

Freire's Pedagogy of Love and a Ph.D. Student's Experience

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Had I been the person that the tutor helped ahead of me—I would have felt disrespected. And that made me really want to just walk away; and I wanted to just leave and go home. I was like, “I’m not going in there to deal with that. That’s not even fair.” But the deadline was near; my paper wasn’t finished; so I had to go in. It took a lot. I really had to leave my ego at the door and prepare myself for the worst. And sure enough, when I got in there and was with that tutor, he was loud. Everybody in the waiting area could hear what he was saying, and I was totally embarrassed. But I went back to what I learned in the military. I learned how to just be silent. Learned how to remove myself from the abuse until it was over, but at the same time to listen to what was being said that was important enough to keep me from having to go back. I had already made up my mind when he started saying what he was saying, “I’m not coming back here. So let me get what I need so that I don’t have to come back.”

—from Steven’s narrative

Introduction

This article offers an interpretation of Freire’s concept of pedagogical love in a word to world—theory to practice—approach. We offer a definition of the term *love*, then present coauthor’s Steven’s narrative as an illustration of a real life experience of Freirean pedagogical love. The goal is to begin a conversation about the transformative value of an instructional model rooted in Freire’s pedagogy of emancipatory love; and to seek ways in which this model is applicable to writing centers and other educational settings—not just in colleges, but also K-12 environments.

Pedagogical Love in Freire

Paolo Freire speaks about pedagogical love—using the terms related to love more than seventy times in *Education for Critical Consciousness* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. However, although he explains pedagogical love within the context of transformative education, Freire did not specifically define the meaning of the term *love*. The opening epigraph from Steven’s experience as a Ph.D. student visiting the writing center represents the antithesis of Freirean pedagogical love proposed in this paper.

While writers such as Antonia Darder and Edward Michael Schoder offer valuable insights into the Freirean concept of pedagogical love, we add to this body of literature by theorizing our own experiences as graduate writers and offering a new perspective on pedagogical love that is rooted in justice, selflessness, and fairness.¹ Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework for our definition of pedagogical love, the ideological and instructional practices we associate with this model, the educational outcomes we anticipate from this model, and the generative nature of this model as it operates in coauthor Steven’s narrative.

Our definition of the term *love* contains three elements illustrated in Figure I steps 1a and 2a. The first is Lawrence Kohlberg’s concept of *justice*, the second is derived from Erich Fromm’s and Søren Kierkegaard’s secular maxim conveyed in the command to *love thy neighbor as thyself*, and the third is the concept of *agape*, or selfless love. Through this analysis, we propose a definition of *pedagogical love* that calls on educators to be personally committed to the axiological, ontological, and socio-political principles of *justice*, as evidenced in Kohlberg’s sixth stage of moral development. In describing our moral obligation toward justice, Kohlberg states that a just approach is characterized by making rational “sociopolitical choices” that are based on what is “morally right” and fair to individuals (*Philosophy* 182, 193).² This commitment, we believe, is one of the major defining characteristics in the practice of educators who are capable of successfully implementing instructional practices of Freirean pedagogical love. We argue that this commitment calls on teachers practicing pedagogical love to also be committed to the use of education as a means of sociopolitical empowerment and for creating students who are what Freire described as more fully developed “authentic” human beings.

Fromm’s and Kierkegaard’s secular maxim conveyed in the ontological and axiological command to *love thy neighbor as thyself* (Figure 1, 1b) is the second element in our definition of pedagogical love. Like Fromm, we believe that educators and their students enter a relationship that is similar to what he described loving one’s neighbor as loving oneself, allows one to

“commit oneself without guarantee, to give of oneself completely in the hope that your love will produce love in the loved person” (Fromm 115). Similar sentiments are expressed in Kierkegaard, who declared that, “everyone is one’s neighbor,” that “your neighbor is everyman,” and is your equal (58, 72). When these ethical maxims are applied to education within the context of Freirean pedagogical love, this extends beyond the altruistic act of caring. It becomes an unconditional, selfless, egoless commitment of educators practicing pedagogical love and expecting nothing in return for themselves. Under these conditions, the practice of pedagogical love is politically and socially enriching to a well-developed democracy, and transformative and cognitively uplifting to students, who are trained to be critical thinkers in the traditions of both Socrates and Freire..

