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## Too Important to Fail: The Banking Concept of Education and Standardized Testing in an Urban Middle School

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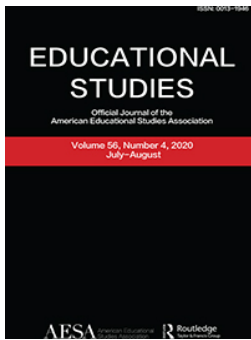
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## Too Important to Fail: The Banking Concept of Education and Standardized Testing in an Urban Middle School

Eric Ruiz Bybee 

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### ABSTRACT



Paulo Freire’s influential concept of “banking” education describes an oppressive process that positions teachers as the “depositors” of knowledge into passive student “receptacles.” However, according to Freire, teachers also have an “ontological vocation to be more fully human” that can only be achieved through freedom from oppression. In this article, I use Freire’s concept of banking education to reflect on my experiences giving standardized tests during my final year teaching at a high-need middle school in New York City. Drawing from narrative inquiry methodology, I bring these teaching/testing experiences into conversation with the sociopolitical discourse on banks and argue that the contradiction and dehumanization of standardized banking models oppress both students and teachers. I argue that neoliberal forms of “accountability” in public education also force educators to substitute the humanization and freedom of student engagement for a type of “proxy personhood” achieved through acting on behalf of corporations.

### The influence of Paulo Freire

Of all of the academic fields influenced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, the power of his work is perhaps most visible in the area of education in general and schools of education in particular. Indeed, a 2002 study of 16 highly ranked colleges of education found that Freire was assigned on the syllabi of educational foundations, reading, and general methods courses at 14 of the 16 universities (Steiner, 2005). Freire’s spread through the curricula of schools of education has made terms like “critical consciousness” and “praxis” part of the discourse for many pre-service teachers, graduate students, and teacher educators. However, the uncritical treatment of Freire in many courses has caused theorists like Peter McLaren (2001), Henry Giroux (1992), and Donaldo Macedo (2000) to lament the “unproblematic domestication” of his ideas into a “method” and even resulted in calls to “reclaim” his critical pedagogy.

The “banking” concept is another Freirean neologism whose lengthy development in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is at odds with its cursory presentation in many education courses. Heany (1995) provides an example of a basic definition of “banking” education in his “glossary” of common terms for first time readers of Freire:

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In the “banking” concept of education passive learners receive deposits of pre-selected, ready-made knowledge, the learner’s mind is seen as an empty vault into which the riches of approved knowledge are placed. The approach is also referred to as “digestive” and as “narrational” education.

While such a treatment of banking education might be appropriate in an introductory reading or lecture, many students of Freire fail to move beyond this incomplete understanding of the idea. A closer reading of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reveals that Freire also imbues the idea of banking education with notions of contradiction, objectification, dehumanization, domination/violence, and death.

### Banking education and naming the oppressor

As important as Freire’s notions of banking education were when he originally penned them, his term carries additional weight in the wake of the world financial crisis that occurred a decade ago<sup>1</sup>. The largest collapse since the Great Depression, the financial crisis of 2008 eliminated forty percent of the world’s wealth and led to government and Federal Reserve bailouts of several banks deemed “too big to fail” totaling over eight trillion dollars (Conway, 2009; Goldman, 2009; Hilsenrath, Ng, & Paletta, 2008; Ivry, Keoun, & Kuntz, 2011). Although a subsequent recession saw drastic increases in unemployment and decreases in public funding, (Butler, 2011; Rampell, 2010) some of the banks who played a key role in the crisis soon saw record profits and began rewarding their executives (some of whom were implicated in the crisis) with record bonuses (Helmore, 2010; Melloy, 2011). These issues, along with the role of money in politics and a general increase in income concentration among societies’ top “1 percent” led a diverse coalition of working and middle-class individuals to “Occupy Wall Street” (OWS) during my last year of teaching on September 17, 2011 to voice the demands of the “99 percent” (Shwartz, 2011). The “Occupy” movement’s subsequent spread to over 1,500 cities around the world, the news coverage each “occupation” enjoyed for several months, and the popular support it prompted among “average” Americans have changed our societal orientation toward certain types of banks and bankers (Saad, 2011).

