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THE BENSON KIDS: TEACHING IS LEARNING

The truth is that much of what I know about teaching and learning, I learned when I was teaching Spanish and English to junior and senior high school students in Benson, Arizona, a rural community in the desert Southwest. Initially, I thought, “I will teach, and they will learn.” Gradually and painfully, I began to recognize that my assumptions were wrong. In fact, much of the teaching methodology that I had learned previously just didn’t seem to work.

Within the first twenty-four hours, the students started teaching, and I started learning. I learned all twenty-eight eighth graders’ names and faces only to discover that they had—yes— told me the wrong names. I had other classes, but this group was my homeroom class, and I would be spending the majority of my day with them. My new colleagues were quick to warn me about all the “problems” that I had received. The students had many labels, which I have since learned to hate: *at risk, troublemaker, problem child, minority, limited English proficient*, and so on. Many of the families lived in areas that we would today call low-socioeconomic communities. It seemed to me that they were just families that were working as hard as they could, doing the best they could, and trying to enjoy their life a little.

I was hired to teach language arts. When they asked me whether I could teach language arts, I thought, “Sure, what could be so difficult about that? I know about languages and literature, so I certainly must know about language arts.” When I walked into the classroom the first day, I soon learned what could be so difficult about it. There, lined up on a shelf that ran the length of one wall, were all the texts: (1) twenty-eight light-blue spelling books, (2) twenty-eight royal-blue basal readers, (3) twenty-eight tan penmanship books, (4) twenty-eight large burgundy grammar books (at last, something I recognized—in fact, I had used that book when I was their age), and (5) twenty-eight yellow language arts workbooks. Let’s see: 5 (different sets of books) : 28 (students) = 140 texts for my eighth graders, and I would have other books for my sixth and seventh graders. I knew that I would never be able to keep track of all these books, so my first decision was one of the best I ever made: Toss the texts. At that time, I did it out of desperation, but doing so taught me more than several teacher-education courses had ever done. The truth is that we didn’t really toss the texts; we just left them in nice visible stacks on the shelf in case anyone ever wanted to use them (or wanted to see us using them).

On the second day, one of the boys who was considered by his peers to be among the biggest and baddest asked a really good question: “If we aren’t going to use them books, what are we going to do until June?”

Danny, spokesperson of the eighth graders, asked with a hint of challenge in his voice.

“Let’s just read and write,” I responded.

“Read and write?” they said in unison. “What?”

“Whatever we want,” my mouth answered. I can assure you that no one in the room was more surprised than I by my response. But you must remember that I was just trying to get through the day.

“Anything?” they pushed.

“Anything,” I innocently answered.

That day after school, I drove to Tucson to explore the used-book stores. There, on the floor in the back of one store by the gardening books, I found a little worn paperback entitled *Hooked on Books*, by D. N. Fader and E. B. McNeil, which was published in 1966. I had never heard of Fader or McNeil or this book, but it seemed right for the moment. I took the book home and read it from cover to cover.

Fader and McNeil had some unusual ideas for the time. They said that students should read and then write about their reading in journals. They said that teachers should not correct errors but that they should respond meaningfully to what the students wrote. Not correct grammar and spelling errors? Heresy! Fader and McNeil also said that students could write anything they wanted, and that teachers were to assign only a specific number of pages, which would increase with each passing week. Quantity over quality, I thought. But remember, I was desperate. I had twenty-eight students to face the next day, and they were probably expecting me to have some answers.

On the third day with my students, I told them what I had found, and we discussed their ideas. They agreed to go along with me. During this discussion, I also mentioned to the class that I had just read a journal article that said it really didn’t matter if I corrected all their errors. The article said that they wouldn’t learn from my corrections. I vividly recall Albert, who already had a reputation for his behavior, mumbling for me to hear, “I could have told you that.” These were disturbing ideas for me because all I could think about was the enormous amount of time I had wasted correcting students’ papers with the mighty red pen.

In those days, we had no idea what a journal was, so we just used the school-supplied lined paper, which we placed inside school-supplied construction paper. The first week, I assigned five full pages, both sides, every line filled. The students were shocked and sure that they couldn’t do it.

My actions in the classroom now ran counter to anything I had ever been taught, but I had gone too far to turn back. The students slowly began to find materials to read; even more slowly, they began to write. Danny, of course, was the first to issue a challenge. The students slowly began to find materials to read; even more slowly, they began to write. Danny, of course, was the first to issue a challenge. I noticed the magazine, which in those days we called a girly magazine, and knew that every eye in the class was watching. However, my parenting had prepared me for this, and I shot him the old “Mom eye.” Today, I would not be so gentle. Today I would grab the magazine and use it for curriculum to demonstrate how little girls and little boys are socialized in different ways in our culture. Danny was lucky; he knew me before I knew about gender biasing.

