SOCIAL EDUCATION FOR THE DISABLED:

STANDING AT THE MARGIN OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Bernardo Pohl, Jr. Ed.D
University of Houston-Downtown

Abstract: The fusion between critical pedagogy, holistic (moral) education, and disability studies continues to be uncharted waters, if not a hotly contested topic. Although there are publications delineating the pros and cons of such fusion, a discourse advocating for a liberating pedagogy for the disabled continues to be absent. Based on critical/moral pedagogy, social justice, and narrative inquiry, this project is the self-narrative of a disabled educator, who is looking and searching for answers and spaces where this dialogue can take place. What started as a mere research for social justice in education, it has morphed, unintentionally, into the moral quest for social justice and equality for the disabled. This study explores the tensions, promises, and challenges of special education.

What is the role of special education as an agent of social change in American education? What can we make of the term *social justice,* which currently dominates many aspects of teacher education, except in special education? For years, in the United States, academics have addressed the most pressing cultural and political issues regarding social justice and general education (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2003; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007, 2007). However, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, we are unable to say that a well-established field of disability re-search exists within that context (Valentine, 2007). There is minimal research that investigates how society, politics, and culture affect the disabled in the United States (Artiles, Kozleski,

Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010) —especially research that explores how these factors impact disabled individuals who are also ethnic minorities (Artiles, Trent, & Kuan, 1997). Examples are rare of emancipatory and liberating pedagogies on disability education (Goldstein, 1995; Poplin, 1995). Furthermore, narrative inquiry and ethnographic studies about exceptional students continue to be unexplored (Clandinin & Raymond, 2006). When it comes to narrative, as Jones (2007) states, they—the disabled— continue to be the "silenced voice" (p. 32). In conclusion, as Valentine (2007) argues, there is a "culture of silence" when it comes to social justice and education of the disabled in academia (p. 128).

Critically Looking at Education

If education is to be taken seriously, as an action where a better learning environment is genuinely pursued, educators must confront the fact that education is a political and social undertaking—an act which is often played inside public spaces shaped by intense histories, challenged by different political forces, and operated with deep social tensions (Kincheloe, 2004). As such, this project starts with the notion that education must be considered as whole through a critical lens, not as discrete isolated spaces (Kincheloe, 2002). However, this can be a serious educational dilemma for many educators. They continue to view school as a good and safe place because they had a good educational experience in safe schools. Thus, understanding these educational conflicts is essential for critically looking at education by educators who are developing a deeper social understanding of these spaces. By gaining these insights, teachers start to understand the different forces that shape education: race, class, gender, and culture. With the evolution of these understandings, education becomes a democratic deed, which must address these social manifestations (Giroux, 2003; Kincheloe, 2004; Purpel & McLaurin, 2004).

Critically looking at education is an arduous endeavor. It involves more than simply learning few teaching tricks. It requires profoundly understanding the social forces that shape education (Miller, 1990; Purpel & McLaurin, 2004). It requires a deep comprehension of education within the culture and community (White & McCormack, 2006): music, films, printed media, radio, TV, and so on; alternative bodies of knowledge produced by sub-cultures and marginalized entities; the complex frictions within schools and districts; the tensions between teachers, administrators, and parents; the silent, complicit conformity of academia for the status quo and the official knowledge; the rigid, sanitized nature of educational research; the social anger for public schools; the complex nature of bigotry, racism, social intolerance, homophobia, and gender bias; and much more. Without a doubt, this a serious challenge that requires teachers, students, administrators, and the public to analyze the social nature of education as a complex web that influences every aspect of our lives. However, the benefit of developing these attitudes is very beneficial for the critical educator.

It is not easy to look critically at education. It is a never-ending, organic process with a constant evolution of the purpose and nature. It is not a defined set of practices, guides, and procedures; rather, it is a perpetual observation of the evolving nature of the world, constantly observing changes taking places, continuously defining and re-defining the outcomes. It is a challenge that unmasks our pre-conceived notions about our lives (Valentine, 2007)—a never ending discovery of what makes us human as a breathing, living entity.

