

Doing What We Want to Become: Preparing New Urban Teachers

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Abstract:

The shortage of competent, caring professionals who see themselves as urban educators has long been recognized as a problem that teacher preparation programs need to address. We argue that situating an entire elementary teacher education program in an urban school setting and engaging candidates in ongoing conversations about difficult social issues can make a difference in how graduates see themselves and how they judge their ability to succeed as the next generation of urban teachers.

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“You can’t teach! Every day it’s something.”

“Mornings the kids come in, there’s been a shooting or something, and that’s all they’re thinking about.”

“ It doesn’t matter what techniques you use, it doesn’t make any difference.”

“ It’s because the community is dysfunctional; the parents are dysfunctional; and so are their kids” (Anyon, 1997, p. 152).

As faculty members who choose to situate their teacher education program in urban schools, we are often confronted by students who question our judgment. Not only are the schools we work in situated in old buildings without the comforts of air-conditioning and state-of-the-art technology, but they are also populated by a larger than usual proportion of children from impoverished families. Our students’ resistance to spending time in these schools is not totally unexpected, given what we know about the difficulties that many urban districts have in attracting qualified teachers. A number of national studies have shown that minority and poor children are the most likely to be taught by underqualified teachers (Berry, 2001; Haycock, 2000). The “dismal state of schooling in most of our central cities” (Anyon, 1997, p. 9) is not a secret. It is not surprising, then, that our students, most of whom are White and come from suburban or rural areas, are less than enthusiastic about spending time in urban schools.

Our program for prospective elementary teachers spans a 2-year (4-semester) period. During the past 6 years we worked with 3 different cohorts of students. Each cohort had around

30 students and was taught totally on site by us (with the assistance of doctoral students) in one of three urban elementary schools. The larger teacher education program at our university had classes that met on campus and used a combination of urban and suburban schools for field experiences and student teaching. Following the logic that “adding a course or a field experience” (Sleeter, 2001, p. 100) isn’t enough to make a real difference, we made our cohort program totally field-based and required students to spend the entire two years “in residence” at an urban school.

The focus on urban schools was not easy to sell to prospective students. Although our university campus is located in the downtown area of a major Midwestern city with a large African American population, the majority of our teacher education candidates came into our program with the expectation that they would do their fieldwork and student teaching in communities that were similar to the ones they came from. They saw our program’s urban focus as an obstacle to their career goals. This mismatch was compounded by the fact that students often ended up in our group even though they did not want to be there. Although advisors did their best to inform new students about the differences between our “cohort” and the “regular program,” it sometimes seemed that students did not understand what they were signing up for. In addition, some students only agreed to join our group because the regular program was already filled and no longer available for the semester when they wanted to begin. All of these factors fed into a general sense of malaise that became a pattern for some of our students. Throughout the 6 years that we worked with 3 different cohorts, there were always students who urged us to abandon these “poor schools” and allow them to learn about teaching in “better” schools like the ones they had attended in their own hometowns.

Another pattern that we noticed across all 3 groups was the willingness of many of our teacher education students to accept the status quo, as “that’s just the way things are.” Either they didn’t notice the lack of power and the societal inequities that lead to problems for many urban children and their families, or they blamed the children and families for having problems in the first place. Many of these future teachers began our program with the belief that children and parents just needed to “try harder” in order to work their way out of poverty and intergenerational failure. At the beginning of the program, students rarely felt the need to interrogate their underlying assumption that poor people deserve the problems they have. Similarly, they did not wish to spend any time talking or thinking about issues like poverty or racism. They frequently stated that they were not prejudiced and intended to treat all children the same way.

Challenging Color-blindness

Our observations support Sleeter’s (2001) conclusion that “White preservice teachers tend to use colorblindness as a way of coping with fear and ignorance” and that they envision a multicultural curriculum “as mainly additions to the existing curriculum” (p. 95). While their profession of color-blindness might have been well intended, this approach has been characterized by others as presenting “a huge blind spot in orientation when it comes to educating African American children” (CampbellJones & CampbellJones, 2002, p. 137; Delpit, 1995; McIntosh, 1989). Ladson-Billings (2001) argues in *Crossing over to Canaan* that most existing teacher education programs do little to free students from the parochial attitudes that they bring with them. She urges teacher educators to break away from their “folkloric” past practices and focus on social justice issues in more than superficial ways. “Rather, an important

component of preparing to be a teacher is interrogating the way status characteristics like race, class, and gender configure every aspect of our lives” (p. 5).

