

Addressing the Living History of Oppression and Emancipation in American Education

LuAnne Kuelzer

Oklahoma State University-Oklahoma City

Neil Houser

University of Oklahoma

Introduction

The United States is made up of a wide diversity of ethnic groups who have, in theory, combined into a fabled “melting pot” society. Education is one means used to meld these peoples into “Americans.”

Education can be defined as including training in all of those aspects of living that are prerequisites for maturity (Szasz, 1983). This involves a mastery of the skills required for survival as well as a full awareness of one’s cultural and spiritual heritage. While formal education typically seeks to teach the values and behaviors young people need to succeed in society and to change them from outsiders into citizens, it can also effectively erase newcomers’ traditional and ethnic heritages. What may be viewed by the dominant population as a benign and beneficial process has, nonetheless, been historically problematic for many immigrants and people of color because the main educational focus has primarily been from a European American perspective.

In this article, we examine historical and current oppressive situations in K-12 and higher education. Second, we look at how institutional attitudes and governmental legislation can result in and perpetuate oppressive situations. Finally, we give examples of ways instructors at all educational levels can work within curriculum requirements yet also foster critical thinking and emancipatory possibilities.

A Brief History of Oppression in the United States

From the earliest encounters between Europeans and Indigenous people, attempts were made to educate the young in the contact language. Europeans felt their languages and cultures were morally superior to those of Native peoples; therefore, Franciscans and Dominicans in the Southwest taught Spanish conventions, Jesuits in the St. Lawrence River and Great Lakes regions educated Indian children in French language and customs, while Puritans in New England and Anglicans in the Atlantic seaboard attempted to replace Native society with English outlooks, attitudes, and traditions (Berkhofer, 1972). The aim of these encounters appeared to be not only social and cultural dominance (Zinn, 1995), but also the devout goal of the Indians' "acceptance of the Bible as the sole standard of faith" (Berkhofer, 1972, p. 8).

As early as 1609, just two years after English colonists landed in Virginia, British investors in Jamestown colony instructed Sir Thomas Gates to begin educating Native youth (Library of Congress, n.d.). This command implied that Indian children had not been educated by their own peoples. First among the ways proposed to "civilize" and Christianize the "savages" (Robinson, 1952, p. 154) was to remove Indian boys from their tribes and bring them into the colonies for the purpose of teaching English and the principles of religion to them. This removal of children from their homes eventually evolved into the Indian boarding school system. The ruthlessness of assimilating Indian youth into American culture at all costs may best be exemplified by Captain Richard H. Pratt's famous saying "Kill the Indian, and save the man" (Carlisle, n.d.).

Unlike the strategy of brutally imposing European-centered education upon Native populations, white slave owners withheld education from African slaves brought forcibly to America. With enslaved Africans, illiteracy added an additional layer of control to white slave owners; to this end, the 1832 anti-literacy laws made it a criminal offense to teach a slave to read or write (Fort, 1999), and Southern states imposed harsh penalties on white people who made an effort to produce literacy among slaves and on slaves who tried to learn to read or write (Zinn, 1995).

Although emancipation officially ended slavery, the prohibition against education remained a functional reality if no longer a legal one. After the Civil War, shattered Southern states built new schools for European American children but made only the barest of provisions for African American children. Few African American youngsters remained in school past eighth grade, and high schools for African American adolescents were rare. The education available to African American children in the South was abysmal in both quantity and quality, even though the economic reconstruction

of the South depended on appropriate education for all, both Black and white. Nevertheless, “appropriate” education for African American young people frequently meant industrial and agricultural education, manual training, instruction in hygiene, and other kinds of training to prepare them for jobs as laborers and domestic servants (Ravitch, 2001).

