

*Disrupting the Grade Imperative Through Critical Pedagogies Embedded Into  
Human Rights Focused Literary Study*

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**Abstract**

This paper presents the story of what happened when I incorporated critical pedagogical practices, within a human rights focused unit of study, into my literature classroom and examined the effect it had on my students' perceptions regarding the purpose of their education. After providing a theoretical framework, positioning my study within existing research, and outlining my study, I then explain my methods for selecting research participants and gathering data, ultimately concluding with implications. This study took place within a highly competitive Korean American international high school where grades, GPA ranking, and admissions into Ivy League institutions are perceived by most students to be the fundamental purpose of education. My study broadly begins by examining the learning environment, perceptions, and practices of one class, eventually narrowing my research to be focused on a single student. This student's story demonstrates that even within highly competitive schooling environments, where the purpose of learning has largely been reduced to rote memorization and GPA ranking, the introduction of critical pedagogies, within a human rights focused unit of study, has the *potential* to disrupt paradigms surrounding the purpose of education; raise critical consciousness; and possibly foster transformative learning, leading to a greater sense of purpose regarding education as a means of connection to the world beyond the self.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Human Rights Centered Pedagogies, Literature Classroom, Purpose, Critical Consciousness, Transformative Learning

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## Introduction

My first year teaching at a private Korean-American international high school in Seoul, South Korea, I thought I had fallen into an educator's paradise. On the surface, it seemed like an educational utopia in which education was functioning the way it ought to; the way we all know it could and should. However, after a year or two, a crack appeared in the corner of the facade. As I took a closer look, and peeled back the layers, I began to uncover some of the less obvious truths about my utopian environment.

I realized that most of my students had punishing work schedules, participated in a full load of extracurriculars after school, and attended hagwon or cram school in the evenings. A hagwon is a for-profit private cram school. Often my students would not return home from hagwon until well after midnight, at which point they would most likely stay awake completing tasks into the early hours of the morning.

While the accolades, awards, and successes of my students were noteworthy, I began to understand that most were not being driven by a self-transcendent purpose, but rather by the pursuit of GPA ranking, and the expectation that they gain admittance into an Ivy League institution. Even more troubling, many of them indicated that cheating and hiring shadow tutors to complete their work was an acceptable form of attaining their educational goals.

Research indicates that “a purpose is distinct from but related to personal meaning. The former includes a person's goal and his or her motives for pursuing it. The latter refers to the sense that something matters and makes sense in the context of one's life or worldview” (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008; Yeager & Bundick, 2009). While the external factors motivating my students to achieve high ranking marks did create *some* sense of purpose for my students, when questioned, most indicated that they did not believe they were in school to cultivate a deeper sense of self in relationship to the world, but rather, they indicated that they believed the purpose of their education was to be obedient to a larger objective – one in which their own dreams were often set aside for the fulfillment of familial and societal expectations. This external pressure placed upon my students did spur incredible feats of production and task completion, however, they often indicated that self-actualization, critical consciousness raising, and transformative learning was not an aspect of how they had been taught to approach their education.

Thus, I became increasingly concerned with the perceptions my students exhibited regarding their education. I rarely saw them engaged unless that engagement could be linked to a grade, thereby increasing their GPA ranking, and facilitating a greater chance of admittance into one of the famed Ivies. I needed to better understand how I might cultivate of a deeper sense of purpose within my students beyond that of grades and college admittance.

Yeager, et al. define a purpose for learning as “a goal that is motivated both by an opportunity to benefit the self and by the potential to have some effect on or connection to the world beyond the self” (2014). While my students were effectively motivated by the opportunity of benefiting the self, they were less accustomed to motivational factors related to purpose which have a connection to the world beyond the self. Keeping this in mind, I wanted to explore avenues which might guide my students toward possible new ways of thinking about the purpose of their education.

