

People, Policy, and Praxis: Freirean Pedagogy and Local-Level Policy Implementation

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Ambiguity in policy implementation guidance can result in discrimination and disenfranchisement. Adult education programs grounded in Freirean pedagogy can be responsive to these situations through an open dialectic that provides for an exchange between internal program relationships and external organizational relationships. This case comes from my experiences as an educator in a Freirean, Spanish-language, high school equivalency (HSE) program in New Jersey during significant national changes to HSE credentialing in 2014. It describes policy implementation in the local context in relationships between governing institutions, service organizations, and the people policies are meant to govern. I construct a narrative for relevant policy environments and actions through the assemblage of primary sources, such as policy documents and internal organizational reports, as well as an analysis of 25 news reports and commentaries taken from 2013-2014. I argue that all policies, even those initiated at the national level, are ultimately enacted locally through the dialectic relationships between policy makers, administrators, program staff, and students at a variety of public and private organizations. I show how Freirean approaches to program design and operation respond to political, policy, and programmatic complexities to address discrimination and disenfranchisement. In conclusion, I discuss implications for educators seeking to adopt a Freirean framework into their own program design and implementation. These include reflection and action at the local level within an analysis of larger oppressive structures, thoughtful design and critical flexibility to work closely with students in program operation, and engagement in dialectic relationships with existing or potential collaborators.

Keywords: Freire, adult education, high school equivalency, program design, policy implementation

Introduction

Before 2014, people in the county who sought to obtain a high school equivalency (HSE) diploma sat for the GED exam at the Pine Street School.¹ When I began at Bridgeway, a local nonprofit organization, in 2011, I joined colleagues in adult education who shuttled between our office and the Pine Street School to complete registrations, coordinate with test proctors, drop off and pick up students on test day, and pick up test results. At registration, test-takers indicated in which language they wanted to complete the exam:

¹ Names of places and organizations have been changed to preserve anonymity.

English or Spanish. On test day, they brought a money order for \$50 and a number 2 pencil, presented an ID, and were assigned a seat intermingled with other test-takers completing the test in the language of their choosing. If they obtained a high enough score on each of the five sections of the test, NJ's Department of Education (NJ DOE) mailed them a high school diploma within 6-8 weeks. However, our routines changed drastically in January 2014, as they did nationwide, when the GED exam publisher made substantial changes in content and delivery to the exam, requiring new HSE policies in response.

The same year these changes took place, Bridgeway engaged in a partnership with other local nonprofit organizations to launch *Juntos en Comunidad (Juntos)*, a multi-organization initiative that provides English- and Spanish-language social and educational services to the Latin American immigrant community in the county and the surrounding area. My colleagues and I navigated the confluence of changing education, labor, and immigration policies as we envisioned, developed and operated the program.² As the initiative's HSE program manager and as a Freirean educator, I designed the program as mother tongue-based instruction (see Benson, 2004) rooted in three Freirean guiding principles (Freire, 1992, 2000b, 2000a; Horton & Freire, 1992). These principles include the open dialectic embedded in praxis, the action-oriented hope of liberation, and the impossibility of political neutrality. Together, they proved to be a useful framework from which to respond to both the curricular changes that the new GED prompted as well as to local action that effectively disenfranchised students who were not able to complete the Spanish-language HSE exam locally for fifteen months.

The case presented below has two simultaneous goals. The first is to articulate the rationale for our pedagogical practices. The second is to convey the relational nature of the political, policy, and programmatic complexities involved in local HSE policy implementation. I argue that all policies, even those initiated at the national level, are ultimately enacted locally through the dialectic relational exchange that happens between policy makers, administrators, program staff, and students at a variety of public and private organizations. Because Freirean pedagogy is grounded in relational exchanges that bring together disparate, often competing or conflicting—even oppressive—persons and ideas, *Juntos's* HSE program was able to critically and flexibly engage with other agents. This study will highlight dialectic relationships, that is relationships in exchange, involved in HSE credentialing in one county in NJ by focusing on the interactions that occurred at the local level specifically around disenfranchisement and language ideologies. I also emphasize policy implementation as a relational process occurring between governing institutions, service organizations, and the people policies are meant to govern.