In 1955, *Brown vs. the Board of Education II* ended the official, but not the effective, nationwide segregation of schools. Because African American families tended to be located in poor neighborhoods with limited access to newer and better-funded facilities, teachers, supplies, and technology, forced busing was eventually used to desegregate schools and bring African American students into equalized schools. It was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, though, that federal law specifically prohibited discrimination on the basis “of race, color, or national origin in any programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance (USLegal, n.d.). This meant that school districts receiving federal aid were required to ensure that minority students received the same access to programs as non-minority students.

However, there were practical obstacles involved with assigning pupils to schools a great distance from their neighborhoods. Partially due to this hardship for children and their families, parents of all races called upon school district leaders to consider alternatives to accomplish integration. In response, many school districts came up with solutions like magnet schools (McMillan, 1980) and open-enrollment school districts (Education, 2017) to encourage voluntary participation in racially balanced schools. Despite such approaches, inadequate and outdated materials and low teacher expectations for minority students were still widespread problems. Additionally, the majority of teachers were white, and school curricula overwhelmingly presented a Western viewpoint of the world, reinforcing the historic pattern of education in the United States in which European Americans emphasized the *otherness* of many students (hooks, 1994).

Nor were African Americans the only members of society to be negatively affected by oppressive attitudes and legislation. In the late-19th and early-20th centuries, Asian Americans were singled out with strict anti-immigration laws and quotas. It was not until the U. S. Immigration Act of 1965 that the national-origins quota restrictions against people from “Asia, Africa, and the colonized Caribbean” were eliminated (FitzGerald & Cook-Martin, 2015). Even though the Immigration Act is more than 50 years old, European American culture often does not consider people with Asian ancestry as “real” Americans (Takaki, 1989). Moreover, the contributions of Asians to the settling of the West and the internment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps during World War II are frequently omitted from history textbooks. Currently,

despite often stellar high school grades, the number of Asians enrolled in universities, especially in Ivy League universities, is far lower than their percentage in the general population (Eikenburg, 2015).

More recently, Central and South American immigrants have become targets of oppressive legislation. For example, in 2007, Oklahoma passed House Bill 1804 which makes it a felony to knowingly or unknowingly give any sort of aid or assistance to undocumented immigrants. After the bill passed, the Tulsa Public Schools System, alone, reported a reduction in enrollment of “up to 25,000 Latino students” (Vargas, Sanchez, & Juarez, 2008, p. 461). In 2008, the same state representative who wrote HB 1804 proposed further legislation which attempted to make English the state’s official language (Navarre, 2008, p. 290). This bill differed from educational language programs meant to help newcomers adapt to their new country, such as bi-lingual or English immersion instruction for English language learners, in that it had definite anti-immigrant objectives. In 2010, Arizona’s State Bill 1070 made it a misdemeanor for an alien to be in Arizona without carrying required immigration documents (p. 2). The bill also obligated police to determine a person’s immigration status during a traffic stop, detention, or arrest if there was reasonable suspicion that the person was an undocumented alien. Critics of SB 1070 said the law encouraged racial profiling, while supporters maintained it prohibited the use of race as the sole basis for investigating immigration status. Responding to the controversy, the Obama administration challenged the constitutionality of Arizona’s anti-immigration law. The resulting lawsuit brought a decision that blocked much of the racial profiling portions of the bill (KEYTLaw, 2010).

Current executive policy has targeted Latino people for oppression in several ways. In Donald Trump’s presidential candidacy speech was the promise, not only to build a wall between the border of Mexico and the United States, but to—somehow—force Mexico to pay for it. Included in that speech was the claim that Mexican immigrants, specifically, were taking jobs from United States citizens, costing taxpayers billions of dollars in social services, trafficking drugs and committing a variety of other violent crimes, and that Mexican immigrants should all be deported (The American Presidency Project, 2016.). As president, Trump is attempting to make good on his threat to deport Latino immigrants by ending the protection from deportation provided by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) to undocumented immigrants who were brought illegally into the country as minors by their parents. Ending DACA could result in the deportation of as many as 800,000 young adults who have overwhelmingly been peacefully integrated into United States society (Mark, 2017).