American Mismatched Faith in Education

As an American institution, public education holds a very privileged and important place in our country. It is the democratic, cultural, and social compass of our nation, which must mold

young people in this country into productive citizens. As Purpel (1989) argued, it is in the schools where students must learn how to read and write, do math, succeed in sports, be poets and artists, learn to cook and sew, be dreamers, and realistic achievers. We expect our schools to be safe, comfortable places where students decipher their deepest questions regarding sex, health, rituals, friendship, love, and hate. In this United States, we are firm in our conviction that everyone must benefit from a formal education, believing that public education is the giant umbrella that holds everyone together as the ultimate social equalizer. In short, America has a great amount of faith in our public education system.

Unfortunately, it is sad to realize that public education, as a national institution, is under attack. It is suffering from a mountainous barrage of assaults from a disgruntled public in the form of angry taxpayers, disappointed parents, homeschooling advocates, magnet school proponents, private school supporters, disingenuous business leaders, opportunistic journalists, and religious groups (Miller, 1990; Purpel, 1989). Moreover, these special interest factions have hijacked the public school system in order to promote their political agendas. Surprisingly, however, these groups tend to share the common belief that our public schools must promote, sustain, and protect some basic patriotic and democratic values—values deeply influenced by an economic apparatus based on capitalism (economic laissez-faire), patriotic convictions rooted on Puritanism, and concepts of individual freedom grounded on rigid Protestant traditions (Miller, 1990). In that regard, there seems to be very little disagreement in what this nation expects from our public schools.

Special Education in Crisis

In the United States, today, 10 to 12 percent of the population suffers from a disability (Jones, 2007). In primary and secondary American public schools, there are over 6 million students enrolled in some form of a federally funded program that supports the special needs population. To put it in simpler terms, one out of eight American students officially qualifies for specialized educational services (Valentine, 2007). Unfortunately, the education of the disabled is also in crisis; it is safe to say that we are reaching the end of the road with nowhere else to turn. As Joe Valentine (2007) argues, we—those working with the disabled—find ourselves in a constant state of "professional schizophrenia" (p. 127) as we deal with the riddles, tensions, demands, and contradictions of the profession. Sadly, the result is that we find ourselves unable to figure out how society's most pressing matters affect the disabled in all aspect of their lives: economically, socially, politically, and culturally.

If this is not enough to make us pause, consider the fact that special education in the United States must confront three major dilemmas: 1) tensions of inclusion, 2) the over-representation of minorities, and 3) the silence from the academic community. In recent years, the main goal has been inclusion in regards to the education of the disabled, which is to educate the special need students within the general school population. This is referred as "*the least restrictive environment.*" Inclusion, however, comes with its own bag of problems, including lack of funding, teacher training, and professional support. The major problem with inclusion, however, continues to be a problem of attitude by parents, teachers, and administrators (Reiser, 2006). The main reason for this is because special education does not include a small portion of the student population with very specific medical challenges and severe disabilities anymore. Today, there are 13 main categories for special education services, which include milder and less severe conditions, ranging from hearing impairment and blindness to emotional disturbance and

learning disabilities. Within these categories, there are tens of subcategories, making the inclusion situation overwhelming for professionals who service disabled students. In addition, inclusion comes with the tensions and raw feelings from the teachers, administrators, and parents who are trying to survive in a system that continually demands more every day—an educational model that offers very few guidelines on how to go about implementing better learning experiences for those with special needs.

