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Behind the Veil of the Infallible Teacher Persona

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Connecting Theory to Practice

**Behind the Veil of the Infallible
Teacher Persona**

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Teachers are generally perceived as self-sacrificing, kind and generous do-gooders. Though well-intentioned, this commonsense perception leaves oppressive assumptions unexamined and ultimately undermines teachers' professional agency. I explore this phenomena and its implications reflectively and in relation to scholarship on critical pedagogy and teacher identity. To realize teaching as liberatory, I suggest programs of teacher education engage students in exploring the complexity of their motivations to become teachers. Though taboo, questioning teachers' relationship to power, control, and punishment refuses to shield these tendencies from the light of examination, for the benefit of children and society more broadly.

Keywords

Critical Pedagogy, Paulo Freire, Social Justice, Sociology of Education, Teacher Identity

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Introduction

In my first year as a teacher, while checking out at a grocery store, I noticed a sign at the register said “police, firefighters, teachers and veterans get 10% off.” Not one to let a deal pass by, I let the cashier know that I was a teacher. “Oh, wow,” she said, shaking her head, “thank you for doing that!” I hadn’t expected this level of pity in stating my profession. It wasn’t as if I was doing charity work. I enjoyed teaching and felt fairly compensated, happy to have a salaried job that was meaningful to me and included benefits and time off. Though I thanked her and understood her comment was intended to convey her perception of teaching as demanding and perhaps underappreciated, her response got me thinking: What does this response say about how society views teachers? Does pitying teachers indicate they are generally viewed by others as inherently self-sacrificing, generous and kind people? If so, what does this image imply, and what does it obscure?

Given that teachers are often positioned as virtuous givers in a world dominated by greed and materialism, the interrogation at the heart of this writing may feel destabilizing. Those of us who identify as teachers may become defensive. And yet, I argue that questioning teachers’ motivations and calling common sense into question are necessary to realize the transformative potential of teaching, a premise upon which rests the vast field of critical pedagogy. Of course, I can’t speak for all teachers: Many may be the selfless figures society makes them out to be. In this essay, I will speak for myself and say I definitely am not one of those. Rather, assuming that my profession puts me beyond reproach manifests as an impediment to improving my practice as a teacher. Being a good teacher should not rest on the denial of myself as fully human, as selfish and neurotic as that may be. As I describe, the opposite is true: Bravely assessing teacher motivation and disposition can contribute to improved teaching practice. This will be relevant for teachers who, like me, chose teaching as a practical profession that provided stability and purpose, who do not shed their self-interest under the guise of service. Those who view teaching as a profession that has the capacity to empower individuals and create a more just society may inch closer to that aim through peeking behind the veil of the infallible teacher persona.

The Theory

A close look at the history of public education in the United States shows that schools—for better or worse—have always been viewed as instrumental to society (Feinberg & Solits, 2004; Philips, 2005). After the American Revolution, public education was framed as a mechanism for training future politicians, ensuring the health of the democracy, and leveling the playing field between rich and poor (Spring, 2024). The history of public education in the United States reveals that schooling has been an ideological battle ground—from its project of assimilation of European immigrants and deculturalization of Native American families (Sakiestewa, 2010), to its expansive scope related to health, sex education, and nutrition, to its role in international affairs (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The extent to which schools can shape society is debatable. Some say schools cannot solve social ills that are rooted in economic and political power structures (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1993). What is not debatable is the fact that, historically, they have been tasked with doing so.

Critical pedagogy extends this premise to assert that because schools exercise enormous potential in shaping society, the kind of teaching happening in schools matters immensely. Perhaps most famously in this tradition, Freire (2000) theorized that teaching could contribute to what makes us fully human, or it could

function to serve the interests of the powerful elite, to objectify and dehumanize. Freire's problem-posing education challenges teachers to center their curriculum and pedagogy around real-world issues that are inherently multidisciplinary. In this model, students' experiences, concerns and interests are expressions of culture and are not to be dismissed in favor of teaching as merely a transfer of information. Critical pedagogy challenges traditional understandings of the teacher as powerful and students as powerless. Contrary to industrial teaching methods, critical pedagogy frames teaching that truly changes the world as rooted in dialogue, love, and respect.