In order to help our students understand the effects of these status characteristics, we introduced them to a “critical literacy” text set that we had been developing over the past five years (Harste, Breau, Leland, Lewison, Ociepka & Vasquez, 2000). Books in this text set typically focus on difficult social issues that are not often addressed in schools, particularly at the elementary level. They tell the stories of people in history and contemporary life who were or continue to be marginalized, discriminated against and treated unfairly for a number of different reasons. Characters in these books deal with historical phenomena like the Nazi holocaust in Europe and slavery in the United States as well as current topics like racism, gender discrimination, religious persecution, homophobia, war, poverty and homelessness. As in real life, the problems described in these books are not easily solved. And, as in real life, the typical storybook ending where everyone lives “happily ever after” is not a common occurrence. Our students often reacted negatively when we began to share these books with them. “This is not appropriate for children,” they said emphatically. “These books make me uncomfortable and bring up sad topics that I don’t want to think about. I’d rather read happy books that the children and I can enjoy.”

In terms of both the books from the critical literacy text set and the urban schools we placed them in, our students seemed to be saying, in essence, that some topics are too hard to talk about and are therefore better to ignore. In the almost same breath, however, they complained that children in all schools appeared to be cruel to each other and often ended up in quarrels that took valuable time away from what their teachers were trying to accomplish in the classroom. This problem is so pervasive that conflict resolution has become a standard focus in many school

districts. However, it is usually treated as a separate topic, not one that is integrated into the larger curriculum. We see conversations about books that focus on difficult social issues as one way to make conflict resolution an integral part of the regular school program. These conversations help both children and our adult teacher education students to connect the real-life issues they confront every day with what goes on in school. In many cases, it might be the only chance that both the older and younger students have to talk openly about how people treat one another and what role they might play in making their classroom, neighborhood and world a better and more compassionate place.

Gracie's Girl (Wittlinger, 2000), *The Lady in the Box* (McGovern, 1997), and *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991) are children's books that address the topic of homelessness. Sharing these books with children opens up lots of spaces for critical conversations. One of these (*Gracie's Girl*) tells the story of an elderly homeless woman who ends up dying, even though some children try to help her by bringing her food and showing her an empty storage building at their school where she can sleep at night. While homelessness is not a pleasant topic, it is one that children are anxious to discuss. They bring up many questions: Why do some people end up being homeless? Whose fault is it? What can be done to help them? This is not a common topic for discussion in most elementary classrooms and will undoubtedly make some teachers uncomfortable. It is, however, a subject that many children find relevant and compelling. Urban children are especially interested because they are aware of homeless people in their community. After experiencing books like these, they often want to take some sort of social action in order to address the issue of homelessness. Sometimes they follow the lead set by the characters in *Gracie's Girl* and put their efforts into collecting canned goods, clothing and blankets for a homeless shelter. Or, they might decide to write letters to the editor of their local newspaper to

publicize the problems of homeless people and offer ideas for helping them. Since all of their action plans will include some form of reading, writing or speaking, the children become acquainted with the role that literacy can play in challenging or maintaining existing power relationships.

Critical Conversations in Teacher Education

In many ways, our teacher education students were not much different from the children in terms of needing to experience critical conversations about difficult social issues. They never approached these sensitive topics with as much enthusiasm as their younger counterparts, however, and some of them continued to insist that they wanted nothing to do with these books for many weeks. Sooner or later, however, they were drawn in. They all had opinions about why Gracie was homeless, whose fault it was that she died, and what the rest of us should (or should not) do to improve the situation for others like her. The question of what is fair and just always came up eventually, and led to further conversations about power relationships and how they determine who wins and who loses in any situation. These discussions played an important role in helping our students to become what we think of as “critically literate.”

