

# Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis

ISSN: 2325-1204. Journal homepage: <https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/jctp/>

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Volume 2, Issue 2, 2014, Article 6, <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp-180810-23>

## Searching for Heroes: A Critical Examination of Student Emotional Responses Following Mandatory Social Justice Training Workshops

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### Abstract

This study examines undergraduate students' emotional responses following required social justice training workshops at a predominantly white urban university in the northeast. Journal entries from 24 participants were qualitatively analyzed in two undergraduate education courses based primarily on reactions to the documentary *Waiting for Superman*. This study is informed by critical multicultural education and a thematic and discourse analytic research design was employed. A thematic map and thematic chart emerged from the data analysis. Implications for pedagogical practice and recommendations to move beyond best practices in social justice student engagement are offered.

### Recommended Citation

Veloria, C., Robinson, E., & McMickens, T. L. (2014). Searching for Heroes: A Critical Examination of Student Emotional Responses Following Mandatory Social Justice Training Workshops. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, 2(2), 96-112. <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp-180810-23>

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## Introduction

During President Obama's second inauguration speech, he spoke about the ideals of the Founding Fathers and the need for civic engagement:

You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country's course. You and I, as citizens, have the obligation to shape the debates of our time – not only with the votes we cast, but with the voices we lift in defense of our most ancient values and enduring ideals. (Obama, 2013, para. 26)

This statement is reminiscent of the "civic renewal movement" that has been sweeping institutions of higher education for more than a decade. Alternatively called the "democratic movement," "community-building movement," and "civil society movement," it entails investing in civic skills and organizational capacities for public problem-solving on a wide scale and designing policy at every level of the federal system to enhance the ability of citizens to do the everyday work of the republic (Sirianni & Friendland, 2005).

According to the Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership (2005), civic engagement involves one or more of the following:

- Learning from others, self, and environment to develop informed perspectives on social issues
- Valuing diversity and building bridges across difference
- Behaving, and working through controversy, with civility
- Taking an active role in the political process
- Assuming leadership and membership roles in organizations
- Developing empathy, ethics, values, and a sense of social responsibility
- Promoting social justice locally and globally

In the case of higher education, robust civic education in K-12 schools and communities should encourage and support collegiate civic engagement efforts. As such, providing substantive opportunities for college students to learn about and practice engagement will prepare them to take on deeper problems in the professions, education, and government, as well as within all areas of our civic infrastructure (Sirianni & Friedland, 2005). Regardless of the professions students pursue after college, a main goal is for them to engage in an ever-changing world with open minds and to actively work to promote full and equal participation of all groups in society (Bell, 2007). However, how this is accomplished is difficult to assess, especially as civic

engagement and social justice are concepts that are complex and polyonymous (Jacoby & Associates, 2009).

One important aim of higher education should be to help students become knowledgeable, skilled, and committed to working toward democratic aims (Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003). In 2011-2012, the university where we are faculty members began hosting a “social justice series” that entails campus-wide events for students and faculty focusing on social justice issues. From our perspective, “social justice has become a buzzword in higher education” (Patton, Shahjahan, & Osei-Kofi, 2010, p. 268), and our home institution is no exception. While such programming is aimed at promoting a certain type of criticality, in the absence of continuous ideological discussions that include self-reflection and critique, stand-alone events fall short of the required vigilance of power dynamics that this work demands. We must insist that we collectively learn and engage in deeper conversations about systemic injustice, even when we fundamentally disagree with one another (Applebaum, 2009).

We wanted to capitalize on the first ever “social justice series” offered at our university and to engage in deeper reflection, contestation, and critique with our students. Therefore, we actively sought ways to incorporate aspects of the social justice series into our curricula across three different courses: Culturally Responsive Education, Pre-K Outreach and Tutoring, and Diversity Issues in Higher Education (a masters-level course). We purposefully highlighted all of the social justice events on our syllabi, wove them into the course content, and required that our students actively participate by making some of the events mandatory.

This paper focuses specifically on the journal responses to the 2012 on-campus screening of the documentary *Waiting for Superman* in the Culturally Responsive Education and Pre-K Outreach and Tutoring courses. Both courses explore the relationship between cultural diversity and schooling by examining impediments to academic achievement and advancement of students of color, non-native English-speaking students, and other underrepresented groups. Implications of diversity for teaching and learning in a multicultural society are also examined, along with issues of gender and its intersections with race, ethnicity, class, and culture. Additional time is also spent on the exploration of pedagogical tools to enhance teaching for social justice.