The third element in our definition of pedagogical love calls on educators to be practitioners of *agape* (Figure 1, 1b)—love given without expectations of

reciprocity or personal gain—given only for the love of justice for humanity. When translated into pedagogical love, *agape* leads to an educational process where educators work with students in a collaborative, respectful, empowering relationship that negates the banking model of instruction.

We believe that educators whose personal epistemological, axiological, ontological, and sociopolitical ideologies align with Freirean pedagogical love and his ideas on education are vital to our proposed model of pedagogical love. Educators in this model serve as guides and helpers to students on their educational journey. In practice, our proposed model of pedagogical love helps educators provide learning opportunities that facilitate graduation for students like Steven, whose narrative of his experiences as a Ph.D. student is presented in this paper. Steven’s narrative offers insights into the educational processes involved in our Freirean pedagogical model. This narrative also indicates the type of student-graduate that can be

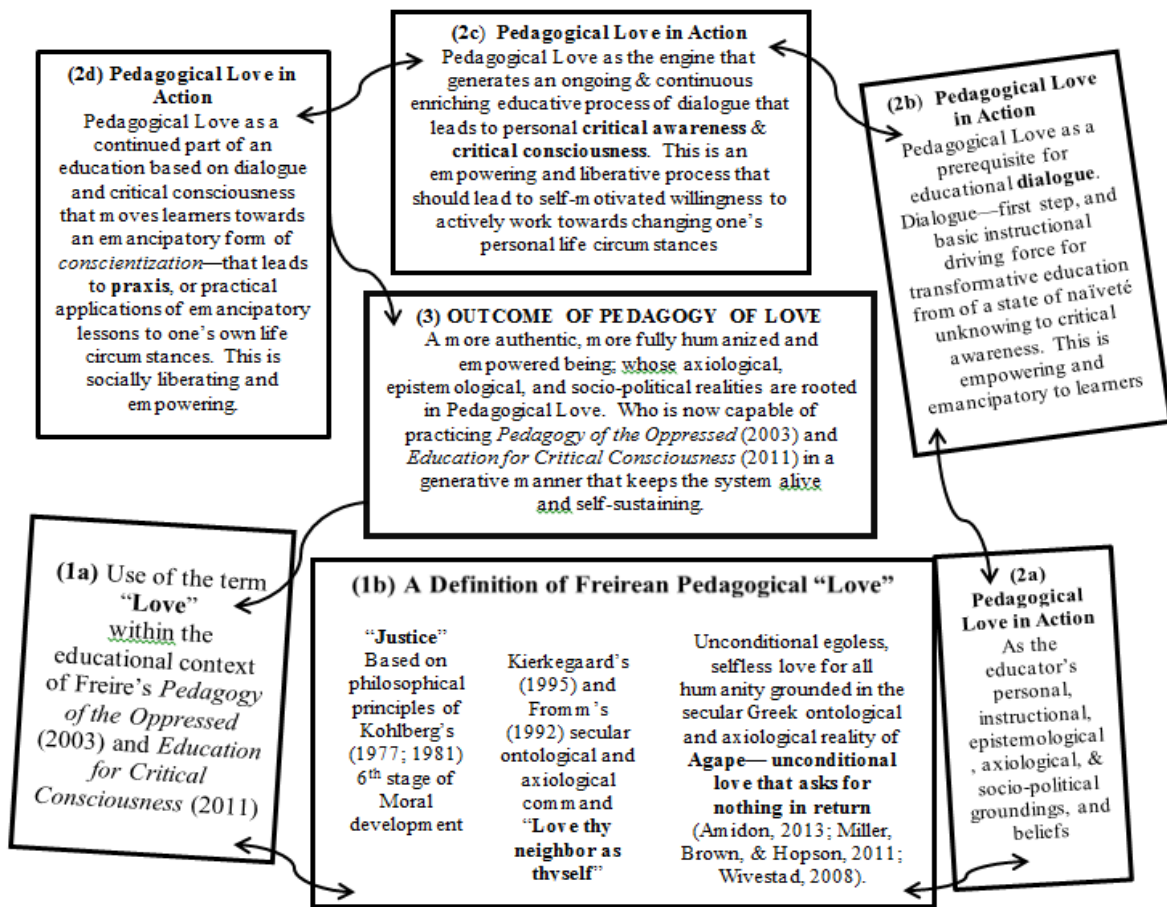


Figure 1. An illustration of a generative model of Freire's pedagogical love in action: It contains definitions in boxes 1a and 1b, as well as the illustration of the operation of this system as a transformative and empowering educational concept in boxes 2a through 3.

created by this approach. Students like Steven, under the guidance of teachers embedded in principles of pedagogical love and who are adequately equipped to practice this instructional approach, will experience educational growth that is not just cognitively productive but also personally uplifting on a sociopolitical level, as Freire argued (see *Pedagogy; Education*).

We believe that student-graduates from a system of education rooted in Freirean pedagogical love develop over time the tools and qualities that enable them to become a new breed of teachers needed for the adaptable-generative model illustrated in Figure 1, stage 3 and stages 1a–2a. As Freire argued, this generative system is self-procreative and self-renewable, one that will not become stale, outdated, or irrelevant. This regenerative feature of the Freirean model is an outcome of this system because it is rooted in critical thinking, dialogue, reflection, and a continuous motion of new praxis that is all a part of a creative process. This system is not rigid, but it is flexible with the potential for making adjustments when and where they are required over time and space, as Freire argued (see *Pedagogy; Education*).

The Word and the World: A Doctoral Student's Story

