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## **The Politics of Liberation and Love in Privileged Classrooms**

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### **Abstract:**

When considering critical pedagogical work in the United States, it seems inimical to consider this liberatory work in nonpublic schools, as the majority of students attending these elite institutions are the children of members of and/or benefit from hegemonic and repressive power structures in place. This narrative review chronicles my experiences as a critical educator working in American independent schools. It explores the idea that critical pedagogues in tuition-based schools are uniquely placed to assist the movement of elite students toward places of liberatory and positive praxis by anchoring private school experiences in Freirian pedagogy. It also explores the necessity for the liberatory education of students of privilege, explaining that often after exposure to critical pedagogy, these students both desire and are able to use their considerable resources to humanize and empower themselves, and through this, society--helping to end cycles of oppression.

**Keywords:** *critical pedagogy, educational determinism, critical theory, liberatory education, private schools*

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## INTRODUCTION

### **The Politics of Liberation and Love in Privileged Classrooms**

*This explores the synthesis of my devotion to liberatory education and my work as a teacher in the American private (tuition-based) school world. After several years of teaching in the private school realm and sensing the potential that exists for the application of Freirian pedagogy, I turned to scholarship for assistance in the best ways to teach critically. I was flummoxed by the lack of research exploring liberatory education of elite populations and tuition-based schools. Perhaps I should not have been surprised by this dearth of scholarship, but it was at odds with my personal experiences, as most private school teachers have the desire to teach critically and see the primary goal of education as empowering students to institute positive social change (Livingston, 2019). This critical pedagogical mindset is often part of our shared focus as private school teachers and is a precipitate for much of our decision making, manifesting in everything from smaller, individual lesson-planning to our contributions to school cultures, echoed constantly in our desire to empower our often wealthy and always privileged students to act as accomplices for social justice and liberation.*

The majority of private school teachers see the primary purpose of education as empowering students to positively change society. Most private school teachers have some experience with critical pedagogy (Livingston, 2019), so why have Freirian pedagogs as a population not formally delved deeper into the idea of critical pedagogy in private schools, where there tends to be a tremendous amount of teacher-classroom autonomy? When there are close to half of a million private school teachers in the

United States alone (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), it seems like this dynamic should be explored.

Perhaps the primary reason for the dearth of research in this area is that, at first thought, it seems problematic and even inappropriate to take a philosophy for the liberation of the oppressed and apply it to the financially and socially elite, the primary populations of tuition-based schools. This application raises several immediate questions: is it ethical to take a pedagogy specifically designed for the education and liberation of historically disenfranchised groups and apply it to a private, privileged group of schools and students? Is it even possible? Will liberation and valuable praxis occur? Through a combination of research, experience, and a good deal of soul-searching, I conclude that it is not only possible, but crucial to all liberation that critical pedagogy be implemented in *every* manifestation of educational space, public and private alike. Liberatory pedagogy should include the students of privilege, the “elite” that are often found in these types of private schools.

This paper uses the term *elite* as a way to view the primary population of students at private schools. *Elite* is complex and difficult to define, as discussed by Gaztambide-Fernández (2009), but is colloquially used in many studies regarding education to distinguish not only a tuition-based school but one deemed to have high social status among social groups that have power to decide what is exclusive and successful, usually equating this success as private financial success in a capitalist market and individualistic society. The American private school world is complex and varied, and includes all tuition-based institutions: religious, secular, boarding, coed, and others (National Association of Independent Schools, 2018). With so much variety in

institutions that can be labeled “elite private schools,” defining *elite* may be *purposefully* difficult; Bourdieu (1991) reminds us that power elites benefit from the vagueness of the definition. Although this is certainly the case, much educational literature surrounding the definition contains a common *understanding* in the independent school communities in which I have worked. This understanding matches definitions by Persell and Cookson (1985), who describe elite schools as schools that can place their students at decided advantages vis-à-vis their non-elite peers, especially regarding admission to selective colleges. Would it be possible to take the advantages these elite students have, and, by educating them critically, empower them to use these (often unearned) advantages for the good of all?

### **The Liberation of the Children of the Bourgeoisie?**

Critical pedagogy for students of privilege seeks to liberate children of the *elites* from their unique types of bondage, strives to heal them from the sickness of their isolation, and empower them to be able to connect with others. The father of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire (1998), instructs us that dehumanization—which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it—is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human. If we take this as truth, it is then crucial for private school teachers and students to reach places of Freirean praxis, because if [the privileged] are left to be trained to use the many resources at their disposal to dehumanize and disempower others, and thereby themselves, the cycle of oppression and the struggles that surround it will continue (Denis-McKay, p.26). All students should have autonomy of body and mind, and it is crucial they be educated as such. We must never forget to include all children—regardless of the socioeconomics of their parents and backgrounds—in critical dialogue

and liberatory praxis, for the deterministic nature of education can liberate these children from the ignorance in which they will most likely end up trapped if they are allowed to continue learning in their current hegemonically oppressive, elitist, and dehumanizing environments. This is not to say that critical work should stop in public education—it is more crucial than ever—but rather that it is imperative that critical education should be expanded to include all students.

