**Title: Sexual Healing: Confronting Disembodiment in Public Schooling**

Ali-Khan, C., and **White, J.W**. (2020). Confronting disembodiment in public schooling. In Kress, T., C. Emdin, & B. Lake (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy for healing: A soul revival of teaching and learning.* Bloomsbury Publishers.

Abstract: Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing” (1982) highlights the power of pleasure as a source of healing. We think it is time for educators to listen--to heed the message that we must start paying attention to the body if we are to move beyond the deeply destructive mind-body paradigm. In this chapter we draw from critical pedagogy, feminism, and our own experiences as educators to demonstrate how addressing the body in schools is intrinsic to social justice. We argue that healing the pain that is inflicted by patriarchy, classism, ableism, heteronormativity, and social disconnection must include challenging all policies and practices that silence the corporeal and the physical. Specifically, we examine how schools engage in a de facto disembodiment of teachers through hegemonic ideas and the policies that emerge from them. We shine a light on a number of practices that encourage ontological view of both students and teachers as brains-on-stems (where physicality and bodily needs are to be ignored). In resistance to these ideas, we challenge ourselves and readers to instead engage in teaching that is abjectly physical and joyful in its physicality.

**Let’s get physical**

*No one talked about the body in relation to teaching. What did one do with the body in the classroom? Trying to remember the bodies of my professors, I find myself unable to recall them...The public world of institutional learning was a site where the body had to be erased, go unnoticed. (hooks, 1994, pp. 91-92)*

2020 has, for many of us, been a year filled with pain and deep disappointment. American society is unwell; we are suffering in ways and to degrees that are unprecedented. The magnitude of recent events juxtaposed against surreal (if not downright incompetent) governmental responses to suffering has led many people into feelings of despair. It is easy to lose hope and to see healing as an impossibility. Critical educator Paulo Freire (1998) reminds us, however, that it is necessary to respond to pain with hope. According to him we must first find and then deconstruct the sources of pain, particularly the pain that is hidden from view and normalized in everyday life: “the struggle for hope means the denunciation, in no uncertain terms, of all the abuses, schemes and omissions” (p.106). Freire asks us to challenge these with a different reality, one that is rooted in hope. In what follows we heed Freire’s advice to deconstruct the sources of our pain (“to read the world”), in this case looking specifically at the pain that hides in our bodies and the healing that can be possible when that pain is no longer ignored.

We question how much pain is caused by an adherence to policies, practices, and mores that steer educators into treating themselves and their students via the Cartesian mind-body divide —to see themselves and their students as brains on stems. Ultimately, we posit that the denial of teachers’ bodies is significant to education and comes at a great cost. In what follows we trace the ways that schools endorse and perpetuate practices of disembodiment while simultaneously policing teachers’ and students’ bodies. In order to examine the normalization of body-phobic messages that run rampant in teaching and teacher education, we also share our own experiences of denying the importance of our bodies as teachers. We note how school-based messages about physicality reflect the hegemonic (white, male, and upper-class) mores and ways of being. Additionally, we raise questions about the healing that might surface if educators were to demand that their bodies be taken seriously and as meaningful to the acts of teaching and learning. Inspired by current movements and bringing together insights from Black Lives Matter, #Metoo, and the body positive and sex positive movements, we ask: What are the possibilities that might emerge if schools were sites for reconnecting the body to the intellect and how might resistance to disembodiment help move us toward healing and wellness?

In our combined 24 years of high school teaching and additional 27 years as teacher educators, we have become increasingly aware of how often and without question teachers adhere to the notion that obedience is synonymous with professionalism. Recent events have further prompted us to question the myriad ways that this idea is enacted through our bodies. We have been struck, for instance, by how often teachers are mandated to use their positions to control the bodies of students and, in turn, how often their own bodies are controlled by the notion of professionalism. Drawing now from our combined experiences, we recognize, critique, and provide alternative possibilities to these hegemonic practices. Our thinking is largely shaped by the work of Michel Foucault (2010) who exposed the ways that the human body can be disciplined, regulated, subjugated, and encouraged to strictly control self and others. It is also shaped by the work of educators who refuse to deny physicality (and sexuality) in educational space (e.g. Johnson, 2004; Kipnis, 2015) and who demand that we pay attention to bodies in schools (e.g. hooks, 1994; Darder, 2010). In what follows, we use our experiences as straight, abled bodies cis gender educators to think about the discursive paths of bodily harm and healing in schools, highlighting how mixed messages about the body serve to alienate teachers and students from themselves and from each other.

