Towards Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Secondary Mathematics Classroom:

It all Comes Down to Social Justice

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**Abstract**

This paper is a reflection on personal history as a path to deconstruct curricular experiences and develop a transformative curriculum theory. A coming out experience is used as a lens for understanding marginalized groups in our schools and as motivation for the creation of an inclusive learning community. An exposure to injustice and inequity in second grade becomes an impetus for action and the creation of a transformative pedagogy. Leadership work in Common Core State Standards in Mathematics (CCSSM) grows into an act of social justice. Dialogue at the National Association of Multicultural Education (NAME) conference facilitated a multidimensional understanding of the need for social justice emphasis in life, weaving together all the facets of my professional and personal life into in a coherent personal and curricular vision. Curriculum studies provided a frame to reflect on story and theory to create a plan for using a social justice model to move towards culturally responsive teaching in secondary mathematics.

**Introduction**

 My journey has taken many winding paths beginning with my schooling and continuing as I have learned, stretched and grown through teaching many grades. Over 18 years I have taught preschool, third grade, fourth grade, middle school, first grade and fifth grade. I now find myself trying to figure it all out again during my eighteenth year of teaching, but my first year teaching High School mathematics. I am a new teacher once again, but my theories about what education means and the purpose of schooling only become more solid with time, experience, discourse and reflection. It has been an amazing journey of growth. I have learned much from my students, their parents, my colleagues and professors. I had no idea I could learn so many lessons and at the same time, eighteen years after I first began teaching, still have so much to learn! Our impressions on the purpose of schooling begin in our first years as a student. Reflecting deeply on narratives from my history helps me create a lens through which to develop a personal and curricular theory and a plan of action for change.

**A Story of Invisibility**

Adolescence is a time for identity exploration and formation. In my ninth grade “High School Survival Skills” class, we explored and discussed issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, child abuse, gun control, sex education, suicide, birth control, abortion, bullying, values, beliefs and other issues having to do with identity formation. During the unit on family life, we had a panel of gay youth speak about their difficulties in school. They shared their personal stories and asked for the students to consider how to make schools a safer, more accepting environment for gay and lesbian youth. Near the end of the class we were asked to write an anonymous question, fold it up and put it into the box. I had tried so carefully to write in all uppercase letters so the teacher, who I treasured, would not recognize my writing. My heart raced, I felt flush and a bit short of breath as I hid the letters I painstakingly formed on the small paper. When Mrs. Todd read my question aloud, we all laughed and looked around the room. She read, “HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM GAY?” and I laughed just as hard as everyone else, trying to not expose the agony I was feeling on the inside for having actually written that question. It was the fact that I, me, Krista McAtee, put those letters onto the paper and made that thought, that wondering, a part of history that was more difficult to handle than the laughter. The gay youth in the classroom telling their stories and my classmates listening respectfully lulled me into an overly optimistic moment, hoping that this could be a supportive, safe community. However it was the laughter that made me want to disappear completely. I wanted to just melt into the carpet on the floor and not be visible. The fear, anguish and embarrassment made me physically nauseated. The room became blurry and at that moment I was not sure I would survive until the bell rang, let alone to the end of the day. I knew my teacher was very supportive and kind, but I do not remember her answer. In fact this experience, ensured that I never entertained that question again publicly or privately, not even once, for the next four years of high school. It could not even be a possibility. It was too painful!

Two years later, I sat next to a teacher during a similar panel at a diversity conference. Even though I did not identify myself as gay, her derogatory comments about the youth on the panel felt like acid eating away at me from the inside. I wanted to jump up and down and get away from her, but I was a well-behaved student and politely kept my seat next to the judgmental teacher for the remainder of the presentation. I had to sit still, stay invisible. I continued to be invisible as peers in high school were beaten for being gay. I never acknowledged them. I never supported them. A teammate from basketball with whom I practice daily for two years was hospitalized by a group of boys because she was gay. When we played basketball, I was always the nurturer, caring and listening to the worries, woes and fears of my teammates. It felt too unsafe for me to reach out to a battered friend and show my sympathy or support. I had to stay invisible. I could not identify myself with that label in anyway. It was unsafe.