As Henry Giroux explains in his June 2018 article in *Democracy and Education*, neoliberal regimes across Europe and North America have waged a major assault on critical pedagogy, public pedagogy, and the public spheres in which they take place. In the last few months, Americans—along with many other neoliberal societies—have seen legislative pushes to directly and purposefully limit liberatory education, with critical race theory and its pedagogical cousin, critical pedagogy, specifically targeted. The concept of critical race theory has recently been vilified by United States politicians as a “radical,” “un-American,” and “racially divisive” concept. Several states have even banned schools from teaching critical race theory, with more states debating doing the same (George, 2021). Thus the imperative to not only resist and defend against these assaults on critical pedagogy in public education, but to expand its practice to include private spheres. I offer a set of experiences that highlight how this is not only possible but necessary.

Historically unappreciated and undervalued in the U.S., teachers themselves often unwittingly buy into the idea that teaching is somehow not an honorable profession; even those of us that recognize our value are hampered by the hundreds of years of American deemphasize on education (especially on all critical thought). Yet this same

history provides many examples of how neoliberal regimes in power *do* value and understand education's importance; among the first changes enforced by totalitarian and fascist regimes is always the curtailment and elimination of any liberatory curricula. Moments before his inauguration in early 2019, fascist Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro tweeted, "One of the goals to get Brazil out of the worst positions in international education rankings is to combat the Marxist rubbish that has spread in educational institutions." On the campaign trail, Bolsonaro said he wanted to "enter the Education Ministry with a flamethrower to remove Paulo Freire" ("Bolsonaro to Erase Freire and Feminism from Textbooks"). Clearly, if education is among the first targets of oppressive and fascist regimes, it is of paramount importance to liberty and democracy, and thus both can and should be used offensively to combat repression in all its incarnations. While this is its own justification for including private education under the critical pedagogy umbrella, there are more nuanced, complex, and important reasons to include Freiran pedagogy in nonpublic schools.

Liberated societies can only exist if education itself is liberating, and *all* students deserve this liberation. With the twenty-first century American government's daily movement away from democracy and closer to fascism, each tool in every educator's arsenal must be used to combat repressive systems of the status quo and replace them with communal, equitable, and egalitarian organizations. Educators are not popularly seen as key figures in social and political liberation, but we may be among the most important. Because education is deterministic, we are able to fight repressive, hegemonic systems on the front lines and on a substantial, powerful, and effective scale. An implementation of critical pedagogies in private schools would limit the power of schools to see students as cultural capital, a concept developed by French sociologist

Pierre Bourdieu (1996) and defined more contextually by Anthony Abraham Jack (p. 19) as “the collection of taken-for-granted ways of being that are valued in a particular culture.” This expansion of Freirian pedagogy would help create and support a non-stratified community, so that “social mobility” becomes unnecessary, thus resisting the popular idea of the role of private school education as a means of becoming more social and economically mobile. Critical pedagogy in independent schools allows for a unique type of praxis that removes all students from the cycle of having to exist as cultural capital. For the critical independent school educator, this pedagogy provides opportunities for the most privileged of students to engage with their peers, with other members of their classroom community, and with their own ideas about privilege, power, and equality (Livingston, 2019). It does so in a way that encourages critical engagement while providing space for students be a part of a community of thinkers “who assist each other while at the same time check each other’s tendencies to purely idiosyncratic or self-interested thinking” (Young, p. 8).

Ultimately, if we care about social justice and we believe that education can help transform society, then we *must* care about how students of privilege are educated. Examining privileged students’ experiences with schooling can help to illuminate how inequalities persist. They can also de-normalize elite education, generate strategies for including elite students in social movements working toward justice, and elicit compassion for the ways in which systems of oppression ultimately dehumanize even those they advantage. (Swalwell, 2013). This inclusion of elite private schools in the charge to form a more just and equitable future can feel unnecessary, and thus is a challenge to critical pedagogs working in all spheres of education. However, as Denis-McKay (2007) notes, “because the dominant culture relies on unquestioned privilege,

the opportunities to name, critically reflect, and act are equally denied the privileged and the other” (p. 27). Leonardo (2009) similarly notes a need for a different approach with privileged (white) students when he references Lenin’s belief that “the proletariat must be educated while the bourgeoisie revolutionized.”

