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# Yes, Actually Subjugation Is A Vocabulary Word

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## Yes, Actually Subjugation Is A Vocabulary Word

### **Cover Page Footnote**

I am deeply indebted to Ana Quintero-Arias for her ongoing support and tireless work advocating for all children. And to Desmond Crooks who told me that teaching is about "creating the space for anything that interrupts the collusion of supposes, leaving the individual naked without being threatened."

Yes, Actually Subjugation *IS* A Vocabulary Word

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## SUBJUGATION IS A VOCABULARY WORD

### **Abstract.**

Teaching today is driven by calls for accountability in the form of high-stakes testing and relies on a standardized, de-contextualized approach to education. The results are "one size fits all" curriculum that ignore local contexts of students' lived experience, discourage student engagement and ultimately work against deep understanding of the content. In contrast, a praxis of ethical caring and place-based education that includes a radical-democratic approach, recognizes teaching as political and utilizes the students' stories, local knowledge, culture, language and community as an integrating context for learning.

Keywords: multicultural, decolonizing, bilingual, storytelling, praxis

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### **Yes, Actually Subjugation IS a Vocabulary Word**

#### **Introduction**

Multicultural education discourse is well-established, yet stereotypic representations and repressive silences continue to dominate the K-12 practice. Children of color or those experiencing poverty rarely find themselves represented in the literature or classroom curriculum. As a result their voices, perspectives, and knowledge are excluded from the conversation. This paper extends an invitation to envision a decolonizing, democratic, inclusive classroom through *Cultural Linguistics* (CL), a class created to address educational inequalities and improve the learning conditions for all students through instructional change (Moll & Diaz, 1987). Storytelling provides the framework for this change. CL seeks to expose and challenge the stock stories that children of color, poverty and immigrants are ‘culturally deficient,’ ‘lacking’ in the knowledge required to succeed in school.

#### **Identified Need Within Our Society**

The putatively *objective* lens of *white-stream* (Grande, 2004, p. 152) curriculum perpetuates the norms and beliefs of the dominant structure. Reflexivity toward this linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, gender and racial bias allows for critical exploration of curriculum content and for the opportunity to explore other standpoints, other stories. Effectively challenging the status quo and ensuring the inclusion of those whose voices are otherwise not represented is essential in order to engage students in their education. “For people from marginalized communities, stories are a way of bearing witness to their struggle and survival in a racist system.” (Bell, 2010, p. 19) Storytelling provides the framework for students to identify the stock and concealed stories in the curriculum and in their communities in order to write their own stories of resistance and transformation (Bell, 2010). The classroom must become a space

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where students are encouraged to question each other, teachers and curriculum. Working collaboratively, students and teachers can begin to envision a school and a society that legitimizes and values a plurality of thinking, being, and experiencing the world (Pewewardy & Hammer, 2003). This guided inquiry requires the participation of Elders as well as broader community alliances in the classroom because stories cannot be written or told in isolation. Experiences, knowledge and core values expressed through stories become a living, primary reference, contributing to the legitimacy of the students' knowledge, understanding and identities.

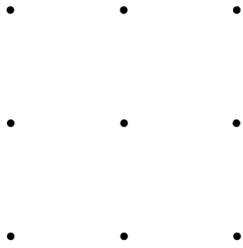
Cultural Linguistics is a course dedicated to helping students succeed in a system that was not designed for their success. Students develop a sense of self-worth, cultural identity, community and friendship. Students who were trained to see themselves as "other" learn to look at themselves through a new lens- one that allows them to see themselves as they truly are and could be, rather than as a living stereotype they were doomed to reenact and reproduce.

“Students are hungry for spaces and curricula that provide context and historical knowledge to help them ground their own experiences and analyses.” (Bell, 2010, p. 69) CL supports students of color as well as students from dominant white culture, to explore and interrogate their own culture as they develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of the lives of their peers of color and the value of their role as allies. The stories of marginalized communities provide “a way of bearing witness to their struggle and survival in a racist system.” (Bell, 2010, p. 18) This offers all students the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills that transcended all content areas in school and social settings.

The following is a story of resistance and transformation. It begins with a metaphor posed as a challenge: *Connect all of the dots with four straight lines, without taking the pencil off the*

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*paper, or retracing any line. Lines may cross. You may choose to accept the challenge, or read the story, as you see fit.*



### **The Story**

Cassie, an outgoing twelve-year, with hazel eyes and light brown hair, *texted* a story-poem to me on a Saturday morning without any introduction or explanation- the frog croaking signaled the text on my cell phone. She does this intermittently, sending unexpected gifts like this one. It might be a poem, a story, or once a ceremonial song she'd asked the Elders' permission to share with me. Cassie was never officially enrolled in my class, but joined us for reading workshop, where she first shared that her father was Lakota during a unit about the westward 'invasion' and colonization. Soon she joined us for math and finally for Cultural Linguistics. Its been three years since that time, and she continues to share her stories with me -- counter-narratives to the stock story she's been trained to believe; concealed stories and stories of resistance that reflect her spirit and her dreams.