In the remainder of this paper, I present the story of what happened when I incorporated critical pedagogical practices embedded within a human rights focused unit of study into my literature classroom, and examined the effect it had on my students' perceptions regarding the purpose of their education. My study broadly begins by examining the learning environment, perceptions, and practices of one class, eventually narrowing my research to be focused on one student. This student's story demonstrates that even within highly competitive schooling environments, where the purpose of learning has largely been reduced to rote memorization and GPA ranking, the introduction of critical pedagogies, within a human rights focused unit of study has the *potential* to disrupt paradigms surrounding the purpose of education; raise critical consciousness; and possibly foster transformative learning, leading to a greater sense of purpose regarding education as a means of connection to the world beyond the self.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

When explaining the banking system of education, the famous Brazilian educator, scholar, and philosopher, Paulo Freire, (1970) argued that “the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (p. 71). He further argued that “the more completely [students] accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (p. 71). When viewed through Freire's theoretical framework, it became clear that my students' perceptions about the purpose of their education as a medium for constructing meaningful experiences were stifled due to the traditional, hyper-competitive schooling environment they were immersed in. Under these conditions, my students, although accomplished, often could not articulate a greater purpose for their learning beyond GPA ranking and college admittance, thus having adapted to the “fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (p.71). When queried about possible alternative reasons for engaging in their education, my students indicated that they did not feel empowered to explore alternative frames regarding their education.

While getting into a top-tier university is certainly a worthy goal to have, the pressure to achieve this goal at all costs circumvents the purpose of transformational and authentic education. As Lee, S., & Shouse, R. (2011) points out, in Korea, “the demands of college entrance, and career success, schooling and testing serve as the nation's main engines of social reality and occupational structure” (p. 221). My students had been conditioned to view their educational status in Korean culture as tantamount to their lifelong status as an individual, thereby elevating this singular objective to one of the most defining features of their educational purpose.

Education is one of the most prominent features connected to social status in Korean society, and access to top-tier college preparatory schools are disproportionately accessible to those families with higher socioeconomic status. This phenomenon is not unique to Korean society; educational advantages accessed by those in higher socioeconomic status can be seen in all societies. That being said, South Korea does have a particularly unique set of values and circumstances which create what Lee, S., & Shouse, R. (2011) call “prestige orientation” (p.3). As such, my students were conditioned to focus only on the goal of achieving social status (a self-interested goal) and struggled to articulate any further purpose for their learning (self-transcendent goal). One of the foundational aspects of this conditioning can be traced back to Korea's roots with Confucianism.

Kim, S. (2013) confirms, “the importance of moral education and teachers’ moral authority based on Confucianism has long remained the central feature of Korean education” (p. 15). Due to this foundational belief system, most of my students were conditioned to base their decisions on familial expectations regarding schooling and career choices. Thus, a purpose for their education had already been clearly defined, leaving little room for the exploration of purpose associated with self-actualization or transformative learning.

Research has revealed a distinction between a purpose which is self-interested versus one that is self-transcendent. Eccles and Wigfield (1995), believe that “learners may view a task as likely to benefit the self, believing it will be intrinsically enjoyable or lead to a personally fulfilling career” (p. 215), or “learners may also have motives that transcend self-interest” (Eccles, 2009, p. 44). In most cases, my students were unaccustomed to identifying their own purpose with regards to their education, as they had been conditioned to value the expectations of their elders, society, and larger community in support of a collective purpose which they had internalized as self-interested, rather than to identify with individualistic notions of purpose, which may have the potential to lead to more self-transcendent views.

Research completed by Korean scholars indicates that “Korean education deprives its students of the opportunity to assist the practice and growth of their own intelligence” (Kim, 2013, p. 15). The strong roots of Confucianism still prevalent in society discourage independent thinking, in favor of a more collectivist perspective regarding the purpose of education. According to Sorensen (1994), the system of education in modern day Korea, like most educational systems, does serve the function of practically training an efficient workforce, but unlike some other educational systems, it does not, however, function “as the means by which autonomous individuals seek upward mobility through the acquisition of cultural capital” (p. 6).

