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RECKONING: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOOK FORWARD AND BACK TOGETHER AS CRITICAL EDUCATORS

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Abstract:
This feature piece explores what can happen when educators allow for collective reflection to transpire. Written as a dialogue, this piece presents two doctoral candidates working through what it means to identify as critical educators in this moment. These two educators met during the height of the education reform movement as a part of Teach For America. This reflective piece weaves theory, practice, and experience to help make sense of their time in education and how to navigate complexity within the larger education narrative.

Keywords: Education Reform, Teach for America, critical educator, critical pedagogy, teaching, theory, practice

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"things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. we must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil."
-Adrienne Maree Brown

This dialogue happened over the course of three weeks between two people who are currently working through what it means to identify as a critical educator. We first met in 2010 in Teach For America (TFA) where Chloe began her teaching career as a Mississippi Delta Corps member. Andy, who had just finished his two years with TFA, was her program director - her first direct supervisor in teaching.

Chloe and Andy were heavily steeped in the education reform ideologies of that era: a time when*Waiting for Superman*, Big Goals, and high-stakes testing dominated the discourse around "transformational change" in education. Andy went on to become a teacher and then principal at Success Academy in New York City and Chloe ultimately won the Sue Lehmann Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2012, which was Teach for America's highest national award.

After 10 years in education, we came back together to discuss for the first time where we had been since we last saw each other in Mississippi. We focused on two critical questions: *What does it mean to be a critical educator in the moment and how do we look back on our time in education with this lens?*

While there has been individual reflection prior to this point, we had not come together to collectively reflect on ourselves, our actions, and where we were situated in the larger education reform movement—then and now. Additionally, we were finally willing to dialogue with relational care around the complexities within critical education, the "One Day" movement, and the larger systemic forces at play - even if it meant bringing up discomfort and pain. As practitioner scholars in training and skilled educators with an increasing depth and breadth of experience, we believe that one must constantly reflect on their practice. But are we willing to analyze the larger picture alongside each other? Are we willing to examine both our theories and our practices? Are we willing to acknowledge and name some of the damage that the system of education reform did on individuals who committed their life to this fight for educational justice? Are we willing to engage in the differences we may have?

This piece is a conversation. We wrote it in dialogue; we present it as dialogue. Our process has been experimental and uncertain. No outlines, no end goals. Plenty of fear. But, for those of us who were in the system of education reform and strive to move forward as critical educators - both within and apart from that system - we think such brave but tenuous spaces are necessary: spaces where we can grapple with the important junctures and critical moments of our lives - and do so vulnerably and honestly. While it might be easier to look at individual actions and embark upon commitments to change, we feel that is not enough for this moment. We need a more humanizing approach: a willingness to look back on our own narratives and be unafraid to question each other and ourselves with hearts forward.

We write this piece for those of us who started in Teach for America and stayed in education. Whether you became a charter school principal, public school teacher, or tenure track professor, we see you, we validate you, we honor you. We see your light. You stayed.

Spaces protected for dialogue have often become polarizing and we have been often pitted against one another leading to unproductive conversations, isolation, and inaction. In turn, it has been easy to create silos.

Instead, we, Chloe and Andy, set out to embark upon something else:

This piece is not pro-TFA or anti-TFA. It is not pro-charter or anti-charter.

What do those binaries mean anyway? Why are we so afraid of gray?

Creating binaries in these conversations are harmful because they do not allow us to humanize and unveil the deeper, more complex issues that are under the surface around visions of education. We hope to surface these issues through excavating ourselves and being unafraid to discuss the different paths we took since Teach for America.

We honor the path you have taken- the dead ends, winding roads, ones filled with both joy and tears. But we hope this will help you recognize the power of pausing to reflect upon your own journey with another who may have taken a different road. In turn, we hope it will illuminate the path forward and give us reason to remember that we cannot neglect or be afraid to look behind. We hope you find it in your heart to do the same.

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C: Andy, it's so nice to have a chance to catch-up. What does being a critical educator mean for you in this moment?