These changes in our collective understanding about what it means to be a “bank” or a “banker” imbue the notion of banking education with a new significance that deserves exploration. Although some might argue that the connection between the practice of banking and banking education is little more than superficial semantics, Freire and the theorists who study his work have recognized the power of words and word meanings to oppress or liberate. After all, it was Freire—a teacher of literacy—who used the idea of intransitive verbs (those verbs that do not act upon an object) to describe the “semi-intransitive consciousness” of people developing a critical perception of the world (Heany, 1995). Similarly, in the introduction to the 2005 edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Donaldo Macedo meditates on the importance of language in doing justice to the various concepts dealing with oppression and wonders what would have occurred had Freire instead written *Pedagogy of the Disenfranchised*. He concludes that substituting words like “disenfranchised” for “oppressed” or “ethnic cleansing” for “genocide” distorts and obfuscates reality and ultimately allows the true oppressors to go unnamed (Macedo, 2000, p. 21).

It is with the intention of more truly “naming the oppressors” that I bring Freire’s notion of banking education into conversation with the (post-financial crisis) discourse around what it means to be a “bank.” Under a more traditional “banking” model the teacher is imagined primarily as the “depositor” while the target of oppression and objectification is the student or “vault.” However, according to Freire, teachers also have an “ontological vocation to be more fully human” (p. 74) that can only be achieved through freedom from oppression. Thus, the contradiction and dehumanization of standardized banking models oppresses both students and teachers. The ascendancy of neoliberal forms of accountability, privatization, and corporate education reform, (De Lissovoy, 2015; Ravitch, 2013) also mean that educators are forced to substitute the humanization and freedom achieved through critical engagement with their students for a type of “proxy personhood” achieved through acting on behalf of private corporations.

## Methodology

The goal of this paper is to discuss the various meanings Freire ascribes to banking education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (p. 72), to reconceptualize and problematize them for our social moment, and then to show how those meanings play out in a school setting using my own experiences as a teacher at a high-need middle school in New York City. In order to facilitate this interplay between a theoretical construct of banking education and the data I have systematically collected about my teaching experiences, I employ a qualitative research methodology that focuses on lived experience and bringing that personal experience into conversation with the larger theoretical dialog.

Narrative inquiry methodology is a way of studying experience and is rooted in the belief that people’s experiences and knowledge take the form of stories. Narrative inquiry methodology, because of its focus on experience and story, is at its heart relational (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2009) and is always strongly autobiographical (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A variety of qualitative sources collected systematically can be used as data and are usually called field texts. Clandinin et al. (2009) explain that “Field texts are relied upon as markers of experience” (p. 599) and can include things like field notes, interview transcripts, and photographs.

Narrative inquiry firmly grounds analysis in a three-dimensional inquiry space that focuses on (1) the personal and larger social significance of the stories; (2) the temporal components of the stories including considering them in light of the past, present, and future; and (3) the notion of the place or situation in which the stories occur. The three-dimensional inquiry space uncovers tensions and bumping places between various stories of experience and allows the inquirer to examine the potential meanings and implications of these conflicts. The narrative inquirer raises wonderings about experience that emerge from within the three-dimensional narrative space and uses theoretical and philosophical literature to interrogate the experiences and understandings of the tensions. The inquirer is then able to place the narratives in a larger social theoretical context so that both stories and social theory can inform each other (Clandinin, 2006). Through its attention to stories and social theory, narrative inquiry methodology is

well-situated to address the “unproblematic domestication” of Freire’s ideas and bring them into conversation with current challenges in schooling and society.

### **Data collection**

The data I will use is drawn from 3 months of observations I did during 2010–2011 school year teaching science to 6th, 7th, and 8th grade bilingual special education students. Statistics from the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) during that year indicate that the demographic distribution of the student population was 91% Hispanic and 8% Black with 93% qualifying for free lunch. Additionally, about 9% were recent immigrants with 85% remaining in school from year to year and 23% without stable living situations (NYTimes Schoolbook School Data, 2011). During my last year, I was part of the school leadership team that helped prepare this information for the NYCDOE, and I also know that our student turnover rate was about 50% with half of our population (about 200 students) either enrolling or withdrawing after the official start of the academic year.

