

PEDAGOGY

A Physical Educators Use of Freirian Praxis for Critical Reflection

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Abstract

Reflection is a vital component of quality teaching. It is supported and practiced in teacher preparation programs and furthered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, whereas critical reflection with particular emphasis on the internal schema of the practitioner has not been focused on much and training within teacher preparation programs and/or in the professional setting has been negligible. Three vignettes are shared to highlight pinnacle moments of internal dissonance that evoked the need for critical reflection. Particular attention was paid to the internal struggle of the teacher and decisions made or not made to highlight the search for equilibrium and wholeness of teacher and self. The purpose of this article was to support the intentional act of critical reflection through praxis as a lifelong journey to enrich the lives of educators and further transform their worlds in which they exist and intersect.

As a beginning elementary physical education teacher, I questioned my practice on many occasions and felt uncomfortable in my own skin. I did not like who I was as a teacher and felt I did not have a sense of fidelity between my conscience, heart, and craft. The conflict that existed between internal self and external pedagogical practice caused a great deal of cognitive dissonance. Even

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though I was aware of these feelings, I felt impotent in my efforts to correct them, as I was unsure of the source of conflict and/or how to restore myself as a whole teacher with an undivided self. In my attempt to name and identify the cause of dissonance, I spent many hours reflecting, dialoguing with trusted colleagues, immersing myself in literature, and sifting through the internal structures of my soul. From this cycle of deliberate reflective action emerged what would become my greatest source of personal growth as a human and teacher, helping transform my pedagogical practice and making whole my divided self. This was the genesis of my emergent critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) serving as a new pair of glasses through which I viewed the world, thus spawning what has become a lifelong praxical journey (Keller, 2006).

Entering the arena of education, a teacher is an amalgamation of bundled lived experiences, conscious and unconscious, forming the internal self and identity that becomes external when one begins the transaction of teaching and learning (Clarke, 2009; Palmer, 2007). Palmer (2007) stated, “We teach who we are” (p.1), insisting that teachers should not divorce their internal self from their teacher self once they enter the classroom. If they do, they are in essence divided and begin to lose heart as teachers and become discouraged and unfulfilled from their work, rendering themselves ineffective teachers, unable to connect to students. Teacher preparation programs and further professional development provide little or no attention to a teacher’s internal self, and wholeness of identity is ignored (Palmer, 2007). As the lens through which educators view the world, the internal self must be explored, critiqued, evaluated, analyzed, healed if needed, and deeply understood, thus providing the space for truth to emerge in pedagogical practice.

Critical Reflection Through Praxis

According to Piaget (1972), humans are engaged in a constant interaction and interrelation with their environment by interpreting the environment and then relating it back to their internal schema or cognitive structures. When tension exists between the external interpretation and the internal schema, disequilibrium and dissonance occur (Piaget, 1972). In the effort to seek equilibrium, space is created for critical reflection (Freire, 1970; Piaget, 1972). Critical reflections do not happen in a vacuum, and the process takes time. Dialogue during critical reflection is vital and may occur through modes such as digging into literature, talking with trusted colleagues, or exploring the internal self (Bakhtin, 1977; Mead, 1934).

Freire (1970) called this method of critical reflection praxis, and he described it as a continual process that is cyclical and ongoing, consisting of naming or identifying the problem or situation causing dissonance, critically reflecting upon it, and then acting to change or challenge the given situation. This process is fluid, dynamic, and perpetual as people grow and change through every moment of their existence, whereas if they critically reflect, they prompt a praxical journey stimulating critical engagement and transforming action (Freire, 1970, 1974; Keller, 2006; Mead, 1934).

Reflection has long been held as a core to quality teaching and is taught, supported, and practiced in teacher preparation programs and further promoted by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (n.d.-a, n.d.-b). The challenge for teachers is to strive for critical engagement in their world and employ a personal praxical journey, exploring the internal infrastructure of self and gaining an understanding of how the internal impacts the external in the transaction of teaching and learning. Furthermore, teachers become the people students need and deserve, a teacher that is whole.

To open a space for evaluation and reflection, I use experiences from my teaching practice as vignettes. Each vignette will reveal instances that prompted dissonance, promoted praxis, and spurred critical engagement that culminated in transformed teaching practice.

My Critical Reflections

First Vignette

The following vignette is an example of a teaching moment that prompted years of dissonance and internal chaos. It describes a moment during the measuring of height and weight for body mass index (BMI) data collection of a mixed-gender fifth grade physical education class.