The second dilemma is the overrepresentation of linguistic and racial students in special education in the United States (Valentine, 2007). Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans are particularly affected by this trend, especially in urban schooling settings where the disability labeling has become the new tool for segregation. What makes this particularly disturbing is the social acceptance of this form of disability-based apartheid (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). In America, sadly, it is safe to say that discrimination based on disability does not spark the same social outcry that other forms of discrimination generate (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Pohl, 2013). Contrary to what we might tend to believe, issues of race, linguistic, and ethnicity are not at the front-and-center of the disability and education discourse (Slee, 2001), while class and socioeconomics do play a very big role in determining whether or not a student receives special need services (Valentine, 2007).

The third dilemma is the apparent silence and disregard from the academic setting to truly comprehend the disabled. Sadly, research and discourse in disability education continue to be driven by scientific demands and constraints of the academia (Gallagher, 2001). For the last four decades, the medical and social models of have been the two dominant forces in disability research (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Barnes, 1997; Reiser, 2006). The medical model looks at disability as a biological problem, which needs to be fixed (Ong-Dean, 2005); the social model

proposes that the limitation the disabled encounters are social barriers (Oliver & Zarb, 1989; Stiker, 1999). Generally, however, disability research continues to be data-driven, numerical in nature, and scientifically rationalized (Pohl, 2013)—research that rarely explores the human, lived experience of the disabled (Jones, 2007). The result is an endless supply of technically "jargonized" literature, which is hardly ever utilized by professionals in the trenches.

Narrative, Disability and Citizenship

As we can see, the problems faced by education, regular or special, are many; and by now, it is clear that we are in need of a pedagogy of consciousness for the disabled. This means having a society with members working together for a common good while attaining their own individualism (Erevelles, 2002). Nevertheless, even within the disability studies community, we appear to be at odds about what constitutes citizenship for the disabled. There might be many explanations for this, and we cannot list all of them; however, the answer might be in our apparent lack of self-narrative and examination, which deprives us of ontological spaces where we can explore our state of *being*.

Narrative has the benefit of providing the chance for the individual to be critical and frank about the struggle between society, justice, and power (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2002). It is a dialectic mode where a profound self-conversation can occur, where the individual becomes aware of the dominating social forces, which surrounds him or her. It is a process that encourages examination of society's relationship, self-critiquing the factors that limit self-growth(Valentine, 2007). Narrative, as an inquiry, produces the critical *self* who explores the social, political, ideological, economic, and cultural problems of our times (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007).

In this form, narrative becomes a desire to address moral issues in education within the increasingly normalized (Gur-Ze'ev, 2002), technically rationalized (Eisner, 2001), and objective based pedagogy demanded by those advocating for the ‘official knowledge’ (Apple, 1993), indicating a profound personal transformation and pedagogical self-construction (Ellis, 1997). Believing that education is but one aspect of human transformation, the teacher becomes a researcher, embracing the understanding of the human experience of teaching and learning (see Aoki, 1983; Aoki, 1989/1990). As a result, there is a greater awareness of the educator’s role; therefore, education is no longer the dispensing of facts (Freire, 1970), but a lived experience (Aoki, 1983). In the end, the promise of this inner transformation becomes attainable; and this self-awareness becomes an invaluable effect, helping one to cope with the promises and challenges of educating our youth.

Self-narrative inquiry establishes the opportunity for teacher reflection (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002) and action research (Schön, 1991). Narrative is a powerful tool for understanding teaching and learning as a human experience (Craig, 2001), which promotes the livelihood and fluidity of inquiry (Schwab, 1982), helping us reflect on processes and practices (Schön, 1982). Action research promotes empirical questions (McNiff, 2007; Whitehead, 1989). This study, as such, explores the various scenarios necessary for addressing moral issues in special education through research, narrative, and self-inquiry.