The educational and instructional processes involved in our interpretation of Freire's pedagogy of love have five stages (Figure 1, 2a–3). The first four stages involve the active instructional practices of our model of pedagogical love, while the final stage—stage 3—represents the embodiment or tangible student outcomes of the instructional practices of pedagogical love. Because our system rooted in Freire's ideas is a generative one, it loops back from stage 3 to the start, whereas graduates, students such as Steven, return to the system as teachers who continually replenish and sustain the model we propose.

In a theory-to-practice—or as Freire calls it, a *word-to-world*—application (“Reading”), excerpts of Steven's journey through the Ph.D. program are used here to illustrate pedagogical love and the lack of it at work in a real-life situation. The sequencing of these events is represented first in steps 2a to 3, and then 1a to 2a in Figure 1. This sequencing of Steven's journey is loosely organized around this conceptual framework in Figure 1—since real life events often do not generally adhere to the strict mechanics of theoretical models such as that illustrated in this chart. All names except those of the authors are pseudonyms.

The Educators

Steven's episode of hopelessness rooted in the anti-dialogic silence of a banking model of education in the epigraph of this paper intersected with ones in which he experienced hope on the journey towards graduation. In talking about hope and hopelessness, dialogue and anti-dialogue, oppression and emancipatory transformation in education, Freire stated that all these alignments are possibilities in education (*Pedagogy*). However, he added, only one option is an ontological, axiological, and historically acceptable one, and that is an education that is liberating, empowering, and aligned with authentic and true democratic principles and goals.

Anti-dialogic and pedagogically loveless education

Freire wrote about undemocratic and anti-dialogic love that is “counter-educative . . . predominantly emotional and uncritical . . . and anticomunicative”; he stated that this alignment “involves vertical relationships between persons . . . cannot create a critical attitude, [and] is hopelessly arrogant” (*Education* 9). According to Freire, anti-dialogic love “does not communicate, but rather issues communiqués” such as that illustrated in the opening epigraph (*Education* 41).

In describing the incident in the opening epigraph, Steven said:

The entire encounter [at the writing lab] felt like abuse to a point where it wasn't necessary. I wasn't an 18-year-old sophomore. I wasn't a second-year graduate student. I was a father and a husband and a professional teacher for over a decade, and now I'm walking in to you and you think that whatever it is you have to give me is so important that it elevates you above all the things I've done in my life. I didn't think that was right, but I knew that I couldn't just walk out.