My school was one of two “small schools<sup>2</sup>” sharing a red brick building that wrapped like a U around one end of a city block in a northern Manhattan neighborhood. Located close to a park and surrounded by pre-war apartment buildings, small businesses and ubiquitous corner *bodegas*, the school building was (and remains) an important hub of community life. During the school year, the building was often open until 10 pm each weeknight with various after-school, adult education, and sports programs that kept students and their families buzzing around the building long after the school day had ended. The majority of the teachers, students, and staff at my school were Latinos with roots primarily in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Mexico and much of our informal conversation in hallways and offices occurred in Spanish.

My primary method of data collection was to spend time at the end of each school day writing what occurred during school hours and my reaction to it. The amount of time I spent writing varied from one half-hour to two hours depending on what occurred during the day, the time I had available, my level of fatigue, and other factors. Most of my data was typed into an online word processing program but I also sometimes used a notebook and camera to help me remember what occurred throughout the day. I tried to describe events that seemed interesting or significant in sufficient detail so that I could use them later to improve my practice as a teacher and teacher educator. Although I was a fourth-year teacher and lived in my school neighborhood, my position as a white, Mexican American, college-educated male from the west differentiated me from my school community and influenced my data collection.

### **Data analysis**

The temporal and spatial analysis of my field texts began with a re-reading of my journal entries with special attention to elements of time and location in the narratives recorded in the entries. I looked for patterns regarding these elements and wrote memos to myself and made mental notes of particular intersections of time and location in my entries.

The analysis of the personal and larger social significance of the stories began as I re-read and reminisced about my experiences in the classroom. Again and again, I kept turning to Freire's construct of banking education to help myself make sense of my experiences. Therefore, I began to use the concept of banking education outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a vehicle to bring my personal stories into conversation with a larger theoretical conversation of social significance. Banking education was employed as both a focus and an interpretive lens. I first developed a list of themes related to the concept that arose from a close reading of the text. The main ideas that emerged were *contradiction* (pp. 71, 72), *objectification* (p. 72), *dehumanization* (pp. 74–76), *domination/violence* (pp. 71, 76), and *death* (p. 77). My next step was to do an initial read-through of my field notes and then code them in different colors according to the Freirean themes. At this point, it became apparent that the banking themes occurred with more frequency during periods when my students were either taking or preparing to take high-stakes, standardized exams—particularly during a period of month-long state testing near the end of the year. Once I had coupled thematic quotes from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with my own representative classroom experiences, I examined them together and noted what larger themes emerged around neoliberalism, education privatization and the world financial crisis.

### **Banking education and standardized testing**

The standardized test is a crucial part of the way that banking models of education are enacted in our schools—a chance for educators to know the “disposition” of the knowledge “assets” they have been anxiously depositing all year. However, these (metaphoric and literal) “stress tests” of student “banks” are more than a benign accounting of student knowledge. Many have written about the problems of standardized testing models, particularly the high-stakes exams that are linked to student promotion and increasingly play a role in teacher salaries, opportunities for tenure, and even the decision to close schools. In a meta-synthesis of forty-nine qualitative studies of high-stakes testing, Au (2007) showed that the primary effect of high stakes is that it narrows curriculum, limits teacher ability to meet sociocultural student needs, and corrupts educational measurement tools. Additionally, Ravitch (2010, 2013) has argued that the rise of standardized accountability measures represents the imposition of a business or market-based model whose ultimate goal is to undermine public education and open the door to further privatization. Similarly, McDermott and Raley (2010) have asserted that, because psychometric tests are well designed to correlate with race and class, measured learning has become a new way of turning race into a social structural barrier. In their words, “There is a direct line of argumentation from *Brown v. Board* and the culture of poverty to current screaming on the Achievement Gap: from Jim Crow to the Big Test, they seem well designed to reinforce inequalities” (p. 41).

Experiencing four straight weeks of almost daily testing created a unique environment at my school for students and teachers alike, one where the climate of hyper-accountability was taken to its logical extension: a school setting where students show up nearly every day to take tests.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, it became the ideal setting for examining how

standardized “banking” methods of education oppress and objectify students and teachers alike.