This article contains four major parts: a theoretical description of Freirean pedagogy, the construction of the case, two examples of praxis at *Juntos*, and implications for educators. First, I describe the three guiding principles listed above. Second, I summarize how the case has been constructed, outline the changes in and responses to HSE testing, review exam changes as described in news reports and commentary, and consider local policy implementation. Third, I present two examples of how the Freirean guiding principles listed above manifested between *Juntos's* internal and external relationships with other agencies and organizations. These examples advance the argument that policies are ultimately enacted locally within the context of these dialectal relationships. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of implications for other educators.

² Two other important policy changes occurred during this period that are not fully addressed in this paper: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals in 2012 and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014.

Freirean Pedagogy

The central thesis of Freirean pedagogy builds on the idea of an open dialectic, which Freire develops in the context of oppressive social structures (Freire, 2000b). The dialectic refers to mutually influencing relationships between people and their world. The openness of the dialectic process refers to differences or even conflicts between members; these may or may not resolve but nonetheless remain mutually engaged (Freire, 1992). From here, he defines praxis as “reflection and action upon the world to transform it” (Freire, 2000a, p. 51). Praxis is a purposeful, iterative, political process. Within this definition are several important assumptions: first, the world in its present condition is oppressive; second, the world can and should be transformed to end oppression; and third, transformation comes through purposeful and decisive action. For Freire (2000a), praxis is the process of self-liberation, wherein “the oppressed must see themselves as women and men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (p. 56).

As such, praxis creates a framework for dialectic relationships within the component parts of educational, social, and political processes. Romão (2019) writes that praxis does “not result from the profound opposition of the opposites but from the possibility of dialogue that exists between them” (p. 508). Freirean pedagogy emphasizes the mutually influencing relationships between people and their world; between the past, present, and future; between reflection and action; between educators, students, content, and methods; and even between oppressed and oppressors. Praxis, then, accepts and engages in yet unresolved tensions towards a transformed world (Freire, 1992, 2000a, 2000b).

Because praxis seeks to transform the world from its present oppressive condition to a liberated condition, it necessarily includes an action-oriented hope. Freire (1992) writes, “I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream” (p. 2). Like praxis, which requires both reflection and action, hope “demands an anchoring in practice” (p. 2) that simultaneously imagines a transformed future while working upon the present moment. Indeed, Freire warns that without action, hope “dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness” (p. 3). The future transformation (liberation) affirms the impossibility of political neutrality. Freire continues,

There is, nor has there ever been, an educational practice in zero-space time... To try to get people to believe that there is such a thing as this, is indisputably a political practice... It is as political as the other practice, which does not conceal—in fact, which proclaims—its own political character. (p. 67)

All educational practices, whether explicitly or implicitly, originate from and participate in political perspectives. Therefore, educators should strive to practice “the difficult exercise of the virtues of humility, of consistency, of tolerance” rather than towards an unattainable neutrality. Although these principles are considered in sequence here, they are in reality mutually defining and reinforcing within the implementation of Freirean pedagogy. Therefore, they are further explored in the examples taken from *Juntos* later in this article.

Methodology

This case concerns local implementation of policies enacted by NJ DOE and involves a range of public and private agencies and organizations spanning national, state, and local jurisdictions. Therefore, it examines a variety of documents to engage in “a process of

reflection which is set in a thoroughly historical context” (Freire, 2000b, p. 32). This process was conducted in two parts. The first involved collecting primary sources, alongside autoethnographic fieldnotes, to create a chronology of events, stretching back to early federal adult education legislation up to 2014. The second involved collecting news reports and commentary specifically on the 2014 HSE testing changes.

The assemblage of the primary sources listed here constructs a narrative for the relevant policy environments and actions described in greater detail in the sections that follow. While this article focuses on the events immediately before and after 2014, the review included historical documents, policy documents, governance, and compliance reports in the form of meeting minutes and internal organizational operation reports. I selected documents from public institutions based on relevance and availability that represent federal, state, and county government: federal adult basic and secondary education legislation from 1962-2014;³ New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development and Department of Education policies regarding HSE test publishers, test preparation programs, and test centers⁴; and the local Workforce Investment Board’s Literacy Committee meeting minutes from 2013-2015.⁵ Documents from private organizations vary in topic and scope: statements on the development of the Common Core Standards and the GED Testing Services’ rationale for adopting them; statements from CBT/McGraw-Hill and ETS regarding their exams’ equivalency with the GED and validity for federal education programs; and 29 internal *Juntos* reports, dated October 2014-December 2015, on operation of the HSE program. I supplemented these with autoethnographic field notes from my time as Adult Education Manager at Bridgeway.

