

The Immediacy of Action: A Critical Response Theory in Pedagogy

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406: Social and Cultural Foundations of American Schools

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Until recently I thought that teaching for social justice meant going into tough schools where the students are all tattooed, with gang affiliation, and making some grand entrance or impact on their life that would keep them from at the very least facing the criminal justice system later on. I initially thought that school was like a business, I even referred to myself as an employee of the students. Looking closely at my responses to journal questions from weeks three, four and five, I have grown to understand what teaching for social justice means and how it pushes against a capitalistic framework. I started noticing a shift in mindset from many experiences with colleagues, conversations with peers, discussions raised from readings in class, interactions with my own faculty, and chats with people outside of TEP. Now, it is my primary objective to reframe my philosophy of education to pedagogy that emphasizes safe learning environments, dialogic practices that promote discourse, accountability, personal pride, and belonging. All the while advocating for all students in every space I am invited to speak. This is how I reflect my love and commitment to every student I encounter.

In week three of class I wrote what I thought was the perfect response to the question, “[w]hat is the relationship between capitalism and schooling?” Initially I responded with a common refrain. I wrote that, “I encourage my students to think of themselves as CEOs of their

own business . . . I tell them to consider myself as an employee to them and their caregivers,” (Teacher Journal, Fisher 10/14/2025). Maybe there is some truth to this idea, but it lacks precision and fails to answer the question as it was asked. By the end of class I had a slightly better way of understanding the intention of the question and I extended my initial thought saying, “education as a capitalistic construct holds, in that students gain independence by increasing their sphere of influence in more elite groups,” which works in the major context but requires knowledge of hegemony and social reproduction to fully comprehend the analogy (Teacher Journal, Fisher 10/14/2025).

Social reproduction is a preservation of “social class differences in secondary and postsecondary education [as] a conserving force in modern societies. . . the reproduction of unequal class structures,” (Anyon, 1981, p. 3). This relates to hegemony which is “a form of ideological control in which dominant beliefs, values, and social practices are produced and distributed throughout a whole range of institutions such as schools,” according to Henry Giroux in his examination of Antonio Gramsci’s 1971 theory of *cultural hegemony* (Darder, 2016, p.32). Darder goes on to say in Chapter Two of *Culture and Power in the Classroom*:

Hegemony in American Schools results, more specifically, from initialized social relations of power that are systemically asymmetrical, and therefore unequally privilege students from the dominant culture and class over working-class students from subordinate cultures (Darder, 2016, p. 33).

I recall the very next class, week four, had the prompt, “How is hegemony reproduced in society and schools?” where I initially said “in society we tend to support a certain form of order, we have expectations based on what the majority deems ideologically orderly,” which is still true

to my understanding today (Teacher Journal, Fisher 10/21/2025). Further reflection on this idea that day I concluded that, “[p]sychologically we have group mentality theory that expands on what informs human behavior based on group decisions. So, if one is able to affect enough people then it is far easier to affect an even larger group,” (Teacher Journal, Fisher 10/21/2025). This is how we can leverage hegemony in a classroom, and doing so in a positive way should net positive results.

Applying the lens of teaching for social justice requires us to consider the classroom as a group that behaves according to a certain set of norms. Which is precisely why a safe space norm is crucial to how to leverage a positive hegemony that will push a socioeconomically challenged, marginalized, or otherwise underrepresented members of the classroom upward thus affording a better social preservation for those lives. In laymen’s terms, it happens in the classroom, the microcosm of society that establishes social reproduction for the society of tomorrow, is the fertile ground for creating repairs in a social justice context. We as educators help facilitate this by creating safe learning environments, encouraging students on how to use discourse and indeed teaching them how to actively participate in safe dialogic practices.

When should all these practices take effect and what risks exist from delay? This is a turning point in my reflection. I would have said immediately in the past, but now I also believe retroactive and corrective actions are also steps in the positive direction. The ladder means that facilitators are self-reflective in a growth mindset instead of fixed on their initial reactions to prescribed behaviors. When one takes notice to breakdowns in communication, and practices that do not help a student to progress forward and upward or does not build their spirits, it is critical to act swiftly to catch the learner who is now falling. Not just falling behind in work but falling in society. If you believe in social reproduction, then you recognize that this theory applies to all

groups and subgroups of society, not just a classroom, but it could be an office, or any social environment. When one is stepping against the boundaries of these systems, they are at risk of being pushed out altogether, this period is a delicate one, because if they fail to get rebuilt, they really will become just a statistic according to that group. That is, contributing to the number of students who just didn't meet the moment as expected. How can institutions adjust for those who live on the margins. First, we need to really ask ourselves where the hardlines are, perhaps we have created so much artificial padding that the margin is nowhere near the actual border. Maybe we have become hypersensitive to anything that seems outside of scope that we forget our own mandate to support students in time to prevent bad outcomes.

