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## Learning through Living: Freedom, Fear and Reading in the Classroom

Leslie Bailey Mashburn

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LEARNING THROUGH LIVING: FREEDOM, FEAR AND READING IN THE  
CLASSROOM

by

LESLIE BAILEY MASHBURN

(Under the Direction of William Reynolds)

ABSTRACT

The journey leading to today has been long and arduous. The irony of the situation is the manner in which I was void of any knowledge that the journey existed. Complacency, intimidation and service to the other are descriptors of my previous life. Determination, freedom, excitement and pride are characterizations of my current being.

Realizing there is a problem is the first step towards making a change. I was brought to the realization that I had been deskilled when I began my studies as a doctoral student. What seemingly should have been a gift, was a curse. Professors encouraged me to think for myself, develop my interests and my voice. I struggled in silence instead of embracing the freedom.

Through much agony and soul searching I came to the realization that my inability to think for myself was a topic worth study. If it happened to me, it has happened to others and the cycle must stop. Engaging in self-reflection, I discovered that I had participated in the deskilling process on three levels: as a learner, a classroom teacher and as a college professor.

My transformation experience is presented throughout the pages that follow. Particular emphasis is placed on the effect of deskilling specifically related to reading instruction. Deskilling in the classroom is examined from the point of view of students,

classroom teachers and college professors. It is my hope that all readers of my words will find hope in a shared experience and gain a will to begin their own personal line of flight towards freedom.

INDEX WORDS: Freedom, Deskillling, Autobiography

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CLASSROOM

by

LESLIE BAILEY MASHBURN

B.S., Georgia Southwestern State University, 1997

M.Ed., Georgia Southwestern State University, 1999

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in  
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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LESLIE BAILEY MASHBURN

Major Professor: William Reynolds

Committee: Ming Fang He  
John Weaver  
William Ayers

Electronic Version Approved:

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all people who have desired to make positive change in their life. Moving from a place of comfort into the world of the unknown is difficult and nerve racking but often necessary to find one's true self and identity. This is for the students I have taught in the past, those I teach now and for all those I will instruct in the future. Let us all make a line of flight.

I am most grateful to my family who has endured with me throughout my transformation and continue to love me nonetheless. To Troy, Will and Abby – completing this work and this transformation is all for you.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to begin by acknowledging the fact that there is no way to list everyone's name individually who has shown support for me throughout this process. Whether in big or small ways, whether it has been a smile, a hug or a listening ear, so many have served as cheerleaders as I have struggled to find myself and attempt to make sense of who I was and who I wanted to be.

Troy, Will and Abby – you have probably suffered the most throughout the dissertation process and for that I apologize. Nonetheless, you have stuck by me and shown love to me when I was less than loveable. You are my heart and soul. I look forward to all of the movie and popcorn nights and other fun times we have coming as a family now that I do not have to spend all of my time on the computer. I love you. You have Mama back.

My friends are true gold. Thank you Heidi Hayes for all the times when I felt I could not go on, the way you spoke in admiring tones of my ability to keep it all together, while unfounded, inspired me to pick up, put on a smile and trudge on. Leigh Medders, what can I say?! The day we walk across the stage to graduate together in the December ceremony will be one of the proudest days of my life. Not because I will have the degree, but because I will be sharing the accomplishment with you. Without you as a sounding board for my daily drama, both related and non-dissertation related, I would have never made it this far. Melanie Thornton– you and I were such an unlikely pair for both obvious and hidden reasons. How many laughs have we shared on our drives back and forth to the 'Boro? From the moment we met our friendship has been unique and I appreciate your support and encouragement more than you know. I appreciate the



willingness of Gayle Tremble to pass me in the process and allow me to ride your coattail with tons of questions. You have amazing patience! YeVette McWhorter – colleague, mentor and friend. My dissertation is finally a good one – a ‘done’ one!!! Without your ability to make me laugh at myself and point out my haggard appearance I may have let myself go altogether. We compliment each other well and your friendship is cherished. I would also like to thank Laura Horne and Tiffany Nipper for being the receivers of my many complaints without judging or reminding me of how much I hate complaining! You allow me to vent and our daily cell phone conversations begin my days on a positive note and pick me up when I am dragging! And finally, thank you Sherry Evans for being just as crazy as I am and for continually reminding me that my words carry authority and interest for others. I am amazed that you *wanted* to read my dissertation and have helped me edit and revise. Girlfriend, you are great!

Last, but not least, I would like to express my appreciation to the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. William Ayers, Dr. Ming Fang He, Dr. John Weaver and Dr. William Reynolds. It is amazing how someone who is so far away can so sincerely express interest in a student who is essentially a stranger. Dr. Ayers, I am so grateful for your willingness to help me become a better scholar and writer. The time you have so willingly given in all circumstances is greatly appreciated. It has never mattered that you were states away. Thanks in particular for reminding me to stay true to my own story and worry less about what others say and/or do not say in all contexts. Dr. He, I wonder if you thought I would ever arrive at a topic! Your sense of humor in our Qualitative Research class served as an incredible encouragement when I felt so discouraged. The compliments you would give helped me to believe that my story and my voice are worth

hearing. Dr. Weaver, thank you first of all for bringing Melanie and me together and for the genuine concern you have for all of your students. When I am being told I should not have friendships with students, I remember how we talk of that and know that I am right. Thank you as well for having in me the confidence needed to venture into our joint authorship of articles and a book chapter. I have enjoyed our academic arguments and hope to continue arguing and writing with you in the future. The words ‘thank you’ are not adequate for expressing my appreciation to the last person in this list – Dr. Reynolds. You have been the catalyst for the journey. I still find it hard to believe that you saw in me someone other than the person sitting in your class silently waiting on others to speak. I know at times you may have regretted pointing out my abilities which often led to opinions concerning control issues that we have exchanged and bantered about frequently. Nevertheless, as soon as I realized I *do* have control over my voice and being I have been a new person. Thank you for realizing there was more to me that meets the eye and for encouraging me to explore all of my complexities.

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*The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high*

*and we miss it, but it is too low and we reach it.*

*--Michelangelo*

## CHAPTER 1

### LEARNING TO LIVE

#### The Person I Was

There is not even a stoplight. No need for one really – there is very little traffic. The houses that stand have existed for as long as I remember. The environment is safe – even ‘across the tracks’. It is the type of town where people leave their houses and cars unlocked with no worries of vandalism. It is the sort of atmosphere that makes me feel safe as I walk or run before daylight. It is where I grew up, fled, and have now returned to live my life with my family. Pinehurst, Georgia has a population of 335 and is a storybook small town where everyone knows everyone including their personal business. It is where I call home. As I begin looking back, I see both the beauty and tragedy of growing up in such a ‘safe’ environment.

When I was in school, I was a “pleaser”. I was the teacher’s pet and proud of it. I always did my schoolwork, homework and was eager to help others. My desire was to make my teachers as well as my parents happy. In doing so, I believed I would be a happy person. Those were my goals – make others happy and therefore be content with myself. In my strife to please, however, there were (and still are) daunting thoughts and fears of failure. I have always been exceptionally afraid of anything less than perfection and this obsession with excellence has driven me to excel in my schoolwork. Achievement for me had little to do with what I internalized as knowledge. I felt like

success was signified by what others thought of me and by the letter grade ‘A’ on the paper report card sent home at the end of each grading period.

Fullington Academy in Pinehurst graduated one of its largest classes ever in 1994 consisting of 31 students. We were ready to face college and the world and believed whole-heartedly that we had received a quality education. Perhaps that was true, I was an honor student and had no trouble getting into the two colleges to which I applied – Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia, and University of Georgia in Athens. What I failed to realize at the time was that the grades were worth little more than the ink in which they were written. I had not empowered myself through my learning at all. Instead, I merely fit the mold of production by schools.

I remember distinctly the first moment I felt unsure of my preparatory education and my own intellectual abilities. Although I was dressed like the typical college prep student right down to my new L.L Bean backpack, I would soon be in for a shock. My clothes and outward appearance would not be able to compensate for the internal feeling of despair that would soon overwhelm me. It was my first college English course and we were assigned as essay to write; I regret that I do not recall the topic, but it was a set topic nonetheless. I did as I was accustomed, wrote my paper, turned it in early and awaited my grade, confident I would receive an A. I believed college would be the same easy task as my previous education. Little did I know how wrong I was. It is with much humiliation that I can now recognize my ignorance.

I do not remember my English professor’s name, but I do remember he was a male, tall and dark-headed whom I had deemed pretty knowledgeable, that is until he returned my essay. Much to my surprise and horror my eyes were drawn to the large C

marked in red at the top of my paper. A grade of C? Surely this was a mistake I thought. I made A's not C's. My chest began to tighten with apprehension. I immediately made my way to his desk, almost speechless, to inquire about the reason for such a disastrous grade. It was at this very moment that I had an inkling of fear that I was in fact, not as smart as I thought. He proceeded to tell me I had no thesis statement to which I responded, "What is a thesis statement"?

Imagine the horror I felt as I admitted I did not know what he was talking about. Shame surged within me and I could feel the warmth of embarrassment creep into my cheeks. The lump in my throat threatened to choke me. My heart was about to beat out of my chest and for a moment I feared I would pass out. I had never, ever, made a C in my life! Fortunately, the professor did not laugh at my lack of intellect and my apparent stress but alternatively did his best to explain what I should already know. He said I needed to develop my own thoughts. He was acutely unaware that growing up in Pinehurst, I never thought outside of the small town atmosphere. Without trying to sound like I look down on people from Pinehurst, (I am one of them after all), growing up there, we are taught to conform, to believe what the majority believes, to be satisfied with the simple and what is provided to us. Doing anything different was viewed as rebellion.

Unfortunately the battle did not end there. On that initial paper, I did earn a grade of B, but I was still horrified. I should make A's and anything else was unacceptable. Like many others I was obsessed with getting all A's because anything else would signify failure (hooks, 1994, p. 157). That course was a struggle for me the entire quarter. In the end, I received an A, but I am fairly confident I did not earn it. Honestly, I think the professor wanted to pacify me so that I would cease to pester him. The sad part is I



realized that and although happy I achieved my goal of an A, there was the miserable feeling of failure inside because I knew I did not really earn it.

Outside of my English course, there were other instances in which I felt I was unprepared for life as a student in higher education. We had many tests in college; tests in which I had no idea of how to prepare to complete successfully. In all of my years of education K-12, I have very few memories of ever bringing home books to study for tests. Learning came very easy to me, or so I thought. The revelation is that I did not have to study because my teachers essentially spelled out what we would be tested over before we ever thought about studying. In college, I learned how to take a test, and I was encouraged to think. As a student at Fullington, I was required to recall only at the literal level to achieve the great A. No thoughts of my own required. No *ability* to think for my own required.

Did my parents realize I was struggling and feared I was a failure? Of course not. I could not admit that I was less than perfect. It is hard to do so even now. I talked to my mother almost daily, but it was useless chitchat or she was giving directions on how to cook something as I was trying extremely hard to impress my boyfriend with my domestic abilities. That, too, was a lesson in failure. My mother had always cooked without my help because she could do it faster and it was easier that way; more time efficient. I did not even know how to boil a hotdog.

My parents divorced when I was in my teens and although from my hometown, my father lived only ten miles away, we did not have much of a relationship. It is still that way. Nonetheless, I knew my parents were both proud of me as I was their only child to go to college and pursue a four-year degree. Never in a million years would I

admit the struggle I was encountering and even more, would I refrain from blaming the private education they had worked so hard to provide. I struggled privately on my own.

The questions I now began to ask myself were – Why did making A's make me feel smart and successful? Why did I fall short of realizing I lacked true learning at all? The answer is simple, yet complex: fear. In a chapter titled *The Path to Success, in Thirteen Theses in Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 2*, (1999), Benjamin writes “fame, or rather success, has become obligatory and is no longer the optional extra it formerly was” (p.145). The feeling that one must be essentially perfect to be successful is not original. Without success I would be a failure and therefore I have spent all of my time and energy working, as stated by Benjamin, towards optimum achievement. The dilemma with this train of thought is the manner in which my focus had been on the concrete, of the obtainable end product.

I now realize I have thought nothing about why or how I do what I do, or know what I know, it is simply a ritual or routine that guides my day. It has been only recently I have come to question both my beliefs and the beliefs of others. Yes, I gave brief consideration to the fact when I was an undergraduate student, but as always, I was able to overcome the obstacle and therefore pushed the thoughts of failure deep within hoping they would never surface. So now, as I confront the demons of my past once and for all I feel the need to admit openly that it is a frightening process. I wonder if anyone else has experienced the nervousness that I now feel as I reflect on my past and think about my future. What if everyone realizes that I am not perfect or always together with the answers to their questions? Will they see me as weak? Am I a C student? Am I average?

I ponder on goals in which I have outwardly productively achieved, and have come to the awareness that I lack a great deal of knowledge in how to genuinely succeed in the world. I have accomplished the first step – admission of the problem. I realized I must confront that I lacked true knowledge or rather an ability to think and use my own thoughts for the benefit of learning. This happened at an orientation meeting for doctoral studies at Georgia Southern University (GSU). One of the speakers said the best thing a beginning student can do to succeed is to discover his/her own area(s) of interest, research the interest(s) further and proceed to gear all individual course papers towards that topic. Being a planner and goal setter, I attempted to decide precisely what my dissertation would be about on my three-hour drive home. The problem was that not only did I fail coming up with a topic for my dissertation by the time I pulled into the driveway, but I had also developed a migraine from the stress I was placing upon myself. I considered countless topics and could come up with nothing I was interested in at all. I felt desperate and quite honestly, stupid, because I did not know anything I was interested in. I had never before written or studied anything of my choosing. Teachers always provided the topics, titles and outlines for my studies. I began to think I would not be able to be a doctoral studies student. I would not accomplish my goal. I felt defeated and my courses had not even begun. If I was going to succeed, I needed more direction, more instruction. I needed someone to tell me exactly what to do!

A couple of weeks later, I realized through a discussion with a friend whom was also a GSU doctoral student, that we had both experienced suffering. We did not know how to be ourselves because someone had always formed our voice for us. Now we had a theoretically wonderful opportunity to be our own person in our coursework, but we did

not know how to embrace the assignment. Freedom to express our opinion? What opinion? In all of my years of school, although never written on the blackboard to be transcribed into my spiral bound, college ruled notebook (as necessitated by my teachers) there was an unspoken imperative that learning occurred through agreement in the group as a whole. I was never encouraged to disagree, even respectfully. I laugh now as I remember sitting in my senior literature course and believing my teacher was so smart because she knew what the great poets and writers meant in their writings. Occasionally she would ask if anyone knew the meaning or intentions of the author but when we did respond, we were always wrong. Now I realize she was reading the answers from the teacher's guide! She did not know any more than the students in her classroom, yet she was the authority. Now, I was expected to have a voice of my own, and to challenge the opinions of others. That, as I was beginning to understand, is how a person learns. Paulo Freire, often credited for the founding of critical pedagogy, believed students had to become aware of their own knowledge. I was not capable of embracing such.

Freire defined conscientization as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 17). The reality of the situation was startling as I realized my lack of consciousness of learning. Being provided freedom in academia as I had never known it previously produced a coexistence of freedom and fear within me because I lacked a voice of my own. I felt ignorant and defeated. For the first time in my life I wanted to give up the fight. I became angry at myself and everyone who had stripped me of my ability to think for myself – my parents, previous teachers, older siblings and sadly, even my husband who unknowingly I came to resent because I was living a life doing what

others wanted me to do, told me to do, expected me to do and always in the manner of someone else's preference. Being a pleaser was not going to benefit me in the doctoral studies program. I would have to make a change. Fortunately, I chose not to give up.

Although I continuously tried to think on a daily basis of the topic I wanted to study for my dissertation it was not until the second year of my program that I realized what really interested me. I have always hated attention in the respect of being the center of attention. When I was engaged to be married, I despised opening presents in front of everyone and I refuse to allow family members to have birthday parties in my honor. I do not want everyone looking at me, singing to me, giving me presents, making a fuss over me, etc. But nonetheless I came to the realization that *I* would be my own topic of study. *My intimate teacher lore.* William Ayers speaks of this phenomenon in *Teacher Lore: Learning From Our Own Experience* (2002) in the following manner:

At its heart, teacher lore, as its name implies, is a storytelling and a story bearing activity. We are, each of us, grounded in a context, embodied in a physical, cultural, historical world not of our own creation. What we make of that world, and what we make of ourselves in that world, is what our stories are all about. (p. 155)

My personal experience and struggle with my educational journey is worth further inquiry. If I confront the manner in which I was taught and the struggle I am encountering in order to make a change, maybe my story will enable someone else to do the same. I remember how alone I felt and the relief that washed over me when my friend told me she felt the same. Being alone is sometimes a welcomed occasion as a busy mother of two, but in a field of intellectuals, feeling insubordinate is anything but a

comfort. I always consider myself to be a strong analyzer, but I had never before analyzed my life and the roots of the fear and frustration I was feeling. This journey was full of trepidation as I had never experienced before.

Examining my roots and confronting demons from my past educational experience is not simple. I constantly ask myself, “What will I do if I discover I really do lack intelligence? What if I never stand strong enough on my own to think for myself? And worse yet, what if all my family and friends abandon me because who I really am is not the person they understand and want to have in their lives?” This uncertainty at times has driven me to the highest limits of frustration and the brink of insanity. I had always thought I was a leader and now I realized not only was I wrong, but I was far from being able to think like a person capable of leading anyone or anything. I felt my entire identity was a lie.

Since I was a little girl, I saw my father as dominant to my mother. He treated her often with disrespect and never *asked* for anything, just *told* her what to do instead. He was like that with my siblings and me as well. It always seemed to me, however, that my brother and sister were not as intimidated as I. Looking back I think that may be due to the fact that they are both at least 9 years older than me along with the fact that I was very much an “accident”. Maybe he had less connection with me because I was initially unplanned. Nonetheless, I was afraid of him. I do not ever remember being a “daddy’s girl”. I did whatever he said without a second thought. To this day I still hide from him. When I began my studies at GSU, I lived three hours from campus and arrived home after midnight on the nights I had class. My father felt as if that was not safe and offered to accompany me. That thought was terrifying. We have nothing in common and

conversation would be very strained. Fortunately for me, at the orientation, one of the professors in the doctoral program introduced me to another student who has traveling from nearby my home. She and I became immediate friends and I was relieved not to have to ride to Statesboro and back weekly in the company of my father. What he (my father) did not know was that my new friend was African American. If he had known that fact, he would have forbidden me to ride with her. Could he do that? I was a married adult. Technically the answer is no, but he would have raised (pardon the obscenity) hell for my doing so. I hid my friend from him.

At this point as I struggle each day I am slowly learning how to genuinely live *my* life; regardless of what anyone else believes. Until a short time ago, I had not realized, much less accepted I had been served an injustice. Ming Fang He (2003) states “[I] realize[d] that one can never thoroughly learn about a first culture until exposed to a second culture” (He, 2003, p. 79). I literally *feel* what she is saying. It was only after pursuing a goal of obtaining my doctoral degree did I comprehend there was a problem. It took stepping out of my culture into another world to become conscious of what I was lacking. I lacked *me*.

#### Who I am Today

My passion is now for all people, regardless of their age to ask themselves – Do I know how to live? Since beginning to think for myself I have made somewhat of a list of things I want to accomplish or do before my time on earth is over. To an outsider, this may be insignificant in the context of this paper. However, one must truly understand my life in order to comprehend the depth of my feelings about my personal awakening. It is not that the tasks on my list are insurmountable. It is the way these tasks are viewed by

others as rebellious. While rebellious to others, accomplishment of these goals proves to myself and others that I can do what *I* want, and I can think for myself and make my own decisions.

Prior to becoming a doctoral student I had never flown in an airplane. My brother is a pilot of small aircraft and crop dusters but I had never been in the air with him. My husband, Troy, refuses to fly and had all but said I was forbidden to do so and I had never given any consideration to going against his wishes. I see repeatedly how girls marry men that are like their fathers. Thankfully, Troy is not anywhere near as dictatorial as my primary male figure of my life, but he did essentially “make the rules” of our household. I felt safe in that type of environment because that is what I had been accustomed to. That is, until, my professors started discussing the Bergamo Curriculum Conference held annually in Dayton, Ohio. I wanted to attend. To make a long story short, I did attend but not without great expense to my marriage. Troy could not believe I would go against his wishes and do something he explicitly did not believe I should do. Frankly, I could not believe I would do it either. Never before had I defied “authority” such as this. In his defense, it was not so much that he was worried about my being away from him, but it was a matter of safety in his eyes. His best friend died in a plane crash a year before we married and even though prior to that event he declared he would never fly, that tragedy served to confirm his fear. He said no, I could not go. I went. I did make it to Dayton and back safely and have since then traveled to the conference yearly as well as flying to some other conferences in the United States. The point is that I did something for myself. I not only attended the conference, but I presented as well. More than those accomplishments, I found love there. A love for my own thoughts and for myself. I



attended sessions in which participants would argue with the presenter and at first I was afraid and nervous. How dare they argue in a crowd? I soon learned that everyone there believed that others had thoughts of value and slowly I realized that perhaps my thoughts had value as well. I witnessed critical thought processes and was ecstatic to realize that I had thoughts of my own that I could voice without the room erupting in laughter.

