

The Counterstory and the Promise of Collaborative Compassion in Education

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Gause, C. P., Okun, T., Chapman, D., Nix-Stevenson, D., Stalnaker, A.(2007).The Counterstory and the promise of collaborative compassion in education. In David C. Thompson and Faith E. Crampton (Eds.), *Fostering compassion and understanding across borders: An international dialogue on the future of educational leadership*. UCEA Conference Proceedings for convention 2007.

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Article:

The current socio-cultural political climate in the United States, the renewing of the Patriot Act, disaster relief or the lack thereof, the ongoing threat of terrorism and the corroding of essential civil liberties, the rise in materialism and environmental destruction, the demonization of those in poverty, and the privatization of a free public education force us to ask the following question: What is the promise and purpose of a democratic education?

Our national discussion about education is currently reduced to issues of testing and the achievement gap. We do not ask this larger question as we stay mired in the assumption that the purpose of education is production – of skilled workers, committed consumers – within an ethos of progress, more, better where the bloodshed and violence attached to such “progress” is at best deplored, at worst sanctioned.

This narrow discussion is our country’s master narrative, acting “to universalize and cast dialogues in binary, contrasting categories that support the maintenance of dominant groups. A master narrative is a script that specifies how some social processes are carried out” (Stanley, 2007). The master narrative serves to keep our focus on that which serves entrenched power, reinforcing it in unseen but powerful ways.

Counter stories disrupt the flow and logic of master narratives, allowing us to recognize our own complicity in the reproduction of master narratives while freeing us up to take action (Lawless, 2003). Counter stories help us develop multiple and often conflicting models of understanding social and cultural identities in ways that support our ability to hold complexity and broaden our perspective of the possible.

The counter stories to a narrowly focused master narrative about testing and achievement are those that push us towards the larger question. For example, many credible voices today are predicting an approaching global catastrophe in the 21st Century. Chalmers Johnson (2007), in his book, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*, makes a strong case for his prediction of the future bankruptcy of America. He bases this belief in his argument that one cannot have a democracy at home and an empire abroad because empire requires a buildup of centralized power antithetical to democracy. Johnson points to two historical examples: the ancient Romans and the 20th Century English. The Romans decided to give up their democracy to pursue their dreams of empire. The English, on the other hand, gave up their empire to keep their democracy (even though the decision was not altogether theirs). He suggests that Americans are now faced with a similar choice.

The centerpiece of our democracy is capitalism, the right to profit. In our national psyche, we have come to assume that the two are interdependent, synonymous. In fact, separately and together they present their own challenges. Capitalism’s prioritization of profit and the substitution of consumerism and materialism for relationship and love fuel our tendency to denial, as we become addicted to our domination while simultaneously ignoring the price that we pay for it. Mark Matousek notes that, in a society where the underlying belief is that more is better, we seem unable to recognize that “once our basic needs are met, the

very opposite seems to be true” (2007, p. 54). He makes a link between “our isolated, overstuffed homes and a breakdown in community – the unseen price of cheap goods and big lives” (Matousek, 2007, p. 57).

Cornel West points to how (2004, p. 9), “we have built up uncontested military might, undeniable cultural power, and transnational corporate and financial hegemony – yet with a huge trade deficit, budget deficit, and intensifying class, racial, religious, and ideological warfare at home.” To remain blind to the consequences is a requirement for empire building if we are to continue our reckless disregard of the impact of our collective behavior on the globe. To open our eyes, to see, would lead us to question the very paradigm upon which unfettered capitalism depends, the paradigm that has us believing that the right to profit is more inalienable than any human needs or rights.

As a result, blindness becomes essential to the dominant story of what it means to be a U.S. citizen. Inherent in this master narrative is the very act of defining “us” in ways that claim superiority over an opposite and increasingly threatening “them.” In fact, we seem to feel that we cannot truly be “us” unless we can demonstrate our difference from and superiority to “them.” Grounding ourselves in this worldview gives us the illusion of security, a sense of belonging, connectedness, identity, safety from the unknown. While this worldview may signal a deep and legitimate hunger for freedom from chaos and fear, it manifests on our physical and psychological landscape as hostility to complexity, a narrow understanding of moral choice, and a dogged insistence on its own validity.

This us versus them ideology is ironically reinforced within the confines of majority rules democracy. John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, worried that, “pure democracy cannot subsist long nor be carried far into the departments of state – it is very subject to caprice and the madness of popular rage,” making the point that democracy is a dictatorship of the majority who need not give any rights at all to the losing minority. The practice of democracy as majority rules reinforces this “us/them” binary, where one group wins while the other loses.