All of us in the class were scrambling. My classmates' first route was, “Okay, let's set up meetings with Dr. Maxwell and talk with her.” I had my brief meeting, and there was no clarification. The meeting was very short. The only thing I was told was that I was not a good technical writer. That's all I remember. I had no idea what that meant, but I did not know how to say that. I thought she was going to say, “Now this is how you do it.” But it was just the opposite. I guess that was my fault, too, going in there expecting to be led.

I thought about everything that was going on. At first, I felt like I could just figure it out

myself, what was good about writing—even if it wasn't that great. The scary part was, I didn't have a Plan B. All I said was, "I have to find a way to get this done." That's why I did not open up to classmates or my dissertation committee members, and I did not let anybody know what was going on. I thought that admitting I had questions about writing was going to spell trouble for me. I did not know whether reaching out would get me more help; I thought reaching out would let everybody know, "Hey, he's a fraud. We gotta get rid of him." I used that fear to work harder to figure out how to get the writing done.

Educators rooted in pedagogical love and transformative dialogue

Luckily for Steven on this journey, he met instructors whose personal, instructional, epistemological, axiological, and sociopolitical groundings were rooted in pedagogical love (illustrated in Figure 1, 2a). They met him at the door—before he entered the program, when he was first accepted. Steven reflected on how he received a personal phone call from the department chair at the University he graduated from with his PhD on a Saturday morning, informing him of his acceptance. Steven's wife answered the phone because he was not at home, and Steven said he knew after this call that "Right there, this just made me know that this was going to be a totally different experience; and it was."

Steven said:

Before coming to this school I had a lot of negative experiences in a former university where I started my Ph.D. and found out that the program was not a good one because it was all about the money. At that school, they did not deliver what they said they offered in the brochures and in the meetings we had before starting the program. It was only after we finished the first year that they changed on us and flipped the script. Once they got us in, they changed gears and try to sell us all sorts of programs that were not officially certified and were useless in the real world.

Steven continued:

When I came to this University, it was different. I knew that it wasn't just about collecting the money. I felt throughout the whole time that the instructors had my interest at heart—and this was even before they knew what kind of human I was. They didn't even

know me before . . . [and] it was so different that I didn't even know just how to accept it because it was so very different from what I experienced at that other University.

Pedagogical love (Figure 1, 2a) was evident through to the end of Steven's Ph.D. experience. Steven described how his teachers predicted his needs both during the program and after graduation, and guided him and assisted him through his postdoctoral needs—even before he was actively aware of what they were. He said:

My professors knew it was important for me to understand how to navigate the broader academic arena outside of my elementary school world after I got the Ph.D. [Steven is an elementary school educator]. They knew the end game and were familiar with the terrain. Most important, they knew there was a limited time in which to guide me toward self-sufficiency.

Steven further stated:

Each instructor came to the table with particular strengths. They knew what they valued as individual educators. They had their personal understandings of what it took to go through this PhD learning process. They knew what they knew and what they wanted us to know. What impressed me most was the respect each instructor had for his/her craft. They were always prepared and enthusiastic about the content.

Steven linked his experiences to his own practice as an elementary school educator, saying, "I felt the way I wanted my students to feel about learning. Their love and respect for the knowledge made me want to pursue the same for myself. The love for the subject matter, to me, represented their overall love for humanity. They wanted to share that love with me."

Dialogue rooted in pedagogical love

Freire wrote, "If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue" (*Pedagogy* 90). As illustrated in Figure 1, 2b–3, pedagogical love is the starting point and touches on every stage of the process through to the transformative outcomes shown in this model. Having found an institution in which pedagogical love existed and transformative dialogue could occur, Steven describes a true Freirean dialogic experience that moved him from

ABD [all but dissertation] to Ph.D. status. In his words:

Throughout my life as a student, I had always felt I was beneath my instructors because of their command of the subject matter. As a result, I did not feel that my input was valid. In fact, I never felt my input was wanted. I thought that all I was supposed to do was listen and learn.

