

2010

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P. L. Thomas
Furman University

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, P. L. (2010) "Of Rocks and Hard Places—The Challenge of Maxine Greene’s Mystification in Teacher Education," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol5/iss1/10>

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ARTICLE

Of Rocks and Hard Places—The Challenge of Maxine Greene’s *Mystification* in Teacher Education

P. L. Thomas

Furman University

Recently, a colleague talked with me about a field observation she had conducted the day before, an observation that left her between a rock and a hard place. The teacher candidate performed a flawless lesson—well planned, well implemented with students eagerly and fully engaged. As we talked about the observation, my colleague and I agreed that most people (professional educators and laypersons) observing the lesson would be at least satisfied if not thrilled with the beginning teacher’s work because the primary traditional parameters for assessing a teacher’s work include efficiency and structure.

Yet, my colleague felt compelled to ask the candidate, “What was your purpose for this lesson?”—a lesson that required students to write a scripted poetic form commonly asked of students in school (the students have to do little more than fill in the blanks to produce the poem). The teacher candidate said she was doing the lesson because her cooperating teacher needed the student evidence of the assigned poetic form by Thursday to fulfill one of their International Baccalaureate standards. My colleague noticed, however, the lesson had little purpose for the students beyond completing the assignment. The lesson was an effective example of *doing school*, but the lesson in many ways worked against best practice in literary instruction, particularly critical literacy instruction, although fulfilling the accountability paradigm well.

Critical educators who value a student’s reading and rereading of the world, writing and rewriting the world are outside the traditional paradigm that rewards teacher-centered goals and practices; when critical educators seek classroom roles where the teacher serves as a teacher-student and the student serves as a student-teacher (Freire, 1993), the power of the accountability hierarchy is challenged and even diminished, marginalizing the credibility of critical educators who are being assessed by mandates such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

As teacher educators, we are trapped between the expectations of a traditional and mechanistic field and the contrasting expectations of best practice guided by critical pedagogy, as expressed by Kincheloe:

Critical pedagogy . . . is dedicated to the creation of a more just world. With this foundation it seeks to help students and other individuals develop analytical, ethical, cognitive/intellectual tools to identify the insidious modes of oppression that undermine the quality of so many people’s lives. In a critical pedagogy of class awareness, transformative scholars work to expose the ideologies that demonize the poor and challenge oppressive dominant cultural ways of seeing and being. With its literacy of power it identifies power relationships, how schools deploy such power against the poor, how transnational corporations create worldwide conditions for the oppression of the have-nots, and how these macro-micro dynamics intersect to create the most “powerful power” ever. With these understandings it is more prepared to fight oppressive dominant power in ways that help the poor at the political, social, psychological/cognitive, and educational levels. (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2007, pp. 16-17)

These critical commitments stand in stark contrast to the accountability paradigm that offers top-down and nonprofessional (corporate and political) mandates requiring schools to quantify success, teachers to follow scripted standards and lessons (Schmidt & Thomas, 2009), and students to prepare for high-stakes testing.

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In contemporary vernacular, the mythical Scylla and Charybdis have been reduced to *a rock and a hard place*, suggesting a person in some very real way is trapped between two powerful and even unmovable threats. While our contemporary rock and hard place describe well our daily discussions as teacher educators, the original mythology also carries with it the act of *navigating*, notably navigating dangerous waters. And thus we find teacher education a well-worn ship threatened by the traditional field on one side and critical pedagogy on the other—each fraught with dangers for different reasons, but both capable of leaving the ship and its crew scattered helplessly in the very sea they are attempting to navigate. The challenges of navigating the field and the theoretical today have been captured in the work of Maxine Greene some thirty years ago—work that speaks to us in ways that can guide us through the rocks and hard places that stand between us and our calling to lead teachers into our field.

The Challenge of Greene's *Mystification* in Teacher Education

Greene (1978) creates an apt literary framework for her discussion of teacher education with an analogy drawn from *Moby Dick* (Melville, 1851)—acknowledging the broader context of navigation and the narrower flaw of “mystification” in the field. She reminds her reader of Ahab using rewards to manipulate his crew, to mask his true goals in order to increase the cooperation of that crew: “The point is to keep hidden a ‘private purpose’ that takes no account of the crew’s desires and needs” (p. 53). Then, she adds more directly:

Traditionally, teacher education has been concerned with initiating the “forms of life” R. S. Peters describes, or the public traditions, or the heritage. Even where emphasis has been placed on the importance of critical thinking or experimental intelligence, there has been a tendency to present an unexamined surface reality as “natural,” fundamentally unquestionable. There has been a tendency as well to treat official labelings and legitimations as law-like, to overlook the *constructed* [emphasis in original] character of social reality. (p. 54)

Greene writes here of teacher education, but also moves beyond the classroom, arguing for a critical reflection in *all people*, both a reflection on Self and a reflection on that Self within a community—“not merely as professionals or professionals-to-be, but as human beings participating in a shared reality” (pp. 54-55).

