

# “We Are Not Dirt”: Freirean Counternarratives and Rhetorical Literacies for Student Voice in Schooling

*Based on a critical literacy unit in a high school classroom in the San Joaquin Valley, this article details a project on the nature of disciplinary rules and policies.*

---

If several people witness the same tragedy and offer opposing accounts, whose version is the most accurate? In this case, perception is truth. And how reliable is fact anyway when the ‘official’ documents themselves have been proven incorrect[?] Officialness too has its inconsistencies.

—*Tim Z. Hernandez, All They Will Call You*

[P]eople need to read, write, and speak in certain sorts of socially sanctioned ways if they have any hopes of confronting problematic texts or producing informative and empowering ones.

—*Ernest Morrell, Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation*

**W**hile I (Everardo) was a senior in high school in the early 1990s, I was also a newspaper carrier in Southeast Fresno in the San Joaquin Valley. I would rise at 4:00 a.m. for my delivery shift, and I would read about the rising homicide rate based on drive-by shootings and other crimes and tragedies. The news blared about the riots in response to law enforcement brutality and racial injustice toward Rodney King in an unjust world. The images of human violence were fresh on our minds as readers and viewers of media. In fact, later I would learn that the incarceration rates increased at an accelerated pace then and to the present. As a high school student, my choices and world shrank more as my friends abandoned their studies; higher education became my expansion and pathway to personal and professional success. Since then, Michelle Alexander and others have shown in their research that the prison incarceration rates increased full-blown to 600 percent from the mid-1960s until the 2000s to now reflect a “racial caste system” (Alexander 2). The world looked harsh to my eyes in the 1990s as

I began to learn about how systems worked against working communities. I wondered about the US constitutional right of innocent until proven guilty under the court of law.

For the past 15 years, I have been a teacher of English language arts in my home neighborhood in the San Joaquin Valley of California. In the beginning of the 2013–14 academic year, I introduced tenth-grade students to the Inside-Outside Circle technique for classroom dialogue and as a beginning step toward integrated and reflective thinking and youth participatory action research (YPAR). The purpose was to have students share what they were experiencing, including challenges and problems, in their school environment and civic communities. During one of our conversations, the students identified problems that included their dissatisfaction with the school meals, course scheduling, and dress code.

Some of my work was to direct students toward a problem-solving stance through rhetorical literacies focused on academic and creative writing. One problem in particular that emerged during class discussions among students was the name of our high

school's tardy policy: Tardy Sweep (see Figure 1). The students' concern stemmed from the connotation to refuse and trash. Mainly, the students voiced their opposition to the policy as a "problematic text" in need of being confronted as voiced by Morrell (6). Students' awareness of their absence of voice and agency in naming and making a policy further motivated them into describing the situation and the possibility of addressing it through Freirean critical praxis, a methodical process for transformative change. Their sharing in the Inside-Outside Circle became the launch of their rallying cries for change and a new language of naming.

"Why are they trying to sweep us like we're garbage?"

"It sounds like we are 'trash' that is being 'swept.'"

"We are more than just dirt. We are HUMAN!"

"If you treat students more professionally, then they are likely to act more professionally."

"There are many negative connotations associated with the word 'sweep' in the media. For example, there are immigration, drug, gang, and homeless sweeps."

"I'm tired of hearing this over and over again: 'Freeze! You're caught in a Tardy Sweep. Don't move!'"

"I don't think the administrators are going to change the name, so why even bother, Mr. Pedraza?"

If students violated the Tardy Sweep policy, they faced a six-step accountability process that

includes a warning, teacher-parent conference, and lunch detention sessions. All students who were tardy were escorted by staff to their first period. Such practices reflected policing in youth lives that Victor M. Rios witnessed as an ethnographer. He observed, "Shadowing enabled me to observe regular punitive encounters and these became manifest in the lives of these youth in a range of different contexts, across institutional settings" (8). The encounters Rios noted are not foreign to schools in which we teach and learn. Moreover, in the epigraph to this article, Hernandez asks whose account is most accountable, accurate, and truthful.

My awareness of students' love of literature and writing, ranging from poetry and short stories to young adult literature, guided me to select texts that could extend the conversation to texts about humane treatment. We had previously read two literary works that presented the words *sweep* and *dirt* in separate connotations in the poem "How I Learned to Sweep" by Julia Alvarez and in the chapter titled "When I Was Dirt" from the novel *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros. Although the students interpreted the significance of metaphors in these two literary works, they argued against the generalization and dehumanization via languaging in a school-based policy they faced and endured daily. They noted the differences presented in the poem and novel chapter, and they wanted alternate ways of wording that would be less hurtful and punitive. Last, in support of media literacy, the students had viewed clips from the documentary *Precious Knowledge* about young people of US-Mexican origin studying in Arizona schools and having to become more active, engaged, and informed about their learning and curriculum to understand their stories, histories, and future (Palos et al.).

