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## The Unpaid Piper Calls the Tune: Popular Education in the Face of Bureaucracy

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# **The Unpaid Piper Calls the Tune: Popular Education in the Face of Bureaucracy**

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**Abstract:** *Reflecting on possibilities for realizing social change through popular education, this study examines the promise and reality of Paulo Freire's legacy in the context of an urban literacy center for Latino immigrants.*

## **Background**

In 1984, I completed an action research project that traced the evolution over a nine-year period of a “grass roots” literacy initiative modeled after the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil and Chile. The project, supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, focused on a struggle between a multi-campus community college system and a local community wanting to assume responsibility for its own adult education. The issue underlying this struggle was community-control versus efficiency in a highly centralized and bureaucratically administered, citywide adult education system.

The project grew out of mounting tension between Centro Latino, an urban center for literacy and basic education, and its principal fiscal agent, the City Colleges of Chicago. Students, teachers, and other community leaders sought to better understand the roots of their discontent and deep felt frustration. They had achieved success in meeting the educational standards of a state-sponsored bureaucracy while at the same time failed to achieve the emancipatory goals of their Freire-inspired program. Having worked closely with the community in creating this center, I was invited to facilitate focus groups and conduct group and individual interviews over a period of fourteen months. The research redounded into action as the community discovered the conflict at the core of their relationship with their financial sponsor. Local emancipatory goals—dealing with unemployment, gentrification, inadequate housing, and poverty—were inconsistent with the narrow, competency-based focus of the City Colleges.

This earlier research project ended with the community center proclaiming its independence at a cost of more than \$250,000 in annual funding. But the story did not end there. In May 1998 Centro Latino celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. One of more than fifty Freirean programs established in the United States during the 1970s, this center is one of the few remaining as an independent, “grass roots” center for popular education.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This current inquiry took up the earlier project where it left off, looking at the same organization through the eyes of students, teachers, and community, seeking to determine whether the program's emancipatory aims have been realized now that the City Colleges no longer calls the tune. The broader implication of this study has been to reveal those factors that militate against our nation's efforts, now chiefly invested in systems of schooling, to eradicate illiteracy and promote basic education among adults.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Both the original and this recent inquiry are grounded in the conceptual framework of Paulo Freire's work, beginning with his exposure to U.S. educators in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) until the time of his death in 1997. In the early '70s, while Freire was slowly emerging within the academic world as a scholar, his writings circulated widely among “grass roots” educators, especially in the Latino communities of New York, Boston, Chicago, and cities in southern California. Even after his death, Freire continues to inspire educator/activists who plan their political-pedagogical

strategies in the belief that “to change things is difficult but possible” (Freire, 1998).

Popular education is linked with productive social movements that redress the social inequities of race, gender and class (Lovett, Clarke, & Kilmurray, 1983; O’Sullivan, 1993). A national movement for civil rights, the organization of residents in public housing to take over management of their homes, the mobilization of parents for school reform, a “grass-roots” neighborhood group combating gentrification—each of these and hundreds more serve as contexts for the development of popular education (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). On the other hand, educational professionals, employed within specialized, self-defined neutral, educational institutions, are more likely to promote the functional goals of the institution and thus, however well intentioned, maintain the status quo.

In popular education learners organize their own learning around local agendas. When people organize learning on their own behalf they seek to improve the conditions of their lives. They “name enemies” (Newman, 1994) and encourage a movement from learning to action (Horton, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990). The pedagogy they nurture is imbued with the passion to “make a difference” not only in their own positions of advantage within society, but in society itself (Simon, 1992). This is the framework within which Centro Latino was conceived, and the framework in which this research views its programs.

### **Research Design**

This study, begun in January 1999, was initiated as part of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration at Centro Latino. I was again invited to organize an action research project that would examine the sustainability of popular education in the face of growing dominance by large educational institutions and organizations in the practice of adult education. Toward that end, I organized focus groups, each comprising a combination of the center’s various stakeholders. These groups continued to meet monthly. In addition, interviews (and re-interviews) were conducted – both individual and small group – with eight representatives of the broader educational, political, and philanthropic communities, including persons who have provided grants to the center. Transcripts of

these interviews were summarized and made available to the focus groups.

The focus groups allowed reflections on the center’s work (popular education) and its emancipatory goals to take shape as they would in the program itself – that is, through critical discourse. As focal points converged thematically both within and between groups, these points become provisional conclusions to be further tested in subsequent meetings. The process involved participants in both the generation of data<sup>1</sup> and in its analysis with a view to determining immediate and long-term strategies for action.