Additionally, I selected news reports and commentaries from national and local news outlets across the country, dating between January 2013-December 2014. Using a key word search in Google News in the year leading up to and a year after the GED Testing Services released the new College and Career Ready GED exam, I chose 25 pieces that describe events related to test publishers, state governments, local organizations, and students across the country preparing for and responding to the change in the GED exam. There was relatively little coverage of these events, and a significant number of pieces were simple announcement of test prep program hours or eligibility rather than news reports or commentary. Initial coding identified actors involved in the change (i.e., state government, publishers, local organizations, students), actors’ goals (i.e., economic development, education, employment), and the challenges actors faced in providing or accessing HSE credentialing (i.e., financial, logistical). Focused coding further analyzed goals challenges related to economic impact, operational capacity, rigor, and technology. I used the frequency of individual references to specific topics to identify primary areas of concern in the reporting and commentary.

³ Workforce Opportunity and Innovation Act of 2014; Workforce Investment Act of 1998; Job Training Partnership Act of 1982; Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973; Manpower Development and Training act of 1962.

⁴ NJ DLWD Adult Education & Literacy policies, NJ DOE Request for Qualifications for publishers of high school equivalency exams, and NJ DOE Request for Qualifications for high school equivalency test

⁵ The Literacy Committee was a subcommittee of the local Workforce Investment Board (under the Workforce Investment Act) that coordinated adult education activities, publicly and privately operated, in the region. The 2014 passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act updated the role of the local boards. For more information of workforce development governance in New Jersey, see <https://www.nj.gov/njsetc/about/>

Overview of Policy Changes

National and Local Adult Education Policy

Changes to content in the GED exam came on the heels of widespread adoption of the Common Core Career and College Readiness Standards, first released in 2010 (“About the Common Core Standards,” 2021). The standards, developed by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the nonprofit education reform group Achieve, sought to establish new benchmarks for K12 education “to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live” (para. 2). The following year, the American Council of Education, the nonprofit publisher of the GED exam, announced a new partnership with Pearson VUE to establish the for-profit GED Testing Service, which would update the existing GED exam to align with College and Career Readiness Standards (Kim, 2013; Sieben, 2011; Trask, 2012). On December 31, 2013, the GED Testing Service retired the previous exam version and on January 1, 2014, launched its new, computerized College and Career Ready version. The new registration fee more than doubled the cost of the exam. In response, two other major publishers released their own high school equivalency exams: CBT/McGraw-Hill’s Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC)⁶ and the Educational Testing Service’s High School Equivalency Test (HiSET). These exams were updated more gradually over a two-year period from 2014 to 2016 to align with Career and College Readiness Standards, were offered at lower costs compared to the GED, and could be completed either on paper or on the computer (Adams, 2013; Sieben, 2011). All three publishers created both English and Spanish language versions of their exams.

NJ DOE took a market approach to its adoption of HSE credentialing pathways by approving all three test versions. That is, NJ DOE framed test-takers as consumers in an HSE testing marketplace that spanned the entire state, where they could choose from among the vendors which provided them the greatest value. In theory, test-takers could choose which of the three exams to take, and therefore determine how to prepare for, how to complete, and how much to pay for credentialing. However, NJ DOE left it to test centers to decide, based on organizational capacity, which test publishers they would engage and, based on local demographics, which languages they would offer. Additionally, all test centers needed to recertify with NJ DOE to ensure proper implementation of new procedure. This decision was announced in December 2013 (New Jersey Department of Education, 2014).

This arrangement, however, did not actually establish a market relationship between the test-taker and the test publisher. Instead, recertification created ambiguity at the local level between the NJ DOE’s intention, test center’s self-perceived capacity, and students’ stated desires regarding access to educational opportunity. What NJ DOE meant as a bureaucratic affirmation of test centers’ capacity and compliance with new procedures became an opportunity for test centers to renegotiate previous norms regarding language access to educational opportunity and credentialing under the guise of organizational efficiency. Policy ambiguities allowed centers to drop Spanish-language testing that had previously been offered. This effectively disenfranchised students, barring their access to HSE credentialing by reformulating the credential not as one based on the Common Core standards but rather on English proficiency.