My Narrative: Socially Educating the Disabled

I still remember when John entered the room during my presentation in Ottawa and I met him for the first time. For some reason, I found his presence imposing, which caught my eyes. He told me that he was a teacher from Edmonton, and he really wanted to attend my session at

the annual meeting of the Canadian Disability Studies Association. John is severely paralyzed. He uses a wheelchair and the help of a guide dog. However, I will never forget his comments during questions and answers: "We need to promote a 'get-out-of-the-closet' movement for the disabled. I am not 'physically challenged' or "special' or anything like that; I am disabled dam it!" To be honest, his remarks took me by surprise because I never really had the time to sit down and truly reflect what it means to be disabled. I spent an entire lifetime avoiding the issue. It was not until I became a doctoral student that I had to confront and write about my reality.

The critical act of looking at special education through the critical lens of social education and critical pedagogy is not new for me. It is actually a project that I started thirteen years ago while reading Purpel's (1989) *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis on Special Education.* For me, reading Purpel's work was a revelation. It helped verbalize and visualize many of the social ills of American education: testing, teacher burnout, the public's anger for public school, decaying buildings, a teaching profession with a high revolving door, and so much more. However, I needed a place and a space to understand education differently, away from the crunched numbers, analyzed data, and dissected results, neatly written down on a piece of paper. I needed a place where to vocalize my anger, frustration, and despair. I needed a place where to make sense of the daily chaos of the classroom. After a lifetime of ignoring my disability, pretending that I was not disabled, I reached that point where I was forced to confront that reality head-on.

I look at my life in a very paradoxical way. My mom is from Chile, and my dad is from Argentina. She has deep Spanish-Chilean roots, while he has a strong German-Argentine heritage. However, I did not acquire a strong cultural mark from either side. I spent my childhood constantly traveling South America, living with my family in different countries because of my dad's work in the oil business. I was born in Argentina, but I never spent any significant time in

that country to consider myself a “true Argentinean.” By the time I was five, we already had lived in Brazil and Peru. When I was six, my family returned to Argentina to spend a year with our grandparents so that my dad could go to work at the offshore oilfields of Scotland and Nigeria. When I was seven, we moved to Venezuela, where I spent the rest of my childhood and my early teens at an American oil company compound.

In Venezuela, my life quickly evolved around street baseball, salsa music, and tropical nature. Venezuela was so different from Euro-centric Argentina and the cold, crisp Patagonian plains. However, it had an instantaneous hold on my soul, which I never let go. In the oil company compound, I was quickly inducted into English from the “Venezuelan Americans,” who acted more like American than Venezuelan, pretending that they did not understand a word of Spanish. Eventually, English became our semi-official language.

However, growing up in different places left me asking many questions regarding my identity, sparking my curiosity about our family’s true heritage and culture, wondering why it always felt as if we were the outsiders who never have had a place that we could truly call our own—a place where we could actually belong. In many ways, my life has parallels with *West Side Story* had Maria and Tony been able to marry, properly live as husband and wife, and have kids. The color, economic status, and a privileged education did help tremendously in preventing what would have been total marginalization from all possible sides. After all, for my maternal grandmother, Dad was not Chilean, but another cold-hearted German boy from upper Buenos Aires in search of an innocent southern girl. For my paternal grandfather, Mom was not German, but another darky from the Patagonian plains in search of a better life in the big city. For Mom’s friends, Dad was not one of the boys from the neighborhood, but another geophysicist venturing outside the compound in search of adventure. For her sisters and aunts, he was only having fun

while he was in town for the drilling season. For Dad's brothers, the family's German heritage would be lost. Later, as the years went on, for our Argentine friends, we were the deserters who were traveling the world, leaving behind everyone else in the chaos of a country in disarray. For the Americans and Europeans in the compound in Venezuela, we were the "Argies" who were not supposed to live there; and once in Houston, we were the "wets" who crossed the river and the stories of "Argentina and the oil company" were just a lies. For the Mexican, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans in school, we were the "arrogant" Argentines.

So much left me wondering, nevertheless, how I did survive these experiences without any major trauma. In my early years, I wanted to seek those answers to my questions; it just seemed, however, that I was never able to find proper spaces where I could do just that. Many of these questions would be unanswered until I went to graduate school.