The documentary, released in 2010, is billed as an analysis of the failures of American public education. Several students and their families are featured as they interact with educational institutions and place their hopes in being selected in a lottery for acceptance into charter schools (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010). For this event, we crafted and provided students with the following detailed journal prompts for their reflection and response:

1. The language of observation is never neutral, as our way of characterizing things is always linked to specific assumptions about the world (DeVault, 1999) and our multiple standpoints. Given this, how would you characterize the movie *Waiting for Superman*? What aspects of the film captured your attention the most and why? From your perspective, what are the salient themes of the movie?
2. The children and families depicted in the movie are impacted by multiple forces (i.e., political, economic, social, cultural, etc.). Choose a focal student and discuss how all of these factors interconnect in ways that shape/influence the educational trajectory of the child.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is theoretically grounded in the work of critical multicultural education (Grant, 2010; Kanpol & McLaren, 1995; May & Sleeter, 2010), which helps learners become aware of the forces that shape their lives so that they might work toward transformation and social justice. This framework is focused on the intersection of power, identity, and knowledge and promotes critical questioning of inequalities related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ability. Critical questioning is one of the core concepts of critical multicultural education and a valuable tool that involves asking not only “Is this true?” but also, “Who says so?” and “Who benefits most when people believe it is true?” (Grant, 2012, p. 922).

As critical pedagogues engaged in and in support of a social justice agenda, our goal is to demonstrate how we all strive to be “social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live” (Bell, 2007, pp.1-2). Thus, as scholars and teachers, praxis is an important construct for us to consider given the constant engagement between theory and practice. We draw on the work of Patti Lather (1986), who defined praxis as the reciprocal shaping of theory and practice committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society. Our research is also informed by the liberatory work of Paulo Freire (1993), who defined praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). This view of theory and practice informs how and when we use certain pedagogical tools as well as how we view engagement in and beyond the walls of academia.

At the level of engaging our students to promote social action in the community, we recognize that it is critical to help move students from cynicism and despair to hope and possibility. We acknowledge the struggles and disillusionment of many students when learning about issues of privilege and systemic power operations (Hackman, 2005). However, shifting

worldviews – from acceptance of the status quo to critical questioning of systems and action – is one of the greatest and most important challenges in social justice teaching and research:

Educators need to disrupt the notion that silence is patriotic and teach students that their rights as citizens in this society carry responsibilities – of participation, voice, and protest – so that this can actually become a society of, by, and for all of its citizens. Students need to learn that social action is fundamental to the everyday workings of their lives. (Hackman, 2005, p. 106)

This pedagogical approach entails finding ways of engaging our students with social justice in order to promote civic engagement. Not surprisingly, this stance is not always shared or supported within higher education. Consistent with Patton et al. (2010), “After all, to critically engage with social justice scholarship and practice is not at the top of the list when it comes to advice for new faculty members on how to be successful in higher education today” (p. 265). However, critical awareness rests on grappling with theory and research in the field of social justice and must move beyond a reliance on best practices.

Best practices are pedagogically sound when critically examined in the context in which they are being implemented. Education is extremely contextualized and as educators, we need to be mindful of our positionality, our students, and the social context in which education is taking place. The current political context makes the work of teaching for social justice challenging. Since the attacks of 9/11, there is growing skepticism around the benefits of diversity: “For many, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity are no longer something to be celebrated, but rather feared” (May & Sleeter, 2010, p. 1). Getting support for courses and projects linked to social justice has proven to be difficult for us as it is for others in academia. There have been conservative shifts in political thinking in the United States linked to the economic crises, fear of future attacks on American soil, and the reality of our national involvement in the Middle East, which can obstruct discussions about race, ethnicity and culture (Wells & Harkin, 2009).

Concurrently, public education is under attack from neoliberal forces (Edelsky, 2006) seeking to privatize the field of education (Gutierrez, 2008). We must recognize that this new conservative discourse resonates with the experiences, fears, hopes, and dreams of many Americans (Apple, 2006). Nonetheless, we embrace the challenge laid out by Henry Giroux (2009) for higher education to play a crucial role in reclaiming the links between education and democracy, knowledge and public service, and learning and democratic change (p. 1).