José was the next to issue a quiet, but direct, challenge. The entire class was busily reading and writing. I was quietly walking among the desks and responding to students. When I came to José, I noticed that he was writing rapidly. He had a large book, the Tucson phone book, and he was copying names. Long lists of names filled his blank papers. *Hooked on Books* had prepared me for this. Fader and McNeil told me that this would happen. They told me that the student would soon tire of this and would want to move to something that interested him.

“What are you writing, José?” I asked.

“I’m copying the phone book,” he replied.

“Where are you in the alphabet?” I asked.

“I’m still on the A’s,” he answered.

“Okay,” I said and moved on to the next student.

José never made it to the B’s. From the Tucson phone book, he went right to reading about geography and writing about places he found in the almanac. José eventually graduated with honors in English and in Spanish and is now a pilot in the U.S. military. He has visited most of those places he used to write about.

Each Monday, I assigned more pages. Each Friday, I went home with a huge stack of messy, dirty, construction-paper journals, each filled with treasures and literacy. The next Monday, the students got their journals back with my comments, thoughts, questions, and stickers. I remember the absolute joy and delight I saw on the faces of those “problems” when they read my responses on Monday. I finally quit adding more pages when we hit thirty per week simply because I couldn’t carry everything. I knew that Fader and McNeil were onto something powerful when the kids groaned and complained when our free reading and writing time was over.

Remember the blue basals that had been left on the shelf with the other texts? Eventually, they were used by one boy, Gilbert, who read every single story in the blue basal. He not only read every story; he thoroughly enjoyed them. Gilbert had been considered a nonreader who had resisted every basal to date. During the spring months, he continued to explore the texts stacked on the shelf and shared his discoveries with me. I think he thought I should have this information. On reflection, I think I was not fooling Gilbert; he knew that I needed all the help I could get. In late spring, the students took the annual achievement test. As with several other students, Gilbert's reading scores jumped three grade levels.

"What did you do for Gilbert?" the principal asked me.

"What did I do? What did Gilbert do for himself and for me!" I thought to myself.

The other twenty-seven students and I completely enjoyed the freedom of reading and writing. As the students took control of their own learning, their reading and language scores soared. Gilbert read his texts; the other students read science fiction, history, novels, texts from other classes, and even poetry. I read educational journals. I didn't understand it then, but I do now. From these students, I learned the following:

- Reading improves writing.
- Choice matters.
- We get smarter when we write.
- We love it when someone responds to our writing.
- Flexibility and a sense of humor help.

All my teaching and learning since those years has been directly related to my experiences teaching and learning with the Benson kids. We discovered by reading, talking, writing, hearing, experiencing, risking, and musing, and we learned together. We learned that it all takes time—the great enemy of public education! Every time I read books about critical pedagogy, I see their faces, I hear their questions, and I remember their laughter and tears.

What can be learned from this today? The Benson kids gave me the pedagogical principles, or "Benson basics," that have sustained me through three decades of teaching. I was lucky enough to come of age in teaching when we were expected to teach children and not just the curriculum and the standards. The following words resonate with me: "In my 35 years of teaching and my 6 decades of living, I have never met a *standard* child" (J. Yatvin, personal communication, September 5, 2002).

Teachers tell me that today, real reading, writing, and responding have too often been replaced with one-word-right-or-wrong blanks to fill in. Choice is vanishing; flexibility has been transformed into rigidity; and even the thought of a sense of humor is no longer funny.

Teachers tell me that cynicism and silence are pervasive in schools today. It is painfully clear that the real world of teaching and learning today is vastly different from when I learned my Benson basics. Could I make it today if I were just starting my career? I do not know, but I am sure that I could not make it without critical pedagogy: to name, to reflect critically, to act.

The most challenging question I am asked today is “How can teachers survive during this era of prescribed pedagogy?” We begin the search for that answer together; critical pedagogy will guide us. First, we *name* as we experience it, and I am doing that right now. Second, we will *reflect critically* together throughout the pages of this book. Third, we *act*. The answers do not lie in cynicism or in silence.

Learn, Relearn, and Unlearn Your Way to Critical Pedagogy

A group of those Benson kids were in my classes in the seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades as their classes and my teaching assignments changed. In those years, the only thing I knew about accountability was the students’ success, and succeed they did. I watched them go from being isolated, marginalized “problem kids” to student leaders during their high school years. In those years, I didn’t know about collecting data. I knew only that when those students graduated with two honors cords (one in Spanish and one in English), the proud tears of their families were data enough for me. Teaching and learning with this group of students for six years gave me the courage and patience to learn, to relearn, and to unlearn, which eventually led me to a study of critical pedagogy.