Of course, it is great when we can work with bad outcomes to create a whole better solution for individuals who fall short of expectations. We really should not have to be so good at this if we as educators were better at supporting them as they were falling or calling for attention or asking for help in non-direct ways. We must be honest with ourselves about what our real mission is in this space. Social justice as a lens encompasses all forms of justice, restorative, distributive, retributive, and correctional justice. A student who is falling doesn't need restoration or repair; there is still time to help before the system pushes them against a hard line. They do not need distributive justice as the theory holds they would have already received their fair share of resources they are entitled to. A student who is falling does not need correctional justice in all cases, as we assume workers within a system are operating by policy and procedure not employing emotional standards to complex issues. If they are not, then perhaps procedural and corrective justices are required.

No, I contend for a student who is falling but still not yet fallen can receive the full benefits that social justice would offer. Since social justice targets the social inequities established by

years of oppression, the economic barriers that create achievement gaps, unmet health needs that create engagement barriers, physical barriers that put undue pressure on students to show up with as much energy and enthusiasm as the next student. These are clear targets to aim for when I student is noticeably struggling. Failure to recognize the struggle or act in a timely manner is a failure of the system not the student.

“We should start by defining love as it pertains to teaching and community building. This type of love must be intentional,” is what I initially said in response to week five’s prompt, “[w]hat role can love play in transforming classrooms and schools,” (Teacher Journal, Fisher, 10/28/2025). This is how we protect the falling student and it is also how we pick up the student who has fallen on tough times. The key to making this practice work is to A, actually do it, B, believe that it will work, and C consistently stick with the plan. I concluded with my reflection that day stating “[i]f you believe that love is an action and a choice and that love in the context [of] pedagogy informs spiritual growth, then somewhere is a calculus about what selfless act can I make as a teacher,” (Teacher Journal, Fisher, 10/28/2025). This comes from the definition of love in a pedagogical sense.

“The will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth,” is love, according to author bell hooks (hooks, 2023, p. 4). The author hooks describes a selfless act, a sacrifice, as a necessary requirement of love. I put it concisely, “[l]ove implies care, a sense,” as I trail off, a sense of mutual understanding (Teacher Journal, Fisher, 10/28/2025). We need a true humanizing force to overwhelm the senses. This would take the facilitator out of the institution long enough to see clearly how to respond to the falling or fallen student. Long enough to realize a solution that does not offend the policies of the institution does exist and the heuristic provided by the institution is not the only appropriate action plan. The

educator who employs this practice sacrifices their time, emotional-bandwidth, and perhaps risks their own relationships with colleagues, but their implementation of a unique solution may be most optimally supportive to the student, and thus better for the classroom as a whole.

I have changed a lot as a result of this course and my field experience. I discovered that what social justice means to me does not always align with those who use the framework often. Social justice to me is always about sacrificing something for the greater good for all parties. It is not just to consider only the greater good, it is necessary to always consider the fallen or falling students who so often get pushed into spaces they did not want to be in. Those individuals deserve the same type of pedagogical love as any other student.

Even Darder says in their 2020 response to, philosopher and educator, Paulo Freire's popular text, *The Pedagogy of Love*, that "sufficient autonomy and responsibility to struggle for an educational praxis and a way of life that could support democratic forms of economic and cultural existence," is necessary for pedagogical liberation. This idea specifically in reference to Freire's notion that critical educators should "make not of our adherence to the status quo," and to do so by highlighting our own ideologies and intentions. My takeaway from this is that we must check ourselves and be honest if we are going to call ourselves social justice educators. That is, to create and "embrace a pedagogy of liberation," we must not allow ourselves to be fearful of a deviation from conditioned reactions to behaviors. Instead, we should replace that apprehension with the 'autonomy,' and 'responsibility,' of a true social justice educator (Darder, 2020, p. 499).

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