

# A Focus on Becoming: Reflections on Teaching

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**Abstract:** Teaching in diverse contexts can be a challenge for teachers who strive to create classrooms that respect the diversity of students. Among many skills, teaching requires a critical consciousness of the ideologies that shape the pedagogy within a classroom. As a white, American teacher who speaks English as her native language, the author brings multiple perspectives of privilege to her teaching practice. In this narrative, she reflects on her experience with ideological becoming as she critically examines her experience while teaching a summer camp for teenage girls who came to the United States as refugees.

**Keywords:** teaching, refugees, ideological becoming, critical consciousness

*“This 1 millionth child refugee is not just another number. This is a real child ripped from home, maybe even from a family, facing horrors we can only begin to comprehend.”*  
-UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake

Every year, millions of people are forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict and persecution (Alazroni, 2017). As the quote above from Anthony Lake reminds us, these millions are not numbers, they are people (as cited in United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2013). On some level this seems obvious, but when these abstract figures became people in my life and students in my classroom, the true weight of what I did not know became increasingly apparent.

On paper, my teaching education and philosophies were marked with the tenants of humanizing pedagogy. I had read Freire (2005) and Darder (2012), and I believed in the transformative power of education. This was an easy façade to maintain while working with students who looked remarkably like me and who lived by similar narratives. Despite being a student of cross-cultural education, I had yet to fully understand the concept of culture in practice. Rather than existing as a definitive entity, Benhabib (2002) described culture as “a constant creation, recreation, and negotiation of imaginary boundaries” (p. 8). Individuals create unique life stories that are informed by established narratives of a culture. My narratives were rigid, and they defined how I saw students, how I taught them, and how I responded to them. It would take a summer of teaching and learning with a group of young refugee girls for me to understand the limitations of my own worldviews and begin to challenge them. As a student, I had done some research on the ideological becoming of pre-service teachers. Bakhtin (1981) described ideological becoming as “an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values” (p. 346). Looking back on the experience that I recount below, I can see now that this was a story from my own process of ideological becoming and how hard it was to see from the inside.

I walked to the door. Two girls with scarfs loosely wrapped on their heads peered out between closed curtains. That was my destination. Before I could knock, an older woman swung the door open. She smiled, and I smiled back as the two young girls dashed in and out of my sight. I said good morning, and the woman nodded in return. Their mother and I continued to smile across

the door frame as they gathered their items and joined me outside. I introduced myself and asked the girls their names. They responded quickly and succinctly. I asked where they went to school and what grade they were in. A long silence followed, broken only by their smiles. They had no idea what I had said. The three of us laughed nervously. As we walked to the next apartment our conversation continued in the same way, me asking questions, them smiling in return. I knew nothing about them: the language they were speaking, how old they were, where they were from, or what they had been through before coming here. I was their first teacher in the United States.

At the next few doors I knocked on, no one was home. The two girls followed as we walked through a maze of buildings in an apartment complex that housed a large number of the girls registered for summer camp. Finally, I approached a door where an audible hum of excitement radiated. My knock revealed a room full of girls wearing tightly wrapped floral hijabs. Many of the girls had gathered together to wait for their teacher to arrive that morning. They chattered excitedly, eagerly trying to talk with me, soon giving up and chatting amongst themselves. And, so, we walked together to school, in a hum of linguistic isolation. It would take me all summer to start to understand these girls. They may never know the extent of my doubts, my conflicts, and my frustrations; I will never know if it was worth it for them.

I was teaching a summer camp for refugee teenage girls in central Texas. The summer camp was based on a similar program in Illinois that focused on holistic support for adolescent refugee girls and that was designed to help them develop autonomy, language, and social-emotional habits. The summer program was organized around themes of world peace, health, and women's rights. My social justice-oriented curriculum was out of reach for the girls. As I introduced our lesson on identity, my words slowed down and became more deliberate, each syllable more clearly defined. "We are going to make a timeline of our life," I explained. "Where do we start?" In the face of silence, I backed up. "What does the word *life* mean? Hmm, *story*?"

A large portion of my class had recently come from Syria. They would spend the summer being taken to doctor and dentist appointments, being sick, taking care of sick family members, and more. They would not spend their days dutifully coming to camp, and this fostered in me a great amount of frustration. In reality, I faced pressure from the camp organizers, who in turn felt pressure from donors who required girls in seats in return for the necessary funding. In reality, the girls had doctor and dentist appointments to make up for living years with limited access to such services. As I dutifully made calls to their homes, I met their reasons with apathy—I had seats to fill.

My frustration every morning as I took attendance was not a direct cause of their empty seats. It was more the combination of their empty seats, the expectations bestowed upon me to fill those seats, and a powerful desire to help them. I was in constant conflict over whether to focus my teaching on the girls who came every day, essentially leaving the other girls to sink or swim, or to constantly backtrack on the material. I gravitated toward the first option. Those who missed class would struggle, and I hoped it would serve as a reminder of the importance of showing up. I felt like a bad teacher when they struggled. I felt like a bad teacher when I saw their empty seats. These tensions were constant frustrations. Tensions like these are also the foundation of ideological becoming (Gomez, Lachuk, & Powell, 2015). Tensions and conflict around daily

choices create cracks in our narratives so that we can see, and perhaps question, our assumptions, beliefs, and values. Because I acted on a narrative that students did not want to come to school, I saw students who missed too much camp rather than girls who came as often as they could. If I had questioned my assumptions in the moment, I might have responded from a more compassionate place. I might have seen that they were happy to be there. Amy (when possible, the girls chose their own pseudonym) would come each day with a new friend in tow. For me, each friend became a rotation of faces who I would never see again. For her, each friend was a means to come to camp since she could not walk there alone.