### ***Banking education and contradiction***

Freire indicates that the banking concept of education causes a fundamental contradiction between the roles of students and teachers. The teacher who approaches the student with this mindset considers knowledge as a, “gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” “[By] projecting an absolute ignorance on others... [the teacher] presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Instead of viewing students as partners or equals in this process, the “banking” teacher seeks to emphasize the teacher/student contradiction in ways that reproduce the inequity in society. According to Freire (1970), this contradiction manifests itself in some of the following ways:

- a. the teacher teaches, and the students are taught;
- b. the teacher knows everything, and the students know nothing;
- c. the teacher thinks, and the students are thought about;
- d. the teacher talks, and the students listen—meekly;
- e. the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- f. the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
- g. the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- h. the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- i. the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- j. the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (p. 71)

If Freire were to re-imagine the aspects of the teacher/student contradiction for our climate of hyper-accountability his list might look something like this:

- a. The teacher has to proctor the test while the students have to take it;
- b. The teacher administers the rules in the testing guide while the students have to abide by them;
- c. The teacher is allowed to walk around while the students have to sit still;
- d. The teacher can talk with other adults who enter the room while the students must be silent;
- e. The teacher reads passages while the students must listen and bubble answers.

Indeed, perhaps the only area where standardized testing doesn’t further the contradictions under the banking model is that, in our climate of accountability, standardized tests are increasingly being used to measure both students and teachers according to



“value-added” models (Amrein-Beardsley, 2014). In other words, students and teachers might be unequal in many school hierarchies, but they are both created equal before The Test.

At the heart of the student/teacher contradiction is that—in the context of standardized testing and policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the successor Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA)—the teacher is standing in as a proxy for the state (Giroux, 1983). As proxies, teachers are acting in the interests of the state and their institutions. This creates a contradiction for teachers whose usual role is to act in the best interest of their students and is similar to the contradiction experienced by other public servants—police officers—in the wake of Occupy and other recent protest movements like Black Lives Matter around the country. Although the average salary of \$76,488 in the New York Police Department (NYPD) locates them with New York teachers (who average \$78,885) in “The 99%” (“Where the 1 Percent fit in the hierarchy of income,” 2011) many police officers find themselves in contradictory positions relative to the citizens they are supposed to protect. This contradiction was put in stark relief when images of a former Philadelphia police captain being arrested in his uniform by members of the NYPD at an OWS protest surfaced on the internet (Grant, 2011). These images, along with charges of excessive police force (Penny, 2011) and comments about the NYPD being a “personal army” for billionaire former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg (Pareene, 2011) led many to question whether police serve citizens or institutions and “The 1%” (Penny, 2011).

The same question of serving (young) citizens or institutions could be asked of teachers as well. The following vignette, recorded during the aforementioned month of standardized testing in my school, illustrates the teacher/student contradiction that exists when teachers act in the interests of the state:

All of the students quieted down except for (as usual) Daniel,<sup>4</sup> who responded oppositionally with a smile. So (as usual) I sent him out and gave everyone who had been misbehaving a half-hour of detention after school. When I went down to give them the detention Mrs. Garcia [the homeroom teacher] shared an interesting theory. She thinks that Daniel misbehaves only in my class and not with the other female teachers because he wants to spend time with me after school. It seems to make sense because he always looks like he wants to play when he starts to misbehave. She indicated that he might not have another adult male in his life that he interacts with like he does with me. (Author, field notes, May 24, 2011)

According to his homeroom teacher, the student responded oppositionally in my class because he wanted to spend more individual time with me. Compounding his desire for personal interaction is the fear and inadequacy that many of my bilingual special education students felt in testing situations. However, as a teacher who is held accountable for covering content and administering tests, I am incentivized to remove students who stop both of those processes from occurring in my classroom.

Interestingly, Mrs. Garcia’s theory seemed to be confirmed when Daniel, who often played the role of “behavior problem” in my classroom, faithfully attended an after-school program that I began during the last months of the school year. I also recorded many instances in my field notes where many of the contradictions that existed between me and my students seemed to vanish when I would engage them with games like

Scrabble in the time that remained in our “testing block” after they finished their exams (Author, field notes, May 12, 2011, and June 6, 2011).