### **Study Context**

We are three professors in teacher education and higher education – a Puerto Rican woman, a White woman, and an African-American man – who are committed to teaching for social justice. We all teach in a predominantly White institution (PWI) located in an urban area in the Northeast. We draw on tools of critical multicultural and social justice education in our classrooms to position ourselves and to discuss our subjectivities. Therefore, as critical multiculturalists, our goal is to model and engage students in self-assessment and reflection, learning of theory, critical questioning of dominant discourses and systems, and building tools and skills for taking action (Adams, 2007; Grant, 2012; Hackman, 2005).

Despite our pedagogical approach, we characterize the university-level approach to promoting diversity as what Chang, Chang, and Ledesma (2005) referred to as “magical thinking”: “If you will it, they will come” (p. 12). For reasons of support and solidarity, we have created a research and writing group that serves as a space for us to reflect on our practice, share our experiences and our work, and critically discuss our professional and political context. We believe that this work cannot be done in isolation; we rely on each other for support and guidance. The reality is that “to effectively understand and work toward social justice in higher education, we need to understand and evaluate the institutional processes, the patterns of distribution, social relations, and cultural/societal norms within the higher education system” (Patton et al., 2010, p. 269). As like-minded scholars, we find comfort and solidarity while simultaneously making sense of this challenging work and sharpening our pedagogical tools. Within this space, we collaboratively crafted the journal prompts, discussed pedagogical strategies, and reviewed journal responses while keeping in mind the demographic composition of our students within the institutional context.

### **Methods**

We reviewed the social justice training statements of 24 participants enrolled in two undergraduate education courses in Culturally Responsive Education and Pre-K Outreach & Tutoring. In both of these courses, participants were required to attend the university-wide screening of *Waiting for Superman* and to provide responses to the aforementioned journal prompts based on the documentary. Individually and collectively, we reviewed and read each statement several times in order to identify themes. We identified terms related to emotions (i.e., sadness, despair, helplessness, anger) and societal connotations associated with urban schooling (i.e., drop out factories, poor, neighborhoods, economic). This approach allowed us to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants’ responses as well as understand *why* and *how* they made sense of the documentary (Creswell, 2012).

Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggested techniques for ensuring credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Based on those suggestions, we functioned as a team during and after the collection and analysis of the data. To ensure dependability and confirmability, we kept files relating to the research study in a central and secure location. Upon Institutional Review Board approval, all participants were asked to voluntarily submit a reflective journal that documented their responses from the film and a demographic questionnaire that asked them to choose a pseudonym. By keeping records of the data and files, we were able to create an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba).

At the end of the semester, after grades had been submitted, the participants were asked if they were willing to voluntarily submit their journals for research purposes. Out of the 24 participants who voluntarily submitted their journals, 10 were presented in this study. As illustrated in Table 1, the 10 participants included four White females, three White males, two Black females, and one Latina.

### **Data Analysis**

Due to our theoretical orientation and epistemological commitments, we recognize that data analysis is not done in a vacuum. We employed theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which was driven by our journal prompts. Thus, we coded deductively (Boyatzis, 1998; Hayes, 1997) and shared these codes with each other. We identified themes and sub-themes based on our individual and collective readings. These are captured in Table 2.

**Table 1***Background Information of Participants who Provided Journal Prompt Responses*

| Student's name<br>(Pseudonyms) | Year of study | Race   | Gender |
|--------------------------------|---------------|--------|--------|
| Becky                          | Junior        | White  | Female |
| Betsy                          | Junior        | White  | Female |
| Carly                          | Junior        | White  | Female |
| Evan                           | Sophomore     | White  | Male   |
| Isabel                         | Junior        | Latina | Female |
| Jackie                         | Junior        | Black  | Female |
| Jane                           | Sophomore     | Black  | Female |
| John                           | Junior        | White  | Male   |
| Maggie                         | Junior        | White  | Female |
| Paul                           | Sophomore     | White  | Male   |