Living amongst Americans, Canadians, and Europeans, the Venezuelan compound had an Anglo-Saxon-American feeling to it. Inside the compound, one was in suburban small town USA; and in many ways, it truly was a different world from tropical Venezuela. Halloween, Thanksgiving, Sunday crab boils, and college bowls replaced soccer, Maté tea, and Argentinean empanadas. Soon, the Spanish-Italian-Euro-centric culture of Argentina and Chile faded into memory. Mom, on the other hand, refused to send us to the American school. According to her, we needed to keep our heritage, so we attended the local private Catholic school. Therefore, we grew up in this weird, mixed environment of the American-Anglo-Saxon culture inside the company's compound and the flare of Venezuela's Caribbean life at school. Eventually, we would move to suburban Houston; and for me, the "burbs' were just like the oil compound, only on steroids.

During most of the 70s, mom practically raised us by herself. Dad was constantly being deployed around the world due to his work. Quickly, Mom asserted herself as the stronghold and pillar of the family. She was the relegated stepdaughter who was thrown out of the house and left to survive on her own since the age of eleven or twelve; therefore, she did not waste any time in imposing her no-nonsense, pull-no-punches, and take-no-garbage personality. Dad was the family's teddy bear, showing us his tenderness and love every time he was at home. From Mom, we obtained our faithfulness and strong obedience to Catholicism, desire to make good grades, and determination to succeed. Forced to fight for her mere survival since she was a little girl, she never accepted or tolerated weakness or defeat. Under her wing, one must fight, be strong, be the hardest worker, swallow your tears, and never let your guards down. From Dad, we got our love for books, painting, music, reading, and studying. Under his wing, we learned to pursue our passion for education.

Education has always been important in my life. For Dad, who grew up in a family of teachers and educators, education was essential. He showed the tender, loving side of learning, encouraging us to do our homework and make good grades. For Mom, growing up in a family where the concept of education was almost non-existent, she was the strong-willed person, determined to make sure we did our very best in school and became productive members of society. She always said that we were not going to end like her good-for-nothing brothers and cousins, while she praised my dad and his father for having so many degrees and so much education. As I grew older, education became more than simply doing homework and making good grades, but it emerged as the avenue where I could indulge my curiosity of exploring all these languages and cultures that were crossing, fueling my life and spirit.

I was born prematurely with cerebral palsy due to labor complications. When my mom was pregnant and on vacation, she had an accident while crossing a snowy street at a ski resort in Chile. I turned upside down inside my mother's womb. A military medic, who was also on vacation, helped my mom survive the critical first 48 hours as she had convulsions, high fever, and almost lost me. Once my parents were back in Argentina, doctors suggested an abortion. My mom insisted on giving birth to me. During a routine check, an inexperienced resident broke the amniotic sack, causing my mom to go prematurely into labor. In the commotion, I lost oxygen to the brain during the drug induced and forced labor. Once I was born, nurses were unable to detect whether I was breathing or not, so they literally started to punch me. After they stopped beating me, I was officially declared dead. The hospital's nun and chaplain on duty discovered that I was actually alive as they were giving me my last rites. My dad decided to place his glasses on my nose, and they discovered that I was actually breathing. I was so small that they kept me in an incubator for three months.

I was paralyzed from the neck downward until I was two; I could not use my legs until I was four. They told my parents that I was going to be a complete vegetable, a useless human being. My mother decided that things were going to be different, so self-taught herself physical therapy. In order to relax my stiff muscles, she gave me intensive massage session; eventually, I was able to move my head, neck, and arms. When I was three, she took the initiative to make me walk. She achieved this by filling an entire room with balloons, placed me on the floor, and let me play. Since I wanted to grab the balloons, I started to move in the floors. Soon, I was able to move my legs. By the time I was six, I was able to run and jump.