The concerns expressed by students of Latinx, Southeast Asian, and Punjabi descent mirrored what H. Samy Alim and Django Paris describe as a "saga of cultural and linguistic assault [that] has had and continues to have devastating effects on the access, achievement, and well-being of students of color in public schools" (1). Their experiences in and outside of school reflected indifference to adult authority when their agency and voice are unconsidered and overlooked. They explained that the presence of an on-campus police station further adds a law enforcement ambiance with parked police cars by

FIGURE 1. Tardy Sweep Form Used by the School Administration

The form is titled "TARDY SWEEP" in bold, uppercase letters at the top center. Below the title, there are several lines for text entry, each followed by a horizontal line for writing. The fields are: "Name", "ID#" followed by "Per" and "Rm" on the same line, "Date" followed by "Time" on the same line, and "Teacher" at the bottom center.

the flag pole in front of the school. YPAR became a rallying cry of critical inquiry with a justice orientation for young people to “experience transformative learning that changes their lives and opens doors of personal, academic, and civic opportunity” (Mirra et al. 2).

The feeling of voicelessness creates a sense of internalized powerlessness for students in their schooling and preparation for learning and success. The San Joaquin Valley is surrounded by farms as well as correctional institutions and service industries. Each of these industries is interconnected with students’ lives, with some having family members incarcerated and others working the land or in the burgeoning prison industrial complex. Based on inequities reproduced by institutions and experienced by students, the notion of creating change seemed far removed from their schema and experience to enact change. As a result, I sought a way to introduce them to critical praxis as a “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire 126). This was largely driven in my belief in changing conditions through nonviolence, civil discourse, and—if necessary—civic disobedience to change conditions. Change can unfold through models from Tolstoy, Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Dolores Huerta, among others.

### Critical Pedagogy in Practice

I first heard about the critical literacy pedagogue Paulo Freire as an undergraduate student at the University of California at Berkeley in the mid-1990s. Critical pedagogy spoke to my students’ experiences and research interests. Years later, I was greatly influenced by reading *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* by Jeffrey M. Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell. Their book made critical pedagogy in practice possible for me as a teacher in the English language arts classroom. In other words, I understood that Freire’s concept of reading the word and the world together applied to the reading of a dominant, oppressive narrative along with the need for a liberating counternarrative to tell more about young people experiencing the name of the tardy policy through their eyes and perceptions. In an article on the counternarrative as a research

method, H. Richard Milner IV and Tyrone C. Howard remind us:

Similarly, the counter-narrative allows the researcher and participants to study and name a reality inconsistent with what might be considered the norm or pervasive otherwise. A recurrent theme of this body of work is that the narrative and counter-narrative should be captured by the researcher, experienced by the research participants, and told by people of color. (542)

It was not enough to settle for the official policy name, when students could engage in their own research for change in the present as they considered students who would follow them in secondary-level studies.

A justice orientation can begin from within our classrooms by inviting and affirming students’ prior and background knowledge about their experiences with injustice in the schools and communities they inhabit and from which they learn firsthand. In their book, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell explain, “With remarkable consistency, schools serving low-income, non-White children disproportionately produce the citizens who will spend most of their adult lives in the least desirable and least mobile socioeconomic positions (prison, low-ranking military positions, and service labor)” (4). This resonated with me as a teacher and for the underserved communities of students seeking equity, equality, and fairness. For students interested in gaining a voice and agency, especially in their school, it became essential to question and disrupt the name of an administrative policy negatively affecting adolescent life.

The integration of critical thinking was directly influenced by the California Common Core State Standards and California English Language Development Standards. Moreover, taking the “hacking” stance posed by Antero Garcia and Cindy O’Donnell-Allen, I discovered like them as educators that “considerable liberty exists in determining how [standards] may be enacted” with professional judgment (48). In addition, four school principles complemented and guided the planning of the unit of study:

1. Physical and Emotional Safety
2. Respectful Collaborative Culture for Students and Staff
3. Rigorous Aligned High-Quality Instruction
4. High Expectations and Success for All

Combined with critical pedagogy, integral education guided the development of the unit that was named by the students as *We Are Not Dirt*. The unit was informed by the following rhetorical literacies in practice: (1) writing a business-oriented letter; (2) attending Safe and Civil Schools meetings with school campus staff; (3) addressing decision-making adults for change via letters and in person; (4) reading literature on nonviolent direct action; and (5) assembling and publishing a book on students' participatory action research.