Item two on my list is somewhat comical. I want to karaoke; not in the comfort of someone's home, but in public. This I have yet to do. Why? Last summer, I had gathered all my nerve and was about to go commit to a song when my family who was with me at the beach frowned upon the idea. I was torn. I did not want to cause a scene in front of my children, but then again I wanted them to see that I could stand up for myself, particularly my daughter. Typically, I realize cheerleading is seen as something that girls do. But the kind of cheerleading that Abby participates in is different. It is without a doubt a sport and the competition is fierce. In Pinehurst, little girls look cute in their pink ball helmet with the hole cut out in the back for a ponytail to peek through. My brother and sister have told me many times "Give her a ball". That is not her personality. It is not her personality to don a cheerleading outfit and it to be just that – an outfit, like she is playing dress up. Instead, when she puts on her *uniform* as it is called in the competition cheerleading world, she is an athlete. The concept of cheerleaders as athletes is essentially foreign because no one else from our hometown or surrounding areas participates. That is the point. I do not want her growing up always doing what others tell her to do. I want her to stand up and sing like I did not. For some reason, possibly because I am not yet *totally* capable of embracing my own identity and voice, I

succumbed to my family's directions, remained in my seat and did not make my singing debut. I regret that decision, but know that I will accomplish my stardom very soon.

Perhaps the most controversial item on my list (which is hard to believe considering what I went through with the flying issue) has been my desire to have a tattoo. It is intriguing to me how perceptive my doctoral professors are. In Ohio last year I was in the backseat of a rental car along with two of my professors, Dr. Weaver and Dr. Reynolds and some other colleagues from the conference. I do not recall how the subject came up, but I announced I wanted a tattoo and upon hearing my declaration, Dr. Reynolds and Dr. Weaver laughed. They wondered what my Southern Baptist deacon husband would say about that! Always a planner, I had a plan laid out. It would start with the Troy and me watching the MTV reality television show depicting the daily operation of a tattoo parlor, *Miami Ink* and after he would stop fussing about all the people getting the tattoos, my hope was that he would begin to see the reason why people get them. I hoped that he would see that for many, a tattoo is not a random mark but instead it carries meaning. We did watch *Miami Ink*, he did think the people were ridiculous for ruining their bodies, but it broke the ice, or so I thought. When I delicately mentioned that I wanted to get a tattoo for my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, you would have thought I had told him I was dying. Thus began a yearlong argument. Before I left to go to a conference in California, he even said to me that I had better not come back with a tattoo to which I replied, "If I do are you going to divorce me?" He did not reply at all and I walked out of the door stunned but even more determined than ever. I told my friend I was tempted to get the entire divorce decree inked into my back and make him sign it. What he refused to see was that I wanted the tattoo for me, not for anyone else to see. I

wanted a butterfly because that is very symbolic of the change I feel I have been through. That did not matter. I won this battle in the end and Troy even accompanied me to get the tattoo (because he said, of course, that if I was going to contract hepatitis he wanted to be there to see it) and I love it. I look at it with pride, not for going against my husband's wishes, but for what it means to me. It serves as a constant reminder to me that I can spread my wings and fly on my own. In exploring my life, I know that I am just now emerging from a sheltered cocoon into a being with wings and an ability to live as *I* want to live. I have gone from a girl who got all of the answers right on the test to a woman who now questions the writer of the test. I am learning to live!

In my work as an assistant professor, textbook representatives who are marketing and trying to sell their product constantly contact me. I am offered test banks, power points for each chapter, chapter notes, and many more supplemental aids to make my job as instructor 'easier'. The issue is I did not take the job I have now because I thought it was easy. I am being offered services that will serve to deskill me as an instructor. Unfortunately I would have once embraced all these offerings but now I appreciate that I must break the cycle of uniform knowledge. I cannot place upon my students the same injustice that enveloped me as a learner. Deskillng teachers, professors and students separates conception from execution. The 'why' is being taken away from the 'how to'. As teachers, professors and students, we are no longer being asked why we do what we do; how we do it is the only area that seems to matter.

As a college professor of future teachers, I have discovered that pre-service teacher candidates enter colleges and universities with hopes and dreams of touching the lives of children. I read their applications for our teacher education program and many of

them write of the teachers who made a positive impact on their lives and they vow to do the same. They believe all children can learn and will do so later under their own direction. These teacher candidates often enter teacher education programs such as the one in which I am connected, full of enthusiasm for teaching and the profession as a whole. They then embark on an intellectual journey striving to acquire the best teaching methods in order to be the most effective teacher possible. In many circumstances however, upon participating in field experience and later in leading a classroom of their own students, they are faced with a dilemma. They find that many of the instructional methods they learned to employ in the classroom, particularly reading instructional strategies, are not going to be a useful part of their everyday curriculum. Instead, they are forced to abide by a deskilling and downgrading method of instructing their students to read.

In my first semester teaching at the college level, a male student, Todd, raised his hand to ask a question and said he had something he wanted the class to discuss. Being somewhat self-centered, I was privately patting myself on the back, proud, because my students wanted to have a discussion! Unbeknownst to me, my discussion would turn into a near riot against teacher education. The issue Todd posed was this: Why are students forced to sit in college classrooms day after day learning how to best teach children when in reality, when they enter the classroom as a teacher, the only ability required is the ability to read the script? Although I was initially inclined to give him a brilliant answer full of educational terminology about the importance of learning theory and theorists etc., I took a deep breath and acknowledged the value of his thoughts. Todd tended to be outspoken and more often than not got on everyone's nerves for

talking so much, but it was evident that in this instance he was expressing the opinion of everyone in the classroom. I brought this question to my colleagues at our next faculty meeting and unfortunately the answer I received was not one that I felt would satisfy Todd and the rest of my students. Accountability. We are held accountable for teaching our teacher candidates and must provide proof to our accreditation agencies that we assess our teacher candidate's knowledge. We must have data and the way we get our data is by lecturing and then giving multiple-choice tests. The parallels between higher education and public education are abundant.

With the implementation of President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, there is even more of an emphasis placed on students' ability to read. President Bush states, "The Administration is committed to ensuring that every child can read by the third grade" (No Child Left Behind, 2001, p.10). Standardized tests are administered each year in order to gauge whether or not all students have achieved sufficient progress particularly in the area of reading. I am infuriated by this notion of uniformity amongst students. The testing situation presents a dilemma for classroom teachers. Classroom teachers know better than anyone how their students learn best and they also know the ability level of each of their students. This knowledge surpasses outsider or test predictions about student performance. Nonetheless, teachers are stripped of their ability to teach students according to their knowledge of students' aptitude and forced to follow a scripted, "scientifically based" reading program. I view this as a valid difficulty that should be brought to the forefront of study and inquiry. The majority of these reading programs are recognizant of curriculum lacking critical thinking skills provided to students so that they may implement in their skills in daily learning and

expression of acquired knowledge. Following the guidelines of this federal mandate strips teachers of their freedom to teach students in the ways in which foster the most intellectual growth while simultaneously robbing students of their own abilities to foster critical thought processes.

Another issue worth further study is the methods in which programs and curriculum are deemed worthy of implementation in the schools. Michael Apple writes in *Ideology and Curriculum* (1990) and *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (2000) on knowledge, power and curriculum. He discusses the question “Whose knowledge is of most worth?” Student knowledge cannot be reduced “to specific forms of overt behavior so that the educator can have certitude of outcome” (1990, p. 109). This again is measurable on a pencil and paper test, or in today’s classrooms, a computer-based multiple-choice test that does not consider critical thinking and process, which is more important than the right answer itself. The knowledge the student possesses is most important, not that of the textbook. Unfortunately, the textbook has great power over both the teacher and student. There are committees who spend days pouring over texts deciding which one is “best” to meet the needs of the students. What is the need for this when the teachers and students are the ones who possess the greatest wealth of knowledge?

Apple (2000) carves out three types of knowledge: knowledge that, knowledge how, and knowledge to (p.118).

Knowledge ‘that’ is factual information, such as knowing that Madison is the capital of Wisconsin or Baton Rouge is the capital of Louisiana. Knowledge ‘how’ is skills such as knowing how to use the library or how to inquire into the

histories of, say women or unions in the United States. Knowledge ‘to’ is dispositional knowledge. That is, it includes those norms, values and propensities that guide our future conduct. Examples include knowing how to be honest, to have pride in one’s racial heritage, to want to learn more after one’s formal schooling is over, to be intellectually open-minded, or to see oneself as part of a democratic community and to act cooperatively. (118)

Each of these three types of wisdom is important, yet in many instances more emphasis in the classroom is being placed on knowledge that and how.

Why is more emphasis being placed on knowledge that and knowledge how? By focusing on these two types of learning, it is “safer” (p.119) and less critical of the curriculum. Teachers do not have to have as much skill to bestow upon students these two types of knowledge, as argued by my student Todd which Apple refers to as the “deskilling of teachers” (p.117) an unfortunate situation in which teachers are not required to utilize the skills they employ as effective and as a result, the skills degenerate.

The skills that teachers have built up over decades of hard work – setting relevant curricular goals, establishing content, designing lessons and instructional strategies, ‘community building’ in the classroom, individualizing instruction based on an intimate knowledge of students’ varied cultures, desires, and needs, and so on – are lost. In many ways, given the centralization of authority and control, they are simply no longer ‘needed’. (117-118)

I often refer to it in this manner: If you can read, you can teach. Many of the textbooks used in the schools are so scripted, that there is no critical thinking required on the part of

the teacher, nor is he/she required to practice reflection on technique and effectiveness given that all one has to do is read the script. Todd was right in his belief.

How much testing is suitable? Students must pass an exam in order to graduate from high school. Students wishing to go beyond their K-12 education must take the Standardized Assessment Test (S.A.T.) or an equivalent evaluation measure and upon entering a college or university sanctioned by the Board of Regents, students must also pass a Regent's examination. Yet the testing is not complete for those wanting to become educators. "The Professional Standards Commission (PSC) has initiated the development of a new educator assessment program called the Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators (GACE<sup>tm</sup>). These new Georgia assessments will be fully aligned with national standards, Georgia educator certification requirements, Georgia educator preparation standards, and the new Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) for P-12 students now being implemented by the Georgia Department of Education" (GA PSC Website, 2006). Before entering teacher education programs, students must pass all of the afore mentioned assessments. All of this testing is deemed necessary by the education department of our state and the Board of Regents. One would think that having passed all of these assessment measures, students would leave our high schools and then our colleges ready to meet the world. That is not, however, a safe assumption.

Feelings exist among faculty in institutions of higher learning in our country indicating our well tested students are not as prepared for success as many believe. It seems that faculty are surprised at how ill prepared students are academically when they come to college (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 129). The reason students are not adequately prepared for education beyond high school graduation is due to the lack of



freedom they experienced in their K-12 learning. Without the freedom to learn through thinking for themselves and developing their own voice, students are reduced to regurgitating the knowledge fed to them by their teachers. The injustice placed upon these students becomes most evident when they enter what we tend to refer to as “the real world” and are faced with circumstances that require them to think and not reiterate facts.

As a college professor of reading education for teacher education candidates I feel the same dilemma as classroom teachers. I would greatly prefer to teach my students in a manner that promotes critical thinking in learning the instructional methods used to teach students to read. However, due to the need to ensure all of my students are able to pass the GACE exam, I often succumb to teaching practices I know are not optimal for my own students.

The context of teacher education in 2007 is not about knowledge; it is about the testing of information. “Our [college professors’] situation is not very different from that of our colleagues in the public schools. Having lost control of the curriculum, public-school teachers have been reduced to domestic workers” (Pinar, 2004, xi). Just as the public school teachers must prepare their students to pass a standardized test, I, too, must do the same.

### My Future

It is now my goal to be able to translate the knowledge I gain from my inquiry to my teaching in order for my teacher education students to realize the injustice placed upon not only the students in the classrooms, but on the teachers as well. “Students who enter teacher education bring with them their first chronology negotiated throughout their cumulative classroom lives” (Britzman, 1991, p. 56). I feel as if I have a Dr. Jekyll and

Mr. Hyde type personality. One moment I am on my soapbox engaging my students in discussion and encouraging them to think for themselves and to step out of their comfort zone. Unfortunately I then remember the ‘proof’ we must provide to our accreditation agencies and how our teacher candidates’ test scores are reported to Georgia Board of Regents with our institution’s name listed as responsible for their performance (or lack thereof) and resort back to lecture and multiple choice tests. I fear that I must teach like the professors next door to my classroom in order to be effective.

One of the issues for consideration is deconstructing methods of reading instruction employed in many of the public schools of Georgia and investigating the ways in which these types of instruction deskill teachers and take away the freedom of learning and expression from students. I am living proof that these methods, whether employed in the public or private school results in students who are followers, not leaders. This investigation is vital for my profession. Unfortunately, with the increased emphasis on phonics much in part due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, students are not gaining a picture of reading as a process of many differing faculties. “Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29). When asking someone who is not directly related to reading education to define reading, his or her answer rarely contains the word ‘knowledge’. The purpose of reading is for comprehension and what a student comprehends is directly related to his/her existing knowledge of ‘the word and the world’.

“Less than one-quarter of college and university faculty would characterize students as ‘well prepared academically,’ while less than half gave their student even

‘satisfactory’ of ‘very satisfactory’ ratings in term of their quality” (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 128). While it may be true that students are going to college unprepared, it is not entirely the fault of students. Students, many like me, are afraid of freedom. The freedom itself is binding. What is even worse in particular instances is the lack of consciousness of the phenomena restricting the individual and/or fearing confronting the obstacle(s). “If they [people] are afraid of acknowledging structures, they can scarcely think of breaking through them to create others, to transform” (Greene, 1988, p. 19). Until I was given freedom, I was content with my life and did not even realize what I was lacking. I began to understand the changes I wanted to make in my life but was frightened. The fear within creates a domino effect culminating in an inability to alter daily life. What should be liberating, serves as a restriction. “Fear of freedom, of which its possessor is not necessarily aware, makes him see ghosts. Such an individual is actually taking refuge in an attempt to achieve security, which he prefers to the risks of liberty” (Freire, 1970, p.20). Liberation brings about angst for the reason that it leads to students taking responsibility for their learning. Taking responsibility as I have always known is having one’s homework, being prepared with sharpened pencils (#2’s of course), paper and the other supplies needed to sit and receive information. I could have been a poster child for responsibility. In an American Educational Research Association session (2007) titled “Quality and Equality: Right Answers, the Curriculum, and Political Attacks on Thinking” Alfie Kohn stated that in many schools “responsibility means mindless obedience”. I sat in my seat and knew that he could have speaking directly to me and about my own experience. I have gone through life, both in school, in home under the

supervision of my parents and even as a married woman, being obedient to the wishes of someone else.

Even more lamentable, is the reality that some colleges and universities continue to serve students an injustice beyond their K-12 education and are a factor in the freedom-fear relationship; this is one type of problem addressed in Bill Readings' *University in Ruins (1996)*. Readings brings to the forefront many disparagements concerning academia at the post-high school level. Instead of being spoon fed information as a continuum of the previous educational experiences of students, Readings states, “[that] educated properly, the subject learns the rules of thought, not a content of positive knowledge, so that thought and knowledge acquisition become a freely autonomous activity, part of the subject” (p.67). Autonomy is associated with independence or freedom in this instance, as Readings is discussing, the importance of the student or subject, being able to attain insight instinctively while encountering information so that it is internalized as part of the learning in a non-threatening way. Unfortunately, students go to college lacking critical thinking skills yet the institution does nothing or little to help.

In the typical classrooms of many students today, what is taught and heard are the facts, dates and places of occurrences in our past that have made us who we are today. Is that relevant? Should this type of curricula be accepted as foundation in our schools? Is the date and location the point, or are the feelings, motives and thoughts behind the people in the cultures the rationale for our being as we exist in the present day? This is an issue that must be confronted - changing the philosophy of teaching facts and instead strive to create curricula “around forms of culture and school knowledge that empower

students who traditionally have been excluded from the benefits of a *critical education*” (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985, p.156). By limiting learning to facts, students are lacking exposure to interpretation; the separation of conception and execution becomes an issue again. Students are not given a chance to voice opinions about these matters, nor are they given opportunities to explore the reasons behind the history and events that make us who we are in authentic circumstances that make learning seem relevant. Instead, students replicate the desires of the teacher and note, memorize, and later forget all of the information that has not been internalized in a way that represents who they are. “The curriculum comes to mean skills. The student-teacher relationship is made into lists of individual basic competencies” (Giroux & McLaren, 1989, p.107). This is alarming considering the lack of regularity and conformity in the world they are studying. A breakthrough or liberation is needed.

Fortunately, I have learned to view the past as a story and find it interesting. When viewed in that manner, the past serves to intrigue me and inspire further study. What methods of instruction were used to teach my classmates and myself prior to my college career and doctoral program? What have I learned about how I was taught and the foundation behind those methods? Do I view curriculum in the same light as I did before arriving at Georgia Southern University?

The answers to the questions above are not simple in nature. In some cases, the answers are difficult to face as I realize I am somewhat hypocritical in my own teaching of pre-service teachers. I find myself occasionally employing the instructional philosophy of “do as I say, not as I do”. Where are the ethics in that situation? I am in this instance just as guilty as those I have convicted of serving me an injustice.

I have changed significantly since embarking on the journey towards my doctoral degree. Like water flowing through a stream, I have sometimes slowed in times of drought and weariness while at other times I have rushed like rapids as ideas flowed freely. Nevertheless, many of my preconceived notions of what my previous educational experiences did to enrich my life and learning have changed. My views of how I was taught as well as my views of my own current teaching have been altered. I now realize that my learning prior to my doctoral studies was centered on curriculum as the methodologies and materials of instruction. In examining my past, I have now come to the realization that curriculum is not a set of textbooks with teachers' instructions, but instead it is an entire field that like me has undergone a change. "Curriculum transmits culture, as it is formed by it. Curriculum modifies culture even as it transmits it. Similarly, as with culture, we live curriculum before we describe it" (Grumet, 1999, p.24). The reconceptualization of curriculum studies was a monumental movement towards improving education, which has yet to reach fulfillment, and because the field itself has been reconceptualized it has not translated into practice throughout all of education.

There have been many scholars who have written about the issues of freedom in teaching and learning. The specific research interest I pursue deals specifically with reconceptualizing curriculum through the education of pre-service teachers. By examining my past, delving into the curriculum field, and then translating my knowledge into my own teaching practice, I begin to make strides towards changing the cycle of student production both at the college and K-12 level. I become my own line of flight.

The remaining chapters of this work directly relate to the life I led prior to realizing I lack a voice of my own. Much of what I will use for the basis of my work is my personal experience. As Henry David Thoreau (2003) writes in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, “I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience” (p. 7). Granted there are a large number of philosophers worthy of my study. However, I do not know their story nearly as well as I know my own.

I wonder if anyone notices the minor change of wording from the title of this work and the title of this initial chapter? Although very likely to make typographical errors, this variation of words is no mistake. It has been through my learning *as* I live that I have actually arrived at learning *to* live. The process has been and will hopefully continue to be a transformation of my being. In reading the chapters to follow, a glimpse will be given into my life as an initial learner (K-12 and college), my current life as a student (GSU doctoral program) as well as my life as a college professor. Through each of these lenses I examine the interaction of freedom and democracy in the classroom as well as the interaction of those liberties on reading instruction within the classroom today.

## CHAPTER 2

### READING TO LEARN

Beginning to think for myself has been and continues to be an arduous journey. While difficult, I find it to be enlightening as well. Standing up for oneself is not always easy. Sometimes, I must admit, that it is almost becoming somewhat fun and/or a game these days as I begin to think for myself. What do I mean? Take for instance my tattoo and the fact that my domineering father still does not know about it. How is that a game? The way in which I plan for him to find out.... Daddy, as I call him (father is way too formal) is the most opinionated person I know. I have often said that it would be futile for even Jesus to argue with him. He believes that he is always right and he makes broad sweeping statements and declares them as absolute truths. One day when he gets on his “high horse” about crazy people, I plan to steer the subject to tattoos. I can imagine him ranting and raving about how only whores and drug addicts do something to their body like get a tattoo. I will stop him and confirm what he is saying, “So Daddy, all women who get tattoos are whores and/or druggies?” “Hell yeah!” I can hear him declare. It is at that moment I will proudly show him my tattoo and tell him to meet his whore-ish druggie daughter.

