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You Cannot Be a Teacher

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Dedication: To Lisa—Thank you for believing in me.

Charlemagne is known to have said: “To speak another language is to possess another soul” (as cited by Shwayder, 2010, para. 2). “You cannot be a teacher,” she said with sharpness in her voice. “Little children will never understand you,” she continued, going on and on, explaining all the possible reasons why I could not be a teacher in a Kindergarten classroom. I stood there voiceless, helpless, and surprised. I did not answer, as answers did not come through my suddenly closed-up throat. All I could do was not cry. It took a lot of strength to pull myself together after hearing how inadequate my English and my accent were for young learners. It took even more strength to pull myself together after hearing that I should not be an educator.

“I cannot be a teacher? I am a teacher!” I wanted to scream. I completed my degree in multidisciplinary studies in elementary education here in the United States, and I was certified to teach. Nevertheless, my license, my school, and my high marks on the teacher evaluation rubrics did not matter. What mattered was that I did not fit the norms and expectations of a typical American teacher.

Most people, at least once in their lives, have been told something about themselves which they later considered changing to better fit in. Maybe they asked one too many times and discovered that indeed, they needed to lose or gain 5 pounds, that pink was not their best color, or that their shirt was in fact ugly. However, imagine being told that a characteristic that could not be changed was hindering one’s success and making others uncomfortable. There I stood,

in the empty hallway, after hearing my dream would not be a reality. I began making my way out of the school. I was destroyed.

Now, after many years have passed, I ask: “Who is a typical American teacher?” “Why was I not fitting the norm?” “And what was so *other* about me that I did not obtain the teaching position in that elementary school and was told to quit a career in education?” Now, I am no longer voiceless, and I can pose questions: “What did happen to me?” “Was it a form of discrimination?” “Do we learn and teach in multicultural environments of equality?”

I decided to pursue a PhD in exceptional learning, and this is where I redefined what should be seen as typical; typical American language and typical American culture. Through my journey as a doctoral student, and through my postdoctoral work, I learned that what happened to me was not a random act of injustice and discrimination but a part of a bigger push from the status quo to remain untouched. What happened to me was an example of a broken and unjust system proclaiming its values and doctrines to maintain the linguistic and cultural norms of those in power.

Thus, let me analyze what occurred and why it occurred. Simply stated, I was refused a job.

According to U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2021), “National origin discrimination involves treating people (applicants or employees) unfavorably because they are from a particular country or part of the world, because of ethnicity or accent, or because they appear to be of a certain ethnic background.”

Nevertheless, not only was I not given the position, but I also was told to choose a different career path. Hence, I wonder, was I perhaps a threat to the interviewing

principal, or was I seen as a potential threat to her students? My answer is *yes*. I was a danger as *the other* because I was *the other*. I was perceived as the one not belonging, the one communicating in a different language. Many times, poststructural qualitative research questions the value of any type of communication and emphasizes the miscommunication happening within the same language. That is why, even if I consider that English and especially my accent were factors in not hiring me, the real issue was much bigger and went beyond communication.

My doctoral program and postdoctoral work introduced me to examples of schooling and curriculum that are constructed and addressed to certain groups and populations while excluding others. I was outside the norm for that particular school, and that was the reason I needed to be removed, rejected, and turned down. My accent marked me as not belonging to the English native speaking group, and I was a potential threat, hazard, and intruder into a community, the alien coming from a diverse, foreign background. I was seen as all of these things because there was the underlying concern that I might not share the common values of the majority. Thus, my accent exposed me, and I was seen as *the other*, possibly carrying another culture, other beliefs, other morals, other values, or another religion. If as McLaren (2003) stated, “Knowledge is a social construct” (p. 196), then I also represented to the interviewing principal another knowledge, and the inability to present the status quo curriculum in the indoctrinating manner to which it was designed.

Fiske stated, “Knowledge is never neutral” (as cited in Apple, 2014, p. 45), and Apple (2014) deepened this concept in his discussion about the *official knowledge* taught in schools, emphasizing that what was presented as education and educational

was in fact constructed by those in power with political, economic, and social benefits at stake. I was seen as an outsider, and I was not an educator who could teach the official knowledge representative of Anglo-American culture and values of the neoliberal time.

My doctoral and postdoctoral work made me redefine what happened that day. I can see my story through the lens of critical pedagogy. I have learned that schools and classrooms have to be welcoming and inclusive to all, and that educators and administrators have a duty to be aware, reflective, and proactive about the factors that shape learning for many students, such as hiring decisions. I am confident now that differences in language, culture, and national origin construct, not deconstruct societies. I define myself as a teacher who hopes to work towards equity in classrooms.

There I was, that day, after the interview: empty hallway, making my way out of the school.

I was destroyed because I did not get a job, and I left with a presumption that few schools would hire me. I had to find another path. I love my story now because it redefined me as an educator and as a scholar. My experience sent me on an adventure in graduate school and beyond, and it gave me the opportunity to explore exemplars of advocacy, which I desire to follow. As Anzaldúa (1999) wrote, “Attacks on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. *El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arranco la lengua*. Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (p. 54).

It was important that my readers learn a little bit about me before I introduced myself and that they get to know one of the stories that brought me here and made me, me. Now, I know who I am. As all people do, I possess many identities. To list a few: I am Polish. I am American. I am a woman, a

mom, and a dreamer who dares to believe that equity in education is possible. My name is Dorota, and I am a teacher.

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