



Bridging the potential-realization gap: one educator's journey toward a praxis for personal and collective liberation

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Abstract: In this personal essay, I discuss how shifts in my positionality as an educator changed the dynamics of power between me and my students, how the threshold between informal education and the School marked a clear delineation of power that placed us on opposite sides. My journey as an educator paralleled my personal journey as a Black man in the United States, during which I had to navigate the troubled intersection between race and disability. Along the way I became aware of a “potential-realization gap” – internalized as a hovering sense of inadequacy, and externalized as a deep disillusionment with people and the world. Where once race had operated on my consciousness from the margins, certain experiences forced me to contend with my identity in ways I had been able to avoid before, in part due to a stark divide between mind and body. With racial consciousness came indignation, manifest in my orientation as a teacher activist, and which I imposed upon my students as the imperative for their – but not my own – liberation. Wading through toxic environments, spaces of collective trauma and bureaucratic rot, any attempts to make change were usually met with fierce resistance. This disconnect, between mind and body, theory and praxis, school and community, reality and my ideals – exacerbated by racial trauma and ADHD – tore a jagged fissure through my career. Lost in all of this were the young people I was ostensibly fighting for, yet for so long failed to recognize as agents in their own liberation. I had sought in vain the pedagogical method, the repositioning, the creative freedom – something – that would allow me to reconcile the disparities. But it wasn't until I approached the decision to leave schools in favor of community education, that I discovered participatory action research (PAR), and with it the need to ground my own work, and that of my charges, in identity, history, shared struggle, and building community. In PAR, I discovered the possibility for *collective* liberation – a means for bridging the gap within myself, and between myself and the communities I serve.

¹ Kermit O has been involved in education for nearly two decades, as a mentor, coach, tutor, curriculum designer, and secondary school teacher. Disillusionment with institutions led him to explore alternative formations toward the practice of education as liberation. Understanding how education reproduces oppression along multiple axes, including race, gender, and class, Kermit strives to reimagine the ways adults and young people can engage with each other in the co-construction of knowledge, shared struggle, mutual support, and building community.

Keywords: mind-body split, potential-realization gap, individualism, racial trauma, participatory action research

Resumen: En este ensayo personal, analizo cómo los cambios en mi posicionalidad como educadora cambiaron la dinámica de poder entre mis alumnos y yo, cómo cruzar el umbral de la educación informal a la Escuela marcó una clara delimitación del poder que nos colocó en lados opuestos. Mi viaje como educador fue paralelo a mi viaje personal como hombre negro en los Estados Unidos, durante el cual tuve que navegar por la intersección peligrosa entre raza y discapacidad. A lo largo del camino, me di cuenta de una "brecha de realización potencial", internalizada como una sensación flotante de insuficiencia y exteriorizada como una profunda desilusión con las personas y el mundo. Donde una vez la raza había operado en mi conciencia desde los márgenes, ciertas experiencias me obligaron a lidiar con mi identidad de formas que había podido evitar antes, en parte debido a una marcada división entre mente y cuerpo. Con la conciencia racial vino la indignación, que se manifestó en mi orientación como docente activista, y que impuse a mis alumnos como imperativo para su liberación, pero no la mía. Vadeando a través de entornos tóxicos, espacios de trauma colectivo y podredumbre burocrática, cualquier intento de traer cambio se encontró con una feroz resistencia. La desconexión entre mente y cuerpo, teoría y praxis, escuela y comunidad, realidad y mis ideales — exacerbados por el trauma racial y el TDAH — cortó una fisura dentada a través de mi carrera. Perdidos en todo esto estaban los jóvenes por los que yo ostensiblemente luchaba, pero durante tanto tiempo no logré reconocer como agentes de su propia liberación. Había buscado en vano el método pedagógico, el reposicionamiento, la libertad creativa — algo — que me permitiera conciliar las disparidades. Pero no fue hasta que me acerqué a la decisión de dejar las escuelas a favor de la educación comunitaria, que descubrí la investigación acción participativa (IAP), y con ella la necesidad de situar mi propio trabajo, y el de mis estudiantes, en identidad, historia, lucha compartida, y construcción de comunidad. En IAP, descubrí la posibilidad de la liberación colectiva y un medio para cerrar la brecha dentro de mí y entre mí y las comunidades a las que sirvo.

Palabras clave: división mente-cuerpo, brecha de realización potencial, individualismo, trauma racial, investigación-acción participativa

Résumé : Dans cet essai personnel, je discute de la manière dont les changements dans ma positionnalité en tant qu'éducateur ont changé la dynamique du pouvoir entre moi et mes élèves, comment le franchissement du seuil de l'éducation informelle à l'École a marqué une délimitation claire du pouvoir qui nous a placés sur des côtés opposés. Mon parcours en tant qu'éducateur a été parallèle à mon parcours personnel en tant qu'homme noir aux États-Unis, au cours duquel j'ai dû naviguer à l'intersection troublée entre la race et le handicap. En cours de route, j'ai pris conscience d'un « écart de réalisation du potentiel » - intériorisé comme un sentiment d'inadéquation planant, et extériorisé comme une profonde désillusion envers les gens et le monde. Là où autrefois la race avait opéré ma conscience depuis les marges, certaines expériences m'ont forcé à lutter contre mon identité d'une manière que j'avais pu éviter auparavant, en partie à cause d'un fossé entre l'esprit et le corps. Avec la conscience raciale est venue l'indignation, manifestée dans mon orientation d'enseignant activiste, et que j'ai imposée à mes élèves comme l'impératif de leur libération - mais pas la mienne. En pataugeant dans des environnements toxiques, des espaces de traumatisme collectif et de pourriture bureaucratique, toute tentative de changement se heurtait généralement à une résistance farouche. Cette déconnexion, entre l'esprit et le corps, la théorie et la praxis, l'école et la communauté, la réalité et mes idéaux - exacerbée par le

traumatisme racial et le TDAH - a déchiré une fissure déchiquetée dans ma carrière. Perdus dans tout cela, il y avait les jeunes pour lesquels je me battais ostensiblement, mais pendant si longtemps, je n'ai pas réussi à me reconnaître comme agents de leur propre libération. J'avais cherché en vain la méthode pédagogique, le repositionnement, la liberté créatrice - quelque chose - qui me permettrait de concilier les disparités. Mais ce n'est que lorsque j'ai abordé la décision de quitter l'école au profit de l'éducation communautaire, que j'ai découvert la recherche-action participative (RAP), et avec elle la nécessité de situer mon propre travail, et celui de mes élèves, dans l'identité, l'histoire, lutte partagée et renforcement de la communauté. En RAP, j'ai découvert la possibilité d'une libération collective et un moyen de combler le fossé en moi-même et entre moi-même et les communautés que je sers.