### ***Banking education, objectification, and dehumanization***

Another important element of Freire’s notion of banking education is that of objectification and dehumanization. Freire adds to the idea of students as “vaults” (Heany, 1995) by discussing the way that they are turned into “containers” or “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. “The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates the dehumanization standardized testing in the context of hyperaccountability:

Today we had to give the ELA [English Language Arts] state exam. That meant that I had to spend four periods reading a test out-loud first to a group of 8th grade SETTS/ELL [Special-Education and English-Language Learner] students and two more periods of reading out loud to [a seventh grade class]. If they gave medals for test proctoring, I should have received one today—my voice still aches from all of the reading that I had to do. (Author, field notes, May 3, 2011)

Whether being asked to read tests out-loud for hours on end or being required to use scripted teacher-proof curricula, many educators feel like they are robots valued more for their ability to convert text to speech than their ability to engage students critically.

The transformation of teachers and students into objects through standardized testing is all the more ironic in light of the legal and political rights afforded the corporations and banks that create these tests and administer schooling in the United States. The doctrine of corporate “personhood” entitles corporations the right to own property, to enter into contracts, to sue and be sued, to exercise limited rights to free speech and to spend an unlimited amount of money during political campaigns (NYTimes Editorial, 2009). That means that the “person” of Pearson Education, Inc. creates the multiple-choice tests that de-person the New York City public school teachers and students who administer and take them. Some of those students will likely graduate and attend a for-profit college run by corporations like Apollo Education Group, Inc. (Cohen & Bray, 2016) where they will likely experience further banking forms of education like online learning (NYTimes Editorial, 2011). They might be among the 10 million students who choose to finance their education through SLM Corporation, another bank commonly known as Sallie Mae (Schultz, 2010; SLM Corp [SLM], 2011). If those students have been recruited regardless of their ability to pay back the loan (Goldman, 2011) there is also a good chance they may default (Lewin, 2011). These are the fruits of the neoliberal privatization of education in our country: a schooling process where students are dehumanized and turned into figurative banks by “person-ed” literal banks and corporations who are the gatekeepers in determining who gets educated and how they pay for it.

The dehumanization that occurs when people are reduced to objects is even more insidious with students who lack the experience to critique a standardized test and must

be convinced of an exam's importance to be able to complete it. I recorded one such instance in my field notes:

I was really impressed with how well [my sixth-grade class] was doing with the test by the time I got there 3rd period. Each of them had their highlighters and were doing their very best to highlight the important parts (i.e. the entire page) and write the important words and phrases. Even so, some students reached their frustration level pretty quickly with the short answer/essay section. Since the proctoring rules prohibited me from either explaining things in Spanish or pointing to parts of the test, I ended up having to pantomime things for José, who neither speaks nor writes English well enough to do anything other than pick out cognate words. He is a handful, but he has been doing a lot better recently. (Author, field notes, May 4, 2011)

The absurdity of trying to administer an English-only test to a student who neither speaks nor writes English is more acute when the student is invested in a process where some level of failure is practically assured. Au (2009) has argued that standardized testing presents students with “non-standard” learner identities with a “triple bind” where curriculum becomes increasingly adapted to test content, standardized content works against “diverse” learner identities, and high-stakes testing environments create intense pressures for nonwhite students to perform well (p. 68). This pressure and ideological investment in the test are created at the macro-level through neoliberal policies that make “person-ed” corporations the gatekeepers of educational access and acceptability but are enacted at the micro-level by teachers like me who wanted to keep their jobs and students like José who wanted to feel successful.

However, the bind presented by the exam is also more than ideological for my bilingual special education students and others with “non-standard” learner identities. Under contract with Pearson Education, my school and others across the state were required to administer “field tests” to our students to help the company “fine tune” questions for the following years’ exams (Hernández, 2013). The practice of adding to an already oppressive testing load (see footnote 2) so that students could function as an unpaid focus group for large corporations was commonplace during my time as a teacher and raised uncomfortable questions. Where did the work of my students—English Learners with learning disabilities—factor in a group of question items “standardized” along a normal curve? If standardization requires a large curve with “valid and reliable” question items in the middle and “tails” on either end representing items that either too many or not enough students were able to answer correctly—where did the “non-standard” identities of my students fit in? More than likely, it seemed like my bilingual special education students occupied the “tail” of question items too easily answered to be considered “valid and reliable”—questions likely to be left off the following years’ exams precisely because my “non-standard” students were able to answer them. Thus, in addition to their unpaid labor on behalf of corporations, they were made unwilling contributors to a form of quantitative oppression that defined them as less than fully human.