It wasn’t until two years after high school, that I left the country to travel to Europe and discover who I was. I flew into Frankfort Germany by myself. It didn’t really matter that I had no idea where I was going to stay that first night. I had a return ticket for six months later and had a three-week German immersion program scheduled in Berlin a week after landing. I could not reconsider that question in my own country. I wasn’t completely conscious of why I had to leave. I only knew I needed to be away from everything familiar in order to be able to grow and become myself. I had to be a very long ways away from home before I even considered taking that risk again. Over the course of my trip I wrote three full journals about my experiences, travels and reflecting on my first twenty years. It wasn’t until three months into my journey that I began to think about pondering questions about my sexuality. Even though I was over 5,000 mile away from home in Totness, England, I was afraid to write questions of myself about my sexuality in my own journal. I had parents that believed in civil rights, equity and justice. My parents had moved me into the class of a gay teacher in elementary school to give him and the community a message of support of his right and value as a teacher. My fears did not come from worrying about my parents reactions. I knew they would accept me. The fear came from my community, school, society, and a knowing that homosexuality was not even a part of the marginalized groups that were worthy of discussions in schools. Thorton (2013) wrote, “the belief that the archetypical human is straight is called heteronormativity.” (p.331). There were no discussions over the course of my education about equity for gay youth and families, except for that one day in ninth grade. Maybe some people were open, but it was such a taboo subject, that it was not part of the dialogue. The absence of who I was represented in the curriculum made it clear that it was a terrible thing, too bad even to discuss in conversations of equity and social justice. Thorton (2013) suggests, “Educators must answer the question, Does everyone count as human?” (p. 332). “The hidden curriculum rigidly control(ed) the boundaries of sex role behavior.” (Thorton, 2013, p. 333). The gay perspective did not count as human after my years of experiencing heteronormativity in the hidden curriculum. I finally composed a painstakingly written three-page introduction in my journal before I began to write myself questions on the topic of my sexuality. “If you care about me and you are reading this journal, you will stop reading when you come to the part written in pink.” I was thousands of miles away from home, writing in my own journal, and still it was not safe to ponder questions about my sexuality. I spent a month in that house by myself in rainy England writing, questioning, reading, worrying and questioning some more.

I remember the night that I finally I came to understand and accept that I was gay. It was New Years Eve and I was staying with friends in Germany. I decided not to attend the social events of the evening with them, but to stay in the house, light the candles on the Christmas tree and write in my journal. When I accepted my homosexuality, the initial sense of relief and happiness that came with that acceptance was profound. However, it was quickly clouded by a deep dark fear. I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I had always been honest and open about who I was and where I stood. Now that I knew this about myself, how could I possibly continue to be open and honest and teach young children? How would school communities react? What would parents say? Would administrators be accepting? How would the students handle my honesty? Why did I have to even worry about this?!? It was very disappointing and frustrating.

The next step in my process of acceptance came when I realized that my homosexuality was a window into the reality of marginalized groups. I began to realize that being gay gave me a gift of understanding and empathy about privilege that most white people do not experience. I became more aware of the privilege that affected my daily life. I could pass for straight. I did not wear my gayness on my skin the same way as children of color wear their difference. I could choose hide my difference in situations that were unsafe. I became more and more aware of acts of injustice against the Latino students around me and in the news. When I returned to California, I became actively involved in a group for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (GLBTQ) youth and spoke to groups of teachers around the county about the need to support all youth in our schools. While I worked toward my own teaching credential, I asked teachers to take a firm open stand in support of GLBTQ youth and children of GLBTQ families at their schools. I chose to be open and honest about my sexuality in hopes of teaching others to value and embrace difference. “The common failure to even mention the existence of Lesbians and gay men (let alone bisexual and transgender persons) clearly clashes with gay matters today being a visible part of the of the public landscape in most of America.” (Thorton, 2013, p. 332). I now had to be visible, because for a very long time I was forced to be invisible because of unsafe conditions created by a hidden curriculum that dehumanized homosexuals.

**Implications for Teaching**

My experience in High school is what Peggy McIntosh (1990) would consider as phase I curriculum; the curriculum of white males and the curriculum of invisibility. I had spent many hours in my youth working to create a supportive, inclusive community, but I never even imagined that I could belong to that same community. Because of the dehumanization of essentialist education, as Pinar (1974) explains, “children must learn to be dissatisfied with themselves.” (p. 363). Pinar’s ideas of loss of self to others, loss of self-love, estrangement from self, and internalization of the oppressor were completely evident in the essentialist education I experienced. (1974). Having my difference ignored by both the explicit and implicit curriculum for the first twelve years of schooling, it was crucial for me to become visible, in order to create space for a humanist experience in education.

