

## **Does Critical Pedagogy Work with Privileged Students?**

**By Ricky Lee Allen & César Augusto Rossatto**

Several years ago, one of the authors got his first job as a university-level instructor. He taught a teacher education social foundations course at a large public university in Los Angeles. Having been immersed in the canon of critical pedagogy, he devised a syllabus that was based almost exclusively on critical pedagogy readings. His intention was to engage students in a critical examination of the role schooling plays in reproducing hegemony. He met much resistance and outright anger from many of the students in the class.

This type of experience is not uncommon for those teaching critical pedagogy in the U.S.

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Looking deeper at the specificities of the resistance, he noticed a disturbing pattern. Approximately half of the class, consisting mostly of White students and a few students of color, hated the critical pedagogy literature. And the other half, consisting mostly of people of color and a few White students, expressed that they felt empowered by the literature. It struck him that something very different had happened in the way that Whites in particular interpreted and valued critical pedagogy. Plus, he was disturbed that those who hated it were mostly White emergency credential teachers who taught mostly students of color. Yet the only critical curricular tool the author had available was

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critical pedagogy. He wondered, “Are there limits to critical pedagogy? Is there some other discourse or pedagogy that can make more progress in transforming White consciousness and forming alliances among both oppressor and oppressed?”

Over the last few years, both authors have found keys to transforming White consciousness through an examination of the relationship between critical multiculturalism and critical pedagogy. Those who teach multiculturalism in teacher education programs constantly struggle with “sensitizing” prospective teachers to the ways in which power and privilege contextualize daily interactions in schools. Historically, multicultural education for teachers, at least in its more critical forms, has emphasized building an awareness of the unearned disempowerment of students who are members of oppressed groups (e.g., Sleeter, 1996). But more recently, there is a growing trend towards exposing and abolishing the unearned empowerment of the oppressor. This newly systematized pedagogy calls for examining the identity formations of those from privileged groups (e.g., Tatum, 1997). It represents a form of critical multiculturalism that seeks to move those who consciously or unconsciously surveil the hegemony of the oppressor from their comfortable, “neutral” place towards a transformed and deliberate monitoring of a type of social justice that is in alliance with the oppressed (Allen, 2005). For example, the growing movement of critical Whiteness studies has been a valuable resource for critical multicultural education. Many more multicultural educators are now engaging White teachers in an examination of their White privilege in an attempt to motivate them to battle white racism through their teaching.

However, this is easier said than done. Multicultural educators whose pedagogy directly challenges systemic privilege (e.g., White privilege, male privilege, class privilege, heterosexual privilege, etc.) often encounter heated opposition from students who act as representatives of the (relative) oppressor group. Along the way, many, if not most, multicultural educators go through a range of emotions when dealing with classroom hostilities. Some become angry or depressed, or may even become fearful of retaliation from students who are uncritical about their unearned sense of entitlement. Some of these educators decide that it is just too draining to engage privileged students. Still others rationalize their disengagement from challenging power by stating that privileged students do not deserve to have their concerns dictate the classroom discussion. In some cases, we empathize with these stances, particularly when they come from educators who are members of oppressed groups.

But some multicultural educators feel that despite the tremendous struggle it is important to not give up on these students since they will someday be classroom teachers, if they are not already. In urban areas, the students of these prospective teachers will most likely be people of color or other members of oppressed groups. And these students do not have the privilege of not dealing with teachers from dominant groups who are oblivious to the realities of oppression and the processes for achieving a “positive” group identity. Or, the students of these prospective teachers might be members of an oppressor, not an oppressed, group (e.g., suburban White

students). Who will challenge their ideological formations? Who will teach them about the need for social justice? If members of oppressor groups do not take up this cause in the classroom, we argue that changing the role that schooling plays in reproducing the social order will be that much more difficult.

In this article, we examine the limitations of critical pedagogy, as commonly conceptualized in U.S. multicultural and social foundations fields. What we have concluded is that there is a definite need to re-invent critical pedagogy for its implementation in the more privileged spaces of U.S. teacher education programs. In order for critical pedagogy to bring about wide-scale transformation of social inequalities in the U.S., it must be re-envisioned, at least in part, around inquiries into the identity formations of those in oppressor groups. It must also be more willing to embrace the empowerment found in the development of positive identities for those in oppressor groups. In general, these positive identities should be *ideologically consistent* in their commitment to social justice for all oppressed groups.

Thinking about critical pedagogy, part of the problem in applying it to the U.S. context is that its major founder, Paulo Freire, wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1993) as a means of empowering oppressed Brazilians (as well as other oppressed people in the poorest parts of the world). But even though oppression is an overwhelming reality in both countries, the U.S. reality is different from that of Brazil. In the U.S., most live a relatively privileged life. It seems to us that many U.S. educators working in higher education may be choosing to apply critical pedagogy without fully considering the specificities of the U.S. social context. Namely, that the students in U.S. teacher education classrooms, especially those who are White and middle or upper class, are some of the most privileged humans to have ever lived in the history of humankind. Yet many of them believe that they are just “normal” humans or, amazingly enough, victims of “reverse discrimination.”