**The professional body?**

Schools provide mixed-messages about bodies; they focus on regulating the body while also promoting a narrative that our bodies do not matter (i.e. it is ‘who we are and not the bodies that we come in’ that matters). For teachers, bodily erasure and regimented control are closely tied to ideas about professionalism, appropriateness, and morality. These ideas have been repeated so often and from so many places that they have been normalized, and for the most part, widely accepted. Teachers are encouraged if not required to fit into the machinery of schools.

Many educational historians have used the analogy of factories to describe schools (Bowles and Gintis, 1977; Liston, 1990). Frederick Taylor’s approach to industry has taken root in our schools; vestiges of machine-like control, regulation, regimentation and standardization are visible in practices such as bells and age grouping (assembly line), age and ability grouping (standardized inputs), national standards and scripted curricula (interchangeable parts), and a myopic focus on assessment (quality control). An associated focus on efficiency in schools has translated into disciplining the bodies of students and teachers. Schools control and value students in part by how well the latter demonstrate bodily regulation (that they speak, laugh, eat, defecate, and move at specific and teacher-sanctioned times). Bodily obedience is valued as “good behavior.” Because teachers are, like so many of us, deeply ensconced in a hegemonic paradigm--one that is itself based in Freire’s notion of the oppressors also being oppressed (Freire, 1990)--teachers enforce oppressive rules on students while they themselves adhere, often unquestioningly, to similarly oppressive expectations so as to be considered professional.

For teachers, *professionalism* equates to compliance with myriad layers of rules that control our bodies and deny our needs; these rules govern dress, use of language, body language, eating/drinking, proximity to others and the ability to address basic human needs (i.e., using the bathroom). Modern schooling values a machine-like conformity into which the messy and organic body cannot easily fit. This situation is bound to become exponentially worse as pandemic-related educational practices further disembody teachers and students and reify an already problematic paradigm.

We believe that teachers' bodies are split into two categories: the sacred body that is pure and innocent and the profane body that is impure and unworthy of consideration. Within this are straight versus queer bodies (evidenced in common and tacit rules around which wedding or family photographs are on desks and whose marriage is “rubbing sexuality in our faces”) and able machine like bodies versus bodies that exhibit any physical needs. Narratives and practices of corporeal erasure and control operate for teachers (and in turn their students) in a paradigm of bodily shame. In what follows we examine just some of the ways that teachers’ bodies are disciplined and shamed in schools.

**Shame on you**

Almost all schools have tacit, if not overt, rules for how teachers are expected to appear; the way that this is understood and enforced is instructive. Using the language of “professionalism” most schools expect teachers to look as if they belong in a *casual Friday* business environment. Accepted are khakis and button-downs, mainstream corporate logos and designer shoes (Freeburg, Workman, & Arnett, 2011) while the long list of unacceptable attire remains amorphous, its suitability for classrooms is judged against the norm of “I know it when I see it.” Teacher dress codes for women also and often incessantly prohibit any non-matronly display of femininity. In this we see the old binary of Madonna/Whore in full bloom; teachers are expected to look pure and motherly and any suggestion of their own sexuality is both overtly and tacitly shamed.

The kinds of body regulation that are mandated in teacher dress codes are also rife with cultural and class biases. Piercings, for example, are expected to be limited to certain numbers and to the ears; visible tattoos are to remain covered; dreadlocks are frowned upon; bra straps are to be covered; t-shirts are forbidden; open toe shoes are not allowed; skirt and dress lengths are regulated; shorts are forbidden etc. This kind of control of appearance/dress also echoes the kinds of somatic control evident in militarism as the teacher “uniform” signifies broader institutional and corporeal compliance (which we touch upon later). We find it additionally troubling that the teaching body is fashioned as if the signifier of middle class (corporate) dress is intrinsic to being knowledgeable/credible. (We cannot help but note here how the idea that wealth = knowledge has been highly problematic in recent U.S. politics.) The irony is also that this requirement of sameness sits in direct opposition to the American meritocratic myths that the way we look does not matter and the oft-touted notion that we are a country that values a culturally diverse “individuality.” We believe it is important to point out the disconnect between telling students to “be themselves” and not fall prey to peer pressure while expecting both students and teachers to visibly conform to a hegemonic norm.