Returning to her affinity for literature—for all artistic expression—Greene (1978) notes that American literature is replete with works that explore the corrupting influences of many of the traditional forces associated with America; the irony, of course, is that these works are the core of the traditional American literature canon, speaking against the very system that schools tacitly support. Through these paradoxes, Greene recognizes that schools in the U.S. practice “the long tradition of socialization through schooling” (p. 56). She also uncovers for us the tremendous disjuncture between the artistic expression that students study and the broader messages of that “socialization.” In other words, ideal students *in the traditional context* can simultaneously explain the themes addressing the corrupted American Dream in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) while also filling their transcripts with all the *right* data in order to go to the best colleges (as identified by *U.S. News and World Report*), to land the best jobs (*Fortune 500*), to make the most money—and to fulfill the American Dream, the same American Dream challenged by the novels studied in those advanced classes that bolster their efforts to succeed within the system of schooling that leads to a promising career.

The high-stakes dynamic of our current accountability movement tends to reduce all classroom behaviors to functional acts—fulfilling standards and mandates without critical reflection on the credibility of the standard or mandate, thus falling prey to the fatalism Freire (1998) warns against and supplanting the opportunities Fitzgerald offers students and teachers to confront the assumptions of American ideals through critical considerations of the text that prompts the students to reread and rewrite their lives:

One of the violences perpetuated by illiteracy is the suffocation of the consciousness and the expressiveness of men and women who are forbidden from reading and writing, thus limiting their capacity to write about their reading of the world so they can rethink about their original reading of it. (Freire, 2005, p. 2)

Teachers assign novels in order to address standards that will be assessed on tests used to hold schools accountable, while students dutifully complete assignments in order to fulfill the requirements of coursework in order to graduate as gateways to careers. In a perverse cycle, *The Great Gatsby* serves as a conduit for students to enter the exact system about which Fitzgerald sought to warn his readers, a system that very well may have brought about his own unhappiness and untimely death.

“[E]ffective socialization demands an affirmative approach to the *status quo*,” Greene (1978) continues, even when the content of the courses contradict that *status quo* (pp. 56-57). And a disturbing dynamic is uncovered here that often creates tension for critical educators: Schools of education work within the *status quo* to create teachers who support the *status quo* resulting in students who *seek* the *status quo*. “This has meant a more or less uncritical acceptance of meritocratic arrangements, of stratifications and hierarchies,” she explains (p. 57). In traditional settings, ideal teacher candidates, ideal teachers, *and* ideal students respect authority; they strive to maintain the foundations of the government and society that make schooling available. And questioning and challenging become markers for failing to meet the ideal that is defined by compliance, thus rendering the critical educator disruptive, less than ideal.

Implicitly, challenging the norms of accreditation or graduation may be seen as rejecting the system, thus threatening the *status quo* of power. And for our systems to run smoothly, we need cooperation—not critical confrontations.

McNamee and Miller (2004)—citing Huber and Form (1973), Kluegel and Smith (1986), and Ladd (1994)—have

identified the power of this “uncritical acceptance”:

According to the ideology of the American Dream, America is the land of limitless opportunity in which individuals can go as far as their own merit takes them. According to this ideology, you get out of the system what you put into it. Getting ahead is ostensibly based on individual merit, which is generally viewed as a combination of factors including innate abilities, working hard, having the right attitude, and having high moral character and integrity. Americans not only tend to think that is how the system should work, but most Americans also think that is how the system does work.

Yet, as McNamee and Miller show, ample data and evidence of many kinds exist to challenge this deeply entrenched belief in rugged individualism, both in our society and in our schools: Here we should acknowledge that the process for individual achievement in society outlined above is the same paradigm for student success in most schools. Since future teachers emerge from those schools and then pass through colleges of education before returning to those same schools, “teachers [have given] little sign of raising critical questions themselves” (Greene, 1978, p. 57), despite numerous opportunities throughout the past fifty years to question several cycles that have reduced our schools to standards- and test-based institutions that seek above all else to fulfill accountability requirements.