According to Comber (2001), “critical literacies involve people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice” (p. 1). Our focus on developing teachers who are critically literate derives from the theoretical model of literacy as social practice (e.g. Luke & Freebody, 1997). According to this model, literacy is best understood as a non-neutral form of cultural practice that positions readers in certain ways. To be literate in the fullest sense, readers need to be able to take a critical perspective and interrogate the assumptions that are embedded in texts as well as the assumptions they bring to these texts. They need to be able to ask whose voice is heard in a

particular text or context and whose voice is silenced. Similarly, critically literate teachers need to be able to interrogate their own assumptions and the assumptions that are embedded in the systems of meaning that serve as a foundation for popular culture and intergenerational “wisdom” that is passed down as unexamined truth. A critically literate individual is able to recognize stereotypical references and is willing to challenge statements like “Urban schools are dangerous places where there is little learning going on” and “These kids have so many other problems that learning to read just isn’t important for them.” As literacy educators, we see this facet of development as one that has not received the attention it deserves because of more traditional emphases on comprehension and decoding. Therefore, a major goal of our program is to help our students become more critically aware. While we believe that critical awareness is important for all future teachers, we see it as an essential element in developing the next generation of urban teachers.

Repositioning

Our third cohort of undergraduates was particularly vocal in their criticism of the program. Many of the students in this group did not approve of our emphasis on critical literacy and did not see any benefit from working in urban schools during their teacher education program. Since our students moved through the two-year program as a group and stayed with us throughout that time, they had many opportunities to voice their opinions about our choice of teaching materials and our decision to situate the program in urban schools. After a considerable amount of criticism, we were not optimistic that many of these new teachers would see themselves as agents of social change. We predicted that the majority of them would hurry back to the suburban communities that they had come from originally and not give a second thought to the conversations they had experienced during their time in our program. Similarly, we predicted

that they would be relieved to return to the traditional “happily ever after” stories of their own childhood memories once they were out from under our supervision.

As it turned out, we were in for some surprises. The first one was that the books dealing with social issues seemed to get more popular as the program went on. No matter where we went, we found our students using these books more than any other genre. Even during the final semester, when students were planning curricular engagements and choosing materials on their own, they seemed to go out of their way to include books that brought up social issues. When we asked them why, the most common response was that the children found them interesting and there were fewer discipline problems to deal with when they were using them. It did not take these novice teachers long to discover that the children listened carefully and engaged in thoughtful discussions when they perceived that the issues being discussed were worth their attention. This conclusion is supported by Wilson and Corbett’s (2001) study of how urban students define good teachers. Including “real- life stuff” (p. 86) and relating school topics to the students’ experiences was identified as one of six traits that urban students valued in a teacher. Our students’ experiences with these books is also supported by the observation of an experienced teacher who said that she could “hear a pin drop” when she shared critical books with her third graders (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999).

The second surprise occurred when we caught up with members of this group several months after graduation and asked them how their job searches were going. One after another, they told us that they were either already under contract or attempting to get hired in the same urban district where we had worked for two years. Fourteen out of the 29 students who were actively seeking a teaching position ended up with jobs in this district. Alice and Darlene (pseudonyms) are representative examples of students who were extremely vocal in their

complaints during the program, but who later chose to work in the same urban system. In an attempt to explain the anomaly of their repositioning, we interviewed them and went back through their journals to look for evidence of movement towards a critical perspective.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1 is a working model. It suggests that a critical perspective can be conceptualized as having three dimensions. The first is an understanding of how systems of meaning and power position people in specific ways. Included in this dimension are numerous beliefs and practices that are accepted as common sense in the dominant culture. The unquestioned assumptions inherent in these belief and practices serve to position people with varying amounts of power and prestige. The second dimension is a willingness to recognize one's own complicity in maintaining inequitable power systems and relationships. This dimension is characterized by people's recognition of their own "hand in the cookie jar" (Leland & Harste, 2000) and realization that their actions might inadvertently be perpetuating the very practices that they are fighting against. The third dimension is a commitment to social action that addresses the perceived inequities.

What is not clear from the data we have collected is whether or not these dimensions occur in a developmental sequence. On the one hand, it makes sense to argue that individuals have to understand the systems of meaning operating in society before they can see their own role in perpetuating them. On the other hand, however, we have learned from experience that the

ability to be self-reflective about how we might inadvertently be supporting the very systems we want to criticize is often one of the most difficult aspects of critical literacy for people to attain. In addition, we have known teachers and teacher education students who start with social action projects and only later begin to understand how tokenistic their actions are in response to the dominant systems of meaning they want to challenge. The best we can argue at this time is that the wedge showing critical literacy needs to address all of three dimensions simultaneously.