Thus, our central question is, “Should critical pedagogy be used with U.S. middle- or upper-class White students without any significant changes in the theory of critical pedagogy itself?” We believe that the answer is “No,” and a sympathetic critique of critical pedagogy is called for. Our goal in this article is to outline a refinement of critical pedagogy that deals more explicitly with students from oppressor groups and, to a lesser extent, those in oppressed groups who have internalized the discourse of the oppressor.

### **Constructing the “Oppressor Student” in Critical Pedagogy**

An *oppressor student* is a student who is a member of an oppressor group (White, male, middle- or upper-class, etc.) and a benefactor of oppressor group membership. Since oppression is a structural phenomenon, no individual person can escape their location as the oppressor any more than no individual person can escape their location as the oppressed. These changes can only occur at a societal

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level. Even the most radical White student, for example, is an oppressor because they still benefit (relative to people of color) from the social context of Whiteness. While it may be difficult for well-intentioned people to accept themselves as the oppressor, moving beyond denial is a key first step towards building a humanizing social order (Freire, 1970/1993). As White men, the authors accept the fact that we are the oppressors relative to most humans. One could say we are “oppressor educators.” This does not make us bad people, and the intention is not to build stereotypes. Rather, it locates us in a hierarchical system of oppression and reminds us that regardless of good intentions we need to work at learning how to play an effective and positive role in ending oppression given our privileged statuses.

Over the last few years, we have had numerous conversations with other critical educators about the difficulty of teaching oppressor students. Granted, our evidence is anecdotal at this point. However, we have strong reason to believe that it seems as though oppressor students exhibit common patterns of behavior in critical classrooms. When they are immersed in a sustained examination of the particular form of hegemony that gives them their unearned privilege, the oppressor student many times does poorly on class assignments, both in terms of understanding the concepts or critiques and completing assignments in a full and timely manner. Some even drop the class. Also, they seem to resist deeper readings of critical reading materials, if they read at all. It is as if they have a difficult time “hearing” those they read. Moreover, they consistently deny the existence of the structured, oppressive realities that are the social inheritance of the oppressed. Thus, these students have a difficult time understanding why they as (future) educators need to focus on social justice. They hold on to individualistic educational psychologies that privilege positivistic learning techniques or non-critical strategies of self-actualization and “higher-order” thinking skills. They often seem to not understand, or not want to understand, why members of oppressed groups do not simply assimilate to the normative order, and they feel that they have “accommodated” the oppressed as much as they are willing to. They exhibit a multiplicity of behaviors and discourses in attempts to distance themselves from self-reflection, whether at a personal or group definition of “self.”

Within this type of classroom scenario, it is easy to understand how an educator would doubt whether critical pedagogy works with oppressor students. The frustrated educator might even begin to struggle in their own mind as to whether they should be more accommodating to the oppressor student. “Should I make the reading assignments shorter and more politically neutral?” “Should I tone down the critiques I make of structural oppression, the oppressor, and hegemonic ideologies?” “Should my lessons on multiculturalism make oppressor students feel more comfortable or should I persist in ‘speaking truth to power?’” Critical pedagogy seems to have provided critical educators with few answers for dealing with the concrete problem of power and privilege in U.S. classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

We believe that to adequately outline critical pedagogy’s lack of focus on the oppressor student, we must begin with an analysis of how critical pedagogy constructs

the image of its central character: the oppressed student. Historically speaking, critical pedagogy has paid close attention to the oppressed student. And rightfully so. It is the oppressed who are traumatized by the institutional oppression endemic to our educational systems. The oppressed student is discursively the binary opposite of the oppressor student in that you cannot have an oppressed without an oppressor. As such, they are defined in opposition to one another; one is what the other is not and vice versa. Critical pedagogy is premised on the notion of the oppressed student as the idealized subject whose empowerment must take precedence in evaluating, devising, practicing, and imagining schooling. Placing the oppressed student at the center of analysis and action also puts politics at the center of schooling and pedagogy. In the critical pedagogy view, no longer are students a universal human being that can be abstracted and idealized, as they are in traditional or mainstream pedagogies. Instead, they are members of oppressed groups (and those not in the oppressed group are by definition in the oppressor group).

In critical pedagogy, the oppressed student's experience of living as an objectified and dehumanized being becomes the critical focal point for learning in the classroom. The oppressed student is seen as being close to the experience of oppressive social structures, giving them a degree of epistemological authority. The familiarity of systemic oppression provides the motivation to gain not just the skills to "read the word" but also to "read the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987). That is to say, the curriculum espoused by critical pedagogist combines traditional literacy skills with the project of developing a collective consciousness about the oppressive nature of social and cultural institutions (Freire, 1969/1973). This intimacy with oppression is seen as a source of knowledge that can be developed into a critical literacy experience that empowers students to challenge how they are represented and transform the institutions that maintain the status quo.