In addition to these interactive and participatory modes of inquiry, I became a participant-observer in six classes and also reviewed available documentation, including proposals, reports to funders, and publications of student writing.

### **Emerging Themes**

#### *Rebuilding the Barrio*

Giroux’s construction of “right-wing nationalism” sheds light on the disorientation, destabilization, and alienation experienced by immigrants from Latin America. Giroux describes this as “the project of defining national identity through an appeal to a common culture that displaces any notion of national identity based upon a pluralized notion of culture with its multiple literacies, identities, and histories and erases histories of oppression and struggle for the working class and minorities.” (2000, p. 69) Mainstream literacy programs continue to emphasize “Americanization” (without using the term) and adaptation to the norms and rituals of an assumed national culture. By remaining neutral in relation to cultural issues, mainstream programs background the normative framework of their literacy curriculum and perpetuate the illusion of national homogeneity. Freire’s challenge was to break this cycle of seeing ourselves through another’s eyes and to re-awaken in learners their right and ability to “make culture.”

Centro Latino is not simply an educational program; it is a center of culture that reflects the multiple cultures of its learners. There are frequent potluck suppers, dances, and holiday celebrations of Puerto Rico, Mexico, Guatemala, and every nation of the community, providing opportunities for fami-

lies and friends to strengthen community ties across ethnic borders. On a daily basis, coffee and shared food provide students with an informal and relaxed environment for conversation about their personal and social lives. Many people get to know and trust their neighbors. "It's changed my life," Marta noted. "I have friends I never knew before, people in the next building I never talked to."

The convivial atmosphere of the center, reflecting the interlocking cultures of Latin America with its multiplicity of struggles and political options, resonates with many voices. For the adults who participate in classes, the journey to the New World begins from their home, learning builds with understanding the strengths and oppressions of the *barrio*.

### *The Politics of Assimilation*

The strength of Centro Latino lies in its Freirean understanding of literacy as only peripherally about reading words; at its core it is about reading the world. Beginning in the '70s, when there was little or no support for Spanish language literacy in the United States, the center's staff realized many of their adult learners were not only acquiring a new language, but also learning to read for the first time. This double handicap made learning torturous for adult immigrants enrolling at the center.

The center pioneered Spanish literacy classes as a first step to learning English. These classes, the value of which is now widely appreciated, build on the native language strengths of the learners, reaffirming prior knowledge and culture. Together with the fiestas and other cultural celebrations, acquiring Spanish language literacy further underscored the significance of each learner's heritage.

There is a critical edge to this reaffirmation of culture, juxtaposing Latin American roots with day-to-day experience in the U.S. "I thought I was getting away from poverty," admitted a young woman from Mexico, "but the poverty came with me. Sometimes it is harder here because we are surrounded by so much riches." Another Mexican day laborer noted how he came to find work in Chicago, but found "all the jobs have gone to Mexico."

While the center's staff are divided in their understanding of appropriate strategies for introducing immigrants to the culture of work in the U.S. (see

below), through cultivation of partnerships with small and mid-sized corporations that hire Spanish-speakers, there is little question that employment is the ultimate goal of the program. Unfortunately, there is little available hard data on the success of the program in this regard.

### *Giving Voice*

Freirean pedagogy dissolves the borders between teachers and learners. Students at the center share what they know with their peers and with the teacher. There is initial resistance to this blurring of the teacher's authority. "I felt I was being called out all the time," complained one student. "I didn't think what I knew was important, but then I saw others respected what I said – the teacher too!" Learners in several classes read one another's journals and worked collectively to strengthen and clarify the writing.

Despite collaboration, however, a teacher's voice is still privileged in most classrooms. Learners take notes only when the teacher speaks, reflecting an ingrained assumption that only professorial utterances impart important information. Other teachers counter this privilege, remaining silent and allowing all discourse to come from the students. This leads to a problem frequently encountered in popular education – what some have termed the "tyranny of structurelessness." Sometimes such structureless classes are bogged down in trivia, while a teacher waits for cues from the students; at other times classes that are going well take a sudden turn because of a learner initiated digression.

The classes at Centro Latino use no text books, emphasizing instead the writings of learners who have produced and published a variety of thematic anthologies, many focusing on local issues – housing, schools, jobs. These "texts" become readers for subsequent learners, who then go on to produce their own texts. Over time, funding sources have influenced the selection of these themes. For example, the Illinois Family Literacy Initiative funds publication of writings on family values, thus moving the focus of attention to less political concerns. In subtle ways funding, even in a scaled back Centro Latino, continues to shape the agenda.