TO LEARN: DIFFICULT LEARNING EXPERIENCES The Benson kids taught me that we learn by reading, talking, writing, listening, experiencing, engaging, interacting, solving problems, posing problems, and taking risks. And we do it better if we are in a safe and secure environment with an adult who cares about us. Learners choose what to learn. If it doesn’t matter to learners, it doesn’t matter.

In my own experience, I can remember several learning experiences that were not wonderful. My doctoral course on statistics, for instance—now there is something that was not fun to learn. However, there was one great surprise: As promised by his former students, the professor really did eat a piece of chalk in the middle of his lecture on multiple regression. In a class of fifty adult graduate students, I think I was one of two or three who noticed. However, I had been waiting and watching with eager anticipation all semester. If I had to learn stats, at least I was going to get to see the famous professor eat chalk.

Now that I am no longer teaching and learning with the Benson kids, I want you to know who my current students are. I am teaching in a state university. When I speak of the graduate students, I am talking about people who have been up since 6:00 A.M., washed a load of clothes, gotten their kids off to school, taught all day, gone to an after-school meeting, and arrived at the university for a night class. Yes, I teach tired teachers. Even though the graduate students seem to be very hardy souls, sometimes I can see that learning isn't always wonderful for them either; for instance, sometimes when students read a new idea or hear a new thought, resistance and denial precede learning. We have all done this and probably will again.

TO RELEARN: DIFFICULT RELEARNING EXPERIENCES Learning can be very challenging, but the problem is that it always leads to relearning, which is more challenging. I think that relearning often involves a shift in methodology. When I walked into that Benson class, I had to shift my methodology from what I had learned previously to what I needed to learn from the students. Relearning takes place when students teach us all those things we didn't learn in teacher education.

Sometimes the adult students in the graduate classes are far enough along the relearning curve to understand that the ideas we generate in class are not for class only; rather, these ideas are to be applied to their own worlds. For example, Marta wrote,

As I start off each new year in teaching, I have to relearn because each class is so unique that I can't use the same type of teaching methods or discipline. I never could understand how teachers could come into the first faculty meeting of September and have their lesson plans done for the entire year. Don't we have to base our teaching on the needs of our students?

It's reassuring that in our own struggle with relearning, we are in good company. Paulo Freire criticizes his followers for just being content with his first texts and not reading the critiques he has made of his own work, which show that learning and relearning never end (cited in Gadotti, 1994, p. 88).

My relearning has continued since the publication of the last edition of this book, in which I used the word *rigor* in a Freirian sense of academically challenging work. However, the word *rigor* seems to have been semantically altered, and today its use in schools often connotes mastery, inflexibility, stiffness, harshness, severity, and even cruelty. Teachers have told me that the construct of rigor is now akin to child cruelty as schools vainly attempt to bring all kids to "proficiency" in reading, math, and science, as required by the No Child Left Behind Act. Rigor is applauded by some and derided by others who wonder how we can possibly have all children above average. Rigor is particularly cruel for some children.

For example, imagine being a child with a specific learning problem who is expected to demonstrate proficiency in reading, math, and science by 2014, when all children will be required to be at 100 percent of proficiency. To understand rigor in schools today, Koehler (2003) says, think rigor mortis. He calls for more vigor and less rigor. For Freire, rigor in schools was always balanced with the joy of learning. Frankly, I am struggling with my relearning of rigor. Critical pedagogy calls us back to the joy of rigor, from a Freirian perspective.

Authentic is another word I am struggling to relearn. For me, *authentic*, as in *authentic teaching and learning*, was at the very heart of real teaching and learning. In education, we strive for authentic learning as opposed to simulated learning experiences. However, I noticed that a colleague in the world of English composition and rhetoric had a tendency to wince when I said *authentic*. “When terms like *authentic* are used, institutional power and class bias are erased from the picture. The actions of literacy instruction are portrayed as entirely benign and self-evidently beneficial to the students” (Newkirk, 1997, p. 90).

Relearning is tough. Mine continues as I think about *tolerance*. It seems that we live in an age of tolerance, and it is really starting to grate. We tolerate everyone and everything, and we take way too much pride in our tolerance of others. I have listened to many teacher-education students study Banks’s four phases and then talk in class about how *tolerant* they are or are not. I think Banks is giving us a framework to reflect on equity, social justice, and democratic principles in the classroom. I do not think he is calling us to *tolerance*. Think of it this way: My husband and I have been married for almost 43 years. How do you suppose he would feel if I said to him, “Honey, in all of our years together, I want you to know that I have learned to tolerate you”? Yikes. Or what if we told our kids that we can tolerate them? I know that I don’t like it if someone *tolerates* me. Words are not just neutral little sounds or black marks on a page; they are laden with feelings. Words, feelings, and ideas are mutually informative.