When read in combination, educational literature points to three common reactions as defined by Swalwell (2013) of privileged children when exposed to social justice pedagogy. First, though they may well learn of injustices in the world, privileged students are likely to “frame these issues as abstract and demonstrate a deep unawareness of their root causes (p.108).” Second, whereas marginalized students may come to feel empowered by learning about systemic oppression, privileged students are “likely to feel overwhelmed by guilt or anger and resist this pedagogy (p. 108).” And third, if students choose to participate in social action as a result of their exposure to social justice pedagogy, Privileged students are more likely to act in ways that frame themselves as “savior figures” who help a deficient *other* in a patronizing or superficial way. Instead of expanding their worldview, empowering them to act, and engaging them in action as social justice pedagogues hope, the literature ultimately warns of the potential for social justice pedagogy with privileged students to backfire (Swalwell, 2013).

While these reactions by students of privilege certainly must be considered when critically educating them, they are far from probable or insurmountable. Perhaps more importantly, while there have been studies that examine the relationships between social justice and students of privilege, it important to note that almost no research

exists examining the direct application of critical pedagogy in private schools. It is my experience as a critical pedagogue in a private school environment that I wish to share.

While we see school mission statements as a window into the communities, ethos, and priorities of independent schools, most missions are assembled by school boards, administrators, and committees from a “parts kit of hoary clichés and trendy buzzwords.” School mission statements are “so general and so alike that they fail to differentiate themselves and the schools they represent, reducing even the most noble of aspirations to banalities” (Gow, 2009). Oftentimes, missions are physically separate from diversity and equity statements, but contain rhetoric that implies equity and solidarity. This false solidarity is actively dangerous, in part because it relies on charity rather than mutual aid, and thus serves to further existing systems of oppression and exclusion, but more importantly because it offers a conscience salve in the form of the illusion of solidarity and action.

This ethos of charity is, frustratingly, an often well-intentioned but all-too-common framework in the educational structures of privileged youth, frequently manifesting as “service work,” a type of voyeurism, or what Hernandez-Sheets calls “helperism,” which is “platitudinous and no longer viable for marginalized peoples (p. 152).” Such approaches are both disruptive and distracting. They are very frequently found in private schools in the language of “community service” requirements, in which privileged students are briefly dropped into existing community support organizations to provide temporary and transitory physical help, ignoring what is most needed—real solidarity and support, including a commitment to build long-term relationships with these community organizations and movements over time. I know in the private schools

in which I have worked, there have always been “community service” requirements, some with remarkably narrow focus, like raising public awareness of horse abuse. Other private schools at which I have worked have required “service learning days” in which students spend a day volunteering at places like women’s shelters or cleaning up roadside litter.

These experiences resonate with some of the students, but as this work is not anchored in any type of *reality* for the elite, much of what could have been valuable—in fact, much of the intent of the exercise itself—is *abstract* and therefore its value is often lost. While any help can be positive, and it is wise to insist that privileged institutions provide service to their communities based on ability and need. Such shallow forms of “service learning” can obscure underlying causes of injustice, reify privileged norms, excuse privileged students from critically reflecting on their lives, and reproduce a false sense of “us and them” (Butin, p.1685). But pseudo-awareness of real oppression is not limited to “community service.” Independent schools also maintain the façade of training their teachers to be justice-minded, liberatory practitioners, but rarely offer concrete and/or philosophical professional development experiences to their faculty. This is a tragedy, as many independent school educators are justice-minded and see liberation as a primary purpose of their work (Livingston, 2019). What can be done to synchronize the desires of so many private school educators to further liberatory pedagogical objectives and provide resources and education that empowers us to do so successfully? Unfortunately (and perhaps on some levels, purposefully), private school professional development (PD) very rarely considers this type of pedagogical development, and often access to PD is limited by wealth: both the lack of personal wealth of the teachers themselves and the distribution of PD money and professional

leave by private schools. The dearth of available critical pedagogical PD is its own issue to be addressed.

In the world of tuition-based schools in the U.S., local and national independent school associations do provide a multitude of diversity, inclusion, and equity events; training; and conferences. However, they are almost all fee-based, and thus often counterintuitive to their purpose. Even though most private school faculty do not pay out of pocket to attend these events, it comes out of most teachers' limited yearly PD budgets. Thus educators are required to select between equity-based PD and other skill-building experiences, often at the expense of the former, thus furthering faculty ignorance of critical pedagogical practice. Access to diversity-based PD events are necessary, as the population of students of color in nonpublic schools has substantially increased in the last twenty years. Critical pedagogy, while addressed in discipline-specific journals and occasionally in larger education spaces, is “not given enough coverage under the constant attack for market-oriented non-secularization of the education system” (Çomak and Nur, 2018). This disconnect between the increase in students of color and students from economically disadvantaged populations and the opportunity for PD in critical pedagogy for private school educators serves hegemonic structures and continues to disenfranchise all private school students. The American National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) admissions data from 2000–2001 shows the enrollment of students of color at 16.8% of total enrollment, with the 2018–2019 enrollment of students of color much higher at 31.6% (NAIS 2019). For a multitude of reasons, American private schools are steadily becoming more diverse. Thus PD that uplifts and supports these students and encourages liberatory curricula is crucial, and should not be limited to wealthier schools with larger endowments and PD

budgets. The large-scale implementation of liberatory pedagogy could alleviate many of these issues, as *all* learning would be exercised in diversity, equity, and inclusion as both faculty and students move toward a place of liberation. However, a primary challenge to this large-scale implementation remains the lack of educator exposure to critical pedagogy, in particular—and not surprisingly—the omission of critical pedagogy for private school educators.