Today this win/lose “democracy” is witness to the expansion of executive power to unprecedented levels, a foreign policy based on pre-emptive strikes, spying on American citizens e-mails and phone calls, and a never ending “War on Terrorism,” which former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan now admits is intended to control material resources. Johnson (2007) predicts that the U.S. empire will implode, much like the Roman Empire did, from the exorbitant costs of pursuing such goals.

Added to this dire warning are those who caution a catastrophic scenario of environmental devastation. In 1992, the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a *World Scientists Warning to Humanity* signed by 1700 scientists including every living Nobel Prize winner at the time. This statement gave blunt notice that “many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know.... A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated.”

In the 15 years since this warning was issued we have only recently found the intellectual will to admit the problem, and then only weakly. We have yet to find the political will to change our behavior. We are again on familiar ground tread by other peoples; Jared Diamond in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Succeed or Fail* suggests that we face a fate similar to that of Easter Island in 1200 A.D. His study of societies ranging from the Mayan Empire to modern China led him to distill a unified theory about why societies fail or succeed. Of the five factors that he identified as contributors to collapse, one, a society’s response to its environmental problems, is an inevitable predictor of demise. The salient point is that this response to environmental problems is completely within our control; in other words, a society can choose to fail.

Why, given our position as the richest, most powerful nation on earth, would we choose to fail? And what is the role of education in our collective denial of our impulse to fail?

A CLOSER LOOK

During this era of market competition, globalization and educational accountability, democratic education has been reduced to the ability to achieve academic standards in the assumption that these standards indicate an ability to successfully acquire material goods, wealth, and power. This ability to acquire is our measuring stick; we are not institutionally interested in critiquing the consequences of inequity, greed, and inequality. Instead, we prefer to focus on or at least give the illusion of focusing on, any barriers to such acquisition.

While much of the public is not conversant with the specifics of the No Child Left Behind legislation, nearly everyone is familiar with the overall goal of the act: that all students regardless of ethnicity, income or educational status demonstrate proficiency in reading and math based on annual standardized tests. In fact, NCLB was introduced in 2001 as a revision to Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which focused on improving educational services to the nation's disadvantaged students. This revision holds schools and school systems accountable for student achievement on standardized tests and applies sanctions when these targets, expressed as Adequate Yearly Progress, are not met by students in each and every subgroup.

To be sure, very few educators would argue against the high expectations for all students implicit in NCLB or the aim of closing the academic achievement gap between white students and students of color. If we look at its history, though, we find that NCLB was initiated during Bush's campaign to win the White House. While there has been much debate as to whether NCLB represents and protects the interests of traditionally underrepresented students, we suggest that NCLB is the wolf in sheep's clothing, primarily serving the interests and industries that support Bush's agenda while masquerading as an effort to help all students achieve.

For one, the main beneficiaries of NCLB are the companies that produce standardized tests, textbooks, and curriculum resources, contractors of SES tutoring, and even the experts whose claims carry the weight of scientifically based research.

Second, NCLB is being implemented to serve a small representative group rather than the majority of the population. For example, the technical details of the legislation include how many students make a subgroup, how one can meet targets via safe harbor or a confidence interval, what accommodations are acceptable for students, test exemptions for ESL students, and mandates and sanctions when targets are not met (choice, SES, restructuring); local policies determining needs for improvement are absent. No mechanisms have been provided for teachers, students, and parents to have a voice in how to measure student achievement and school improvement, much less how to define it.

Third, through this accountability plan, students are to give back the mandated curriculum in the form of correctly marked multiple choice answers rather than constructing their own knowledge or even demonstrating mastery through open ended responses. NCLB promotes the view that teacher is the authority on content within the classroom, and that state and federal bureaucrats are the authority on what constitutes worthy knowledge. We would contend that a truly democratic education would position the teacher as co-learners engaged in meaningful joint inquiry, and that the role of the state and federal bureaucracy is to lay the groundwork for students to personalize learning targets. Instead, the content of the tests and curriculum reflect the concerns of an institution committed to the master narrative while abandoning any attempt to ask the larger questions.

Finally, and perhaps most instructive, while NCLB states an aim of helping disadvantaged students by closing the achievement gap, the standard is set by and for white students. Rather than protecting the rights and needs of underrepresented groups through this legislation, these groups are often further blamed for their failure to catch up to a standard set by and for those who, however well intentioned, use themselves as the standard for excellence. Explanations for failure such as lack of effort and parental involvement, and general chaos in the home further a deficit view of these students. The knowledge and skills that these students do possess is not validated unless it overlaps with that content which is valued and accepted on the single test. Rather than

protecting the interests and rights of those who have historically and institutionally been disenfranchised, NCLB replicates the status quo with the winners and losers the same as ever before.