The regulations on teachers’ bodies also include regulations of the sounds bodies make via language, discourse, and acceptable noises. Teachers’ voices--in the sound that bodies make while speaking--are conscripted to a set of tacit rules that govern the volume, pitch, magnitude, as well as language and words. For example, “Standard” English--what Lisa Delpit (1995) refers to as the “codes of power” (p. 24) --is the de jure language for classrooms. Delpit notes that both actual words and syntax (e.g. AAVE - Black vernacular) are strictly policed. Despite decades’ worth of research on code-switching and code-meshing in classrooms and a wealth of evidence that these approaches are “culturally sustaining” pedagogies (Paris, 2012), many if not most educators continue to demand of teachers and their students strict fidelity to standard-English. The use of words considered obscene or profane, regardless of curricular and classroom contexts, are often for teachers heavily policed and punished. Meanwhile the tacit rules regulating the sounds that bodies make through control of speaking volume, the duration of laughter, patterns of interruption, eating/chewing noises, etc. are framed as issues of “respect.” But here again these mechanisms of shaming and corporeal control have an obvious cultural and class bias generally, and furthermore model a form of cultural assimilation that seldom gets noticed or challenged.

This normalization of control is particularly evident when it comes to the topics to which teachers may or may not give voice. Official school curriculum is tightly controlled and regulated (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; White, 2012). Such regulation is arguably most salient in issues of sex and sexuality in schools. Teachers do students a disservice when they allow policymakers’ and their own discomfort about sex to silence classroom conversations (White & Ali-Khan, 2020). Schools reinforce, via omission and censorious messages, the notion that we all live in cis-gender, straight bodies and that any topics pertaining to the body are not legitimate forms of knowledge. They reify specific cultural norms about what is and is not appropriate for our classrooms by celebrating some ideas and relegating others to the taboo. In keeping with this hidden curriculum of shame, teachers (and by default students) are taught to deny any voicing of the somatic experiences regardless of how much these impact their lives (Ali-Khan, forthcoming).

Practices of disembodiment for teachers extend into the ways that bodies are dismissed as having little influence on work opportunities, social mobility, and overall life trajectories. The deeply rooted, uniquely American, and ultimately hegemonic myth of meritocracy stresses that our minds are separate from and more important than our bodies. Schools focus almost solely on students’ cognitive development (and give only tertiary attention to physical well-being through electives like health class and physical education). We posit that such practices serve to reduce a focus on the body and thereby to hide the fact that sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia are endemic in our society. Despite a ubiquitous focus on the body in media and pop culture, teachers are expected to behave as if we are a society that is blind to the bodies we are in. Any discussion otherwise was considered too political and both overtly and tacitly forbidden in schools. (It is our hope that the *Black Lives Matter* and *Trans Lives Matter* movements will encourage educators and educational policy makers toward a deeper understanding of the importance of the bodies to questions of equity.)

Many schools also enforce bodily parameters with strict rules around physical proximity and touch. Although there is a wealth of evidence that highlights the connectedness and comfort that comes with physical proximity and the power of the human touch, (e.g. Sin & Koole, 2013), many schools have--due to salacious news stories, narratives of teachers as predators, and fears of litigation--implemented fear-based expectations regarding touch. It is common for schools to impose strict rules around physical contact with students (excepting handshakes, high-fives, or fist-bumps). Secondary teachers are not to be trusted alone in classrooms or other school sites with students. Even elementary teachers who desire to respond to the clearly expressed needs of young children are increasingly reticent to physically touch their students for the purposes of comfort or celebration (Owen & Gillentine, 2011). The fear of teachers' bodies as enacted in touch-phobic policies and practices is counterproductive in that it silences any actual discussion of what real consent looks like (Ali-Khan, forthcoming).

One of the most common, and we believe most dehumanizing, of school rules is the regulation of basic human functions, for example the ability to use a bathroom. Ignoring individuals’ specific needs and contexts, many if not most schools have specific and severely limiting rules for when students may and may not use the bathroom. Though these rules do not officially pertain to teachers, we posit that teachers’ bodies are even more regulated than are those of their students. In contrast to virtually every other profession, finding ways to go to the bathroom can be excessively onerous for teachers. Teachers must try to carve out brief moments in which to use different facilities (often far from their classrooms). Further, despite the fact that teaching is primarily female, schools continue to shame and/or disregard the needs of the menstruating body (Johnson, Waldman, & Crawford, 2020). In addition, the needs of the pregnant and post-pregnant body (that may, for example, need to breastfeed or pump) is institutionally silenced. Kimberly Wallace Sanders (2003) powerfully describes how classroom interactions about teacher pregnancy moves teaching away from the pure male space of intellect and makes the body visible. Because teachers are expected to be available to students throughout classes, before and after school, during class changes, and often during lunch, they are consistently forced to ignore their own basic physical needs.