⁶ TASC is now a publication of Data Recognition Corporation. See <https://www.mheducation.com/news-media/press-releases/data-recognition-corporation-drc-announces-agreement-acquire-key-assets-ctb.html>

High School Equivalency in the News

In news reports and commentaries about changes in HSE testing, the increased rigor derived from the College and Career Readiness Standards and state responses to changes were the central focus. Across the 25 pieces, there were 130 individual references to the change in standards, the requisite curricular changes at test prep programs, and concern about test-takers ability to pass the exam at its new standards. This was followed closely behind with concerns about technology, with 101 individual references. These concerns included requisite skills for employment and post-secondary education, programs' operational capacity to acquire equipment and incorporate computer training, and test-takers ability to manage the computer-based format of the test. Concerns around rigor, technology, and cost were framed as problems of operational capacity for state education or workforce agencies, local test centers, and local test prep programs as often as they were described as personal challenges for students. Writers took direct quotes, in order of frequency, from program operators, test publishers, students, and state policy makers. Student quotes talked about personal goals, rigor, and technology. Test publishers focused on workforce participation and economic impact. State officials and program operators focused on operational capacity, or rather limitations in capacity, to adapt programming and facilities to meet the requirements of the new exam.

Workforce participation, whether immediately after obtaining the HSE or in the future after post-secondary training or higher education, was the primary rationale offered for increased rigor and the computerized format. The pieces framed educator and student comments about rigor, technology, and workforce participation around students' time out of K12 schooling, experiences with low-wage work, and responsibilities as parenting. However, writers made no reference to demographic data, including race, ethnicity, language, or income level except in two instances: one writer discussed mean and median income, another discussed race. Overall, student statistics focused on test completion and enrollment in post-secondary education. Students are described in terms of their present employment ("low-income") as linked to their lack of HSE credential or potential employment if they acquire it. In terms of economic impact of an HSE credentialing market and of successful HSE candidates, 11 pieces discussed improved individual or familial economic conditions and 14 talked about a distributed economic benefit to society at large. Most frequently, however, the pieces focused on workforce participation and improved employability.

State officials' and program operators' concern with operational capacity, coupled with test publishers' rationale about society-level economic benefits, confirms a bureaucratic view of HSE credentialing within the larger workforce development system. Together, the pieces describe the HSE credential as a tool for maintaining individual and social economic stability. The increased rigor and computer-based format is seen as ensuring students maintain sufficient skills and knowledge to produce wealth both for themselves and for society at large. The emphasis on economic impact is consistent with American modernism wherein "poverty [has] become an organizing concept and the object of a new problematization" whose "solution was economic growth and development" (Escobar, 2012, p. 24). Poverty, reframed here as a lack of economic stability, is a social problem with a technocratic solution wherein local test centers and test prep programs are coordinated through state policy. The economic framing of the problem eclipses racioethnic and linguistic dimensions. These are overlooked because they cannot be readily incorporated into the "the ideological scheme" and subsequently "either go unnoticed or get explained away" (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 38).

It is clear that the issue of linguistic disenfranchisement in HSE credentialing is not a widely considered topic in national conversations. In the pieces analyzed here, there was no reference to English- or Spanish- language testing. Test publishers' choice to develop a Spanish-language exam and NJ DOE's (or any other state agency) decision to accept the Spanish-language exam as a pathway to credentialing do not come up in news reports or commentaries. There was no discussion about language at all. In fact, key word searches in Google News that included "Spanish" or "language" alongside "high school equivalency" yielded no relevant results, only announcements about local English as a Second Language programs. The news reports and commentaries reveal that operational capacity, and not language access, have been the primary concern for the majority of state officials and program operators.

Thomason (2001) writes that "language contact (which is itself a result of social history) has social consequences" where "the language of a minority culture is used by a dominant culture as a marker of cultural differentness: not only does it provide a means of identifying the people to be discriminated against, but it also offers a target for discrimination" (p. 7). Omission of Spanish-language testing in the media generally constitutes erasure from public discourse and justifies discrimination and disenfranchisement at the local level for a lack of conformity to the dominant culture's norms.