No longer do I exist as a student, teacher, mother and wife domineered and fooled by the views of others, I delve not only into the general world around me but also into literature and research with new fervor and vigor for absorbing knowledge and synthesizing it into thoughts of my own. Once when I was teaching math in my third grade classroom, I had a student, Marcus, who was experiencing great difficulty with subtraction and “borrowing” as we called it. A fellow teacher suggested that I use place



value models to demonstrate the process. I went to the resource library, checked out the place value models, brought them back to the room and spread them on the floor ready to enlighten Marcus. It did not take but a few minutes to realize I was in trouble. I had always done as my teachers told me: Cross out the number to the left, make it one less and put a one in front of the number that needs it. They told me to do it and I did. I was great at math. But the problem was, I did not have a true understanding of the concept and therefore could not help Marcus. Fortunately, I called over another student who was great with math and asked him to help Marcus while I ran to my desk to recover from my shame. How could I not understand a third grade math concept? As much as I have criticized teacher's editions thus far, I was proud to have it at that moment. I had to read over and over the meaning behind why one number is crossed out and then one given to another number. I took the book home that night and studied. Of course, hiding my ignorance from my husband, but I had the place value models in front of me trying to make sense of what I should already know.

Whether it is math, or any other subject matter or text, I am now fortunate to have learned the art of critical reflection and be able to “replace mere opinion about facts with an increasing rigorous understanding of their significance” (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 148). No longer do I take information for granted. If I could go to school all over, I would ask ‘why’ in all of my classes, not only math! While sometimes experiencing feelings of despair and humiliation at having gained this ability so late in life, I am nonetheless grateful and realize that this ability enriches my life.

One of the most interesting observations I can now make about my own life is the nature in which I have changed my way of (or should I say ‘lack of’) thought. I now

acknowledge that just as I have changed so has the character of education. “The nature of education is changing, and the curriculum must reflect the emerging values of the postmodern era” (Daspit & Weaver, 1998, p. 215). The emerging values and issues of the culture in which we live today are ever changing. There are many concepts worth study related to teaching and learning, one of my primary areas of awareness. Critical theory, critical pedagogy and freedom, and critical reading are key themes of intrigue as I read in the field of curriculum studies in the postmodern area while also exploring ways students and teachers are deskilled in classrooms in Georgia. These interests are central to the transformation of students, many like myself, who seek life but sometimes feel as if drowning in a sea of teachers, peers and a culture seeking to debilitate personal thought processes. The war for freedom is being fought daily in the lives and minds of people, both students and non, all around us. I now possess the ability to learn and increase my wisdom on a variety of topics daily as I study and live in the world around me. Reading is not only a matter of transporting words from the page to my mind, but it is a process of creating meaning for my own thought processes.

#### Critical Theory & The Frankfurt School

There are many theorists who have utilized their expertise in the arenas of education and specifically in critical theory and critical pedagogical practices. Studying these theorists and their works is beneficial as I analyze reading programs and assessment measures in Georgia Public Schools. It is important to probe into the works and beliefs of great scholars such as Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and others who analyze education from a critical perspective. Many of the prominent curriculum scholars mentioned above base their work in critical theory, which is useful when

examining the current state of our educational programs. I agree with the way intellectuals associated with this framework delve into and study the injustices placed upon education in our world today and assert that is beneficial when investigating the existing state of our educational programs. Educators immersed in critical theory often revolt against control and strive for freedom in education; a viable model for us as fellow educators to follow. Freedom should be a process of liberation for both the leaders and learners in the classroom.

The scholars mentioned above base much of their research and work in critical theory which is not a modernistic term. It originated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany as a product of the Frankfurt School of Germany that came to rise in the United States in the 1950's (Bottomore, 1989, p. 13). Many of the great scholars who were members of the Frankfurt School, often times are referred to as basing their work on the beliefs of Karl Marx. While true, the Frankfurt School did not sustain a Marxist viewpoint throughout all of its years of existence. I find it intriguing that members of the Frankfurt School did not always agree and sometimes it appears as if their differences in their beliefs dimmed the similarities in the way they thought. That fact, in and of itself, is pivotal as I realize they worked and learned together and from one another, while respecting their differences. In the past, I have felt if I disagreed with a peer or professor, I was inferior and my beliefs and opinions were substandard as well. Understanding this phenomenon helps confirm my desire to learn as I live.

Regardless of the comprehensiveness of a belief system held by the members of the Frankfurt School, one of the most important concepts to arise from the body of scholars was that of critical theory. Critical theory is central to my belief system. Again,

I begin to grasp my potential to think and analyze, which is fundamental to critical theory. Prior to becoming interested in the field of curriculum studies I perceived any term preceded by the word critical as having negative connotations. I neglected to contemplate the comprehensiveness of the word critique from which critical is derived. In reflecting on my current comprehension however, of the words ‘critical’ and also ‘theory’ with their meanings, I find that critical does not necessarily align itself with criticism. Critical as I see it interacting with theory is a word that means a thorough and/or essential examination and assessment of the subject matter of study. My view of theory’s meaning includes the word as a condition, a foundation as well as an understanding. A theory is not necessarily concrete as I once believed, but rather it is a comprehensive belief system. Peter McLaren writes in *Life in schools* (1989), about this understanding in relation to the thought processes behind the ways in which pre-service teachers are educated in institutions of higher learning:

Critical theory, while certainly not a unified system of thought, contains some general assumptions: all thought and power relations are inexorably linked; these power relations form oppressive social arrangements; facts and values are inseparable and inscribed by ideology; language is a key element in the formation of subjectivities, and thus critical literacy – the ability to negotiate passages through social systems and structures – is more important than functional literacy – the ability to decode and compute; oppression is based in the reproduction of privileged knowledge codes and practices. (Slattery, 1995, p. 193)

In the quote above one statement is particularly significant to the effort I formulate as I read to learn. As a literacy educator, I struggle with the methods in which students are

taught to read in our classrooms. The power over how teachers assist students in formulating language and literacy abilities is of great concern. As indicated by Slattery in discussing language and critical literacy, reading should be viewed as a process, not a product, thus more emphasis should be placed on the critical literacy aspect of reading and literacy in general. When learning how to instruct students in the area of literacy existing classroom teachers as well as pre-service teacher candidates must be made aware of all aspects of literacy and realize that the process is more expansive than the mere pronunciation of words.

In contrast to teaching pre-service teacher candidates to examine content presented to student in a broader context, in many colleges and universities, an undue emphasis is placed on training teachers to be managers and implementers of preordained content, and on methods courses that rarely provide students with an opportunity to analyze the ideological assumptions and underlying interests that structure the way teaching is taught (p. 2). Unfortunately there is no promotion of critical thinking or analyzing content or surrounding culture. Bill Ayers states, “We have methods courses but no goals courses” (2007, AERA Conference). How true. We are so busy talking about pedagogy that we overlook the point. Ayers also asks, “What is the goal of education? What is school for? What does it mean to be an educated person?” The goal of schools and education in general should have nothing do with increasing test scores. What does that show in relation to true learning of students? The Frankfurt School of Germany existed in fostering an awareness of “critical social consciousness” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 2002, p. 248). The members of this institute desired to promote awareness of all circumstances, which should be one of the goals of education.

This is an important issue to face and translate into the study at hand. The Frankfurt School served to provide a discourse and mode of critique for deepening our understanding of the outcome and function of schooling (Giroux, 1983, p. 72). The move away from creating students as mere reproductions of the system towards fostering students' abilities to become independent learners and thinkers is vital to the overall success of the students beyond their K-12 education. This institution on which many scholars based their beliefs was more than walls encompassing students living, reiterating and experiencing facts. "The concerns of the Frankfurt School were not reason as such but the rationality of the twentieth century, not equality but mass society, not the conquest of nature, but its rape" (p. 16-17). Proponents of the Frankfurt School believed "...that injustice and subjugation shape the lived world. Focusing their attention on the changing nature of capitalism, the early critical theorists analyzed the mutating forms of domination that accompanied this change" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.434). As society is composed of the 'products' of our school systems, I concur as I see and experience firsthand, the consequences of the instructional practices put forth today. I am a product of a system creating students who lack critical thinking abilities.

In order to better understand what the Frankfurt School of Germany's thought system resembles, consider the following four-step sequence:

First, there is the demonstration of the intellectual and historical significance of the thinker. Second, there is an analysis of the particular insights possessed by the object, the text. Third, there is a demonstration of the partiality of those insights; that is, there is an analysis of the reasons that the texts, despite their virtues, possess a theoretical structure that would tend to render them historically false on

the whole. Finally, there is the demonstration of what, in general, was worth learning from the thinker, the manner in which those things could be integrated into a general theoretical critique of the existent (Friedman, 1981, 214-215).

The Frankfurt School of Germany helped broaden the spectrum of concepts for study to include culture. Students are being oppressed through the methods of instruction delivered in their classrooms on a daily basis. It is not that students are incapable of learning. Content must be relevant to the daily lives of students in order for them to have an interest in their own learning and begin to take responsibility for that learning as well. Critical theory is compatible with this principle as it seeks to demonstrate how unequal power situations exist within society, sometimes referred to as social injustices. Students must be taught to look beyond the text itself and delve into the semantics both forthright and hidden in order to gain complete understanding of what is written and then translate the written into knowledge and power for their use. Doing so, will promote increased student interest in content.

The proclamation of critical is characterized by “the detecting and unmasking of beliefs and practices that limit human freedom, justice and democracy” (Glesne, 1999, p. 12). It is important to keep this definition in mind when considering the status and operation of public education classrooms. “Creating a democratic educational vision that provides hope for all teachers and students is central to critical theory” (Slattery, 1995, p. 194). Hope is not associated with negativity, which is abundant in many classrooms today. It is not the facts and subject matter that is negative, but instead it is the attitudes related to learning that is forced upon students. In a recent discussion with the interim president of my university he indicated a concern that students are refusing to work as

instructed by their teachers. As he spoke, I smiled inwardly as I thought of my current research and study into critical theory. Critical theory seeks to absolve the negativity and give students positive energy and breakdown the structures of inferiority built by teachers with the 'right' answers. Critical theory seeks to go beyond the textbook and deeper into the culture and surroundings of students seeking to involve them more in the planning and development of curriculum so that it is more relevant and therefore more intriguing to their life.

Nonetheless, the Frankfurt School itself does not withstand criticism as it has been noted that it consisted of an unhistorical approach (Bottomore, 1989) It seems difficult to discuss the Frankfurt School in a sense that it may lack roots in history. The major tenet arising from the Frankfurt School being that of critical theory indicates the need to examine theory and curriculum through a critical lens. How could this occur without delving into history? The problem lies in interpretation that is discussed prominently in critical theory. What is perceived by some as research is only valid if conducted with human subjects, followed by a thorough analysis in paper form. Contrary to that belief system lies theoretical research grounded in critical theory in which the research aspect into the history of a phenomena occurs through study of the phenomena itself in the form of literature and works authored by scholars in a particular field. Instead of arguing the Frankfurt School lacked historical roots of study, I contend it is the school's methodology of doing so which led to its development of critical theory itself. "Critical educational theory owes a profound debt to its European progenitors. A number of critical educational theorists . . . continue to draw inspiration from the work of the Frankfurt School of critical theory" (McLaren, 1989, p. 159). We continue to view it



with historical significance from which we have much to learn. History is a story and if viewed in such a manner is less intimidating and may be viewed as more than dates with no relevance to our lives today.

### Critical Pedagogy, Freire & Freedom

What is pedagogy and what does it mean in relation to my interests? As I begin to understand the ways in which I have been taught in the past and the injustices served upon my classmates and myself, I realize there is a great need for all teachers to understand curriculum. It is not enough to be a product of (as a student) or even a producer of curriculum (as teacher or professor). Without a clear awareness and assimilation of curriculum, students and teachers lack foundation on which to build knowledge. The pre-service teacher candidates enrolled in my courses sometimes ask why it is important to learn about theory. My response is that understanding theory is the basis on which they build their personal philosophy of teaching and learning. Curriculum is not limited to the textbooks from which they create their lesson plans. It is vast *field* worth study. “Beyond the problem of comprehensiveness, but certainly related to it, is the problem of *understanding* the curriculum field” (Reynolds, 2003a, p. 33). It is my firm belief that the teachers who have been a part of my life prior to my doctoral studies did not have such an understanding as discussed by William Reynolds. It is now in my own understanding of curriculum, however, that I see parallels to my life in general as I struggle to control every aspect of my being and existence instead of understanding who I am and the driving forces within. Understanding the field of curriculum helps better my own teaching practice as well as gain a better insight of the learner within.

Henry Giroux & Peter McLaren (1989), both influential scholars in the field of curriculum studies write,

*Pedagogy refers* to a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations. It can be understood as a practice through which people are incited to acquire a particular ‘moral character’. As both a political and practical activity, it attempts to influence the occurrence and qualities of experiences. (p. 239)

Pedagogy is more complex than a surface explanation of teaching and it is in interpreting this explanation of pedagogy by McLaren that I am drawn to the works of Paulo Freire who wrote much on the state of democracy in education as well as contributing to the field of literacy education. I openly declare Freire would see the methods in which we are producing knowledge in students as stripping them of their ability to think both for themselves and about themselves as well.

An important issue related to critical pedagogy is its dialectical nature, which “allows the educational scholar to see the school not simply as an arena of indoctrination or social control or a site for instruction but also as a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment,” (Slattery, 1995, p. 202). Until students realize they possess a voice and the voice within contains power and knowledge, they are only seen as products of an education system. A grade to be made, a class to pass with no emphasis on ability to delve beyond the surface into subject matter and gain a true understanding and consciousness of the world around them. Paulo Freire addresses this in relation to a critical consciousness. “Critical consciousness represents ‘things and facts as they exist empirically, in their causal and circumstantial correlations . . . naïve consciousness

considers itself superior to facts, and thus free to understand them as it pleases” (Freire, 1998, p.82). He called for an awareness of what we are doing to the children in our classrooms. Are teachers and professors aware of the cycle of debilitating students being created in schools? This comes to light in mammoth proportion when examining learning and literacy in the classroom in particular.

Freire discusses in great detail the role of culture and society on education as well as emphasizing the role of language in learning. One instance in which these two elements are tied together occurs in *The Paulo Freire Reader* (1998). In this text there is a discussion of how certain language or rather, the way(s) in which language may be phrased could possibly be interpreted as offensive to some.

We inevitably make comparisons between cultural expressions, those of our own environment and those of our borrowed environment, but if we don't try to understand critically what is different, we run the risk of making rigid value judgments which are always negative towards the culture which is unfamiliar to us. (p. 203)

Cultures are different as are students in the classrooms. This does not mean that people must take a firm stand on what or which is best or better between two elements. What this does imply is that differences are meant to be respected and treated as methodologies of learning and developing understanding in the classroom. No one language or culture is subservient to another. Each student walks in the classroom with a knowledge of language and learning. It is then the teacher or professor's responsibility to assess the degree of knowledge held by the student and then proceed to create an environment conducive to increasing the learning of students in a positive manner. Prior to beginning

my study into the curriculum field, I am ashamed to admit that I was never asked, nor did it occur to me on my own that I should take someone else's culture into consideration.

Examining my role as a teacher in the public school setting and now as a professor in higher education I reflect on the classroom environment I create and the interactions I have had in the past and now have with students. Both when I taught in the public school and now at the college level I have been criticized for my relationships with students. Do not get the wrong idea – never has the implication been that I have had inappropriate relationships with students as so often portrayed in the media. But when teaching third grade I often took students to football games, out to eat and/or to my home to play with my own children. Fellow teachers were concerned about the legal ramifications if anything were to happen such as a car accident or what if I were accused of inappropriate behavior – especially when bringing students to my home? Perhaps I should have been more concerned. But I wanted to teach because just as my own pre-service teachers write on their applications for our program, I wanted (and still do) to make a difference in the lives of children. I know I made a difference, sometimes I could see that right away and at other times, it was noted in the way students practically caused accidents when seeing me on the highway and began banging on the car window of the vehicle in which they were riding to get my attention to say hi. Now as a college professor, I am told I am too friendly with my students. I disagree. I do not have to be a machine feeding them information with no feelings or emotions in order to be effective. The opposite is true. I witness students trying harder in my classes because they do not wish to disappoint me because they know I believe in them. I tell them so. I send them emails and/or text messages when I can tell they are having a bad day letting them know I

noticed and that I care. When a tragedy occurs in their life, it is me they come to for a shoulder to cry on. I have lunch with them, go to their weddings and have a true interest in their lives. To me, that is what teaching is all about. Who cares if they do not address me as “Mrs.”? That is not the point. Respect is the point. They know that I respect them and they in turn, respect me. There have been times when I have upset them with a grade on an assignment and they realize that being my friend does not mean special favors. Recently, one of my students came to me upset over a grade. That example in and of itself would upset some of my colleagues who believe students should never question their grade. However, I have an open door policy and will always discuss an assignment with a student, even after it is graded. The point of the story is that through our discussion, my student began to cry and we talked and she shared her feelings about some things that were happening in her life and how this “bad grade” (which was a B; I think I insulted her when I said she reminded me of myself!) was just one more thing to add to her frustration. The conversation was long and before it was over she was no longer upset with her grade, but realized that she had learned more through working hard on the assignment and receiving a B, than did her roommate who skimmed the surface, yet managed to meet the requirements and received an A. She was also able to see that parallel in her life as well and I wonder if I did not have the relationship that I do with my students, would she have suffered in silence and felt ignorant? When meeting a new group of students one of the first things I tell them is I will not pretend to be something or someone I am not. I want to feel comfortable with them and I want them to feel the same about me. I often sit on top of the table, “Indian style” and try to make class a

conversation. There is no desire for me to be viewed by my students as an authority figure as teachers are often represented.

The relationship between students and teachers in classrooms is described like that of banking in Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Students are fed information in the form of facts and never expected much less, taught, to think about why. I contend that in situations such as this, deposits are being made but they are empty deposits. Students are so focused on accumulating the information (memorizing it) that they overlook the reason deposits are made and there is a lack of "critical consciousness". Feeding facts into students and expecting those facts to be regurgitated is not the point. In order to "make it rich", teachers must make *investments* into those accounts. As a teacher, that is what I try so valiantly to achieve. Withdrawals, such as intimidation, frustration, and memorization, will serve to put students "in the red" and unable to think for themselves. I fear that as I taught in the public school system I may have fallen victim to making empty deposits. I also realize that is the way in which I was instructed in many of the classrooms in which I was a student as well. I am at this point beginning to see how I have lacked freedom in my previous education (both as a teacher and learner) and am pursuing ways in which to better myself and my instruction of students from this point forward in order to break the negative cycle.

Freire was also a believer in active involvement on the part of the educator in the lives of students. As discussed previously, he was saddened by the banking view that seemed to dominate classrooms and instead advocated for teachers as members of the classroom society, posing problems and working alongside the students in a discovery method to find solutions. Teachers should be mediators of learning, not dictators. In

*Education for Critical Consciousness* (1983), Freire discusses the value of participatory learning in his experiences with the Brazilian people. “They could be helped to learn democracy through the *exercise* of democracy; for that knowledge, above all others, can only be assimilated experientially” (p. 36). By being active in the discovery of education, or in this instance the idea of democracy, people are free to learn by doing, not through the receiving of lecture or empty words conveying someone else’s knowledge. Participating in relevant learning situations helps make the content more concrete for the learner.

Freire does not limit the active involvement of participant to K-12 education. “He argues that this ideal should be promoted at every level of the education system – from primary school to university and beyond” (Roberts, 1999, p. 24). As educators and particularly in my case (educator of future teachers) it is vital that I become an active participant in the learning processes of students. Someone once told me that we are much more likely to teach how *we were taught* than we are to teach how *we are taught to teach*. In order for our students to become participants in society, we must first demonstrate it ourselves. You cannot translate this to students through *telling* them to do so –you relate it to them by *showing* it instead. Actions speak louder than words.

