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Abstract - The debate over what content and methods should compose the mathematics education of children has been an omnipresent contested discourse in the mathematics education terrain. In today's schooling regimes, the push for accountability and the movement towards a culturally-coded, standards-based curriculum seem to cripple every earnest attempt at rejuvenation and redemption of democratic access to educational opportunities and resources for learners. The abysmal inequalities we witness in schools and societies worldwide have been complicit in creating a rather apocalyptic vision of the future of education as a practice of engagement and empowerment. With a longstanding history that imbibed racial demarcation and reductionist positioning, the quest for liberation through transformative education endeavors appears as if a figment of pure imagination. In the face of intensified challenges that transcend national geographic boundaries, we seek refuge and inspiration by revisiting the works of crucial thinkers such as bell hooks who reminds us of the ultimate goal of education, viz. praxis of humanization and liberation.

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Towards an Engaged Pedagogy: bell hooks Manifesto and the Teaching and Learning of Mathematics

Iman C. Chahine

Abstract - The debate over what content and methods should compose the mathematics education of children has been an omnipresent contested discourse in the mathematics education terrain. In today's schooling regimes, the push for accountability and the movement towards a *culturally-coded,* standards based curriculum seem to cripple every earnest attempt at rejuvenation and redemption of democratic access to educational opportunities and resources for learners. The abysmal inequalities we witness in schools and societies worldwide have been complicit in creating a rather apocalyptic vision of the future of education as a practice of engagement and empowerment. With a longstanding history that imbibed racial demarcation and reductionist positioning, the quest for liberation through transformative education endeavors appears as if a figment of pure imagination. In the face of intensified challenges that transcend national geographic boundaries, we seek refuge and inspiration by revisiting the works of crucial thinkers such as bell hooks who reminds us of the ultimate goal of education, viz. praxis of humanization and liberation.

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the ideas set forth by bell hooks in her book *Teaching to Transgress* and to further explore its relevance to the teaching and learning of mathematics. Additionally, we will expound on basic issues that reflect her pedagogy including the role of the mathematics teacher and how she envisions the classroom setup. Furthermore, we will relate hooks' work in this book to other discourses in critical theory as well as propose potential impact on our evolving perspectives in critical pedagogy.

I. Introduction/Context: Who is bell hooks?

bell hooks is a teacher, a theorist, an activist, a cultural critic. She is an African American woman who was born Gloria Watkins in 1952 in Kentucky. She lived through the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and experienced firsthand the upheavals following the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education. The early part of hooks' educational journey took her from a childhood in a segregated Southern community, to a high school experience dominated by the conundrums of court-ordered integration, or desegregation, to the elite college environment of Stanford University.

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hooks' work was foreshadowed as far back as when she was in elementary school. In the Introduction to her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, she states, "Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers—black folks who used our 'minds'. We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization" (p. 2). Additionally, her later educational experiences in mostly-white institutions, structured to reinforce dominant paradigms, offered no space for critical resistance and revolution. As a theorist and teacher, hooks was motivated to explore feminist pedagogies and soon found out that she occupied a rather uncomfortable space which neither feminists nor African American liberatory theorists wanted to embrace. Undaunted, bell hooks has continued a brave struggle to craft a revolutionary pedagogy that authentically addresses issues of race, class, and gender.

II. Engaged Pedagogy

Inspired by the ideas of Freire and Buddhist philosophy, hooks proposes a pedagogy toward freedom, self-actualization, and students'/teachers' empowerment. This she calls "engaged pedagogy". hooks' *engaged pedagogy* is one that stands in opposition to that perpetrated by the dominant culture. Freire refers to this dominant system as "the banking system of education" where "memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later date" following set agendas (hooks, 1994:5,7). Such a system dictates an atmosphere of boredom, disinterest and apathy. As a result, boundaries are created, which neither students nor teachers are allowed to transgress. In this context, only the teacher is responsible for classroom dynamics and is held accountable to the larger institutional structures.

hooks envisions an *engaged pedagogy* as more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. She asserts that *engaged pedagogy* emphasizes wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit. Equivalently, students should be seen as whole

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human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge. Furthermore, sharing confessional narratives in academic discussions of facts or more abstract constructs is a very helpful approach employed in *engaged pedagogy*. It allows students to claim a mathematical knowledge base from which to speak and fosters critical thinking as well. It shows how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material. But hooks stresses the fact that both the engaged teacher and her students should be willing to share their stories and not the students alone. In the practice of *engaged pedagogy*, both the teacher and the students must be able to critically listen and hear one another respectfully.

The learning process becomes then one that engages everyone. This way the privileged voice of authority will be deconstructed by collective critical practice. Emphasizing the place of the experience of oppression, which can be either of victimization or of resistance, in the learning process, hooks argues that experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know what we know.