## **Instrument of Social Change?**

### *Structural Barriers*

The center is rooted in the work of Paulo Freire for whom education was a means to transforming society, not merely imparting knowledge and information. The most critical challenge to this commitment at Centro Latino is the wide range of interpretations of the goals and mission of the organization among staff. Some have a functionalist approach, helping immigrants adjust to the language and culture of a new society. One five-year teaching veteran stated, "We [Latinos] don't know how to fit in, we don't know how to act in a way people here respect."

While some staff members have a transformative approach consistent with Freire, most take a more liberal view of their work. They focus on attitudes rather than structures, the individual rather than the group, on personal growth rather than social and political transformation (Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, & Thomas, 1991). The evident success of Centro Latino, its longevity and reputation among educators and community members alike, is wholly consistent with this liberal model of schooling. There is little evidence that the center or its alumni, despite their commitments, have contributed significantly to changes in the social or political conditions of day-to-day life in Chicago. A few graduates are known to have achieved success in their personal careers—one even became an alderman, of questionable value to the community. It should be added that little has been done to keep track of alumni, so the achievements of graduates might well be greater than is known.

But as for the Freirean goal of social change, there are easily identified structural barriers that keep Centro Latino from succeeding. The most obvious of these is funding. The lion's share of funding is locked into providing ESL and literacy education. Staff must show measurable outcomes in these areas, siphoning time from organizing efforts around community issues. "How do you recruit adults into an English class," asked one teacher, "and then use the class to promote generative themes or a community issue?"

Another structural barrier is the schooling model which many popular education centers adopt. Schools recruit individuals, one by one, each with his or her own agenda and interests. In contrast, social action organizations are built on the common agenda

and interests of groups. A teacher who taught at the center during the '70s observed that "students here have all kinds of agendas, and the only thing that you're likely to get them together on is the agenda of the school itself. That's what happened in the early years when Centro Latino was under attack [by the City Colleges]. Then there was social action." It is rare that a chance group of individuals will discover common cause in classroom discussion worth the investment of time and energy for social action, even when discussion is focused on community issues. This is true especially when the individuals have already been marginalized by underemployment and isolated by language.

### *Competing Purposes: Learning a Language vs. Organizing*

While Centro Latino's commitment to the community is widely known and respected, most adults enrolling in classes come for individual, not social reasons. Most are monolingual Spanish speakers and are frustrated in their search for employment. Miguel had been in Chicago for two years working sporadically as a bus boy, mostly for meager tips, but never for longer than two weeks at a time. "I'd be out of there first time somebody tried to get me to do something I didn't understand," he said. "So I went to Centro Latino and applied."

Most center staff are committed to grounding language acquisition in reflection on the day-to-day realities of the neighborhood. The commitment of these teachers is evident to learners – a commitment that is consistent with learner goals, even though tangentially. One learner noted, "What I see is that the teachers care what happens to us, not just jobs, but the whole community. I don't see that in other schools."

The fact that most adults who go to Centro Latino are struggling to learn English militates against their involvement in complex and meaningful discussions of social change issues. Efforts at dialogue are slow and frustrating, especially when change must be negotiated with people whose only language is English. In contrast with Freire, who worked with people in their native language, one teacher expressed her frustration, "This is a very slow process. So much of it is learning words, and trying to keep a thread of conversation going at the same

time you are learning the words... well, it's just very slow."

Despite this, many participants and teachers expressed frustration at the inconsistent attendance by students, due in part to the pressures of poverty, the lack of childcare, and acquiescence to the erratic demands of employers and service providers, especially case workers. But other activities of the center – meetings, assemblies, and field trips –also made competing demands on student time, resulting in inconsistent participation in class and a consequent disruption of the flow and continuity of lessons.

### Conclusions and Implications

Several themes emerged from the research:

- The development of a liberatory praxis continues to be stifled by public finance and the school-based models which public funding requires. Conditions required for local control render such programs marginal in relation to well and usually publicly funded educational organizations that demand standardization and efficiency.
- Teachers, however well intentioned, who lack grounding in local struggles to improve social conditions flounder in their attempts to promote liberatory goals.
- Popular education efforts in the United States suffer from the absence of social vision, exacerbated by a lack of viable social movements for change.

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<sup>1</sup> Data in this instance is, of course, an articulation of the prior analysis of participants in the study. Their analysis thus becomes "data" in the sense that it can be reflected upon and subjected to further collective analysis.