Also of note are the more informal but still problematic dearth of workshops, literature, and discussion about critical pedagogy in almost all incarnations of NAIS-organized PD, including events specifically designed at a national level for educators of color and their allies. At the NAIS People of Color Conference in 2018, out of more than two hundred presentations in total, there was *one* presentation on critical pedagogy (31st NAIS People of Color Conference Program). The previous year, there were *no* critical pedagogy events (30th NAIS People of Color Conference Program). We must ask why this is the case, for it is not due to lack of interest. My 2018 workshop on critical pedagogy in independent schools filled a room to overflow capacity. Our subsequent break-out discussion groups reinforced my anecdotal experience that critical, radically minded educators are (1) surprisingly, a substantial number of independent school faculty, and (2) unaware or only partially aware of the existence of critical pedagogy as a liberatory tool (Livingston, 2019). While the audience attending this session was self-selecting in a myriad of ways, the larger desire of private school teachers to educate critically was later supported with numerous surveys conducted nationally among more than one hundred private school educators about their beliefs and backgrounds. An enormous 97% agreed that the primary purpose of education was “to empower students to create a more just and equitable society.” An ethos of belief in the tenants of critical

pedagogy also exists most strongly in this population, with 89% agreeing that their students' "pre-knowledge and previous life experiences are all as valid as their own" (Livingston, 2019).

It is important to note that while much literature exists emphasizing the need for critical education in teacher *preparation* programs producing both public and private school educators, most teachers *already active* in the private school world claim that the primary purpose of education is to empower students to create egalitarian future societies. Therefore we must become familiar with, have access to literature and resources for, and begin to practice critical pedagogy in our private school classrooms. This private school liberatory pedagogical agenda is very possible to implement because of the large amount of teacher autonomy given in these classrooms: 88% of private school teachers surveyed felt they had "much autonomy" regarding both content and pedagogy (Livingston, 2019). With the U.S. Digest of Education Statistics (2017) putting the number of private schools at over 34,000, there is a strong argument to be made that the implementation of critical pedagogy in private schools has a tremendous amount of positive potential. It is impossible to institute social change in this population without the implementation and indoctrination of knowledge and values shared through education; conversely, it *is* possible to institute social change (assisted by elite allies) with the implementation of liberatory knowledge and collective values in private schools.

Schools are not simply sites of opportunity; rather, they are "deeply political places where students are sorted and labeled and where the policies, practices, curricula, and informal interactions can reproduce society's inequalities in both covert and

unambiguous ways” (Oakes, p. 118). Independent schools need also to be engaged as sites for these opportunities.

If we believe that there is an overall pressing and immediate need for critical education, it becomes necessary for private school teachers to become guerilla-educators as we attempt to circumvent the educational system in which so many of our students are trapped. This is done by chipping away at this system from the inside: by Freirian pedagogy used to open minds one student at a time; by emphasizing the collective good, rather than furthering individual competitiveness; and by adding voices of the historically marginalized and disenfranchised to the existing body of commonly taught knowledge, in a way that shows these groups as active in history, rather than having history happen on top of them. It is done by crediting innovators, and inventors that have been historically ignored because of their gender, race, religion, or ethnicity. But it is more than this. The methodologies described in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) can be used in private school classrooms. Because of its unique mix of student backgrounds, private schools and private school educators are uniquely positioned to implement critical teaching.

It is important to keep in mind that alliance between the privileged and the oppressed should *never* come at the expense of the oppressed. In my time in the private school world, I have seen many administrations, mission statements, and task forces work hard to maintain the *illusion* of solidarity with the oppressed. Often, with honorable and honest intent and feeling, they do strive toward accomplishing their goal. However, anything more than a cursory exploration of any manifestation in actual practice illuminates this as false solidarity. The mission statements of schools accredited by

NAIS show a myriad of priorities, but the language of many of them includes statements like “respect for all persons” and “valuing of differences,” while the actual experiences of students differ considerably.

### **Using Love to Liberate the Elite**

What becomes crucial in considering the value of critical pedagogical and liberatory practice in schools is the idea that every student experiences educational determinism—that the type and amount of education experienced by a student predisposes them toward their future social (and often economic) roles in society (Livingston 2019). Perhaps the challenge of recognizing education as deterministic is best expressed in an article discussing the lack of democracy in private schools by Jack Schneider (2018):

No school, if it is to realize its full potential, and if it is to foster the public good, can be conceived of as private, parochial, or even independent. These terms imply ownership, competition, disunity, disconnection. Schools with the most freedom to act and the greatest power to effect change must not be fortresses and silos. They must be laboratories and lighthouses.