Research confirms evidence which links the highly competitive nature of education in the Korean context to a deficit in authentic learning and individual meaning making. Byun, Schofer and Kimhadow (2012) confirm that “education has long been practiced as individual tutoring in Korea, but it has evolved in recent years to include cram schools (hagwon), correspondence courses (hagseupji), and online tutoring, all of which are more structured and commercialized than individual tutoring” (p. 6). Furthermore, the authors elaborate on the ethos and practice surrounding education in Korea as being “focus[ed] on helping students memorize large amounts of material for particular tests in a very short period of time, rather than fostering critical thinking” (p. 6). This research is indicative of a pervasive mindset in Korean society around the purpose of education, which largely excludes individual meaning making and self-driven purpose from the general framework.

While my students had the benefit of attending a private international school, and were thus less impacted by traditional Korean schooling methods, many were still influenced by these larger presuppositions around the purpose of their education. Through my study, I hoped to empower my students to consider possible alternatives regarding their purpose for learning. I hoped that by framing my students’ learning through Freirean critical approaches I would be able to assist my students in understanding that “they did not have to memorize description(s) mechanically, but rather learn [the] underlying significance. Only by learning the significance could they know how to memorize it, to fix it. Mechanically memorizing the description of an object does not constitute knowing an object” (p.8-9), as Freire elucidated in his 1983 essay, *The Importance of the Act of Reading*.

Ideally my student's perceptions would shift to be more in line with the Freirean idea that "education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (p. 78). Through my study, I hoped to facilitate a paradigm shift in my student's perceptions regarding how they critically and creatively saw themselves within their education and the world at large.

### **Critical Approaches to a Human Rights Centered Literary Unit of Study**

My goal was to take one of our literature units and reframe the focus of our reading to be centered around current human rights issues. In addition, I replaced most of the standardized assessments with critical pedagogical approaches to learning. While these two adjustments may sound like every day good teaching practices, they were somewhat foreign methods of instruction for most of my students, who were most comfortable with traditional modes of test taking and memorization as the main engines of their learning process.

With this goal in mind, I chose *And the Mountains Echoed*, by Khaled Hosseini as the core text for our literary unit of study. This novel explores a variety of themes such as child slavery, children's rights, and power. I chose this novel because it was around this same time that NATO forces had been withdrawn from Afghanistan. Because of this current event, I had been working with an Afghan Advocacy group in my free time, and I noticed an opportunity to bring my volunteer work into the classroom and make real-world, human rights connections with my students. I surmised this may potentially provide a window into alternative perspectives for my students regarding the purpose of education.

As we made our way through the novel, I integrated more critical pedagogical approaches into our daily learning routines and removed the standardized modes of assessment which my students were accustomed to navigating. As the unit progressed, I also lessened the link to summative grades associated with these tasks, as much as was possible. I provided enough grading to sustain the documentation of their learning, while reducing the connection between these critical pedagogical activities and their summative grades.

Throughout this unit, students engaged in a series of formal and informal interviews, kept learning journals, and met as a small group after school to discuss human rights issues which were a direct extension of the text we were reading.

### **Methods and Research Question**

In the earliest stages of my research, I set out to understand how to best cultivate purpose, outside of grades and GPA, by attempting to scaffold more self-defined, autonomous learning activities into my daily teaching routine. The results of my earliest research found that simply providing more autonomous, self-driven learning opportunities did not yield a greater sense of personal purpose. In most instances, the results were even more lackluster than when the students had been guided by clear directives, linked to grade-oriented outcomes. By removing the typical purpose of competing for grades and ranking from my students' routine and handing them creative license to autonomously build learning activities based on their interests, most students were far less productive under these conditions than I had anticipated.