The effect of high stakes tests with the threat of sanctions undermines the very instructional strategies that we know serve disadvantaged students. High quality instruction is less likely to occur because teachers are held responsible for ensuring student scores on a single test rather than for meeting individual student needs. As a result, NCLB draws our attention away from the social and economic inequities that exist within the education system to focus on individual scores and AYP targets. And when scores are posted, the winners can again wonder why the disadvantaged members could not seem to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This is how the master narrative serves to reiterate longstanding discriminatory practice in the name of equity while ignoring the growing evidence of the catastrophic consequences of such duplicity.

WE CAN CHOOSE ANOTHER WAY

According to Hopkins (1997) education is considered to be the most accessible means for achieving social, political, economic, and cultural liberation in the United States. This traditionalist view accepts the idea that public schools are vehicles of democracy and social and individual mobility. Educators and laypersons alike believe that public schools are the major mechanism for development of a democratic and egalitarian society. Gutmann and Thompson (1996) posit:

In any effort to make democracy more deliberative, the single most important institution outside government is the educational system. To prepare their students for citizenship, schools must go beyond teaching literacy and numeracy, though both are of course prerequisites for deliberating about public problems. Schools should aim to develop their students' capacities to understand different perspectives, communicate their understandings to other people, and engage in the give-and-take of moral argument with a view to making mutually acceptable decisions. These goals, which entail cultivating moral character and intellectual skills at the same time, are likely to require some significant changes in traditional civic education, which has neglected teaching this kind of moral reasoning about politics. (p. 359)

Democratic education involves educators empowering students to engage in free and open discourse, and offering consistent opportunities for students to engage in inquiry, reflection, critique, and ultimately, social transformation (Knight and Pearl, 2000; hooks, 2003; Nagda, Gurin, and Lopez, 2003).

As educators/activists/collaborators, we face a defining choice. We can either support the master narrative or work to create a counter narrative, reinforce the assumptions of empire or open ourselves to the possibility of earth community. Regardless of the language we employ to frame the choice, the point is this – we have the power to choose a terminal crisis or an epic opportunity.

Not to be taken lightly, choosing where we sit in relationship to the master stor(ies) greatly impacts our ability to re(imagine) our schools as sites of transformation and possibility. CambronMcCabe & McCarthy (2005) challenge educators to consider schools as living systems that can be envisaged through a social justice framework. As such, they state:

Within a social justice context, school leaders are being called on to take up the role of transformative intellectuals, public intellectuals, or critical intellectuals – that is, individuals who engage in critical analysis of conditions that have perpetuated historical inequities in schools and who work to change institutional structures and culture. (p. 202)

If school leaders are to (re)imagine schools, then we must advocate for social justice and become what Marshall & Oliva (2006, p. 22) characterize as Bridge People. Most importantly, school leaders must become rhizomatic.

The rhizome – a metaphor of ‘lateral’ logic – implies a world that is dynamic, ever-changing and always ‘becoming’ in a never-ending process. Building from the philosophical and cultural theories of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), rhizoanalysis uses the contrast between rhizome (e.g. ginger, iris, and agapanthus) and tree as a metaphor of the contrast between two forms of logic. The tree’s linear structure – from roots through the trunk to the branches – is a metaphor of the fixed, determining and linear logic that explains things in terms of cause and effect relationships. The rhizome’s contrasting ‘lateral’ structure – a collection of mutually dependent ‘roots’ and ‘shoots’ – is a metaphor of a dynamic, flexible and ‘lateral’ logic that encompasses change, complexity and heterogeneity. A rhizome is never finished; it is always ‘becoming’ through crossovers between offshoots, through expansions of one form of growth into another and through the death and decomposition of outdated elements. A particular rhizoanalysis, such as our identities as educators, is never fixed and final, but is always becoming. One meaning about who we are expands into another; some meanings become outdated and new meanings shoot forth. From a ‘rhizomatic’ perspective, the development of learners in educational communities requires more complex explanations than the cause-and-effect relationships that currently grip our educational institutions.