**Table 2***Themes and Sub-themes Based on Participants Journal Prompt Responses*

| Theme/sub-theme                  | Number of responses |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Emotional Language               | <b>57</b>           |
| Poverty (economic factors)       | 18                  |
| Race                             | 15                  |
| Govt. standards/politics         | 8                   |
| Funding                          | 8                   |
| Neighborhood (community)         | 8                   |
| Unprepared/bad teachers (tenure) | 8                   |
| Family support                   | 7                   |
| Overcrowding                     | 4                   |
| Testing                          | 3                   |
| Unions                           | 3                   |
| Language                         | 3                   |
| Achievement gap                  | 1                   |
| Violence                         | 1                   |



After further discussion and refinement, we decided to come up with a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that would allow us to examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations of ideologies (Figure 1). This process entails additional interpretative work and analysis that is related to thematic discourse analysis (Singer & Hunter, 1999; Taylor & Ussher, 2001), whereby broader assumptions, structures, and meanings are theorized as underpinning what is actually articulated in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We were struck by the number of emotional responses and decided to work specifically on this data set. Emotional response is an area that is not often discussed with respect to cultivating professional growth – not just as future educators, but as complex, multi-faceted human beings (Shapiro, 2010). We believe this is an area that warrants attention given the extent to which it can potentially propel students to action.

### **Findings - Emotional Responses**

The Latin origin of emotion is *emovere*: to move out, to stir up. When people are emotional, they are moved by their feelings. They can be moved to tears, overcome by joy, or fall into despair . . . emotions are dynamic parts of ourselves, and whether they are positive or negative, all organizations, including schools, are full of them. (Hargreaves, 1998a, p. 835)

What is the purpose of evoking an emotional response? While we knew the viewing of *Waiting for Superman* could potentially elicit strong emotional responses from the students, we did not consider at the time how, or even if, we should use those instances as moments to expand on their perspectives. Denzin's (1984) work on emotional understanding highlighted the ability of individuals to engage within another's emotional field and experience similar experiences felt by the other person. However, we wondered, can this really be accomplished by merely watching a documentary?

We were surprised to the extent that students deviated from the journal prompts and, instead, focused on describing their feelings. For example, participants expressed (emphasis added in bold):

***It was hard** to see all the students work so hard and still not get what they deserve."*

(Betsy, White female)