Alice: “I Just Want to Stay in My Hometown”

Alice was one of the students who had argued long and hard about having to do her student teaching in an urban school. She pointed out more than once that since she did not plan to teach in an urban school, it made no sense to require her to spend so much time in one. She also said that she just wanted a “normal” teacher education program, not one that made her spend time in urban schools. She claimed that she never would have signed up for our program if she had known that it would have such a large focus on diversity and critical literacy. After graduation, Alice immediately applied for a teaching position in her hometown. We had provided reference checks for administrators there and assumed that they would offer her a position. We were stunned, therefore, when we learned that she had turned the ensuing offer down and had taken a job in the city instead. Naturally, our first question was “Why?” After all we had heard from Alice about her plans for teaching in her hometown, why had she turned down a job there? In an interview, Alice responded that she had visited an elementary school there and “hated what was going on.” She felt that the school was too traditional and had too much emphasis on competition and rewards. She was bothered by the expectation that all of the children would achieve the same amount of growth, and was unhappy with the lack of diversity. Alice characterized the instructional approach at this school as one that was “unfair for any child

who is not right in the middle.” She said that she saw no space for children who didn’t fit into the lock-step expectations set by the adults and knew that she could never be happy working there (Interview, 8-2001).

The model in figure 1 provides a framework for examining Alice’s development as a critically literate individual during the program. We found many examples of the first component, “Understand Systems of Meaning,” in Alice’s journal entries. For example, during the first semester in the program she addressed the issue of why children at a particular school were not allowed to talk at lunchtime. After reminiscing about how she had looked forward with great anticipation to talking with her friends at lunchtime when she was in elementary school, she stated:

I cannot imagine being stripped of these precious moments. I cannot imagine never talking at lunch...I find myself asking the question, “Who are we to strip valuable conversation time from these children?” (Journal entry, 9-1999).

In this case, Alice implied that it was unfair to deprive these urban children of what she saw as their right to talk to each other as they ate lunch. Although she could not articulate the underlying assumption that she disagreed with, she was able to challenge the cultural norm that positioned these children as not being capable of engaging in normal social conversations at lunchtime.

During the second year of the program, Alice wrote about issues of power and control on a regular basis. In one instance, she challenged the dominant cultural norm that allows teachers to choose the topics that their student are required to address in their writing:

I believe it is very important to give the students a voice. If not allowing them to choose the topic of study, then choosing a question gives them a voice. Letting them write in their journal about what interests them will also give them the voice they need to perfect

a final piece. A person writes best when they (sic) are writing about what interests them (Journal entry, 9-2000).

In the same entry, she went on to interrogate the commonly accepted belief that teachers must control their students' every move:

Why are there so many teachers who run their classrooms with no student input? Could it be that they are scared to death to give too much control to students? (Journal entry, 9-2000).

Although there was evidence that Alice was able to identify some of the systems of meaning that marginalized urban children, we found contradictory evidence regarding her ability to interrogate her personal involvement in maintaining the inequities that were problematic to her (dimension 2). An incident that led us to believe that she did not achieve this dimension occurred during the final semester of the program, when we asked our students to write a personal memoir and to work with a child in their student teaching classroom to write his or her memoir as well. We then asked our students to analyze the two memoirs in terms of the evidence of privilege in each one. Alice was very critical of this assignment and wrote:

I found myself feeling low about dissecting every move my parents had made. Why did my mom stay at home? Was she being the "good wife?" Why did they choose to raise me in a small town? Were they sheltering me? Why did they buy me my first car? Were they giving me too much? I felt like we were repenting our sheltered lives... I do not feel one must interrogate their childhood in order to understand the urban children they work with (Journal entry, 1-2001).

When asked to analyze the role that privilege had played in her life, Alice became defensive and argued that it wasn't her fault that she was raised in a family that could give her more than the

family of the child she was working with in the urban school. She was unwilling or unable to think through the implications of how her memoir differed from the child's memoir in terms of the role that privilege (or the absence of privilege) played in their lives.