Despite my disability, it was not until my teenage years when I became aware of my condition. My childhood was consumed with playing cops and robbers, recreating Maradona's

world cup moves with my brother, and dreaming of working in the oilfield like my dad. It was not until I became a teenager that the reality of the laughs, mockery, and "limitations" started to have an effect on me; however, I knew that I had to let it go and keep going forward. Mom also had a lot to do with this. All of us had to grow up under her strong-willed command, and there was no space for feeling sorry or defeated. We never had the time to think about it. If things went wrong, tough it up and keep on going.

Elementary and middle school were fun—lots of playing without too much regard for making good grades. It was in high school, however, where my life took a sudden turn. It hit me very hard to see my brother and two sisters excel effortlessly in everything they did. Actually, it was not effortless; it was the result of very hard and arduous work, but I did not see it that way. During my sophomore year, I finally decided to be like them. I was going to make the grade, be on the honor roll, and excel just like them. By the time I graduated from high school, I was making straight As, I was a regular on the honor roll list, and I moved from 610th to 205th place in the class ranking of about 800 students.

Not everything in secondary school was a success story. I was officially placed in special needs services. And with that, the stigma of being placed in a totally separate category came with it. Without truly understanding why, I felt embarrassed, isolated, and depressed. Eventually, I tried to take my life twice, and I was placed on counseling services. Suddenly, I found myself in different classrooms; I was away from my brother who was in the same grade with me since I had been held back a year. My big protector was gone. Things were different in Venezuela where my disability was a mere physical inconvenience, and I was part of all regular classes. Everyone was helpful. Peers helped me with homework, notes, and projects. Teachers provided me with the support and the extra time that I needed. In sports, I was the goalie, umpire, or

server, and I was part of the action. In the U.S., everything was so different; and abruptly, I was labeled, tracked, evaluated, and separated. For somebody capable of hitting a perfect homerun or bending it like "Beckham," playing chess and shuffleboard in adaptive physical education was so humiliating.

Despite my new reality, my disability was the last thing I had in my mind. It was a struggle to survive middle school. I was just trying to learn the system. It was like trying to learn to live on a totally different planet. For me, it was horrible to cope with the bell-to-bell period schedule without time for rest. Gone were the days of long recess, studying periods between classes, and the lazy lunches under the mango trees.

High school was equally hard for me. Yes, I did make the grades and honor roll. In high school, however, I learned how detrimental and devastating the world of special education could be. Coming from Venezuela, where I attended regular classes with minimal support, being placed in modified classes with a watered down curriculum was devastating. Counselors and administrators seriously believed that my grades from Venezuela were not a true reflection of my abilities, and they did not hide their belief that I was socially promoted before I arrived in the U.S. When I started to make straight A's in high school, I requested to be placed in regular courses; however, I was told that I would not survive the demanding curriculum. I always wanted to be in Algebra and regular math like my brother, but my pleas fell on deaf ears. I was not allowed to take Algebra I—a freshmen level course—until I was a junior. When I made a perfect one hundred in Algebra I for the year, I requested to take Algebra II in 12th grade. However, the administrators placed me back in Consumer Math during my senior year. They told me that Algebra II was "too hard," and I needed a "refreshment," according to my counselor, Mr.

Pears (not his real name). Moreover, he made it clear that my algebra teacher, Mrs. Flower (not her real name), "modified" my grades to give me a little "slack."

My dream was to be an architect. Since I was little, I loved to do drafting, also known as technical drawing. As a little kid, I would sit beside my dad or my godfather in their studios and pretend that I was also designing an oilfield tool. In high school, I fought so hard to take drafting and learn the craft, but I was always turned down. One day, during my junior year, I showed my drawings to Mr. Pears. He took me to see the drafting teacher, Mr. Orsak (not his real name) who basically told me to not even think about taking his class. He said that he did not have the time for a student like me. In the end, my experience in high school was a constant struggle of proving to others that I could succeed, convincing my counselor that I could make the grade while dealing with the disillusion of being considered inferior to the rest of my peers.