Teachers’ sacrificing of their physical needs extends into the physical spaces in which they spend the entirety of their professional lives. Discussions about the habitability of school buildings--most often focused on the insufficiency of those structures--are almost always focused on their suitability for students (Kozol, 2012). While these discussions are important, the stakeholders most affected by a crumbling infrastructure are seldom considered. It is teachers who spend decades in buildings that are often crumbling and unsafe. In our own K-12 experiences we have worked in buildings that have had problems with mold, rats, dust (which contributes to problems with asthma), windows that were either non-existent or nailed shut (leading to searing hot or numbingly cold temperatures), broken walls, leaking pipes, and cramped conditions. Poor ventilation, long a problem in schools, is only now being seriously addressed due to the pandemic (Mooney, Stein, & Steckelberg, 2020). In short, due to the nature of their jobs, teachers are virtually locked into buildings that may be causing significant harm to their physical well-being.

**Resistance**

The kinds of hegemonic notions encapsulated by the mind-body divide are, by definition, difficult to challenge and even more difficult to overcome. Generations of students, parents, educational policymakers, and teachers have been enculturated to focus on the body on the one hand (e.g., in popular culture) and to deny the body on the other (e.g., in schools). In the former the body is sacred; in the latter it is profane. This divide is both harmful and hypocritical. We believe that it is up to critically-minded educators to begin to break down this unhealthy dichotomy--to chip away at the foundations of an inequitable and untenable system.

While we do not expect any one teacher or group of teachers to tear down the deeply ethnocentric, androcentric, and logocentric practices of educating the mind while ignoring the body, there are myriad ways that teachers can enact change in their classrooms and schools. Teachers can, individually and collectively, engage in overt and tacit resistance--to be what we have called “guerrilla warriors” in a struggle for more socially-just schools. In what follows, we provide a list of steps teachers might take to recognize and celebrate the importance of the body. (It is important to note here that we have not included body-based recommendations that only pertain to students, e.g. free lunches and school-based healthcare). We do not aim here to be comprehensive but to spark further discussion:

* Advocate to school policymakers, administrators, teachers, and parents the need for research-based, holistic sexual education that comes not via a standalone course at the middle or high school level but that is integrated throughout K-12 curricula. Teachers can further advocate for a pleasure-based approach that acknowledges that human sexuality is intrinsic to wellness (rather than a risk to be mitigated through a framework of harm reduction).
* Critique, challenge, and circumvent school dress codes for both students and teachers. Highlight for school administrators, parents, and students the social and cultural norms--and the inherent biases--implicit in the ways that “appropriate” school dress is authorized (and by whom).
* Make our own teaching bodies visible through classroom discussions about the tacit and normalized erasure that comes deeming menstruation, pregnancy, pain, and other forms of embodiment as “inappropriate.”
* Acknowledge the importance of the body across curricular/content areas and recognize that these issues are culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies that engage students in learning.
* Insist that the concept of “taboo” has no place in education; that classrooms should be places wherein we name and address difficult issues rather than silence them.
* Create a dialogue about school rules governing the use of bathrooms and challenge those rules via individual classroom-based policies. Respect that bodies have physical needs that do not vanish in institutional spaces.
* Integrate ethnic studies, anti-racist, feminist, LGBTQ+, and disability education into school curricula wherever possible and therein challenge both the Cartesian separation of body from mind and the meritocratic myth of a body-blind society.
* Support and add to the effort to keep guns--inarguably the most dire threat to students’ and teachers’ bodies--out of schools. Be informed about the issues and use social media and connections with parents to forge a stronger anti-gun voice.
* Publicly question the connections between militarism and military recruitment in schools and other forms of violence (thereby refusing ideologies that support violence when it is governmentally sanctioned). Make connections to militarism on a global scale and militarism on our streets--how the goal of both is to harm the body.
* Openly discuss the idea of physical pleasure (in any and every form) as *intrinsic* to the purpose of education. Recognize that aim for education must be for the greater good, and this has to include an understanding that the bodies we all live in are significant to our lives.

In trying to bridge the artificial body-mind divide, we remind teachers that though this endeavor is overtly political, there can in reality be no separation of education from the political. As Paulo Freire noted, teaching is an inherently political act (1970). While teaching in ways that respect the body may be controversial for some, it is no more political (yet far more harmful) than refusing to do so. Hope and healing are intrinsic to our bodies; it is through embracing this fact that we can begin to undo some of the pain that we are collectively and individually experiencing. We believe that teachers are uniquely positioned--individually and collectively--to throw a wrench into the machine, to pause or at least slow it long enough to allow for a return to the organic, the corporeal, and the sensual.

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