

Revelations of a Former Pollyanna

By Jocelyn Weeda

Pollyanna is the quintessential American white, braided pigtailed girl who is so optimistic that she is always seeing the world as bright and sunny, dismissing anything bad she sees coming her way. She always finds the bright side to any situation. While this can be refreshing, in education today it is not always realistic. It's much like an ostrich burying its head in the sand or a three year old who is playing hide-and-seek thinking she is hiding when she puts her hands over her eyes. As an independent and intelligent woman, it is difficult for me to admit, but I am a former Pollyanna. I cringe when I now think back to how I was burying my head to the plight of education and the validity of my voice in the struggle to correct the course.

As one of many white, middle-class women in the field of education, I was also a successful student in the educational system. I figured out early on how to navigate this system successfully. Let's be honest, I was who the system was made for - I sat quietly when told, did assignments just as the teacher asked, gave more answers than asked questions, and basically followed all the explicit and implicit rules of schooling. In all reality, I was a teacher's dream! Eisner (1994) points out that "rather than cultivate initiative, schools foster compliant behavior. One of the first things a student learns...is to provide the teacher what the teacher wants or expects" (p.89). As an adult and teacher in this system, I was compliant as well. I would accommodate any mandate that came my way. Just as when I was a student, I would not question or complain. Instead, I would find the best part of the mandate and make my students fit that part. I would adapt to the needs of the mandate. I would say, "This isn't so bad," or "I can make this work," or "I have no choice in this, so I better make the best of it," etc. Or I would smile and go do differently in my own classroom, but never making waves. Why not? The system had served me well. I was successful, doing something that I loved, and trying to make a difference.

So what's so wrong with all that? By complying with the system, by making it work, I am complicit in perpetuating the insidious nature of an oppressive system made more domineering with high stakes testing and the national common core standards. What I am *not* doing adds as much harm as what I am doing. By not standing up for what is wrong with the system, I am saying I support the current status quo. When I navigate the system and stay silent within it, then I do just as is expected of me by those that hold the power – I continue to oppress. What message am I sending to my students when I don't stand up for them and what I know is best for them? A message I can no longer stand silently by and watch occur.

How the System Works

It's fascinating to me that I could be a part of a system my whole life and not really know or think about the actual systemization of education. For the last year and a half I have been asked to critically examine this system and its implications to myself and my students. My eyes have been opened to the challenges to education, the marginalization of various groups within the educational system, and the tie of economics and politics to education.

Revelation #1: The major challenge to curriculum and education today is a need to “teacher-proof” the curriculum. Since the 1920s reform movements have been trying to scientifically boil down the act of teaching. Since Bobbitt, Thorndike, Mager, et al, teaching has been looked at as a subset of skills, almost as if there is a magical, dichotomous chart that would point a teacher by using yes and no answers to the correct way to teach every child (as if every child reacts to situations in the same way). No matter how people may try to minimize education into a discrete set of acts, it is not possible. Creative and critical thinking are very human acts that cannot be reduced into a subset of actions. This cannot be quantified anymore than the skills that are needed to make a piece of art beautiful, a play in sports that raptures the crowd, or the ability to not just make sound, but create soulful music. “Each situation in which educational

decisions are made is significantly unique, not simply unique in the sense of time and place – all situations are unique in that sense - but unique in the sense that the goals, methods, people, and context differ from each other in important ways and must be treated with respect to those differences if decision making is to be effective” (Eisner, 1994, p. 125). There is definitely a subset of skills that all teachers use, but to try to make that a checklist of behaviors is absurd. A machine can never substitute for the humaneness that is needed when working to further learning. “To expect all of our educational aspirations to be either verbally describable or measurable is to expect too little.” (Eisner, 1994, p. 114) In manufacturing, there is accountability woven through the quality of the product and the profit. What we need to realize is that students are not automobiles or steel, but vary in so many aspects. The machinations of a factory do not create human beings, no matter how practical they may seem. The bottom line is that education cannot be teacher proof.

Revelation #2: There are many issues of privilege and marginalization in schools today. As a system, we privilege a white, Euro-centric, middle class model of education. When others are brought into the curriculum, it is as an aside or a celebration. Let’s celebrate what is not “normal” in history (or any other subject area) – Blacks, Latinos, and women history to name a few. What is null in the curriculum speaks volumes to what is considered the knowledge that is of most worth. That knowledge becomes the canon of all classrooms. This canon includes that the most privileged voices of our American legacy have come from white, Eurocentric males. When I recently read studies from the National Core of Common Standards committee, the information that they used to show that there is a deficit in the learning of 17 year-olds is based on this canon. In their literature study, there was only one author of color, two women authors, and the most contemporary piece was from 1954. In privileging this information as what creates an American legacy, we are saying that all the other contemporary voices and voices of marginalized groups are not as important as the others. Therefore, it is important for both

teachers and students to be taught that just as their own experiences influence the way they think and create bias, educational texts, tests and resources have bias, too. Banks (1994) explains that an essential element of multicultural education is “knowledge construction, or the extent to which teachers help students understand how perspectives of people within a discipline influence the conclusions reached within that discipline. This dimension is also concerned with whether students learn to form their own knowledge” (p. 40). This is an important tool for uncovering bias and presenting many perspectives within the classroom which would allow for recognition of the perspectives and achievements of those that fall outside the dominant culture. It is imperative to integrate the contributions of people of color and non-Eurocentric perspectives in the curriculum.