A: Chloe, it really is wonderful to be connecting with you after so long. As for your question: The truth is, I don't really know. For me, "critical educator" is an aspiration. Directionally, I know that is where I want to go, where I am trying to go. But I have so much to learn and feel so behind in my learning. I am reading everything I can find. It's invigorating, inspiring, healing; but also confusing, painful, frenetic.

Last spring, I was reading a lot of hooks and Freire. But my entrypoint was very… curricular. I had transitioned to a new job at a new network, and I was so upset about the direct instruction, the lack of discourse, in the curriculum. So I was looking for powerful readings that might change hearts and minds about "I do, we do, you do." But the more I read critical voices, the more my own heart and mind woke up. I began to see the wider and deeper field of critical education. I realized that discourse is just scratching the surface. Because discourse can still be teacher-centered, even if the teacher is barely talking. It's really more about: where do the values and intentions of the classroom originate? What is the students' role - not in this one discussion, or in this one lesson, but in the whole educational ecosystem? So I started thinking a lot more about the subject-object relationship, about coconstruction, about the decentering of self.

And for me, for someone in the charter sector, that's a big realization. Because once you start down that logic chain, you quickly confront some of the fundamental issues of the big, college-focused charter networks. I try not to generalize, but many of these networks are white-led; they ascribe value to a specific educational end (college admission); and they dictate, via a top-down school design, the terms by which students achieve that end. It's a kind of macro-banking. Sage on a very, very big stage.

I wasn't seeing that before. I wasn't suspicious of the places I went, the institutions I became a part of: Harvard, TFA, Charters. That's not to say I didn't detect problems or have my critiques. But at a fundamental level, I really trusted society. I trusted that if I was working toward "equal access," I was advancing justice. I wasn't seeing that working toward access, rather than working to dismantle, is to privilege that which is already privileged.

So now, I'm coming to understand critical education as far more than a pedagogy. Instead, I'm viewing it as a lens by which to critique the whole world. It's the idea of actually being *critical* of all things. About opening one's eyes and looking around and suspecting that all of this - *all of this* - is working to preserve, to enshrine, to obscure white supremacy and hegemonic power.

I'm also realizing that so much of my blindness has been rooted in how I've thought about (or not thought about) my own

identity. I really believed in meritocracy because, for a long time, I viewed myself as the son of single mother who was poorer than the kids around him, who decided to work harder and be nicer than all of them, who, by virtue of that hard work and good character, fulfilled his dream, earned coveted admission to the Ivy League. When really, I was a white boy on Long Island, who yes, worked hard and was nice; but who attended a well-resourced public school system, followed its game plan, and benefited from its standing relationship with elite colleges. My high school sends at least one kid to Harvard every year. I was just version 2004.

It's embarrassing and scary to say all of that. To admit that I'm just now, at 34, starting to become a*critical* thinker - rather than a critical *thinker*. Because I have always been a thinker. I look really hard at my life, work really hard on myself. Since eighth grade, when I studied the 1961 Freedom Rides for a history project, I've had this intention to dedicate my life to advancing social justice. And I've always tried to honor that intention. So, for two decades, I've been reading and thinking about race, about class, about inequity.

But somehow, even with all that reading and thinking and yes, doing, it's only now that I'm developing a*critical* lens. I take personal responsibility for that. I have a lot of anger and shame for that. I should have been doing more to locate and listen to the critical voices who have been doing this imperative and generous work of educating others, like me, who are not yet there. But I didn't do that. So most of my anger and shame is inward, for me. But if I'm being honest, some of it is outward, for the institutions that educated me. Why isn't critical theory in Harvard's core distribution? Why didn't we read Freire, hooks at TFA, at Success? Instead, we read self-published trade books, like TFA's *Teaching as Leadership* rubric or Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion.* Maddening.