The central dilemma for critical educators is the mystification at the heart of Greene’s (1978) discussion: “Teacher education, then, confronts a complex situation. . . . It seems clear that teachers cannot overtly attack or try to undermine the institutions in which their students plan to work” (p. 58). She is writing well before No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), but her discussion is just as easily seen as a critique of the newest incarnation of mechanistic approaches to education. The bureaucratic response to reforming education is little different today than fifty or even thirty years ago. That bureaucratic and reductive view of schools, however, could not thrive if it did not work within a larger and mechanistic view of teachers and schools—and ultimately society.

“Notions of the Given”—The Silent Tyranny of Objective Classrooms

Greene could not have been surprised when the news broke about this: “This story is big here in Denver. . . . A 16-year-old World Geography student, Sean Allen, taped his Bush-bashing, capitalism-hating high school teacher’s screeching diatribe” (Malkin, 2006). This incident lasted for several days on talk radio and cable news programs. By most social standards, among most of the discussions of this taped lesson, the teacher was declared *unfit for our schools*, despite several follow-up stories from students attesting to the teacher allowing and embracing a spectrum of views from his students, even those views that contrasted with his lectures. For our purposes here, we must note that the social rejection of the teacher rested significantly on *his critical stance toward authority and government*.

Ironically, of course, we almost never hear a word of protest about the abundant misinformation found in our U.S. history textbooks (Loewen, 1996; Zinn, 1995), primarily because the misinformation better supports the meritocracy myth our schools are obligated to promote for the good of the society. These texts represent the expectations of authority in the form of assumed objectivity. Throughout modern schooling, textbooks in history classes have portrayed the U.S. in the most positive light, even during war, while misleading students through omission of any facts of history that work against the myth. *Objectivity*, then, serves as a code for normalized ideology—a fact that is challenged by critical educators who are ironically discounted as subjective.

For example, Zinn (1995) created a history of the United States specifically *unlike* traditional school texts. The distinction made by Zinn rests in his title, *A People’s History of the United States*, highlighting that traditional approaches to history (notably in high school) look at history from the perspective of the winners, the elites, while Zinn chooses to see history from the bottom of the heap. As a former high school history teacher, current teacher educator, and Zinn scholar, Welchel (2009) explains that history is dealt a nearly lethal blow in high schools due to the accountability-based drive to cover material, the poor preparation of history teachers, the call to raise test scores, and the popular view that history is simply a set of facts (which can be identified and taught objectively). He offers this chilling characterization:

Students are simply taught what to think regarding the standards-dictated content instead of how to think historically. During my career as a secondary history teacher, my social studies colleagues often took the path of least resistance and became reliant on traditional state-adopted history texts. Their classes degenerated into a brief lecture or presentation, followed by directions to read the next section of the chapter being considered and answer the review questions conveniently provided. Unless history teachers have a passion for their academic field and become self-educated concerning the entire span of U.S. history, this instructional rut, unfortunately, is very easy to

fall into. (p. 41)

While Greene (1978) argues that “democracy is and has been an open possibility, not an actuality”—thus requiring “the kinds of action [by teachers] that make a difference in the public space” (pp. 58, 59)—the reality of school’s focus on socialization is that we are committed to capitalism above all else, even at the expense of democracy (Engel, 2000). History, for example, is simply a course to be completed as part of the graduation process that fits into the larger call to prepare a world-class workforce; history is not seen as a field worthy of pursuit because “think[ing] historically” is intrinsically valuable or essential to any person’s empowerment. We are apt, then, to use labels such as “patriotic” or “good American,” encouraging directly and indirectly the ideal student to become the eager and optimistic *worker* and *consumer*.

These dynamics are the result of both students and teachers lacking a critical lens. Historically, Greene (1978) shows, teachers have “not [looked] critically at their presuppositions,” adding,

They have (partly because of their felt obligations to school boards, taxpayers, and the like) *looked towards social consequences in their effort to justify what has been done in schools* [emphasis added]. They have seldom looked at the question of whether their actions were intrinsically right. . . . Teacher educators have thought too little about the need to break with positivist notions, notions of the given. (p. 61)

And this “notions of the given” is pervasive throughout the school system. Students seek to fulfill the requirements of the teacher, while those requirements go unchallenged. Teachers seek to fulfill the requirements of standards, testing, and political mandates, while those mandates go unchallenged. Teacher educators seek to fulfill the requirements of state certification and national accreditation, while certification and accreditation requirements go unchallenged. These “givens,” as Greene notes early in her discussion, are “law-like” (p. 54).