III. The Mathematics Classroom

Needless to say, an engaged mathematics classroom should be one in which freedom is practiced, one that enables and enhances our capacity to be "free". The body should be moved as the mind moves. For hooks learning is most powerful when it liberates. The students should evolve as independent critical thinkers. In this regard, the mathematics classroom should be an exciting place, where instituted boundaries are transgressed. The setup is flexible and noncom-ventional. For example, students and teachers sit in circles where they can see each other. This will help make sustained conversation among students and between students and teacher possible. Agendas are flexible to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction for the purpose of deeper and more engaged learning and problem solving. Students have to be seen in their particularities as individuals and collectively interacting with each other.

hooks considers the classroom as a place for joy as well as serious learning. She insistently shifts the focus from a traditional perspective of a classroom as a place where content knowledge is being delivered to an environment where issues are consciously and critically challenged and debated. hooks, also, persistently highlights the necessity for creating a classroom environment in which students and teachers act responsibly and wisely toward the benefit of collective commune and where knowledge is negotiated and constructed through the praxis of action and reflection.

On another perspective, hooks delineates a vision of the classroom as a common ground where teachers meet to learn and exchange these learning experiences fully. For hooks, learning in the classroom extends beyond learning a content knowledge to a process of deliberately nurturing affective inclinations, emotions, and passions that surface out during intense dialogues. The classroom that hooks advocates is that which challenges patriarchy and transcends the bourgeois biases of class, color, and gender and thus moves toward humanization of individuals equally and collectively. In such a classroom, the monocultural mathematics instruction will be transformed into more inquiry-based exploratory experiences delineating trajectories of ethnic growth, hereof, asserting a mentality of equity and opening up spaces for participation and inclusiveness.

Considering the classroom as the "most radical space for possibility", hooks challenges the idea of a "safe harmonious" classroom and calls for trans-forming it into a communal "holistic model of learning" empowering students as well as teachers toward the pursuit of truth. She insistently invites teachers to create free, flexible and democratic spaces encouraging all students to face their fears and have a "voice" in their own learning. Hence the classroom is the space where freedom of speech and daring ideas emerge and are nurtured by dialogue among students and between students and the teacher. hooks explains that students' diverse experiences, religion, language and culture makes it fundamental for them to have a voice in the classroom. Such perspective encourages a rather humanistic aspect of mathematics as the creative expressions of human thought across cultures and civilizations.

hooks views excitement as necessary to stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement. Furthermore, she asserts that excitement in the classroom does not mean that there should be no reciprocity and respect. In order to create excitement in the classroom, the engaged teacher would need to build classroom communities where everyone will show interest in one another, in hearing each others' voices. More importantly, in an engaged classroom, everyone influences the classroom dynamic, everyone contributes and their contributions are resources which if used constructively, enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community. Both the teacher and the student will need to see the classroom always as a communal place so that the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community can be enhanced.

IV. The Role of the Teacher

In her outcry for renewal and rejuvenation in teaching practices, hooks insists that every engaged teacher must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes his/her own well-being. She

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should be seen to help herself first so that she can in turn heal her students by bringing about enlightenment. She will keep attending classes and will not miss any opportunity to affirm her students' quest for self-actualization. By the same token, students in an engaged mathematics classroom should be able to expect that the mathematical knowledge received in class will enrich and enhance their thinking it will address the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences. They should assume responsibility for their choices of what knowledge they want to have and should be able to discuss these choices freely with their teacher. This interchange of ideas means that the teacher's voice should not be the only account of what happens in the class; students' expressions and thoughts should be valued. In doing so, both the teacher and the students grow and are empowered by the process. In addition, the engaged teacher's voice must never be fixed and absolute but according to hooks, should always evolve in dialogue with a world beyond itself.

In an engaged mathematics classroom, the goal of the teacher is not merely to share information and content knowledge but to contribute to the intellectual and spiritual growth of the students. The teacher must teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of the students. In this respect, she/he provides the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin, one in which both the teacher and the students are active participants, not passive consumers. Everyone has to claim knowledge as a field in which we all labor in order to be able to change the world.

hooks explains that teachers should be wholly present in mind, body, and spirit while encouraging students to take risks. She further maintains that students bring to the classroom a unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing which should not be ignored. According to hooks, this complexity of experience can rarely be voiced and named from a distance.

Moreover, teachers should ensure that order is maintained in the classroom while allowing for useful interruptions and digressions. An engaged teacher makes sure that the class does not perpetrate class biases, elitism and other forms of domination. It is her responsibility to address tension in class. Only when students share experiences in conjunction with academic subject matter will they remember each other. bell hooks (1994) envisions the role of the teacher as that of a facilitator, celebrating education as the practice of freedom and urging students, through dialogue, to go beyond boundaries toward self actualization and transformation. Capitalizing on students' experiences as valuable resources for building mathematical instruction, she calls for open, active engagement of students in the learning process. Highly inspired by Freire's work, hooks fiercely challenged the "banking system" of education and perceived teachers as "healers" concerned with the well-being of their students both spiritually and mentally.