Sharing personal beliefs should not be taboo in the classroom. bell hooks (1994) states that teachers should not ask students to take risks that they will not first take themselves (p.21). When expecting students to write and share their words, teachers should first do the same demonstrating the necessity for respect for the opinions and experiences of others. As a enthusiast for writing, when discussing writing in the classroom and assigning writing activities it is a common practice for me to also write

with my students. It is my goal to never ask students to do something I would not first be willing to do myself. I have found that especially in the writing process, that when I open up my feelings and attitudes on paper, my students feel safe to do the same. Once when writing about fear, I shared with my students how I had a brother, Chip, who was killed in a farming accident two years before I was born. I related this to my fear that something may happen to my own children and I discussed in my writing how I wonder how my mother survived the tragedy and the sadness I feel because no one in my family will talk about him. I believe it is because of this openness that one of my students in my classroom (third grade) wrote that fear is when a car pulls up to take you away from your family or how fear is the sign of the cops driving up and seeing your father in handcuffs. The environment of the classroom needs to be conducive to learning and openness where teachers as well as students shamelessly discuss topics of relevance and interest. Freire, too, advocated openness as an important part of teaching. “All teachers adhere to certain moral values in their pedagogical practice. Freire believes teachers ought to make their ‘dreams’ – their moral and political ideals – known to students, while explicitly encouraging critical interrogation of those views” (Roberts, 1999, p. 27). The key vocabulary in this passage is “explicitly encouraging critical interrogation”. I have been taught to interrogate text to get the maximum amount of meaning from the words of the writer as advocated by Freire. This skill should be passed on to future teachers so that all students will broaden their ability to think and learn beyond a printed word.

As I continue to study Paulo Freire and his contribution to the field of curriculum studies the overwhelming aura I experience is one of freedom in students; freedom in their learning and the ability to learn through mistakes without fear of reprimands or



ridicule. To some, this approach may be viewed as lacking enough direction by the teacher as the “instructor”. This is not the case. I refer back to the definition provided earlier of the span of meaning of the word ‘critical’ pedagogy. Pedagogy then translated into teaching practice and we arrive at Freire’s notion of freedom in students’ learning. Although typically not associated with prescriptive type teaching and learning, to say that Freire lacked prescriptive methodologies is incorrect. Freire is associated with Marxism and the views of Marxists of what the world and society *should* be like. This is in fact, a prescriptive notion. Freire was explicit in his explanation of the reasons for the struggles in society and education and also provided a prescription for methods of remedying the problems (Allman, 1994, p. 21).

One issue of particular importance is the methods in which pre-service teachers are educated and the lack of critical pedagogy in that process. “Teacher education today threatens to become culture-in-the-unmaking as it is deprofessionalized by anti-intellectual interventions by government and by presumably professional organizations such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)” (Pinar, 2004, p. 26). Having recently undergone an accreditation review by NCATE, I wholeheartedly agree with Pinar’s statement. I was mistakenly under the impression that our pedagogical practices and the content of our coursework would be scrutinized during the visit. In contrast to my expectations, nearly every meeting with team members centered on the use of technology in our classrooms and our pre-service teacher candidates’ abilities to utilize technology. While I agree technology is important, it is not central to the education of our candidates and their instruction of students. Technology is not an area in which students struggle or have great need for additional instruction. I have

always been very proficient in the area of technology as are my students; it is with thinking for myself (without the assistance of technology perhaps?) where I struggle.

“Many teachers seem ill-prepared to exercise even the limited academic freedom they enjoy, let alone press against its limits. Too many teachers – prospective and practicing – remain trapped within vocational conceptions of their profession” (p. 230). I am living proof of the validity of this statement. How can I turn the tables and regain control in a positive sense? I have often heard peers in my doctoral classes ask how to make a change. The answer has consistently been to do so in small steps and without expectations of immediate success. “The practice of critical pedagogy requires a substantial personal investment of time and energy” (Giroux & McLaren, 1989, p. 252). This is an understatement at best. Because we are used to receiving one clear-cut, black-white answer, it is difficult for us to comprehend the notion that the answer is not simple. Being an agent of change is not easy nor is it a task to be undertaken in a day. It is difficult; making change is complex. “The reconceptualization in curriculum theory challenges educators to no longer view the world as being at the service of the competitive, mechanistic, and materialistic self-interests of business and individuals” (Slattery, 1995, p. 94). Nonetheless, if as educators we wish to mirror the change that occurred in the field of curriculum studies in the 1970s and reconceptualize our own classrooms, we must be willing to invest the time and energy required to do so. Too often we give up if we do not see immediate results. The process is not immediate. First there is a need to recognize a need for change. For some of us, that feat may not be quick. Once exposed to alternative ways of thought, others may immediately see the need for change. Next is the requirement of study and thought in which we begin to see

how to make a change in our classrooms and daily lives as well. How long a person studies and researches is up to the individual. In my case, there is a need for all to be life long learners. Then comes the active change and determination. Beginning to make a change may be simple, but having the determination to follow through and keep up the fight is where difficulty arises. It is often times easy to become discouraged and give up. Determination and passion for our cause will keep us going.

Taking the core of the problem to the forefront of classrooms and making a change is my goal. I have lived the life of oppression and submission and now wish to confront the ghosts of my past and move forward. Sharing this journey with others makes me optimistic that change *can* occur. “How can writing for this larger audience, especially in the matter of education, allow the audience to begin to struggle with and against impediments to freedom and structures of domination?” (Reynolds, 2003a, p. 68). I can only hope that by continuing my study that I will become a better educator of future teachers and struggle to answer questions like these. There are hidden agendas in education that must be exposed. Henry Giroux (2004) writes “The not so hidden curriculum here is that kids can’t be trusted and that their rights are not worth protecting” (p. 37). If taught to think for themselves, students will realize the atrocities in the ways in which they are being taught and will begin to stand against the dominating force that eliminates their freedom of learning. It is up to those of us aware of this problem to begin to show them *how*.

#### Critical Reading & the Present Educational Context

In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987), Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo address the concern of critical reading in great detail. Having an ability to read

beyond the written word and examine intentions of the writer and possess the ability to analyze content is vitally important to the intellectual development of individuals. Nonetheless, many people in our society do not consider this aptitude important today. Walk up to most anyone on the street and ask for an opinion on the state of public education today and you will typically receive an answer that involves the words 'change' and/or 'test scores'. "There is the idea that if only we make the appropriate adjustment (in curriculum, in teaching techniques, in how teachers are prepared, in testing, etc.), the school engine will then hum smoothly, and those test scores will soar" (Pinar, 2004, p. 176). This belief is shallow, nonetheless held by many people in our culture. "The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context" (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.29). Without the ability to read critically and for oneself, the quote above related to the elevation of test scores may be internalized as believable truth. Examining such a statement with an ability to critique it, allows the evidence that the statement is not cohesive and relative to the true state of education. Testing and accountability are abundant schools, but how those results are interpreted and used is erroneous. The intention of this discussion is not to deal with misuse of scores at the moment, but instead to arouse a desire to be able to interpret and read for oneself. To do this is to gain truth from text instead of relying on and falling prey to the beliefs and assumptions of a text's author. Teaching itself is very complex, yet in the eyes of many seems simplistic.

Another notion that may arise in a discussion of education with someone you meet on the street is that of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The subject prevalent in media today, thus many people are familiar with the concept. Examining this mandate

with a critical perspective brings to the forefront many matters worth addressing. In relation to the teaching of reading specifically, the federal mandate NCLB is full of contradictions. NCLB aims to focus broadly on the following four elements: 1. Increasing accountability for student performance 2. Focusing on what works 3. Reducing bureaucracy and increasing flexibility and 4. Empowering parents. These statements scream contradiction!

Increasing accountability for student performance; no one would argue that teachers should be held accountable for the learning of the students they teach. Under this statement there is a discussion of the reprimands of continually failing schools and the ways in which schools showing improvement will be rewarded. Students are expected to be able to “read” by the end of grade three. Keep in mind Paulo Freire’s banking views of education. If students can perform, or shall I say regurgitate information on a standardized test, then a teacher and a school will be deemed successful. Does this tell us anything in relation to the students’ abilities to think for themselves? Consider the following scenario: A second grade teacher, Mrs. Jones, is an excellent teacher. There is one particular student in her class, John, who reads on a Pre-Kindergarten grade level. At the end of the school term, John reads on a first grade level. Mrs. Jones was a success! She was able to increase John’s reading level two grade levels in one year. However, Mrs. Jones will appear as a failure due to the fact that John will take a standardized test on the second grade level which is going to prove to be at his frustration level. When she is held ‘accountable’, she will appear a failure.

Focusing on what works – great idea! Money should be spent on programs that are effective. The contradiction found within this statement lies in the fact that there is

typically a three-year implementation period that is required before it is fair to judge a program as successful. When the programs are being implemented in classrooms today, the students are tested yearly. The schools are then rewarded or sanctioned based on the results of the standardized assessment. Another issue worth further study is the methods in which programs and curriculum are deemed worthy of implementation in the schools. An entire book could be written on this statement alone. Students work best when they are interested in the materials and subjects being taught. How many students are interested in learning isolated letter sounds and rules of spelling? What is the relevance to their lives? How does this make students think?

The third issue addressed in the blueprint for NCLB is reducing bureaucracy and increasing flexibility. This statement may be the biggest contraction of all. Is the act itself not a form and result of bureaucracy and government? Does the implementation of mandated curriculum not take away freedom in teaching best practices? In the description of this statement there is also mention of the additional “flexible funding” that will be allotted at the local level. Any person involved with a school who receives the Reading First Grant that is a source of funding through NCLB will voice the truth of restrictions placed on schools because of the additional funding. Schools receiving funds through Reading First are very limited in the choices of curriculum used to educate students. Is this reducing bureaucracy? “I heartily accept the motto, - ‘That government is best which governs least’” (Thoreau, 2003, p. 265). “It does not educate” (p. 266). Power and control are issues in the classroom. Teachers and professors have it all, students have none. The issue with this misbalanced environment is with the students having no concept of even possessing power at all. When constantly under pressure of

domination it is impossible to discover a personal voice. Even more tragic is the ways in which students are being governed within the classroom by rules of which they are not even aware. (Levinas, 1982, p. 15). The unspoken or implied rules. This is contradictory due to the fact that all other facts and subjects students are expected to assimilate are spelled out for their learning (or memorization!). In contrast students are then expected to have clear understanding of other implied decorum. Freire developed an alternative way of thinking which was more of a “problem-posing pedagogy” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2002, p.826). “Freire viewed the problems of education as inseparable from political, social and economic problems” (p.826). I concur with Freire on this point as I see it as difficult to separate education from the world around us. Freire was jailed and exiled during his life due in part to the beliefs of Moderates who did not look favorably upon Freire’s theory, which they felt, was tied to Marxism. This is political.

Statement four from the NCLB blueprint is yet another area of contradiction. I refer back to the previous scenario with Mrs. Jones and John. Under this statement, parents will be informed of the ratings of the schools in which their children attend and will then have options of transferring their students to higher performing schools if necessary. What if students are in classrooms led by teachers such as Mrs. Jones, where the problem lies in the abilities of the *students*, not the school and teachers? It seems unfair that parents will be misinformed based on the results of standardized tests. What will the numbers published in the newspaper actually inform parents regarding the ability of their students to successfully read? Keep in mind that calling words alone is not

reading – true reading is the ability to comprehend material, make sense of it, and apply it in future and differing situations.

There is a need for change in education today. President George W. Bush indicated in his 2004 State of the Union Address stated that the funds needed to do so would be made available. Yet the funds are funding curriculum programs “intended to strip young people of the capacity to think critically both by teaching them that learning is largely about test taking” (Giroux, 2004, p.39). How is this type of learning going to assist students once outside the confines of a classroom where there are no longer cameras recording their every move? It is not going to further their intelligence, but nonetheless will serve a purpose – the students will leave the educational system a product of what was programmed into their minds on a daily basis. A quality education should not be defined as high test scores. The banner hung on the front of school declaring “School of Excellence” should not equate superior performance by students. Those banners are gained through high achievement on tests. Students whose quality education equates to those notions of success will be conformers, seeking a yes/no, simplistic answer while believing what politicians and the news media say. They will be a generation easily swayed by the thoughts and opinions of others. They will be who I was.

### Critical Pedagogy & Students’ Experiences

Within the context of providing students with the skills and abilities to become successful readers there is often one very important concept that is overlooked: Reading is not an end product; it is both a process and a product. Unfortunately, in many public



education classrooms around the nation, students are being treated more so in the likeness of a manufactured factory product than they are treated like true human beings.

The result is that schools – often seen as socializing agencies that help society produce intelligent, responsible, committed, and skilled citizens – turn out to be strange and disturbing institutions that not only *teach* subjects but also *produce* unreflective human subjects who, in their day-to-day activities, play out the ideologies of the dominant culture (McLaren, 1989, p.164).

Being successful in this sense, transforms into being a part of the dominant culture.

McLaren disagrees with that assumption as do I. Culture plays an integral role in the education of students. Culture should not, however, define who or what is taught.

Differences among students should be valued and students should not be taught in manners that pressure them to become *like* one another in a melting pot.

At stake here is a notion of literacy that connects relations of power and knowledge not simply to *what* teachers teach but also to the productive meanings that students make of their cultural and social differences bring to the classrooms as part of the production of knowledge and the construction of personal and social identities. (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 17)

Knowledge and power play important roles in the classroom culture. It is in the uneven distribution of who has the knowledge and power that creates conflict. Not only at stake in this instance is the knowledge and power of the student, but it is also an internal power-knowledge struggle for teachers as well. What is the struggle for the leaders of our classrooms? The culture of the curriculum that dictates daily instruction.

Part of the domineering culture in many systems is a scripted reading program. Such programs are dreadfully scripted yet many schools believe them to be research based in theory and practice. By learning the skills that promote reading ability in isolation, students are then devoid of the ability to think critically and creatively. “Children grow into the passive lumps high school teacher and college professors and employers complain about because school has taught the vast majority of young people that they are incompetent and that their thinking is neither interesting nor to be trusted” (Hinchey, 2005, p.29). One detrimental consequence of this deskilling manner of teaching and learning is the success and feelings of the students once they are out in “the real world”. The work place and social aspects of living in the world do not follow a script. In world circumstances people are given freedom to express themselves, pursue success in their careers and happiness in life. The issue then becomes the inability of some to do so because as students in the critical years of learning they have never had an opportunity to utilize their own voice. The freedom bestowed upon them is no longer welcoming and liberating; instead the freedom may then evoke fear. “Every freedom has both positive and negative dimensions, because every freedom is created and is created for a purpose” (Menand, 1996, p. 5). It is within this freedom and fear filled relationship I have come to begin to understand my life as a journey of worth. It is through the negative of the intended positive that I realized how much I have learned through my own life.

Students in our classrooms are innately curious. It seems that teachers squelch that curiosity through traditional teaching practices. Curiosity should be fostered in our students so they are unafraid of the questions inquisitiveness may bring about. A double

standard is the issue. We want students to become critical, independent thinkers in the context of their friends, but not within the confines (perhaps confinement?) of the classroom. It is “castration of curiosity” (Freire and Faundez, 1989, p.35). “When students are free to ask questions on a subject, it can often give their teachers a new angle, enabling them later to engage in more critical reflection” (p.33). Students are afraid to ask questions and the teachers are afraid of the questions they (students) may ask. This is injustice at its peak. I have no qualms about telling my students I do not know the answer to a question and I encourage them to be just as honest with the students that will one day fill their classrooms. This candor makes us human in the eyes of students. All people in education do not feel the same way however. A former dean who was extremely authoritarian once said to our faculty that we should never tell our teacher candidates we do not have an answer to their question(s). This statement came from a lady who after seeing me running one afternoon, proceeded to call me into her office to critique my running style, running attire and running shoes. She saw herself as the only person with answers about any and all topics. When it came to our teacher candidates, she felt it better to create ‘fake’ knowledge than to admit lack of knowledge. I earnestly disagree. We as educators do not hold all the answers. If we did, we would not be among the most underpaid professions! No teacher or professor is the proprietrix of *all* knowledge with an ability to squelch curiosity that benefits learning. Students must be given an opportunity to develop a critical voice of their own; critical not referring to negative, but analytical instead.

To assume a critical voice then does not mean to destroy or devalue the struggles of others. Instead, a critical voice attempts the delicate and discursive work of

rearticulating the tensions between and within words and practices, or constraints and possibilities, as it questions the consequences of the taken-for-granted knowledge shaping responses to everyday life and the meanings fashioned from them. (Britzman, 1991, p.23)

Learning to take on a critical voice is not an easy task, yet it is detrimental to the future of society for teachers to assume is it not possible. Learning to gain meaning from a variety of different contexts and increasing critical thinking abilities will serve to increase the overall intellectual abilities of students therefore producing more productive citizens. If that is the case, I wonder why more people are not interested in the promotion of critical thought processes? The reason for the disinterest is due to control. I believe this is what my former dean adhered to. She wanted total control of our students and her faculty members (in all aspects of our lives!). If what and how students are exposed to is controlled, then ultimately others may determine the actual thoughts of students.

As a result of students being removed from the planning and the actual ability to *experience* learning, they lose interest in education altogether. Innovation and originality in a classroom is important to the promotion of student interest. Students must first be interested in the subject matter and learning in general before any education can be gained.

. . . Passivity and disinterest prevent discoveries in the classroom, that discourage inquiries . . . . It is not simply a matter of motivation or interest . . . . We can call it a question of having to do with freedom, or perhaps, the absence of freedom in our schools. (Greene, 1988, p.124)

Greene is referring here to the constraints students feel on their learning. Freedom again arises in the discussion. Students need to experience independence in their learning. By providing students with educational experiences from which they have input, students feel as if they possess power over their learning. “Power means personal growth: developing knowledge and skills that increase the quality of our lives, lead us to achieve, and increase our feeling of self-worth. In short, meeting the need for power is at the heart of education” (Erwin, 2003, p. 21). Paulo Freire would concur with this statement. Freire would propose allowing students power over their learning in the classroom, thus validating their knowledge and experiences while enabling them to possess authority of their own. Feeling in control aids students in valuing their self-worth as they come to view themselves as possessors of knowledge.

#### Critical Pedagogy & Teachers’ Experiences

The methods in which teachers lead classrooms have a direct effect on the environment and the learning that takes place within. Paulo Freire (1970) notes the following attitudes and practices, which are components of the origin of freedom-fear coexistence that causes students who have had no freedom in learning, upon being given freedom, to endure trepidation:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen – meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher

chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt it; (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students; (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (p.59)

Teachers do not possess wisdom that is capable of being deemed as more valuable than the knowledge of the learners. Students are being forced to sit in their desks and act as sponges of knowledge and later expected to produce the knowledge in the same form it was introduced. One of the student teachers in which I currently supervise recently shared with me how her teacher makes the students sit in their desks with their feet flat on the floor in front of them, backs against the back of their chairs and hands flat on the desktop in front of them. Think of how you sit when you are comfortable. Never, and I can say that without reservation, do I sit robotic like that! How can students learn if this is an uncomfortable situation for them? It is less important how students sit, than their comfort – if they are comfortable, they will be more receptive to learning.

On occasion, students are given opportunities to express their learning, and perhaps even allowed to sit comfortably, but even in those circumstances, the environment is under extreme control of the teacher with rules made exclusively by the teacher in order to ensure containment. Standards imposed on teachers become vessels through which they have yet more control over the learning environment. The interests of students are not of value and pupils are then treated as objects responsible for learning unrelated subject matters.

The power over students' critical thinking abilities held by teachers with the above intentions/beliefs in mind is phenomenal. All of the above statements support Freire's view of education as a parallel with banking. Schools are not businesses such as banks, and Freire would concur. It seems to me that if people would take note of this misconception, then who would be allowed to move forward with implementing situations and learning experiences that are right and developmentally appropriate for students. Thus the need for people to begin to make small changes to do so.

Many of the teachers who are leading the classrooms of which our future leaders and students, are feeling the same feelings of desperation as the students to whom they direct their instruction. It seems ironic to me that no other profession exists without a teacher. That is not just a statement found on a t-shirt, but it is a true declaration. However, teacher salaries are among the lowest of all professions. It is estimated that by the year 2009, 2 million new teachers will be needed (Nieto, 2003, p.3). Having this information at our disposal, it would seem as if the intelligent act to perform would be to honor teachers instead of devalue them. The methods in which teachers are being forced to teach students anger some. "Anger is one letter away from danger" (p.22). This is perhaps one of my favorite quotes and I think of it often as I find myself angry at the current situation of education. The people leading classrooms view the knowledge of the student as danger and that is the reason in which students are being stripped of their abilities to think for themselves. Along the same lines, teachers possess knowledge, which may be viewed as a threat to those in power, and in order to squelch transferring of that knowledge to learners, teachers are forced to follow a scripted curriculum.

How does critical theory affect the belief system of educators? The following quote taken from *Finding Freedom in the Classroom: A Practical Introduction to Critical Theory* (2005) is a description I find very simple and easy to understand. By simple, I do not desire to undermine anyone's intelligence. Instead, I present a definition of critical theory that educators not involved directly in curriculum studies will comprehend.