So, returning to your question: I don't know exactly what it means to be a critical educator at this moment. But it definitely involves reading the texts and talking to the people who help me to open my eyes and to question everything. To critique everything through the lens of supremacy and hegemony. And to specifically interrogate the educational ends and means that I have assumed to be "good" - ends and means that (maybe) create "equity" (for some) *within* the current system, rather than to disrupt that system itself. It's also about being brutally honest about how that system has worked for me - and about how my work within that system has been not only insufficient, but also unjust. Kendi says that the heartbeat of antiracism is confession; I think it's hard to imagine being a critical educator, at this moment, without doing a lot of confessing.

C: I have found in some progressive educational spaces, there tends to be emphasis placed on this idea of student choice and student voice being a pathway for change in curriculum and instruction. Let kids have choice, let kids pursue their passions, and allow them to speak their truths. But, this approach isn't inherently critical if we as educators are unwilling to acknowledge the hegemonic society around us and our students.

I believe the curriculum we choose to teach reflects something deeper about who we are as educators and what we believe about the world around us. Our children of color bring gifts to us and our curriculum should build upon these funds of knowledge[1] in important ways. They are song-writers, animal lovers, poets, and dancers. Often these students are unable to utilize their knowledge in important ways: when they are unable to read books with characters who look like them or told that they cannot propose this writing topic because it isn't one of the choices or that they can't do this because it is isn't "academic enough," we are silencing these practices. Their gifts die in the walls of our classroom. Without knowing it, we are often reproducing the hegemonic systems of racism in our schools.

I think you really hit home with this: Understanding one's identity and backstory and how it influences one's worldview should be step one to embarking upon the path toward becoming a critical educator. If you aren't able to recognize your role in the space and in the larger system, then you are likely doing irreparable harm.

As you know, during my 2nd year in Mississippi, I sent a few of my Black students to an independent school in the northeast for the summer constantly harping on the idea of educational access and opportunity. I didn't find out until much later how harmful some of those experiences were for my Black students. Bettina Love discusses the concept of "spirit murdering," the idea of killing the spirits of black children, and how it works to deny the safety, nurture, and acceptance because of structural racism. I didn't realize until later that some of the students were manifesting deficit beliefs about themselves and where they came from as a result of the experience. "I hated my blackness," one of my students told me years later. They felt that the only way they could succeed in education was for them to leave Mississippi. I thought I was granting them educational opportunity, but in reality, I was also communicating the message that where you come from isn't good enough and you should leave.

The resilience and the strength of the Mississippi Delta cannot be overstated. A real critical educator would have found ways to think about the strengths the community had and listened more to what was needed for the educational opportunity to be sustained in the region. We should have been disrupting the systems of inequity alongside the community.

But I want to make this point: I didn't recognize how my own upbringing heavily influenced my years during Teach for America. I grew up upper-middle class— the daughter of an Indian immigrant and Anishinaabe woman— in the suburbs of the American South. I lived down the road from Stone Mountain, Georgia, the home of a Confederate memorial, and attended majority white public schools. In kindergarten, my mom dressed me up as a Native American when letters came home from school to dress your child as either a Native American or Pilgrim for Thanksgiving lunch. I begged my mom to dress me as a pilgrim.

"Chloe, we are American Indian. You're dressing up as an American Indian." My mom put my hair into braids. She adorned me in beautiful clothes. A pow-wow ceremony in Michigan would have embraced me. Instead, I was the only student who showed up dressed as an Indian. I still remember the student who pointed at me and asked me to chant. No one wanted to sit with me for Thanksgiving lunch. I went home and cried. I begged my mom to never do that to me again. All I wanted to do was belong. To do that, I needed to hide that I was Native American.

The school system supported this effort. I never learned about anyone like me. The rare histories I learned didn't resonate with the Native American who lived away from the reservation and played soccer with her friends on the weekend. It was either epic tragedies such as the Trail of Tears or egregious stereotypes taught in Georgia History class. So it was easy to convince myself I fit in. I was white-passing and I was rarely subjected to the casual racism that affected my black classmates.

