Critical Hope and Despair: Loosening the Knots of Education

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I entered a home in the Kakuma Refugee Camp, where a woman showed me her beadwork. She handed me a clear, tangled fishing line. She mimed to me that she wanted me to untangle the fishing line for her. As she handed me the plastic line, I found the end and started to work on it. A few minutes later, the group was leaving and I had to go with them. I handed it back to her. As she pulled from the end that I loosened, the knots became tighter and tighter. In a brief moment, staring at her weathered hands, I found myself lost. Lost in my thoughts.

I share this story because students often come with visible threads of their lives that they want to share, and they also come with invisible threads that we can be aware of if we take the time to listen, really listen, to know where to begin. The concept of critical hope is like this. What is often visible to teachers and learners is that there are systems that favor a dominant society at the expense of others (Boler, 2014), whereas what is invisible is our complicity in maintaining the status quo. When we address these unjust systems through meaningful and reflective dialogue, oftentimes decentering and disruption happens, and this is where critical hope can manifest and ultimately foster change and transformation in students, teachers, and communities (Martin, 2018; Martin et al., 2019).

In this short essay, I outline two threads that support critical hope in the classroom. One is visible, that is, a push for more inclusive and culturally responsive global policies, whereas the other is often only visible to a teacher and learners that are fortunate to co-create space for critical hope to happen in their classroom.

In our global education policies, we need critical hope. Policies (e.g., Education for All, Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]) are moving in this direction and becoming more inclusive, culturally responsive, and just. They are being shifted in a direction that some leaders and policymakers (e.g. The World Bank, creators of the SDGs, to mention a few) from the economically powerful are attempting to learn from the communities that are most affected (Mohamedbhai, 2015). These counternarratives need to be heard due to communities and countries often having realistic goals, practical solutions, and concrete understanding of the context that is far better than the leaders who are dictating from the top. The purpose of inviting counternarratives is "not to 'integrate' them in a structure of oppression but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'" (Freire, 1994, p. 74). These policies can dramatically change students' lives due to their support, build capacity, bring accountability to governments and education sectors, and support reform. Thus, when we welcome our students into the classroom, we also need to reflect on why the implementation of these policies are not moving faster?

As teachers, we need to not give hope, which I don't believe one can do, but rather we need to co-create spaces that support students to embody their own hopes, thus collectively educating our own hope. We can do this by meeting students where they are at. This is self-explanatory and yet often people forget what it actually means. It does not mean to lower your expectations of the student but rather understand that not everyone learns the same way, as much as our textbooks want us to think. More often than not, school is designed for the affluent, Global North, to succeed. Although we say

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words like "culturally responsive practices," "universal design learning," and "equity," we must actually apply them. Students will respond better when they understand that you want to learn and work alongside them. When teachers can also see themselves as learners, we are in a partnership, untangling invisible thread, which is knowledge.

We can also be a witness to a student's despair. Despair is not necessarily bad. It is a social construction that we see as a negative connotation, but it can also be a source of awakening, motivating, and hopefulness. As teachers and learners, we just need to be very careful in setting students up for critical despair (Martin, 2018), that is, a space in which a person "confronts the status quo while having the perception or the reality that one cannot do anything about the situation" (Martin, 2018, p. 125). An example of this would be students learning about their human rights while living in a country that enforces unjust policies that counter what they are learning, thus, leading the student or teacher to critical despair and perhaps nihilism.

In this short essay, I outlined two threads that support critical hope in the classroom. One is to advocate for more inclusive global policies and the other is to cultivate critical hope and be a witness to despair in the classroom. In order to nurture hopeful views, we, as teachers and learners, can recognize our own inherent value, wealth of resources, and solutions that we can bring to the classroom and understand that when we embody our own hope, we might be the catalyst for others to embody their own hope.

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