Accordingly, learners in educational settings prosper from the example of rhizomatic educators who engage in “critical complex teaching (Kincheloe, 2004).” In this context, Kincheloe describes these individuals in the following manner:

They alert individuals to the demands of democratic citizenship that require the lifelong pursuit of learning. In such a context no teacher, no concerned citizen is ever fully educated; they are always “in process,” waiting for the next learning experience. As they claim and occupy such an important socio-political role, critical complex teachers dismantle the Berlin wall that separates educational policy from practice. (2004, p. 52)

A requisite for ‘becoming’ an educator who utilizes Kincheloe’s critical complex epistemology is a willingness to ask questions like:

What are we doing? Why are we doing it? What do we value? Why do we value what we do? How are our values evident or not evident in our practice? How is what we’re doing affecting all students? Is what we’re doing privileging one group over another? Is what we’re doing working for all students, why or why not? Are our practices transparent? Is our leadership transparent? (CambronMcCabe & McCarthy, 2005, p. 215)

THE CHALLENGES OF A NEW APPROACH

How do we become rhizomatic in our approach to education? How do we take on a master narrative that is bringing us to the brink of social, economic, and spiritual disaster? The counter narrative needed today is one that underscores the reality that our cultural commitment to unsustainable profit, corporate environmental destruction, and a foreign policy predicated on controlling people and resources are creating conditions which make us all vulnerable, and the historically powerless disproportionately vulnerable.

The master narrative operates to insure that counter stories remain isolated and disconnected; as a result, any potential alliance to combat the current logics and narratives would also require radically changing each group’s own narratives. For example, historically disenfranchised communities have viewed the solutions to their own inequity in terms of, “How do we get *in* to the American Dream?” This question, which is a different version of the assumption underlying No Child Left Behind, keeps people and communities divided from each other because the unstated assumption is how there is only so much room and if some are let in, others must be kept out. At this point in history, the questions of justice and peace require us all to ask, “How do we get *out* of the American Dream?”

Changing these narratives will take a monumental shift in consciousness. But unbelievably difficult obstacles have been surmounted before. And ironically, our ability to achieve a shift in consciousness requires us to

embrace that which we have been taught to reject. Jewish philosopher Eugene Levinas said, “I am saved by the critique that comes from the Other.”

What seems clear to us is that right now we must form alliances with each other and other groups who share and/or recognize our global vulnerability. We are instructed by alliances from our past; the alliance, for example between the Jewish and African-American communities that led one of the great progressive movements in the U.S. in the 1950’s and the 1960’s. These two communities have consistently shown a leaning to a politics of equity, justice, and inclusion that exists in both groups. Polls show that they expect more of each other and more from themselves in recognizing their shared oppression. They also recognize how short they have often come from realizing these expectations (Greenberg, 2006).

We cannot learn from history, however, if we only view it through a romantic haze. No group is monolithic and no alliance is monolithic either. We can learn from the serious points of tension that existed concerning the boundaries of mutual support and self-interest -- tensions about the role of courts, vigilante groups, civil disobedience, media and education, about accusations of paternalism, Jewish exploitation of Blacks and Black anti-Semitism, tensions across the two groups and within each community as well.

We see these tensions in education as well. For example, the experience of an African American male academician bring a critical consciousness to his classroom will find many of the critical perspectives regarding the intersections of race, class, and gender affront the white Southern Christian values my students hold near and dear. The expectation is for all in the academy to operate out of false civility and behave as if these values should not be critiqued and/or interrogated, but honored and celebrated regardless of how they assault the plurality of values students bring into public schools daily. We know from both firsthand experience and anecdotal sharing off colleagues that any faculty member of color, regardless of credentials, ideological orientation and instructional style faces students who implicitly and explicitly challenge professorial authority, scholarship, intellect, and political agenda (Antonio, 2003; Baez, 2003; Bonner, 2004; Hamilton, 2002; Lawrence, 1995; Tate, 1994; Thomas, 2001). After speaking truth to power in many of our dialogic encounters, students will label their teachers with descriptors such as “the angry black man” or “Dr. Thug,” while at the same time those of us who are white will teach the very same subject matter without facing these epithets.

If we continue to learn from our history, we note how a powerful narrative in the 1940’s made space for two disparate groups to ally with each other across all the tensions; that narrative was Anti-Nazism (Greenberg, 2006). As is often the case, an understanding of a common enemy can bring groups together. Clearly, Jews had a direct self-interest in espousing anti-Nazism. African Americans found it effective to link anti-Nazi rhetoric with their own domestic oppression. Both groups called on America to live to its highest ideals for the next three decades.

We certainly have a common enemy now, and the opportunity that this enemy provides is that it supercedes national, ethnic, and identity boundaries. Today we face the opportunity to shift to a life-sustaining perspective. Gloria Anzaldœa refers to this shift in consciousness as *conocimiento* (Anzaldœa, 2002). To achieve this shift, we must embrace a “critical complex teaching epistemology” in which educators engage the public in developing and scrutinizing complex questions like: “What are the tacit agreements that create obscene wealth for a few, while progressively impoverishing the rest of humanity? and What interlocking systems of power causes indenture to us while simultaneously creating an economy that uses the Earth as house and sewer? (Macy, 2001).”