In the process of my upbringing, I did exactly what missionary schools and boarding schools did to generations of Native American children. They couldn't kill them so they instead worked to kill their culture. I neither saw myself as Native nor Indian growing up. I was a white student from Georgia; I fit in. I hid my tribal card in my desk. I never learned Anishinaabemowin, the language of my people. I didn't learn about traditional medicine. I didn't attend pow-wows. I laughed along with my friends in high school when they called me "dot and feather" to poke fun at my mother and father's identity.

As a child, I had taken the step of assimilating, which led to losing who I was and then later denied me the ability to critically see how those beliefs could be reflected onto my curriculum. So when I joined TFA, I saw myself as white and unknowingly reflected the colorblind, educational system centered around academic rigor and high achievement to ensure educational equity for my students. I didn't recognize this until years later.

So my students who faced microaggressions at the independent school left feeling terrible about themselves and felt they had to give up who they were to succeed in this. I put a lot of blame on myself for that.

Critical educators must recognize the inequity and racism of the entire system and work to disrupt it through working on themselves and then thinking about how this all fits into the larger system. Because I thought the master's tools could dismantle the master's house with my kids in Mississippi. I was wrong. If I had read Audre Lorde and unpacked my own identity, I believe my teaching may have been different.

A: So, I *had* read Lorde. My undergraduate major was American studies; I dedicated most of it to studying black history and literature. Wrote my thesis on Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, how they were marketed to white audiences in postwar America.

But what I did not do, in all that time, was unpack my own identity, my whiteness. I thought it was enough to critique the canon, to read the novels and the histories that were not within it. But that was not the same thing, at all, as interrogating my own whiteness. And that's why I think I ended up so deep in ed reform - years deep - without developing a more critical eye, a deeper and better awareness of what I was doing and not doing as an educator and person.

Reading what you shared above, it just reminds me how… how much whiteness has not been part of my conscious identity. The conversation with your mother; the racialized teasing; the hiding of your tribal card, your heritage. There was nothing like that for me, growing up. I was a dozen other things: creative, smart, fat. But I was never white, even when I was. I never had to be. Even as I railed against the canon, took classes in contemporary Afro-Am lit and the history of slavery, I wasn't aware of my whiteness. Even when it was right there, you know? Even when I was reading a text like *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, I wasn't understanding that the whiteness Morrison wrote of was *my* whiteness, too. Not really.

So, even though I thought I was doing the work; even though I was woke enough to resent wokeness; I still wasn't white enough. And I'm still not. For me, there's still so much work ahead.

In Mississippi, you know, I taught much younger kids than you did. Third and fourth graders. And so I was not talking to them about high school and college like you were. We spoke of goals and dreams in a very abstract way. But I, too, was spirit murdering; a concept that I am so grateful to have encountered in reading Bettina Love, even though this is perhaps the most

difficult phrase I have ever had to read. But I did have to read it, to see and to understand a truth about myself and my work that I wish were not there. I recognized the truth in these two words the instant I read them.

In Mississippi, my harm came less by what I did, more by what I failed to do. What I did: built really fun and intentional classrooms; taught content clearly. My students posted impressive academic gains. And I loved the kids. I'm in touch with many of them. What I failed to do: in my two years, I didn't really do anything to elevate critical consciousness - my students' or my own. And I think, in this way, I was harmful to their spirits. I was kind of *performing* the role of teacher, with zero experience and zero real training, without having done any self-educating on what it might *really* mean to be a white teacher serving black students in the Mississippi Delta. So we're all singing about fractions and reading *Charlotte's Web* and getting good test scores; but when I look back, now, I see some phoniness there, some emptiness, because I just...I think I was just reproducing what a white boy would think of as a great elementary school classroom, based on his distant memories of his own grade school, his recent viewing of *The Ron Clark Story* on Lifetime. Not knowing that I had an obligation to be interrogating my whiteness and my privilege before presuming I had any business being in the classrooms of Sunflower, Mississippi.