No one in critical pedagogy has made the argument for the educational self-determination of the oppressed better than Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/1993) describes a philosophy of education and liberation, arguing that the oppressed must challenge that which oppresses them without becoming like the oppressors. The role of the oppressor is central to his construction of a pedagogy of the oppressed (Allen, 2005). For example, he states that the violence of the oppressors makes them dehumanized. The oppressed should not desire to internalize the violence of the oppressors in their struggle to overthrow that which dehumanizes them. If the oppressed become like the oppressor, both are dehumanized. In the struggle to overcome oppression, the oppressed must restore humanity to all because the oppressor is usually not in a position to do so. Therefore, the humanistic duty of the oppressed is to liberate themselves and the oppressors. Freire suggests that the oppressed must be guided by a "radical love" for all humanity so that they do not turn out like the oppressor, who is full of fear and hate.

However, there are persistent and troubling obstacles in critical pedagogy classrooms that inhibit the construction of critical and collective consciousnesses.

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One of the pedagogical struggles often articulated by critical pedagogists is that the oppressed student does not always understand the ways in which oppression has become part of their everyday lives (Giroux, 1983). In fact, the oppressed student might not even believe that they are oppressed. The oppressed student, as a member of an oppressed group, may exhibit thoughts and behaviors that are consensual with their own oppression. Their subjective and ideological formations have been colonized by oppressing, hegemonic discourses (McLaren, 1994).

Take for example the case of Cuban-American students in one author's classroom. During an exercise called "The Vocabulary of Images," the students were asked to use photographs from magazines to express their identity. It seemed that the majority of these students identified themselves as White and/or Hispanic but not Latina/o. This choice of identity signifiers is interesting. They seemed to desire an association with a European heritage, whether that was with a more Northern European signifier like "White" or the more Iberian-oriented signifier of "Hispanic." There seemed to be an almost complete denial of a possible Mestizo identity, which the term "Latina/o" is more likely to signify. There was almost no reference to their potential indigenous and African ancestry (although it is possible that a few did have solely European ancestry). Instead, they opted for the "racial purity" of the Hispanic White. There was a strong disassociation with any group that symbolized darker skin color.

This phenomenon may be perceived as odd as some scholars would argue that Cuban Americans are Latina/o. Nevertheless, new studies such as the one done by Maria del Carmen Cano (as cited by Robinson, 2000) reveals and exposes the history of racism in Cuba where darker skin color has as a consequence social injustice. The oppressor identities of many of the Cuban exiles have deep historical roots in the enslavement of Africans. In fact, their racial ideologies are rather consistent with those of other lighter-skinned people in Latin America (Adams, 2001; Allen, 2001; Skidmore, 1990; Wade, 1993). The larger irony of this situation is that White Americans do not think of Cuban Americans as either White or European. This was evidenced during the Elian Gonzalez spectacle. Right-wing Cuban Americans believed that they were "mainstream" until they saw the nation's general response to their claims of injustice. White America basically saw them as just one more group of "ungrateful Latino immigrants" and not as fellow Whites or Europeans. Rather than forming radical alliances with other Latino groups in fighting White supremacy, many Cuban Americans in South Florida have instead chosen to identify with Europe and Whiteness in an attempt to gain political support for their attempt to re-colonize Cuba.

When students demonstrate a "colonized mentality" (Fanon, 1952/1967), critical pedagogy has traditionally suggested that the teacher should construct an educational experience that engages the oppressed in a critical examination of their social location within the totality of the hierarchical social structure in question. Crucial to this pedagogical theory is the notion that dialogical conflict provides a means to develop a critical consciousness of the oppressed student's place and role in the perpetuation of an oppressive social structure. For instance, Freire (1970/1993) asserts that a

contradiction of identity exists in that the oppressed have an internalized duality of consciousness. Being “themselves” is in contradiction with being like the oppressor. Within the territory of the oppressor, there are tremendous social forces that cause the oppressed to internalize the model of the oppressor. Thus, the liberation of this contradiction is a painful process where the oppressed deconstruct the world of oppression by transforming their realities through a liberating and humanistic pedagogical experience. This experience is not an individualistic experience but a collective one that calls them to become agents of their own history.

The political project of critical pedagogy is a redefinition of education and literacy as a means for political unification among the oppressed, with the ultimate goal being social transformation. But what is meant by “social transformation” in critical pedagogy? By what political process should this social transformation occur? Our reading of critical pedagogy is that the primary vision of social transformation is that of a revolution by the oppressed. In other words, the oppressed should not wait for the oppressor to change, and they should liberate themselves. We do not necessarily believe that most critical pedagogists are directly calling for armed revolutions by the oppressed and their allies. However, we do believe that armed revolution is an assumed feature of the vision of critical pedagogy as those in our field do little to thwart thoughts of armed revolt in our discourse. Although armed revolution probably should not automatically be the first choice, it is an exercise in privilege to tell those who are being systematically killed that they should use more peaceful strategies to humanize the oppressor.