Unfortunately, the reality of how students like Daniel and José are made to contribute to their own oppression is rarely revealed to them as teachers work to invest students ideologically in the process of testing. Indeed, Freire (1970) could well have been writing about a standardized test reading passage when he wrote:

The banking approach ... will never propose to students that they critically consider reality. It will deal instead with such vital questions as whether Roger gave green grass to the goat, and insist upon the importance of learning that, on the contrary, Roger gave green grass to

the rabbit. The “humanism” of the banking approach masks the effort to *turn women and men into automatons*—the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human. (p. 74, emphasis added)

Freire’s analysis here is as incisive but can be taken a step further with regard to our current context. As previously indicated, teachers play an integral role in the banking process by acting as proxies for the state. However, in an environment of neoliberalism and increasing privatization, teachers are now proxies for banks and corporations and are denied the “ontological vocation to be more fully human” along with their students. Since the “business” of educating along standardized models takes precedence over all other issues, the personhood of banks and corporations is enacted at the expense of the personhood of teachers. This relationship between the personhood of banks and teachers functions in both directions when teachers, denied the ability to be fully human, are forced to rely on corporations for a type of “proxy-personhood.” While banks and corporations have historically become more human through legislation and court rulings, teachers are increasingly required to seek their own humanization through the tools (standardized tests, value-added data, etc.) created by these same institutions.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Banking education, domination, violence, and death***

According to Freire, the banking model of education “regards men as adaptable, manageable beings” (p. 71) and works toward “changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated” (p. 72). The banking model of education doesn’t stop at the objectification of teachers and students but rather sees their dehumanization as a step along the path toward domination, violence, and death. Many scholars have written of a “school-to-prison pipeline” that facilitates the incarceration of minoritized students through “zero-tolerance” suspension policies (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014). Sadly, since my special education students had the additional label of “learning disabled” or “emotionally disturbed” I quickly learned that they were prime candidates for incarceration in my already high-need school setting. Each year, many of my students were arrested by the NYPD inside the school building, and I recorded three such instances in my field notes. These included a 16-year-old 8th grade student locked up for getting in a fight, another 8th grade student arrested for stealing a coat, and a 7th grader who spent the night in jail for bringing a wine-bottle opener to school after he had been bullied. I only learned about the overnight jail stay when the usually energetic 13-year-old student had his head down and indicated (in a matter-of-fact way) that he, “didn’t sleep very well in jail last night.” The police were called in his case because of a zero-tolerance school policy stating that they must be called for any knife blade measuring longer than one inch. The wine-bottle opener had a small blade measuring one and a half inches.

The pervasive domination of a carceral school system enacting zero tolerance policies against poor, minority students is all the more unjust when one considers the latitude afforded those corporations and banks at the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum. The financial crisis and ensuing economic decline has made it clear that banks can engage in unethical and illegal practices like deceiving their clients (Smith, 2012),

fraudulently foreclosing on homeowners (Greenberg, 2012), and even laundering money for drug cartels and totalitarian regimes (Mollenkamp, 2012), and largely avoid incarceration (Morgenson & Story, 2011). In fact, the most salient relationship that some banks have with prisons in an environment of increasing privatization is that of investor (Krugman, 2012).

Highlighting the remarkable injustices of privatized prison and schooling systems that target minoritized students is important, but it can also obscure the domination and violence of day-to-day schooling practices. While many students in high-need schools live with the threat of incarceration, only a relatively small number will find themselves locked up. By contrast, the threat of the high-stakes standardized test is one that all students know will be fulfilled. Freire understood the domination of the banking method occurred in the everyday acts, that the “Verbalistic lessons, reading requirements, the methods for evaluating ‘knowledge’, the distance between the teacher and the taught, the criteria, for promotion: everything in this ready-to-wear approach serves to obviate thinking” (p. 76).