Mots clés : division corps-esprit, écart de réalisation du potentiel, individualisme, traumatisme racial, recherche-action participative

Resumo: Neste ensaio pessoal, analiso como as mudanças na minha posição como educador mudaram a dinâmica de poder entre mim e meus alunos, como cruzar o limiar da educação informal para a Escola marcou um delineamento claro de poder que nos colocou em lados opostos. Minha jornada como educador foi paralela à minha jornada pessoal como homem negro nos Estados Unidos, durante a qual tive que navegar na perigosa interseção entre raça e deficiência. Ao longo do caminho, tomei consciência de uma "lacuna potencial de realização", internalizada como uma sensação flutuante de inadequação e externalizada como uma profunda desilusão com as pessoas e o mundo. Onde a raça havia operado em minha consciência a partir das margens, certas experiências me forçaram a lidar com minha identidade de maneiras que eu havia sido capaz de evitar antes, em parte devido a uma divisão acentuada entre mente e corpo. Com a consciência racial veio a indignação, que se manifestou em minha orientação como professora ativista, e que impus aos meus alunos como um imperativo para sua libertação, mas não minha. Vagando por ambientes tóxicos, espaços de trauma coletivo e podridão burocrática, qualquer tentativa de trazer mudanças encontrava uma resistência feroz. A desconexão entre mente e corpo, teoria e prática, escola e comunidade, realidade e meus ideais - exacerbada pelo trauma racial e TDAH - abriu uma fissura dentada ao longo de minha carreira. Perdidos em tudo isso estavam os jovens pelos quais lutei ostensivamente, mas por tanto tempo não consegui reconhecer como agentes de sua própria libertação. Tinha procurado em vão o método pedagógico, o reposicionamento, a liberdade criativa - algo - que me permitisse conciliar disparidades. Mas foi só quando me aproximei da decisão de deixar as escolas em favor da educação comunitária que descobri a pesquisa-ação participativa (PAP), e com ela a necessidade de fundar o meu próprio trabalho e o dos meus alunos em identidade, história, luta compartilhada e construção de comunidade. No PAP, descobri a possibilidade de libertação coletiva e um meio de preencher a lacuna dentro de mim e entre mim e as comunidades que sirvo.

Palavras chave: divisão mente-corpo, lacuna de potencial-realização, individualismo, trauma racial, pesquisa-ação participativa

Introduction

I've been involved in education for nearly two decades, as a mentor, coach, tutor, and a classroom teacher. Ever since I was a child, I've had this orientation towards justice, never accepting the adage "life is unfair". Not uncritically. Because why *couldn't* it be fair? As I got older, this orientation pushed me towards social justice work, and thinking about equity as it applied to the different dynamics of power in society. More recently, I've become disillusioned with discourses around equity, and even justice, both of which aim to remedy harm, but continue to situate these practices within existing – and fundamentally oppressive – systems. As an educator, my internal compass has jostled erratically in search of a moral, philosophical, teleological North, which I now understand to be nothing less than liberation.

My start as an educator was informal: tutoring younger family members, or the children of my parents' friends. I coached basketball, taught web design at summer camps, and even as a teenager found myself in a sort of mentoring role for younger kids. For reasons I couldn't discern at the time, children always seemed fascinated by me. In retrospect I decided this affinity was because I engaged them in an authentic way, never condescending to them. I met their gazes as directly, as if they were my peers. I treated them like people, rather than novelties or curiosities. But once I became a "teacher", I lost this authentic connection, as the dynamic between myself and young people became shaped by ideology and mediated by power.

My path has been plagued by fits and starts: six different colleges, two unfinished graduate degrees and a third in progress, and countless jobs that never quite managed to feel like a career. For most of my life there has been a gap – what I call a "potential-realization gap" (Figure 1) – my own sense of my capabilities and what I have been able to accomplish.

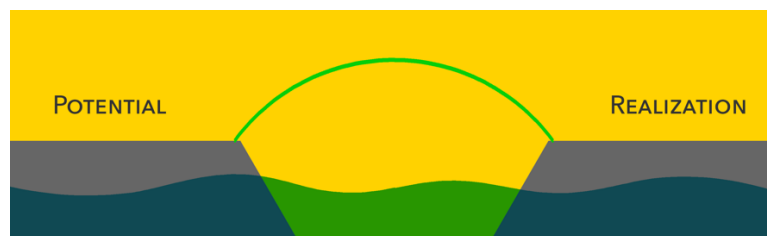


Figure 1. Visualization of the Potential-Realization Gap

It often felt like I stumbled more than walked, bumping into people or stepping on their toes, crashing into one barrier or another – the confines of a box of my own making. Or so I thought, until at age 40, I was diagnosed with ADHD. Masked by my strengths, my disability went undiagnosed and therefore unconsidered. In that it limited both executive function and impulse control, it was a direct contributor to my stuttering academic and professional experience. Without a diagnosis, the disability felt more like a character flaw, one that I simply lacked the resolve to overcome. The potential-realization gap was exacerbated by the demands and expectations placed on me by others, and my complex navigation of racial identity. It's a strange sort of thing to be constantly told how great you are – or could be – only to frequently fall short of that ideal. I've come to believe the gap is a manifestation of an artificial split between mind and body (Figure 2), each on opposite sides of a self-constructed mental barrier. Deep below this barrier is the physical reality of the unconscious, where intellect and emotion are information transmitted, stored, and *embodied* in a vast neural network, regulated by the endocrine system, and influenced by billions of gut flora. There is no separate

“mind” operating from on high, and there is only what is, no angst or projections about what could or should be.