Another disturbing matter that primarily affects Latino people is President Trump's "zero-tolerance policy" (Arnold, 2018) toward unauthorized immigrants, which means the Department of Homeland Security prosecutes every undocumented migrant crossing the U.S.-Mexican border, including asylum seekers. Thus, undocumented adults who want to seek asylum must appear before a federal judge and are held in federal custody while awaiting trial. Meanwhile, their children are separated from their parents and sent to detention centers. To date, "12,800" (Dickerson, 2018) children have been taken from their parents and held in "more than 100 centers across the United States." To help defray the cost of detaining migrant children, President Trump proposed "a \$3.6 billion cut—or 5.3 percent—from [the] current" from the federal educational budget (Ujifusa, 2018a). Programs whose funding would be affected by the proposal include "Title IV of the Every Student Succeeds Act," the "Preschool Development Grant program," and the "Head Start program" (Ujifusa, 2018b). Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has defended the Trump administration's proposed educational budget cuts (Ujifusa, 2018b).

Detaining migrants, while expensive, is creating a financial boon for private prisons and other contractors.

Several federal contracts have been issued for private facilities designed for the mass incarceration of detainees in Texas and [corporate prison contractor] CoreCivic's federal contractors have exploded by more than 900 percent.... JPMorgan, Wells [Fargo], and BlackRock's number of shares in the private and detention industry have collectively increased 28.3 times...driven mainly by JPMorgan and BlackRock, whose reported holdings increased 237.8 times. Moreover, the companies simultaneously capitalize on loopholes in so-called Real Estate Investment Trusts to shield their detention-industry assets from corporate taxation. (Chen, 2018)

Despite much negative news, there have been positive developments in education. The dropout rate of African American students have lowered dramatically, while high school graduation rates have increased; student participation in advanced placement classes, especially among minority students, has increased; math and verbal Scholastic Assessment Test scores have increased across almost all racial and ethnic groups; and greater numbers of African American and Latino high school graduates than ever enroll in and complete their college programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Institutionalized Methods of Oppression

Oppressive circumstances continue and are perpetuated in schools

today. This often involves the trivialization or illusion of deep learning, which subtly maintains many conditions initiated throughout our history. It is what Paulo Freire calls “banking education” (1970/2000). Banking education reduces learning to little more than the memorization and recall of facts. Students become “containers” into which teachers make “deposits” of information. Freire considered this style of education to be oppressive because the more students work at storing the deposits, the less they are able to develop critical thinking and critical consciousness. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed upon them, the more they tend to adapt to the worldview as it is presented and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 73).

The 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* published the troubling discovery that American students’ academic achievement lagged far behind that of students from other industrialized nations, especially in the areas of science, mathematics, and technology. Both the public and politicians feared that, as America’s educational standards declined, the result would be the loss of our competitiveness in the world’s market economy. Included in the report was the suggestion to strengthen the rigor of America’s high school curricula by increasing the graduation requirements of five basic subjects to “four years of English, three years of math, three years of science, three years of social studies, and half a year of computer science” (National Commission, 1983). To ensure the courses prepared students for academic excellence, the report also recommended that schools “adopt higher and measurable standards for academic performance” and raise “standards for training, entry, and professional growth” in the teaching profession (Peterson, 2003, p. 6). These tougher standards were generally accepted as top priorities for U.S. schools. The main instrument for measuring student and teacher performance is standardized testing. Because states nationwide use the results of these tests to “determine student promotion and placement, teacher salary, school accreditation, district funding, and graduation opportunity,” (Smyth, 2008, p. 133) these tests are often called “high stakes” tests.

High stakes testing is one of the mechanisms of banking education in K-12 schools. High stakes testing is driven by government and big business interests and has the effect of shaping many current oppressive realities of education (Apple, 1996). Commonly linked to high stakes testing, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) was developed as an eventual response to *A Nation at Risk*. Since the passage of NCLB in 2001, every state has developed standards, standardized tests, and accountability systems and mandated that students have the option to transfer from schools with low test scores to those with higher test scores, NCLB also, purportedly, promotes parental choice and competition between schools (Hursh, 2005).