Language-based Disenfranchisement

Although we can trace policy actions related to HSE from the federal level down, such as in the design, promotion, and adoption of the Common Core standards, policy implementation always occurs locally. Borrowing from Mariana Valverde (2011), I argue that policy interventions are implemented through "embodied, experiential, and relational categories" (p. 280). The interaction between local organization and government agencies and the people the policies are meant to govern influences how policies actually operate day to day (Valverde, 2011). Others have described the policy implementation in terms of top-down and bottom-up (Sabatier, 1986) and explored the way local "street-level" bureaucrats enact policies (Lipsky, 2010). Valverde (2011), however, is of particular relevance here because she describes these relationships as "dialectic in form, [and] open-ended rather than closed" (p. 280). For example, test publishers and NJ DOE's actions to facilitate HSE credentialing in both English and Spanish indicate a certain intention at the national and state levels. However, at the local level, the option to discontinue Spanish-language testing at the local level affirmed language ideologies that gave English primacy, minoritized Spanish, and barred access to educational and credentialing opportunities for Spanish-speaking students seeking to demonstrate their academic knowledge and skills in their native language.

The ambiguity created by the recertification policy was exacerbated in the county by test center operations being passed between organizations. The local school district had operated the GED test center at the Pine Street School from time immemorial. However, in view of changing test center requirements, the school district declined to continue operating the testing center. The local community college (CC)'s adult education department agreed to operate a local test center, but availability of testing was delayed both by indecision about which test publishers to engage and language to offer as well as a backlog at NJ DOE of recertification requests from across the state. In this vacuum of local testing services, test-takers would need to (and in fact did) travel outside the county to testing sites 30 miles (for English-language testing) to 75 miles (for Spanish-language testing) away. Finally, CC began scheduling test-takers sit for the HiSET exam in December 2014 but decided to continue only in English. They defended this decision as a

problem of operational capacity, citing a lack of Spanish-speaking personnel at the college generally and in the adult education department specifically as the major reason.

Chun and Lo (2015) describe how language difference, used as a proxy for racioethnicity, allows for characterization of language users as competent and appropriate. However, language cannot be reduced to purely technical skill (language proficiency for test completion) or logistical limitation (organizational capacity). CC attempted to objectify English- and Spanish-language HSE testing using these frames. By focusing on operational capacity, rather than expressed local desires, CC failed to see test-takers as more than “an abstract category and [see] them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice” (Freire, 2000b, p. 50). Alim (2010) characterizes educational institutions “as designed to teach citizens about the current sociolinguistic order of things, without challenging that order, which is based largely on the ideology of the dominating group” (p. 28). CC failed to consider how excluding Spanish-language testing reformulated English-language competency as a feature of HSE credentialing. They “fail[ed] to acknowledge language minoritized students’ common racial positioning and the ways that such positioning suggest deficiency...normalizes these racial hierarchies and provides them legitimacy” (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 166).

Although HSE test-takers were effectively disenfranchised, *Juntos* and its students nonetheless engaged dialectically, internally between staff and students to respond curricular requirements, and externally to confront discriminatory language policies. In the end, the decision to restore Spanish-language testing was brought about through *Juntos*’ commitment to Freirean pedagogy and the relational exchange between a variety of local and state entities, organizations, and individuals.

Praxis at *Juntos en Comunidad*

Juntos largely operated as a fully bilingual community center at First Baptist Church’s parish house-turned-office space. Besides HSE classes, *Juntos* offered ESL classes, parenting support groups, financial coaching, homeownership counseling, and more. Each of these services was coordinated by organizations with complementary specialization. I represented Bridgeway’s workforce development division and oversaw the HSE program. Drawing from my own experiences as a Latin American immigrant and long-time county resident, I sought to create a program firmly grounded on Freirean pedagogy that would offer hope and solidarity for the Spanish-speaking immigrant community in the region. I was convinced then, as I am now, that “[h]ope is an ontological need” (Freire, 1992, p. 2) and that the practice of education is itself an act of hopefulness. Freire (1992) writes, “One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be” (p. 6).