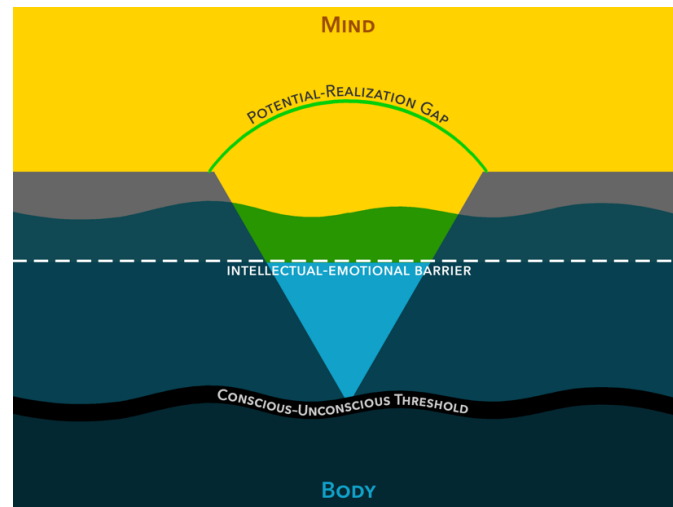


Figure 2. Visualization of the mind-body split

The potential-realization gap manifests not only in my sense of self, but also in my disillusionment with “people” and “the world” – a generalization about humanity as a whole – based upon random instances of egregious behavior that seem to outnumber instances of good will, integrity, or compassion². I mourn what I perceive as an enormous gap between “what people are” and “what they could be“. Even as I reject the idea that any person is only one thing or fixed in any way of being. In fact, the gap can only exist if I have some underlying belief in other people’s potential.

I have come to suspect that the two gaps are internalized vs. externalized expressions of the same phenomenon. Just as my own potential-realization gap formed from a lack of self-knowledge, the depth of my disillusionment with anyone is proportional to our intellectual and emotional distance from each other, how little about them I know or understand. As I’ve come to understand myself better – particularly as it applies to racial identity and ADHD – the potential-realization gap has narrowed. As I continue to reconcile my expectations for what people “should be” with a deeper understanding of who they are, in all their complexity, it has a recursive effect in cultivating further self-acceptance. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on this process, my precarious navigation of both internal and external worlds, and by the end chart a more surefooted path toward reconciliation and liberation for both me and my students.

I – Racial Identity Formation and the Mind/Body Split

Any understanding of my positionality as an educator must be grounded in the formation of my racial identity and awareness. For the first *two-thirds* of my life, race was a spectral force acting on my life from the periphery, on the outskirts of consciousness. My parents, both black, had their own conflicted racial histories, but rarely engaged me in conversations about race or racism. My mother’s apartment was filled with black music across the generations, from the Isley Brothers to the Supremes to Sade. My father was into John Coltrane and Miles Davis. Yet I do not

² This perception of the prevalence of negative behaviors has to do with my tendency to disqualify the positive, and the fact that negative events are more easily committed to my porous memory – a characteristic of ADHD.

recall ever having “the talk”³ with either of them — and indeed as a teenager I had a reckless disregard for authority, including police. I was not fully conscious of the black body they might brutalize on a whim.

During one incident, when I was twelve, I was surrounded by seven police cruisers in a shopping center parking lot, and harassed under the pretext that I was an “eighteen-year old car thief”⁴. I had no knowledge or sense of the reality in which black children are perceived through racist lenses as older or less innocent (Goff et al., 2014). I was sufficiently humble, not out of fear of being harmed by the police, but of the consequences waiting for me at home. The racial dimensions of this encounter escaped me until the next morning, when I overheard my father cursing out an officer over the phone.

ADHD had the effect of making things “bounce off” rather than “sink in”, and may have contributed to me having a “less structured self-narrative” (Klein et al, 2011). This, in addition to my determination to forge an identity separate from my parents, even from a young age, meant that my relationship to black culture was mediated by my own divergent interests. And these often took me “off-world”. Video games allowed me to “escape”, not only from reality, but from racial identity formation. The soundtracks allowed me to mentally revisit impactful scenes, or to invoke the emotions they inspired. Music in general became utilitarian, a way for me to redirect or reinforce how I wanted to feel at certain times. It was a mental hack, a secret door through the intellectual-emotional barrier. I did not run away from my blackness so much as *evade* it, as a consequence both of porous memory, and little grounding in cultural experiences.

I didn’t connect the digital stories I loved — of scrappy underdogs rising to challenge Power, or unassuming warriors pushing back against the incomprehensible weight of history — to the countless instances of black resilience in the face of oppression, domination, and death. This was likely because I wasn’t exposed to much black history in the predominantly white K-12 schools I attended, and because game heroes were phenotypically white, even when they came out of Japan. Black people, in my experience, were never the protagonists. Even when I was the one writing the stories.⁵ On the contrary, dark people, dark creatures, and indeed darkness itself, was equated with evil, or at least with physical and cultural aberration, and moral ambiguity.

In middle school, my father gave me the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and while I enjoyed it as a story, it didn’t resonate with me on a personal level. Instead it became proprietary knowledge, a little piece of evidence to support a burgeoning sense of superiority. But like so many things, Malcolm came and went, and left no lasting impact.⁶ My father also tried to get me to read *A People’s History of the United States*, but the book was either out of my depth, or far too much content to hold with my

3 “The talk” is a common conversation that takes place between black adults and their children, about the risks of being black in USAmerican society, particularly as it applies to interactions with police.

4 It’s worth noting that at age twelve, I was five feet tall, and weighed about 75 pounds.

5 I’ve written fiction stories since I was 11 years old, and not until my 20s did I even attempt to write characters of color. I once hired an artist to draw one my characters, based on myself, and felt a cognitive dissonance to see my own black body in fantasy armor — itself based on European designs.

6 I would rediscover Malcolm later and he has since become my “favorite” historical figure, as his powerful oratory, and unflinching excoriation of Power, resonates with my own counter-hegemonic orientation.

fleeting attention. I remember reading about Columbus's massacre of the Arawak, but rather than feeling any indignation, it was just another story, one that I would repurpose rather than retain. It's a bit embarrassing to admit now that I wrote a horror story about an undead warrior called the "Arawakadaver" (Arawak Cadaver), who rose from his grave to take revenge on his colonial murderers. Meanwhile, my own race, my own relationship to history, was tenuous — topsoil turned by caprice, and too shallow to lay roots. Being "black" to me, felt more like a circumstance into which I was born, than anything that I claimed as a part of my identity. The times during my youth when I felt most cognizant of my race, and what it meant to others, was on the few occasions white people used *the word* against me. My response was always the same. As if I had been programmed through hypnosis — but really because of impulse control issues stemming from ADHD — my fists moved faster than my brain.