### Adopting a Critical Praxis in a Circle

A practical concept within critical pedagogy is critical praxis, which supported the writing of a business letter with elements of YPAR. The five steps of the critical praxis model are as follows:

Step 1: Identify a problem.

Step 2: Research the problem.

Step 3: Develop a collective plan of action to address the problem.

Step 4: Implement the collective plan of action.

Step 5: Evaluate the action, assess its efficacy, and reexamine the state of the problem.

While conducting the Inside-Outside Circle in five class periods, I documented the experiences as an insider ethnographer of my classes. I wrote on the board, "What are the connotations associated with the name 'Tardy Sweep'?" The students stood up, formed a circle, and documented their perceptions and feelings about the name in their journals. Then, they shared aloud their thoughts.

Next, the students took three steps in a clockwise manner, spoke with a classmate, and jotted down their conversation. I instructed them to do this several times and then shared aloud as I wrote their thoughts on the whiteboard. As I walked the circle, the following was stated:

"Sounds like dirt."

"Sounds like a homeless sweep."

"Drug sweep."

"Gang sweep."

"Trash."

"Doesn't make me feel good."

Many of the students began to identify the problematic nature of the policy name. They expressed their dissatisfaction as well as feelings of being treated unfairly to the point of disregard, disrespect, and mistreatment. Thomas Newkirk refers to these feelings as "blows to our identity" and states that such feelings are "truly painful and difficult to process, and impossible to forget" (13). Despite these feelings, the students sat down and continued sharing in class by taking turns in the dialogue.

After they reached a consensus on identifying the problem, I asked the students, "What do you think can be done to change the name?" Silence. Wait time. Heads shook from side to side. I observed subdued bodies and even slumping at desks. As if in a chorus from an Aztec or Greek drama, the students raised their voices and spoke:

"We won't be able to do anything!"

"Who will listen to us?"

"They [staff] won't listen to us. We're just students."

"What is there to do about it, anyway?"

These comments launched the beginning of a research-driven unit that was guided by students in action to bring change in their school community.

### Emerging Researchers and Writers for Freedom

As emerging researchers, the students were introduced to the five steps of critical praxis and unpacked each of the steps as it applied to the identified problem. For Step 2, I shared two kinds of research: (1) the knowledge that we already possess and know from our own experience, and (2) the knowledge that is gained from formal research in the exterior world by seeking articles, books, newspapers, magazines, and peer-reviewed online sites. The students found articles with various connotations to the terms "sweep" and "dirt." The students found negative connotations that were hardly affirming, but mostly dismissive and deficit-based toward human behavior. Indeed, they even found an article titled "Taming the Tardies: Every Minute Counts" that described student behavior as a form of robbery toward their peers and teachers via tardiness (Sprick and Daniels 21). Another student

group found the language of “restitution” used by Randall S. Sprick to address student discipline and behavior management. Even so, it was the term “sweep” that remained problematic to the emerging researchers.

Step 3 called for the development of a collective plan of action, which requires conversations and sharing of differences of opinion on how to bring solutions to the problem. I explained that all of this needed to involve the rhetorical literacies such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The students decided to write a collection of business letters addressed to the school’s administrative team about the name of the “Tardy Sweep” policy and its implications on their learning and schooling, with a suggested name of “Time Management Support Policy.” One letter is included here:

2 October 2013, Mahatma Gandhi’s Birthday (1869–1948)

Dear Principal and High School Administrative Team:

Thank you for all of your hard work for our students and school. You have done a great job keeping our school in good shape with all of your rules. You all truly make this school a school worth attending. However, I, like most of my peers, have a problem with the wording of the policy “Tardy Sweep.”

The word “sweep” used for gathering criminals. I have read article with titles that often have the word “sweep” in them. I read recent articles with headlines such as “Early Morning Drug Sweep Nets 14 People,” “3,100 Arrested in 6-Day Immigration Sweep,” and “165 Arrested in L.A. County Gang Sweep.” It’s the like words “Tardy Sweep” make us feel like criminals and that we will not amount to anything. When we are late, it is like we are being trained to become criminals instead of professionals or model citizens. When I hear security staff yelling, “Tardy Sweep! Get to your classes!” it is like hearing the police trying to catch us. I feel like I am not getting the support I need. I would like to see teachers supporting us to get to class on time.

