

Walking in a Minefield

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I am grateful to Frank Margonis for writing about white teachers and the minefields in which they work as they attempt to teach students of color in a neocolonial world context. I am very familiar with Gloria Ladson-Billings' *Dreamkeepers*; in fact I have in my office enough copies for a class that was part of an urban multicultural teacher licensing program that attracted predominantly white, middle class women seeking to work in schools similar to Ms. Rossi's.¹ In my own work where I spent five years with students from collective cultures in American schools, I struggled with how to bring the students' white teachers' voices, like Ms. Rossi's, into the conversation.² Their good work deserves to be honored, as Ladson-Billings recognizes in *Dreamkeepers*, and Margonis attends to in his essay.

At the same time, many scholars warn us that taking a proactive pedagogical approach to structural or institutional influences such as the history of racism in the United States can end up recreating the very racism teachers like Ms. Rossi and scholars like Ladson-Billings and Margonis seek to eliminate. Margonis is aware of concerns of using totalizing descriptors such as African American or Native American to seek eliminating racism, and of the tenuous ground he is on in seeking principles to guide teaching in neocolonial educational contexts. He knows that those who embrace Levinasian principles for relating to students are concerned that summative understandings of others "reduce mysterious and complex individuals to our object of knowledge." Margonis demonstrates his awareness of the minefield he seeks to walk through with his description of Gert Biesta's concern for minding the educational gaps that exist in classrooms, the spaces where people are free to come to presence with one another.

However, Margonis wants to argue that while Ladson-Billings' description of Ms. Rossi's teaching of math "appears to be an example of the sorts of intersubjective play Biesta finds most promising," it's important to recognize that Ladson-Billings' interpretation of Ms. Rossi's success as a teacher is due to Rossi's general understanding of her students' communication preferences and her awareness of the ways in which the neocolonial context could cause her students to distrust her, as a white teacher. Margonis' central claim is that "Ladson-Billings' generalizations about teachers and students in neocolonial contexts are absolutely critical to helping students in neocolonial contexts attain the intersubjective possibilities for which Biesta argues." His solution is a both/and logic instead of either/or. Teachers need to attend to their students in their particularity while at the same time recognizing their teaching is embedded within a social and historical context. I agree. However, I want to tease out the tensions more. I also think a relational (e)pistemology, one that supports Biesta's ethical and ontological analysis, can help us further explore the solution Margonis suggests.

First, it is very important we acknowledge that *no* classroom is a safe place. There is *always* uncertainty and unpredictability that make it a risky, dangerous environment and not just for some, but *for all*. This is not necessarily a bad thing, in that some risk is necessary for growth; still, Ms. Rossi needs to help make the classroom safer for her students and seek to develop caring relationships based on trust and respect, so they all can risk opening up and learning from each other. We need to acknowledge that the students who walk into the classroom are complex, unique beings, as is Ms. Rossi, and the school is an institution that is embedded within a historical context, a unique geographic location, a particular community, and so forth. There is a lot of context that comes into that math classroom along with Ms. Rossi.

Also, it is important to acknowledge that while we can give Ms. Rossi credit for seeking to get to know her students through a questionnaire she gives at the beginning of the school year, and then uses students' responses to guide her curriculum, we also know students will try to tell her what they think she wants to hear (they will try to please the teacher) and they are very adept at reading their teachers (according to research, it takes about 2 weeks). I had small classroom sizes as an elementary teacher and was with my students for most of the day, and yet there were several students I did not get to know very well until the second or third year they were in my classroom, and I am hesitant to say I knew them well. Given that we are strangers to ourselves, how can a teacher ever claim that kind of knowledge of another? Here, Emmanuel Levinas offers us an important reminder of the stranger in others and the humility that strangeness requires of us as teachers.

I did not understand what caused Jerry's anger in my classroom and his aggressive reactions if a classmate accidentally brushed against him until I learned that Jerry's parents were on the FBI's "10 Most Wanted" list as former members of the Weathermen. I found this out when they disappeared over Christmas break after being involved in killing a state trooper who stopped them for a traffic violation, and the FBI came knocking on my classroom door. That is when I learned I did not even know Jerry's name or age, let alone that his parents' car had loaded guns in the trunk at all times. Jerry was in our small Montessori school for at least three years and in my classroom with fifteen–seventeen students for two years.

I did not discover some of the family problems Joey wrestled with that caused him to be depressed and write in his journal that he was contemplating suicide until the second year he was in my classroom. Because Joey trusted me enough to share with me he was suffering, which I shared with my principal, and the family trusted the principal, they were willing to enter into family counseling. That is when we learned one parent grew up with an alcoholic parent and the other's parent was institutionalized with schizophrenia. Expressing their emotions did not come easy for Joey's parents, and their children were struggling in school as a result.

My point is that Ms. Rossi's questionnaire only scratches the surface of her students' lives, and it still positions her on top of the hierarchy, unless she is willing to answer the same questionnaire for them, or even better, let her students help to

design the questionnaire they'll all try to answer, share with each other, and continue to revisit. Students always remain strangers to us. Still, teachers have to try to get to know their students, to greet them and welcome them and seek to communicate with them, in the gap between you and I that is where education takes place.

I seek to extend Margonis' argument with further discussion of a relational focus to help us better understand the both/and logical approach Margonis seeks. Unfortunately, Ladson-Billings slides into an either/or logic in *Dreamkeepers* and creates a reductive dualism with her sharp contrast between culturally relevant teaching and assimilationist teaching that limits her contribution to a both/and logic. In my work, I have explored relationality in terms of (e)pistemology and continue to further examine relationality in terms of ontology.³ In *Relational "(e)pistemologies"* I seek to "bring things together, to emphasize how things overlap, associate, integrate, refer, compare, connect, *relate* to each other, and in that relating, how things affect each other and change each other.... I offer a unifying logic that presents the universe as whole and open."⁴ I argue, in Levinas' language, for the phenomenological irreducibility of human relations.⁵ Levinas emphasizes the asymmetry of relations by introducing a third person to consider in relations besides the primacy of interpersonal relations. The other is always a stranger to us, is always exterior to us, and is phenomenologically irreducible. Levinas argues that our ethical relation to the other is prior to our ontological relation to ourselves and the world around us. The other's existence has priority over ours. I insist, in agreement with Martin Buber, Nel Noddings, and John Dewey, on the mutuality of relations, the transactional nature of relations that are reciprocal. This mutuality preserves the two-foldness of relations. It insures the alterity of the other as well as prevents the I from being reduced or subsumed by the other.

Biesta points to the gap between teachers and students, and I point to the connection, that we are selves-in-relation-with-others. Margonis is pointing to structural or institutional influences that affect teachers' lives and students' lives. We all agree; one cannot turn one's attention too much in one direction or the other, without risk, for they all transact with each other, continually. We are walking together, cautiously, through this minefield.

1. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

2. Barbara Thayer-Bacon, *Beyond Liberal Democracy in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

3. Barbara Thayer-Bacon, *Relational "(e)pistemologies"* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

4. *Ibid.*, 77.

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject* trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993).