*“Remember those times Old Dream Woman, remember those times when we would lay down together with our eyes shut and our mouths open, Old Dream Woman do you remember those times when we would watch the stars laying down and saying “Oh hahaha!” Remember those times Old One, when we would lay underneath the starry sky with all the people in our hands? Oh Old One remember those times when it was just me and you dancing into the world of nothing into the world of black darkness and despair*

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*floating above us, left with nothing, no one to hold on to when your feeling sad or sometimes just to hold on to because your cold or lonely? Young dream woman I remember when you were just a little buffalo floating in that world, floating in my world floating in nothing but air, young dream girl I remember when it was just me and you in a pile of black darkness looking for something to hold on to, but not because we were having a bad time in life but because we were cold and bitter, for what are we supposed to do when its just me and you? Old Dream Woman when it's just me, and you, we doze off into this dream land with green grass, you, me-- just us. Young dream woman I remember all those times. All of them.” (C. Roberts, personal communication October 12, 2011.)*

*(Her words resonate and reverberate, reminding me of the gift of sharing in the education and the lives of children....)*

“She’s smart. She’s just kinda stubborn and lazy.” That was what Laura, the fourth grade teacher told me about Cassie. In school, Cassie had been subjugated, colonized, and judged lacking. Why would she want to try?

“Ya,” the teacher stretched out the ‘a-a-a,’ “She’s just not into doing much work.” She paused, and nodded her head slightly, listening to her own words.

Funny-- the “not into to doing much work” piece. The Cassie I came to know would pout or groan, then shoot me a look to kill and get down to work. She brought so much to the class: humor, voice, spirit, and her stories. Stories that continue to resonate and reverberate, weaving their way into the education and the lives of other children.

*Tú eres mi otro yo.*

*Si te hago daño a ti, me hago daño a mí.*



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*Sí te amo y te respeto a ti, me amo y respeto yo.*

*You are my other me.*

*If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself.*

*If I love and respect you, I love and respect myself.* (Valdez, 1973, p. 174)

This story begins medias res- right in the middle.... It was Wednesday afternoon, Irina leaned around the doorjamb, both hands supporting her torso as she peeked 'round the corner to ask some scheduling question. She stopped abruptly, mid-sentence, chocolate brown eyes wide as her voice rose an octave: "Are THOSE YOUR VOCABULARY WORDS?" I jerked my head up, focus jolted away from the papers in my lap, as I swung around to see what grabbed her attention on my word wall. I barely managed to swallow the guffaw, nodded my head, and felt my right eyebrow fly upward.

"Yes. Actually, subjugation is a vocabulary word. Four syllables, five vowels."

### **The Class**

This story about the kids: talking and listening about issues of ethnicity, language, body image, sexual and gender identity and racism- the subjugation one group, by another, for a purpose. Its about the ongoing struggle to decolonize the classroom and challenge the oppressive curricula that trains students to take tests, rather than educate them to be critical thinkers; active participants in their communities. It's about being so humbled by all that my students bring to class, that I continually problematize what I count as knowledge and my approach to teaching. I must be as vulnerable as I ask my students to be; continually reach through the standardized curriculum to transform my classroom into a sacred space. A space that welcomes critical discourse, and constructive conflict-- that explicitly addresses the cultural biases these children experience daily.

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“My son comes home from school and tells me how much he hates the color of his skin. He wants to change his name! My beautiful son!” A mother cries out in her native tongue, as the speech pathologist translates for the award-winning third grade teacher. The teacher quickly responds, “Oh, we’ve had classroom conversations about this, so I’m *sure* he’s feeling better now.”

Teachers need to challenge everything we are ‘*sure*’ of—including the data presented near the beginning of each year. Last year the team was *sure* that Esperanza, an English Language Learner (ELL), was cognitively delayed and needed to be referred immediately for Special Education services-- she had “flat-lined” (made little or no gains) for over two years. I dug in my heels and refused. Did they know that Zapoteco was Esperanza’s first language, Spanish her second and English, her third? Somehow in her five years at the school, the subject hadn’t come up, yet Esperanza shared this information the second week of Cultural Linguistics—the session with the cultural grid where students explored their families, languages, foods, music, family stories and core values. The data team offered me six weeks to demonstrate improvement. “Sorry, that’s not realistic. She needs less pressure, not more.”

*Tú eres mi otro yo.*

*Si te hago daño a ti, me hago daño a mí.*

*Sí te amo y te respeto a ti, me amo y respeto yo.*

*You are my other me.*

*If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself.*

*If I love and respect you, I love and respect myself.* (Valdez, 1973, p. 174)

Each week we open with these words to heal and nurture love of self and love of community, to create the sacred space and embrace rage, pain, play, laughter- the paradox and

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ambiguity living offers. We explore inclusive, democratic rights, versus rules and privileges. Rights guaranteed in the constitution, rights that disappear once students enter through school doors. What would rights to privacy look like in the classroom? What about the right of assembly, the right to petition, the right to innocence until proven guilty, or the right to a jury of your peers? Students interpret, study and experience these rights. They learn to become allies, instead of “bullies.” They learn to disagree without being disagreeable. They investigate issues many face on a daily basis— sexual and gender identity, language, body image, issues about ethnicity as well as anti-immigration legislation, racial profiling and exploitation. They carry these issues with them to class every day. If these issues are ignored or denied, how can students ever feel safe enough to learn?

And Esperanza? She went from reading 71 wpm at 4th percentile to reading 130 wpm-16th percentile. Her vocabulary improved from a score of 4 (zero percentile) to 11 (3rd percentile), comprehension progressed from a score of 4- (1st percentile), to a score of 7- (3rd percentile)! The entire class improved 17%. I was guaranteed another year of one hour a week dedicated to Cultural Linguistics.

Are you wondering about the dot challenge? If you seek an answer to the challenge posed at the beginning of this story, you have to look beyond the array of dots that you see so clearly on the page. The solution to the problem serves as a metaphor. It requires you to imagine dots that are not visible (you might not consider), those just outside the scope of the array. We must all stretch beyond the stock stories we’ve been taught, to learn and understand the concealed stories and stories of resistance that may have been just out of reach, in order to join together to write the stories of transformation.

*“Once you learn your limitations  
you encounter your infinite potential”.* (Valdez, 1973, p. 190)

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