my masters degree created a shift in my perspective of learning and mainstream education. Through my studies I found an explanation for how I was

molded from an uninterested and resistant student into a model citizen and then teacher who in turn perpetuated those values instilled in me on my students and my own children. Test scores, grades, showing progress on standardized tests and learning in the now guised as creating life long learners trumped the importance of building relationships, communal value setting, and creating authentic learning environments in my own classroom and home. I understand now that my socio-economic status allowed me to achieve favorable grades even when my actions did not deserve high scores. I was provided learning opportunities that were restricted from others based on my status alone. I believe the standardized tests that I scored well on were tailored to my middle class experiences. The pressures to conform to this system from my teachers directly attributed to my identity development. I turned out a success story, a product to complement a capitalist economy and society.

I do not want the same institutional educational practices and experiences I had to be those for my children or any others. Public education should in fact provide equitable learning opportunities for all students in an environment that best supports life-long learning. What that looks like is arguable, but we can all agree a more advanced knowledge of learning is needed. Expanding the understanding of learning, as an inherently cultural and social process, and exploring how identity is developed both culturally and contextually are important avenues for further research (Nasir, 2011; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Exploring these paths can lead to where I envision a truly authentic learning environment where the teacher is free from the pressures of curriculum spewing, standardized test scores, performance based pay and classroom management expectations; where students are free from the pressures of conformity, standardized test performance, academic ranking and the idea that they are alone and responsible for their academic and personal life outcomes; where authentic

learning takes place through community immersion, strong relationship building, positive identity development and a holistic view on the student.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

“One of the great virtues of the academic tradition is that it organizes human knowledge and makes it comprehensible to the learner. It aims to make a chaotic world coherent. It gives intellectual strength to those who want to understand social experience and the nature of the physical world” (Ravitch, 2000, pp. 17-18).

Although compulsory schooling intended to apply this great virtue through best teaching policies and practices to educate all students, my observations and this critical review of the literature imply that the approach to authenticity in schools taken by educational psychology has been limited by the concentration on individual responsibility for learning outcomes. The focus on remedying the student to assimilate to the current societal needs through educational policies and practices avoids the learning potential authentic experiences can produce. Authentic selfhood can be found in the context of shared traditions, practices and ways of life with others. This authentic experience is what has and still is missing in most of our schools.

What is generally not missing is the overwhelming focus on psychometrics that test and make assumptions about individual student learning. Psychological conceptions have unfortunately been too narrow and too focused on individual traits. This is not to suggest Psychology plays a trivial role in education, but it does imply that it should not function as the central component of our educational system. Since its existence, educational psychology has attempted to test and create the most effective learning strategies and programs to maximize student academic performance. These practices have resulted in some favorable outcomes for students, but they have also fostered self-expression, and encouraged pursuit of individual goals (Martin & McLellan, 2013). The attempts to improve student academic performance through

educational reform including standardized testing, self-regulated learning, ‘no excuse’ schools and even social-emotional learning have not resulted in equal outcomes for our children or positive identity development. Individualistic tendencies have been supported through the educational policies verified through research-based studies that ignore communal self-development. Although it would be difficult to stop from focusing on the individual logistically, I believe educational reform that reflects authentic experience and communal relationships without psychometrics is worth a try.

What would this type of education system resemble if attempted? Instead of schools being separate and neutral they would serve as community centers that bring together all of their members to share and showcase relevant learning opportunities for all. They would reflect learning communities where all members are gaining knowledge from each other and respected in their individual roles (Rogoff, 1994). Schools would be places where students and parents aspire to convene; places where they feel welcomed and appreciated for individual strengths, not scrutinized for their weaknesses. Students, parents and educators would be equally accountable for managing the physical buildings’ maintenance. Shared responsibility would build community values, ownership and pride for the facility. Students, parents and educators would be directly involved in cafeteria food preparation, landscaping, custodial tasks, and even maintaining a school garden to cultivate fresh produce for the cafeteria and for the community.

In this ideal system, schools would provide the resources that influence identity formation discussed by Na’ilah Nasir (2011): material resources, relational resources, and ideational resources. Material resources are physical materials that provide a sense of being an actual learner. These include but are not limited to the basic tools required for educational practices such as paper, pencils, textbooks, and laboratory and recreational equipment. Relational

resources are positive interactions between peers and adults that support positive academic trajectories. These are provided through conversations with a wide network of adults that have interest in the student's academic and personal future. Ideational resources are ideas about oneself and one's relationship to the world as well as ideas of what is good and valuable. They include settings where positive declarations of the student's future participation and contribution to a specific position are provided. Students draw on these ideation resources to develop their identities and academic paths (Nasir, 2011). Making all these resources readily available to use in learning environments without the pressures of academic performance and class ratings nurtures positive identity and communal selves formation and supports authentic learning for students.