Based on this initial outcome, I learned early on in my research that having a clearly defined purpose and understanding your “why” is critical to student engagement. Thus, in the second and most recent phase of my study, I incorporated critical pedagogical approaches embedded into a human rights focused literary unit of study, and my ongoing research was guided by the following inquiry: *to what extent does the incorporation of critical pedagogical practices and human rights focused literary study contribute to the facilitation of a shift in perception regarding how my students view the purpose of their education?*

## **Context and Participants**

This study was conducted with twelve students from one English Literature class in a private American international high school located in Seoul, South Korea, serving an affluent Korean American population. My study broadly began by examining the learning environment, perceptions, and practices of one class, and eventually narrowed my focus down to a single student, Yoobin (pseudonym). I chose to focus the story of my research on Yoobin as she is representative of the largest body of students, in that she sees the purpose of her education to be admittance into a top Ivy league school, with little ability to articulate a purpose beyond this immediate goal.

## **Data Collection**

To conduct this study, I utilized a variety of qualitative research methods including pre-study surveys, interviews, teacher anecdotal observations, and student reflections.

Based on the results of an anonymous survey I collected at the beginning of the year, I determined which of my classes was predominately made up of students whose perceptions around education were most aligned with the objectives of GPA accumulation and college admissions and chose to focus my study on this class.

I also completed observational notes on students’ exhibited behaviors with regards to engagement and interest in activities which were not linked to summative objectives, as well as activities linked to the human rights focused literary study and critical pedagogical approaches to learning. Moreover, I conducted two sets of interviews with students from the class – one at the beginning of the study and one at the end. Additionally, once I narrowed my focus to Yoobin, I conducted follow-up interviews with her.

To complement the observational notes and interviews, I collected reflective journal entries from my students. At the close of each critical pedagogical activity or human rights focused lesson, I provided the students with an opportunity to reflect on their metacognitive process, specifically drawing their attention to the differences in their perceptions around their learning in relationship to these activities versus activities which were associated with more traditional schooling such as testing and information recall.

The interviews along with the reflective entries proved to be the most valuable data, as I was able to capture in narrative form authentic reflections through writing as well as dialogue. By engaging in the interviews with open-ended story questions, I was able to listen attentively and allow the students a space to really open up about their perspectives on education, and on how they viewed themselves within that framework.

## **Data Analysis**

The data collected suggests that most students are interested in considering possible other motivations for learning. By the end of the study, students who had once been adamant about the purpose of their education being solely for grade accumulation, GPA ranking, and college admissions, did in fact find some interest in pursuing education for “loftier reasons.” In coding the data, I identified four larger themes: (i) the overwhelming pressure placed upon students to perform at extremely high levels, and the oppressive and limiting effect this pressure and lack of time has on students’ desires to pursue alternative concepts related to purpose, (ii) the importance of providing alternative concepts related to purpose, and not just simply removing the objective of grades and college admissions, but rather complimenting this objective with more meaningful alternatives, (iii) the positive impact human rights focused units of study have on engaging students in more self-transcendent motivations for learning, and lastly (iv) the positive impact critical pedagogical approaches have on shifting students perceptions from that of a grade imperative to that of a more self-to-world meaning making experience.

## **Data Discussion and Survey Data**

In the initial anonymous survey, most students felt that approaching their education with the purpose of grades and college admissions was “necessary.” Some students even responded to survey questions indicating that “cheating [was] also necessary to achieve [that] goal.” While not every student was an advocate for cheating, these comments highlight the competitive and pressurized mindset that is reflective of the educational environment which these students are accustomed to navigating.

At the close of the study, there were still students who indicated that grades and college admissions were the most important aspect of their education, but even these students indicated that they enjoyed the human rights focused lessons, and the critical pedagogical approaches to learning, and even suggested they “like[d] these methods of learning more because [they felt] more comfortable having discussions and not needing to have the correct answer all the time.”

This data highlights the importance of removing the pressure of grades and superficial goals, as it allows students the opportunity to explore ideas, and reduces the focus on needing the correct answers.