I did not, in those moments, become grounded in racial identity, hear the cries for justice ringing across time to fill me with righteous anger. Rather, I understood the word as those boys intended it: as a signal they thought they were better than me. The rage I felt had nothing to do with my blackness, except strictly by definition of the word. Instead, it struck at my sense of self — as an individual who was, in my mind, *better* than my peers. I had been told as much, implicitly and explicitly throughout my life, so how dare these *uppity* boys suggest otherwise?

I felt the same indignation in my 20s, when a white guy stated as fact that I had a lower intelligence because of my race. My rage came not from any wounded pride on behalf of black people, because at the time I had no knowledge of the frequent correlations drawn in academic circles between race and intelligence. Rather it was a defense of my own imagined superiority. In retrospect, I realize this "superiority complex" was a response to unconscious racial trauma, compounded by ADHD, manifest in emotional dysregulation and preoccupation with self.

I suspect that I inherited the disability from my father, who because of his own potential-realization gap, seemed intent on living vicariously through me. As he pushed me, often violently, toward some unreachable precipice, he disparaged nearly everyone else. I *still* grapple with the aftershocks of that socialization, though any residual delusions of grandeur are promptly swallowed by the gap. What kept me from plummeting from the heights of my own artificially inflated ego, was the cooling influence of my mother, whose love wasn't conditioned on unreasonable demands.

For most of my life, the gap seemed separate from my experience of race. Yet many unconscious or ambiguous experiences of racism were each a droplet in a surging groundswell behind the mental wall. A painful experience in my mid-20s caused the dam to break. Where before the gap between potential and realization had been abstract, something I deeply *felt* but did not quite understand, the bubbling-up of racial self-consciousness (Figure 3) provided an explicit rationalization. In what became a sort of racial *crisis*, the gap was no longer my own private inadequacy, but a gaping wound exposed to the world, one I imagined others saw as a function of my blackness.

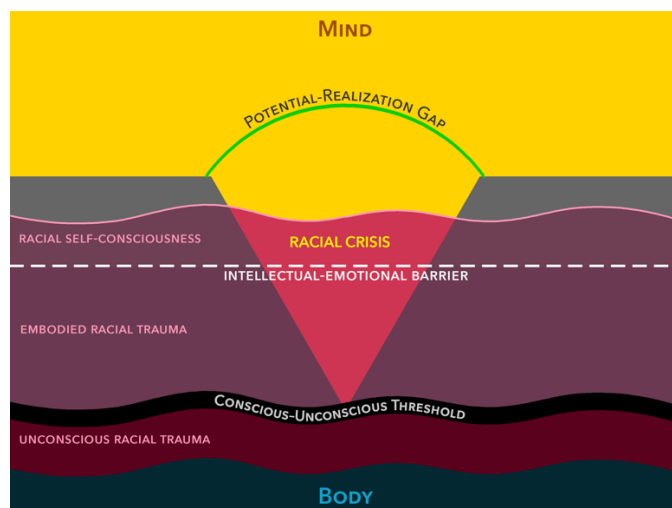


Figure 3. Visualization of racial crisis as a function of racial self-consciousness occupying the potential-realization gap

Say what you will about the empirical validity of Kübler-Ross, but I went through some version of the five stages of grief, if not in the established order. Rather than succumbing to self-hatred, my preoccupation with justice turned that energy outward. Anger had long vibrated just beneath the surface of my skin, tickled the back of my throat, tensed my fingers into easy fists. With my growing understanding of racial politics in the U.S., my rage began to overflow (Figure 4).

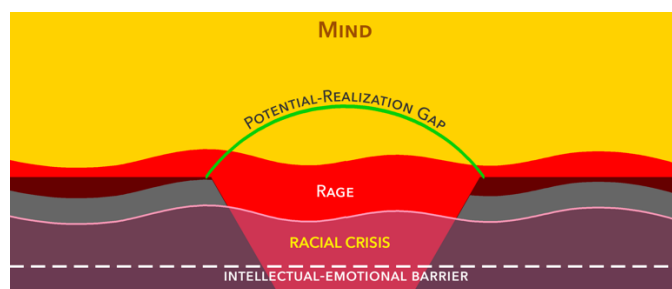


Figure 4. Author visualization of rage overflowing in response to racial crisis

Denial coincided with a newly acquired knowledge of “race as a social construct”, which to me meant I could also *deconstruct* it. At one point I even proposed “the complete renunciation of my ‘blackness’, the deconstruction of my racial context,” regarding it as a stigma imposed on me by others, unmoored from any culture or history.⁷ I still aligned myself politically with black people, but on the basis of justice, rather than in-group identification, again marking a separation between my intellectual self-concept and the body in which it resided.

Bargaining came and went in sporadic intervals through my twenties, while depression has been a through-line for twenty years, but it was always *rage* that fueled my trajectory. My ADHD diagnosis provided new context, new understanding, and with those came acceptance. What I’ve struggled to shake is the sense of “lost

⁷ This quote comes from an unpublished personal journal I wrote in 2005, in which I “renounced” my race, identifying it as a marker of inferiority imposed upon me by others, rather than a cultural identity.

time”, which translates into an urgency behind everything I do – often read by others as impatience, intensity, or self-righteousness.

The evolution of racial self-consciousness into racial awareness has also been an intellectual process. I “reclaimed” my race, sometime after learning that “black” as a cultural identifier existed among peoples in Africa, well before European colonization and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Blackness is steeped in culture and history, an expression of self and community, not merely a “label” imposed on us within structures of domination. Yet still, even as I’ve learned from and found solidarity with other black people, this connection has been intellectual, not something I felt.