Critical pedagogy, today a diverse and multifaceted theoretical framework, holds as its highest ideal teaching that empowers people to question power structures, think critically and honor their lived experience as knowledge (Darder et al., 2024). This approach to teaching is indeed laudable and simultaneously feels next to impossible in the context of schools as government institutions. The tension of positioning teachers both as agents of social cohesion and social transformation, combined with administrative demands to measure, document, manage and conform to educational trends and mandates, not to mention all of the skills needed to plan, teach and assess a multitude of individual students on a daily basis relegates the ideals of critical pedagogy to the realm of fantasy, or so it seems. After 20 years as a teacher across multiple age groups and subject areas and a PhD in sociocultural studies with a focus on education, I have only ever felt that I enacted critical pedagogy superficially. My question is: Why? Why, despite deep knowledge of and appreciation for critical pedagogy, has it eluded me?

Theory exploring teacher identity is vast and growing, particularly since 2010 (Rushton et al., 2023). Though beyond the scope of this article, the field of research on teacher identity reveals that teacher identity is multidimensional and constantly evolving in response to social contexts, emotions, personal background and experiences in programs of teacher education, among other factors (Alsup, 2006; Beijaard et al., 2000; Day & Leitch, 2001). As Rushton et al. (2023) discovered, there are few studies that meaningfully explore teacher identity of primary school and early childhood teachers, teachers from the global south, and teachers in "non-core curriculum subjects," such as art, physical education, geography, and history (p. 15).

In addition, for decades, scholars of critical pedagogy have lambasted programs of teacher education for not only failing to develop teachers' critical consciousness but actively contributing to a social order defined by inequity, racism and the preservation of elite power (Bartolome, 2007; Giroux, 1988; Katz, 2008; Kincheloe, 2004; King, 1991; Kitts, 2024; Nieto, 2000). A wealth of scholarship demonstrates a myriad of ways that programs of teacher education can reverse their complicity with injustice and move instead toward contributing to profound personal and social transformation, reparation and justice (Harris et al., 2020; Kitts, 2022; Matias, 2016; McIntyre, 1995; Picower, 2021; Sleeter, 2001; Zeichner, 2009). Aside from common reflective exercises and outside of language teacher identity, research on interrogating teacher identity for its oppressive mechanisms and potentially toxic qualities is less developed (Friedman, 2016; Hess, 2003).

To contribute to the expansive scholarship at the intersection of teacher identity, critical pedagogy and teacher education I wonder: How do commonsense assumptions about teachers' moral superiority stifle authentic engagement with personality traits such as narcissism, sadism, control and perfectionism, among others? And, what is the prevalence of these personality traits among teachers in the United States?

The Practice

In my case it is not the institutional structure, the external demands, or the practical realities of teaching that have thwarted my ambitions as a critical pedagogue. As a tenure-track professor now, I have total freedom to design and teach my courses in the way I know to be best for my students, my style, and my subject area. Even as a high school teacher in a public charter school I was afforded tremendous autonomy. And yet, for the most part, I have played the part of teacher, unable to extract the persona of teacher from my authentic desire to decenter, interrogate, and transform the inherent, unquestioned power of the role.

In all honesty, hiding behind the teacher-as-giver persona has thwarted a genuine appraisal of my motivations for going into teaching. Not acknowledging my true motivation (or being supported in acknowledging this during my teacher preparation) has created an obstacle to becoming the teacher I long to be. So, for the sake of realizing a teaching practice that can change the world for the better and honor students, here is the truth that feels taboo: I did not go into teaching to save the world, or even because I love children. Consider re-reading that last statement again. Have you ever heard a teacher confess to this? While it may be easy to acknowledge that perhaps not all teachers are in it for the love of the game, have you ever heard a teacher make such a blunt statement? I, for one, have not. Why is that? If we in the teaching profession cannot speak honestly to our motivations, how can we effectively advocate for fair compensation and supportive working conditions as professionals? Moreover, when confessing selfish motivations is taboo, the space to discuss and process less-desirable aspects of our personalities, assumptions and habits diminishes.

For the sake of depriving the taboo of its power I will repeat: I did not go into teaching to save the world, or even because I love children. To those who think women naturally relate to children because some of us have bodies that make them, I say: It has only been in my middle age that I have even begun to understand children through the raising of my own. The knowledge and skills were in no way innate, at least for me. That had to be learned. And likewise, only later in life (after entering a PhD program) did teaching become a social justice issue for me. At 22, fresh out of college with a liberal arts degree and a major in philosophy, I was trying to figure out how to survive. I wanted a job with purpose, and I knew I didn't want to sell my soul in the pursuit of profit. One day, I saw an ad on the New York City subway that read: "You remember your first-grade teacher's name. Who will remember yours?" I have to hand it to the marketing team; this hooked me. Though I had originally moved to New York City at 18 to pursue fame and fortune, I thought I could forgo the fortune in exchange for stability, and settle for fame—or at least being remembered. Yes, my motivations to teach were rooted in my need for purpose, stability, and self-importance. This seems reasonable, and yet, it isn't the whole of it.