Though it might seem as though high stakes testing would foster higher classroom standards and teacher accountability and, therefore, be a beneficial situation for students, it is not always the case. For instance, many states' tests have been found to be poorly constructed, and even well-constructed tests often discriminate against students of color or those who live in poverty (Horn, 2003; Hursh, 2005). Additionally, studies identified that teachers often do not place as much instructional emphasis on non-tested subjects such as the arts, science, and social studies (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Eisner, 2004; Houser, 1995; Hursh, 2005). This phenomenon of curriculum "narrowing" (King & Mathers, 1997, p. 148) may result in a wide-spread decline in time devoted to the untested areas.

An additional consequence of high stakes testing's pressure to improve scores is teachers spending classroom time preparing students specifically for tests (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003). Class time that should be used for instruction may be used, instead, for such non-academic skills as teaching strategies for identifying correct test answers or in practicing how to accurately bubble-in answer sheets.

Another case in point is the rash of recent teacher layoffs resulting from failure to "comply" with the requirements of NCLB. Many states have been affected. A typical example involves U. S. Grant High School in Oklahoma City. Because of a failure to raise student test scores for four consecutive years, at least 75 of the school's 155 teachers were held to be personally responsible for students' poor testing performance and, thus, were removed from the school (Rolland, 2010).

Finally, schools can manipulate test results by expelling weak, minority, or "problem" students before exams (Hursh, 2005). Students who do not return to school after the expulsion period are frequently recorded, not as dropping out, but as transferring to another school or for other reasons than dropping out (Winerip, as cited in Hursh, 2005).

Such competitive practices ultimately erode rather than enhance learning and, consequently, undermine public knowledge and further enable private business interests. Antonio Gramsci makes a powerful case that such outcomes may, in fact, be conscious aims rather than unintended consequences of well-meaning actions. Gramsci argues that the function of hegemonic activity is "to organize the consent of the masses in support of the dominant class" (1971, p. 12). The interests of the economically elite are presented, not as narrow, corporate-political interests but as national interests, which are shared by subordinate groups. Hegemonic activity works to persuade the masses that actions ultimately designed to benefit the few are actually beneficial to all. Consequently, activities such as Secretary DeVos's plan to privatize schools in the form of a voucher system, framed as increased educational choice but which will divert

public resources to private profits, serve to “reduce parents and children to mere customers in a marketplace” who, if they are unhappy with their school, “have no option but to take their ‘business’ elsewhere – which of course assumes there is somewhere else to go” (DeGroff, 2017, p. 36).

Thus, by arguing that such movements as NCLB set high standards and establish measurable goals in order to improve individual outcomes in education, the federal government convinced many that NCLB was a noble effort. However, it is the economically elite, rather than the school children it was meant to benefit, who have experienced the most benefit from this effort. Framed as school reform meant to help underprivileged students by breaking up state teacher unions and the bureaucratic stranglehold of traditional public schools, NCLB has resulted in an explosion of jobs for charter schools, statisticians, publishing and test-writing companies, educational software companies, and tutoring companies (Birch, Donovan, & Steinberg, 2007; Tucker & Toch, 2004), “representing a \$500-billion-dollar capitalist opportunity” (Teasley, 2017, p. 134).

Meanwhile, not only do oppressive circumstances continue in public schools today, but colleges and universities are also feeling increased pressure to conform to practices and standards they do not always embrace. Such was the case in a four-year liberal arts institution in Oklahoma in which one department recently completed a ten-year process of making every course available online and insisting that all faculty members participate in delivering these courses. This realization shed additional light on the stream of memoranda we receive in our own institutions, offering pressure and incentives for faculty to develop on-line formats for the courses we teach.