Juntos, however, existed in “the tensions, contradictions, fears, doubts, hopes, and ‘deferred’ dreams that are part and parcel of living a borrowed and colonized cultural existence” (Macedo, in Freire, 2000, p. 11). Funded exclusively through private foundation dollars, *Juntos* operated within the constraints not only of larger neoliberal ideologies directing the operation of adult education programs towards labor market considerations, but also of the foundation’s beliefs about self-sufficiency.⁷ While we affirmed the

⁷ *Juntos en Comunidad* was funded beginning in 2014 by a private, family foundation with a 30-year charter sunset in 2022. The foundation engaged the Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers University to validate its approach for economic self-sufficiency for low-income families. Grantee organizations operate collaboratively to engage the families through shared case-management

potential, individual economic benefit of the HSE, we were “unimpressed with dogmatic methodologies” (Gadotti, 2019, p. 40). Freirean pedagogy was for us, “more oneiric than epistemic,” as Rubem Alves describes; our guiding principles were more like “prophetic maps” by which we could orient *Juntos*’s HSE program as we sought alternatives to “the circularity of education’s well-worn byways” (as cited in Gadotti, p. 46). Education-in-praxis, instead, engages and rearrange social relationships to develop and update visions for the future that liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor alike—and is therefore necessarily political (Freire, 1992, 2000b). At *Juntos*, we “never understood literacy education of adults as a thing in itself, as simply learning the mechanics of reading and writing, but, rather, as a political act” (Freire, 2000a, p. 117) that maintained access to educational opportunity and credentialing for otherwise marginalized Spanish-speakers.

Internal Dialectic Relationships

A significant component of *Juntos*’s programming generally, and the HSE program specifically, was volunteerism oriented around reciprocity and solidarity, such as neighborhood park cleanups, a community garden, meal prep for the local code blue shelter, Back to School party, Christmas posada, and more. Beyond the volunteerism coordinated by *Juntos*, students maintained a larger network that facilitated spontaneous and organic social organizing. Students coordinated mutual aid, including school pickups and at-home childcare to accommodate work and study, additional study sessions, making and dropping off meals, and rides to classes and to testing centers. These types of volunteerism rebel against the oppressive present (the lack of safe housing, safe places to gather, adequate food, and opportunities for celebrating shared values) while bringing about the desired future through an action-oriented hope. *Juntos* “accept[ed] neither a ‘well-behaved’ present nor a predetermined future—root[ed] itself in the dynamic present and [became] revolutionary” (Freire, 2000b, p. 84). Gadotti (2019) elaborates the point, “The world that surrounds us is an unfinished world and this implies the denunciation of its unjust and oppressive reality and, therefore, of a transformative critique and announcement of another reality” (p. 39). We testify that this future transformed world “is not something given to be received by people, but rather something to be created by them” (Freire, 1992, p. 39).

Students also demonstrated hope and solidarity in their volunteerism as student-instructors who lead cohorts of their peers as they studied HSE materials. Freirean pedagogy denounces education as the mere transfer of knowledge and instead sees it as re-made in new instances with new people, iteratively and collaboratively (Freire, 1992, 2000b). Recognizing our authority as program staff, and acknowledging our students’ agency, we engaged in an open dialectic: “The people must find themselves in the emerging leaders, and the latter must find themselves in the people” (Freire, 2000b, p. 163). Student-instructors chose from the workbook what they wanted to teach and were assigned to a corresponding cohort. Some student-instructors volunteered after completing the credentialing exam, others alternated attending a class as a student and leading a class as an instructor.

In between six-week blocks of class, we met over pizza to debrief the last block and plan for the next one. Alongside conversations about schedules and supplies, we also spoke often about critical consciousness, though we seldom used the phrase. We all agreed that teaching for the HSE exam included “the awakening of critical consciousness [that] leads

responsibilities. More specifically, the foundation’s approach is a social service delivery method that requires families to identify two adult leaders for the family unit to develop behavioral adjustment plans to complete accomplish goals to stabilize the family and prevent crisis (and the need for emergency economic support through public funds).

the way to the expression of social discontents precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation” (Weffert as cited in Freire, 1992, p. 36). That is, beyond the content in the workbook, we agreed to also teach about the larger policy landscape that informed test design, test administration, and the value of the credential. By acknowledging the historic reality of the HSE credential, we were able to have critical conversations about the credential’s utility. Freire (2000b) writes that educators and their students engage “not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators” (p. 69). Critical conversations were recreated again and again outside our meetings, moving into our respective classrooms, into individual coaching sessions, and into the car rides, and even mealtimes students organized with each other.