But the professors in my doctoral program were different; they reached out, initiated a conversation that made me feel as if we were equal partners, that I was not lower or inferior to them. These conversations were used as a part of their teaching in the course content as the basis for the flow of information in classes. It really took me a while understand that those professors wanted me to utilize the content beyond regurgitation and superficial discussion. They used their kindness and concern in order to support our learning and to deliver what we needed to learn in a manner I could easily understand.

Now that I know this is what dialogue is about, I guess that's what it was, but back then I didn't know that, but it made me feel good as a student and made me feel as if what I had to say was worthwhile and important. They were respectful even when they challenged us and pushed us outside of our comfort zone if you know what I mean. They treated us well.

"So What?" A Transformative Dialogue

"Here is one example," Stephen said. "I had a conversation with one of my professors who was helping me formulate my research focus. When I presented my plan, he looked at me and said, 'So what?'—I was stunned. I stumbled through an inadequate explanation, but I thought it made all the sense in the world. So what? Those two words haunted me, but it was one of the most important questions I was asked."

Stephen continued:

At first, I could not answer that question because I never thought about it; I was never asked those types of deep questions that made me think hard. Made me think, and think, and think again in order to come up with an answer. And it took me a long time of going back and forth with him in conversation. That one simple question, "so what?" Why was this important? It backed me into considering what

was the real foundation of that study. When I was finally able to answer that "so what?" question, that's when I was able to find my direction.

From this question—"so what?" I learned one of the greatest lessons about the dissertation writing process—my opinion was meaningless unless I could contribute something new and back it up with solid evidence. That helped me begin to move forward, and from there on, I thought differently as I researched, wrote, and researched some more. That opened new doors and gave me a new way of looking at what I wanted to write about.

Dialogic Education

The "so what" conversation in the previous section is vital because it illustrates this process in a real way that is not contrived, in a real life educational situation involving Steven. That "so what" dialogue moved him from inaction to action, from failure to success, and ultimately to transformation achieved by graduating as a Ph.D. Steven said about this transformation:

This was an awkward period of the process for me. This was a point where I could see who I was and who I needed to become. They offered assistance that guided me forward and that's why I graduated—along with my effort also, of course. Again, love surfaced in those relationships with my professors. The beauty of it was that it was all so natural for them—at least that's the way it seemed to me. It didn't seem as if they were faking it or making it up.

By the time I presented, for the very first time, I was ready for it—and I was comfortable because of the process and the experiences I had with those professors outside of Mr. Maxwell and the writing lab problem. When it got to this point I really was able to understand the love because of my experiences with them, love that was shown and that I could give back in a manner the instructors could understand, I believe. They expressed appreciation for my efforts, and that meant more than any grade on any assignment, and it worked like a charm.

Critical Consciousness/Awareness and Reflection

As illustrated in Figure 1, 2c, the outcome of dialogue rooted in pedagogical love is critical consciousness (also referred to as critical awareness).

Eventually critical awareness/consciousness leads to critical reflection; then to the next step—praxis—that completes this process that leads to a rebirth, so to speak, that is emancipatory, empowering, democratic, and transformative (Figure 1).

Steven reflected and attempted transformative actions earlier in his journey before effective dialogue such as that represented in the “so what” conversation. These attempts at reflection did not lead to transformative praxis rooted in critical awareness/consciousness because of the absence of true dialogue and pedagogical love. However, in this new attempt, Steven experienced success because he now had the educational and experiential tools to successfully navigate the next steps in his transformative process (Figure 1, 2c–2d).

Here is what Steven said about this stage that was different because of the “so what” dialogue rooted in pedagogical love:

I think this was an important moment when I decided that when I wrote my papers, what I said I was going to do was write my papers for me, and I wasn't going to just give the professors what I thought they wanted to hear. I started writing for myself. And that tough because I had never done that before. I had always written papers because of what I thought the professors wanted. Now I had to really think about what was at stake for me in the writing, and I had to make sure that it sounded like me. That took on a life of its own to the point where all of my professors, they responded to what I was writing. There was no class where the professor did not respond to something I put in there that came from me and wasn't just regurgitation of what we did in class.