And then, at Success, you know, I think the most damaging aspects of my work had to do with assimilationist ideas and practices. I think when people think about Success, they think about draconian discipline and test-prep, and a lot of the critique stays at that level. For me, I think those critiques are valid, though I also found Success to have a tremendous amount of warmth and joy and much more child-centered pedagogy than the rest of the charter sector. My deeper critique of SA and of my own work there, with some distance, has to do with assimilationism. There are organizational values around engagement and critical thinking, but there's no doubt that the organization's mission is about getting into elite colleges, and much of the design and programming derives from that. The theory of justice is, bust open the *gates* to the Ivy league, rather than,*bust open* the Ivy league. And I ran that theory of justice. I ran it hard. There was real veneration about highly selective colleges, which I supported. Now, I think that college access and persistence can be part of an equity agenda. But the problem with my leadership at SA was that we weren't doing enough to pair those aims with an actual critique of college, college readiness, meritocracy, privilege. And so, the ethic of the school basically became: this thing, this thing that is actually a tremendous gatekeeper in our society...this is what *matters.* And so you need to take these courses, pass these exams, spend your summers at these campuses, dress this way for your interviews, apply to these schools and not those schools. And it's complex, because on the other hand, our parents and kids were informed, active, aware; they wanted a college preparatory program and they wanted college, for themselves. But still, I think I had an obligation to center the texts and spaces and dialogue that would elevate a critical perspective. To heighten awareness, such that everyone involved was talking more about power and privilege, equity and justice.

As I'm writing, I can honestly feel my white fragility and defensiveness surfacing, because I feel this desire to tell you about some of the other work at the high school; work that was more identity-affirming and less assimilationist; wonderful work that I really credit mostly to the students who stepped up, seized opportunities to build courses and clubs and events and dialogues that were just incredible. But I'm going to really try to not focus there, because I don't think I move forward, or help others move forward, by defending what was good. Instead, the more important thing I'm trying to communicate, here, is that I view my work over the past decade as not only insufficient, but also harmful. And Chloe, that is so painful, you know? It weighs on me. Because I worked really hard, I had every good intention. I loved the kids and I wanted the best for them. I still love and want the best for them. And yet, while that is all true, and while I did good, I also did harm. I did.

And at the very root of that, I think - as you shared above - was my lack of grappling with my identity, my whiteness specifically. How my whiteness shaped my values, my beliefs, my conceptions of a "good" education. To specify: as a barely conscious beneficiary of a white supremacist society, I was a big advocate of our mythical meritocracy and of our entrenched paradigms for a "quality" education. Those things had worked for me. For *white* me. So I pushed those agendas. I designed, managed, taught, and led toward those agendas. In these ways, I fell short and I caused harm.

Chloe, I've shared here a little bit about my journey since Mississippi. But what of your journey after Mississippi? Where did you begin to read Lorde, to learn some of the things that you wish you had known back then?

C: Andy, I still remember one particular moment in Mississippi when you were coaching me. I was 23 years old. I was sobbing: "All I want to do is be better for my students." After you left, I spent two more years in Mississippi trying to do that. I did all the things I was told to do: get my degree in Educational Leadership (like you did), take on more leadership roles, and work harder for the kids. I had heart, but I still did not know enough about teaching or myself. I also was not ready to be a school leader. While I am proud of much of the work I did in Mississippi including the classroom culture I created for my students, I still felt like a failure.

I left education reform sprinting. Not toward critical theory. At least not at first.

TFA championed the opportunities I gave my students but I still did not feel like I was doing enough from a pedagogical standpoint and let's be honest: I wasn't. I went on to a progressive international school in India serving kids from over 40 different countries, as one of the youngest teachers hired. I laugh now because that school took a risk in hiring me because I was so inexperienced. I was surrounded by people who had taught for decades, the head of the IB English taught at my school, and I was overwhelmed by the talent of the faculty. My plan was that I would learn what affluent schools were doing in terms of pedagogy and bring it back to under-resourced schools, where I left my heart.