We also believe that the discourse-practices of critical pedagogy typically support social movements, such as the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. When critical pedagogists speak of social action, we assume that social movements are a primary option. Social movements differ from revolutions in their appeals to the oppressor. Social movements play on the moral sensibilities of the oppressors in the hope that they will change the cultural, institutional, and legal practices that are already in place in, say, a nation-state. Revolutions, by definition, seek to create *a new nation-state* by usurping the governmental power of the oppressor. The main strategy is not to appeal to the moral sensibilities of the oppressor. The oppressor’s capacity to stop oppressing in an expedient manner is much more hopeless in a revolutionary perspective. And that can often be an accurate assessment. In sum, the political course of social transformation being promoted by critical pedagogy varies. However, critical pedagogy discourse provides the chance to discuss the dialectics between armed and cultural revolutions. Moreover, the larger point is that constructions of the characteristics of the oppressors are ever-present in discussions about how to deal with them, whether the discourse explicitly mentions them or not. In other words, one cannot debate the options of armed versus cultural revolutions without discussing the characteristics of oppressors.

How is the oppressor student represented in the critical pedagogy paradigm? This is much more difficult to describe because the experiences and concerns of

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the oppressed student are the primary focus. After all, the intent is to de-center the knowledge legitimated by oppressors through their ideological apparatuses (Althusser, 1971). We do believe, though, that there is an implied pedagogy *for* the oppressor in critical pedagogy discourse. Students from the oppressor group are to be engaged in a pedagogy that challenges them to gain a consciousness of how they contribute to hegemony. They are asked to form a critical consciousness of how society and schools function to reproduce social inequality through cultural and institutional processes. And above all, they are asked to intervene in hegemonic constructions on behalf of the oppressed and challenge members of their own group. The oppressor student is asked to align with the oppressed in acts of social transformation that are revolutionary and democratic.

In fact, some believe that the oppressor is oppressed, that indeed we are all oppressed. For instance, some say that the oppressor is “oppressed” by his/her unfounded fear of the Other and lives their life seeking to create a comfortable place away from those they fear. However, this notion goes too far. If everyone is oppressed, then the term “oppressed” loses its value in naming a different type of human experience. Freire (1970/1993) clarifies this issue by saying that the oppressor is *dehumanized* but not oppressed. More importantly, critical pedagogy discourse tends to hold out little hope for the majority of oppressors to move past their dehumanizing ways and take up radical causes. For example, Freire (1970/1993) alludes to the notion that the oppressors will not liberate other oppressors because they enjoy a world of privilege. This implies that their sense of morality will not motivate them to correct that which is socially unjust because they are too invested in their dehumanizing situation. However, Freire does show hope for some of the oppressors when he describes a path for the “rebirth” of the oppressor (Allen, 2005). U.S. critical pedagogy needs to pay more attention to this part of Freire’s theorization.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the critical pedagogy paradigm seems unsuited for privileged geographical and cultural contexts. Remember that the emphasis in critical pedagogy is on experience that is close to the most negative consequences of oppression. Critical pedagogy, at least that derived from a Freirean lineage, was meant to speak to poor Brazilians, other poor Latin Americans, and oppressed groups in other extremely poor parts of the world. This version of critical pedagogy may transfer well to inner-city classrooms in the U.S., although little research has been done to provide much needed evidence, support, and critique. But in U.S. teacher education programs, most of the students are White and middle class, not to mention that they come from hyper-segregated pockets of extreme wealth and power that they tend to see as simply “normal.” These students certainly live in a different world and worldview than poor Brazilians and other Latin Americans of color.

How do we use critical pedagogy with these privileged teacher credential students when they have not lived close to the traumatizing effects of, as well as daily struggles against, colonization and structural oppression? Should we base instruction primarily on *their* experiences when their lives are so detached from



the realities of the oppressed? Maybe we could focus on the relative oppressions that they have experienced. For example, many teachers-to-be are women. So could we not emphasize gender as a totality of structural oppression? But will White middle-class women, who comprise the vast majority of the U.S. teacher workforce, necessarily translate their understandings of gender oppression to racial and economic oppression? And what should a critical educator do if their class consists of a large contingent of white middle-class men?

Our suggestion is that critical pedagogy needs to more strongly emphasize the relational construction of identity for both oppressed and oppressor students. It is the tension around these social identities that most of us meet head-on in our classrooms as we work towards the abolition of hegemonic mechanisms like tracking and the hidden curriculum. We believe that a more explicit theorization of the oppressor student that includes the construction of their specific group identity and the reconstruction of it towards a more positive counterhegemonic sense of individual-self, group-self, and Other is needed.