When pressed, proponents offer familiar rationales cast in the language of technological progress and humanitarian rhetoric, related to the need to keep pace with the rest of the world and the desire to reach those who do not otherwise have access to higher education. What remains unaddressed are the economic benefits accrued by institutions that enlarge classes, reduce faculty, and eliminate overhead related to building and maintaining physical spaces. When pressed to justify the educational advantages of online technologies, apologists ask for evidence demonstrating that new technologies are not effective, thus imposing upon critics the notoriously untenable burden of proving a negative.

Conversations with our peers in other institutions have raised new questions regarding the intentions of those in our own institutions. This was the case when one colleague recently announced her intention to develop an online format for a core graduate course in multicultural education. Although we believe our colleague’s intentions were virtuous, including the use of potentially valuable technologies such as Skype and

WebEx as a means of connecting with students and citizens around the globe, we have become increasingly suspicious of the motives of those who continually encourage us to develop online courses, that our efforts may be appropriated by others, and other possible unintended consequences of decisions like these.

Oppressive circumstances are also present in the “corporatization” (O’Malley, 2012) of higher education by for-profit colleges and universities. These institutions

have a profit-based purpose and do not qualify for tax-exempt status with the IRS....[They] may operate entirely online, as traditional campus-based universities, or a hybrid of the two. They distinguish themselves from non-profit universities by treating their students as customers and operating on a business model with financial growth as their primary goal. (Salemme, 2017, p. 89)

The average tuition at for-profit institutions is “67% higher than the average in-state tuition at a public four-year institution” (Forgive, 2015, p. 2018), which often leaves students with overwhelming debt. A common complaint by teachers at for-profit institutions is “the great pressure to keep students enrolled forces them to dumb down courses, lie about attendance, and sometimes change grades” (O’Malley, 2012, p. 24). Shockingly, Secretary DeVos has “halted Obama-era regulations that sought to hold for-profit institutions accountable for their poor outcomes...[implicitly telling] accreditors that there are no consequences if you do a horrible job” (Green, 2018).

The Nature of the Problem

Although troubling, these challenges to democracy and education are not surprising. As long as educational institutions exist within a broader context of asymmetrical power (and communication) relations (Habermas, 1991), we should expect that oppressive conditions will continue to exist as well, and that change will require an ongoing struggle. The historical nature of the process (Foucault, 1988; Hegel, 1977; Marx, 1978) suggests that this has, perhaps, always been the case.

The question is what can be done and how can we proceed? The task for educators, today as in the past, is to continually strive to understand the nature of the problem within our own social and historical contexts in order to envision and enact more effective alternatives.

Fortunately, we already have a pretty good idea about the nature of the problem. We know that our problems involve: (1) material as well as ideal factors (Hegel, 1977; Marx, 1978); (2) temporal/historical factors such as institutionalized thinking (Freire, 1970/2000; Quinn, 1992); (3) spatial factors

such as separation and fragmentation, e.g., social stratification (Anyon, 1980; Diamond, 2006; McIntosh, 1989); dualistic thinking about race and gender (Anzaldúa, 1999; Catanzarite, 2003; hooks, 1981); nationalism (McLaren, 1996); dualisms of mind and body (Foucault, 1988); binary either-or thinking (de Saussure, 2006); (4) power factors such as domination and oppression, which are but a short step from separation and fragmentation, e.g., once I see another as “other,” it is but a short step to see and treat the other hierarchically as lower or higher in relation to oneself (Chubbuck, 2004; Freire, 1970; Henry & Sears, 2002; Noddings, 1992); and (5) awareness of factors such as invisibility or lack of consciousness, e.g., DuBois’s *Double Consciousness* (2007); Freire’s *Unconsciousness* (1970/2000); Marx’s *False Consciousness*, (1978); Sartre’s *Bad Faith* (1956).