It was time for our fall fitness test and the day for this particular fifth grade class to perform height and weight measurements to gauge body mass index (BMI). For student confidentiality and self-preservation, I measured students behind a curtain in the classroom, not visible to other students. Performing the task in this manner was standard practice. I believed this not only would fulfill my requirements of maintaining confidential student records but also be a thoughtful, nurturing, and conscientious teaching practice. I thought this was the best practice for fulfilling my assessment and performing the expected duties of a quality physical educator. This was a

typical day of fitness assessment in my classroom; students were engaged and all was going well. I was working through a fifth grade class roster and the next name up to be called was one of my “tough” boys. He was always happy to be in physical education where he could be successful and display his athletic prowess. However, this day was different. Behind the curtain I asked him to step on the scale to be weighed, and he refused with big crocodile tears pouring down his face. Without asking, I knew what was wrong; he did not want to be weighed. This young man, although perceived as a tough, confident, and competent physical education student, was overweight, and his pain and insecurity I had previously failed to acknowledge bubbled to the surface before my eyes.

In this moment, I realized that I could inflict harm as a teacher by highlighting a source of pain in my students’ lives. To this date, I prided myself in creating an emotionally and physically safe environment in my class, yet I had apparently been causing harm. I fought back my tears as I empathized deeply with my student and assured him we did not have to weigh him and attempted to comfort him with words of kindness and care. Although this moment was disturbing and upsetting, I ignored my inner voice and self and proceeded with the day’s plan and finished my BMI data collection with the remaining 380 students.

Although ideally I would rather have not gained insights through students’ potential harm or miseducative experiences, this event sparked a praxical journey of critical self-reflection, critical dialogue, and transformative action. This was a clear example of strife between the internal self and the external teaching practice. Why did I ignore my heart and move forward with what I knew at that moment to be harmful and miseducative to many of my students? Collecting BMI data was a standard and required procedure throughout the district where I was teaching at the time. The data were used in informing practice, providing detailed information to parents about their child’s physical fitness and health, and demonstrating needs analysis for grants. Was I valuing program goals and outcomes more than the individual students? The answer I concluded was not an easy yes or no, but a paradigm shift in the way I thought about BMI and, more important, the way I collected the information.

Following that incident, I changed the discussion students and I had surrounding BMI concerning its implications and value. I provided my students with more information about the importance of BMI and how it may help individuals make better, informed decisions about their health. I also allowed students to opt out from be-

ing weighed or measured. Wiesel (1992) stated, “We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph” (p. ix). This small shift in practice supported my belief in an individualized education for my students and my ability to see the universe they bring to the classroom. Another change I made was increased and quality communication with parents, to garner their feedback, insight, encouragement, and/or assistance. This conflict and subsequent praxical journey helped transform much of my practice around assessment, evaluation, data collection, relationships with students, and my partnership with parents.

Second Vignette

The second vignette is an example of my naïveté about following institutional culture and disregarding the fidelity between practice and self. When I was a young teacher, I desperately wanted to fit in, be positively perceived by my peers, and follow the culture of the school. Although I was correct in my desire to become a quality teacher, this vignette describes an aspect of my journey to find myself as a teacher.

When I was a first-year teacher, my classroom management and transition procedures were lacking. In the absence of other possibilities, I had no choice but to adopt the practices I saw and heard around me. It was a daily experiment to find what worked best with my students. I followed the example of more seasoned teachers in my building and built on my experiences as a student. Without the sophistication (critical thinking) necessary to discern what quality practice looked like or the wisdom to realize what I needed, I attempted to mimic colleagues’ methods who were lauded for their “control” of students and their classrooms. I quickly found I was only talking down to my students, treating them as objects to be controlled and manipulated, and not treating them with respect. I chose the most rigid of practices to emulate given that was the prevalent culture in the school, as students with strict teachers’ seemed well behaved and disciplined and seemed to exhibit self-control.

This poor choice played out for me at the end of a long day with a first grade class as I attempted to line them up and take them back to their classroom. I had lost my patience with first graders. They were being normal first graders and doing what was natural by moving and playing. I needed and wanted them to line up and had directed them to do this several times, and since they would not, could

not, comply, I began to escalate my tone of voice, ultimately yelling at them and attempting to shame them for their “misbehavior.” Of course, this did not change the behavior of my first graders. My behavior only made theirs worse.

This situation immediately struck a negative chord in my soul; I felt terrible and knew something must change. Thus, my uncomfortable dissonance sparked a praxical journey and exploration into my internal self to examine my actions and determine how to transform them to become a whole teacher once again. Ashamed of my small amount of patience and yelling at first graders, I knew I needed to figure out how to use management techniques that fit my personality, my students’ needs, and the unique needs of my physical education class. I knew talking down to students and yelling at them was inappropriate behavior for a teacher. Yet, this was a common occurrence with several colleagues with whom I worked and was considered acceptable behavior within the culture of the school. Although culture of strict teacher control compelled my initial choices in classroom management, I felt this was wrong for my students, and it never settled with my identity as a person and teacher. I questioned why I would choose actions inherently incongruent with my personal and professional ethics and at odds with my disposition.