While I occupy a black body – obvious every time I look in the mirror – my intellectual self-concept, now “unapologetically black”, still feels disconnected from black physicality. I use the word “occupy” because my body feels like a vessel for my mind, rather than part of an integrated whole. This is further compounded by ADHD, which sees me enter states of “hyperfocus”, virtually unaware of my body until my physical needs become too urgent to ignore. This detachment also relates to a recurring impostor syndrome, as if I am merely performing blackness. Of course I understand I have no choice in the matter, as per the ancient black proverb that says I don’t have to do anything but “stay black and die.”⁸

It is as though my expression is filtered through an internal control panel, toggling any number of code-switches for different audiences and circumstances. Even as I know black people are not a monolith, that my experience is my own and just as valid as any other, I feel a pressure to conform to certain social contexts, or otherwise to hide my differences.

One of bell hooks’s students said, “When I dance my soul is free. It is sad to read about men who stop dancing, who stop being foolish, who stop letting their souls fly free” (hooks, 1994, p. 197). I can’t dance. By which I really mean I *won’t* dance under most circumstances – another example of the mind-body split holding sway. To be “foolish” is to be vulnerable, and to be vulnerable draws me down into my body, where I seldom want to be. And so I intellectualize the *mechanics* of dancing, *thinking* rather than feeling the rhythm, preoccupied with “doing it right”. And because I’ve made dancing a mental exercise, rather than a physical one, doing it “wrong” registers as an *intellectual* failure. This is especially exacerbated among other black people, for the fact that music and dance and rhythm are so embedded in our culture, as a means of expression, as a tool of resistance, as a way to heal from trauma. Where I “can’t do it”, it becomes yet another reminder of how disconnected from other black people I seem to be.

This is not hypothetical. At my most recent job, as part of teachers’ introduction to students, a group dance routine was put together. I refused to participate, to avoid exposing my “lack of rhythm”, which would call attention to the cultural distance between myself and my students and invite ridicule. But in my refusal, there was also a denial, barring students from a chance to connect with me in an authentic way. All to avoid “being foolish”.

On the other hand, there are two distinct sets of circumstances in which I do feel “authentically black”. The first is among black academics, activists, artists or others who even bother to say things like “black people aren’t a monolith”, indicating an

⁸ Not a proverb, but something commonly said in defiance of one being told what they “have to do”.

understanding of our intra-group diversity, such as to make room for my particular flavor of blackness. The second, ironically, is in majority-white spaces, where I always manage to find the other one or two black people, even from across a crowded room, a strategic nod signaling a shared understanding. As these circumstances are invariably traumatic, our differences become almost meaningless. There are few things like racial isolation to anchor mind to body. And where there are *no* other black people to be found, I tend to embrace my role as the foremost authority on blackness, even as I make it clear to others that I am not the *representative* for all black people.

On the contrary, even as my entire personal and political inertia points toward racial, social, and economic justice, I feel so far removed from others' lived, felt, *embodied* experiences, or even how they intellectualize their own circumstances. Even though I grew up working class, my parents were both fairly well-educated, and seldom unemployed. They were also quite good at buffering me against the impact of financial struggle, just as I was good at being oblivious. This distance, between myself and other black people, has been most pronounced for me as a teacher of black students – the vast majority of whom are socially and economically disenfranchised. While this places us in political alignment, their struggles are merely conceptual for me, and I feel disconnected from the materiality of their circumstances. I imagine they feel the same, gleaned from any number of signals that despite my phenotype or passionate claims to blackness, I am not quite “like them”.

Because poverty, violence, and trauma tend to be geographically concentrated, the schools where I've taught are often sites of inordinate struggle. And where the infrastructure for healing or restoration is inadequate or altogether absent – or worse, where these communities are actively being oppressed, disenfranchised, or neglected – it makes for extremely toxic environments. Sometimes literally, as with the many Philadelphia schools plagued by asbestos, lead, and vermin infestations; comorbid with underqualified teachers⁹, disaffected parents, skeleton support crews, and parasitic administrators gorging on suffering to inflate their resumes¹⁰. It is these same administrators who are the least amenable to, if not hostile toward the mere suggestion of systemic change. After all, this would require a lateral, collective effort, and a disruption of the dynamics of power – a threat to their coveted roles as middle managers.

What, other than “necessity” – as determined by street addresses and catchment zones – or the legal mandate for schooling enforced by truancy court and the carceral system, would make anyone even step foot in such a place? As I struggle with this distance between me and my students, across the divides of race, class, language, culture, and generation, one of the strongest manifestations of impostor syndrome comes as I question my own motivation for working with these particular students under such strenuous circumstances.

While I have always rejected the savior narrative of well-meaning white educators, I felt charged with cultivating in my students the knowledge they needed to

9 While it is true that teachers are often underqualified in the subjects they teach, here I am speaking more about the inadequacy of teacher-education programs in preparing them for work in high-trauma communities.

10 This may sound extreme, but I have known many administrators who implemented harmful policies, completely failed to make any substantive change during their tenure, only to move on to another school to repeat the process. Causing harm for one's own benefit is the *definition* of parasitism.

challenge oppressive systems. What I failed to grasp, as I encountered resistance from students time and time again, was that I could not “make them realize” anything. I could not “lead them” anywhere. It is for people themselves to decide what their liberation looks like. In any case, where pushing up against oppressive institutions only brought their full weight down on my head, and where impulse control issues were exacerbated by the reverberations of trauma between all of us who occupy these spaces, I have found myself on the outs. And as I have stumbled, wounded, to the next place willing to take me in, the question of motivation remains a klaxon against my ear drum, challenging the very pretext of an education for liberation.

II – Contemplating an Education for Liberation

Recently I’ve begun to think of the relationships between teachers and students as occupying a matrix, with respect to whether pedagogy is teacher or student centered, and whether it reinforces or subverts the relations of domination in the broader society. Such a matrix places all “teaching styles”, by which I mean the dynamic between teachers and students, into four general categories (Figure 5): traditional, neoliberal, activist, and liberatory – the latter conceived through a process of deduction.

