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**Panel: Speaking from and with the South: What knowledge is of most worth? (Maria
Luiza Sussekind, coord.)**

Title: Letter to my student teachers: Another knowledge is possible

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Dear student teachers,

In his introduction to *Professora sim, tia não: Cartas a quem ousa ensinar* (Letters to those who dare to teach), Paulo Freire (1997) justifies writing the book for his strong ethical and political commitment towards a democratic school. As Paulo, I also write this letter to you moved by the same commitment. I cannot idly stand by watching the democratic ideal for which many people fought for (and died for in senseless wars waged abroad) in the years before 1974 in Portugal. After 48 years of dictatorship, political democracy brought a renewed sense of hope in a modern and progressive society, one that would bring true equality among classes, among gender, within the intimate spaces of homes and families. One that would no longer allow a huge mass of students to drop out of school, for being poor, whose families did not possess the necessary cultural capital that the school uses to select those who will succeed – and those that will stay, for, as Paulo Freire reminds us, school abandonment and dropout is an ideological construct: students do not abandon

school willingly – they are abandoned by the school, in several ways prohibited of inhabiting it (Freire, 1997, p. 10).

Today, after 44 years of political democracy, even though students are no longer abandoned by school in huge numbers, there is still a very long road to travel towards effective social democracy. We still have a long way to go when our public schools still retain 150 000 students in the same school year, 35% of 15-year old students are retained at least once (Grácio, Almeida, & Ascensão, 2015), and where the impact of the socioeconomic and sociocultural level of the families is still high – having a mother with a university degree doubles the chances of finishing basic education when compared with having a mother with just basic (9-year) education; a school where not having social support measures almost doubles the chances of finishing basic education without retention and successfully in all school subjects (DGEEC, 2016).

When you say, referring to the Roma minority in schools, the social group with the highest rate of school dropout and retention, “she is well behaved *even though* she is a gypsy” or “I have normal students *and* a few Roma”; or still, referring to the fact that compulsory education was enlarged to 12 years of schooling and that now includes ALL students, “we are giving them what is best for them [vocational training] – they have *neither* the cognitive ability *nor* the cultural competence to achieve more than this”, in your words you do show that “Reason is ideological, not grammatical” (Freire, 2013, p. 48, my translation). You show the slyness that dominant ideology uses to naturalize the position of structural subalternity for the ‘usual suspects’ in our public schools. Keeping some social, minority, ethnic groups *where they belong* works really nicely in cutting off any chances of social mobility, as these vocational, alternative paths are not any equivalent to the prestige academic paths – those who will give access to higher education, to prestige jobs, those who are considered both socially and educationally relevant. In this educational framework, these students will seldom succeed; the kind of knowledge they possess is irrelevant to

school; their experiences and their families' experiences and funds of knowledge (cf. González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) are irrelevant (and invisible) to school.

Other times, unwittingly, you resort to ideological mechanisms that use, as an excuse, the official schooling grammar that “makes it almost impossible to have an education and a curriculum outside a particular framework that is bounded by issues related to standards, classification, objectives, disciplinary orthodoxy, and competences – in other words, the official curriculum language”

(Paraskeva, 2011, p. 175). When you, my student teachers, state: “I do not have the time; I have to cover the syllabus/ to teach the whole syllabus, I cannot take the time to go back and explain...” or

“Curricula are far bigger than we can take for each school year and sometimes that leaves no time to teachers to deviate from the curriculum to talk about specific and different examples of the real

life that are really useful for each student's needs” (something I have been hearing over and over again...), what you actually doing is to perpetuate social and cognitive injustice in schools. Paulo

Freire (2001) again: one does not immediately understand what one reads and studies;

understanding is weaved, forged by those who read and study, in a patient, challenging, and

persistent mode – it is also imbricated with the level of intellectual experience of the reader and of

the author. And when the distance between the two is too wide, the effort to understand is hopeless

– it is a continuous struggle to get to know. And as we so well know, this struggle is particularly

cumbersome for those who come from a more disadvantaged sociocultural and socioeconomic

background, that is, for the majority in public schools.

In the much needed task of “exercising critical judgement in the resistance to the sly power of ideology” (Freire, 2013, p. 130, transl.), the critique of assessment practices plays a key role. As the National Council of Education recognizes (Grácio, Almeida, & Ascensão, 2015, p. 10), even though literature and research clearly select formative assessment as the main evaluation and

assessment mode that should guide educational action, school culture and schooling practices privilege summative assessment and standardized testing:

This tendency is embedded in an educational system where an overwhelming 'grade culture' prevails, without the corresponding concern in the processes that promote learning. Practice is impregnated in this culture, first and foremost with the tradition – without any parallel in other educational systems – of compulsory public display of individual grades with student identification, arising from internal assessment, under the pretenses of transparency, but with questionable effects in the perception of results on students and their families. (...)