Greene (1978) explores the central dilemma offered by John Dewey (1938/1997), a dilemma that has been misunderstood at best and ignored at worst: Dewey “knew that optimism, demands for conformity, and ‘riotous glorification of things “as they are”’ discouraged critical thought” (p. 62). In U.S. society, and thus schools, critical challenges are popularly viewed as outright rejections. Within critical pedagogy, the challenges to assumptions are seen as fruitful, an essential part of process toward emancipatory practice, toward the *ideal* of democracy as “an open possibility” (Greene, p. 58).

If we return briefly to the public outcry concerning the teacher secretly taped by a student (Malkin, 2006), we can see clearly the reality of critical language by a teacher being interpreted as rejection and even as a threat—and ultimately as evidence of that teacher’s desire to indoctrinate (the ironic charge often leveled at critical educators who by their commitment to critical pedagogy seek to reject indoctrinations of all kinds). More broadly, let’s consider a typical student-teacher interchange. Most educators have had this experience, but anyone can experiment with this dynamic in a classroom. A teacher asks a question; and then a student responds. When the student answers, the teacher responds to that student *with a question* designed to prompt student elaboration. But for most students, what does the follow-up question from the teacher signal? Rejection—a teacher-hint that the student’s answer is incorrect. Almost all students will back away from the answer immediately because classroom dynamics have taught students that questions are rejections. These are the classroom dynamics Greene warns against, that characterize our high-accountability world of schooling today, and are ignored during the mechanistic teacher certification process.

As Greene (1978) recognizes, contemporary education in the U.S. has been dominated by traditional assumptions—positivism, behaviorism, and accountability. A central consequence of behaviorism in the schools has been to train students *to avoid error*; public mistakes are shameful in our schools, and our society—a sign of weakness, a sign that the person does not embody the merit that will bring that American Dream (thus *teachers acquire* and *students learn* that teachers follow incorrect answers with a question to allow students to save face). I have witnessed recently that elite students in a college with high academic requirements are openly hesitant to share drafts of their essays; they have admitted directly to me that they want their professors to see only their perfect final products. Some go so far as to discount process writing as treating bright students like children. In the minds of students, research-based pedagogy is subsumed by their behaviorist views of learning (errors must be avoided, errors are signs that a student lacks merit)—and being successful.

The quest for unerring efficiency in both the school system and in each student stands at the core of NCLB, a mandate that has created the dichotomy of 100% or failure. These same mechanistic assumptions value analytic thought above all else; working from discrete parts to the whole is more efficient to transmit, more efficient to test, and more efficient to convert to numbers for accountability. But, as Greene has mentioned earlier, when have we stepped back as a field to question the

quest for efficiency over effectiveness, or efficiency over empowerment?

Demystifying Standards and High-stakes Testing *through* Teacher Education

Greene’s life work has shown us that the corruptive influences discussed above are a real and powerful set of forces without our system of schooling. Her writing from 1978 would have been just as apt in 1958; and it rang disturbingly true in 2008—and today. But she offers a foundation for breaking the cycle:

My point is that teacher educators ought to work to combat the sense of ineffectuality and powerlessness that comes when persons feel themselves to be the victims of forces wholly beyond their control, in fact beyond any human control. (p. 64).

While the solution is clear—the teacher education process within schools of education is an ideal setting for breaking the cycle—the dilemma is no less daunting. The greatest roadblocks to fulfilling Greene’s call include the following:

- Most educators are drawn to teaching *because they themselves have been successful students*. It is often extremely difficult for teacher candidates to look critically at the system within which they were successful; this holds true for both teacher educators and teacher candidates.
- Teacher candidates in the U.S., having been socialized to view critical perspectives as rejections and having embraced the American Dream, must be introduced to critical perspectives and must learn how to raise questions.
- “Teacher educators must ask themselves whether this kind of questioning can occur in teacher’s colleges and schools,” Greene (1978) warns. Why? Possibly the greatest obstacle to breaking the cycle of mystification in schooling was captured by the discussion at the beginning of this essay: How does a teacher educator foster critical pedagogy in teacher candidates who must secure and maintain a position within the very system critical pedagogy encourages the candidate to challenge? While we can and often do convince young scholars and educators that critical challenges are forms of praxis that empower both individuals and the community, we are not directly involved in transforming the hierarchy of authority that exists in schools. *What we value in the halls of academia is often seen as a threat in the field.*

