

Invitations, Development, and Freedom: A Personal Perspective

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"If there are no invitations, there is no development."

(Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 50)

The Latin root of the word education means to "draw out" or to "call forth." In the introduction to *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Maxine Greene (1988) stated that she sought an audience of "those who educate with untapped possibility in mind" (p. xii). To educate in this manner it is necessary to open up the space that exists between the dialectic of the actual and the possible. One must call forth the possible and draw out the relatively untapped potential existing in each individual.

In the context of my own professional practice it has only been in the last few years that I joined Greene's (1988) audience of teachers who teach "with untapped possibility in mind" (p. xii). Becoming a part of this audience has helped me discover that to teach in a manner that calls forth and draws out, we must "explore some other ways of seeing, alternative modes of being in the world; and...explore implications for educating at this moment of 'reform'" (Greene, 1988, p. 3). We must also focus our interest "in human freedom, in the capacity to surpass the given and to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (Greene, 1988, p. 3).

For us to address adequately the problems in education today, we must envision the difference between what is and what can be. To re-conceptualize and reconstruct an educational system that helps students maximize untapped potential we must be able to recognize the walls that prevent the process of becoming. First, we must turn our attention to the teachers of our nation, and in dialogue we must open spaces that free teachers and students to become more than we are today.

Just as I once felt bound to the "cotton wool of habit" (Greene, 1988, p. 2) and confined by the constraints of the system, there are many teachers in schools today who feel as if they no longer have choices. For these teachers, teaching has

become a matter of routine. Somehow our current emphasis on test scores and achievement has led us away from "a concern for the critical and imaginative for the opening of new ways of looking at things" (Greene, 1988, p. 126). Before we as teachers can help students alter their direction, we must first recognize the obstacles that prevent our own process of becoming. We must explore the dialectic of the personal and the public.

Our personal conceptions of self, both positive and negative, begin to form during the early months of life. Although a clearly differentiated and structured self-concept is a fairly stable entity, self-concept continues to develop and change throughout a person's lifetime (Fitts, 1971; Purkey, 1970). Self-concept develops as a child begins to master the experiences of life. As the self evolves, it is made up of everything that forms the experiences of one's individual existence. According to self-concept theory, our perceptions of self are formed as we interact with significant others in our environment. In terms of the dialectics of freedom,

...the interactions between human beings (themselves a mixture of the possible and the actual), objects and events, the actualities and potentialities of all that is involved, including social institutions, are conditioned and modified by reciprocal interdetermination, how we behave toward each other. It is in such interactions that we may come to know and define ourselves. (Garrison, 1990, p. 198)

The interactions between human beings in schools and society help to shape and form teacher and students' self-concepts. Self-concept is not a single perception of self, but instead it is a "complex and dynamic system of beliefs which an individual holds true about himself [or herself] each belief with a corresponding value" (Purkey, 1970, p. 7). As interactions occur within schools and communities, both teachers and students internalize a complex and meaningful pattern of beliefs and attitudes, and each pattern is important in determining behavior and success as learning individuals.

As educators interact within a society of significant others who view education as ineffective, many have begun to internalize a negative concept of themselves as teachers. Many teachers have internalized a sense of powerlessness and an acceptance of the status quo. These teachers have accepted the actual as the reality that exists, and they have lost the ability to imagine the possible. "Yet, those of us committed to education are committed not only to effecting continuities but to preparing the ground for what is to come" (Greene, 1988, p. 3).

How can we prepare for what is to come if we cannot imagine the possibilities? To open the space where the freedom to become exists, we must first recognize and name the walls that are impediments to our development. For each teacher the obstacles may differ, yet for many of us the walls have been our negative conception of ourselves as teachers and our inability to envision the possibilities. It is only when we engage in dialogue with others, open spaces in which we name our walls, and can take action, that we realize, "there are always multiple perspectives and multiple vantage points....There is always more. There is always possibility. And this is where the space opens for the pursuit of freedom" (Greene, 1988, p. 128).