The daily violence of the banking model of education can occur in many ways. De Lissoy (2012) argues that a “logic of violation” inherent in a standardized instruction and curricula fractures learning experiences and traumatizes student identities through the ubiquitous labeling processes of contemporary schooling (pp. 2–3). The effects of the this daily assault were apparent to me when I was asked to proctor a state exam for a group of 8th grade special education students who were not from any of my classes and had a reputation for being difficult to manage. For these students, the usual frustrations of the high-stakes test were compounded by the fact that they had been labeled “disabled” and many knew that failing the exam would mean going to summer school or not being able to go to high school the following year. Once I had quieted the class down and started them on the exam, I noticed that a student in the back got up and switched to another desk. When I approached him and asked if anything was the matter he responded, “the flies were bothering me” without bothering to look up from his test. Then I noticed it: the desk where he was sitting was full of rotting, mostly organic trash that, in the heat of the un-airconditioned class, had attracted a swarm of buzzing flies (Author, field notes, May 4, 2011). Significantly, the student moved, not because he was bothered by the existence of the garbage, the flies, or any of the other intolerable aspects of that setting; but rather because the buzzing flies didn’t allow him to take the exam. According to Freire, the oppression and violence of the banking model of education is ultimately “necrophilic, it is nourished by love of death, not life” and that the “necrophilous” person loves the inorganic, the mechanical, and ultimately kills all life in seeking to control it (p. 77). The buzzing flies and rotting garbage illustrate the normalized, daily violence of oppressive schooling and how the death inherent in banking education is more than a metaphor. In that context, the pervasive domination, dehumanization, and death of the banking model revealed itself through literal decay.

## Discussion and conclusion

By putting my classroom teaching/testing experiences into conversation with Freire’s conceptual framework, this self-study reveals multiple dimensions of standardized

banking models of education. Namely, that banking education in the concept of neoliberal hyper-accountability highlights dimensions of contradiction, objectification, dehumanization, domination/violence, and death. These dimensions illustrate how standardized banking models oppress both teachers and students—especially as the latter is forced to substitute humanization for the “proxy personhood” of acting on behalf of corporations.

### ***Alternatives to banking education***

According to Freire (1970), the remedy to the contradiction, objectification, and dehumanization of the banking model of education lies in its opposite: “problem-posing” education. Problem-posing education fosters a conscientization that frees and humanizes teachers and students from oppression through critical engagement. He writes that, “Authentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). Although standardized testing is increasingly a daily reality for teachers and students everywhere, it is far from the only reality they face. Within the confines of the school setting there are still many opportunities to demonstrate “authentic caring” (Valenzuela, 1999) for students in culturally relevant and sustaining ways that validate their identities as diverse human beings (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2014). Indeed, schools can become sites of resistance when educators refuse to participate in the reproduction of societal inequities (Giroux, 1983).

One surprising aspect of my field notes was that, in addition to the many instances I recorded of teacher and student dehumanization, I also recorded many instances of resistance and transformation. Oftentimes educators don’t realize that their good teaching practice can be a form of resistance to the forces of privatization and institutional control. In an informal interview I recorded with a progressive school administrator about a year after my self-study, I asked him about a school sustainability initiative that he had implemented to increase the well-being of the school community and “resist” (my word) the increasing standardization of the curriculum. When I used the word “resist” he paused and, after a moment’s thought, replied that he had “never really thought of it like that.” I spoke with him at the end of a long day and, although he was obviously tired, he brightened a bit at the notion of his school-based initiative being “resistance.”

Just as Freirean educators work for the humanization of their students through the dialog and praxis of a problem-posing education, they must also have the tools to examine their own classroom experiences in light of larger theoretical and sociocultural forces. Through narrative inquiry methodology I was able to bring my own experiences with high-stakes testing into conversation with the theory of banking education and see that the frustration and objectification that I experienced with my students is a symptom of the larger trend of neoliberal privatization in public education. Once I understood that standardized tests created a situation where my humanization as a teacher was sacrificed to enact the personhood of a corporation, I became empowered to recognize my own resistance, consider new ways to challenge prevailing trends, and help others do the same.