Three years after returning from Europe, as a new teacher at Roseland Elementary School and enrolled in Masters courses at Sonoma State University, I began to explore questions of openness and honesty in my own classroom. With the help of Dr. Virginia Lea in The Reflective Educator course, my fourth grade students, their parents and several articles about queer theory (Pinar, 1998) and multicultural education (Nieto, 2004 and hooks, 1994) I explored the possibly of being open with my students and families about my homosexuality. According to Freire (2013), “Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words.” (p.157). In this process I interviewed students, parents and teachers about the pros and cons of being “Out” in the school community. Their varied reactions, as well as the readings, helped me become clear and strong in my understanding that it was essential for me to be visible as a gay teacher in my community for many of the same reasons it was so difficult for me to accept my homosexuality in the first place. Freire (2013) wrote that, “the task of the humanist is to see that the oppressed become aware of the fact that as dual beings, ‘housing’ the oppressors within themselves, they cannot become truly human.” (p. 161). I needed to bring my homosexual identity into the conversation for my own inclusion, but even more so for the acceptance and appreciation of all of my students and their parents as valued, respected members of the school community (Nieto, 1992). I was truly amazed and encouraged by the overwhelming support from the community. Parents and students, both White and Latino, encouraged me to be open. I found that parents who were educated in our system as well as parents who completed no more than second grade in Mexico supported me and were open to heartfelt conversations about a topic that is often taboo, especially in Catholic and Latino communities. The most resistant were the teachers. They did not see any need from me to bring my “personal” life into the classroom. Although they all spoke of their families, they thought that me talking about my family was somehow crossing a line of acceptable and appropriate boundaries. In the end I did speak to my students about my partner and the children we were in the process of adopting. Although I have switched schools and districts, I have always found it natural and easy to be honest with my students about my family, that is until my most recent move. There is something about being at the high school which has made me need to protect myself once again dropping back into to pattern of becoming invisible as a way to protect myself. The essentialist nature of the high school program has become dehumanizing even for me in my role as a critical teacher (Slattery, 2006). It is clear that this is an area in which I need to focus energy. I need to move toward transforming my own role and the school community. I have already given the powerpoint presentation I created for my curriculum theory class to my largest class at Sonoma Valley High School (and plan to give it to my other 3 algebra classes). The students applauded when I finished and several gave me hugs and told me about their differences. “I was adopted.” “I live with my grandmother.” “I live on my own, without any parents.” “My father died of drug overdose.” We all have our stories and that is what makes up the fabric of Peggy Mc Intosh’s (1990) phase four curriculum. If we value, appreciate and learn from our differences, we truly are building a more socially just community and world. Creating space for those stories to emerge in a Secondary Mathematics classroom seems to be my current challenge, however I am making progress toward that goal. I have also asked to present my powerpoint and stories to the eighty faculty members at an upcoming high school staff meeting in hopes of framing the conversation about how we are honoring and appreciating the uniqueness of each member of our diverse learning community.

**A Transformational Exposure to Injustice in Second Grade**

Second grade was one of my toughest years as an elementary school student. I didn’t know what was going on at the time, but there was a lot of anxiety and unrest in the school. A few weeks into the school year, my parents switched me from one class to another. I had liked my teacher, as I always did, and I was very unhappy with my parents for disrupting the beginning of the school year. I did not want to start all over learning rules and expectations in Mr. Burner’s class, but I did not get a choice, as is very often the case for 7 and 8 year olds. Eventually, I adjusted and learned to appreciate my new teacher. My second grade teacher is the first and only teacher in my first twelve years that presented what Peggy McIntire would consider phase III curriculum, the curriculum of the “isms”. We sat on the floor and he showed photos from a book about the injustices of the 40s, 50s and 60s, photos of anti-black sentiments, white and colored drinking fountains, benches, and movie theatres. He told his own stories of walking down the street with his black friends and having things thrown at them, ketchup, mustard and even being spit upon. I listened to his stories and drank in the photos in shock and horror.

When I can home from school that day, my face was swollen and my eyes were red and blurry from crying and I was full of rage! I couldn’t believe that any person could treat another human being the ways my teacher told me he and his friend were treated. Who did those people think they were? How did they ever come to believe they were better than someone else? Why didn’t my parents tell me that this happens in our world? If it was the white people who did these horrible things, how could I be “white”? I did not want to have anything to do with people who could treat other people with such cruelty and hatred! I cried for days at school and at home. I was being eaten up by anger, hurt, confusion, shame and disappointment. The happy world that I thought I lived in no longer existed. Up until that point I had no idea about the privileges I enjoyed simply because of the color of my skin. I knew from second grade that it was my responsibility to do whatever I could to fix some of the damage that white people did to other groups of people.

My priority in my neighborhood, family and school from that point on became to stand up against injustice and to make as many people as I could feel valued and important parts of the community. In fourth, fifth and sixth grades, I was part of the bilingual program in our school. I loved my Latino (mostly Mexican) friends, loved learning Spanish and sometimes noticed subtle discriminations that made my friends feel like outsiders. I did everything I could to counteract those messages. In attempt to make people feel welcome and appreciated members of the community, I was the first person to make friends with any new student. In October of fifth grade, when Maria Guitierrez came for her first day from Mexico with no English, I befriended her, learned that her mother’s birthday was later that week and offered to make a giant pizza size cookie to bring to her house to celebrate. Two days after meeting Maria, I found myself at her house with all of her family celebrating her mother’s birthday. I knew very little Spanish, but I could say, “Mucho gusto.” or “el gusto es mio.” and “¡Feliz cumpleaños!” I felt loved and accepted by Maria’s family even though we could hardly communicate with language. We communicated mutual respect, care and appreciation.