During winter break, I reread texts from college courses, explored professional journals, talked with quality veteran educators, and pondered my situation. I decided either I was going to get better or I did not need to teach. Luckily, this voyage of discovery led to a drastic modification in the way I interacted and dialogued with students and a positive shift in my classroom management methods. I began seeing my students as human beings full of experiences with their own universes just waiting to be opened and explored. I began treating my students not as objects to be manipulated but as young people who deserved a whole teacher, fully human with all that being human entails, but more important, they deserved my respect, to be treated with dignity, and for me to truly see them as unique individuals. Although it did not happen overnight and took time to work out, these tenets became the tone of our shared learning environment.

Third Vignette

The third vignette is an example of how my curricular choices and the emphasis I place on them as a teacher had a negative impact on my students. Fitness testing was a school district and program requirement, which I performed twice a year (fall and spring) with

my students. I chose for my students to perform the mile run. This curricular choice proved to be a poor choice with unintended consequences that had a negative impact on my students.

It was spring and time to perform the second round of fitness tests, which for most students did not equate into fun or enjoyable physical education. This particular day involved the mile run. Since it was the spring, I expected that everyone would perform better on the mile run. As the third grade class walked outside to run their six laps around the track, I situated myself with stopwatch in hand and reviewed aloud the scores from the fall, imploring everyone to do their “personal best.” As students lined up for the run, I was fully aware that only two or three would successfully run all six laps and that many would walk even though they were being timed. Yet I reminded students to pace themselves and to do their “personal best.”

The obesity rate for this class was around 33%, and two students had asthma as well, but this did not stop me from strongly urging them to do their “personal best.” I knew that these students would feel compelled by peer pressure to fulfill my expectation and compete with one another even if they should not. I blew the whistle to start the timed run, and the students ran as hard as they could, but this did not last long. One student fell and scratched her knees about 25 yards into the run, and others struggled to finish the run even walking. The students with asthma picked up their inhalers and walked with them in hand, and just as I predicted, only a few finished with better time than what they had achieved during the fall. While I was lucky to not have caused apparent physical harm to these students, the emotional and social harm I unintentionally inflicted could last a lifetime, which is blatantly counter to the purpose and goals of physical education.

This vignette portrays yet another example of my lack of critical evaluation and reflection. Through personal reflection and dialogue with other quality and valued professionals (critical reflection), I sought to change my methods of testing. I later used multiple methods: from the Progressive Aerobic Cardiovascular Endurance Run (PACER) test (The Cooper Institute, 2007) to a simple de-emphasis on the test when students performed it as a mile run, jog, or walk. I found that altering expectations and/or lessons often encouraged and empowered my students who may have otherwise been injured or marginalized by me or through the activity. Additionally, I began recording scores on personalized stickers for students as opposed to calling out scores for everyone to hear. This scenario provided another example of the transformative nature of my praxical journey

and served as a step toward helping my students become lifelong adherents of physical activity and health.

Discussion

The vignettes and subsequent reflections, shared from my 6 years as an elementary physical education teacher, are memorable moments. These stand out for me not only because I am embarrassed of my action or lack of action in each moment, but also because these incidents represent the essence of what should and/or could cause pause, dissonance, strife, and conflict within a teacher's heart and serve as catalysts for change through praxis. In an effort to provide insight into the early stages of transformation, I shared details of the changes that I made, recognizing they do not represent or detail the dynamic intricacies of transformative actions. Additionally, I am not trying to insinuate there are cookie cutter solutions to the complex act of teaching, but rather teaching and transforming my practice was a personal journey of exploration to seek the answers that were best for my students, our school, and me as their teacher. Situations such as these arise in several forms and are often the main progenitors of teachers losing heart and courage if no deeper inquiry or reflection is made into the source of dissonance. This illuminates why I believe praxis is a concomitant element of good teaching. All experiences, thoughts, and/or interactions can and should spur praxis to help teachers critically engage and transform their world.

Conclusion

My praxical journey of naming, critical reflection, and activism was liberating as a teacher. Internalizing this form of critical reflection, embracing my praxical journey, not only in my practice but also in my life, has been transforming. Through this positive change, I created space internally and externally within my practice, always providing room for improvement. Greene (1988) stated, "We may have reached a moment in our history when teaching and learning, if they are to happen meaningfully, must happen on the verge" (p. 23). Because of my disequilibrium and being on the verge, I became a better person and teacher for my students and colleagues. I was able to envision change within my practice, program, and policy to fulfill the goals of meaningful quality physical education. Through this process, teachers should become questioners of the status quo and be empowered to engage in thoughtful critical reflection of what is best for their students and for themselves. My hope is for all teachers to engage critically in their practice using praxis as a form

of critical reflection to help transform the tension that lies between the internal and external and use that created space to transform the lives of their students through their teaching.

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