### **The Undertheorization of the Oppressor Student in Critical Pedagogy**

Due to the global scale of U.S. hegemony, U.S. political elites dictate externally to countries around the world and internally to those who are non-dominant how the economy should work and what counts as legitimate knowledge (Spring, 1998). Thus, the project of developing a critical consciousness of hegemony and oppression should be a significant educational goal for educators of social studies teachers. In addition, the development of consciousness should be ideologically consistent across multiple totalities of oppression. Students should understand that they can be simultaneously the oppressor within one totality and the oppressed within another, and they should be concerned about both their own oppression and their oppression of others (Collins, 2000; West, 1999). After all, we are all members of a group that has more relative power and privilege than some other group. The difficulty in practice is that people tend to be closer to a consciousness of their oppressed identities than they are of their oppressor identities. For example, in our experience working-class White men are more likely to embrace a class-based critique of schooling than a race- or gender-based one. The critical pedagogy literature provides little information on how to teach working-class White men in the U.S. about their complicity with the oppression of women and people of color.

Critical pedagogy's undertheorization of students representing oppressor groups represents a hidden hopelessness. If critical pedagogy made a shift toward paying theoretical and practical attention to oppressor students, then it must coincide with a new belief in the possibility that oppressor students can change and that their transformation is a major component of counterhegemonic projects (Allen, in press). In part, critical pedagogy's undertheorization of the oppressor student is due to its political

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project of developing a collective sense of agency among the oppressed as a means of revolution and self-determination. However, as discussed earlier, political revolution is not the only type of radical political vision that the oppressed consider and use.

In some social contexts, the political option of revolution might not be an immediately viable strategy. For example, revolutions by slaves in the Americas occurred more frequently in colonies and/or nations where those who were enslaved outnumbered the oppressor (e.g., 1804 Haitian Revolution). However, in the U.S. the construction of an enormous white polity violently opposed to Black integration and/or self-determination has long dampened the prospects an African-American armed revolution (Du Bois, 1935). Instead of revolution, the oppressed and their allies have more often opted for non-violent means of social change, such as that practiced during the Civil Rights Movement or the Women's Movement. In a social or civil rights movement, there is still a need to develop a collective, unified agency among the oppressed. But unlike the vision of armed revolution, there is an essential appeal to the moral sensibilities of the oppressors in order to bring about social and legal change within the existing nation-state.

We argue that critical pedagogy and critical educators should take another look at the social movement perspective. The issue of transforming the oppressor, at least strategically and contingently for the purpose of civil rights campaigns in the U.S., should be a more central focus, although as Bell (1992) points out this option has many limitations. The strategy would be to influence the perspectives, ideologies, and behaviors of enough members of powerful and privileged identity groups so that new institutional and legal policies would be enacted. The contingency would be that this strategy would have to produce tangible results in transforming the systems of inequality addressed, or else a new strategy would need to be adopted. And in the face of structural oppression, failure is likely. But failing to try is worse (Bell, 1992).

Critical pedagogists need to re-examine their root strategy for teaching for social justice. While the skill and charisma of critical pedagogists are factors on an individual level, our assumption is that critical pedagogists are no more or no less skilled and charismatic than other types of educators. At some point, we have to consider that the possibility that the content of our "critical" curriculum and its inherent assumptions might be the problem (Allen, 2005). The authors' very anecdotal evidence suggests that privileged students are seldom transformed by the typical critical pedagogy literature. Certainly, some do change, but too often the attraction of even these students to critical pedagogy is that it shows them how *they* have been oppressed, thus allowing them to avoid a significant interrogation of how they contribute to the oppression of others. Their investment in specific, concrete, and privileged social identities, such as Whiteness, remains unchallenged.

Although less common, another possible reaction to critical pedagogy literature is that students from oppressor groups do believe that the literature and classroom discussions have changed their understanding of their role as the oppressor in a system of hegemony. Yet they still think and act in ways that do little to serve as a meaning-

ful intervention into the system of privileges that they benefit from on a daily basis. Primarily, this is because critical pedagogy texts often stay at the level of metatheory on oppression and do not deal extensively with the specificities of oppressive social identity relationships (Ellsworth, 1989) the way that much critical multiculturalism does (e.g., Tatum, 1997). Oppression is a social construction that produces different kinds of experiences for the oppressed and the oppressor. In a critical multiculturalism framework, knowledge comes from the excavation of a *particular* oppressive relationship. The oppressed learns how to resist the material and representational consequences of oppression and transform its cultural and institutional manifestation. The oppressor learns how their identity has allowed them, or even required them, to develop purposeful misunderstandings of themselves and the Other (Mills, 1997). Also, they learn how to intervene as members of the oppressor group in systems that give them unearned privilege and power (Allen, 2005).

