

What Does It Mean for Teachers to Recognize the Otherness of Students? Going with/over Margonis Between Freire and Todd

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Ms. Yamamoto was hired as an elementary school teacher last April right after she graduated from a teachers college. The class assigned to her to teach was fifth grade and seemed well-behaved at the beginning. As children got accustomed to her, however, their behavior in the classroom became out of control. Some did not listen to Ms. Yamamoto but chatted, slept, or walked around during her class. She lost her confidence and quit the job. Mr. Saito, on the other hand, was a fifty-year-old, experienced teacher. The class assigned to him to teach last year was sixth grade and already disciplinarily challenged. He tried everything he could, but nothing changed. His health condition became worse. His doctor recommended he stop teaching for a while and take a rest at home.

Japanese school children are segregated, not racially, but academically and socially in regard to their abilities and their parents' economic conditions. Some of them have already found themselves losers and others may think that they can take it easy in school, but not in the private cram school or at home, where they are always pushed to study harder. These phenomena in public schools are called *gakkyuu-houkai* (class breakdown). Educational administrators and researchers take the phenomena seriously. Some of them say that recent teachers do not have enough teaching skills, and that they should be sent to training centers or, if seriously deficient, be fired. Others say that, because of the idea of progressive education imported from the United States, children have been allowed to do anything they want. What they should have learned is patience, respect for their teachers, and care for others. Others attribute class breakdown to diet, maintaining that Japanese children have nutrition problems in their brains because they always eat junk and instant food, which includes plenty of chemicals.

Those who give various suggestions are concerned about education from their goodwill. They care about children and the future of their society. They seek solutions, maybe scientifically proved solutions. In order to acquire the solutions, they try to know every factor that caused the phenomena. What they lack is the way of thinking about how to get along with what they do not know, or an ethical attitude toward strangeness or otherness.

Frank Margonis illustrates well how a teacher could get along with what he or she does not know, by considering Lopez's case from Freirean and Levinasian perspectives. His specific question is "what does it mean for teachers to show respect across the divides of race and class, when the teacher is already positioned as a custodian of an unjust status quo?" Since his consideration is fruitful, I shall extend this question to broader educational settings by asking, "what does it mean for teachers to recognize the otherness of students?" in order, not to obtain a prescription, but to seek insight into our own educational practice.

I shall begin asking you another question: do you think that Mr. Lopez was unlucky? If he was told to teach a different class in which students would be willing to learn from him, would he be happier or more successful? You can guess possible results, but there would be no correct answer. He was successful in teaching the class finally. If the school principal, however, would tell him to teach another class in the middle of the year, he would be a failure. This uncertainty is a normal element of education. We do have only limited knowledge.

Margonis is quite right when he pointed out the limitation of progressive education. They assume an authoritarian relationship and focus on knowledge acquisition. I would rather say that an educational relationship is asymmetrical in regard to knowledge and ability. Previous educational theories are not useful for Lopez's politically complicated case. So, Margonis's contribution is quite remarkable. However, unless we understand how the other appears in educational settings, we, together with progressive theoreticians, would fail to see the otherness of students.

As Margonis points out, a teacher holding Freirean principles would bring a certain image of students into her classroom, and another teacher possessing a Levinasian perspective would try not to bring any image of student into her classroom. School teachers, however, are in charge of a class that consists of a number of individuals who have different backgrounds. How teachers respond reflects limitations, not only on knowledge, but also on human capacity for care. The number of teachers who can be completely committed to their students physically, psychologically, and socially is limited. They may have a family to take care of. Teaching as an occupation also has its limits.

In Lopez's case, there is a particular type of human relationship that is determined by its institutional context to be a "student-teacher relationship." This human relationship can be an educational relationship and also a non-educational one. Let me compare similar human relationships, such as, child-adult relationship, learner-teacher relationship, and student-teacher relationship.

- The child-adult relationship is not necessarily an educational relationship. In certain societies, adults are supposed to teach something. In another society, what adults are doing is to live with children and show them how to live. Children are expected to become adults after they learn appropriate behavior and values.
- The learner-teacher relationship is quite educational. While learners can learn by their experiences without a teacher, teachers require the existence of a learner in the relationship.
- The student-teacher relationship is institutional. Even if someone does not teach anything in school, he or she could be recognized as a teacher as long as he or she is hired as a teacher. The student-teacher relationship, of course, is expected to be educational.

Lopez had no educational relationship, but a merely institutional one at the beginning. He may have wanted to invite his students to an educational relationship

when he fought against them. Fighting itself is a different human relationship. If we think of the other in education as the Other in a Hegelian picture, we would fail to see what it looks like.

“The other” literally means the second of two in a bipolar relationship, something or someone additional and less familiar. It is something else than the self. In terms of the use of the concept, there are at least two characteristics of “the other.” First, “the other” is used to describe something extraordinary or beyond our control. Nature, god, madness, or unconsciousness can be characterized as “the other.” Secondly, “the other” is something outside our concern or excluded. Thus, “the other” is sometimes ignored and not mentioned as “the other” at all. Hegel described the relation of the self to the other as a master-slave relationship at an early stage of the development of consciousness.

In educational bipolar relationships, the otherness of students is easily ignored and supposed to be corrected. A child/student/learner is expected to learn something that he or she does not yet have, but an adult/teacher possesses in most cases. The former should be developed, enlightened, or colonized by the latter. Since one of the tasks of teaching is normalization, the uniqueness of a learner may have to be denied occasionally.

We live in a real world. We cannot be free from our historical social conditions. I agree with Margonis that we cannot help beginning with our specific biased and limited conditions. We may fail to teach this time even if we have been successfully teaching before. In Lopez’s case, the political discord, especially “the disconnect between his ideals of serving students and the punitive character of his actual teaching” let him become aware of his closed mind. In a case where there is no political conflict between a teacher and a student, we also need the same prompt. What it does mean for teachers to recognize the otherness of students is to leave room for potential otherness: a student can appear as the other at any time. Even if you recognize potential otherness, you may fail to teach students. It is not a promising prescription, but a kind of ethical obligation that you feel toward the other.