In that moment, right before deciding to pursue teaching, I also reasoned it would be nice to have authority, be respected, have all the answers, and be in control. I felt those urges buoy my choice to enter the teaching profession, and yet, I suppressed them. I knew they were shameful, and so I pushed them down and—until now—never told anyone the real reasons I went into teaching: Power over others, cloaked in a do-gooder facade. While I used to think these shameful motivations meant I was simply a jerk deep-down, I've discovered their root in a childhood defined by danger, unpredictability and trauma; formative experiences that defined my life choices. Though I am not proud to admit this, I imagine I am not the only one. If I had a community of practitioners or an education program that spoke openly to these

underlying justifications, I might have arrived at a critical pedagogy by now or at least done less damage in those early years in the classroom.

Lortie (1975, p. 62) wrote of the power of the “apprenticeship of observation,” where teachers tend to enact the kind of teaching they were subjected to as students, often one defined by submission, authority and control—at least in working and middle class schooling environments (Anyon, 1980). This mimicry, combined with perceived expectations from administrators, parents, and supervisors to perform a caricature of a teacher often outweighs the noble theory of the teacher from a critical pedagogical perspective—one who designs learning experiences through inquiry, questioning, and a beautiful cacophony of student voices. After all, it can feel insurmountable to enact an identity most of us have never seen modeled, let alone validated by those responsible for our evaluations and, ultimately, livelihood.

Programs of teacher education that take seriously issues of equity and social justice would do well to interrogate toxic personality traits and power-hungry motivations for entering the profession. Education professors can engage their students early on about why they are choosing to pursue teaching and push them to go beyond cliché statements about “changing the world” and “wanting to help.” This is not to promote dissuading well-intentioned students from making a positive impact, but rather to encourage honesty and self-reflection, to support students to get past saying “the right thing.” Creating the opportunity for students to speak to the complexity of their chosen vocation builds self-awareness to interrupt dehumanizing habits before they take root in practice. Furthermore, supporting students to unflinchingly speak to their needs as professionals cultivates their proficiency advocating for fair pay and working conditions without guilt or shame.

Additionally, teacher education programs could convey the qualities of a critical teacher persona to cooperating/mentor teachers and administrators at student teaching sites. Too often education students pass through programmatic requirements without any context, and in the end have little opportunity to enact their theoretical knowledge during student-teaching. Coming from an institutional context, communicating the value of pedagogy that empowers students and centers problem-posing education validates critical pedagogy in K-12 settings. This could be done through student-teacher evaluation rubrics, recruitment materials, or triad conversations between teachers, student-teachers and supervisors.

Those in teacher education know cooperating teachers are hard to find. Finding cooperating teachers who are also critical pedagogues is harder still. Given the dearth of teachers willing and able to support student-teachers, teacher education field supervisors and professors tread lightly, not wanting to impose their ideals, nor alienate much-needed practicing teachers. To make up for the lack of critical pedagogue cooperating teachers, teacher education programs could better serve their students, their students’ students (school-age children) and the public through providing examples of critical pedagogy in practice, both through their own college teaching and exemplary videos specific to their student population.

It is not lost on me that there must be teachers out there who did experience thorough, critical, and deeply transformative teacher education that prepared them to enact a pedagogy rooted in student empowerment and the pursuit of social equity—I’ve just yet to meet them. And I certainly was not fortunate or sufficiently informed at 22 years old to find one of these programs for myself. Looking to survive—and be in a position where I could reasonably expect authority and respect—I was part of a fast-track program that only required six weeks of student teaching in summer school, and the pursuit of a Master’s degree while teaching full-

time. I cringe now, looking back on who I was as a teacher in my 20s with practically zero examination of myself, my motivations for teaching and how my role was entangled in the social reproduction of inequities. Perhaps someday I will have the courage to write that story, for the sake of other young people on tracks too fast. When I imagine how that grocery store interaction might have gone if appraising personal motivation and critical teacher persona were common knowledge, I envision the cashier looking at me askance and saying something to the effect of: “I hope you’re one of the good ones.”

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