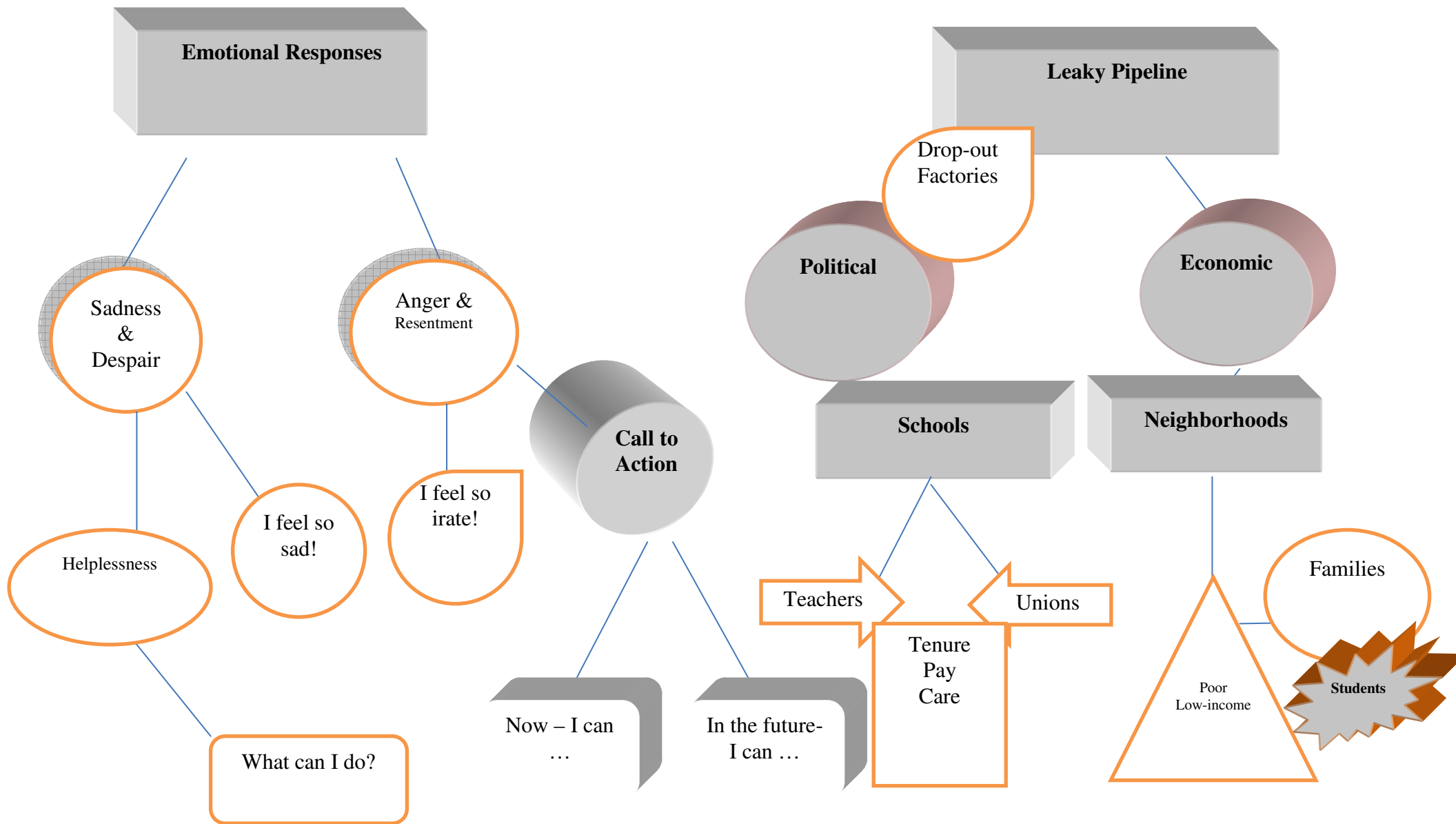


Figure 1: Thematic map of underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies

*“I felt that there has to be another way for people not to rely on just a ball to determine the future of the child’s education.”*

(Paul, White male)

*“The most **heartbreaking** aspect of the film came from having to watch several children and their parents go through the heartbreaking process of finding a good school.”*

(Becky, White female)

While such focus on emotional language might be enticing for educators who may believe that such language demonstrates emotional understanding (and thus leads to engagement), we posit that it is best to proceed with caution. While we critically examine some of the emotional responses, we also comment on missed opportunities to further engage our students in the classroom. We highlight ideological assumptions that should have been further explored since these assumptions can be quite problematic and can actually derail the goal of engaging in social justice work. After all, words used to describe emotions are themselves “actions or ideological practices” that serve a specific purpose in the process of creating and negotiating reality (Zembylas, 2005b, p. 937). Our analytic lens is centered on emotional responses. We coded words used to describe emotion (Figure 2; i.e., happy, sad, angry) and interrogated those words in action and ideological practice to arrive at four major themes: Structural Inequality, Searching for Heroes, Fixing the Problem, and Getting Involved.

We draw on poststructuralist approaches to discourse, which examine the role of culture, power, and ideology in helping to produce “emotional discourse.” We specifically focus on instances of negative, positive, and hopeful emotional responses to highlight how participants adopted and resisted certain dominant discourses (Boler, 1999; Zembylas, 2003). Using a poststructuralist perspective, our central argument is that emotion functions as a “discursive practice in which emotional expression is produced – that is to say, it makes individuals into socially and culturally specific persons engaged in complex webs of power relations” (Zembylas, 2005b, p. 937). Therefore, the focus of our analysis is on the discourse of experience rather than on the experience itself. According to Foucault (1977, 1983), power is dispersed and manifested in discursive practices and exercises, making it unstable and localized. Discourses produce power, which in turn, continuously produce and constitute the self.