In the four years I taught there, I did learn about pedagogy: I was able to collaborate with colleagues who were masters in their craft and explore deeper questions on various pedagogical models and what it takes to help different types of learners read and write to their full potential. A daily collaborative planning block with my department led to deeper realizations around the fundamentals of practice: what data is valuable; the power of authentic collaboration; and the value of autonomy and subsequent risk-taking to curricular development. This experience helped me begin to understand the richness of curriculum design and instruction—the vast array of opportunities when it comes to differentiation, individualization, and increasing civic engagement; however, it also helped me begin to see the limitations of mainstream practice. When it came to meeting the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, teachers needed to be culturally responsive. I determined that this was an area of complexity worthy of further study, which brought me back to the United States. So, I came back with more questions than answers.

However, a few things came full-circle for me years later that speak to some of your points:

I appreciate theory as it has greatly influenced my vision for teaching and where I situate myself within the larger system, but pedagogical wisdom matters in the theory to practice intersection. I have seen self-proclaimed critical educators teach without an understanding of how to differentiate for students or teach content, lecturing the entire class. The best teachers I have seen are able to live out the intersections of theory and practice in dynamic ways. Teaching is an intellectual art and we need time to master the intricacies of this practice alongside other educators. It's why practices like merit pay, teacher bonuses, and comparing test scores are not helpful. We should pay teachers well, give them vacation time to rest, and provide ways to make this profession a sustainable, intellectual journey: provide time for educators to collaborate meaningfully and engage in theories in robust ways with ample time to reflect upon how this influences their teaching practices. What would Lorde or bell hooks say about *Teach like a Champion*? What are we communicating to students when we enforce policies like SLANT in our classroom?

My dissertation work examines what happens when first-generation, students of color from working class backgrounds engage in a college-readiness program premised upon interrogating issues of race, class, equity, and social justice. One of the emerging findings from this case study suggests that critical literacy and critiquing systems of power allow students of color to grapple with their own intersectional identities and what that means for the college process and their college experience. It aligns directly with what you are stating because busting open the gates was never enough given the system in which we currently operate. Over 40 percent of white students admitted to Harvard receive preference for being an athlete, legacy applicant, child of faculty, or Dean's Interest (which usually means the child of a donor)[2] . We can't pretend that persistence is enough here. Why was I so focused on the Ivy League and concepts of meritocratic prestige? Why was I ignoring other possible pathways for students to pursue educational opportunity and happiness? I will add as an aside that students came to these realizations not only because we opened a critical space but also because I am now a skilled pedagogue who used a variety of tried and true learning engagements to spark a joyful, robust, and engaging learning environment. Pedagogy requires criticality and criticality requires pedagogy.

But back to something we discussed earlier: in order for our kids to "bust open the educational system," allowing their experiences and stories to be centered, we have to first be willing to interrogate ourselves and ask ourselves how we influence the space: As Paulo Freire states, "The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in the teaching is to make it possible for students to become themselves." After being in education reform, decentering myself was difficult, but it's what I had to do in order to allow kids to flourish. As Audre Lorde might suggest: it's what we must do to allow students to build coalitions toward an educational vision worth fighting for.

Lastly, focusing on the intersections of theory and practice and how it influences our teaching is much easier when teachers don't have to worry about a child going hungry or their parents being detained by ICE. While I agree that critical educators must think about the students' role in the educational system, what happens when the rest of society is failing on promises of healthcare, affordable housing, economic security, and other basic needs for our students and their families to live happy and healthy lives? How do we as critical educators manage this on the day-to-day and personally within ourselves? What we do in schools can never be an excuse to ignore the social safety net or other crucial issues of justice.

A: I remember that moment well. I was 24. We were both so young. But I think, looking back, we both sensed that we were really

out of place and did not know enough about what we were doing to do it well, to do it right. Though my career was taking off in the Delta, I had this gnawing feeling that, as a TFA coach, I was taking on roles and projects that well exceeded my actual knowledge base. I felt I needed to step back and to learn more. I wanted more time in the classroom, more time to hone my craft.