After spending most of the time in elementary school with my Latina friends, I expected it to be the same in junior high school, but it wasn’t. My friends were not in the same classes as I. I felt like they had disappeared. I was confused, disappointed and a bit lost. When I found them hanging out on campus in a corner with all of the other Latinos, I tried to approach, but did not feel welcomed or wanted. I didn’t know what to do or how to handle the situation. Seventh and eighth grade was a very difficult and awkward time. I was very saddened by the loss of my friendships, but I felt powerless to make any changes. I discussed it with my mom and was encouraged to try, but every time I tried to approach my friends, I felt like I was getting the cold shoulder. I didn’t know what I had done, but I assumed that I was now seen as one of “them”, those people who don’t care, who don’t want Latinos to belong or be successful. This was a profound loss for me and made me feel like I was unintentionally part of the oppressors. Later, when I went through the credential program I reflected on this transformation of my friendships and thought it had to do with systemic racism that separated my Latina friends from my classes and my experience. They were placed in a different track than I was. It was something outside of my control and outside of their control that created this division. “Bifurcation by categories based on race, learning styles, intelligences, social class, gender, sexual orientation, or religion unnecessarily and illogically divides human beings and inflicts tremendous pain and suffering on all of us.” (Slattery. 2006, p. 4). This experience further ignited my passion for developing a more just experience for marginalized youth in our schools and society.

**Implications for Teaching**

In the classroom, I have had multiple opportunities to advocate for social justice policies and practices that affirm diverse students. I have been teaching in Sonoma Valley Unified School District for 14 years now. I taught English Language Arts and Social Studies in Spanish to all of the students who were Limited English Proficient (LEP) in the middle school. At that school, I worked day and night to try to transform it into a community that honored and affirmed differences. In spite of my efforts to make change, the system continued to marginalize minority youth in very dehumanizing ways. Even thought the school population had nearly 50% Latino youth, there was no secretary, helpline or even recording that facilitated communication to Spanish speaking families. I worked hard to make change at that school, but came home in tears night after night feeling like I was just another cog in the wheel that allowed for the systemic racism to continue and the messages of failure to defeat the children of color. There were several times that I would be walking by the conference room on my prep and there was an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) being developed with teachers and parents, but nobody in the room spoke the language of the parents. Sometimes I was asked or offered to stay. If I didn’t happen by when one of those meetings was being held, I guess the parents had to simply guess what educational planes were being made for their child. I remember clearly when a student arrived straight from Mexico the day before STAR testing. I contacted my principal because I was sure that he should be exempt from testing his second day of schooling in the United States. She didn’t know, so I contacted the district office. The person in charge told me he needed to take the test and to just tell him to do his best. It was my first year in the district and I didn’t feel strong enough to go against the powers that be, so I told this dedicated, hard working student to “do his best.” He said to me, “Pero, no entiendo nada.” (But I don’t understand anything). I tried to be as caring as I could and I said to him in Spanish, “There are many words that are similar in English and Spanish. Much of the academic language in English comes from Latin and is the same in Spanish. Just do your best.” For some reason he trusted me, even though he did not know me at all and he spent every moment he could pouring over each word in that STAR test trying to do his very best work. I felt like a horrible traitor to the students, just another part of the racist system holding them down and isolating them. I knew I could not continue to teach in that environment. I left middle school to teach first grade.

Even though I was terrified to teach 6 year olds, I knew that the dual immersion program honored and affirmed diversity (Nieto, 1998) so I left what the students called “the brown track” in middle school to be part of something positive and empowering in elementary school. For the last 12 years I taught first grade and then fifth grade in Spanish as part of Flowery Elementary School’s Dual Immersion program. One of the things I love the most about teaching at Flowery Elementary School is that this program upsets the power dynamics that happen in traditional schools (Nieto, 1998). In a program where 90% of the day is taught in Spanish in Kindergarten and first grades, where the books, the writing on the walls, the language of the teachers and the principal is Spanish, the students and the parents who understand and speak Spanish have total access to the language of instruction. The Latino students and parents have more understanding of the curriculum. Members of the Spanish Speaking community are the role models and the translators for the non-Spanish speaking students and parents. This program is a perfect example of what Jim Cummings speaks about in *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society* (Cummins, 1996) because the students who are traditionally disempowered and marginalized in most US educational programs instead become leaders, role models and examples of success in the dual immersion model.

Although our schools are based on the banking model of education (Freire, 1970), where teachers fill young heads with important information, Flowery School eventually became a place where I was able to create the kind of learning environment in which I believed. Over the next 7 years, I worked to develop and refine my curriculum in first grade to create a learning environment that honored and valued the funds of knowledge that existed within the school community (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2000) because I truly believe that, “it is the business of the school to give each child the beginnings of a culture so wide and deep and universal that he can interpret his own parents and countrymen by a standard which is worldwide and not provincial.” (Addams, 2013, p.42). Parents came into the class to share the stories of their childhoods. We heard families’ stories, some in Spanish and some in English, about bullfighting traditions in Spain, growing up in New York City, children working to make adobe bricks before leaving for school in the mornings, children doing farm-work before and after school, jobs that require scuba diving to scrape barnacles off the bottom of boats, ways to celebrate Jewish holidays, celebrations of Dia de los Reyes Magos (day of the three kings) and many more. I videoed the presentations of family and community members who often came in full bullfighting or scuba gear and brought artifacts such as swords, menorahs and dreidels into the class. These stories became the beginning place for discussions, projects and ways to build connections between cultures and generations, between present and past and between literature and our lives. I have always encouraged students and families to contribute the richness of their lives, cultures, perspectives and ideas with the class, because when that happens, I can become a learner and the children become teachers (McIntosh, 1990).