Unfortunately, during high school, my family also went through hard financial times. It was the late 80s and the oil bust hit Houston severely. Oil companies in Houston were terminating jobs as fast as one could blink an eye. Consequently, my father had to accept a sixty percent salary cut if he wanted to keep his job. Soon life stopped in its tracks for all of us. The days when I could ask for the most expensive pairs of Nike® shoes were over. Suddenly, my family found itself making the toughest of choices on a daily basis, such as whether to buy milk or pay the electric bill. As soon as we could, my siblings and I started to work. The food was on us, so dad would only have to worry about paying the bills. Mom would wake up at three o'clock every morning and bake the daily bread. She figured out that it was cheaper to bake our own bread for lunch than to buy the bread at the store. During high school, my lunch was homemade baked bread with a thin slice of cheese and ham with a glass of milk. These were truly the hardest days of my life.

After high school, I financed my own college education with a combination of loans, scholarships, and part-time jobs. My high school transcript was worthless, so I decided to start all over again at the local community college. I had to literally do everything from the beginning. Fortunately, the instructors and advisors at the community college supported and encouraged me. I took all of the basic courses; after two years, I applied to the architecture program at the University of Houston. The acceptance letter made me jump three feet up in the air. In 1997, at the age of 26, I received my architecture degree.

Soon after graduating from college, I had what I dreamed all my life—a Bachelor Degree in Architecture. In my mind, I was ready to conquer the world. Things, however, did not go well for me. A mediocre portfolio, average grades, and a deflated job market in the construction industry did not help me in my hunt for a job. Soon, I returned to work at the grocery store where I started as a teenager. In a sudden turn of fate, one day, a friend recommended me to join him at the school where he taught. He suggested that I start as a substitute teacher. The offer was very attractive for me—I was going to make in a day what I was making in a week at the grocery store. It did not take long for me to gain the reputation of the good, efficient substitute who followed the teachers' lesson plans. After the last day of school, I decided to apply for my teaching certification.

I became a special education teacher 12 years ago by pure accident. Originally, I was certified to teach history, but nobody hires a history teacher anymore. The principal at the school I was substituting knew I was looking for a job; therefore, it was her idea to offer me a teaching job in a critical need area: special education. So, I accepted the job. In addition to teaching, I was also a tracking academic manager. My functions, however, were mostly clerical—as a co-teacher, I often did what the content teacher told me to do; and as a tracking academic manager, I

found myself following the decisions from the administrative hierarchy. It was at that time that I realized that I was just a deskilled professional following the cookie-cutter curriculum through mandated standards. Unfortunately, it did not take long for me to find myself in trouble as I vocally challenged and questioned many of the accepted practices in my department. I learned very quickly that what teachers had to say mattered very little to administrators when it came to special needs services. As time passed, I needed a space where I could escape the daily demands of teaching special education. It was then when I decided to enroll in graduate school. Within seven years, I earned my masters and doctorate degrees in Education.

My decision to enter graduate school was an important event in my life, which opened new horizons and perspectives of my reality. It was in the academy where I became acquainted with supportive professors and colleagues who challenged me to engage myself in the praxis of pursuing new visions of what education can be. The experience liberated me, allowing me to understand the inequities that marginalized me throughout my life. Suddenly, I discovered that graduate school was the place that harbored those who resisted the dominant ideology of school and society. Graduate school became my symbol of hope.

I worked for ten years at a suburban school with students of all abilities (general and special education) in all-inclusive classrooms. I currently work with future special education teachers at a major urban university in Texas. In understanding my life, I have learned to comprehend my personal state of being, which allows me to help my students understand a system that is set for failure and oppression for special needs individuals. Because of my background, I can look my students in the eyes, and tell it like *it is* because I know what it is to be in those shoes. My empathy allows me to guide them in a direction of hope—a hope that they, as future teachers, can create a more equitable education for the disabled.

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