We also know that this lethal combination of factors can lead to inactivity (a sort of paralysis) or misguided activity, which feeds back into the larger culture, creating a pervasiveness and ubiquity within our shared institutions and collective consciousness. This is a culture wereinvented each and every day. Indeed, it is a culture “housed within” each of us.

Where does understanding the nature of the problem leave us? At minimum, it suggests a need to be aware of the ways we, too, may internalize and transmit material and ideal conditions of oppression, and it suggests a need for others (our students) to develop a vigilant critical consciousness as well.

But we need more than consciousness. We also need action. For us, this action involves recognizing, naming, and supporting the efforts and opportunities that already exist.

However, we do not expect these possibilities to occur primarily as the result of macro-level political reforms and social movements. Indeed, were they to occur in this way, they would be inconsistent, not only with the dialectical processes of history described by Hegel (1977) and Marx (1978), but also with the process of paradigm change described by Kuhn (1996).

Thus, we believe it is important to remain attuned to the “spaces” addressed by Greene (1988), the “moments” or “fissures” discussed by Foucault (1988), the power of disequilibrium or perturbation (Capra, 1996; Piaget, 1972), the possibilities for self-realization and social transformation that exist in the *Borderlands* (Anzaldúa, 1987), and the carnivalesque situations (Bakhtin, 1981) that exist in society today. With these references in mind, we consider contemporary possibilities in everyday settings.

Emancipatory Possibilities in Education Today

So, back to the question. What *can* be done, and how *can* we proceed

within our current social and historical context? What kinds of emancipatory possibilities can and are being enacted in contemporary education? What can and does this look like in K-12 and higher education?

Even within the current high-stakes testing environment, it is possible to create and utilize existing emancipatory possibilities in K-12 education. By engaging in what Gunzenhauser called “significant conversations” (2003, p. 56), teachers have the opportunity not only to encourage students to connect personally with the curriculum but also to construct higher-order thinking, a skill that is often neglected during standardized test preparation.

One example of the way significant conversations can develop took place in a senior English classroom while the students were reading Ben Okri’s short story “In the Shadow of War” (1997). The story is set during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 and examines the ways that war breaks down the distinctions of what does and does not constitute moral behavior. In Okri’s story, a young boy witnesses three soldiers kill a woman in the jungle. Later, while in the marketplace with his father, he sees those same soldiers again. The boy does not understand why, instead of confronting the soldiers for the earlier murder, the father placates them but hushes him.

After completing the story, the teacher began the class conversation by discussing the love parents hold for their children and the lengths parents will go to in order to protect them. Then the discussion expanded to include those the students felt strongly about and would want to protect. They naturally mentioned family members and friends. The teacher asked if they would extend protection to next-door neighbors, to people on the next street, to strangers across town. The students expressed awareness that they had a personal responsibility even toward people they had never met.

The discussion returned to the Nigerian Civil War and as well as more recent conflicts, such as in the Sudan and Uganda, Iraq and Afghanistan, in which groups of people singled out fellow citizens for murder and torture. The students suggested the Holocaust as another example. When asked if there had been examples in America of such injustice, the students brought up slavery and the ways in which African Americans have been misused and exploited. Then the teacher mentioned the internment of Asian Americans in the U.S. during the Second World War. Unsurprisingly, few students were aware of that event.

Following the discussion of the Asian American internment, the teacher posed the question: Did the students think that in the United States today a group of people could again be singled out for imprisonment or harshly restrictive laws because of their ethnicity?

Overwhelmingly, the students agreed that United States citizens were too sophisticated and had too much appreciation for the country's diversity for such an action to occur now. The teacher asked, given the current attitude toward illegal immigrants in the U.S., especially in southwestern states like Oklahoma and Arizona, could the students imagine Latino Americans imprisoned in a wave of anti-immigrant hysteria. Latino students in the classes revealed that they often felt hostility directed toward them from strangers and thought such a scenario was not out of the realm of possibility. Next the teacher wondered if such a thing might happen to Muslim Americans because of fears of terrorism. The students acknowledged Muslim Americans could certainly be targeted for mass imprisonment. Then came the question, given that they had previously expressed that there was no end to their responsibility toward others, what would they do if individuals or even the government came after Latino or Muslim Americans?