Along with the standards movement came deskilling of teachers and students, removal of the professionalism, and disempowerment of teachers. (Apple, 1986/2013). My first year at Flowery School, I was given several teacher-proof curricula including a math program that told me exactly what to say and what to ask my first grade students. I was part of a typical educational environment based on teacher centered perennialist thought that a universal curriculum should include ideas or truths that have lasted over centuries and that are unchanging. Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchens would have expected the school to provide me such a clear outline of what students need to learn. Adler outlines his essentials of basic schooling in his Paideia Proposal. (1982). Hutchins argues that schooling should focus on “general, rather than particular (ideas) and the permanent, rather than the transitory.” (1968). However, after two months of teaching from this curriculum, when I said to my students, “It is time for math”, and they replied, “Augh!” I knew it was time for me to reclaim my authority as a reflective, responsive, professional educator, (Giroux, 2004). I put the curriculum on the shelf and started teaching math by engaging in discussions, inquiry experiences and playing games. I quickly realized, as Nel Noddings writes, “To provide an equal quality of education for all of our children requires, first, that we hold the variety of their talents and legitimate interests to be of equal value.” (2013, p. 191). I attended trainings at the California Mathematics Council and the National Association of Teachers of Mathematics and learned students-centered, hands-on, inquiry based ways to facilitate mathematics learning. Although I always believed in a constructivist approach to teaching, it was often difficult to facilitate this type of learning in school communities based on traditional, behavioral philosophies. However, there was another moment that spring that greatly influenced my shift from only a theoretical understanding of constructivism to an ability to put that theory into practice.

Everyday I asked students to come up with equations that represented the date of the month because “there is more to life, more to excellence, more to success, and more to devotion than can be captured in a single intellectual model of excellence” (Noddings, 2013, p. 191). It was the 29th of March and the students had come up with many equations, 10+10+9=29, 30-1=29, 5 x 5+4=29. I wrote all of their equations on the board and the students explained their thinking. Then one student said, “400 divided by 16 plus 4 equals 29.” My mind flooded with worry. I started to flush with anxiety that the 6 year olds were better at math than I was. I went to my desk to look for my calculator. I was truly panicked. Then I stopped, took a deep breath, returned calmly to the rug where the students were sitting and asked, “How do you know?” As he explained, I wrote his words in symbols on the board for the rest of the class to see. He said, “Well I know that 100÷4 =25 because 4 quarters make a dollar. And 200÷8 =25, so 400÷16 =25 and then I just added 4 to make 29.” Many of his classmates responded with an “ooohh” of understanding. His thinking became clear to the class when he was given the opportunity to explain his strategy. How powerful learning can be when we consider “origins of significant quests for meaning, origins which ought to be held in mind by those willing to enable students to be themselves.” (Greene, 2013, p. 137) When I realized that I could learn to think differently about math with the help of six-year-old children, I also began to really understand that my ways of knowing, thinking and learning are only that, my ways. Why should I consider my ways of thinking better or somehow more valuable than the ideas and strategies held by all of the other learners in the classroom? Noddings would agree, “‘equality of quality’ in education cannot be achieved by forcing all students to take exactly the same course of study, nor can the ideal of a democratic, classless society be actualized by establishing only one model of excellence.” (2013, p. 187). This experience allowed me to create a classroom that Peggy McIntire would call the fourth phase of curricular and personal re-vision (1990) where every student is a teacher and every teacher becomes a learner.

**Common Core State Standards for Mathematics as Education for Social Justice**

In my role on the planning committee for the California Mathematics Council Conference I had several opportunities to addend conferences on the new Common Core State Standards in Mathematics CCSSM. As I learned about the CCSS in mathematics, I became inspired about the potential shifts in pedagogy that could create social justice experiences in the classrooms. Although these shifts in classroom practice were new to many teachers, most were very comfortable and familiar to me. In math I never taught the standard U.S. algorithms. I asked students to come up with ways to solve problems that were meaningful to them. They explained their strategies and reasoning to the class. Then the class asked questions. I often posed a new type of problem and had them struggle with the problem on their own first, then discuss it with a partner to see if they could push each other to think about the problem in a deeper way or make sense of the problem in a different way. I asked them to hold each other accountable for strategies and arguments that made sense and were complete. If one student did not understand, it was his/her responsibility to ask again and again until the other student’s reasoning made sense. The explaining student was also responsible to explain her/his thinking in as many ways as possible until it made sense for their partner. Sometimes they would then explain the partner’s strategies to a larger group and other times they would share with the class. This process of accountability for the understanding of each student also happened in the small group and whole class discussions. There were times that one group disagreed with another group. In the beginning of the year the students would ask me to act as a referee and say which group was correct. They quickly learned that it was futile to ask me for the answer. I just asked them more questions. Often when one group had a correct answer, I would say, “Are you sure you’re correct? Because that group over there has a different answer.” My goal was to create community and individual responsibility for the learning that did not rely on me as an “expert” because I was a learner in my classroom. Often times adults came in and participated in this community. They had to learn that they too were members who could contribute to the discussion, but I did not want my students to look to anyone as an expert to believe uncritically. Students often brought in parents’ ideas for solving problems, but they had to explain those ideas until they made sense to the rest of the class. For homework I sent home only 2 math problems, but the students had to explain two different strategies for solving each problem. I often posed questions that had two or more possible correct answers. We had great debates in class those days until students were able to articulate how their thinking about the problem made a different answer completely viable.