But, where you sprinted away from ed reform, I dug my heels in; set my eyes back home to New York and to its burgeoning charter sector. Within the TFA-verse, at the time, charters were where you went if you wanted to learn from models of excellence, if you wanted to innovate. I didn't really interrogate that. I trusted it, got excited about it. Plus, I was unlicensed and couldn't teach in the DOE. So one weekend I boarded a plane in Jackson, carrying a garment bag that held my one navy blazer and a bunch of anchor charts I had drawn for my demo lesson. The next 48 hours was a whirlwind. I bounced from charter to charter, teaching adverbial phrases with gusto.

Of all the schools I saw, Harlem Success Academy #4 stole my heart. This was before Success got big; it was still four campuses in Harlem. Many of the other, bigger-name networks felt cold, clinical, robotic to me. During one interview, I got in trouble for talking to - "distracting" - a student during work time. But HSA #4 was different: warm, familial, full of childlike wonder. Student art cluttered all the walls. I sat in on dance and karate and chess classes. There were two recesses in the schedule. During work time, the kids invited me right into their guided reading group, no qualms from the teacher. I was just amazed.

So I signed on to teach fourth grade. I had no idea how fateful that decision would be. Like you, I had an amazing collegial experience. I worked with brilliant teachers. We would read the class novels together, discuss them as adults. We'd pour over student writing samples. We worked with fantastic CGI (cognitively guided instruction) consultants and unlearned everything we thought we knew about math. I felt like the worst teacher in the building, but I was learning so much, devouring the professional development.

In the beginning, I struggled with classroom management. A lot. I had been trained over the summer on some of the charter-style tactics, the Lee Canter behavior narration. But I was terribly inauthentic with it all and so, of course, it was not working. I thought I was going to get fired at one point. But my colleagues kind of rallied around me, took me under their wings. They were all models of "warm demanding" pedagogy: they were strict but loving, and kids thrived in their rooms. My principal, Danique Loving, was my #1 model and mentor here. She taught me so much about holding high standards while exuding belief, levity, love. And by December, after spending hours observing my colleagues' rooms, talking to them, crying with them, I finally found my footing, and my own classroom began to soar.

I share all of this because I think it's hard to talk about SA without addressing what it's known for, reviled for. I think it would be easier for me to just say, it was all terrible, I regret everything. But that wasn't really my experience. That's not really how I hold it in my mind, or my heart. I think it's complex and many things are true. Looking back, Success is where I learned so much about child-centered pedagogy; *and* there was way too much test prep. Success is where I learned how to build a focused and happy classroom; *and* a lot of the behavior expectations were too stringent, unacceptably so. Like so many things, it's just terribly complex.

But, as I shared earlier, I am very clear on my biggest regret and biggest critique of my own leadership there, which has to do with the degree to which I was a non-critical assimilationist. When you write of your dissertation work, which is so important and valuable, you say, *we can't pretend persistence is enough here*. And that really hits home. Because persistence was my #1 design imperative at SA High. When I took the school in 2015, there was a lot of buzz in the charter sector about these really troubling college graduation stats coming back - persistence rates in the 35-45 percent range. I commend KIPP for being so transparent about that data. It was a big wake-up call for charters. And I thought, okay, SA High has barely begun - there were only freshmen at the time - how can we design this differently? What happens if we design backward from the idea of college *graduation*, rather than college admission? And my faculty, the kids, we really rallied around that question. And good stuff came of it: internships, summer residencies, advisory programming. I remain proudest of our January term, where we paused "regular" classes and teachers designed their own three-week electives.

And yet, because I was so underdeveloped in my critical awareness, we did all of that without centering critical literacy, without programmatically preparing students to, as you write, "grapple with their own intersectional identities and what that means for the college process and their college experience." There was a lot of pat messaging about "playing the game." You know, navigate the power structures. Then, disrupt them down the line. But critical theory wasn't central to the programming, and that is what I really regret, because I recognize now that the resultant framework was assimilationist. There would have been such power in pairing this intense college-prep programming with vigorous study of critical theorists. We all would have been so much better, fuller, stronger for it. But, in my under-examined whiteness, I was just designing experiences that felt "aligned" to college graduation, without fully understanding the role of racial and other identities in those experiences. I fell so short in this way.