Not only would all the necessary resources be provided in this ideal school system, but also curriculum would be designed to broaden and deepen the knowledge of education's past and education's present (Donato & Lazerson, 2000). Students would be guided to think critically and creatively, leading the student to discover their own academic freedom. Students would be taught how to change reality and problematic situations through authentic experiences. Educators would use authentic dialogue with students to lead cultivating discussions and interactions. Authentic dialogue practice is the difference between "learning to earn and learning for freedom" and is present in a cultural-historical methodology (Vasallo, 2012).

A cultural-historical approach to curriculum writing would be used to understand how culture contributes to individual learning and development. This style would be used to discover how "learning is conceived of as a process occurring within ongoing activity, and not divided into separate characteristics of individuals and contexts" (Gutierrez & Rogoff, p. 20). The cultural styles approach characterizes cultural differences using respectful rhetoric that does not

insinuate social hierarchy. The focus is on group experience in activities and not individual traits. It also deconstructs school thinking and assumptions that differences are deficits. This alternative is an effective way to “get beyond a widespread assumption that characteristics of cultural groups are located within individuals as ‘carriers’ of culture” (Gutierrez & Rogoff, p. 19). Educators would lead in depth local history mapping to engage students into their personal culture and make meaningful connections in this ideal school system.

Effective educators would possess an understanding about their students’ personal, social and cultural environments in which they live. Educators would build strong relationships with their students, value their students’ individual perspectives, engage in their students’ interests, and acknowledge their students’ worth to create the most superior setting for learning. Highly qualified educators would organize paramount learning environments through a critical pedagogical perspective, personal learning experiences, appropriate language usage, and creativity. Instead of focusing on how to implement best strategies of instruction to a category of students, educators would focus on getting to know the individual students’ cultural practices and personal histories. Gaining this knowledge would allow teachers to develop implementation practices that tailor to the identities of the students rather than prescribing instruction based on generalities of so-called “learning styles”.

Instruction including these practices will challenge students to grow academically and socially. It will have a constructive impact on student learning experiences and identity development. Fostering communal selves will lead to educators avoiding stereotypes and labeling which will lead to all students developing positive identities. Educators using these strategies would provide equitable learning opportunities so that the academic trajectory of all

students is towards success and not failure and the achievement gap that is of broad and current significance will expire.

An example of an alternative learning institution that has been successful is the Big Picture Learning school. It was established in 1995 with the mission to center the student in their education, working closely with other students and a mentor. Authentic learning and assessment is prevalent as well as parents and community member involvement. Schools are not “bound by the structures of buildings, schedules, bells, or calendars” (Big Picture Learning", n.d.). In its graduation year, the rate was 96% with 98% admitted to postsecondary schools. National attention produced monetary grants that allowed this system to launch more schools around the country.

If learning is an inherently cultural and a social process, and if identity is developed both culturally and contextually a supportive learning environment that fosters academic performance, creativity, and positive communal identity development will advance long-term student success. Deconstructing educational psychological labels about learning enables a shift from individual responsibility to societal and supports a constructivist lens on learning and identity. Further research is required to develop a broader understanding of how culture influences learning and identity development.

Continuing research that explores the relationship between identity and learning as it relates to social and educational stratification will help to eradicate assumptions of students, understand the achievement gap issue in our schools, expand the understanding of learning as an inherently cultural and social process, and explore how identity is developed both culturally and contextually. Persisting in this research will help to shift the focus from the individual student's

pathology to the ways our society systematically organizes the academic trajectories of our students to reflect a neoliberal economy.

Garcia summarizes the most effective way for challenging the current educational practices by reminding us “teaching is transgressive and that it is only through creating and questioning the discomfort that comes from challenging the status quo that true learning takes place” (p. 255). John Dewey suggested schools should encourage students to question the status quo as a way to construct more effective processes in society to certify students make transformations and not be inserted into a particular structure (Rudolph, 2014). Questioning the status quo has transformed for me my personal perspective of learning, my philosophy of education, the public education system, and the communal values I live out with my family. I aspire to make transformations in our educational system, possibly through establishing an early learning center that will provide the most effective and authentic learning experiences to positively support the academic trajectory of every student, build communal selves, and benefit society.

As Vassallo stated, “education is not about the insertion of the individual into the existing order but entails an orientation toward autonomy and freedom” (Vassallo, 2013b, p. 139). My personal education experience reflects both my placement in a prevailing order as a young and emerging student who was privileged through guidance toward academic success in accordance to societal regime, and also a conducive academic setting that permitted questioning the status quo. That questioning laid the groundwork for my learning liberation, and created an attempt to transform a future school system that demonstrates communal values and provides authentic learning opportunities for all students.

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