We students would like to propose that we reconsider the name “Tardy Sweep.” Let us consider a name that would make students feel like we are being supported and that you are here for us always. I propose a name that can truly make this school a friendly community such as “Time Management Support.” No student wants to feel

like a criminal. Please consider this special and important request.

Thank you all for taking the time to consider my suggestion and for reading this letter.

Sincerely,

Sophomore Student

To move the project unit forward, the students collected letters and created a YPAR book with peer editing activities and a final published product as Step 4.

Having read in class about The Freedom Writers Foundation, I adopted some of the principles related to this group and the students began to think of themselves as “Freedom Writers” in a movement for school change.

The effects of the collective plan of action became evident when the school principal and staff members responded to their book publication and submission for review. A total of 75 sophomores who participated in the collective project unit during the 2013–14 academic year witnessed change through the committee meetings and administrative team that reached a new name as the “Start on Time” policy adopted during the senior year in the 2015–16 academic year. The students’ persistence in the quest for change was a long labor that sometimes appeared to wane, but was then amplified when they met a supportive group of leaders within their San Joaquin Valley area civic communities.

## A Good, Equitable Thing

In our conversations in class, the students wondered often if their arguments and voices against the policy name would be considered worthy by the school staff. Since their doubts persisted during the spring 2014 semester, I asked them, “How can your voices gain support from the university community if that’s a group missing?” The students shared an early draft of their collective book in development and sought letters of support from university community members who shared their critical stance toward the name of the tardy policy and the need for change.

The students responded with surprise that other people, professional adults, would actually lend their voice of support for the project. Locally elected and appointed officials as well as community college and university professors lent their support of the YPAR-driven students and their critical and

rhetorical literacies in action. Soul Vang, a local poet in the Valley schools and communities, joined the students in their conversation to bring change at their high school. To honor their labor, critical thinking, resilience, and action research, Vang wrote the counternarrative poem "Sweeping" as an official testimony and document and read it aloud at the students' book release party which they organized and invited the school's administrative team to attend, two of whom showed up, the principal and vice principal.

#### Sweeping

Sweeping is usually  
A good thing—it cleanses  
And renews. We sweep crackers  
Fallen on the floor, leaves crumbling  
On the driveway. We even sweep  
Gangs, drugs, and crimes away  
From our streets. But  
We should never  
Sweep tardy students  
From our schools—we help  
Them to get up earlier,  
Get to class on time,  
And succeed.  
A student, after all, is not  
A floor, nor  
A fallen  
Crumb. (iv)

The students involved in the YPAR project experienced their multiple power literacy for equity in the following forms: (1) power of group collaboration; (2) power of language; (3) power of dialogue and group consensus; and (4) power of working together around a shared cause.

In our hierarchical and often inequitable society, which is designed with people creating stratifications based on "power" and "clout," those without access and privilege may be limited in ways of expressing their dissent and dissatisfaction to be heard. Morrell notes, "[T]here is so much to do and so much at stake. Literacy, well at least critical literacy, is fundamentally tied to the realization of our full humanity, especially in times like these. For our children, literacy determines their ability to engage the world as citizens, as intellectuals, as workers, and hopefully as artists, filmmakers, and writers of the next generation" (xi). Students' determination led to policy-changing and identity-affirming actions.

## Final Thoughts

Some protest activism has the potential to become reactionary and filled with anger, name-calling, and sometimes violence. A dejected spirit of defeatism can appear. Nonetheless, the students, later renamed youth participatory action researchers, responded with none of these extremes by remaining poised and calm through daily mindfulness practice and small-group processing of their thoughts and feelings. They sought to tell a counternarrative by applying the methodical five steps of critical praxis found in Freire's critical pedagogy. As such, they cultivated a healthy relationship to power and began their project by working within their educational system, seeking alignment with the state, district, and school protocols as well as their personal and collective vision and sense of purpose. Some students opted out of this project while expressing openly their doubts and reticence. They argued:

"The administrators are not going to change the name."

"There are too many Tardy Sweep passes made already."

"They are not going to make new passes and changes just for us. Why would they, anyway? They make the rules we must follow."