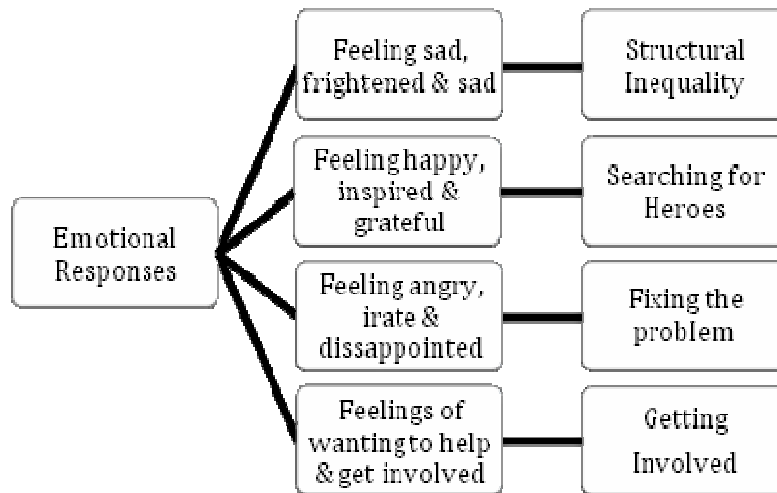


Figure 2. Conceptual diagram depicting the various emotional responses of student participants to the documentary and subsequent emergent themes

### Structural Inequality

*“Also, during the movie, I had felt **bad** for several of the children who had not been accepted because of the poor education that they will go on to receive.”*

(John, White male)

Negative emotions are significant, even more so in a field where caring is centralized. This caring orientation has been explored in terms of teachers’ relationships with students, once they have entered the profession (Noddings, 1992). However, a caring orientation has not been examined in terms of imagined children and families. In moving towards expanding this conversation, the question becomes: how can we help future educators expand their emotional understanding when they have yet to enter the field of education? According to Denzin (1984), emotional understanding is:

An inter-subjective process requiring that one person enter into the field of experience of another and experience for herself/himself the same or similar experiences experienced by another. The subjective interpretation of another’s emotional experience from one’s own standpoint is central to emotional understanding. Shared and sharable emotionality lie at the core of what it means to understand and meaningfully enter into the emotional experiences of another. (p. 137)

Watching a documentary that tugs at the heartstrings is powerful, but may not necessarily lead to one acquiring emotional understanding.

Although the participants seemed to be aware that some students receive an inadequate education, they did not always make the connection to structural inequalities embedded in the system. This is an area that we focused on and the following example illustrates this foci:

*I was **sad** to see that most of the kids did not get into the schools that they and their parents wanted them to, and even **more sad** that not getting into a good school is common for parents that try to get their child into one.*

(Maggie, White female)

Despite the wants and desires of the students and parents depicted in the film, this participant understands that a lack of access and limited opportunities are the root of the issue, even though “parents . . . try.” This same participant took an even more macro view of the structural issues involving access to quality instruction and qualified teachers, stating that *“the segment of the documentary about the ‘lemon dance’ **frightened me.**”* The notion of a “lemon dance” supposedly refers to “bad teachers” that get shuffled around from school to school. In an era of high accountability and teacher assessments, the labeling of teachers as lemons has become common practice. Unfortunately, Maggie has picked up on this problematic label without critically examining the larger problem around neoliberal approaches to standardization and assessment of teachers. As such, the notion of a “lemon” being allowed to remain in a school system would be frightening to her.

### **Searching for Heroes**

*“I was **happy** to see that there were so many parents that cared.”*

(Maggie, White female)

This statement hints to a prevailing perception among a lot of our students that some parents do not care. Therefore, it is not surprising that this participant was “happy” to see that “so many parents cared.” What is problematic about this statement is that it centers on individual “parents” and not on systemic issues with respect to a lack of responsiveness or the unwelcoming nature of some schools to certain parents. Had we attended to this statement in class, we could have also delved into multiple ways of caring by asking questions such as: how

did the parents demonstrate that they care in the documentary? Is it conceivable to think that many parents do care the same way, but because they are not captured in the documentary, they go unnoticed? The parents depicted in *Waiting for Superman* come from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and class backgrounds. Therefore, given the students we teach, there is a high probability that “inaccuracies of emotional understanding” can occur (Hargreaves, 1998a, p. 839). These misunderstandings can seriously interfere with future educators’ ability to connect with populations from different ethnocultural or social class backgrounds.

*“Geoffrey Canada, who is the president of Harlem Children's Zone, Inc. It was **inspiring** to see someone who took control, took a risk, and was successful in creating a school.”*

(Becky, White female)

Just like Superman, the following participant positioned Geoffrey Canada as a hero of sorts, as someone who “took control, took a risk.” This positionality of Canada places the responsibility of equality of education on certain individuals, preferably those with superhero powers, as opposed to society as a whole. While the participant may have been “inspired,” this emotional stance lacks a systems understanding. “A school” cannot possibly serve all children. This participant needed to be encouraged to think more systemically and to ponder the purpose of schooling. Given the feeling of inspiration, one can conclude that underlying that is a moral obligation. A moral foundation of society and its institutions, like schools, requires an emotional understanding of other people, and their lived reality (Denzin, 1984).