As educators in search of our own freedom, we have to develop communities where we can come together in dialogue. To define and construct more positive concepts of ourselves as teachers, it is imperative to engage in reflective dialogue with ourselves and with others. Through dialogue we are able to open the space where freedom can exist. Yet, according to Greene, the freedom to become does not simply exist, it must be earned. "To be free in the deepest sense we must desire the objects we imagine with enough passion to pursue the possible relentlessly, overcome the resistance to the real, and eventually bring the possible objects of our imagination into existence" (Garrison, 1990 p. 200). It is not enough just to envision the possibilities and the potentialities. We must also risk choices and take action in order to bring freedom into existence.

In the context of my own professional practice I have discovered that the application of the theory of invitational education opens a space where the freedom to become can be brought into existence. Invitational education is a perceptually based self-concept approach to education. The theory is based on four principles:

(1) people are able, valuable, and responsible, and should be treated accordingly; (2) teaching should be a cooperative activity; (3) people possess relatively untapped potential in all areas of human development; (4) and this potential can best be realized by places, policies, and programs that are specifically designed to invite development, and by people who are personally and professionally inviting to themselves and others. (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 2)

When first introduced to the concept of invitational education, I had reached a point in my teaching career where I was unhappy and frustrated. By trying to "fit in" to the expected norm of the teaching environment of my school, I had lost a part of myself, which earlier had encouraged me to be an effective teacher. I

began to feel the constraints, but could not recognize the obstacles, and I felt as though I had no choices available in order to change my situation.

At this point in time, I was fortunate enough to meet a person who believed that educators not only have a responsibility to invite students to reach their maximum potential, but also have a responsibility to issue the same invitations to their friends and colleagues. In dialogue with this person, I was encouraged to name the "walls" or obstacles that I felt were hindering my process of becoming. I was able to open up a space in which I could envision a difference in what currently existed and what could be. In opening that space, I realized that I did have choices, but that "to become different...is not simply to will oneself to change" (Greene, 1988, p. 3), but also it is the taking of action to enable oneself to change. I also discovered that the changes I was making for myself affected my environment and resulted in changes in my teaching situation, as well as, in my personal life. I believe that the opening of this space where freedom to become could exist led to changes and differences in my teaching and ultimately to my selection as the 1992 Virginia Region VII Teacher of the Year. In addition, these events led to my decision to pursue doctoral studies in education.

In my own life I have discovered "to be something...a person must reach out to create an opening; he/she must engage directly with what stands against him/her, no matter what the risk" (Greene, 1988, p. 11). I have also discovered that educators who issue invitations are able to help students open the dialectical space between the actual and the possible. Practitioners of invitational education are a part of Greene's (1988) audience of those who teach "with untapped possibility in mind" (p. xii). Educators who issue invitations are aware that the walls or obstacles that encumber the process of becoming are often based on human constructions of negative self-images. In school communities where educators invite students and colleagues to grow and become, it is possible to reconstruct and change negative concepts of self. When invitations are accepted, individuals take action to open up spaces for freedom. Issuing and accepting invitations, to others and to one's self, are a part of the interaction that occurs in the dialectic of "the subject/object relationship and the realization that freedom can be achieved only in an ongoing transaction, one that is visible and legible to those involved" (Greene, 1988, p. 83). Through the actions and interactions that occur in this transaction new possibilities can be brought into existence.

Pullias postulated, "The individual cannot or will not see and take advantage of opportunity, however physically available it may be, unless he [or she] is brought to believe that he [or she] has possibilities for growth and that this opportunity is a door for him [or her]" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 36). The transactions involved in invitational education provide a way of opening a door,

of opening a space between the actual and the possible. John Dewey stated, "We are free not because of what we statically are, but in so far as we are becoming different from what we have been" (Greene, 1988, p. 3). To become different from what we have been, to open the space between the actual and the possible, it is necessary to issue invitations and call forth the growth of maximum potential in ourselves, our colleagues, and our students. "If there are no invitations, there is no development" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 50), and if there is no development, there is no freedom.

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