When the Occupy Wall Street movement commenced on September 17th, it transformed a little-known park in downtown Manhattan into a literal and symbolic sight of resistance. Although most people assume that Zuccotti Park is located within the vicinity of Wall Street, it actually several blocks away just across from the new World Trade Center construction site. The reason I am familiar with the location is because, during a brief respite from our month of testing, I had the opportunity to take my students on a fieldtrip down to see the World Trade Center (WTC) and Battery Park. Included among the pictures I have of them reverently touching the WTC memorial and posing in front of the rising buildings are pictures of my students placing “bunny ears” on the iconic bronze statue of a banker on a bench in Zuccotti Park.

In addition to WTC and the park our day-long trip also included visits to Battery Park City, the Irish Hunger Memorial, and The Museum of Jewish Heritage. In the museum they learned about the role that Latin-American countries like the Dominican Republic played in accepting Jewish refugees from the Holocaust. Unaware of the history, many of the students were surprised by some of the exhibits and in my field notes I recorded seeing another female teacher give a hug to an emotional student after we left the museum (Author, field notes, May 13, 2011).

Creating authentic learning experiences like that fieldtrip which allow students to critically “read the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987) is becoming more difficult in an education system increasingly oriented toward accountability, standardization, and privatization. However, if educators desire to fully overcome the teacher/student contradiction they must do it through a process of critical engagement that fully humanizes themselves and their students.

## Notes

1. While Freire updated his approach to education for liberation to include developments like the encroachment of global neoliberalism in later works like the excellent *Pedagogy of Freedom*, a full treatment of his theoretical contributions in this area is beyond the scope of this manuscript. Rather, this paper takes the stance that the current push for corporate “reform” and high stakes testing that are part of daily reality for teachers are best considered (or reconsidered) through a text that will likely already be familiar to them from their teacher education programs.
2. The small schools movement in New York was an initiative that emphasized turning large middle and high schools into several smaller schools, often in the same building. Small schools initiatives were embraced as a “choice-based” education reform by Chancellor Joel Klein (who served from 2002–2011) with support from large philanthropies like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Small schools had “significant limitations” including an “inability to provide special education services, support for English language learners, and array of courses in music and the arts, extracurricular and sports programs, advanced courses, and vocational programs” (Hemphill, Nauer, Zelon, & Jacobs, 2009, as cited in Ravitch, 2010).
3. According to the 2011 NYCDOE calendar, the May/June testing dates that would have applied to my school were: **May 02, 2011 – May 06, 2011**: NYSESLAT (Grades K-12)- Speaking portion; **May 03, 2011 – May 05, 2011**: NYS ELA-Grades 3–5; **May 03, 2011 – May 04, 2011**: NYS ELA-Grades 6–8; **May 09, 2011 – May 13, 2011**: NYSESLAT (Grades K-12)- Speaking portion; **May 11, 2011 – May 12, 2011**: NYS Math-Grades 3–8; **May 16, 2011 – May 20, 2011**: NYSESLAT (Grades K-12)- Speaking portion; **May 16, 2011 – May 20, 2011**: NYSESLAT (Grades K-12) - Reading, Writing, and Listening; **May 23, 2011 – May 24, 2011**: NYSESLAT (Grades K-12)- Speaking portion; **May 23, 2011 – May 27, 2011**: NYSESLAT (Grades K-12) - Reading, Writing, and Listening; **May 25, 2011**: Spanish

Reading (ELE) - Grades 3–12 (Students receiving instruction in bilingual and dual language Spanish); **May 31, 2011 – June 03, 2011**: NYS Science Performance Test - Grades 4 & 8; and June 06, 2011 New York State Science Written Section -Grades 4 & 8 (dates are bolded for emphasis).

4. All student names are pseudonyms
5. In February 2012 the New York City Education Department released performance rankings for 18,000 public school teachers (including my school) based on value-added “data” collected from standardized tests. (Santos & Otterman, 2012) based. Market-based corporate reformers continue the push to reduce teachers to a number, even when they admit that these teaching “balance sheets” have average margins of error of 35 to 50 percentage points!

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