Critical theory is about possibility, and hope, and change. It calls our attention to places where choices have been made, and it clarifies whose goals those choices have served. It calls our attention to the fact that we might have chosen otherwise. Indeed, it proposes a radically different vision of schooling and urges us to make different choices. Whether you accept these revolutionary goals is for you to decide. But whatever your decision, exploring the world of critical theory means that you will forever see far more freedom in your classroom than you imagined possible. (p.15)

I personally maintain, and can only hope I am not alone in believing that teachers should be allowed more freedom in their teaching which in turn will allow students more freedom as well. William Ayers (2004) presents much wisdom along these lines:

The choices we make daily in classrooms are murkier, denser, more layered, and more difficult. The implications of our choices are not always clear, the long-term effects not only unknown to us, but often unknowable as well. We walk our wobbly pathways as best we can, with hope, certainly, but without guarantees. All the more reason to hold in our consciousness the dimensions of what is at stake: humanity's capacity, drive, and potential for forward motion, the



propulsive possibility of enlightenment, the unending quest for human freedom.

All the more reason to bring our moral commitments to the surface for examination and argument. All the more reason – as we make our twisty way – to state from the outset our overriding commitment to humanity. (p.16-17)

The experiences of teachers and what they know exists in the classroom are the best and only way, to best serve the students in our public education classrooms. Teachers are expected to be held accountable for the academic achievement of their students. “The intellectual dimension of teaching is never celebrated by a system whose main objective is to further de-skill teachers and reduce them to mere technical agents who are destined to walk unreflectively through a labyrinth of procedures” (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.124). What is overlooked is the importance of examining students as humans within the context of a classroom. One of the reasons educators leave the teaching profession is due to the mandates dictating their every breath during the school day. Fear of losing jobs keep excellent teachers from instructing students in the ways in which they feel will promote the most learning and achievement.

As educators we must accept that the change(s) will not be an automatic or quick fix. “We may stop assigning textbook chapters in order, but we usually keep the textbook. We may start assigning essay tests, but we usually keep the multiple choice sections too” (Hinchey, 2005, viii). If we begin with small steps such as allowing students to select the order of topics which they must study and/or permit them to express their thoughts on essay questions then a constructive transformation will occur. Seeing small changes will encourage us to allow in the future even more freedom in learning in the future.

## Critical Pedagogy & Curriculum

There are many prevalent issues related to curriculum that are worth study and discussion. It has been noted that the field of curriculum studies has undergone a reconceptualization. Could it be possible that the field of education is in need of another dramatic change? William Pinar (2004) writes that we are in need to first realize the dire state in which we exist (p.5).

The nightmare that is present – in which educators have little control over the curriculum, the very organizational and intellectual center of schooling – has several markers, prominent among them ‘accountability’ an apparently commonsensical idea that makes teachers, rather than students and their parents, responsible for students’ educational accomplishment. Education is an opportunity offered, not a service rendered. (p. 5)

Understanding the methods and materials implemented in the instructional practices within the classrooms of our public education system takes us deep into the realms of both possibilities and resistance. In upcoming discussions, I will analyze specific reading programs used to teach elementary school students in Georgia classrooms and instructional materials utilized in higher education.

One important aspect to take into consideration is the relationship between the consumers of the curriculum, schools and students, and the producers of curriculum, textbook companies. Together, these groups compose a market.

Markets are first and foremost a communication system: They provide information on availability, quality, quantity, variety, and finally, price. Markets let buyers know what is available and sellers know what is wanted – in what

quantity, at what quality, and at what price. . . .What does determine price, and what difference does it make? Price is determined by what a willing buyer and a willing seller agree to. Producers must sell above cost to stay in business.

(Gerstner, Semerad, Doyle & Johnston, 1994, p.32)

It is evident that much of what happens in our schools involves two powerful ideals: politics and money. This truth infuriates me. Students are not items of production coming through a factory line – they are living, breathing individuals. If students were not of value as individuals, they would be thrown away in the sense that they lack worth. Janie Vollmer published a story titled *A Business Leader Learns His Lesson* (2002) in which he tells of a presentation he once made to a group of teachers. He proclaimed to a group of teachers his feeling that schools should be operated more like a business. “If I ran my business the way you people operate your schools, I wouldn't be in business very long!” He felt very qualified to speak this ‘truth’ due to the fact that the ice-cream company he owned had won many awards for its superior product. He alleged

[that] First, public schools needed to change; they were archaic selecting and sorting mechanisms designed for the Industrial Age and out of step with the needs of our emerging "knowledge society." Second, educators were a major part of the problem: They resisted change, hunkered down in their feathered nests, protected by tenure and shielded by a bureaucratic monopoly. They needed to look to business. *We* knew how to produce quality. Zero defects! Total Quality Management! Continuous improvement!

Vollmer neglected to take into account the most important aspect of schooling, the students. He could not make students fit the mold of the ingredients going into a recipe

that would turn out award winning. Students arrive at schools with varying abilities, backgrounds and knowledge levels. A teacher in the crowd who asked him if the ingredients he put into his ice cream were premium brought this to the forefront of his presentation. Vollmer responded, “Super-premium! Nothing but triple-A.” Next she asked the question that brought the businessman to the realization that schools are not factories of production. She asked what happened when he received a substandard consignment of ingredients to which he replied dejectedly, “I send them back.” He realized as many others who are not directly involved in schools should, that students cannot be sent back because they are not of the highest academic quality.

Effective teachers meet the needs of students where they are and strive to promote learning as individuals. These teachers take into account the culture and surroundings from which students arrive and take specific needs into consideration when planning instruction. No one script will fit the needs of all students within the confines of a classroom. Disregarding the abilities and uniqueness of each student is preposterous and any educator feeling otherwise should step out of the classroom.

## CHAPTER 3

### DESKILLING, FREEDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

Do you remember where you were at the moment of a national tragedy? Years ago when teaching third grade, I ambled to the office with a student who was being checked out by his mother. I walked through the door to greet the mother only to find her crying in hysterics. She quickly penned her name and when she left I asked the secretary if there was a problem I should be made aware of. She informed me of the news that would make history. It was September 11, 2001. An American Airlines jet had just crashed into the world trade center. At the time I did not think it to be of the magnitude it turned out to be for our nation. “Everything that was not Hollywood anymore but, rather, a gruesome reality, literally took place in front of the ‘universal witness’ of a global public” (Borradori, 2003, p. 28). I went back to my classroom, turned on our television and could not believe my eyes. Our freedom was being taken away right before us. After that horrible, destructive day, Americans all over the United States and elsewhere succumbed to fear of terrorists.

Turning now to education, where was I when President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002? I do not know. The reality is the minute the stroke of his pen met the paper asserting the words of NCLB, freedom was exhausted from public school classrooms all over our nation. Students and teachers have entered their classroom each day since that instant and experienced the same gnarling, twisting pit in their stomach as we suffered when witnessing previous national disasters. Instead of foreigners never encountered before, our very own governing agencies are the terrorists, controlling every move and word the students and teachers utter as zombies

day after day. The students are forced to sit through ‘scientific evidence based’ educational materials and plans. Teachers are forced to follow a set curriculum and the students are trained to be docile bodies. The testing measures that occur within classrooms as a result of guidelines in NCLB have forced some teachers, “[to] succumb to classroom practices that harm kids. For example, they subject their students to mind-numbing and seemingly endless test preparation exercises that soon stamp out the joy that students can, and should, experience while they’re learning” (Popham, 2007, p.78). Teaching in such a manner and seeing students suffer is heart wrenching for teachers forced to abide by guidelines of NCLB. Our task as educators is to help students become life-long learners. Experiencing no joy in learning does not motivate students to continue the learning practice.

Just as “each murder is one too many” (Borradori, 2003, p. 34) each student and teacher who suffers through this type of so-called education and instruction is one mind too many put to waste. I can only trust that as Derrida speaks of “rhythm” in *The Other Heading* (1992) the time will come and tides of change will draw closer upon us and move us beyond the dictator type of education students receive today. If we do not move beyond this type of instruction where students are treated as objects I fear the effects will be more damaging than we can imagine.

Critical theory is the basis upon which I examine deskilling among students, teachers, and higher education professors as well as curriculum use and abuse. As a believer in critical theory, it is important to understand that critical theory itself does not dictate *how* a change is to be made. There is no prescribed ‘fix’ as dictated by critical theorists. Critical theory brings an *awareness* of the need for change and serves to inspire

individuals (Peca, 2000, p. 15). Knowing there is a need for change is the first step towards actually making a change. Some methods of curriculum used today serve to deskill students, teachers and professors thereby imprisoning them through the power of tests, texts, and textbook publishers. In my work, I specifically analyze how students are deskilled through testing their reading abilities through such programs as Accelerated Reader (AR). In relation to teachers, I study basal readers and the script in which teachers using these published reading materials utilize to teach students. Last, I examine my own work as a college professor and study materials provided by publishing companies who seek to make my job easier by providing me with all the materials needed to take the necessity of thinking for myself out of my job. It is disheartening to realize that in all of these areas (A.R., basal readers and publishing company materials for higher education) it is sometimes difficult to distinguish who is deskilled the most – teachers or students.

### Deskilling Students

Accelerated Reader (A.R.) is a popular reading program utilized in many classrooms today. With A.R., students read a book on their reading level (as determined by a multiple choice test taken on the computer) and then take a quiz over the book's content (usually five to ten questions depending on length and difficulty of the text). This program was designed to serve as motivation for students to read. It is now misused, however, in many schools as the A.R. test scores are used as grades for assessment as part of an overall Reading or Language Arts grade.

There are many problematic issues with A.R. centering on the ways in which the program deskills reading as a process and students as thinkers simultaneously. First consider the way it is implemented in certain schools. When passing a test (by standards

set for A.R., passing is 60%) students earn points. The points accumulate and students may “spend” them on rewards, possibly at an A.R. store set up by the school. Doing so is intended to motivate students to read more so that they will accumulate more points and be able to buy more things (junk!) at the store. In essence, schools are promoting the concept of consumerism by which students are supposedly benefiting from the consumption of “goodies”/products available at the school store. In fact, not only are schools promoting consumption, but also students learn that knowledge is consumption. Students recognize that acquiring knowing is the same as acquiring stickers. The goal, it seems, in education is not to produce students who are critical, but students who can become consumer citizens. In other instances, the points earned are being converted to grades and placed in teacher’s grade books. For those students who do not enjoy reading, their A.R. grades are low and often failing. Students not meeting their A.R. goals must sit back and watch their more “successful” peers participate in celebrations, special field trips and more. Last year, one school system in the town where I teach brought in a snow machine and all of the students who had reached their goals had a snow day! Imagine the resentment building up inside of the students forced to stay inside; resentment not only towards their peers, but resentment towards the act of reading as well.

Another problem I see with A.R. is the way in which students are limited to reading books on their level. Have you ever seen a shiny new book in the bookstore that caught your eye and wanted to read it? Or, has a friend ever recommended a book to you and you went and bought it? With A.R. students are only allowed to read the shiny, attractive cover books or those recommended by friends *if* they are on their specific reading level. No reading books either above or below one’s level. While it is true that



consistently reading above or below one's grade level is not going to increase overall reading ability, there is no harm in doing so on occasion. Of course, students can do so, but they are not allowed to test over the books and with a requirement of a certain number of points that must be earned each grading period, students feel as if they are wasting their time by doing so.

Still another issue I present with A.R. is the test itself and the means in which it deskills the thought processes of students. As discussed previously, there is no one mold that all students fit into. Students are uniquely different as are their backgrounds and what they deem as important. Yet, a pre-written computerized test does not take this background and the differences amongst students into consideration. The A.R. test tells the teacher nothing about a student's ability to think critically, creatively or analytically, but instead, AR tests a student's ability to recall literal and often insignificant facts and details. We cannot educate students without first understanding and valuing their experiences and incorporating that knowledge into the daily learning of the classroom.

One of the joys I have come to know during my examination of my past education and the education I am experiencing now is the knowledge that I do not have to be perfect. I do not have to answer all questions correctly to be 'smart'. The elation of surviving the cycle – I have been silenced by assessments with only one answer and teachers who would not listen; I have been given opportunity to speak, but did not know how to formulate my own thoughts and now I have a voice of my own and I seek to be a better listener. I have not always known the 'right' answer, but through the freedom bestowed upon me of which I am learning to embrace, I realize that I do have an answer to contribute. How does an A.R. test really assess what students know or do not know?

The computer lacks ability to listen to the thoughts and reasoning processes of students.

In *Critical Issues in Education* (2006) Eugene Provenzo writes,

Only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thoughts on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication. If it is true that thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world, the subordination of students to teachers becomes impossible. (p. 110)

Much of the negativity I have discussed prior to this point in the essay would be eradicated with the simple acts of listening, communication and interaction with students. A computer cannot listen to students; only teachers are capable of doing so. Reflecting on my own practice, I realize I do not listen near as much as I talk. What would happen if I were a better listener? No longer would my children begin a conversation with me by saying, "Please listen to my whole story and let me finish talking before you talk Mama." Most definitely I would be a better wife and mother, but I would also be a better teacher as well. What would happen if instead of taking a computerized test over a book, teachers listened to students discuss what they thought about the text they encountered?

Students who are disadvantaged due to situations beyond their control are often spoken down to and stripped of opportunities to make learning meaningful. In fact, research shows that teachers disable students who struggle with learning even more by providing them the answers faster than they do for their "smarter" students (Yellin, Blake, Devries, 2004, p. 158). The teacher in the instance of A.R. is not the physical

human being in the classroom. Instead it is technology that serves to deskill the student by saying what answer(s) is/are wrong and then providing the correct answer(s) with no explanation or opportunity for discussion and personal interaction. It seems as if the technology is being used to get students to think like robots. It serves to try to isolate reading to the individual word instead of realization of meaning. Even more lamentable is the fact that students have the *option* to choose whether or not to view the questions answered incorrectly. They can walk away and never know what answers were amiss.

My second grade son takes A.R. tests each week and I recently asked him if he looks to see which answers he got wrong. His reply was, “Yes. I want to know what the right answer is so next year I can take the same test and get the answers right” (W. Mashburn, personal communication, March 2, 2007). Little did he know his innocent response was igniting a fire within his mother! I am furious as this type of assessment tells me nothing of how my child can think. It only tests his memory. Even if no questions are missed the ‘smarter’ students taking an A.R. test are shown a 100% on the screen and then allowed to move on, again with no real interaction with text.

Teachers should work to teach students to listen in another context also as words flow into their mind from texts they encounter. Teachers should also implement this practice. They should ‘listen’ to the words the author has left for them to interpret from the page. It is left up to the reader to write the story and create his/her own meaning (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 7). Learning to read in this manner takes much more skill than it requires reading a book and answering multiple-choice questions. Students should not experience deskillling. Students’ knowledge should be fostered in a positive learning

atmosphere in which they are encouraged to develop their own voice and use that voice to learn about themselves, others and the world around them.

### Deskilling Teachers

I remember the very moment as a classroom teacher when I came to the startling realization that my former high school English teacher had gotten her answers from the teacher's edition. I now wonder if she realized she was being deskilled. Utilizing curriculum materials such as detailed basal teacher's editions where students focus on isolated sounds and letters, the information is presented from the teacher to the students in small, unrelated pieces. Each day, classroom teachers using this form of curriculum read from a sequenced set of lesson plans that resembles a play. The exchanges between teacher and students are laid out in a manner that dictates exactly what both should say. I view this program as indicating that teachers are incapable of teaching. "Scripted curriculum, often aimed at facts and test preparation, offers formulas for success that seem to treat all learners alike. Scripted curriculum also has the effect of deskilling teachers who become simple *deliverers* of content and skill processes" (Rice, ¶1). It implies that if you are capable of reading, you are qualified to teach students. Not taken into consideration are the abilities of the teacher to control the classroom environment and more importantly meet the individual needs of students. The same rules that are applied and dictated to the students during a scripted lesson from a basal reader may be conveyed through the use of children's literature, student and class created stories or hands on learning activities designed by teachers who know best how to teach their students.

By forcing teachers to use such scripted forms of curriculum lawmakers feel good about them for exposing all students to an equal education. The issue is the interpretation of educational equality. All students deserve the right to a quality education regardless of their background, race, economic status, etc. The difference lies in what quality means to the different students enrolled in our schools. Quality does not have a universal definition in relation to what students need from the classroom environment. Lesson plans used by teachers one year may not be suitable for another year's group of students. Scripted lessons from basal readers and other scripted forms of curriculum assumes teachers are inept at deciding what students need in relation to reading instruction and provides a set of plans and accompanying worksheets to be used year after year – equality and consistency.

The teacher's edition, however, does not have to carry the burden of serving to deskill teachers; in fact, it can be practical if used correctly. There are typically three ways people can respond to a text according to Apple (2000):

Dominant, negotiated and oppositional. In the dominant reading of a text, one accepts the messages at face value. In a negotiated response, the reader may dispute a particular claim, but accept the overall tendencies or interpretations of the text. Finally, an oppositional response rejects these dominant tendencies and interpretations. The reader "repositions" her or himself in relation to the text and takes on the position of the oppressed. (p.58)

As teachers who are critical thinkers, or allowed to think critically, we can teach students to do the same. Students grow up learning through asking "how", "why" "what does that mean?" etc. These questions should be answered instead of silenced. The students may

then move past the dominant and negotiated responses to texts and move towards being oppositional in the positive sense that they are learning from the challenges they place upon the text and one another as well. Students can learn (if teachers are allowed to teach them to do so) the time and place it is appropriate to read from any of the three methods of responding to text.

Do teachers realize they are being deskilled? Does my former teacher of literature realize an assumption was made about her ability to teach students? It is indisputably regrettable that I was almost 30 years of age before I came to the realization that what is written in texts and teacher's guides are not necessarily "truth", but instead, the words are the author's interpretation of the event, therefore subject to supplementary explication by the reader. As a classroom teacher I never knew this because I was provided with teacher's guides telling me exactly what to read say and assign each day in the classroom. I was not required to do any work or research of my own in order to teach my students. I look back and feel the need to apologize to all of my former students. I was deskilled and in turn I did the same to my students. Without critical knowledge of how texts are written, students may never learn of important people who are left out of the typical texts. For example, Corinne Seeds and Helen Heffernan are important women who have worked diligently to make changes in education, yet traditional texts do not mention them because they are women (Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999, p.112). Do students know of this injustice? Are teachers even aware of the injustices placed upon them?

Teachers are like puppets speaking when told, repeating words from a scripted, published lesson plan, and using text's printed words as their thoughts for use in the

classroom. In turn, students are being taught in a slapstick manner in which they know no different. In all of their classes they are supposed to sit still, like wooden toy soldiers and repeat what the teacher says. The teacher has the correct answer and the students are to regurgitate the same information in order to receive a favorable grade. No thinking is required on the part of the teacher nor are the students required to think for themselves. Will these students recognize that they are lacking in ability when they are in the “working world” or will they merely be unsuccessful and deem themselves as failures? Will students fail to meet their full potential because they are unaware of their true abilities? The students do not realize that the freedom to learn by thinking for themselves was ever in existence, thus they do not miss it. The issue here that is so detrimental is that the students do not realize there are alternative ways of learning and expressing what they know and have learned. The fact that they are programmed not to think for themselves is not recognized.

We should be concerned about the type of teaching that exists with programs utilizing basal readers with lessons written similar to plays, and be aware of the trickle down effect of deskilling and the type of students leaving our schools. Plato, a great philosopher studied by many wrote,

[He] had strong reservations about the written word and its ability to convey the full meaning of a philosophy that was as much a practice – involving direct, personal interaction and instruction – as it was a set of static formulations and reflections. (Abram, 1996, p. 114)

On most occasions in the classroom today there is no leeway for personal interpretation. Not only is the teacher’s answer correct but it is considered the best possible answer as

well. How could it be any different? It is the correct response from the teacher's guide. I wonder if during our discussions of Beowulf or Romeo and Juliet if my teacher ever disagreed with the teacher's guide? I wonder if I may have turned out differently as a learner and thinker if she had challenged the teacher's guide, showed us her own thoughts and encouraged us to do the same. Students who refute this 'correct answer' are brought down in an admonishing manner as to deter them from ever speaking out again. I witnessed this firsthand and therefore never spoke up about my own opinion. "The effects or structure of a text are not reducible to its 'truth,' to the intended meaning of its presumed author, or even its supposedly unique and identifiable signatory" (Derrida, 1985, p. 29). According to this quote, which I believe to be true, there is not one meaning to be interpreted from a text by a teacher and then transformed to the knowledge base of students. No one knows exactly what the author intended for the reader to take away from the written words but the author himself. How then, do teachers in the classroom today stand before students declaring one right answer? The teacher serves as the authority. Sadly, teachers may not realize the incompetence that is implied by the teacher's guide. The result of this dictatorship is a classroom full of students and a teacher who are all unable to think for themselves.