In proposing her transgressive, *engaged pedagogy*, hooks addresses students' resistance to liberation in the classrooms and capitalizeson the role of teachers as models daringly sharing their experiences with students and thus paving the way for free, mature dialogue. Furthermore, hooks emphasizes the importance of having students develop a "voice" in their writings as well as in arguments juxtaposed in the classroom. More interestingly, hooks explains that it is the responsibility of the teacher to encourage those communication skills including listening and speaking by enacting those same skills in his/her classroom. She calls upon teachers to respect and value students' voices and to openly and critically reflect on their ideas so that they'll practice the same discipline with their colleagues.

Perhaps one of the underlying messages that hooks addresses in her pedagogy of freedom and transgression is the idea of a teacher as a learner. The teacher is no longer the sole possessor of knowledge, but rather a catalyst that helps establish an atmosphere where students' thoughts and critical ideas continue to flow fervently and incessantly.

Inherent in the idea of the teacher as a learner is the challenge that hooks sets forth against the routine use of daily, laborious lesson plans. She explains that the fear of not covering enough material is what makes teachers restricted as to what to offer in their teaching. However, she commends that teachers follow "the mood of the class" in deciding how and what to do next.

Engaged pedagogyand revolutionary practice: Relating bell hooks to other critical pedagogues

Bell hooks' *engaged pedagogy* is one approach to critical pedagogy and revolutionary practice. The ideas embraced in the book, *Teaching to Transgress* resonate with readings in Grande, and of course, Freire. Recognizing the political nature of teaching and learning, hooks' engaged pedagogy requires the interrogation of culture, oppression, and committed action.

hooks resonates strongly with Grande (2004) with regard to what Grande calls "whitestream feminism." As women of color, both hooks and Grande have experienced being marginalized by white feminists and also being questioned/marginalized by members of their respective cultural community-Native Americans for Grande and African Americans for hooks. While both hooks and Grande seek common ground with critical feminists who are willing to honestly engage issues of race and culture, both have encountered others who cannot or will not attend to previously marginalized voices and viewpoints. In the chapter entitled *Holding*

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My Sister's Hand, hooks explicitly reaches out to white feminists, explicating the historical precedents that complicate relationships between black women and white women, and offering a vision for reconciliation and solidarity.

hooks acknowledges Paulo Freire as one of her most influential teachers. Early in life, hooks came to the knowledge that education was fundamental to liberation. This is a central theme of Freire's work, and provided an almost instant spark of connection when hooks first encountered Freire's writings. Because of the close affinity between hooks' work and that of Freire, many parallels exist between hooks' pedagogy as described in *Teaching to Transgress* and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks responds to Freire and relates his ideas to the experiences and situations that are central to her work-feminist theory and practice, and critical consciousness with respect to race, class, and their respective "isms." The title *Teaching to Transgress* refers to transgressing the boundaries that these concepts have placed on theory, classroom discourse, teaching, and learning.

Like Freire, hooks is passionately committed to praxis, the active manifestation of learning as social justice oriented change in the world. She enthusiastically writes about the intertwined relationships of learning and empowerment. hooks also extends Freire's work by exploring the importance of love and joy in learning, even in classroom environments.

hooks writes for a wide and varied audience. While she explicitly addresses critical theorists, she also writes for more of a lay audience than do many critical theorists. The use of language itself contains many questions addressed by critical pedagogues and theorists; how can one utilize the "tools of the oppressor" in non-oppressive or at least less oppressive ways? By consciously writing with a voice that is conversational and that tends toward simple words, hooks explicitly disrupts conventions by carefully explicating her densely textured texts as she decenters her language and opens new spaces for critical inquiry. While intensely personal in delineating her theory, hooks explicitly connects her personal story to her critical theorizing. She carries this approach forward with her students; for hooks, this becomes her way for effectively interweaving the lived experience of marginalized people, the development of critical consciousness in teacher and student, and the connection of teaching and learning to committed action.

V. Concluding Thoughts

Bell hooks is a sister-in-spirit and a teacher for us. Her pedagogy is grounded in a deep knowledge of the lived experiences of oppressed and marginalized people. hooks sees transformation as essential to the project of being human and has developed a pedagogy that supports this in personal and societal realms. Her pedagogy radiates hope and love, envisioning learning communities in which people are capable of transformation.

In an era of "accountability" and isolation, mathematics teachers more than ever need support and motivation to strive toward transgression, change, and self-actualization. In the cause of humanization and liberation, an engaged pedagogy calls for radically revolutionizing space, content, and approaches to mathematics education (Chahine, 2013). As an organic model of communal learning and mathematics-identity building, an engaged pedagogy emphasizes the role of the classroom as free, flexible and democratic space for reconfiguring history empowering students as well as teachers toward the pursuit of truth. In such a space, the privileged voice of authority is deconstructed by collective critical practice and where students are seen as whole human beings with complex lives and diverse experiences, sharing their daring voices in continuous dialogue among each other and with the teacher.

Perhaps the hope that hooks talks about in her *engaged pedagogy* can inspire and empower us as mathematics educators to transgress boundaries and rediscover the joy and excitement inherent in the teaching and learning of mathematics. Reading hooks, we feel ourselves opening up to making possibilities real, saying, "yes, we can do this!"

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