Praxis—Sitting-in with a Newer Cohort and Graduating

Praxis is the final stage in the Freirean educational model that we offer (illustrated in Figure 1, 2d). In describing this final stage, Steven said:

I entered an awkward period in my growth process. Classes were about to end, and I had to focus on writing the dissertation. This was a point where I could see simultaneously who I was and who I needed to become. [Long pause]. After classes ended, Steven continued, I wasn't ready to write. I did absolutely nothing. One day of inactivity turned into five. Five days turned into two weeks. Before I knew it, four or five months had passed. In

this process, two events—one of them involving a “so what?” conversation with my professor, made the difference between being stuck in a place of inaction or going forward and getting this dissertation done.

The second transformative event took place when my methodology professor invited me to a class she held in the evenings with the cohort two years behind mine. Two of my cohort members and I began going to her class, sitting in the back, and writing our dissertations. Coming to the other cohort's class was hard because it was embarrassing, but it was a liberating experience. The ironic part is that the three of us in the back of that class started a kind of tradition. Dissertation-writing doctoral students continue to sit in the back of that class and write while the newer cohorts are taught. I'm proud of that, and because of this type of assistance, I eventually graduated with my Ph.D.

Transformed, Empowered, and Giving Back

In Freire's *Education for Critical Consciousness* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, education serves a generative role that is the outcome of the dialogic student-as-teacher process. In this generative role, students who are mentored in programs and by teachers who use the Freirean model—imbued with qualities illustrated in Figure 1, 1a–2a—are ready to recalibrate and serve as teachers in this model. Steven's experiences reflected this generative process. After he graduated, Steven became a mentor: “Now, as a mentor to the young men in my school, I am able to understand my role more clearly. I am more than just a male figure for them to emulate. I believe that I am now a conduit for meaningful activities and useful information.”

As a transformed and empowered graduate giving back in a generative model, Steven said:

I now use my newly acquired ability as a researcher to develop a better, more targeted program from which the young men could find benefit. My focus used to be preparation for manhood. The focus gradually shifted toward engineering, mathematics, and public presentation. By doing so, I am able to enjoy my role a lot more and find real fulfillment from the practice of mentoring. I was finally able to unearth the cyclical quality of mentorship They were not supposed to only learn from me, but I was supposed to learn from them as well. My purpose was to transmit the love invested in me.

In describing his graduation and post-graduation experiences, parallel to the Freirean model illustrated in Figure 1, 1a–3, Steven said:

When it was all over, getting the curriculum instruction degree I did could not help me even begin to understand what I was getting into. I went from being a bystander to being the expert in the room. I don't hide behind who I think I am anymore. It is what it is and I just do what I do and let that be it.

I love myself a lot more because I understand my destiny. I don't feel lost. I don't feel like I need to fit anyone's mold anymore. I can be myself—my authentic self—because everything isn't about school; it is also about what's going on inside of me. It still takes me by surprise when I hear "Doctor So and So" at my school. If people slip and call me Mr. Littles, I don't say anything. It's still surreal to me when someone calls me Doctor but it doesn't define who I am. I have said this before in so many ways but I just feel more comfortable about being an educator now, and I am not afraid.

Once I got my Ph.D. something else also happened. I eventually was able to begin a new relationship—with myself. I met me for the first time and was determined to make me successful, but by applying an evolved principle. I became a better mentor for my group of young male mentees, a better supporter for an annual conference for young girls that my wife and I organize, a willing sharer of personally prepared instructional material with colleagues, and a more focused trainer for staff members at my school. Most of all, I became a better man for my family.