External Dialectic Relationships

For Freire (1992), educational practices are necessarily political. Education cannot be neutral; he writes, “Actually, there is no such thing” (p. 67). He continues, “My concern is not to deny the political and directive nature of education...but to accept that this is its nature...” (p. 68). Our decision at *Juntos* to engage openly and actively in critical conversations about HSE policy affirmed our political nature. Our commitment to ensuring continued mother tongue-based instruction, and therefore Spanish-language testing, similarly affirmed it. However, we understood our political nature within dialectic relationship between students, program staff, and the various organizations involved in HSE credentialing. In most instances, this meant pursuing collaborative opportunities with NJ DOE test centers in the region and throughout the state who could facilitate Spanish-language testing. In fact, through a temporary agreement between NJDOE, Bridgeway, and Allies in Health, an allied health training school in a nearby county, was able to offer the HiSET exam at Bridgeway’s office, while the local school district and CC finalized their transition.⁸

Freire’s open dialectic, however, also extends to competing or conflicting relationships. He (1992) writes, “My ethical duty, as one of the subjects, one of the agents of a practice that can never be neutral—the educational—is to express my respect for differences in ideas and positions. I must respect even positions opposed to my own, positions that I combat earnestly and with passion” (1992, p. 69). In the case of oppressive relationships, the dialectic takes a different form: “This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” (Freire, 2000b, p. 44). Freire explains that the hegemonic power of oppressors cannot fuel liberation, rather “the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both” (p. 44). By framing their decision to discontinue Spanish-language testing as one of operational capacity, CC objectified and effectually disenfranchised Spanish-language test-takers. It would not be CC on its own, then, who would restore access (in Freire’s language: “liberate”) for Spanish-language test-takers. It would be necessary to engage in the open dialectic relationship that Freire describes respectfully but not objectively or in opposition. Freire warns, “one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity. Neither can exist without the other, nor can they be dichotomized” (p. 50). He continues, “Only in this interdependence [between objectivity and subjectivity] is an authentic praxis possible,

⁸ NJ DOE approved Bridgeway’s office as a satellite site for Allies in Health’s already certified test center operation located 65 miles to the north of *Juntos*’s offices. However, this arrangement was made only temporarily for two reasons: (1) CC had not yet taken over the local school district’s test center operation, and (2) the HiSET test had not yet been computerized and paper-and-pencil test booklets could be transported by Allies in Health personnel to the satellite site.

without which it is impossible to resolve the oppressor-oppressed contradiction” (pp. 51-52).

As mentioned previously, CC cited a lack of qualified Spanish-speaking personnel as the major reason for their decision not to offer Spanish-language testing and further justified it by referring test-takers to alternate test centers in other parts of the state (more than 60 miles away). On these points, we agreed with Freire: “What would be intolerable would be simply pronouncing the democratic, antidiscriminatory discourse and maintaining a colonial practice” (Freire, 1992, p. 58). At *Juntos* we sought to reinsert subjectivity: the distance was a hardship. Whereas CC was only a fifteen-minute drive from *Juntos*, it would take an hour and a half to drive to the nearest Spanish-language test center. CC objectified personnel, reducing people to an operational component; we countered that more than a quarter of the county’s population was of Latin-American origin and that nearly a fifth of households were bilingual (US Census, 2014a, 2014b).

Meanwhile *Juntos* students and other Spanish-language test-takers repeatedly expressed their desire for local Spanish-language testing in calls to CC’s adult education department, to ETS, and to NJ DOE. In April 2015, after fifteen months of no local Spanish-language testing, CC finally hired a Spanish-speaking test proctor and nine *Juntos* students sat for the test. Immediately afterwards, all *Juntos*’s students, not only those who had tested, wrote heartfelt thank you cards to CC’s Adult Education Director in their native Spanish. The cards expressed what being able to take the test in Spanish meant to the students; they enumerated the ways in which the English-only decision had blocked them from accomplishing their goals. The thank you cards also worked to humanize students to a bureaucracy that would have otherwise continued to view them as operational objects for which they did not have the capacity to engage. After that initial test, CC began offering the HSE exam regularly alongside English language testing. From April to December 2015, 22 students from *Juntos*’s HSE program sat for the exam; all eventually acquired their HSE credential.