On the other hand, we can also argue that Alice's rejection of the job in her hometown implies her rejection of the values (systems of meaning) that she understood as being in place there. Her decision to reject the job offer can be interpreted as a successful attempt to keep her hand out of the cookie jar (dimension 2). Accepting the job would have meant that she was tacitly accepting all of the things she found problematic: the emphasis on competition and rewards, the lack of diversity, the expectation that all children would progress at the same rate, etc. Her rejection of the job offer shows that she was able to reinvent herself and take on a new identity. While some might interpret her action as fleeing from administrative constraints, we see it as evidence that she was developing a stance that fit with her beliefs. Instead of accepting the identity that working in her hometown would have required her to take on, she showed agency and the ability to position herself with a new and different identity.

Since we categorized Alice's decision to teach in an urban school as an instance of "Taking Social Action" (dimension 3), we wanted to hear her explanation for what appeared to be anomalous behavior. In an interview several months after the program ended, we asked her to speculate about what might have caused the change from a "hometown girl" into someone who could see herself as a successful urban teacher. She credited both the critical books and the extended experiences in urban schools as contributors to her growth. She said that the books made it easier for her to talk about and understand hard topics and her time in the urban schools had challenged her stereotypes and allowed her to see that these schools and the children in them were not strange or abnormal. She said that her experiences in the urban cohort program had

given her confidence and a willingness to face new challenges. Alice also stated that she had developed the ability to be articulate about her practice as a result of “all those conversations, talking and working things out” that she had experienced in the cohort program. Alice’s conclusions are supported by findings from a multi-year study of beginning teachers that is presently being conducted by the International Reading Association. Earlier graduates from the same cohort program that Alice and Darlene experienced were found to bring to their teaching “a strong sense of who they were as teachers and what they believed about teaching. Making explicit the connections between beliefs and decisions was an aspect found only within [this] cohort group” (Flint, Leland, Patterson, Hoffman, Sailors, Mast, & Assaf, 2001, p. 114).

Darlene: “It Took Me Two Years to Figure It out”

Darlene was another student who was very vocal in her criticism of our program, but later surprised us by accepting a teaching job in the same district. In a reflection written several months after graduation, she explained this change as a process that had taken place gradually and without her conscious realization over the duration of the two-year program. According to her own analysis, she had entered the program with many misconceptions about her own “picture perfect” schooling experience. She said that these misconceptions had “fogged” her view of the teacher education program and had caused her to react negatively to what she was experiencing:

I can remember at the start of [the] cohort, slowly realizing that I would be in an urban setting for two years and as I realized this, my blood pressure, anger and emotions ran rampant. I kept asking myself and others, ‘WHY AM I IN AN URBAN SETTING?’

This was not where I wanted to teach, nor was it where I wanted to do my teacher training (personal correspondence, 8-2001).

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Like Alice, Darlene headed back to the suburbs when she finished the program and visited schools there. She said that it took her two years in the program, a couple of visits to her local schools and a lot of reflection, but in the end she realized that she did not want to go back. What led to this conclusion? Darlene credited the fact that the program she experienced had focused mainly on “urban education, critical literacy and diversity.” After realizing that the program had been “rewarding,” she knew that she could “get out of the box and make a difference” (personal correspondence, 8-2001).

As was the case with Alice, Darlene’s repositioning didn’t happen all at once. There is evidence of it developing throughout the program. Like Alice, she was making statements that showed this repositioning by the end of the first year. In evaluating her professional growth at that time, Darlene described how she had repositioned herself as a learner:

I went into this semester with a strong goal in mind...to improve my grade...By mid-semester, however, I grew tired of doing everything for others’ approval and not doing things for the right reason...I needed to stop writing my journals about what I thought the professors wanted to hear and start on what was really on my mind and the struggles I was having. I needed to change who I was and start *doing what I wanted to become* (Journal entry, 4-2000, emphasis added).