Revelation #3: Education is big business! Education is a multibillion-dollar industry that employs not only teachers, school staff, and administrators, but also textbook and resource publishers, testing companies, computer and technology companies. Even Bill Gates and his foundation are at the center of the Common Core Standards initiative. All these corporate entities have a stake in teacher-proofing education as more and more of their products will be sold as the panacea of education. Education is also political. It has been used as both rhetoric and propaganda in campaigns across America. According to Eisner (1994), “The government has access to two important resources for influencing the curriculum: money and publicity” (p.134). The way that we educate our children holds power both socially and politically and ultimately economically. Lisa Delpit (1988) cautions educators from further privileging students from white, middle class backgrounds. She explains,

To provide schooling for everyone’s children that reflects liberal, middle-class values and aspirations is to ensure the maintenance of the status quo, to ensure that power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it. Some children come to school with more accoutrements of the culture of power already in place – “cultural capital,” as some critical theorists refer to it (for example, Apple, 1979) – some with less. Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal for education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without having

arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them. This is a very reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power and who have already internalized its codes. (p. 285)

As I look more critically at our system, I realize, “It is even more centrally about the creation, development, and maintenance of white privilege, economic wealth, and sociopolitical power over nearly four centuries. It is about hierarchical interaction” (Feagin, 2000, p. 18). In the implementation of the Common Core, what is worth knowing is being determined not by deliberative, local action, but decided upon by a small national group who were themselves successful in the traditional type of schooling that Delpit describes above. The moment that policymakers ask for these standards to be measured, it automatically situates the knowledge in the standard as more worthy than other pieces of knowledge. This process of standardization inherently excludes and sorts students. “Standardized testing reproduces social and economic inequality...Stripped of subjectivity and social purpose, standardized testing breeds cynicism, and not only among teachers.” (Pinar, 2012, p. xii) Students are becoming savvy to this and are, as Grace Lee Boggs (2011) notes, “voting with their feet against an educational system that sorts, tracts, tests, and rejects or certifies them like products of a factory because it was created for the age of industrialization. They are crying out for another kind of education that gives them opportunities to exercise their creative energies because it values them as whole human beings” (p. 49).

Now that my eyes have been opened, they cannot be closed. I cannot ignore a system that has at its core a hubris that assumes some voices are better than others, especially when it works to silence the voices of educational professionals. I know personally I was working so hard to meet the standards and produce what the system would call a well-educated human being that I did not have the time to actually analyze the system in front of me. I could only find a way to make it palatable enough that my students and I could survive daily. Now, I am haunted by

the connectivity of it all. And each of these connections have further implications that cannot be overlooked or ignored by me anymore.

Teacher Voice - What is Our Legacy?

The fallout from the above type of reform is that teachers do not have a voice in the process or a sense of agency. So how can teachers become more self-transforming and activists? It begins by asking hard questions. What has been curricularized in our school? Where can we take risks to help us to learn? Can everyone be normed as the Common Core is asking us to do? When and where in our day do we allow for student voice? Is this knowledge of the most worth to my students? Have we made a connection between knowledge building and active experience? How do we help students become more involved citizens in their school and their community? What problems are we asking kids to solve to engage their creative and critical thinking capabilities?

It is time we take our voice back or begin using our voice. We must move forward through dialogue and action. Delpit (1988) argues that "...we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness...Teachers are in the ideal position to play this role" (p.297). As Pinar (2012) suggests, "we must act as if we can prevent the new catastrophe"(p. xvi).

It starts with me. Do I have the courage to stand up within the system to make a difference? Do I have the courage to be a lone voice that challenges when others would wish me silent? Do I have the courage to be a transformative force that takes on an entire system? Being progressive is not comfortable or easy. I agree with Pinar when he says that curriculum and education are and need to be a very "complicated conversation." Imagine what teachers can do, if we join our voices, use deliberative decision making processes, and engage in critical pedagogy. I cannot sit and wait for a different or better leader, I must become that leader.

I will never stop being optimistic and looking for the best in most situations, that is who I am as a human being. But I will no longer sit by and not use my voice to fight for a transformational change in our education system. Activism is not easy, but we are at a precipice in which we can choose to support the status quo or embrace the opportunity to redefine and renew education. Disequilibrium has become my personal norm. It is time for my voice and our voices as educators working on the front line to join together and shift the concept of education from creating a workforce to an investment in our own future. We know best what our students need and deserve. “That is how we must demonstrate our love for young people and their creative capacities” (Boggs, 2011, p. 136). As Boggs (2011) points out from her work with Friere, we begin by denouncing what we know to be harmful and announce a new paradigm in education (p. 147). “The social activists among us struggle to create actions that go beyond protest and negativity and build community because community is the most important thing that has been destroyed . . .” (Boggs, 2011, p. 41). Social action must occur for not only today, but for the future of a free, democratic education for all American children – even the Pollyannas!

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