We believe that strategically and contingently focusing on the formation of the oppressor identity also addresses one of the major hurdles of critical pedagogy, namely the internalization of oppression by members of the oppressed group. When oppressed students engage in a critique of the identity formation of the oppressor, their desire to want to be like the oppressor dissolves with greater consistency. They learn how the oppressor marshals resources to perpetuate their unearned advantages. And when they see their classmates from oppressor groups change before their eyes, it is difficult to hold on to an assimilationist, fatalistic, or repressed identity (Rossatto, 2005). In both of our classrooms, we have had numerous students of color who enter the course with uncritical beliefs of the achievement ideology. Their unproblematized belief in the meritocracy system leaves them critical of others in their racial group who engage in radical political actions. For example, many Mexican-American and Hispanic students who have internalized White racism look down upon the Chicano movement. Through interrogations of Whiteness and the transformation of Whites in the classroom, these Mexican-American and Hispanic students often have a change of consciousness. Many become more accepting and even more politically committed to radicalized identities. They also gain an understanding of how they have internalized the fears and misunderstandings that Whites have of other people of color, especially Blacks and Indians. The potential for coalitions that can arise out of sustained critiques of oppressor identities is invigorating for those who have lost hope in achieving an egalitarian society.

Thus, critical pedagogy's current theorization of the oppressor student inhibits the development of social movements in the U.S. because it fails to specifically address, critique, and transform the identity politics of particular powerful groups, namely Whites and men. To move beyond the current situation, what would a pedagogy that strategically and contingently re-centers the oppressor student for the purposes of transforming the oppressor-oppressed relationship look like? Upon what premises would it be based?

### **Toward a Pedagogy for the Oppressor Student**

Incorporating theories of identity from critical social psychology, we propose a pedagogy for the oppressor that puts attempts to transform the oppressor student at the center of the educational experience. The main idea is that a critical consciousness of the lived experience of the oppressed and the oppressor must be learned through direct engagement with the particular system of oppression that is seen as most immediately related to the oppressor-oppressed relation at hand (Collins, 2000). It is often said that the oppressed have a “double consciousness” in that they have to know how to negotiate both their homeplace and the world of the oppressor (hooks, 1990). The oppressor student needs to examine what the double consciousness of the oppressed means for their own consciousness, or lack thereof. That is, how has the oppressor’s lack of awareness about double consciousness formed structured blindness in their perception of themselves and the world?

For example, in urban schools teachers are most likely to be White and students are most likely to be people of color. In this scenario, a critical pedagogical intervention can begin by examining schooling and identity within the social context of Whiteness, as that is the most obvious and historically compelling identity difference between teacher and students. The White educator needs to be engaged in people of color’s representations of their double consciousnesses. They must be engaged in critiques of how their lack of reflection on the double consciousnesses of Others constructs problematic White racial identities, and thus White-dominant social contexts. In the case of Whiteness, we have found that books like Beverly Daniel Tatum’s (1997) *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* and films like *The Color of Fear* and *Ethnic Notions* to be good resources to begin challenging and transforming White supremacist ideologies.

Contrary to popular belief, critical pedagogy is, or at least should be, about more than direct political action; it is also conceptually driven. In other words, students need to learn important concepts, which can in turn enhance political action. One important concept that needs to be more central to critical pedagogy is the notion of identity. Identity is a social construction rather than a biological fact, and it is a concrete experience rather than an abstraction. It is learned through interactions in a world that we are inserted into at birth. We learn who we are through our relationships with each other, thus disintegrating our sense of being as a universal human being. Some of us come to understand that our social reality makes us into particular beings or members of identity groups. Critical social psychology suggests that the oppressed are more likely than the oppressor to learn that they are a particular, not a universal, being because their interactions with the oppressor and their technologies of surveillance, such as schools and the media, tells them that they are not “normal.” Through multiple micro—and macro—aggressions, they learn that they are the “alien” or the “Other” to what is constructed as the normal, dominant, or oppressor being. Conversely, the oppressors do not have to think about how they are surveilled in the domain of the oppressor because they are the

surveillers, whether they know it or not (Allen, 2002; Tatum, 1997). This teaches them that they are normal or simply “human.”

Thus, the oppressor rarely develops an articulated sense of their specific experience as a member of a privileged group, unless it is an identity that they have constructed for themselves in order to maintain their oppressor status. Rarely would this identity be constructed in alliance with the criticisms offered by members of the oppressed group. For example, most Whites believe that they are nice, kind, caring, and benevolent people who have worked hard to obtain their wealth and status (Gallagher, 1997). They seem to have little consciousness of how many people of color distrust and fear them (hooks, 1990). Also, they are unaware, or repress awareness, of their day-to-day privileges, let alone what was done historically to procure the privileges that come with being White in a society built by White racism (Leonardo, 2005; McIntosh, 1997).