He goes on to discuss how private schools can be used as “laboratories and lighthouses” to further the public good. He suggests that in order to do so, private schools must both prioritize diversity and use their position as places of both great resources and much teacher autonomy to focus on educational practices that liberate.

We need to nourish the *capacity* of these children of economic and political advantage to both understand and transform their world through critical consciousness and connection (Noddings, 2003). Elite students are often denied the opportunity to experience dialogue with students from other backgrounds. They are often presented

with limited, myopic sets of knowledge, and told that these flawed pedagogical experiences are not only complete, correct, and appropriate, but the apex of what an education should be—the fallacy that if one education costs \$40,000 and another is free, the more expensive education must be better (often the default mentality in the corruptions of capitalism). These falsehoods will continue until corrected, and corrected in *all* spheres of education—public, private, and otherwise. Revealing this truth is only possible because of the relationships between students and teachers, both being motivated by shared experiences of *caring* and *respect*.

Matriarch of critical pedagogy Antonia Darder (2017) writes about love and its relationship to learning: that love is the most powerful of teachers, a natural human feeling that both encourages and limits actions, and restores us as human beings. No student should be denied this experience, and no lasting, substantive change can truly happen until all students are exposed to these experiences. The love between students and their teachers is radical in itself, and thus the love between *elite* students and their subaltern, middle-class, and usually public school-educated teachers (Livingston, 2019) requires trust and often sacrifice on the part of the educator. The critical pedagogical process in private schools can be painful for students and teacher. Children of privilege are children, after all, and just as they did nothing to earn their privilege, they also did not choose their position—it is necessary we remember they are also victims of this system of oppression, granted, in a different and much more comfortable way. We must be willing as a culture to shine the searchlight of critical consciousness on the difficulties that children of privilege have in breaking free of the limits of being born into a system of oppression—the limits forced onto both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Denis-McKay (2007) puts this in terms of “border crossings” between distinct social groups and wisely cautions us as critical educators in the private school world: both we and our students need be sure “to become border crossers in a respectful and responsible manner,” and to do this, “students of privilege must become culturally competent because by living in a place of privilege, these students are living in a dehumanized world (p. 26-27).” While this world is much safer and more comfortable than the lives of marginalized students on the other side of the “border,” we have a responsibility as educators that includes critically educating students existing on both ends of the enormous gap between us—a gap caused by capitalism and neoliberalism. Pedagogy for students of privilege should seek to liberate the advantaged children in the world from their bondage, perhaps also heal them from the sickness of their isolation and empower them to be able to connect with others. In addition facilitating their own healing and rehumanization, it is crucial we understand the societal potential in critically educating the elite.

Critical pedagogical work with elite students attending private schools is crucial for many reasons, but one of the most important remains the future access of these children to resources that can be positively harnessed to make positive social change. If critical work is omitted from their educational experiences, both the financial and social resources they possess—resources that the majority of us do not have access to—will be (sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously) used to dehumanize and disempower others, and thereby themselves allowing cycles of oppression to continue. A 2014 study by political scientists provides evidence that the traditional levers of political power are most effective when actioned by elite individuals (Gilens and Page,

2014). Their research proves that economic elites are the most influential political actors when it comes to the making of public policy in the U.S. Political scientist and writer David Rothkopf (2009) elaborates on the important, eventual influence of elite students when he claims, “it is still the case that many graduates [of independent schools] go on to careers in finance and government. It is at the intersection of these two sectors that critical decisions are made, sometimes in plain sight and sometimes behind closed doors” (p. 000).

Knowing this, it seems negligent to omit this group of future influencers and policy makers from any practice where the desired outcomes are substantive and egalitarian social and legal changes. Additionally, Persell and Cookson (1985) inform us that many though not all students in private schools go on to become members of the power elite (e.g. politicians, CEOs, corporate leaders), hence these spaces remain important contributors to the (re)production of upper class privilege.

Surely, these spaces could and should also be used for the removal of this same class privilege.

We must think of the ever-increasing global scale of the power and influence of America’s elite, accelerated by technology and the expansion of education generally—these stresses again the importance of critically educating the elite with the reminder that this globalness also exists in education and has led to greater global inequality within countries. This is yet another argument for the inclusion of the children of elites in critical education, as their future global power to repress can be replaced with larger spheres of worldwide liberation. With the amount of potential influence these students will possess, we are foolish to exclude them from our critical pedagogical work.