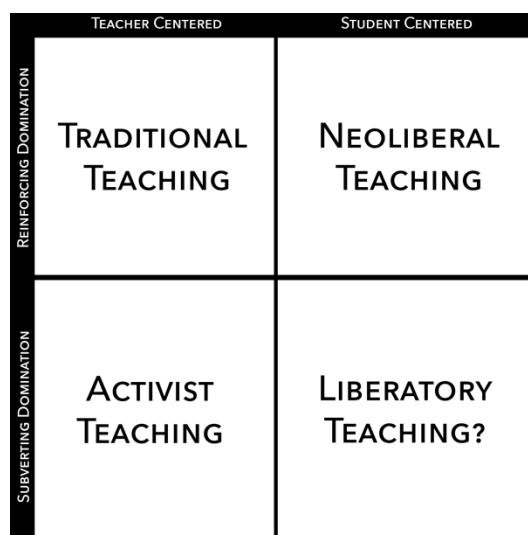


Figure 5. Matrix of teacher-student relationships with respect to pedagogy

The “traditional” style of teaching in the United States shares certain characteristics which deny students any agency, presumes that knowledge flows in only one direction – from teacher to student – and emphasizes student compliance. Teachers are assessed by how well they can “manage” (control) students, while students are assessed on their individual performance, independent of any external factors which may hinder their ability to learn. Because the institution dictates how knowledge is constructed, and what even constitutes knowledge, the cultural assets students bring into school are often deemed irrelevant, or at least less important than their ability to conform. By this view, students succeed despite their circumstances, not because of them.

Where teaching ideology shifts to “student-centered”, it doesn’t necessarily reflect any increase in student agency or voice. As federal funding for education became contingent upon measurable “growth” in student “achievement”, it relied on standardized instruments, mostly testing, to determine the “effectiveness” of teaching.

The “neoliberal” teaching style emerged as the pinning of educational “outcomes” to federal funding opened the door to mass monetization, leading to the precipitous rise of charter schools, and market speculation. Schools run like businesses, the proliferation of tech “solutions” in search of problems, and the granularization of teaching practice into discrete products to be bought and sold, indicate the full integration of neoliberal ideology into education. As this agenda plays out, mostly in public schools, it reinforces the relations of domination between Black and Brown people and capital. These schools are student-centered in the same way that the antebellum economy was slavery-centered, which is to say that “centering” is unrelated to agency.

On the other hand, there have always been teachers who see their practice as a means of empowering their students – most prominently black teachers in segregated schools during the Jim Crow era. The more recent rise of the “activist teacher” seems to be in response to the blatant trespasses of capitalism. The urgency of the moment, for teachers like me, mandated a return to teacher-led methodologies, because surely our students, subject to the whims of such a massive and predatory system, had not the means or even enough awareness of their circumstances, to mount any sort of defense.

As a teacher I thought it was important to acknowledge the ways in which students were oppressed and how it affected their “ability” to learn, or their “engagement” with learning. I wanted them to understand the form of their oppression, to be able to name it, and understand the importance of contesting it. As an activist teacher, I was cynical, not just toward the oppressive systems that restrict my practice and my students’ possibilities, but toward students themselves. If only because I recognized the enormity of the task before us, and how inadequate their prior schooling had been in preparing them for it.

Therefore it became urgent that I “explain” to students all the ways they are oppressed, and the necessity of actively working to dismantle systems of domination. But it occurred to me that my demands, for students to change themselves in accordance with what I thought was best for them, may be just another kind of oppression. The “benevolent dictator” is still a dictator. In addition, not all students responded to this new knowledge with my same indignation. In a counter-productive way, it sometimes left them feeling hopeless. Baptized in the mythology of USAmerican meritocracy, students could at least hold out the hope that some amount of “hard work” would allow them to rise above their circumstances. The reality of the forces arrayed against them, as presented by teacher-activists, could be demoralizing.

Implicit in the teacher activist orientation is an overestimation of education’s power. Simply knowing one’s oppression is not necessarily instructive in how to counter it. The liberal narrative that a person’s disadvantage is a matter of what they don’t know or understand, is a fiction. It is not only harmful, but oppressive, because it places all responsibility for subjugation on people themselves, albeit with a helping hand from the noble souls called to teach.

In reflecting on the characteristics of each teaching style, I have speculated on what a liberatory model of education might look like, identifying the ways in which the other practices fell short, or directly undermined the cause (Figure 6). First, there would need to be a reconceptualization of what it means for pedagogy to be “student-centered”. I believe it must be student-led and informed by student voice.

	TEACHER CENTERED	STUDENT CENTERED
REINFORCING DOMINATION	CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT BANKING MODEL RESPECT AUTHORITY CULTURAL SUPPRESSION INDIVIDUALISM BOOTSTRAPS NARRATIVE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER	STANDARDIZED TESTS DATA-DRIVEN INSTRUCTION BLENDED LEARNING STUDENT "CHOICE" INDIVIDUALISM CYBER SCHOOLS AUTOMATION
SUBVERTING DOMINATION	SOCIAL JUSTICE EXPLAINING OPPRESSION WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ADULTISM IMPERATIVE TO CHANGE CYNICAL EDUCATIONISM	STUDENT AGENCY STUDENT VOICE STUDENT LED RELINQUISHING CONTROL COLLECTIVIST COLLABORATIVE OPTIMISTIC

Figure 6. Characteristics of methodologies within the teaching matrix

This means teachers, administrators, families and community members alike, must make room for young people to participate more authentically in their learning. It must be collaborative instead of individualistic, meaning that students are working toward the collective good, rather than some symbolic personal reward such as a high grade, access to higher education, the “guarantee” of a good job, and beneath it all the distant promise of monetary compensation. Indeed, there can be no meaningful action against domination without a mass movement by communities. Lastly, and perhaps most difficult of all, it requires some degree of optimism, at least a specter of hope despite all the evidence that the problems we face are intractable. The counter-offensive against oppression requires attacking on multiple fronts, including but not limited to critical pedagogy, community organizing, economic mobilization, reparations for decades if not centuries of sustained harm, sweeping changes to public policy, and elevated platforms from which the marginalized can speak to their own liberation.

From this prospect arises a question, merely implied before, but now cast in sharp relief. What is the role of the teacher in an education for liberation? If students must lead the way, if education itself offers no serious challenge to institutionalized oppression, and if our success requires mass mobilization, what is any one teacher supposed to contribute? Are there particular skills or knowledge we have that are indispensable to the liberatory project? Or maybe a critical mass of teachers should enter (or re-enter) the Academy, steeping ourselves in theory to the point of abstraction, in hopes that some elusive solution reveals itself. In the interim, we can write a slew of books completely inaccessible to the very people on whose behalf they are written.