Our belief is that oppressors can neither come to the realization that they are members of an oppressor group nor come to a problematized understanding of their oppressor identity without a significant emotional and cognitive experience. We are skeptical that mere “safe” discourse is in any way effective in achieving the radical transformation of the oppressor’s consciousness that is necessary in order to make placing the oppressor student at the center of pedagogy a worthwhile endeavor. In our notion of a pedagogy for the oppressor, being in “the center” is more like being in the “hot seat” or being the spectacle of oppression that serves as the focus of inquiry and critique. The oppressor student must be confronted with a systematic and persistent deconstruction of their privileged identity, and, above all, they must be in an educational context where they are a part of, but not in control of, the classroom discourse. Some critical pedagogists may feel that this is a paternalistic approach to teaching. However, we should not confuse the pedagogy for the oppressor with the pedagogy of the oppressed. Freire (1970/1993) is instructive when he says,

The restraints imposed by the former oppressed on their oppressors, so that the latter cannot reassume their former position, do not constitute *oppression*. An act is only oppressive when it prevents people from being more fully human. Accordingly, these necessary restraints do not *in themselves* signify that yesterday’s oppressed have become today’s oppressors. (pp. 38-39)

The specific content of their deconstruction should be located within the critical multicultural discourse that is in question, whether that is Whiteness, patriarchy, capitalism, or intersecting oppressions within matrices of domination (Collins, 2000). In addition, we believe that critical pedagogy’s postmodern attention to “voice” must be revised when teaching oppressor students. In our experience, we find that oppressor students have a much more difficult time listening than they do speaking. For them, they must work at listening to Others and not dominating the discussion. At the same time, they need to be engaged participants. We the authors, as White men, have undergone, and continue to undergo, this process ourselves.

It is common for oppressor students to exhibit the qualities of the oppressor in

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classroom activities. One author experienced an interesting situation in Miami. Attempting to create empathy among pre-service teachers for non-English speaking students, he created a theatrical simulation in his classroom. The main idea of the exercise was for students to get a sense of what it is like to be an outsider to a new culture. After dividing into two groups, students met in separate rooms to create a fictitious culture with its own particular gender roles, linguistic codes, etc. They tended to focus on behavior patterns based on real and imagined or dominant and subordinate belief practices particular to their cultural creation. They had the opportunity to practice before the play took place. The last directions given were that one student at a time would visit the other culture as if he or she were a tourist, and each tourist should try to interact with “the people” in an attempt to get to know their coded ways of living. All students had the opportunity to visit the simulated Other.

During the exercise, what stood out to the professor was that when oppressor students, especially Whites, were visiting the “foreign culture” they often seemed compelled to impose their own culture onto the other group. This seemed odd since no directions were given to proceed this way. But given the theory that we have described in this article, behavior like this is to be expected. It seemed that just as oppressors in the real world have unacknowledged high-status cultural capital and privileged access to upward mobility, oppressor students in this exercise seemed to believe that it was natural to not have to understand the cultures of Others.

Although sub-oppressors commit their share of aggressions against those with less relative privilege, generally speaking the oppressed rarely operate with the same sense of cultural and political entitlement as more absolute oppressor students, such as middle- and upper-class Whites. Instead, they tend to live everyday life through the duality of the White world versus the homeplace (hooks, 1990). For example, Fordham (1988) says that the few Blacks who do “make it” in the U.S. economic structure often have to change how they manifest their racial identity. In order to be socially mobile, they must be able to appease White gatekeepers along the way. Many do so by assimilating to a White model of humanity in order to ascend up traditional ladders of success. Still others try to “lift as they climb,” but doing so can take a tremendous emotional toll. Either way, it is evident that members of oppressed groups know consciously or unconsciously who is in charge, and they react with this in mind, though not uniformly, as a means of coping and survival.

As McIntosh (1997) illustrates, racism is (to some) an invisible system of conferring the dominance of one racial group over another. Systemic White racism occupies and controls space (Allen, 2002). It is firmly entrenched. This is why we are arguing for a more direct and interventionist pedagogy. The critical educator needs to realize the depth of the psychological dysfunction that goes into maintaining a hegemonic oppressor identity (Mills, 1997). They need to understand the sense of territoriality that oppression and oppressor students create in classrooms. They also need to understand their own complicity in creating this territory (Allen, 2002). No easy, comfortable exercises will do when it comes to subverting and dismantling the territories of the oppressor.

In classrooms that adopt the pedagogy for the oppressor student that we are articulating, oppressor students will be the center of attention and criticism. The oppressor students who are unaccustomed to being the subject of discussion will often dismiss or deny criticisms aimed at their oppressor ideologies, that is, unless they are shown models of how they can interact differently by working against the system of oppression that they are a part of. Critical pedagogy has yet to provide more explicit psychological development models for either oppressed or oppressor. On one hand, this is understandable in that most of the psychological models produced by White and/or male academics universalize and essentialize humanity. These types of models have been very damaging to the oppressed. On the other hand, many critical pedagogists have embraced extreme forms of anti-essentialism that dismiss the notion that individuals share in the status of identity groups to which they belong, as if *groups* can have high status but *individual group members* are not responsible for their unearned high status. It is ironic that a paradigm so rooted in a positive evaluation of collective social transformation by the people ultimately relies so much on an individualistic constructivist model of identity.