David Korten, in his book “The Great Turning” (2006), talks about three dimensions of a shift in consciousness: cultural, economic, and political. A shift to life begins with a cultural and spiritual awakening – a turning in cultural values from money and material excess to life and spiritual fulfillment, from a belief in our limitations to a belief in our possibilities, and from fearing our difference to rejoicing in our diversity. It requires that we reframe the cultural stories by which we define our human nature, purpose, and possibilities. The values shift of the cultural turning leads us to redefine wealth – to measure it by the health of our families, communities,

and natural environment. It leads us from policies that raise those at the top to policies that raise those at the bottom, from hoarding to sharing, from concentrated to distributed ownership, and from the right of ownership to the responsibilities of stewardship. The economic turning creates the necessary conditions for a turn from a one-dollar, one-vote democracy, from passive to active citizenship, from competition for individual advantage to cooperation for mutual advantage, from retributive justice to restorative justice, and from social order by coercion to social order by mutual responsibility and accountability.

THE PROMISE OF THE COLLABORATIVE COUNTERSTORY

If the master narrative reinforces our attachment to an ideology of domination and fear of the other, we can address our addictive desires and conditioned fear by choosing love. As bell hooks says (2000, p. 93), “the choice to love is a choice to connect – to find ourselves in the other.” hooks argues that “domination cannot exist in any social situation where a love ethic prevails” (p. 98) because we do not wish to dominate those who we truly love. If we are to be fueled by our historical and precious commitment to democracy, then we must heed Cornel West who instructs (2004, p. 16) that the democratic impulse is fueled by the “prophetic commitment to justice,” which inherently rejects tribal or national loyalties in favor of an ethic of love.

To love ourselves well, to love each other well requires that we see ourselves in our full humanity, across the identities that are so easily manipulated by those who aspire to domination and control. We must see this love practice as an unfinished project, a continuous struggle, a rhizomatic project.

We must also commit to shifting our students from a traditionalist view of education and democracy to one that is radical and transformative. We can do this by promoting environments which require students to engage in independent thinking, motivate them to take ownership of their learning process, and providing opportunities for rigorous intellectual study and committed activism that moves beyond arriving at the “right” answers.

How does this translate in our daily life as educators? If we return to our example of No Child Left Behind, we can draw from the example of how one North Carolina school district is attempting their own version of “A Great Turning” within the constraints of this legislation. Iterating a commitment to democracy, the district has identified three central democratic approaches (Sleeter, 2007) relevant to the shift in the district’s approach to school improvement. These include: equality among people for governance, citizen wisdom based on capacity to reason and judge, and active debate to reason through uncertainties. Whereas school improvement has historically failed to reflect democratic engagement, the commonly shared experience of uncertainty about how to effectively reach and teach all students has led to meaningful and inclusive dialogue among teachers, administrators, board members, parents and other members of the community.

As teachers, we can inspire our students to become more conscious of the human condition. We can orient our teaching and practice toward a larger social vision and sustainable change, not simply, or only, organizational goals. Our teaching can become both a form of protest and love. We situate our teaching in our duty and responsibility to encourage a collective effort to transform our environment, institutions, communities, neighborhoods, and schools into arenas where we learn to become agents of democracy and social justice.

Like the astronauts whose unique breathtaking views of the earth globe led them to a spiritual understanding of our interconnectedness, we must learn to sit in the space that holds the tension of our specific identities and our global identity, requiring an embrace of both rather than a rejection of either. Parker Palmer (2004, p. 174) describes this as learning to stand in the “tragic gap,” “learning to hold the tension of opposites, trusting that the tension itself will pull our hearts and minds open to a third way of thinking and acting.” He points out that all those known for their commitment to justice and love – his list includes the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, Nelson Mandela, and more -- have spent time in this gap, “torn between the world’s reality and a vision of human possibility” (p. 179).

While the predominant politic of this country does not support either the practice of seeing the essential humanity each in the other or an ethic of love, a vision unstated has no chance at all. We believe that our

communities feel bone tired of divisive and demeaning rhetoric; they, we yearn for a different way, a “collective desire to return to love” (hooks, 2000, p. 227). The collective spirit of our oneness should speak to the very strength of our humanity and through our counter stories we can vision and live democracy. At the root of education is the promise of a better future and what better promise could we make to each other than a commitment to meet the challenges inherent in moving from a landscape of mechanistic and imperialistic nation states controlled by transnational consumerism to disruptive rhizomatic beings of peace, love and hope.

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