## **Key Dimensions of Critical Synthesis in Elite Nonpublic Schools:**

### **A “Kincheloean” Approach**

Critical pedagogy in private schools, like all critical pedagogy, must “take place on uncharted social and cultural territory” (Kincheloe, 2007) and, as such, the “key dimensions of critical synthesis” as described in *Critical Pedagogy in the Twenty-First Century* (Kincheloe, 2012) are both unique and uniquely necessary in nonpublic spaces. The application of these “key dimensions” of Freiran pedagogy to private education are a synthesis of the critical theoretical tradition and understanding students of privilege in their positions of power—including “understanding of dominant cultural pedagogies, and the subsequent identity construction” (p. 177). Like all critical education, this must include Freiran steps and shared experiences toward a pedagogy of liberation. With elite populations, these often manifest on a different timeline and through different sets of experiences than critical pedagogical manifestations with historically disenfranchised populations.

It is important here I echo Peter McLaren’s (2006) disclaimer in *Life in Schools*. I wish to make it clear that my teaching experiences attempting to synthesize these key pedagogical dimensions of Freiran experience with private school students are not offered as evidence that “proves” that *all* critical pedagogy will work in all private schools, but rather that it *can* happen, and that it is both important and life-changing to these private school students at any and all levels of success. I offer these experiences as suggestions that the inclusion of this pedagogy in private spaces is a solid, viable option; that up to this point it has been incompletely studied; and that it (hopefully) inspires my private school educator-comrades to consider its application seriously, both practically and philosophically. My detailing of the success (and challenges) of

critically educating elites is in no way meant to imply that I am an exceptional critical educator (or exceptional educator in any respect). Rather, I wish to share the modest successes that proved positive while working under my hypothesis that a combination of love and consistent reinforcement of critical practice would move participants in critical private school classrooms to places of growth and discovery, even with the nontraditional audience and complicated group of personalities and backgrounds found in these nonpublic spaces.

In my experience critically teaching children of elites, there have been a few successful tactics for moving students through phases of Freirian growth and toward necessary decodification of relevant issues. The first is a modification of existing curricula to include a Freirian perspective of the past so that past human decisions and choices are clear and the past can be seen as active rather than passive (Freire, 2000). Teaching the impact of human agency on the past and connecting it clearly to the hegemonic structures in place allowed my students to be aware of the root causes of problems while also empowering them to change the future by showing it is not a set course of events but rather dictated by human choice and response—that it can be influenced by their choices and responses. This is often seen by my private school students as both empowering (because they know they have the financial and social potential to institute change, having become aware of their privilege) and also overwhelming (as they realize the depth and breadth of the work that needs to be accomplished). While I did experience some students framing issues as abstract, and demonstrating a deep *unawareness* of their root causes (Swalwell, 2017), it took me several years to realize that this was often a *first step* toward their consciencization rather than a stopping point when I alerted them to their own oppression. As my journey as a critical educator of

elites continued, I found that my experiences were often parallels of (but naturally not the same processes as) those key experiences as outlined by Kincheloe in *Critical Pedagogy in the Twenty-First Century* (2007). It is useful, therefore, to frame these experiences through the lens of the private school educator:

*Key Dimension #1: The development of a socio-individual imagination*

It is the job of educators in elite institutions to move outside traditional private educational practices, challenging students belonging to the power group, often including the children of the wealthy, to consider and imagine new forms of knowledge acquisition. In particular it is our job to emphasize those forms of knowledge and its acquisition that lead away from static knowledge systems and others that laud domination, and instead purposefully stress systems that move these students toward social justice and democratic community. As the gap between the rich and the not-rich becomes larger by the day, and as federal policies continue to support the acquisition of wealth by the rich at the expense of those already disadvantaged, twenty-first century education continues to tear society asunder “by commodified informationalism (p.205)” (McLaren, 1994). This must be combated in all realms of education.

*Key Dimension #2: The reconstitution of the individual outside the boundaries of abstract individualism*

Reconsideration of the individual is central to all critical pedagogy as it celebrates self-realization, but in elite environments, it is particularly crucial that we contextualize this very carefully, considering the traditions in education that use the concept of individualism in the Western tradition. Private school critical pedagogs are tasked with constant re-emphasis and redefining the idea of the “individual,” making sure it is

anchored in critical communitarianism, highlighting that community should always take precedence over individual interests. This emphasis on community can only serve to further democracy and will hopefully help children of privilege acquire and retain a mindset that corrects the harmful traditions of individualism at the expense of the collective whole, especially if positively experienced over a period of time in a safe school environment such as private schools, which are safe and in which most students stay from ages four to eighteen (Council for American Private Education, 2017). This can be challenging if students have benefited from hegemonic systems that applaud individual wealth and present it as “earned” because of ability and hard work. However, because collective thought is not only an imperative but also a superior essential truth to human existence, exposure to criticism of Western individualism will mitigate the erroneous mindset of individualism when critical pedagogy is part of a student’s classroom experience. Realizing that their peers come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and being exposed to both their personal experiences and feelings about these experiences also often serve to foster elite students’ thinking more critically about their wealth, whether it is “earned” or not. Some students—for the first time—consider collective action and the common good as an option in their lives.