In one fifth grade discussion about decimals, most students were arguing that 5.32 was bigger than 5.5 so I ask the students who thought 5.32 was bigger to come up with an argument to convince the other students that their idea was correct. Even though I set up the students with 5.32 as the “correct” students, the students who should be doing the convincing, soon more and more students were arguing that 5.5 was bigger. When groups switched their position from believing that 5.32 was bigger to 5.5, I would say, “Are you sure 5.5 is bigger? Because that group thinks that 5.32 is bigger.” If their understanding was so weak that they could be swayed with this suggestion, then I wanted them to grapple with the ideas a bit longer. I would ask, “Isn’t 32 bigger than 5? So isn’t .32 bigger than .5?” I wanted to construct opportunities for students to experience cognitive disequilibrium and productive struggle. Slattery argues, “Postmodern (dis)equilibrium is the acceptance of permanent psychic discomfort as the best understanding of consciousness. This (dis)equilibrium can inspire social change and political action. Ambiguity and complexity are not destabilizing, they are generative.” (2006, p. 6). I decided that the role that I had was more of a facilitator of a learning community than that of a teacher. To me teachers “teach” more through a transmission model of instruction filling the students’ heads with somebody else’s ways about thinking of the world. Teachers often teach how to get the correct answer, how to do just what the teacher or the system requires. This is not what is important and engaging in the lives of the students. Students are required to memorize and regurgitate the teacher’s ideas. The transmission or banking model of instruction takes the power away from the learners and also depletes their interest in the process. (Freire, 2013). Really 5.5 verses 5.32 is not an exciting question, but the students were engaged because it was their ideas that drove the discussion. At any time I could have simply “taught” them that 5.5 is bigger, but that would have taken all of the power out of their process of constructing their own understandings. And how long would they really remember that information? How well would they be able to generalize that memorized bit of information? I would guess that it would not be very long. In my classroom the students, parents and volunteers questioned me, my understanding, and my ideas constantly just as they questioned each other’s. “Whether critics like it or not, society has become a global plurality of competing subcultures and movements where no one ideology or episteme (understanding of knowledge) dominate.” (Slattery, 2006, p. 19) Why should it be any different in my classroom or in my school? We need to honor and affirm every learners understanding of knowledge.

Last year I took a leave of absence to go back to graduate school full time and to work as a CCSS math consultant for the county office. I received a phone call from the high school principal asking me to teach high school math and was told that although I had no credential in math, human resources had it all worked out so that I could teach math at the high school. The job offered was to teach four sections of geometry, but because of my background, interest in multicultural education, bilingualism, passion for developmental math instruction, and interest in supporting marginalized students we decided that a better fit would be for me to teach the “algebra repeaters” sections. I have one hundred and twenty 10th, 11th and 12th grade students who have not been able to pass algebra. I love the students and am working really hard to develop a classroom community where students take responsibility for their own learning and understanding, and where they are engaged in discussions and willing to risk, argue, critique, and learn. They have been trained to focus on answer getting, not to think mathematically. With exposure only to direct instruction, they are paralyzed when asked to reason and construct viable arguments. This is my biggest challenge in 18 years of teaching! I believe all students can be successful, but they do not believe it. I have been trying to create a learning community at the high school similar to that in fifth grade, but their essentialist experience has had a very dehumanizing affect. The students still do not believe that I want them to question me, that I do not want to be the authority in the classroom, that I am not going to tell them what to do and what to think. According to Pinar (1974) “Students, ‘good’ students that is, more than comply with the instructions of the teachers. They come to depend on them; they come to need them.” (p. 365). My students constantly ask me to “Just tell us what to do and how to do it.” They also ask, “Is this right?” I cannot convince them that this is about taking an active role in constructing their own understandings. They believe it is my job to construct their understandings for them. Maybe they have been trained by teachers and a system that agrees with Bagley (1940) and the essentialists who argue that “adult responsibility for the guidance, control, and direction of the immature is inherent in human nature.” (p. 509) Although I would agree with Freire (2013) and Horton (1990) that trust of the learner is foundational in order to nurture relationship and facilitate opportunities for growth, my student still do not believe that I trust them and I feel as though they really do not trust themselves.