*While watching *Waiting for Superman*, there were a lot of thoughts running through my head. I was sad for all the children, but it also made me **grateful** that my parents were able to allow me to grow up in a town where education was very important.*

(Carly, White female)

Sheft (1990; 1994) pointed out that we experience shame when we feel we have fallen morally short of our own or others’ moral standards in a fundamental way – so much that such feeling can manifest in guilt. Given all of the “thoughts running through” this participant’s head, there is a strong chance that guilt was also felt given the feeling of sadness “for all the children.” This sentiment is couched in an authentic feeling of gratefulness as her “parents were able” to provide presumably a lot of what the parents depicted in the film could not provide to their own children – perhaps due to differential access. It is a wonderful sentiment that further expresses the town’s view toward education as “very important.” What is implied by this feeling of

gratefulness is that certain towns and neighborhoods have different views toward education, which unfortunately impact children both negatively (like the children in the movie) and positively as in Carly's case.

While in the field of education we are all aware of the importance of one's zip code in determining one's quality of education, there is no acknowledgement of the social structures and barriers that exist that limit who has access to move into certain towns. Thus, Carly would have benefited from a closer examination of redlining practices, which were first identified by Holloway in 1998, to describe the discriminatory lending practices that treated Black mortgage applicants differently when the application was for buying homes in predominately White neighborhoods (Ezeala-Harrison, Glover, & Shaw-Jackson, 2008). This practice has led to even greater spatial and racial segregation.

### **Fixing the Problem**

*The same feelings arose as the first time I watched it. I was **angry** and **determined**. It makes me **irate** to see how corrupt the school systems truly are. However, it only makes me more **determined** to become a teacher so I can change this, and hopefully impact lives along the way.*

(Jane, Black female)

According to Shapiro (2010), in respect to teacher efficacy, the most common negative emotion discussed in recent research is anger stemming from students' indifference or misbehavior and the absence of support from one's institution or community. In the quote above by Jane, however, the teacher to be is "angry" and "irate," but also "determined." What has led to this determination is the participant's realization of systemic issues as she thinks about, "corrupt , , , school systems." Since this participant readily admits to previously watching the documentary, we surmise that this prior exposure has provoked a deeper analysis of the issues revealed in the movie.

What warrants additional attention is the emphasis placed on the notion that, "I can change this." While the heart seems to be in the right place (e.g., "hopefully impact lives along the way"), as educators, we worry that this view may be too noble and simplistic. Thus, the question becomes: how do we support the agency to bring about change while making sure that students have realistic and pragmatic expectations?

*After viewing this film for the third time, I still feel the same emotions. I feel **angry, frustrated, and disappointed**. The American school system has a*

*number of problems, some which seem impossible to fix. Students are not getting the same, enriched education.*

(Isabel, Latina female)

The above participant, Isabel, had also watched the documentary more than once. It is interesting to note that the critique of “the American school system” is very strong, which may explain why this participant has already come to the conclusion that some of the problems “seem impossible to fix.” Thus, we are forced to ask – how can such over-deterministic despair translate into action? While we acknowledge and agree with the sentiment that “students are not getting the same, enriched education,” we remain steadfast to addressing this issue nonetheless. Therefore, the focus should be to attend to the circumstances under which education takes place while helping future educators find areas in which they can help bring about change. In reflecting back on this quote, we should have taken advantage of this opportunity to enter a discussion of what it means to attend to feelings while considering how sociological, political, and institutional forces shape and re-shape the emotional landscape of education (Hargreaves, 1998b).

From our analysis, we noticed that the women of color in our study were more apt to have an agentic orientation to “fix the problem.” These “problems” were located in “the American school system,” not the individual. We speculate that their lived reality as raced and gendered beings influenced their epistemic lens.