## **Case Study**

In this section I present the ways in which my students responded to the study, while also exploring general themes and trends. I explore this data through the retelling of one student’s experience as they navigated the study along with their peers. Yoobin, is representative of the largest group of students who either could not articulate a purpose for their education beyond grades and GPA ranking, or did not care to explore alternative purposes, as pressure to fulfill the grade imperative was too intense for these students to take precious time away from this objective in pursuit of another.

## *Yoobin*

Yoobin being representative of the largest population of students at our school, as well as in her class, described herself through her survey results, interviews, and reflections, as someone who “at all costs” needed to achieve the highest grade point average in her class, and hopefully “become valedictorian, because it [would] make [her] parents very proud.” She is also one of the students in my class, who when queried further about the lengths she would go to in order to achieve this high academic status, confessed that “cheating [was] a necessary thing to do [in order] to get ahead in school and life.” She shared a few of her thoughts with me in an interview early in the study regarding her beliefs around her learning.

Yoobin, indicated at the beginning of the study that she really didn’t view school as an opportunity for engaging in meaningful experiences related to self-exploration, actualization, or transformation. When asked whether or not she would be interested in a human rights literary unit of study where the focus was on more critical pedagogical approaches, such as dialoging, and community projects, rather than grades, her response below reflects her initial reaction:

I guess I will participate, because I have to and it could be fun, but in the end, I will still be thinking about getting the highest marks because it will still be part of our grade, right? I think human rights are important, but I am not really sure what it has to do with English class.

This excerpt from Yoobin’s initial interview at the earliest stages of the study are important because it highlights how Yoobin is not unaware of concepts which could be considered of greater significance than merely a competitive grade point average, but she does not see how these larger world implications are relevant to her objectives as a student – at least in her English Literature class.

In one of Yoobin’s reflections after an early discussion-based class session, she commented on why she was not that active in the dialogue. This dialogue was held after an in-class reading of an excerpt from our core text, *And The Mountains Echoed*, and it was not linked to a grade:

I didn’t talk that much because I wasn’t feeling that great and the discussion does not count [for a grade]. I need to keep my energy for my summative later today, and my Socratic seminar in gov pol is summative next class... I am generally less active in formative activities.

The above excerpt from Yoobin’s reflection continues to highlight the emphasis on grades for most students like Yoobin. While she indicated an interest in the topic of human rights, she was not compelled to engage in the activity when it did not “count” toward her grade.

At the midway point in the study the students had recently watched various news clips related to the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan. At the same time, I was also working with a volunteer organization related to assisting Afghan refugees in locating safe places of residence and employment in the United States. We were about halfway through our core text, *And The Mountains Echoed*, and we had read fictionalized accounts of refugee struggles. I saw an opportunity to bring some of the advocacy work for refugees into the classroom as an optional activity. I proposed that any student who wanted, could draft a letter to congress

urging them to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would provide greater long term assistance to Afghan refugees as they settled into the United States. This activity was not linked to a grade.

I collected the letters from students who had opted to participate and sent them off to congress. Yoobin was among the students who opted to complete this activity. This struck me as unlike Yoobin, so I was very interested in reading her reflection after completing this task. Her explanations regarding why she wrote the letter, as well as how she viewed this activity in relationship to her education demonstrated a pleasant shift in her thinking:

I wanted to write the letter because I feel so bad for these refugees. No one should have to die this way. In our book it is very sad how these refugees have to live and if they do not get a chance to leave Afghanistan then they have very little prospect for living a good life at all. I wanted to help even if my grade was not affected.

The above excerpt from Yoobin's reflection after this activity emphasizes an important shift in Yoobin's thinking around activities related to her education. In this moment, she was able to connect a piece of literature to the lived experiences of real people in the world, and was thus compelled to use her own agency and resources to try and enact change, or rather pursue some type of transformation with regards to the world she was living in. Yoobin, was able to see herself as someone who could use her education as a way to transform the world around her, and viewed herself as someone who could contribute as a change agent. The fact that Yoobin felt compelled by a desire to assist others in a time of need indicates that she is capable of viewing her education as a possible means of self-transcendence.