As a new high school teacher, veteran elementary teacher and new K12, CCSS math coach, I find that my students and the teachers I work with have been de-skilled and reskilled. (Apple, 2013) Having taught first through twelfth grade students, I find my high school students less willing to rely on their own thoughts, strategies and ideas for solving problems than my first grade students. I also see that it takes fifth grade students much less time to rebuild a belief in their own ability to think critically than required by high school students.

**National Association of Multicultural Education: Putting it all Together**

My excitement about being invited to present at the National Association of Multicultural Education (NAME) conference stemmed from a desperate desire and hope that being at the conference would give me strategies and ideas about how to create a humanistic classroom in Algebra. I attended video screenings on multicultural education, participated in workshops, listened to lectures and had conversations with researchers and authors. Every presentation included aspects of trusting students, listening to students, creating relationships, questioning the status quo, identifying privilege, and deconstructing oppressive policies and practices. Overall there was a central theme of social justice. Most workshops were interactive and pushed participants into reflecting upon and sharing their personal stories as well as listening to and reflecting on the stories of others. Participating in such and an academic conference with the value of stories being such major theme reminded me of the power of personal narratives.

It was during a presentation about a transformative restorative justice project in El Salvador in which I have been participating in over the past four years, that the interconnection of the theme of relationship became so powerfully clear. In our session, two of my students told stories of their own personal growth and reflection when they went to “help others” in an impoverished community in El Salvador. They spoke about the importance of the relationships they built with the cooks, the soldiers and students. They learned lessons about the value in slowing down, stopping and just being. They spoke about the lessons they learned connecting to people and listening to their stories. Freire writes in Pedagogy of the oppressed, “Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence.” (2013, p.159). This is the same relationship that Peggy McIntosh refers to in phase four curriculum. (2013).

My three children will go down for their fourth trip this summer. The trips to El Salvador have become a part of the way they define themselves, a part of their identity. When my daughter was twelve on our second trip, we watched a documentary about Rufina Amaya, the sole survivor who escape from the El Mozote massacre in 1981. Listening to her tell her story of hiding in the trees watching her husband’s decapitation, the shooting of her nine year old son as he called out for his mother and the murder of her three girls ages 5, 3, and 8 months, the room full of Californian youth was quiet except for the sounds of sniffling. Our group leader, Alvaro, was a good friend of Rufina Amaya having traveled with her to the USA when she spoke to the commission on the Truth for El Salvador. As the movie ended, the group sat in complete silence. It was almost difficult to breath, the silence was so dense. The pain of her story had paralyzed the entire group for minutes. Finally, my daughter, Jessica, got up, walked over and gave Alvaro a hug. She held him and he held her while she sobbed and he cried. The healing that happens in listening to the stories, caring, and holding some of the pain is almost visible. They held each other a cried for a long time. There was so much communicated during those moments without words. “Solidarity with ‘the other’ is the radical postmodern position to overcome nihilism and polemicism.” (Slattery, 2006, p. 4). This kind of restorative justice is a relationship growing experience that both heals and facilitates growth. Counts writes about education as a means to correct injustices. (2013). This is one of those experiences. As we shared our stories about connections with the people of El Salvador during the last workshop of the three-day conference, I was reminded once again of the power of relationship and narrative in social justice. Freire writes, “ True diologue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking- thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the men and admits no dichotomy between them- thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity- thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved.” (2013, p. 159).

My experience at NAME helped me understand that all aspects of my life are about relationship building and social justice. As a parent, a partner, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a teacher, a spiritual person, a community member and a global citizen, my role is to develop relationship and promote social justice through trusting and loving everyone who touches my life.

**A call to Action**

I am hopeful about what “postmodern writers call a ‘paradigm-shift’ because humanity is moving to a new zone of cognition with an expanded concept of self in relation.” (Slattery, 2006, p. 19). If social justice is the main focus in my classroom as well as my life, then I need to develop trusting, honest relationship with students. Through this course it has become all the more clear to me that I believe passionately in the postmodern world view because it “seeks to transcend the ravages of modernity with radically new concepts of society, culture, language, and power. Likewise postmodern educators are committed to a new concept of curriculum development that will complement the social and cultural milieu of this new era in human history. (Slattery, 2006, p. 20). Common Core State Standards in Mathematics are one part of this reconceptualization of the curriculum. The classroom needs to be a place where children can take risks and be able to critique the ideas of others as well as receive criticism. All members of the community must be affirmed and stretched in order to grow. The ideas of trust, honesty, risk, criticism, growth and relationship are critical for social justice in the classroom, on a school wide level, a district level, a community and a global level. My goal is to learn and teach on all levels of the educational community. “For the truly humanist educator and the authentic revolutionary, the object of action is the reality to be transformed by them together with other men- not other men themselves.” (Freire, 2013, p. 160). There are many ways to develop these experiences at all of these levels. I have some ideas about how to do this at the different levels, but I also recognize a great opportunity for growth in my own ability to create trust, honesty, risk, criticism, growth and relationship on many levels of my life.