Why does curriculum exist in schools that deskill teachers in this way? The answer is NCLB. Teachers are forced to teach to the tests in which their students will be forced to take in order to measure 'effectiveness' of both teachers and schools as a whole. They are required to use programs of instruction that are on a list of approved materials for instruction.



NCLB is Taylor-made for the push for efficiency and mass-production of instructional materials and assessments. And it's Taylor-made for the de-skilling of teachers. It mandates that school systems select reading programs reflecting NCLB's narrow definition of "scientifically-based research," empirical in nature and focused on the aspects of reading most amenable to quantitative assessment, while ignoring hundreds of valid studies that look at literacy and reading acquisition in more richly complex ways. The content of curriculum in early reading programs is reduced to narrowly defined skills that can be taught from a script and assessed "objectively." It pays lip service to comprehension and ignores the teaching of critical thinking skills. Teachers no longer need to plan their reading curriculum or consider the variability of their learners; the script must be followed. Scripted curriculum has the effect of deskilling teachers who become simple deliverers of content and skill processes rather than those who intricately synthesize content, skills, and concepts to create sophisticated curriculum designed to meet the needs of their particular students. (Wilson, ¶9)

Within the context of this lengthy quote lies the truth behind the deskilling of classroom teachers. Utilizing programs containing scripted lessons indicates that policy makers believe the knowledge of teachers is of little or no worth.

#### Deskilling Higher Education Professors

When I first became employed at Georgia Southwestern State University I remember feeling jealous that I did not receive a lot of mail in my mailbox. I know that is minor, but to me it made me feel inferior and less important than my peers. One day I admitted this feeling to a colleague. I distinctly remember YeVette's laughter as she told

me one day I would be inundated with mail and would hate it. I disagreed and a few days later she showed me all of the postcards, letters and magazines she had received in one day from textbook publishers. Although out loud I sounded as if she was right, I did not want all that junk in my box, inwardly I was anxious to have my own stack of “junk”. Little did I know how right she was. On a daily basis I receive a lot of mail from textbook publishers, all encouraging me to try their product. Most of the texts presented have accompanying materials in abundance to make my life as a professor easier and teaching my students practically effortless. It is sometimes amazing the similarities in higher education and K-12 classrooms.

I feel as if I share a common interest with the students in the classroom today as I was stifled in my early learning. Today’s curriculum is overpowering the creativity and learning of students. There is a “preoccupation with learning (memorizing) a set curriculum and with individual examination performance,” (Held, 1989, p. 244) One issue I have with this method of instruction discussed is the assumption the publisher makes about the thoughts of students and their professors.

Pre-service teachers are taught the skills to teach-to-execute tasks, manage the classroom, develop discipline procedures, create assignments, make tests, evaluate tests, disseminate curriculum, build unit plans and vary teaching methodologies. Ironically, this works in ways to deskill teachers. This happens when the skills teachers are taught in teacher education are unusable in practice.

(Kampol, ¶19)

Utilizing curriculum pre-made for the college classroom assumes that both all college and public education classrooms are the same and by using their materials, publishing

companies imply the skills presented in their texts are those that all students (pre-service and K-12) need to acquire. “Text publishers define their markets not as the actual reader of the book but as the teacher or professor. The purchaser, the student, has little power in this equation, except where it may influence a professor’s decision” (Apple, 1988, p.94). There is no room for consideration of individual responses of students nor are there areas for the teacher to adjust the lesson to better suit the learning styles of the students in the classroom. Using materials that accompany textbooks assumes that all students are at the same achievement levels at the same time and that they all learn in the same way. This is often spoken of in relation to learners in K-12 arenas of education, but college students are merely older versions of those learners. If this were the case (all students are the same), teaching would be much easier than it is in reality. People often make remarks such as “It should be easy to teach college students; they want to be there”. This is an erroneous notion. As a college professor, it is on occasion more difficult to teach older learners because it is harder to hold their attention, involve them in discussion (due to the way they never were allowed to discuss issues before), and get them to see beyond the grade they will earn. Old habits die hard.

Think back to Paulo Freire’s banking view of education. Publishing companies provide professors with ready-made materials for use in the classroom such as transparencies, topic lists for discussion, PowerPoint presentations, lecture notes, tests, etc. All of these resources are pre-packaged ready for the professor to utilize and transfer to students’ knowledge banks. To turn away from this method of instruction is a necessity.

Through dialogue, the new teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers.

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.

They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on “authority” are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be *on the side of* freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are “owned” by the teacher.

(Provenzo, 2006, p. 112)

There is a need for dialogue in all classrooms, but especially in those of teacher education so that there will be a transfer of technique into K-12 education. The materials provided to professors by publishing companies do not take into account the learners in my college classroom. I have found that it is at times difficult to convey my knowledge into their existing knowledge. Yes, to me, the content and information seems easy to learn, but that is due to my background. Students in my classes do not have the same understanding of the teaching of reading as I.

They [students] try to fit what they are experiencing into their current knowledge and understanding; that is, make sense of instruction in ways that depend on what is already in their minds. Because students know different things than teachers do, their interpretation of instruction may differ from what their teachers intend.

(Floden, 1989, p.2)

It is important for pre-service to see education as more than skills acquired by learners in a classroom or grades on a final transcript. Education is about zeal and an aspiration to learn for the sake of learning. It is about recognizing a need for students to think about recognizing a need for students to think critically and creatively (Kampol, ¶8). Therefore it is imperative for professors of pre-service teachers to share the same sentiment and model a passion for teaching and learning.

#### Freedom & Knowledge

Freedom and knowledge – who has it and who does not is central to the education of students today. Paulo Freire brings to light many interesting concepts in relation to language, freedom in education and learning, and the importance of participatory inquiry in the learning process. He discusses the issue of those in power and the value of their knowledge over the value of the knowledge of those “subordinate”. “It is difficult to understand these issues outside of an analysis of power relations. Only those who have power, for example, can define what is correct or incorrect. Only those who have power can decide what constitutes intellectualism” (Freire, 1987, p. 122). I agree with his thoughts here regarding those in power. However, I disagree with *who* decides what is intellectual. Yes, the intellectuals decide what it means to be labeled intellectual, but does that necessarily mean that everyone accepts that viewpoint? Intellectualism, the definition, may differ from person to person and/or culture to culture. In the instances of A.R., and published reading materials for both K-12 and higher education, intellectual is determined in a way that presumes all those being deskilled by the above mentioned curriculum materials are welcoming someone else’s definition of intellect. Do those in

power know what it means to be “street smart” which is so vital to the survival of many people in our world today?

When teachers are seen as the overarching authority in the classroom it is synonymous with power and great knowledge in the eyes of many. Who does not wish for power in their life? (Erwin, 2003, p.21). However, I encourage teachers to examine the effects of this picture of tyranny on the achievement, motivation, and attitudes of students. “Many don’t want to admit that they have an intrinsic need for power” (p. 21). Admitting the desire for power is not a weakness or a sign of selfishness. If the teacher or leader in the classroom has an internal desire for power and it is a characteristic of most of humanity, then what do we expect students to do with their pent up desire for power and authority in their own lives? “Power means personal growth: developing knowledge and skills that increase the quality of our lives, lead us to achieve, and increase our feeling of self-worth. In short, meeting the need for power is at the heart of education” (p. 21). I firmly assert that Paulo Freire would concur with this statement. Freire would propose allowing students power over their learning in the classroom, thus validating their knowledge and experiences while enabling them to possess authority of their own. They would be subjected to freedom.

### *Uses of Curriculum*

Without a doubt, I wholeheartedly deem that materials are necessary in order for students to acquire the ability to read and become literate. One does not become literate overnight or via means of magic. It is with methods and materials such as the three discussed previously that I find fault. In Gloria Ladson-Billings *Dreamkeepers* (1994), there is a list of statements that encourage literacy growth amongst students of which I

address in the discussion to follow. Although this book containing all of these statements discussed is geared towards successful teaching of African American students, the same tenants apply to all students.

The old adage “the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer” is true in relation to students and education. “Students whose educational, economic, social, political, and cultural futures are most tenuous are helped to become intellectual leaders in the classroom” (p. 117). Instead of students who are the most disadvantaged receiving *less* attention due to curricular and/or budget restraints of an often impoverished system, it is these students who should be of utmost priority to educators. All students are of value and regardless of where they come from, no matter what dialect the students speak, none are substandard or less worthy than another.

“Students are apprenticed in a learning community rather than taught in an isolated and unrelated way” (p.117). Teaching skills in separate and unrelated manners robs students of the ability to see relationships among content areas and thereby blinding them to the relevance of learning and their personal lives. “Students’ real-life experiences are legitimized as they become part of the ‘official’ curriculum” (p. 117). Teachers are not dictators and should not lead a classroom in a dictatorship style. Students live an array of diverse lives, each situation being unique and special to the individual student. What is important to one learner may not be a top priority for another.

“Teachers and students participate in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature and oratory” (p.117). As a professor in literacy education, I strongly advocate that literacy involves more than reading a printed word on a page. Referred to in this passage is one of the areas of language arts instruction that is often

overlooked. As Ladson-Billings notes, it is beyond literature on a page. Literacy is the oral tradition of the literature as well as the oral representation of the words by the students themselves.

“Teachers and students engage in a collective struggle against the status quo” (p. 118). What is right for one student is not necessarily the correct prescription for another, although they may be in the same classroom with the same teacher. There is no perfect, one best way to teach. Teachers and students alike must both work together to find what works for the betterment of the students’ achievement as well as their personal growth.

“Teachers are cognizant of themselves as political beings” (p. 118). This statement is one in which deserves much consideration on the part of teachers. It is impractical for teachers to assert that they do not fall victim to portraying their own beliefs into the teaching of their students. The issue in this instance is not whether or not teachers are political, but it is the method in which this matter is addressed. Sharing personal beliefs should not be labeled as “wrong”, but instead teachers should voice their opinions, emphasizing just that point: it is their personal *opinion*, not fact and subsequently encourages students to voice their own opinions while respecting the views of others.

In teaching students in general, or focusing specifically on nurturing students’ abilities to read and become literate members of and contributors to society, the teachers must take charge of the curriculum and stand against the grain. As Dorothy’s and her friends in *The Wizard of Oz* each had a weakness, they became

painfully conscious of something missing, a hole in need of repair . . . . This is not a bad start for teachers seeking a vocabulary of basics in their quest for wholeness



and for goodness in teaching – a home, a heart, a brain, the nerve. (Ayers, 2004, p. 142-143)

### *Abuses of Curriculum*

An important aspect to deliberate when discussing curriculum is that of the hidden curriculum. It is my firm belief that the hidden curriculum is one of the abuses of general education today. “The hidden curriculum refers to the unintended outcomes of the schooling process” (McLaren, 1989, p. 183). One of the “unintended outcomes” I foresee as problematic with the methods in which students learn today is the disarmament of their own thought processes as brought to light previously in this review of literature.

Yet another abuse of curriculum correlates heavily with the emphasis on high-stakes tests in our state and nation. Many teachers feel the need to teach the test in order for their students to pass, in order to continue employment within the system, and in order to aid their school in the endeavor and strife to acquire the label of ‘success’ or ‘excellence’. As unimaginable as it is for me to digest, there are books and books on the market that aid students in raising their test scores. Yet, what would the public and educators think if the emphasis on high-stakes tests was taken away or reversed? By reversed I turn to the following discussion from Peter Sacks’ *Standardized Minds* (1999):

What would happen, say, if the government bolstered financial assistance to schools based entirely on *poor* performance on standardized tests? That is, the lower a school’s test scores, the more funding it would receive from the government. Such a policy certainly makes certain sense if achievement is positively related to economic conditions of schools. Economically poor schools,

having the worst achievement test scores, would receive the most federal funding under such a rule. (p. 124)

It seems apparent that the curriculum of such schools would then turn from one being abused for the purpose of test success to one focused on increasing student achievement.

The primary abuse of curriculum I see as problematic in classrooms currently is directly related to President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This act of legislation calls for schools receiving funding from the Reading First Grant to utilize scientifically based reading research programs. In other words, the programs used to teach our students to read should have been tested and deemed successful in scientific research studies. On the surface this sounds good; however looks are not always what they seem.

Students should be allowed to act as individuals, ask questions and even make mistakes according to their own schemata. Having to follow the exact same routine each and every day becomes boring for the students and teachers. Yes, I agree that students, especially at young ages, tend to perform better in the classroom when there is routine. Nonetheless, there is a difference between routine and monotony. Making rules and decisions regarding what will be studied in a classroom will give students a voice and a sense of ownership over their learning destiny, I purport giving them a positive sense of self and prodding them towards success.

A popular term used to describe the students who make up the classrooms in our schools at one time was that of a "melting pot". Supposedly, educators were supposed to teach all students to get along with one another; essentially we were encouraged to teach conformity. Thankfully, that term is fading away as we are facing the facts that students

should not conform to the likeness of others. Each student is unique and brings to the classroom a sense of value, beliefs and knowledge base unlike any other. I bring this to light in this review because of the manner in which the state department feels it is necessary and appropriate to compile a list of reading programs that are best for use of teaching reading in the classroom (Georgia Department of Education, 2002). These texts are being deemed 'scientifically based in reading research'. I question whether or not this is sound practice. Who can determine what a sound textbook recommendation is with the diverse population composing our classrooms? It is at this point upon examining the types of materials on this list that I am faced with the scripted, deskilling curriculum used to instruct our students. There is not a trace of critical pedagogical practice in these types of texts.

It is an injustice to treat students passively. The path towards change may be arduous and long, but we must forge ahead.

We must go forward because we have visions of a better place that lies along the road...Our efforts in reading education can help more of us deliberate and decide where we shall stop and stay. The time has come to begin. Together we must start walking. (Shannon, 1998, p.202)

## CHAPTER 4

### BROKEN PROMISES OF READING INSTRUCTION

The opportunity to expose a problem is sometimes a gift; other times a curse.

Why the discrepancy in descriptions? Let me explain . . .

I have a close friend, who for the sake of privacy I will refer to as Sarah. Sarah has been having marital problems because her husband is never home, will not talk about where he has been, is suspected of drug abuse, does not take up time with their baby (who is 6 months old) etc. etc. I pass by Sarah's house each day on my way to and from work. The husband, who I will call Paul, is a self-employed farm consultant. To those who are not familiar with the life of a farmer, this translates to if it is daylight, he should not be home. Every morning when I pass by their house, I look to see if Sarah's car is under the carport. If it is there I know it will be a little longer before I get my daily morning call from her and if it is gone, I know she will be calling any minute. On occasion, Paul's truck will still be parked in its space underneath the oak tree in the side of their yard. Sarah says that is because he gets a late start some mornings and cannot get out of bed. In the afternoons when I pass by mid it is usually around 4:00 PM; a time when Paul should be busy at work. A couple of weeks ago I noticed his truck was home several days in a row. On one occasion there was also another vehicle, one I did not recognize in the drive. You can imagine my initial thought of the wrongdoing that may be occurring. The first day I noticed the extra car, I did nothing. I thought of the car constantly however and worried about my friend and what may be happening behind her back. The second time I saw the car, I felt it may be time for me to do something; but what? I struggled with whether or not to call my friend Sarah to, as I call, "fish around"

for information on who may be at their house with her husband in the afternoon. I contemplated the situation and thought about what I would want Sarah to do if the tables were turned, so I ultimately made the call. Long story short, it was not an affair as I initially expected, but there was a problem..... Paul was involved with drugs and the car in the drive that I did not recognize was that of his supplier.

In contrast to feeling cursed when having to be the one to reveal a problem to my friend, there are times when I recognize problems and am eager to expose them. At those times I bring the problem to light with passion and without a second thought. This is the case with the situation at hand and the learning that I have done through living an experience that has been both binding and freeing at the same time. Just as I have been, I see others deskilled and desire to expose the unfortunate phenomenon. I want to do so that others will see the injustice and strive to make changes as well.

In my experience of both learning and teaching, there are three areas in which I see deskilling occurring prevalently. Examining the three areas I present, it is evident the effect on thinking is widespread. Not only are students deskilled, but the deskilling shapes public education classroom teachers as well as professors in higher education.

The first instance of deskilling occurs with the use of the Accelerated Reader (A.R.) program used in schools, and the way it strips the value of student thought from the reading process. With A.R., students read a book on their designated reading level (as previously determined in the classroom by a multiple choice computerized test) and then take a multiple-choice test over the book's content on the computer. The next context I have experienced which needs exposure on a large scale is the curriculum material used to teach students in schools. Specifically, the scripted lessons contained in

published basal reader series serve to deskill the teachers leading today's classrooms. Unfortunately, the process does not stop there. The third and final process of deskilling which I have encountered has been in my life as a college professor. Publishers constantly seek to make my job easy through providing materials intended to save me time and energy. The reality is that by utilizing the materials provided I am once again succumbing to the thoughts of others who perhaps believe my own ideas lack worth. In all three of these situations, it is evident that promises are being broken each and every day in relation to reading instruction within the classroom.

#### The Broken Promise to Students

As a person highly interested in the area of literacy and the promotion of literacy in all students, I continually hear myself repeat to those in my classes and anyone outside of class who will listen, that the point of teaching a person to read is not that he/she is able to recognize and voice the words on the page. Instead, it is our responsibility to teach critical reading and comprehensive reading skills to students. It is a sad state, however, when those words are falling on the deaf ears of people who do not understand because, they do not see a problem. They have been trained to be happy with others telling them what to do and thinking for them.

I have written in a previous chapter about my feelings for A.R. There needs to be much consideration given to the use and abuse of the program. A.R. is the creation of Renaissance Learning, Inc. An interesting detail to document is the website which promotes A.R. When I originally began research into the deskilling effects of A.R., I visited the website for the program. Recently, when going back to the same website, I noted many changes, not the least of which is the emphasis on the program's alignment

with President Bush's NCLB Act discussed previously in Chapter two. The declaration "Accelerated Reader meets NCLB requirements for scientifically based research," (<http://www.renlearn.com/ar/overview/>) is proudly displayed on the website along with a specific link to a page whose headline reads once again "Accelerated Reader is Supported By Scientifically Based Research" (<http://www.renlearn.com/ar/overview/sbr.htm>). The facts that are left off of the fascinating website are the ones in which I wish to address.

When A.R. was initially introduced into the reading curriculum of schools, the intention was for the program to serve as an incentive to encourage and motivate students to read more. The books are leveled according to degree of readability. Students then read books on their level, take a test on the computer and receive points for correct responses. The points in turn are accumulated and spent on "goodies". Following is a sample list of "prices" and "goodies" that may be for sale in an A.R. store:

- 1 point--penny candy (jolly rancher, etc.), cap erasers
- 5 points--pencils, stickers, pencil grippers, bookmarks
- 10 points--candy bars, folders, gel pens, eraser pencils
- 15 points--key ring, calendars
- 20 points--markers, colored pencils, paperback book

The assumption behind the store is that students will want to read more so they can buy additional items or items of greater value with their points. It is difficult to limit this discussion to the ways in which A.R. deskills students. One of the first problems I see is the way in which this read and reward system instills in students the need for immediate compensation for a task when in fact, very seldom do we receive instantaneous gratification for tasks completed. Although many people desire immediate reward for

work, reality is that most of us do not receive pay after each hour we work, upon graduation students are not immediately guaranteed employment, as educators the impact we make on students is not immediately evident, etc. Aside from this concern of effort and reward and returning back to the matter of debilitating the thought processes of students, it is of utmost concern the manners in which students rush through the books and tests without giving true thought to the meaning that can be gained from the printed words on the page. Depending on the length of the book, the number of questions on a given test ranges from five to ten. There is often no interaction between students and a teacher in the utilization of A.R. therefore there is a lack of knowledge about the thoughts of students as they interact with text. How is a multiple-choice test capable of evaluating the intellectual ability of a student? A.R. does not measure intellectualism, but instead it shows the ability of a student to recall literal information.