In this entry Darlene showed evidence of component 1, that she was becoming aware of how the traditional student/teacher hierarchy positioned her as a learner. This system of meaning was a cultural norm that she was now ready to challenge. In another journal entry, Darlene talked about her evolving understanding of how people learn:

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If there is one thing I learned this semester it is that questioning what you believe, and questioning what you see or what you want to see, is the best way to learn. (Journal entry, 4-2000).

In this case, Darlene was challenging the widely held assumption that learning takes place through being told what to believe. In this model it is the teacher's job to transmit knowledge and the learner's job to take it in and remember it. Darlene's analysis of her own learning identified the key role that questioning had played during the semester.

As with Alice, we found little evidence of Darlene developing the ability to interrogate her personal involvement in maintaining existing power relationships (component 2):

I come from a very sheltered community and being put into [this district] has been what I would consider a cultural shock....I do have certain beliefs about different cultures because of where and how I was raised...but I do not let these views get in the way of the classroom. I see every child in the classroom as the same and do not let how I feel get in the way of that (Journal entry, 10-99).

This example suggests that Darlene could not see her own hand in the metaphorical cookie jar. Unable to analyze how some differences might indeed "make a difference," she was left with the color blind strategy identified by Sleeter (2001) and insisted that she could achieve fairness by treating all children as if they were the same.

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With both of these cases, we were somewhat disappointed to find that component 2, "Interrogate Personal Involvement," continued to elude us. Even though we can make the argument that both of these young women took social action (component 3) by deciding to become an urban teacher, we are left to wonder what it will take to help our future students

achieve an understanding of how they (and we) have all had our “hand in the cookie jar” in terms of allowing inequities to exist and flourish. One possibility is that we need to arrange the components differently and then argue for the existence of a developmental sequence. If we have evidence of students engaging in social action before they are able to accept that they have played a role in maintaining inequities, then we might conclude that the dimensions in Figure 1 should be arranged in some type of sequential order and these particular students never arrived at the final stage.

Regardless of how we look at the sequence of the components, it is clear that we still have work to do. One option is to make the process of interrogating personal involvement more transparent. This might be achieved by providing the students with examples that show how other people have come to understand their roles in inadvertently supporting systems of power that they inherently disagreed with. The fact that white privilege continues to be a thorny issue for large numbers of prospective teachers suggests that we need to give more attention to it.

In some ways, it seems that Darlene had the right idea when she realized that she was not going to get anywhere until she started *doing* what she wanted to *become*. If we want teachers who can think critically, then we need to immerse them in critical issues and give them opportunities to sort through their conflicting beliefs and observations. Situating a teacher education program in urban schools and using children’s books to begin critical conversations about tough social issues encourages the kind of interrogation that leads to an understanding of how systems of meaning position everyone. A book discussion can quickly and easily transfer to a discussion on teaching. Statements like “These kids can’t learn because their home lives are so bad” and “Nobody can teach in a school like this” are more easily interrogated after spending time with urban children and reading books like *Miracle’s Boys* (Woodson, 2000) and *Tomas*

and the Library Lady (Mora, 1997). Both the books and the real-life experiences in urban schools suggest that children from impoverished backgrounds can be just as bright, hardworking and successful as children from families of greater means. However, they can also be crushed by existing systems of power if they don't receive the support they need to reach their full potential. This support is what the next generation of urban teachers needs to be able to provide.

Contrary to much of the rhetoric of the standards movement, teachers of children from poverty need more than a good grasp of content knowledge about the different subject areas they will be teaching. Perhaps more important for them is the ability to see themselves as agents of change-- people who can make a difference in the lives of children. They need to be able to rise above the temptation to give in to a feeling of fatalistic helplessness. Freire (1998) wrote:

I am not angry with people who think pessimistically. But I am sad because for me they have lost their place in history. There is a lot of fatalism around us. An immobilizing ideology of fatalism, with its flighty postmodern pragmatism, which insists that we can do nothing to change the march of social-historical and cultural reality because that is how the world is (pp. 26-7).

Teachers of children from poverty need to find their place in history and say, "though I know that things can get worse, I also know that I am able to intervene to improve them" (Freire, 1998, p. 53). This attitude is not developed overnight or in the safety of a college classroom. It is the product of inner struggle, self-interrogation and the realization that anyone can grow into a new kind of person.

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Figure caption

Figure 1: Three components of a critical perspective