The assessment culture, more oriented towards classifying and ranking, deepens the disciplinary and punishing character of assessment, instead of recentering its focus in detecting difficulties, with a view to determining the appropriate course of action to solving them... (Grácio, Almeida, & Ascensão, 2015, p. 10, transl.)

When you spend more time testing than providing meaningful, and informative feedback (“After one intensive day preparing (primary) students to the tests”, Sílvia, March 15 2018) with the arguments that “we have to prepare children to be competitive” (January 2018) or that “we have to prepare children for the job market” (November, 2016), I cannot help recovering my Catholic upbringing and remember Jesus Christ’s words: “Forgive them father, for they do not know what they are doing”... As Ruth Ann Dandrea (2012), in the book *Pencils Down: Rethinking high-stakes testing and accountability in public schools*, a book of the Rethinking Schools’ project, it’s high time we thought seriously about the damage that is being carried out daily at schools worldwide:

“About Those Tests I Gave You . . . An open letter to my students:

Dear 8th Graders,

I'm sorry. I didn't know. I spent last night perusing the 150-plus pages of grading materials provided by the state in anticipation of reading and evaluating your English Language Arts Exams this morning. I knew the test was pointless—that it has never done its job fulfilling its stated purpose as a predictor of who would succeed and who would fail the English Regents in 11th grade. Any thinking person would've ditched it years ago. Instead, rather than simply give a test in 8th grade that doesn't get kids ready for the test in 11th grade, the state opted to also give a test in 7th grade to get you ready for your 8th-grade test. But we already knew all of that. What I learned is that the test is also criminal. (p. 95)

The dominant neoliberal ideology stresses quality and excellence as value-free, as we apparently live in a world where equality prevails and where it makes no sense to talk about social class, racism, sexism, injustices or social inequalities, let alone relate these with school failure (Santomé, 2006, p. 30). So in the 'neutral space' that is the classroom, students are *trained* to apolitical practices (Freire, 2013, p. 95) and teachers are faith believers in the value of the pretence quantifiable objectivity that comes with tests and standardized testing. For they will create the same conditions for all students, regardless of who they are, where they come from, what their aspirations and strengths are, who they want to become... The construction of neoliberal, conservative and neo-colonial personalities in nowadays schools (Santomé, 2017) works really well in pushing particular groups into the epistemic abyss (Santos, 2008): those students whose cultures are silenced by the official curriculum: the feminine world; infancy, youth, the elderly; sick, disabled people; gay, lesbian, and transsexual cultures; working classes and poverty; the suburban, rural and maritime world; Nations without a State; ethnic or powerless minorities; Oriental or 3rd world countries; religions other than Christianity, agnosticism, and atheism (Santomé, 2011, p. 226). As Paraskeva (2016, p. 45), building on Santos (2014), claims, the struggle for curriculum meaning and relevance

has not only failed to pay attention to the colossal epistemic thesaurus beyond the Western-European, Christian, white, blue-eyed, heterosexual, male cultural terrain but has also been producing other epistemologies as nonexistent. And so, these students of yours, who keep being left behind, who enroll the numbers of retention and school dropout, do so because they do not identify with the school culture, the school curriculum as it is, not as it should or could be. We know what knowledge is of most worth by the official curriculum, but we need to move beyond this Western, Eurocentric, neocolonial, patriarchal and conservative epistemology that produces distorted and oppressing knowledge paradigms that value certain types of rationalities, cultures and social groups, while depriving all others of their rightful place in the history of humanity's cultural production (Quijano, 2000).

However, still using Paraskeva's (2016) words, "...we need to engage in the struggle against curriculum epistemicides. One needs first to assume consciously that *(an)other knowledge is possible* and then to extend past the Western epistemological platform, paying attention to other forms of knowledge" (p. 43). One needs to start in our schools, with our students who are *something else other than*; please forget syllabi, tests and exams; remember why you chose this profession and act accordingly. Remember the mission and purposes of schooling; remember the joy of learning just for the sake of discovery; remember the right of all children to a democratic and inclusive education; remember the right of all children to be children and to behave like children; remember that children and adolescents come from a different background from yours, so they know a great deal of the world that you do not know; and resist the neoliberal momentum that is taking over your capacity for the critical analysis of your work and for informed choice in your daily life in school.

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