Margaret Hillert writes a significant number of children's books that tell a simple story and contain a limited number of words and pages. Her books are usually leveled on a first or second grade reading level. Most of these books have a point value of 0.5 meaning that if students make 100% on the accompanying quiz, they will earn 0.5 points toward their points total eligible for spending at the A.R. store. One book, titled *Come Play with Me*, written by Hillert tells the story of a boy who cannot rescue his goats from a next-door field. Several other animals try to come to his rescue, but only one of them is successful. While the book itself consists of 31 pages, there are only 75 words in the text and most of the story's content consists of rhyming sentence structure. Following are two of the five questions and multiple-choice answers contained on the *Come Play with Me* A.R. test:



1. The little playhouse was \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. in a book
  - b. for a baby
  - c. yellow, blue & red
  - d. little and brown
  
2. A little red \_\_\_\_\_ is fun for play.
  - a. book
  - b. penny
  - c. car
  - d. dog

Students reading on this level read these types of books and then rush to a computer to take a test and earn their prized points. What is problematic in this instance are the question sets which are given to the students serving as their knowledge assessment of the story. In some instances, the storyline is so short and/or simple that is difficult to question the student over actual events in the story. Instead, the questions relate to what is happening in the illustrations. Questions over illustrations are assessing trivial matter. Interpreting the illustrations is not a strategy utilized by all readers, nor is it a necessity in all reading. With longer texts there are problems as well. Who is the authority declaring what is the correct interpretation of a story? Think back to the popular children's literature text, *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White. I would claim that if asked, I would be able to give a thorough summary of the book, including the key characters, the plot, major events and conclusion along with the moral of the story. When examining the ten questions listed on the A.R. test for this book, I was amazed at how little knowledge I

possessed about the classic tale. Following are two questions, which proved my ignorance about *Charlotte's Web*:

1. What did the Zuckerman's have that was best in the county?
  - a. pond
  - b. a swing
  - c. a thrashing machine
  - d. a horse
2. What was the never-to-be-forgotten battle fought by Charlotte's cousin?
  - a. escaping the boy who was trying to catch her
  - b. holding onto the branch in the storm
  - c. capturing the fish caught in her web
  - d. chasing the big black spider out of her web

Because I do not recall the answers to these two questions, does that mean that the knowledge I do possess about the story is invalid and without worth? Does missing these two questions provide an accurate picture of my comprehension ability and my ability to apply strategies in context? The answer is no.

When instructing teacher candidates to consider reading as a process instead of an end product, one of the major tenets discussed in class is the manner in which each reader constructs meaning based on his/her own experience and current situation. For example, people who watch a lot of scary movies are less likely to view horror movies as extremely frightening. If I watch a movie, in contrast, and the music begins to increase in beat and deepen in pitch one of my first instincts is to cover my eyes. I do not want to see the "scary part". Keeping with the scary movie notion, think of times in the past

when you have seen a scary movie. Is it more frightening in the daylight watching it with friends, or is it more alarming if it is watched while alone, late at night? Keeping those illustrations in mind and the meaning they carry, think back to A.R. testing students comprehension of books. One of the biggest and most important lessons I have learned is that there is more than one interpretation of almost all events. Therefore, even if a question does center around an inference or synthesizing type situation from a book, who is to say that the student who read the book does not have good reason for his/her response if it was listed as incorrect by the computer? “The writer has another interpretation of the text he or she produced and the reader has a reorganization of previous knowledge, and therefore, new knowledge is produced during reading and later upon reflection” (Shannon, 1989, p. 124). It is wrong to say there is only one correct answer. I can imagine someone arguing this point on a literal level however with the belief that if a question is more factual, there is no room for interpretation. That is true. However, the point is not literal recall. What is to be learned from the literal recall of events? Very little. What is deemed as an important situation or event from the test writer may or may not be deemed as significant for recall by the reader. With this taken into consideration, it is now important to turn to how A.R. is being utilized in the classroom.

In an increasing number of schools, the program is not used for incentive, but instead is used as a requirement as a part of students’ reading grades. Using grades from A.R. tests can be detrimental to students with students interpreting texts in different ways and employing different reading strategies in order to construct meaning. With the utilization of A.R. as a mandate in the classroom, it assumes that students are “incapable

of reading the word and the world” (Shannon, 1989, p. 92) which is incorrect. All students enter classrooms with knowledge about literacy and learning and they translate that knowledge (whether great or small) into meaningful experiences, thereby creating sense of their world through the printed word. Invalidating the knowledge of students is detrimental to their academic progress. It is wrong to utilize such a deskilling program as A.R. that does not support the theories of critical reading in the classroom.

There is plenty of evidence showing that time spent reading and having access to more books results in more reading and better reading. There is no scientific evidence showing that tests and rewards lead to more and better reading, and there is some evidence suggesting that rewards have a detrimental effect in the long run. Children don't need Accelerated Reader: Children need good libraries, time to read, and encouragement and guidance from teachers and librarians. The best reward is the pleasure of reading a good book. No child needs rewards and prizes to read Goosebumps and Harry Potter. (para. 1, "A.R. in Media," n.d.)

Children need quality time. Time to practice their reading skills, time to allow their thoughts to formulate and time to express themselves in meaningful ways through authentic tasks. A computer-generated test cannot provide the value of time.

#### The Broken Promise to Classroom Teachers

The second broken promise of reading instruction is the deskilling of teachers, which implies they are incompetent. The iniquity to which I allude here is the instructional materials that are utilized in the classrooms. A.R. is not primarily utilized for instruction. The emphasis that is placed on the program's grades however, exists to suggest otherwise.

If I were to ask teachers and administrators to name the program that strips teachers of their ability to think and plan for themselves, the response would most likely be Saxon Phonics. I wholeheartedly agree. At this point however, I would like to expose another method of deskilling which is less palpable and therefore is even more distressing as it is almost a cover up by the publishing companies. The curriculum material I speak of in this instance is the basal reader.

The question may arise – Which published version is the most at fault? That is a difficult question to answer as all of the publishing companies strive to outdo one another in providing the *best* materials for teachers to implement in the classroom. Series are developed specifically geared for the needs of individual states. For instance, in Georgia many publishing companies market their basal series based on the fact that all lessons are aligned with the new Georgia Performance Standards and/or they may include test prep materials accompanying each story or selection to assist in preparing students for the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (C.R.C.T.) administered each year. How the series are marketed is by itself is scandalous. There are sometimes “extravagant celebrations and/or free trips awarded to those promoting a particular series to the largest group of teachers” (Shannon, 1989, p.38). Each company is attempting to stay one step ahead of the other. Imagine how many companies sent new materials to press after the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> in order to be able to market the fact that their series is the most up to date with non-fiction stories?

Granted, one selection may demonstrate deskilling, especially in relation to teachers in a more obvious manner, yet nonetheless whether obvious or subtle the deskilling exists. What is most atrocious is the manner in which the publishing

companies are proud of this deskilling. A slogan by one popular company in the past has been “When it comes to offering teachers guidance, Houghton Mifflin proves that giving you more can help you work less” (Shannon, 2007, p. 60). The pride here is unmistakable. Fortunately, not all teachers enter the profession because they desire an easy job.

I reflect back to how distressed I was to realize my high school English teacher was not the brilliant scholar I had once realized. It is ironic that I felt that way. Years later I portrayed that same quality of teacher brilliance. I distinctly remember sitting in the wooden rocking chair in the front of my classroom with my children all on their carpet squares sitting around me. Our classrooms had been supplied with many items that served to make our environment more “brain-based” in order to promote more neural connections i.e. ‘learning’ in our school. What is humorous as I consider that time is the way in which I, along with most of the teachers in our schools, used the rocking chairs for our own comfort and not as author’s chairs and comfortable independent reading environments for our students! In any case, I was in the rocking chair being observed by a teacher candidate from the local college (the same one where I now teach). I led our lesson from the basal, all the while asking questions as we read. “What do you suppose the main character is feeling as his secret is revealed?” I recited with delight. I continued, asking question after question about the story we had just read aloud in class.

I prided myself on being a good example and also taking time to stop and explain something when my teacher candidate had a question. At the end of the lesson, I sent the students back to their desks and my eager teacher candidate asked if she could ask a question, although she was afraid it would make her sound dumb. “Of course you can!” I

responded. “And never be anxious about asking me a question – it was not long ago I sat just where you are.” I was a part of the deskilling cycle and I was about to promote it further. So there we are, the eager, yet timid college student, and me – the teacher, rocking back and forth like the knowledgeable possessor of all educational wisdom at the front of the room. The big question of the hour was this – “How did you know what kinds of questions to ask the students when you read?” She feared she would be unable to think of questions to accompany all of her lessons for the different content areas when she led a classroom of her own. At that very moment, her image of me was shattered just as my image of my high school English teacher’s intellect was crushed years before. The questions were listed in the book. I did not even have to think of them! Unfortunately I recall saying this with great pride. If I could turn back time, I would have answered with shame. Actually, if I could turn back time, she would not have witnessed me asking the printed questions or following the step-by-step plan.

The question that this memory presents is this: What is the textbook publisher saying about teachers? First, the publisher is saying that teachers are not capable of thinking for themselves. Utilizing the script “positions teachers within pedagogical models that limit their role as ‘clerks’ of the empire,” (Giroux, 1988, p. 91). In fact, in the early 1970’s a prominent publishing company, Scott Foresman and Co. published a basal series that allowed more thought and input by the teacher. Because of this, they “lost approximately 65% of their business within the school market” (Shannon, 1992, p. 197). Apparently, the many assessments, classes and field experience hours teacher candidates complete before receiving a teaching certificate does not equate with ability to teach and transfer knowledge. It actually implies there is little existence of knowledge

altogether. While marketed as a way to save teachers time, the script or step-by-step instructions exist to eliminate human error (p. 178). In relation to students, the publishers are implying that all students are the same. That students in American schools are a picture of the illustrious melting pot and all think alike and will therefore need to be presented with the same questions year after year and will respond in a uniform manner.

I think Lindbergh is smart to be so concerned about his plane. First, when I read page 153, I learn that Lindbergh is doing something no one else has ever done. When he succeeds, he knows what he has done is important, and he wants to preserve the plane for people to see. He may also feel that the plane is special because it kept him safe during his journey. (p. 165)

It is unbelievable the insinuation that teacher's are incapable of producing their own thoughts. Showing this scripted thought process to the teacher candidates in my classroom is one of my favorite activities as they can always tell the thoughts are not my own. How do they know? Because the words and thoughts are not like the ones they have come to know as "my style". Will elementary students be able to tell the difference as well? Of course! They are even more perceptive than their older learning counterparts.

What happens when a student does not respond in the manner that is listed in the teacher's guide? It is worth mention that there is not an alternative list of answers given that a teacher may receive from students. Is the implication that teachers should be able to think on their own some of the time? Or when it is convenient? Or perhaps, would it have been too time consuming and less economical in regards to production for the publishing companies to list possible alternative responses?



In some instances, use of the scripted type basal reading program does result in an increase in the test scores of students. This increase in test scores may occur as a result of the tests, (which are also published by the same companies who publish the basal series) being written in the same manner as the test prep and other scripted materials throughout the entire course of the text. The text itself essentially teaches the test. However, what teachers gain by not having to write individual goals and methods of instruction they lose in control over their work. “They forfeit subjectivity within their teaching, knowledge about scientific investigations of reading and instruction, the respect due professionals, authority over classroom activities, and the history of teaching reading” (Shannon, 1989, p.94).

#### The Broken Promise to Professors

One would think that by the time I had lived through my experiences in K-12 education, participated in the domination of teacher’s thought processes by publishing companies as I taught elementary school, and endured through admitting I had a problem as a doctoral student that I would run far and fast when presented with even more deskilling options for methods of instruction. I sometimes wonder if I will ever learn!!

In my defense, when I first began my career as a college professor I had not yet come to the realization that I had a problem. I wanted to be like all of the other professors who had instructed me before who were now my colleagues. I wanted to be effective. I did not have a clue how ineffective they were and how ineffective I would soon be. Just as big corporations such as Wal-Mart employ ghost employees via the accomplishment of self-checkout lanes in order to save money spent paying physical beings and providing for their health and retirement, schools are making use of the same

method of efficiency. How? When teachers have an outline, they are more efficient. I wanted to be efficient in the same manner as my new colleagues were perceived. I wanted others to view me as fully capable of leading a class of students. I wanted my test scores to fall on the bell curve. Little did I know that some of those whom I held with such high esteem were using methods of efficiency in the form of materials that served to deskill their thought processes and instructional abilities. Efficiency should have nothing to do with the bell curve, student retention and graduation rates and overall instructor ratings. Unfortunately this is the case in some institutions.

The first semester I taught at the college level, I was employed as an adjunct as awaiting my official employment date in August. I was slated to teach one course, Introduction to Reading. I was thrilled yet nervous. I had no idea how to develop a syllabus and I wanted to appear prepared and smart. I knew I was young, and probably appeared even younger than my actual age and feared that gaining respect may be difficult. My students had to know I was superior!

My direct supervisor probably thought I was a nut case to put it lightly the way I bounced around our offices so eager to teach, learn about my colleagues, organize my supplies and work and fulfill my duties with pride! No, this should not classify me as a lunatic, but it has been my experience that people in higher education generally do not exhibit this level of enthusiasm on a daily basis without running out of fuel and energy. Regardless of her initial impression, she gave me the book she had used to teach the class and a copy of her syllabus and told me to change the personal information to my own. This assistance I readily accepted as I had just finished my job as an elementary school teacher and did not have an abundance of time to prepare for my role as adjunct

professor. The class went okay, there were learning experiences, as there still is each semester I teach, but I came out primarily unscarred as my students did as well.

After the summer semester ended, I recall standing at the mailboxes for faculty in our building looking wistfully at the full boxes of others. As spoken of in a previous chapter I even voiced the comment that I hoped I would soon get more mail. This remark was met with laughter from those standing around who replied that I would one day hate the moment I saw my box full. Ridiculous I thought! Of course I wanted lots of mail! I wish I had listened. In an effort to stand on my own, I registered with every publishing company whose materials I found in the trash by our mailboxes. I wanted to select my own instructional materials as I viewed this as a great perk of the profession.

It was not long before my dreams came true. My mailbox was stuffed to the brim with mail. I was elated. In some small way, I felt important because of the paper in the box. At any rate, I thumbed through the countless magazines, flyers and pamphlets given to me all advertising the newest, best, most effective texts for teaching reading to pre-service teacher candidates. What makes this deskilling? Not only was I presented with texts, but I was given the opportunity to utilize all sorts of supplementary materials that would make my job as professor easier. No, I did not have student workbooks, but instead I could adopt a text complete with accompanying teacher's guide (on CD Rom) containing a test bank, PowerPoint presentations, discussion guides, transparencies and more. I did not have to prepare for class; it was all done for me. Who could ask for anything more!

Everything has been well thought out by the publishing company. For instance, when examining the test bank, there are multiple-choice questions, true-false questions,

fill in the blank items as well as essay questions. Questions to suit the needs, wishes and teaching style of any professor! The figures below are of slides taken from the Chapter 1 pre-made PowerPoint presentation in the 2004 text *Integrating the language arts* published by Holcomb Hathaway Publishers:

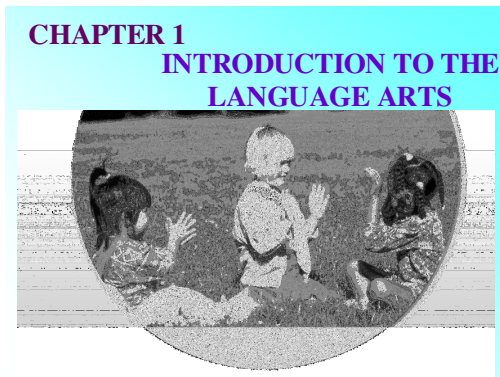


Figure 1 Title Slide

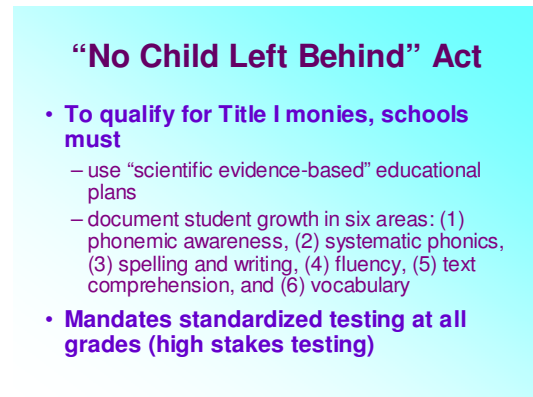


Figure 2 Content Slide

These two slides were selected for specific reasons. The first slide was chosen to illustrate the manner in which publishing companies are careful about the manner in which they represent the student population of today's classroom. One critique of many of the older basal series is the way in which all of the characters and students in the texts were of white, middle-class descent. In the first slide shown, you will notice that out of the three children pictured only one child is white therefore depicting different ethnicities of student populations. The purpose behind the selection of the second slide is to demonstrate the manner in which publishers market to the specific environments to which they sell their product. President Bush's NCBL Act is prevalent in classrooms all around our country. It is interesting to note that in the PowerPoint presentation accompanying the text, the *important* information lifted from the book to post on the presentation for up-close viewing by pre-service teachers is information dealing with that particular law. I

dare say that if the PowerPoint was original and created based on what I deem important, there would not be such emphasis placed on the material noted on the pre-made slide.

The presentation of such illustrious materials is all about control and ultimately the dollar. The relationships of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – that is the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold; it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production. (Provenzo, 2006, p. 300)

By attempting to lure me into using their products, textbook publishers were controlling my actions. I serve as a money making machine to earn them a lot of money as the students enrolled in my classes would then purchase their texts.

What I have now come to realize is that by utilizing prepackaged materials to instruct my teacher candidates I am implying the old familiar phrase “All children (in my case – college students) can learn”. The question may be posed that this is a good philosophy to hold. I have always thought so, until I read a different interpretation of the phrase. Have you ever considered what word should come after ‘learn’ in the phrase? What exactly is it that we want everyone to learn? (Provenzo, 2006, p.40). It is not up to the instructor who utilizes prepackaged text sets as mentioned above. But can the students dialogue about the knowledge presented to them? I realized the negative connotations of using such materials, but had not fully considered all of the implications regarding not only professors, but the students in the college classroom as well.

I am once again reminded I must constantly be aware of how easy it is to slide back into old habits. Just as it is difficult to break an addiction to drugs or alcohol for a person who has developed a dependency, it is also a difficult task to consistently hold my own in freedom to teach in an alternative manner. This difficulty is due to the fact that my entire past has consisted of debilitating and deskilling methods of instruction, both instilled *on* me and *by* me as well, yet that is no excuse. I must find the strength and will to move forward.

All of these are broken promises to so many people impacted by the deskilling process. The cycle of accepting the thoughts of others continues to pull with a great gravity against the forces of freedom. Freedom, democracy; what does that mean? It is important to examine those words in the context of education as we begin to see how the cycle can be slowed, altered and ultimately broken to allow all students freedom. Free without fear of failure – that is true freedom.

## CHAPTER 5

### MY VOICE

Recently over a span of about four weeks, I was extremely busy. I was nearing the end of a large fundraiser for cancer research of which I was serving as chair, my daughter Abby was in cheerleading competitions three weekends in a row and my son Will started recreation department baseball (on top of the “travel ball” he plays on weekends). I was working full time, cooking dinner for my family and father-in-law, overseeing registration for the Pre-K program I direct, assisting with decorating for Abby’s upcoming kindergarten graduation, etc. etc. Many people around me started saying they were concerned about the pace I was attempting to keep in my life. Quite honestly, so many people were approaching me that I was beginning to become annoyed.

The weekend finally arrived and on this particular date, it was opening day for my son’s baseball season, and Abby and I were scheduled to attend a bridesmaids’ luncheon for one of my friends from high school. Early that morning I crawled out of bed (crawled because it had been midnight the night before when I got in!), got Will’s game clothes and bag together, showered, made sure our ballgame chairs were in the car, ironed Abby and my shorts and shirt for the game as well as our clothes for the luncheon, loaded the bags in the car, filled the cooler with blue Gatorades, hoisted it into the trunk and then made one last sweep through the house to make sure nothing important was being left behind. I was weary, but feeling okay and was ready to conquer the day. We were due at the field by 9:30 a.m. because not only was it opening day, but there would also be a dedication ceremony for the new complex on which the season would be played. As usual, I had a plan – I would see a couple of innings of Will’s game, which was

scheduled to begin at 11:00 and then arrive at the luncheon a few minutes late (I had already notified them of course!). I admit that perhaps I was more than a little tired, maybe I was nearing exhaustion, but never would I admit it so I pressed onward with a smile.

We arrived at the field, unpacked the car and proceeded to get settled for the opening ceremony. Sherry, a good friend of mine noticed that I appeared a little disheveled and worn and asked me if everything was okay. (She is the mom of Will's best friend and recently volunteered to be a proofreader of my writing because she is thinking about going back to school and felt it would be good to get an idea of what the dissertation process is like.) I quickly told her I was fine, gave her a reassuring smile but then proceeded to tell her of everything I had to do that day to which she responded, "Just don't do it. Call and tell them you can't make the luncheon. Stay here, watch all of the game and just breathe for once." She said it so matter of factly I was startled and at first would not hear of such behavior. She raised her eyebrows at me, shrugged her shoulders and sat back in her chair. I sat silently, almost unaware of the hustle and bustle of opening day around me. There was no way I would back out of a commitment I had made to my friend.