*Key Dimension #3: The understanding of power and the ability to interpret its effects on the social and the individual*

Perhaps the most urgent of the dimensions key to critical synthesis in the nonpublic arena is the need for students of privilege to be cognizant of their position (both present and future) in places of wealth, power, and authority. Even when we consider that the modern private school classroom contains more racial and class-based diversity than ever before, it must be acknowledged that being in these elite institutions gives every

student in the private school, to varying degrees, the *potential* for power, both political and economic.

The transformative, critical educator must work in two domains when moving private classrooms to places of praxis. In addition to “an understanding of how power operates in the social order and the ways it works to produce subjectivity” (Kincheloe, p. 178), critical private school educators must purposefully anchor their students (and themselves) to this power structure, asking them to consider their own relationships to it, all the while consistently and critically exploring together the ways that “hegemonic forces mobilize desire in the effort to win the public’s consent to the authority of various power blocs” (Kincheloe, p. 178). With so many students having family inside or adjacent to these blocs of power and control, this seems daunting, but as all critical pedagogy is concerned with connections of people, power, and place, it is paramount that students from the elite class are actively tasked with this social analysis so they will obtain a realistic sense of power (both of others and of their own) and examine its past and future impacts on all of these connections between people, power, and place with a critical eye. This does not mean students will not feel compelled to defend their place in a system that empowers them, but it does require all students to consider the system itself, and how it self-perpetuates. Often this is where my colleagues and I report having stopped critical teaching in the past, as the anger and guilt students feel about benefiting from this system require much emotional labor on students and teachers alike, and some risk to the educator if students take this anger and guilt home to their wealthy parents. It is not, however, insurmountable.

*Key Dimension #4: The provision of alternatives to the alienation of the individual*

It is crucial to note that central to the evolution of critical pedagogy is finding alternatives to the social and educational alienation that exist in the current abusive hegemonic power structures surrounding education. This manifests with children of privilege specifically in two ways: First, while individuals from less politically and financially dominant locales such as underfunded public schools are denied access to institutions that provide tickets to social mobility by the use of a rhetoric of standards, excellence and values (Kincheloe, 2007), children of privilege *do* have access to these institutions by attending elite private schools. The trend in private school admissions to diversify access with respect to race, ethnicity, and economic status, paired with an understanding that student access to these “mobility tickets” will result in the eventual opening of the places of privilege to everyone collectively. Of course, the ultimate goal is the elimination of “social mobility” itself, but the opening of these spaces is a necessary step toward freedom from them altogether. Second, if critical pedagogy does not exist in private educational spaces, the children in these spaces are *also* victims of alienation, and are locked into the same oppressive system by their inability to move away from their own (admittedly much less dire) unique forms of alienation. It is possible to include children of elites as part of the German *Bildung* tradition of providing them alternatives to their own alienation (Kincheloe, 2007), and because of the deterministic nature of education, it is crucial that this include private spaces for critical learning.

*Key Dimension #5: The cultivation of a critical consciousness that is aware of the social construction of subjectivity*

An evolving critical pedagogy produces conscious individuals who are aware of their self-production and the social conditions under which they live (Kincheloe, 2004). What this means to private school students is that they often operate in a social reality that they themselves do not understand, and propagate social conditions they do not consciously choose. Students must acquire a critical consciousness so they recognize these dynamics, realizing that the blinders placed on them by their own social prominence and wealth are hindering their overcoming of their own alienation, thus allowing them to construct social relationships with not only each other but those outside their sphere of privilege. After acquiring this consciousness in the private critical pedagogical classroom, the public space/political culture can be merged with the private space/privileged culture, allowing the space to be completely reconstructed and eventually (if necessary) dismantled.

*Key Dimension #6: The construction of democratic community-building relationships between individuals*

Transformative pedagogy must be centered on a development of an individual self, coupled with the construction of a democratic awareness of difference (Freire, 2000). For private school students, the notion of their individual existence being relative to others is often surprising, but necessary because appropriate responsiveness is crucial for “the intersubjectivity that develops both social consciousness and individual agency” (Kincheloe, 2007). Students of privilege must learn to utilize these new understandings of how power shapes subjectivity.

While subaltern students who participate in traditional critical pedagogy often have individual experiences that allow them to understand how systems of oppression strip their social fabric and deny resources and power to their communities, children of privilege must be allowed and encouraged to see how their own positions of power can be used to *prevent* these systems; they can be made aware of their potential to provide resources to combat these systems, and see the need to break down the hierarchical social fabric. While this may seem counter-indicated, in my experience with the education of the privileged, most come to understand that democratic, community-building relationships are necessary for stopping processes that oppress; this often occurs as these children critically acquire appreciation for “the nature of justice, the invisibility of the process of oppression, and the difference that highlights our own social construction as human beings” (Kincheloe, 2007).