For example, let’s consider briefly one aspect of when teacher education has addressed transformative practices—teaching children from lives in poverty. For more than a decade, colleges of education along with standards for accreditation and requirements for certification have addressed *diversity* as a central aspect of teacher education, of being a teacher. Recent scholarship on this concern for diversity and the achievement gap among races and socioeconomic groups has shown that when we attempt institutional approaches to critical issues, the result is *corrupted* by the system itself, resulting in a widespread acceptance of the work of Ruby Payne (1996), work that has no cited research supporting the “framework” and work that *reinforces* the assumptions (deficit thinking) about race and diversity that are common in our society (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2009; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2006a; Gorski, 2006b; Gorski, 2008; Thomas, 2009).

Without a critical perspective in the field, educators have embraced the workbook approach to poverty offered by Payne because the program is efficient and, more damning, the framework offers the myths about poverty (Gorski, 2008) that lie beneath the surface of middle-class assumptions and are pervasive among educators. Ironically, the field has embraced Payne widely (Dudley-Marling, 2007) despite her failure to cite research in a high-accountability era that demands *scientifically-based* practices in NCLB guidelines. Our failure in how we view and address children living in poverty reflects directly the charges made by Greene (1978) three decades ago.

If teacher educators, teachers, or teacher candidates risk challenging the programs implemented in the schools—programs that have cost taxpayers considerable amounts of money through the funding of our schools—those who question the assumptions in Payne’s program are also challenging how funds are allocated, how funds *have been allocated*, suggesting that schools have wasted money (schools that are often simultaneously calling for more funding). Again, the hierarchy of schools and our commitment to efficiency does not allow substantive challenges created by critical pedagogy. Yet, as Greene (1978) implores, “If teacher educators are to make a difference, they need to conceive of ways in which persons can be urged to assert themselves, to take their own initiative, to overcome their alienation” (p. 68).

Educators who embrace and embody critical pedagogy are outside the norms of schooling and society, then. Greene (1978)

cautions us “to avoid, if possible, the high-sounding voice of expertise” as one avenue to having our voices actually *heard* (p. 69). Of course, the irony of democracy is that all voices count; in fact, in popular culture, the voice of the expert may be *less* valued—as impractical, as arrogant—than the voice of the layperson. “The crucial problem, I believe, is the problem of challenging what is taken for granted and transmitted as taken-for-granted: ideas of hierarchy, of deserved deficits [as reinforced by Payne’s view of diversity], of delayed gratification, and of mechanical time schemes in tension with inner time,” Greene concludes, calling for “a democratic pedagogy” (p. 70).

The ideal of democracy that drives Greene (1978) and others practicing critical pedagogy includes this broad reality:

None of this is conceivable, of course, if persons are allowed to remain submerged. Democracy is inconceivable on Captain Ahab’s ship, where the crew members remain island-men, deluded and dominated by someone else’s mad idea. Nor is democracy conceivable in a society permeated by indifference, frozen in technological language, and rooted in inequities. (p. 71)

Now, if teacher education is to be the force that breaks the cycle of the status quo, colleges of education and all the courses therein must be environments where teacher candidates can discover, explore, and refine their praxis. In short, teacher educators must be willing to be challenged themselves, must provide a curriculum that will be challenged, and must practice in our courses and field evaluations critical pedagogy ourselves:

But something can be done to empower some teachers-to-be to reflect upon their own life situations, to speak out in their own voices about the lacks that must be repaired, the possibilities to be acted upon in the name of what they deem decent, humane, and just. (Greene, p. 71)

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Teacher educators are currently the victim of “someone else’s mad idea” because former Secretary of Education Rod Paige questioned the value of teacher certification and codified “highly-qualified” guidelines for teachers across the U.S. as a part of NCLB (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). These recent federal mandates put teacher educators in a state of crisis whereby our time is spent meeting mandates instead of fulfilling the needs of the field—much like the social studies teachers characterized by Welch (2009).

To navigate the difficult waters of *becoming* and *being* a teacher, teacher educators must turn to teacher and student empowerment as the rudder that keeps the ship safe as it avoids the pitfalls of the traditional and practical on one side and the inherent threat posed by the critical stance on the other.

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