But what about my commitment to Will? I had missed his last two travel tournaments due to attending events with Abby. Granted, I was tired and the thought of sitting in the chair feeling the sun soak into my skin as I cheered him on sounded good. But still, I could not give in. I felt I must go to the luncheon, but with every passing second I was quickly feeling more guilty about missing Will's game as I was going to



have to leave before it ever started – opening ceremonies and the dedication were running long and it did not appear that he would start on time.

I felt frozen. The decision was so difficult for me to make, but yet to my concerned and observant friend, so clear – I must take a break. I struggled inwardly. Why did I struggle to give myself time? Why was guilt about either decision weighing down my spirit? As I continued to sit motionless with my cell phone in hand ready to call my friend if I chose to do so, I eyed the bright handsome smile of my first born as he waved to me from the dugout. What would I do? As I neared the brink of tears, Sherry leaned up in her chair to address me again. “Girlfriend, is your dissertation the truth or a lie?” I sat stunned at her question. “You say time and time again how you have learned to think and act for yourself. You know what you need to do – just do it and move on.” She was right. I placed the call to my friend explaining I would be unable to attend the luncheon and then thoroughly enjoyed the game and time with my family.

As I think back on this situation I become frustrated that once again I fell victim to the thoughts and words of others. Another friend had told me the previous day that I should definitely try to attend the luncheon and the game. Why was I unable to voice my own opinion and do what I wanted? Why did I revert to my old way of wanting others to make choices for me and tell me what to do? Was I becoming a pleaser all over again?

How can we move students from these same feelings of incapable to make a decision if their life depended on it to confident, skilled decision makers? It cannot happen all at once. The move to empower students must be gradual and we must realize why the fear exists in the first place. It is our own fault – the methods of instruction and the curriculum materials in which we have utilized in our classrooms have served to strip

students of their ability to think for themselves. Teachers, whether in elementary, middle, high school or college, must realize that they cannot walk into a classroom, give freedom to think and expect students to embrace it willingly without feelings of fear and failure.

Fear of failure is the dark aspect of the hope and striving for success. For most of us our abilities, our good looks and our social techniques, our pleasant, public relations 'hellos,' our ability to laugh at anybody's jokes, our capacity to hold conventional opinions and never to value or fight for any position in an argument too much never seem quite adequate to ward off all the chances of failure. If a young person is successful in competition for one grade, one scholarship, one boy or girl, or one position today, can he be sure of being successful next time?

(Provenzos, 2006, p. 95).

I have lived the above situation. I was successful, not with good looks, but with social abilities and outgoing personality traits. I achieved so-called greatness in classes, but it did not guarantee success for my future. Freedom evoked fear within me as I feared failure itself. When the two elements coexist in a situation such as this, both retaining power to a great degree, the struggle between the two becomes even more complex and difficult to overcome. "Freedom has to be gradually achieved and nurtured in situations that have been made intelligible but that have to be continually named and understood" (Greene, 1995, p.178). The freedom poured out at once increases the level of fear. As in my case, it must be understood that sustaining one's command on freedom may also be difficult. Moving from a deskilling environment to a democratic surrounding evokes the simultaneous positions of freedom and fear.

## Towards Making a Change

Teachers must first realize the role they play in developing students as intellectuals and embracers of freedom. Do we realize our potential influence? Not always. Do we realize we have taught student to play dumb and answer the questions we give them instead of questioning our answers (Shor, 1992, p. 137)? No. We must look beyond what we do in our own secluded world and seek out the assistance of others, including our students. It is not a simple task moving from an individual deskilled to an individual with metacognitive processes able to allow others to hear his/her own voice. Along those same lines, it is difficult to change from a person who assists in the actual deskilling process of others to living the life of an individual who values the thoughts, ideas and opinions of those in his/her surroundings.

Another potential way to help students overcome the freedom-fear relationship is for schools to form more open relationships with higher education institutions. In observing and evaluating pre-service teachers in the classrooms of public schools, I often hear their host teachers speak of how teacher candidates lack certain skills. How are professors supposed to know what practicing teachers feel the pre-service teachers are not learning if we lack communication? In addition to the act of communication is the need for overall improvement of teacher training in college. I now realize this need as I have struggled to overcome fear in my own freedom. As a result I strive to work even harder to instill in my students the crucial task set before them. I struggle to keep other students from falling into the same trap.

A teacher's first job in a public school can be frightening. That fear mixed with the conservative pressures of the institution can overwhelm the liberatory

inclinations of a new teacher. Having *experienced*, and not merely having read about, an alternative pedagogy can help new teachers preserve their democratic ideals. (Shannon, 1992, p. 80)

It is often a great effort to conduct a class in which ideas and concepts are learned through an *experience* instead of an idea I lecture about for several days before administering a test. Many of the preservice teacher candidates I serve feel the same way as I and we work and struggle together in class. We strive to improve their thoughts of themselves as learners and intellectuals just as they will do with their own students in the months and years to come. I have no trouble admitting my weakness and fear to them. We are better teachers if we admit “our lack of encyclopedic knowledge of the world and all that’s in it and demonstrate our desire and ability to learn” (Shannon, 1995, p.107). I feel fortunate to experience these uncomfortable phenomena that have brought me to the place I am today. However, I think back to the students who continue to struggle and realize that whether it is in early schooling of students, or in higher education, there is a difference in how students learn and how teachers and professors teach (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p.129). This gap must be overcome. As we have learned in the doctoral program to become part of the community as scholars, teachers must do the same to enable their students to learn the lingo of wisdom in education (M. Morris, personal communication, April 5, 2004). bell hooks (1994) explains the possibilities we have as educators in the following manner:

. . . We have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as

we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (p. 207).

We should strive with all of our strength to break the chain of teachers passing on to their students the same disfavours of education that ensued in their lives as scholars. Instead of teaching students to be reactive, students should learn to think for themselves and be proactive in their learning processes. “To think takes guts; connect mind and body without caring what other people think” (M. Morris, personal communication, April 5, 2004).

“Shared fear unifies people” (Hillman, 1995, p. 186). I do not pretend to be a know it all, expert and/or dictator and I think I am more respected by my students for my openness. Nowhere in the teacher’s manuals, premade PowerPoint presentation and lists of discussion questions provided to me by publishing companies is a place for professors to allow themselves to be human. Everything is designed for the ultimate efficient transfer of knowledge from the one who knows all (professor) to those who know little (students). Without the ability to be myself with my students there is no need for my mind at all. It is as if electrodes should be taped to my temples with the other end secured to the body of the student so that with the flip of a switch knowledge transfer would occur. This style is not my style. I will be myself or I will not teach at all.

Through affirmative relationships with my students I hope to gain some power to expose them to different modes of thought. I do not intend to change their thoughts, but instead help them see value in their thoughts and in the thoughts of others beyond the written text. I desire to move students from thinking someone else holds the answer to

believing their own thoughts are of great worth. Students need to see the benefits of freedom in education and thought.

In teaching students to embrace power over their learning and shun deskilling methods of instruction and curriculum materials placed upon them, they must be taught responsibility and value of their own learning. Self-regulated learning encompasses this responsibility and involves students having control over their learning and taking an active approach in reflecting on the processes in which they have gone through in order to increase their abilities. Control in this sense refers to awareness of their thoughts and thought processes which is often referred to as metacognition, or thinking about your thinking. Self-regulated learning is an active process that also involves motivation and other strategies that help students to optimize their learning experiences (Young-Suk & Vrongistinos, 2002). Motivation is often key to learning as it is directly related to interest in many aspects. The concepts that students are most interested in are the ones in which they are most motivated to delve into and learn more about.

#### A Return to Freedom

As students begin to develop an awareness and a responsibility for their own learning they should be given more freedom in curriculum materials as well. Much of what is used in the curriculum has no relevance to the lives of students, thus making learning increasingly difficult. Reading aloud from a teacher's guide expecting students to recite (regurgitate) words of the teacher is not true learning. It requires no thought on the part of either the facilitator or the receiver. This is another area in desperate need of change. Teachers should always strive to motivate students and build new knowledge based on the existing knowledge structure of students. With the amount of exposure

students have to television, it only makes sense that we also implement the study of television and film into the curriculum. Television is part of the culture of students of today and is subject matter in which they are familiar. “Teachers and parents alike, many maintain, have little knowledge of, or interest in, engaging the lives of young people in all their complexities” (Dimitriadis, 2001, p.119). If rap or any other music in general is part of the culture that surrounds our students, it is then our responsibility to familiarize ourselves with the form of expression at hand and use it to the advantage and betterment of our students and their instruction.

I now ask, “What does a classroom look like where the teacher is not the only person considered possessing knowledge of worth and students are given choice and authority?” An example of such a model classroom where the teacher serves as a *facilitator* of knowledge is found in *Writing Superheroes* (1997). This model deserves examination and emulation. The way in which the teacher, Kristen, instructs her students leads the students to develop a sense of valued cultural differences and respect for one another as well (p. 182). Such traits are those to be encompassed in all of us involved in a democracy, not only in relation to a classroom environment. Students should be able to “push open the heavy metal doors,” (p.32) and enter a world of comfort and learning; not a world where they feel imprisoned. Educators should take note of the methods in which Kristen handles her class (methods which should not seem so novel!) and attempt to emulate some of these in our everyday lives and experiences. It is my conviction that if we as educators allow our students freedom in the methods in which they express themselves then we will be pleasantly surprised at the level of academic achievement they reach. Instead of expecting everything students produce and utilize within the

classroom to resemble a traditional book and textbook, we should allow them freedom in expression.

Who are we to expect students to emerge from our institutions prepared for life if we have not provided them with foundational tools for success? A disservice is being imposed on students that will only cause them more problems in the future. It is not ethical to teach students in a manner that prevents them from developing to their fullest potential. Continuing to deskill students creates future teachers who will be unable to think for themselves and who will accept deskilling methods of instructing learners. Ultimately the cycle will arrive to the production of professors accepting and exercising belittling teaching practices. The cycle is demeaning and vicious. I have lived the experience, but most importantly I have learned. What I have gained from the experience is this – the cycle must come to an end. The practice of waiting for someone else to make a change must cease. The time for change is now.

Unfortunately, it has been late in my life when that I have realized my inability to think for myself. Thus, I have struggled to experience success when given freedom to express myself in manners of my choosing. The saying, “It is hard to teach an old dog new tricks” hits home with me! Never before have I labored with such intensity towards being successful as a student until I entered the doctoral program at Georgia Southern University. However, it was crystal clear the first night of class that my doctoral experience would be one like no other. I began to feel as if my feet were as heavy as cinderblocks, dragging me far into the depths of quicksand with no one standing on solid ground to throw me a rope.



The freedom-angst relationship is somewhat of a pharmakon – something both good and bad. The side effect of the freedom was the feeling of trepidation. There were times I thought I might succumb to panic attacks when thinking and analyzing the reading assignment for the week. Even more torment came surging through my being when I attempted to write a 20-30-page paper. I had always felt comfortable sailing the smooth seas of multiple choice, fill in the blank tests, which now are long left behind. What makes this significant dilemma is the freedom that should have been so liberating resulted in a drastic, opposite effect.

for there are human beings who lack everything, except one thing of which they have too much – human beings who are nothing but a big eye or a big mouth or a big belly or anything at all that is big. Inverse cripples. (Derrida, 1985, p. 3)

I had developed a typical example of learned helplessness in my own life and although Zarathustra did not mean for this passage to necessarily be interpreted in relation to the ethics of freedom, I see a connection between the thought and the situation in which I have found myself. I was now finding myself in uncharted water. The ‘thing’ as referenced by Zarathustra that I had too much of was the freedom to do whatever I chose with the knowledge I was acquiring. Instead of liberating me, the freedom was crippling in that I felt frozen without clear direction.

It has truly been an eye opening experience seeing how my interpretation of subject matter is considered something to be valued. It is now my job as an educator to do my part to create a line of flight movement to help others see the value of their thoughts as well. People who have been fortunate and gone through their education with teachers who allowed them freedom of thought and expression learned that “Different

readers will legitimately notice different things about a novel, both interpreting and also assessing it in varied ways” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 8).

How does this relate to the return of freedom?

Two words are of particular interest to me in this quotation. The first is “novel”. The job of an educator is to ultimately prepare the student for the outside world in which they must work, live and survive. How much study outside of the sterile confines of the school walls is rendered on the types of texts used in the classroom? I propose the amount to be minimal at best. More of what we do in our every day lives resembles that of information given in novel form. Is it ethical to prepare students with materials and texts that are different from what they will encounter for the duration of their life? The second key word in Nussbaum’s writing, which seizes my attention, is “assessing”. The fact that the students are assessing the novel implies the students’ ability to do so. In other words, the students possess the critical thinking skills needed in order to evaluate and construct opinions of their own. The freedom bestowed upon these students is to be upheld and admired by the outsider looking in. There is no one right answer students are expected to choose on a multiple-choice test.

An ethical question relating to freedom and its return is “What is the level of justice in providing something (freedom in this case) that students have no idea or ability of how to use”? To someone else this may not seem a valid statement to debate. However, when it is you feeling very incompetent you tend to return to Beauvoir’s situational manner of examining the condition at hand. I am returned to the question centering on ethics, “How do I know what to do when I don’t know what to do?” (M. Morris, personal communication, January 10, 2005). Before I realized that was the

central ethics question, I had recited it time and time again in my head, asking it of myself as well as my professors. I sat in my classes, silent like the sound of darkness that permeated my thoughts. “Silence in others signals an absence of knowledge” (Boler, 2004, p. 72). I had the knowledge, but I was afraid to vocalize my thoughts and opinions; afraid to pursue avenues of expression and learning other than what was comfortable. Professors said they understood the feelings of anxiety that were becoming a part of my daily existence as well as that of the majority of my classmates. However, I have to wonder the extent to which they truly understood unless they too have been victims of the sudden outpouring of freedom upon them and its traumatic effect. In this instance the silence is not silence at all – it is deafening instead. “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” (Thoreau, 2003, p. 13). Were the professors able to look inside of me and see the knowledge I was so afraid to share for fear of persecution?

Being afraid to reveal their personal voice while viewing others as perfect has a detrimental effect on students as they seemingly endeavor for something seen as unattainable. This fact alone can sap the freedom of students’ expression right out from under them. When in a classroom situation, feeling as if they do not have the precise answer desired by the teacher, they are incorrect. In reality, a student should be taught, in a respectful manner of course, to challenge the thoughts of others, and use that challenge as a point of learning and acquiring knowledge for themselves. Learning does not occur when the group concurs as a whole, which is what I was taught in school. “Just because you come to a consensus does not mean it is right” (M. Morris, personal communication, March 29, 2005). Instead, a person learns when they listen to others, take what is being

said, assimilate that into their own schemata and then form opinions and viewpoints of their own.

Imagine the awe and wonder felt by students who realize they do not have to be perfect. When allowed to truly delve deep into critical study of both subject matter and people who have made history and lived the lives of which they study, students come to the realization that they do not have to be perfect. The people whose lives are studied every day are not perfect. Giving students permission to go beyond the written word will help cultivate a broader sense of knowledge both of content and of the way the world works. Students themselves will then experience a deeper level of freedom as they see that the scholars they admire were not always without fault. Perhaps I have lived a sheltered life and am guilty of being somewhat naïve, but in reading *Writing on Drugs (1999)* it seemed that most of the people discussed in the text took drugs to stimulate their thinking. Students like myself have viewed literature by the great novelists, poets and playwrights such as Hemingway and others with awe as we read the beauty of their words and language. Little did I know their minds were enhanced from drugs induced into their bodies. Freedom to see these authors as less than perfect intellectuals will allow students to feel as if they can experiment with the ways in which they convey the knowledge they are acquiring without feeling inferior.

#### The Joy of Surviving the Cycle

I consider myself to be a survivor; not a hero or martyr, but a survivor. Although I wish to take my newfound knowledge and insight into teaching and learning and spread the wealth throughout all of the courses I teach I do not feel as if I am worthy of honor merely because I have reached the point where I am today.

As I exercise my ability to think, the actual word 'survivor' brings a couple of images immediately to mind. The first, of course is the television reality series, *Survivor* in which contestants are stranded in a remote location to endure with only a minimal amount of supplies. Students, like the contestants of this reality show are often survivors within the confines of the classroom, which may seem quite remote in and of itself. When I see myself in this manner, I feel as if I have finally won the prize. Levinas (1982) in referring to reading states, "I entered into that reading, at first very difficult, with much diligence but also with much perseverance, and without a guide" (p. 29-30). No, the prize is not a million dollars, nor will my ceaseless perseverance ever bring me that sort of wealth. What I have won, however, is the ability to be me; the ability to think for myself, not only creatively, but more importantly for me, I have learned to think critically. The professors with whom I have studied have not guided each stroke of the keys, but have allowed me to instead, discover on my own. I faced the challenge of the doctoral program and have risen to the occasion. "All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant" (Thoreau, 2003, p. 13). Like the ultimate winner from each season of *Survivor*, I have witnessed miracle after miracle in my voyage to overcome adversity. I am emerging the victor even stronger because of the process.

The second image that comes to mind when thinking about survival is the picture of a person who has endured and triumphed over illness. Much like my angst felt upon the realization of the issues my inability to think was suddenly a problem similar to the experiences of a person diagnosed with a serious illness often fears the unknown and/or questions what to do next. I have recently experienced such fear and anxiety as I stand

by a friend who has been diagnosed with cancer. Treatment for the problem is often intimidating, but yet it is necessary in order to improve and/or survive.

“Will you be a reader, a student merely or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity” (Thoreau, 2003, p. 90). I have moved beyond being merely the receiver of information; no longer a student without direction. The process of coursework I have braved has served as my therapy for moving forward, improving my condition and forging into the future. There were times I felt at a loss, I was discouraged and depressed because I did not think I would survive and complete the program. However I have fought diligently to surge ahead and have ultimately triumphed in the end. Derrida (1985) speaks on academic freedom and states, “the freedom of which I am capable and which I want to preserve” (p. 4) as he advocates embracing freedom in learning. I now realize that I am increasingly proficient in accepting the freedom and giving it a permanent role in my life. I am recovering from the lowest depths, continuing to work through the healing and succeeding.

In my learning cycle, I have come to the realization that many of the most important issues students face and deal with today are not addressed in the classroom. As argued previously, I intuit this to be unethical. Teachers must consider “the cost of their instructional choices” (Boler, 2004, p. xxiii). Without providing students with what they need to understand and have meaningful dialogue with other students and/or people in general, teachers are putting students at a handicap. Such was what I experienced at one time. Teachers must ask themselves if they wish

to create dialogue, wherever it might lead, or to foster dialogues oriented only to specific desired ends? To challenge and change the views of dominant groups, or

to strengthen solidarity and promote transformative action on behalf of the disempowered? To educate toward the status of greater knowledge and understanding (which includes understanding the good and the bad, the politically progressive and the retrograde), or to promulgate specific values and attitudes which the socially committed educator believes will make society a better and more just place (p. xxiii)?

Why have I chosen to examine freedom in education as I have experienced it? The more I learn the more I realize there was great error in the instruction I received. The saying, “You are more likely to teach how you were taught than you are likely to teach how you were taught to teach,” has an alarming meaning now that I openly see the difference between the two. I wish to supercede that declaration. It is unethical for me to continue studying while simultaneously preparing future educators in deskilling manners in order to be efficient or to prepare them for a test. Doing that would make me a hypocrite. Who believes a hypocrite? Who wants to read the works of an author who only talks the talk but does not walk the walk? As Thoreau (2003) states,

There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet do nothing to put an end to them . . . who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free-trade . . . they hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. (p. 270)

Admittedly just as the people whom Thoreau is referring, I struggle with hypocrisy in many areas of my life both related and unrelated to curriculum and education. However, I find it ironic, but yet not coincidental that my study and interest in freedom of learning is very much in line with ethics and related to hypocritical issues.

Hegel suggests an education that is designed to challenge the dependent consciousness that characterizes the slave at the beginning of its long road to freedom – the sense that one is unable to think or act for oneself, that one is unworthy of being treated with respect, that one is doomed to suffer in silence (Carlson, 2002, p.11).

I will not merely talk of freeing enslaved students, but will work earnestly to allow freedom to seep into their classrooms. No longer will I live as a victim of deskilling publishing companies. I pledge to diligently encourage the teacher candidates in my classes to become independent thinkers, challengers of society's questions and traditional beliefs related to education. In doing so, the cycle may be broken and the teacher candidates may then initiate their own lines of flight and begin to change the course of education in a positive manner. "Kant defined emancipation as the process of civic maturation that provides individuals with the self-confidence to use their own reason and understanding" (Borradori, 2003, p. 45). I am now on the right path. I am making the jump towards true freedom.



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