It's fascinating, and amazing, how we haven't really seen each other in a decade, since that tearful coaching meeting; and yet, I see us in one another's journey. In your doctoral work, I see work of such value, work that I wish I had available to me five years ago, when I became a high school principal. And my hope is that my dissertation will speak to a younger you; to the teacher who felt it was hard to decenter herself, but that she had to, so that her students could flourish. You're further along than I am in your degree, but my research and reading focuses on teachers' cognitive sense-making of student-centered curricular reforms. In particular, I'm looking at the intersection of critical pedagogy and adult development theory; how subject-object relationships figure in both, and what that might mean for aspiring critical educators.

I want to more deeply understand the decentering process - and the developmental, biographical, collegial, structural factors that support teachers in transitioning toward critical practice. In addition to my reflections on SA, I find inspiration for this work in the job I just left. I was hired by another charter network to lead a progressive redesign project for its middle schools: away from "no excuses" and direct instruction, toward rich social-emotional and student-centered learning. The school design was so promising. The project spoke to my soul as a charter educator trying to make change, both within himself and in the broader sector. But here's what I found: despite a great design, despite passion and fervor and vision, despite intention and training and texts… practitioners *really* struggled, on the ground, to transition away from the more traditional, teacher-centered school paradigm. And though I know change is always hard, I suspect that this *kind* of change requires far more than Kotter's 8 steps. My hope is to shed some light on how that change manifests *within* teachers; to examine the human dimensions of what it is like to ache for a critical practice. To begin to chart how one can fulfill their desire to decenter.

C: I think what you are getting at here is that critical educators must be willing to prepare their students to help see the world in particular ways. We must prepare hearts and minds. Now, we cannot change the conditions of the world in the traditional sense: I cannot change the way college admissions supports its first-generation students or provide better healthcare access for my kids. But, I can work to center their stories and experiences and provide them the tools of critical literacy to help them work to change the world for the better. That's not easy work and takes pedagogical experience and wisdom. It also takes a village: teachers, parents, elders, experienced teachers, and the community.

Decentering does not mean taking one's identity and stories out of their classroom. This is not limited to school spaces. One of my biggest frustrations is when I see educational researchers neglect to mention their positionality in their research. Even if they don't identify as a critical educator, their positionality influences everything they are doing. But as a critical educator, I believe we should be in touch with each part of ourselves: our privilege, our wisdom, our power, our flaws. And by being aware of it, we can create space to support students in recognizing that they deserve to be centered and celebrated. Having a stronger awareness of ourselves and how we are situated in the world is central in the ability to create the conditions for all of our students to be uplifted.

Our journey and pathway including our identities influence how we approach the world including our scholarship and our classrooms. We, critical educators, must be willing to reflect deeply about ourselves, acknowledge our mistakes, create collaborative learning environments, engage in difficult conversations, and be willing to question the world around us. Without that commitment to ourselves and each other, becoming a critical educator will remain a dream rather than a lived reality. I still have learning and unlearning to do down this path, but I am holding gratitude that I am not alone. There is a world of critical educators that are doing the same internal work that you and I are trying to do. We cannot forget that.

TFA talked about urgency: *We have to keep moving forward. We cannot wait. This is all about the kids. We must get teachers into classrooms as fast as possible.*

What if there had been an urgency to stop and reflect: on our teaching practices, school and district policies, and ways that we have engaged with our communities?

Andy, what if there had been an urgency to stop and reflect on ourselves?

Critical educators in this moment have an opportunity to stop, reflect, mobilize, and commit to actions that can lead to better educational futures for our students. While it is complex and a more difficult path to take, I believe that we can finally move beyond notions of hope to something more tangible and real that will be more liberating to our students and their families. That seems to be worth fighting for.

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[1] Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzales, 1992

[2] Arcidiacano, Kinsler, and Ransom (2019)

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