My tone is facetious because even though I have spoken of education as a liberatory force, my belief in that possibility is fragile. On its own, education cannot disrupt the intersecting axes of white supremacy, gender inequality, capitalism, imperialism, economic inequality, social stratification, and through-line of “divide and conquer”. At the heart of these relations of domination is USAmerican individualism, which has constructed our society on a fractured foundation, dividing people along lines of identity, culture, and politics. Divided further still by nuclear families, single family homes, picket fences, and intergenerational animosity. There are, it seems, *many* gaps.

The root of the word *individualism* is the Latin *dividere*, which just as it appears, has to do with division. The word *dualism*, contained within individualism, comes in part from *duo*, which means two – as in the *self* and the “*other*“. There is also a relationship to the Latin word *individuum*, meaning “indivisible particle”, as in the atom, the pursuit of which consumed Western scientific inquiry for millennia.

This matters because white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is a metastasis of individualism, creating a contentious dichotomy between self and other (e.g. black/white, woman/man, gay/straight) – that which is “normative” and that which is not, defining the latter by its negation. This culture has erected a complex system of extraction, consumption, and disposal, between people and the land, while conscripting our physical and mental energies into its service through exploitation and abuse.

In its current technocratic iteration, the system fragments our bodies, cultures, identities, ideologies, lifestyles, interests, social relations and labor – our entire realities – into *byte-sized* units of consumption (*individuum*), data to be analyzed, manipulated, and commodified. This same culture, in search of “enlightened” and “universal” ideals, so far removed from the lives degraded in its wake, wrenches our minds and bodies apart into a false dichotomy. The same which cordons off my intellect from my emotions, excepting rage, for which it is easy to find a *rational* justification. Sometimes I’m not even sure I feel rage so much as *think* it, summoning it into that gap between lived reality and my ideals. This same gap has often opened between me and my students – emotional connection vs. logical commitment to purpose – and become a core tension in my practice as a teacher.

III – Eros versus Logos

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks talks about the role of “Eros” in the pedagogical process, grounding that discussion in the concept of the mind-body split.

Trained in the philosophical context of Western metaphysical dualism, many of us have accepted the notion that there is a split between the body and the mind. Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present, and not the body (hooks, 1994, p. 191).

With each new school year, new group of students, new colleagues, and so forth, I do not come into the space with any love for these individuals. In that my motivation is ideological, my work always feels disconnected from the people, especially the students, “upon which” I am acting. I do not “care” about them as people – with fears and hopes, traumas and dreams – at least not at first, because I engage with them from the rational side of the barrier.

Instead I care about them as “objects” within a system I want to orient toward liberation. Only later, as we build relationships, and I gain some insight into their lives and their real, non-theoretical struggles, do they become actual people. And even this is rationalized. I care about them out of principle, not out of love. My passion for justice is intellectual, and it may be for this reason that the force of it does not reach my students. Or translates as anger, or disdain, which students may even feel is directed at them.

According to Jung (1982), “The concept of Eros could be expressed in modern terms as psychic relatedness, and that of Logos as objective interest” (p. 65). It is this distance, between Logos and Eros, between mind and body, and most importantly between me and my students, that leaves me contemplating just what role I can play in their liberation. I think students intuit this gap, and absent the framing needed to

articulate it, they kick and flail and swear their resistance: at me, at the institution itself, into the void.

I suspect that even the way I speak about things like racism and oppression – abstract, conceptual, removed from any personal experience – codes for my students the same as if I were a white teacher, despite the peppering of black Philadelphian into an otherwise standard American English delivery. I’ve often sensed that black students see me no differently, as when they’ve called me by a white teacher’s name or vice versa, or an apparent obliviousness where I tried to call attention to our common blackness. I do not think any of this is conscious, or malicious, and I doubt any student would even hesitate to identify me as black. What I’m talking about is more subtle, a subconscious distance between us, analogous to the mind-body split.

I wonder if it is this schism – this *barrier* – rather than the social, economic, or political divides of race, which places students of color into an adversarial relationship with white educators. And in reflexive opposition to *me*, despite our sharing a physical continuum¹¹. Maybe they sense that what drives me isn’t about them at all, but rather some imperative to contribute something to the “cause”, – Resistance? Liberation? Revolution? – or the voluminous yet ultimately impotent scholarship on such things. That when it is all said and done, my every motivation succumbed to entropy, I will have made any impact at all.

Schools are often constructed, by the institutions themselves, and by the culture of schooling reproduced by teachers, parents, and students, as detached from community. This reinforces the gap between theory and practice, between mind and body, between the individual and the collective. Something I have observed on numerous occasions, is that whenever I engage students outside the school building, whether on class trips, or running into them in the neighborhood, their entire demeanor toward me becomes more amicable. In a way, the school acts a proxy for the mind, while the community is the body from which it has been separated. And in this arrangement, because of my orientation toward Logos, I am conflated with the school – the building and the institution from which students, especially black ones, feel utterly disconnected. If only I could tap into Eros, and change “the classroom [into] a dynamic place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears” (hooks, 1994, p. 195).

Without that, it seems like the real work of justice, of empowering students in their own liberation, requires me to recede further and further into the background, to suppress my own ego. Yet at the same time, I recognize that to work collectively requires a cognizance of self, and constant reflection on my own positionality.

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with
mine, then let us work together.”

11 Here I mean the continuum of blackness, the spectrum of colors, hair textures, dialects, experiences; at the same time a recognition that my lighter skin comes with certain privileges and a closer proximity to whiteness – subconsciously manifest – which itself can contribute to the divide. Once, to preface what I wanted to be an important conversation with a young black woman about racial solidarity, I asked her what we had in common. When she drew a blank, I rubbed a finger on the back of my hand. She said, “What? You light skin and I’m dark skin?” And suddenly there might as well have been a whole building between us.

The above quote is usually attributed to Murri activist Lilla Watson, yet Watson herself credits the Aboriginal collective she was working with in the 1970s. It is ironic, but also instructive that activists in the West, in the very process of emphasizing the value of collective action, would take something collectively constructed and “individualize” it. What I take from the quote, though, is that any authentic engagement with others in a struggle for liberation means an inextricable weaving together of our individual and collective trajectories.