At the close of this study, when Yoobin and I met for a final interview, I asked her whether or not her perceptions around the purpose of education had shifted at all, what her thoughts were on the incorporation of human rights into the curriculum, and lastly how she viewed the critical pedagogical approaches to teaching in comparison to the traditional modes of learning she was accustomed to, such as testing and essay writing. Her responses are indicative of why this study is important:

I enjoyed the human rights components in our literature unit. Instead of just reading a book, we made connections to issues in the world happening right now. I also liked the discussions and projects because I felt more comfortable by the end of the unit exploring ideas once I knew the pressure of having to have the correct answer was not such a big issue, and it wouldn't impact my grade. I still think the purpose of education is to get good grades and get into college, but, I think education could be improved if more teachers added issues about human rights and had more interesting activities. I still prefer traditional tests though because I know how to study for these.

These final concluding thoughts from Yoobin, highlight the importance of providing opportunities for students like Yoobin to engage in purposeful learning beyond the grade imperative. Even though Yoobin still views the purpose of her education as a means to an end, she nonetheless, was able to find value in the critical pedagogical approaches which were introduced in this study. Though she indicates that she still prefers test taking, this admission emphasizes the importance of educators in all contexts to move away from these modes of learning as Yoobin clearly indicates her preference for this more traditional way of learning because it is easier to study for these activities, thus easier to presume a correct answer, thereby reducing the function of learning to a transactional score.

Through this case study Yoobin was able to demonstrate a small shift in her thinking around how she perceived herself within our unit of study. While this study did not completely change Yoobin's objectives regarding education, her reflections on the incorporation of critical pedagogical approaches, as well as human rights-focused study are encouraging. If a student like Yoobin working within a very sclerotic and traditional schooling environment, under immense pressure to adhere to a grade imperative, can show a small shift in her thinking, the implications for most students look promising.

### **Conclusion: Implications and Recommendations**

This study revealed that through the incorporation of critical pedagogical approaches framed within a human rights focused unit of study, students have a greater opportunity to engage in their learning beyond the superficiality of grades. These types of approaches to teaching and learning can shift even the most reticent learner toward more self-transcendent, self-actualized learning, leading to a greater possibility for critical consciousness raising and transformative experiences.

At a time when environmental crises are on the rise and human rights abuses still plague large swaths of the population, our objective in education should focus on fostering critical thinking and compassion. Educating for a sustainable future starts with educating radically free thinkers who prioritize critical thinking rather than dogmatic adherence to traditional, normative frames. This study demonstrates that inspiring a greater, more transformative purpose for education starts in the classroom with small approaches reducing the link to grades and emphasizing the importance of meaningful experiences.

A barrier revealed during this study was that often there are outside forces which converge to cultivate a sense of purpose with regards to how students perceive objectives within a learning community. Familial, societal, and cultural forces shape students' notions of how they see themselves within education. However, this study did reveal that small adjustments made in the teacher's classroom can have a large impact on how students view their education. While one teacher in one classroom is unlikely to change an entire cultural belief around education, it is possible to plant small seeds of change which overtime can have a lasting effect.

I recommend that educators strongly consider incorporating more critical approaches to learning into their curriculum, reduce the emphasis on grades, and connect learning to real world problems, so that we may begin to imbue individuals with a greater sense of meaning, and purpose with regards to how we approach our lives, and the responsibility we have to those around us.

Lastly, while the specific context of this case study may be viewed as its own unique setting, it is nonetheless indicative of other highly competitive educational system, and as such acts as a guide for why educators, policy makers, and school leaders must remove the impediments to transformative learning experiences if we are to embody our mission as educators and continue to inspire just, compassionate, empathetic, and innovative global citizens.

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