*Key Dimension #7: The reconceptualization of reason—understanding that relational existence applies not only to human beings but to concepts as well*

Kincheloe (2007) states that critical pedagogs have a responsibility to both critique the individualistic and one-dimensional definition of reason and to expand it so that it includes relationships and contexts, both concrete and abstract. Individualistic, Cartesian ontology has remained the primary reason tool in the traditional American classroom, as the individualism of “reason” encourages the hegemonic, capitalist emphasis on competition and deemphasizes any logic that uplifts, expands, or celebrates collectiveness. Thus reason its own tool of oppression. Removing these limitations on the definition of reason by revising it from this outdated, selfish, colonial definition focused on the individual allows students to educate themselves and each other in a new, transformative process that supports positive social education.

Revising the definition of reason in the pedagogy and curricula of private schools provides students of privilege with a new, expanded, and superior collective way to understand their own experiences and the experiences of others as “reasonable,” shifting them away from the individualistic systems that have allowed the existence of hierarchy and places of oppression.

This can seem difficult, but we should remember that the paradigm of emphasis on the collective rather than the individual is not a new or radical idea, as it has existed (and exists) in most traditional non-Western societies. Because this group-focused, indigenous concept is often replaced during colonization with the erroneous and overly simplistic Cartesian model, it has not been propagated in most systems of education in the U.S., especially in places of privilege and wealth. This must be remedied if critical learning is to occur.

*Key Dimension #8: The production of social skills necessary for active participation in a transformed, inclusive democratic community*

As Kincheloe (2007) reminds us, individuals of “all stripes, ages, and backgrounds in contemporary hyperreality search for an identity, (p. 181)” and this includes children of privilege. Of note is that the resources at their disposal, combined with their potential to hold positions in the current hegemonic power norm, will largely be harnessed for the collective, democratic good when these same students learn to look at social actions not just through the lens of the political, but also with an eye on the “economic, cultural, psychological, epistemological and ontological” (p. 156). Thus, they will not just inherit but also earn the ability to have input into civic and democratic life, where they

can be voices for emancipation, and have opportunities to act as truly democratic citizens. In my experience, most students are naturally very democratic, and desperately want to earn a place in this system—deeply desiring an identity that they feel is both positive and just.

### **Conclusions: Where Are We Now (Again)?**

As a critical educator who works in private schools, I am used to defending myself—defending my choice to teach private school, defending my critically educating the children of the elite—and though I am early in my academic career, as a formidably experienced educator, I will share this: a great many private school children honestly care about, sympathize with, and want to work to change current systems of oppression in America and earnestly wish to move our nation to a place of both liberation and egalitarianism. Many desperately wish to be our allies and accomplices. Most teenagers I have worked with over the past twenty years have a very fierce sense of justice, are hyper-concerned with what is fair and what is right, and crave discussions about issues of equity and equality. When critical pedagogy is introduced to their classrooms, the majority (not all, but most) of them are relieved, sometimes thrilled, to know more about and have the tools to decide what is wrong and how it happened, to understand what is needed for positive change, and—as one young woman with both a huge heart and a huge trust-fund shared with our class—they are excited that they “now know what needs to be done.”

When I was beginning this work and I started discussing the need for implementation of critical pedagogy in elite places of learning, I experienced much skepticism and sometimes pushback from members of the critical pedagogical community,

occasionally even from scholars I had admired for years. It took me months of thinking before I concluded that I *genuinely believed* in what I was arguing: no child should ever be educated in a way that oppresses. No child. The implementation of critical pedagogy in private schools is just a step forward in the ever-evolving process Joe Kincheloe (2007) describes as “changing to meet the needs posed by new circumstances and unprecedented challenges.”

Writing this article, I frequently found myself returning to Shirley Steinberg’s (2004) Introduction to the reader *Critical Pedagogy: Where Are We Now?* in which she eloquently conveys not only what critical pedagogy *is*, but how it *feels*. It can feel empowering to educate critically, but by necessity it is also “uncomfortable.” I took solace in the fact that perhaps my uncomfortableness in applying critical pedagogy to elite populations of students meant that I was being an honest practitioner, and this allowed me to continue to progress.

What I have attempted to convey in this piece, hopefully with clarity and empathy, is that we *should* feel uncomfortable about critical pedagogy in elite places, but that this uncomfortableness is part of the larger experience of movement to a more just and equitable world, away from neoliberalism and its evils and toward a place of love and deep knowledge. It is similar in its uncomfortableness to the growth that occurs in a critical classroom. And while the students of the privileged *should* feel this discord while engaging in dialogue and positive praxis in their classrooms, we as critical pedagogs should feel that same uncomfortableness as we ponder whether or not the application of critical education should be extended to the private domain.

If what is written here—a challenge to the traditional applications of critical pedagogy—has made you uncomfortable, made you question, and has offered a challenge to your status quo, if it has offered another avenue to a place of liberation and love, then we have together, in the words of Paulo Freire (2007), acquired the “knowledge [that] emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”

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