In my own struggles with relearning *tolerance*, I am attracted to the notion of moving from *tolerance* for diversity to *transformation* for equity (Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbell Jones, 2005, p. 81. See Figure 1.9.). They clearly point out that tolerance is not about *them*; it is about *us* and our own values, motives, and practices in the classroom. In addition, Lindsey et al. provide a framework that makes clear distinctions in order to move along the continuum from a more traditional approach to tolerance to perhaps a new perspective of moving toward transformation for equity.

OK, so what word should we use? Do we in schools *tolerate* kids who speak other languages, or do we *accept* and *respect* them? One thing for sure: The student in your class who is the hardest to love needs love the most.

Critical pedagogy asks us to listen to the whispering of the juxtaposition. I strive to remember this, and it is in this spirit that I share with you what Gandhi had to say about tolerance: *If we have no understanding and no tolerance, we shall never settle our differences.* Obviously, this flies in the face of my struggles with the use of tolerance I hear today in the United States, particularly in schools. As I struggle with what I perceive to be a patronization buried in the new semantics of the word *tolerance*, I must remember that, in some contexts, tolerance can be grounded in goodness.

Teachers and students often borrow and read my books; I love this, as what good is a book on a shelf? However, I hate it, too, because often I go to grab a book, and it is gone. Eventually, most books are returned, and usually the books come back with reflections written on yellow sticky notes and often with family pictures as bookmarks of the student or teacher who had the book. I love this part of the process. While writing this chapter, I found a little sticky note in one of my treasured books (Cummins & Sayers, 1995). I have no idea what student sent me this message, but I found it today, when I needed it most:

Tolerance may not be the best option possible, but tolerance is better than what is happening now. You have to tolerate someone before you can begin to understand them. If you can't tolerate someone, then you won't be able to listen to their ideas. Maybe open-mindedness is a better word for tolerance.

TO UNLEARN: DIFFICULT UNLEARNING EXPERIENCES Learning and relearning prepare us for unlearning, which is the most challenging. Unlearning involves a shift in philosophy, beliefs, and assumptions. Unlearning is unpacking some old baggage. I am unlearning *tolerance*. I hate to think that I must revert to grammar to find my answers, but the more I think about this, the more I think it might be helpful to think of transitive verbs, which have an object: to tolerate, to accept, to respect, to celebrate *others*. However, it is really about each of us reflecting on our own hidden assumptions; we're in the mix, too, and therefore maybe we need to use an intransitive verb (no object needed): to be aware of my own assumptions. What is my role?

When I was a little girl, I learned from my Grandma Grace that the melting pot was a symbol of all that was good. Eventually, I had to unlearn that idea because the melting pot was not so wonderful for everyone; some got burned on the bottom. This experience with unlearning was very uncomfortable because it challenged all my previously held assumptions.

The Lakota Sioux Indians who lived on the reservation two miles away tried to jump into that pot for the sake of being "good Americans."

They tried to talk like Grandma, be like Grandma, think like Grandma, and act like Grandma, but no matter what they did, they could not look like Grandma. By doing what they had been taught was right and good, they gave up their language, their traditions, their beliefs, and, in many cases, their very souls. When they leaped into that hot pot, far too much was boiled away. I finally came to learn that the pot is really about power. The melting pot worked for my Grandma but not for her neighbors.

As a European American feminist from a prestigious West Coast university recently told me, "I have long considered myself to be an enlightened feminist. However, my comfortable framework was ripped out from underneath me when I met Pam, an African American feminist who consistently points out the multiple ways in which the feminist movement is Eurocentric."

My unlearning continues.

Sometimes, unlearning takes time and feels like a long leap across the great paradigm divide. For example, when I moved from behaviorism to transformational teaching and learning, it took decades, and not every moment was wonderful.

Summarizing relearning and unlearning, Karie, a teacher, said to her colleagues, "Relearning asks us to add new knowledge, and unlearning asks us to let go of the known." Unlearning is more difficult than relearning because it requires that we part with previous knowledge, schema, and theory that are known and comfortable. Unlearning is central to critical pedagogy, and it often feels terrible. This is good. Does it feel as though everything you ever learned, you now need to relearn and unlearn? This is good. At least for me, it often seems that all I ever held to be true about teaching and learning has been called into question. Many of my long-held assumptions have not stood the test of time.