Conclusion

The narrative of Steven's experience as a Ph.D. student that we presented includes elements reflected in our Freirean model of pedagogical love illustrated in Figure 1. The effects of what Freire describes as the loveless, arrogant, anti-dialogical, and anticomunicative nature of the banking model were a part of this narrative and experience (*Pedagogy, Education*). The progression from ABD to Ph.D. status was also present. So too were dialogue, critical awareness, critical reflection, critical action, *conscientização*, and praxis that resulted in the empowering transformative outcomes described. Also indicated is the generative nature of this model in Steven's giving back actions as a mentor to young men.

In addition, we found evidence of *love*—love similar to that rooted in Kierkegaard's and Fromm's maxim of *neighborly love*—that was embedded in Kohlberg's principle of *justice*, and that is informed by *agape*. This Ph.D. graduate is now practicing the *pedagogy of love* with his own students and mentees as they too seek the benefits that adequate education of good quality can provide.³

Although Steven's narrative includes all elements of the Freirean model in Figure 1, his life experiences did not tidily follow the 1a to 3 lock-step order indicated in this figure. For example, incidents of critical awareness and critical self-reflection occurred prior to dialogue. These actions, however, did not lead to meaningful outcomes nor completion of the dissertation until after the "so what" dialogue and self-reflection. In attempting to get the dissertation done, it was the "so what" dialogue that actually generated the praxis—that operated as the direct spark in the engine to finally getting it done, and encouraged him on the way toward graduation from the Ph.D. program. This example illustrates the Freirean argument for the necessity of pedagogical love and the transformative nature of dialogue rooted in pedagogical love that are a liberating and empowering educational method. The relativist approach that guides our conversations in this paper signifies our acknowledgment that there are no easy recipes or standardized models available to address all educational needs. However, based on the Ph.D. experience reflected in the narrative, we believe that this model is capable of enhancing equity and possibilities for educational success for all students, especially those who are at risk of attrition.

Our goal in telling this story is to make some small contribution to continued dialogue on the Freirean model as it relates to educational equity and achievement, not just at the ABD to Ph.D. level in doctoral programs, but at all levels of the educational spectrum.⁴ Other issues that may be relevant to this paper's discussions include those raised in a previous publication (Smith-Campbell, Littles, and West), such as issues of pedagogical love in K–12 and especially in grades 11–12; pedagogical love and practices of closing equity gaps, and pedagogical love as an axiological approach that replaces violent struggles, rage, and anger on a wider sociopolitical scale in order to create a more just and humanizing world. We hope this conversation continues.

Acknowledgements

To the educator who guided this project, we dedicate this quote from Freire: "To teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the

production or construction of knowledge" (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 30). You are the epitome of the Freirean teacher in every way. I hope that in every way this paper represents to the world the justice you have done for us, your students. Thank you.

Notes

1. Writers such as Darder; FitzSimmons and Uusiautti; Liambas and Kaskaris; Määttä and Uusiautti; Miller, Brown, and Hopson; and Schoder have offered varying interpretations and insights into the Freirean concept of pedagogical love and use of the term *love*. Others such as Noddings and Soto have examined the theme of pedagogical love by presenting the concept of caring as an ethical pedagogical practice and principle, using interpretations that appear somewhat different in orientation and socio-political goals from that of Freire's. The tradition of clarifying and offering reinterpretations is an approach that Freire himself indulged in, as Cruz and others pointed out (see also Morrow; Lake & Dagostino; McLaren; Winchell and Kress).

2. Kohlberg's ideas on justice if applied to Freire's educational vision can result in a pedagogical approach similar to autonomous student-centered instruction and self-directed learning, in which teachers operate as guides and more knowledgeable others in learners' zones of proximal development (Vygotsky). In education this can translate to a relationship in which teacher and student join "in a community in which value decisions are made on a shared, respectful, and equitable basis," and as Freire suggests, the relationship does not result in a banking model where "the teacher transmits that culture and its values to the student" (*Pedagogy* 20).

3. See Noguera.

4. See discussions in Calleja; Cruz; Dirkx; Giroux; Mayo; Miller, Brown, and Hopson; Noddings. For discussions on achievement gap issues, see Darling-Hammond & Rothman; Ferguson; Ladson-Billings; Noguera; Noguera, Pierce, & Ahram.

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