I believe participatory action research (PAR) offers a methodology that reconciles the individual and the collective, and reduces the distance between the self and the other. As PAR begins with situating oneself, to establish positionality, it allows both teachers and students to become aware of our epistemic lenses. In the same way that my turbulent racial history has greatly influenced how I see the world, how I teach, and the construction of my value system, young people should be given the space – and the tools – to understand “who they are, and from where they speak”. Because “all knowledge is always situated”, PAR can bring to consciousness “both from where a given knowledge-claim is derived, as well as whose interests it will serve” (Moya, 2011).

IV – Possibilities for Bridging the Gap

Modern educational research points to participatory action research (PAR) as one of the most culturally relevant pedagogical models (Walsh, 2018; Yull, et al., 2014), in part because it gives students agency, which is different from the kinds of “choices” common to neoliberal education, pointing toward the same outcomes. PAR allows students to pursue their own line of inquiry, positioning them as experts of their own experience, and “engages them in the design and implementation of sophisticated social science research projects” (Walsh, 2018).

In most public schools, due to bureaucracy, lack of teacher or student freedom, and an outsized focus on testing, models such as PAR are difficult, unless conducted as an elective or outside the school day. As it happened, an alternative school in Philadelphia where I was teaching in 2019, had the infrastructure in place to not only do PAR, but to build an entire curriculum around it.

With the help of three colleagues, I tasked students with exploring the local impacts of climate change, and how it related to community health, particularly with respect to higher asthma rates in low-income and black and brown communities. Our research revealed a deep and tangled web between historical discrimination, environmental racism and land-use, and the rather startling phenomenon of urban heat islands. Due to infrastructural issues and a lack of green space, there are temperature disparities between neighborhoods in Philadelphia as great as 22 degrees (City of Philadelphia, 2018). Each of these, we found, connected to the racist practice of redlining.

Behind the scenes I started to build up a network of external partners, in local government and the nonprofit sector. Through our newly formed partnerships came an opportunity to apply for a grant through the Arbor Day Foundation. The school was situated within one of the areas with moderate to high vulnerability to heat. To mitigate these impacts, we hoped to use the grant to transform our mostly barren school courtyard and an adjacent lot into a community green space. The lot, positioned between the school, a playground, and a basketball court, presented a unique opportunity for deep community engagement and intergenerational collaboration.

Unfortunately, despite a great deal of planning, the project did not come to fruition. We did not receive the grant, bureaucratic barriers slowed our progress, and COVID-19 brought everything to a screeching halt. Then, the coup de grace: as we came to the end of the term, I learned that I would not be “invited” to return to my position in the next school year.

I have since decided that I will not return to *any* school. My experience and my research have made it clear how schools reproduce oppression along multiple vectors, leading me to explore alternative formations. In partnership with various local organizations and community members, I am currently adapting green spaces as sites for permaculture design, participatory-action research, land-based environmental and civics education with a focus on racial and economic justice. Rooting our work in personal history and collective memory, we will explore pressing issues such as violence, housing discrimination, the local impacts of climate change, land and food sovereignty. Through a collective narrative-building process, we will *write* into existence the future we want to see. Youth-led intergenerational cohorts will cultivate the skills to act as stewards – planting trees, gardening and farming, water management, carpentry, engineering – skills that will bring immediate improvements to our communities and model a local economy that is equitable and operates within ecological boundaries.

Permaculture design principles speak to the importance of taking care of the environment, taking care of people, and equitable distribution of resources. So first we will transform abandoned hardscape into sustainable green spaces with stormwater management features. These are small things with immediate local benefits, but where models can be replicated, our work could be a meaningful contribution to the global fight against climate change.

Second, urban farms, community gardens, and food forests can provide direct, hyperlocal access to fresh produce for the entire community, sustaining us against insecurity. Food not only replenishes us in mind, body, and spirit, but deeply connects us to community and culture. Breaking bread allows us to break down barriers: between each other, between institutions and communities, and even within ourselves. Community collaboration can bridge longstanding racial and generational divides to maintain a continuum of mutual care.

Finally, the best way to take care of people is empower them, to cultivate agency. Participatory action research offers a framework to investigate intersecting challenges, which combined with political education can foster self-advocacy through civic action. Working collectively with students, in a more lateral power dynamic (as opposed to hierarchy of schools), I hope to restore the authentic connection I knew as a tutor, mentor, and coach. Rather than trying to compel students – *telekinetically, through the sheer force of my will* – toward any particular end, we can work together to bridge the gaps, through mutual struggle, sacrifice, and shared success, and walk side by side toward a collective realization of liberatory potential.

Conclusion

Throughout my life I have been plagued by what I call a potential-realization gap, that is, the distance between my sense of my own capabilities and achievements, leaving me with persisting feelings of failure and inadequacy. A similar gap exists between my expectations of others, and my perception that they have fallen short, which often creates an emotional distance. I believe these gaps are both manifestations – internalized vs. externalized – of the same phenomenon.

Throughout my career as an educator, these divides have never been wider than when I've worked in schools, where they were exacerbated by hostile institutional cultures.

In this paper I have examined the underlying dynamics of these gaps, specifically: 1) the false dichotomy between mind and body; 2) how both my racial identity formation and struggles with undiagnosed ADHD have influenced my ability or inability to connect with others; 3) how the stark separation between intellect and emotion – Eros vs. Logos – has informed my teaching practice and relationships with students; and 4) how the politics of schooling maintains an artificial divide between institutions and communities. It is my contention that all of these gaps follow a common thread – manifest in USAmerican individualism and white supremacy – which not only divides people but sorts them into hierarchies.

I've flirted with various pedagogical "fixes" – ultimately inadequate in addressing entrenched systemic problems – only to come to what now seems like an inevitable conclusion: that the gap between current models of schooling and liberation cannot be reconciled. Participatory action research is a promising methodology, but it must be grounded in community, and where schools position themselves as obstacles – both physically and ideologically – I will work outside of them. At the same time, I recognize the structural factors that make schools a necessity for so many, especially Indigenous, Black, and Brown youth. Therefore, in order to make an impact on any meaningful scale, the development of successful models on the outside must be followed by communities pushing into schools, to dismantle the structures of domination, and collectively reconstitute education toward the practice of liberation.

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