The authors believe that there are critical social psychological models that can at least give those in oppressor groups a path towards being an ally with the oppressed in abolishing the system of oppression in question. It is crucial that identities rooted in oppressive ideologies are disaffirmed whereas those rooted in counterhegemonic ideologies are affirmed. For example, Janet Helms (1990) has done significant work in outlining a model for the development of positive White racial identities that are anti-racist. We have found that models such as these combined with sustained critiques of oppressor identity formations and oppressors' investments in their higher social status have had a significant impact on the transformation of consciousness for not only oppressor students but also oppressed students who have either internalized the oppressor's discourse or simply given up hope.

A pedagogy for the oppressor student needs to address the problematic of guilt. Guilt has a powerful effect on critical classrooms, and it is not given adequate attention. In many ways, guilt is a taboo subject in critical pedagogy. This could be a reaction to knowledge of how Christianity in combination with White supremacy used guilt as a weapon of psychological colonization. However, White supremacist Christians did not invent guilt; that would be giving them too much credit. Guilt is a very human emotion, much like sadness and joy. So ignoring guilt will not make it go away. Repressing guilt only leads to avoidance, denial, and defensiveness. But guilt can be a very powerful tool if we think of it in structural terms. Guilt stems from a sense of complicity with a moral wrong. It enters one's consciousness when one realizes their culpability for an immoral state of affairs, such as systemic White supremacy. Oppressors do not simply shift from complete oblivion of social wrongs to moral outrage at oppression without at least some initial feelings of guilt. True, the education of oppressor students should do more than just make them feel guilty. But we are not sure how transformation of consciousness can occur without the existence

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of guilt. We would dread the classroom of uncritical oppressor students who did not sense guilt when presented with the realities of the oppressed. That would be a very difficult class, indeed. A more positive approach to the realities of guilt is to figure out how to deal with it candidly as it comes up in the course of both learning and social justice work. In other words, we should expect those of the oppressor group to feel guilt, even if they have been doing social justice work for a long time. It is not something that simply fades away, although certainly not everyone experiences it to the same degree. Thus, it is best to consider it as simply part of the work and create affinity groups where feelings of guilt can be shared, discussed, and transformed.

Love can be a powerful anecdote for guilt. Oppressor students need to be taught how to love because their indoctrination as oppressors has taught them distorted notions of love. In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm (1956/2000) argues that love is often thought of as something one “falls into” rather than as the outcome of an ongoing process of building an authentic and trusting relationship. Since individuals within oppressive systems are dehumanized, love within this context is a process where the parties involved support one another in their struggle to become fully human. To love is to make one another stronger so that the partners in the relationship can better work against that which seeks to make them weak. Radical love is a loving practice dedicated to social justice. It takes into account that people are differentially situated within hierarchies of oppression. Therefore, how an oppressor student should love and be loved is different from that of the oppressed student. It is contextualized by their positionality. The oppressor student needs to learn how to dedicate themselves to the process of abolishing oppressive systems that dehumanize the oppressed. The oppressor student needs to unlearn the ways in which their beliefs have consequences that negatively affect the oppressed. The oppressor student needs to learn how to be accountable for their group privilege and do what is necessary to put a stop to it.

Loving the oppressor student requires that they be treated as capable of becoming more fully human once released from their investment in their oppressor status. Loving the oppressor student requires interventions that help them learn how to not dehumanize themselves and others. It requires not allowing them to take on the oppressor role in dialogue. And it requires letting them know that if they make a mistake they will still be loved. That is radical love.

When radical love is practiced in the classroom, a condition exists where students work to humanize one another in direct but loving ways. Real trust, though always in process, is seen as a possible goal. Freire says that we need a pedagogy of love where we can “feel good when we are together with others” (Rossatto, 2005, p. 19). We believe that if educators honestly and passionately express their radical love for humanity and their intolerance for oppression then oppressor students are more likely to move beyond their knee-jerk reactions to feelings of guilt. They need to know that someone is going to help them through the process of change, especially if that someone, namely the teacher, has gone through those changes



themselves. Both authors, as White men from working-class backgrounds, believe that it is important that we share many stories about our own transformations in coming to understand White and male privilege. We make ourselves into models of what is possible to show that there are other ways of being, ways that embrace the positive aspects of our transformed oppressor identities.

In conclusion, social transformation cannot be accomplished with Whites (and other oppressor) students alone, but it cannot be realized without them either (Sheets, 2000). Given that the majority of the people in the U.S. are White (or White-oriented), critical pedagogy needs to work with privileged students or else it will fail to produce significant and radical changes. There is no question that this is tremendously difficult work (see, e.g., Obidah & Teel, 2001). But the power and privilege often promoted by oppressor students needs to be subverted. Yet subverting that power in face-to-face interactions requires practices and theories that go beyond the postmodern pedagogies that critical educators have become accustomed to. An oppressor student is different from an oppressed student. And any pedagogy that fails to account for this difference is unlikely to contribute to meaningful social change.

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