Constructing the realization that they were responsible even for the welfare of strangers helped the students to articulate how large their "circle of we" (Houser, 2005) actually is. In verbalizing that their responsibility to others does not end with intimate relationships, the students came to the conclusion that all human beings have accountability for one another.

In drawing upon Nel Noddings' belief that "sustained conversation and mutual exploration" with an adult is essential in "learning interpersonal reasoning" (1992, p. 53), the teacher acted as facilitator in the discussion, but it was the students themselves who constructed their own understandings and realities. Rather than ending the story with worksheets or lecturing students with her own idea of what she thought the students should take away from the story (both examples of banking education), the teacher's "problem-posing" presented "significant dimensions" of the students' "contextual reality" (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 80), which made it possible for them to critically analyze the story, personally relate to it, and think about their world with new depth of understanding.

Emancipatory possibilities also exist in higher education. A promising example involves John Steinbeck's (1939) *The Grapes of Wrath*, which is used in one of our undergraduate social studies courses. Steinbeck's epic novel provides a richly contextualized portrayal of the plight of a family of poor white Oklahoma sharecroppers during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl era. Utilizing vivid metaphor and keen sensitivity, Steinbeck provides stark contrasts between the human needs of working class families, the institutionalized mechanisms of the capitalist economic system, and the greed of those who profit from conditions they cannot help but know to be unjust. Forced to flee their homes before the bulldozers arrive,

the Joads, like other families from Oklahoma and surrounding states, head for the promise of an improved life in California. However, rather than finding better opportunities, they are confronted with new forms of rejection and oppression. Demonstrating courage and tenacity, the Joads gradually come to realize that only through solidarity can groups of ordinary people hope to change their material conditions, and only through collective opposition can they begin to transform the system itself.

Maxine Greene (1988) argues that the plight of the Joads represents a sort of collaborative existentialist project, a critical coming-to-consciousness that could only have unfolded as the result of a shared search for—and opposition to—the social and historical causes of personal oppression. In the end, the protagonist, young Tom Joad, comes to see that only through critical reflection and collective opposition can working-class Americans hope to resist and transform the conditions of their own domination.

Steinbeck's message resonates with our students, many of whom come from agricultural families, and who recognize the towns and locations identified in the novel and speak of relatives still residing in southern California. Our students are acutely aware of the perceptions other United States citizens hold toward Oklahomans, as well as the stereotypes that are leveled against teachers. They are concerned about existing pressures on teachers to conform to the wishes of others (e.g., to raise test scores at all costs), especially when these pressures seem to contradict their primary mission of teaching and learning. Thus, novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* have stimulated social criticism and personal identification among many of the students with whom we have worked.

The 2018 teacher walkouts in Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and West Virginia serve as recent examples of collective opposition attempting to transform unjust systems. The teachers were protesting for increased school funding, increased teacher and support staff pay, reduced class sizes, pension funding, and increased health benefits (Turner, Lombardo, & Logan, 2018). Although the results of these protests “varied in their success, with West Virginia considered mostly successful, while Oklahoma teachers received relatively few concessions” (Turner, Lombardo, & Logan, 2018), the striking teachers' solidarity in the face of often hostile and unsympathetic legislators allowed them to take action against and resist the oppressive forces in their lives (Freire, 1970/2000).

Experiences like these suggest that it is possible to promote critical reflection and cultural understanding at all levels, from preschool through graduate school, while working within curriculum requirements. When instructors go beyond prescriptive assignments by using such emancipatory teaching methods as significant conversations and problem-posing,

students may experience more profound and deeper connections with material. Consequently, students have opportunities make associations between their background knowledge and lived experiences to create new perceptions that they often do not have when subjected to the oppressiveness of banking education.

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