### **Getting Involved**

*“After this movie, I had a lot of questions, but mostly I **wanted to help** make a change, or better, make a difference in a child's life.”*

(Jackie, Black female)

These are certainly noble desires, and we wonder if perhaps we should have interrogated what it means to “make a difference in a child’s life.” Often times, students feel like they have to immediately commit to a cause or join an initiative of sorts. Though this is a great intention, it may not lead to prolonged involvement. Instead, we should focus on helping students process and make sense of the ways that they can initiate true change.

*Waiting for Superman affected me in a way I didn't think it would. It made me care. I was always **sympathetic** to the cause of diversity and civil rights, but*



*never before this class have I ever **wanted to feel involved** in something that is so obviously broken.*

(Evan, White male)

For the above participant, Evan, being “sympathetic” went beyond the field of education and to broader inequitable societal structures. Within his journal responses, he was able to make connections to course content that focused on the sociocultural, economic, and political context of education. We hoped that all of our students would make this connection and would also be provoked to get “involved” in a system that “is so obviously broken” that it will not work for all. However, we recognize that this is not possible, as everyone is at a different place. Thus, the focus should be on the process instead. One important aim of higher education should be to help students become knowledgeable, skilled, and committed to working toward democratic aims (Gasman & McMickens, 2010; Nagda et al., 2003). We cannot claim that we succeeded, but we certainly can claim that we tried nonetheless.

### **Discussion & Pedagogical Significance**

As educators informed in critical multicultural and social justice theoretical frameworks, we believe that student engagement entails preparing students to engage in the world critically and reflectively (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). As such, we integrated campus programming into our classes and attempted to make connections to broader societal issues by asking participants to challenge their assumptions and problematize education and social issues. At the end of the day, the goal is for student engagement to transcend the classroom and the halls of academia in order for students to become *civically* engaged.

In our classes, we began our work with a focus on identity and self-awareness. We explored pertinent topics in education, insisted on mandatory social justice training, and provided students with space to critically investigate their worlds. However, we recognize that raising awareness is not our end goal, and we question whether we are efficacious in our practice. “Educators need to consider how to move students from awareness of social (in)justice, to critical thought, to social activism as part of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy” (Fuentes, Chanthongthip, & Rios, 2010, p. 360).

In hindsight, we should have interrogated the journal entries immediately after the viewing of the documentary and paid closer attention to the affective language our students were using in class. Pedagogical tack involves the ability to immediately see through motives, notice cause and effect relations, and respond accordingly. We wonder – how much tack did we

exercise by not attending to the journal responses (van Manen, 1991)? Pre-journaling prior to viewing the film may have been another useful approach.

Additionally, we did not specifically look at frameworks that might have been useful in helping us engage in this work more efficiently. For example, we now realize that it would have been helpful to consider adapting Adams' (2007) Pedagogical Frameworks for Social Justice Education, which specifically calls for:

1. Establishing an equilibrium between the emotional and cognitive components of the learning process.
2. Acknowledging and supporting the personal and individual dimensions of experience, while making connections to and illuminating the systemic dimensions of social group interactions.
3. Paying explicit attention to social relations within the classroom.
4. Making conscious use of reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning.
5. Rewarding changes in awareness, personal growth, and efforts to work toward change, understood as outcomes of the learning process. (p. 15)

While we would like to believe that we attended to all of the above, the reality is that we did not, especially in terms of “establishing an equilibrium between the emotional and cognitive components.” We now realize that emotional and cognitive understandings are never completely pure, never absolutely separate from one another as distinctive and self-contained kinds of experience (Damasio, 1994; James, 1917).

We have gained a deeper appreciation for the relevance of exploring emotions in our pedagogical practice as well as in our students' discursive practices (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; Nias, 1996; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). As Nias (1996) noted, teaching involves human interaction and, therefore, has an emotional dimension. Somewhere along navigating the terrain of higher education, we lost sight of that. Thus, we have learned that it is not enough to mandate social justice trainings hoping they will have the magical powers to engage students in social justice work. While we recognize the power of these trainings to evoke the participants' emotional responses to injustices, power can quickly dissipate if it is not harnessed. It is our responsibility as both professors and researchers to enter the emotional terrain and collectively construct the theoretical and applied tools that will engage students in our classrooms, on our campuses, and in our communities. This is not only social justice-oriented and pedagogically

sound, but necessary if we are to answer the nation's call to be, and to prepare, civically engaged citizens of the world.

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