Implications for Educators

In justifying their promotion of the Common Core College and Career Readiness Standards, its organizers asserted that the standards had been developed through “research- and evidence-based” methods (About the Common Core Standards, 2021, para 6). However, “It is sometimes the case that policy has nothing to do with research. Instead, policymakers, whether explicitly or not, are making an argument about what is valuable and what should occupy people’s attention” (Bomer & Maloch, 2011, p. 38). In the case of Common Core, the subsequent changes to HSE testing, and reports and commentaries of these changes, the shallow standard of readiness for (near-term or eventual) workforce participation was once again asserted as education’s main purpose. Freire offers a more complex, dialectal view of education: “In a certain moment it becomes true that one no longer studies in order to work nor does one work in order to study; one studies in the process of working. There comes about, thus, a true unity between practice and theory” (Freire, 2000a, p. 124). In this section, I provide a brief discussion of implications for educators based on the case presented in this paper. I include myself in this discussion because I am foremost an educator, even as I work as an organizer and nonprofit professional.

Firstly, I have argued in this paper, borrowing from Valverde (2011), that policies are ultimately implemented locally through dialectic relationships between actors. Educators seeking to transform the world must acknowledge the dialectic between the local, the

national, and even the global. It is not only possible but imperative that we simultaneously challenge the larger oppressive structures that form the basis of our present society and begin to address immediate circumstances through present, local action. Speaking on work to address structural changes, Freire (2000a) writes, “This should not, of course, be taken to mean that literacy activities cannot begin until after the radical transformation of the system inherited from the colonizers has taken place” (p. 120). Rather, praxis developed in the local environment can “open perspectives for an analysis of national (and regional) problems” (Freire as cited in Freire, 1992, p. 78). In the case of *Juntos*, in our critical conversations with our students and in our negotiations with other organizations and state agencies, we consistently engaged in multi-level analysis of policy and policy implementation even as we designed and operated our HSE test prep program.

Secondly, “that in order for us to create something, we need to start creating” (Horton & Freire, 1992, p. 56). That is to say, program design and implementation do not occur as discrete processes with extended preparation and planning periods. Rather, design and implementation occur concurrently, dialectically, and iteratively. Freire (2000a) recounts that instead of pre-designing a program, his team from the World Council of Churches and the Institute for Cultural Action waited to meet with the team at the Commission on Education in Guinea-Bissau. At *Juntos*, despite the HSE’s focus on test preparation, as staff we waited until students joined the program to elaborate our design:

From the beginning, we rejected the hypothesis of a purely mechanistic literacy program and considered the problem of teaching adults how to read in relation to the awakening of their consciousness... We wanted...a program with men and women as its Subjects rather than as patient recipients, a program which itself would be an act of creation, capable of releasing other creative acts. (p. 81)

At *Juntos*, without knowing what we would create over time, we started creating a program to engage the Spanish-speaking community in the county. This does not mean we were unprepared. With Freirean principles guiding our decision making, we had already assembled Spanish-language materials related to test topics. However, we remained flexible about who would teach and how they would teach. When we engaged student-instructors, we found “It would be through knowing and reknowing together that we would begin to learn and to teach together also” (Freire, 2000a, p. 139). That is, it was with, and not before, our students joined us that we understood what our program would become. Educators should prepare thoughtfully and critically, but also remember that “no one walks without learning to walk—without learning to walk by walking” (Freire, 1992, p. 145).

Finally, our engagement in dialectic relationships facilitates our ability to exist in ambiguity, to respond to changing circumstances, and to manage complex relationships with other players who may not share our goals. Educators should consider their existing and potential dialectic relationships, rather than focusing on oppositional relationships. The changes to HSE to align to College and Career Readiness required us to develop new teaching materials, but our dynamic relationships with students and student-instructors allowed the program to adapt flexibly to student needs. Although the test center recertification process created ambiguity about the language of test completion, ongoing conversations with NJ DOE, ETS, and Allies in Health, allowed us to install a temporary test center at Bridgeway’s office. By engaging CC both before and after their certification, that is, both before and after decisions about test center operations were made, we were able to restore Spanish-language testing in the county. Subjectivity allows open dialectic relationships to form, whether we enter as educators, as students, as program managers,

or as policy makers. Objectification reduces these to mechanistic, immutable operators that prohibit transformation. Educators should be wary of oppositional relationships and seek opportunities for redefining the nature of relationships. This is an iterative process: “Education that supports reflection and action, then, is constantly remade in praxis. In order to be, it must become...[it] is revolutionary futurity. Hence it is prophetic (and, as such, hopeful)” (Freire, 2000a, p. 84).

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