As an educator in the barrio for the past 15 years, I see firsthand how important it is to engage students in creating news and making historical policy change with the accessible critical thinking and rhetorical literacies in our communities. The narratives I describe can first appear in a singular fashion, while others are much more promising—as counternarratives influenced by Freire in reading and writing the world and word—like the one witnessed here via critical literacy and praxis and integral education. It was not so much the tardy policy that the students found problematic, for they were in full support of a policy that held students accountable for their time management, but rather the name itself, "Tardy Sweep," which they found insulting and degrading. To sum up, the cohort of 75 youth participatory action researchers persisted in creating a more equitable schooling environment with humane conditions

for learning in school and navigating the structures of authority and control.

During the 2017–18 academic year, the pioneering students' pursuit of equity through English language arts continued to bestow humane practices for students who follow them at Sunnyside High School, their alma mater. Indeed, our students need various platforms to voice their concerns and gain support that guides them responsibly as emerging researchers for social change in their school and civic communities. We teachers and leaders of language arts are a beacon in their quest for just spaces and learning with teach-ins and teachable moments—in and outside of school. 

#### Note

Everardo Pedraza thanks R. Joseph Rodríguez for supporting the co-writing of this article on YPAR.

#### Works Cited

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press, 2012.
- Alim, H. Samy, and Django Paris. "Introduction." *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*, edited by Django Paris and H. Samy Alim, Teachers College P, 2017, pp. 1–21.
- Alvarez, Julia. *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems*. Plume, 1996.
- California Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. California State Board of Education, 2013.
- California English Language Development Standards, Kindergarten through Grade 12. California State Board of Education, 2012.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *Caramelo*. Vintage Contemporaries, 2002.

- Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey M., and Ernest Morrell. *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools*. Peter Lang, 2008.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Ramos, Continuum, 2000.
- Freedom Writers of Sunnyside High School, The, editors. *"We Are Not Dirt": From "Tardy Sweep" to Time Management Support*. Sunnyside Freedom Writers P, 2014.
- Garcia, Antero, and Cindy O'Donnell-Allen. *Pose, Wobble, Flow: A Culturally Proactive Approach to Literacy Instruction*. Teachers College P, 2015.
- Gruwell, Erin, and The Freedom Writers Foundation. *The Freedom Writers Diary: Teacher's Guide*. Broadway Books, 2007.
- Hernandez, Tim Z. *All They Will Call You*. U of Arizona P, 2017.
- Milner, H. Richard, IV, and Tyrone C. Howard. "Counter-Narrative as Method: Race, Policy, and Research for Teacher Education." *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2013, pp. 536–61.
- Mirra, Nicole, et al. *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research: Transforming Inquiry with Researchers, Educators, and Students*. Routledge, 2015.
- Morrell, Ernest. *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent, and Liberation*. Routledge, 2008.
- Newkirk, Thomas. *Embarrassment: And the Emotional Underlife of Learning*. Heinemann, 2017.
- Palos, Ari L., et al. *Precious Knowledge*, 2011, [www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/precious-knowledge/](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/precious-knowledge/).
- Rios, Victor M. *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*. New York UP, 2002.
- Sprick, Randall S. *Discipline in the Secondary Classroom, with DVD: A Positive Approach to Behavior Management*. 3rd ed., John Wiley & Sons, 2013.
- Sprick, Randall S., and K. Daniels. "Taming the Tardies: Every Minute Counts." *Middle Ground*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2007, pp. 21–23, [www.safeandcivilschools.com/research/articles/tamingtardies.pdf](http://www.safeandcivilschools.com/research/articles/tamingtardies.pdf).
- Vang, Soul. "Sweeping." *"We Are Not Dirt": From "Tardy Sweep" to Time Management Support*, edited by The Freedom Writers of Sunnyside High School, Sunnyside Freedom Writers P, 2014, iv.

**Everardo Pedraza** (pedraza.everardo@gmail.com) teaches English language arts at Sunnyside High School in Fresno, California, and is a psychotherapist intern at Integral Community Solutions Institute, a transformative counseling center in Fresno, California. He is the founder and advisor of the Sunnyside High School Mindfulness Club and has been a member of NCTE since 2017. **R. Joseph Rodríguez** is assistant professor of literacy, multilingual, and multicultural education at California State University, Fresno. He has been a member of NCTE since 1997. Catch him virtually @escribescibe or via email at rjrodriguez@csufresno.edu.

#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

After reading the book *¡Si, Se Puede!/Yes, We Can!: Janitor Strike in L.A.*, students learn about labor unions, strikes, and organizing for change. Students interview staff members in their school to learn about their daily work life and write persuasive advocacy letters. <http://bit.ly/2cyzCfq>