In my classroom I want to create trust and honesty in an environment safe for risk taking and criticism. I want my classroom to be an affirming environment that allows learners to stretch and pushes them to grow. The first step in creating a humanistic learning community affirming of diversity is being honest with my students about my sexuality. If I want open and honest communication with my students, I cannot afford to take the dishonest path of invisibility. If I want my students to trust me, first I have to trust them. I need to be open with my students about my sexuality so that I can create trust and build relationship. Being honest about my difference will allow them to share their differences and therefore allow us to move out of the phase one curricular model of oppression and move toward phase four (McIntosh, 2013).

As Slattery writes, “The postmodern worldview allows educators to envision an alternative way out of the turmoil of contemporary schooling, which too often is characterized by violence, bureaucratic gridlock, curricular stagnation, depersonalized evaluation, political conflict, economic crisis, decaying infrastructure, emotional fatigue, demoralization, and despair.” (2006, p. 21). I see evidence of this crisis in my classroom, in department meetings, across my district and throughout the county. At the same time I see hope and possibility in a postmodern paradigm for curriculum development “especially when it is viewed as a cyclical process where the past and the future inform and enrich the present rather than as a linear arrow along which events can be isolated, analyzed and objectified.” (Slattery, 2006, p. 22). I have been working with administration to help them see the deprofessionalization that has happened within our schools because “we have been conditioned to believe that our goals, objectives, lesson plans, and educational outcomes must all be measurable and behaviorally observable in order to be valid.” (Slatery, 2006, p. 24). Because of the relentless messages that teacher have received since the beginning of the standards movement, “even the majority who do not ascribe to this ideology rooted in the scientific method and the Tylerian Rational have allowed themselves to be conditioned to behave as they do.” (Slattery, 2006, p. 24). I believe that postmodernism and the shift to Common Core Curriculum also “challenge teachers to explore a worldview that envisions schooling through a different lens.” (Slattery, 2006, p. 24)

In my own classroom, I need to create ways for students to share their stories with the class and me as well. William Pinar (2004) argues that educators must begin to understand curriculum in the context of schools, society and autobiography. To start the new semester, I will facilitate a workshop with the students in which we will explore the five phases of personal and curricular re-vision through narrative. (McIntosh, 2013). This will give students an opportunity to share their own autobiographical narratives as well as deconstruct and make visible the beliefs behind different curricular models they experience in their daily lives. The goal will be to help students to demand a more responsive curriculum in their own classrooms and to be more critical consumers of education. I support Counts ideas that, “teachers must bridge the gap between school and society and play some part in the fashioning of those great common purposes which should bind the two together.” (2013, p. 46). I need to improve implementation of grading policies that honor students’ growth instead of fixed understandings in my own classroom, as well as advocate for similar humanistic policies throughout my school and district. I need to make the sure that all students ideas, interests and backgrounds are valued, by the class and myself. In implementing the CCSSM standards and the practice standards in particular, I hope to make students responsible for developing their understandings by reminding them that the mathematical authority comes from sound student reasoning instead of the text or the teacher. I to need facilitate the creation, sharing, critique and evaluation of multiple pathways to understanding. The students need to understand that all mistakes are celebrated as opportunities for learning. Students need to understand that developing understanding takes time, dedication and perseverance. I need to ensure that all members of the educational community are trusted and valued as both learners and as teachers who have important understandings and skills to contribute. “To plunge in; to choose; to disclose; to move: this is the road, it seems to me, to mastery.” (Greene, 2013, p. 138).

Although many of the practices I use in CCSS mathematics instruction promote social justice and equity, I want to explore ways to make the Algebra content relevant to the lives of students and conducive to making change in policies and practices that continue to marginalize students. “We should give our children a vision of the possibilities which lie ahead and endeavor to enlist their loyalties and enthusiasm in the realization of the vision. Also our social institutions and practices, all of them, should be critically examined in the light of such a vision.” (Counts, 2013, p. 48). I would like Algebra to facilitate opportunities for students to participate in social justice and restorative justice projects.

As I sorted through my own stories of my educational journey, I saw evidence of essentialist and perennialist teacher centered practices throughout my career as a learner and as a teacher. What became crystal clear to me was my belief in the destructive, dehumanizing, marginalizing nature of traditional transmission model of education as well as the generative, affirmative, constructive, revolutionary nature of postmodern critical theories. I identified deeply with the ideas of authors such as Counts, Freire, Eisner, Greene, McIntosh, Pinar, Apple, Addams, Giroux, hooks, Horton, Nieto, Noddings, Jackson, Dewey, Slatter and Thorton. Although, this project helped me sort through many theories and identify professional goals, more than anything, it inspired new questions and increased my determination to strive for social justice on multiple levels. An investigation of what Freire has “termed the people’s ‘thematic universe’ – the complex of their ‘generative themes’ – inaugurates the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom.” (2013, p. 161). This is my next step. As I continue to learn how to teach in high school, I also want to find ways to create policies and practices that promote social justice and develop relationship at the site, district, community and global levels through trust, honesty, risk, criticism, affirmation and growth among students, teachers, administrators, and community members.

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