I had two responsibilities as the lead teacher: teach whole-group thematic lessons and teach guided reading in small groups. When the pre-test results came in, I learned that I would have a group of girls who had never learned to read. Their schooling had been so disrupted that they had reached ages 14 or 15 without receiving an adequate primary education. For some girls this was very obvious; for others, it would take me weeks to realize that they did not understand me. I was frustrated because we could not communicate and they did not show up consistently enough for me to see the pattern. Perhaps I had not listened.

The camp served refugee girls from around the world. Among them were 10 Syrian girls that came and went over the course of camp—some for a day, some for a week, none consistently. When they came, they were tied to their phones and to each other, but not to me, their teacher. When I tried to mix up the groups, they would groan—a sign of dislike that transcends language barriers. I wanted to instill independence. I wanted to challenge them to try and speak English. One girl, Kay, spoke excellent English, and she became the translator for her friends. When she came to camp, she was a force in the classroom; she was very intelligent with a magnetic personality. She had the air of a popular girl; she had confidence, style, and friends. When she did not come, I assumed it was because she had something more interesting to do. When I saw her, I saw my own version of an American teenage girl. I defined her through my own narratives that told me students did not want to come to school. I thought I could see right through her.

In the inner circle with Kay was Rosa, another 16-year-old girl who had been in the United States for less than two months. I will never know how much English Rosa understood. She had scored quite high on the English assessment. She would come to camp occasionally, chat with the others in Arabic, and listen to music on her phone. When I talked with her, she responded with a smile. When I asked her to put away her phone, she responded with a smile. She needed to listen in class and participate. She needed to learn English; what was more important than that?

Rosa's older sister, Patty, would join us occasionally, just infrequently enough for us to give up on her before she would return for a day. After fleeing Syria, their family had gone to Jordan, then to Egypt, where Patty had started a degree in business at the university. She would have to start over in the United States. The courses she had taken did not transfer. When Patty broke her leg during one of our field trips, we lost her and Rosa for good. I was their teacher. They had been through so much, but I could not protect them. The day the accident happened, Rosa had been inconsolable. Everyone was upset, but their reactions varied. Some girls cried, some sat in silence. We gathered in a circle, some more willingly than others, and talked about how we felt.

We shared stories of being scared, of being hurt. I encouraged everyone to share. What did I know? Many of the girls were resistant, so I gave space. For others, this was the first moment when they began to share their stories. It also marked the first day that I realized how much more I needed to simply listen. It was time to let go of narratives in which the teacher had all the answers. In that moment, surrounded by tears, I had no answers.

My authority on what was best for these girls was bestowed through curriculum, objectives, and assessments passed down to me. I assumed that my interns and I knew what was needed to be successful in American schools “dominated by standardized and technical approaches to schooling that reinforce assimilation” (Salazar, 2013). The goal was assimilation, to blend into the students around them. Did they need to think, talk, and act like their American peers? In retrospect, what did assimilation even mean? They needed to value their education over their families and their attendance over their health. For many of the girls in my classroom, full assimilation was unattainable. Their hijabs told their story for them along with their accents.

Although there is no consensus on the optimal age of language acquisition, research has shown that the majority of language learners will retain an accent (Moyer, 2011). Language is not the only trait that we ask refugees to forfeit in return for opportunity. On field trips, the girls were confronted on streets and buses about their style, their timidity, and their beliefs. I would sit nearby and try to redirect the conversations. As a man relentlessly tried to talk to the two shy sisters, I tried to divert his attention by asking him questions. I politely told him that they did not want to talk. When that did not work, I tried to talk to the girls to keep them distracted. Every time the man talked to them, they would silently look at one another with nervous smiles. He made me uncomfortable even though I was not the center of his attention. The ride took almost an hour, and I felt powerless to protect them all. I could not even stop one man’s comments about their clothes and language.

Back in the classroom, we used assessments to measure progress for our funders. This brought money, but standardized approaches fail to address the needs of students who have been forced to flee their homes and who may have been stalled in a refugee camp for years or born in a refugee camp where basic education is no guarantee (UNHCR, 2016). The real danger is that standardized approaches assume there is a norm against which we can measure and define all students. In looking back, I can see that the norms and assumptions guiding my practice were informed by authoritative discourses—assumed truths passed down to me in cultural narratives of teaching, education, and students (Bakhtin, 1981; Benhabib, 2002). Authoritative discourses eventually come into conflict with internally persuasive discourses that are informed by cultural norms and by personal experiences. I felt tensions between my desire to create a classroom that truly valued all languages and the pressure to immerse the girls in English.

One day, four weeks into camp, none of the Syrian girls came to class, and we needed signed permission slips for the next day. I drove around the city to each girl’s door to ensure everyone had the form needed to participate. Tina’s younger sister opened the door while a scuffle of activity went on inside. The door was closed and reopened. I slipped my shoes off and kicked them into the pile by the door. When I stepped into the apartment, I was surrounded by people in a space that felt too small to fit us all. I said hello to the parents. Looking around for a familiar

face, I saw Tina for the first time without her headscarf. She gave me her familiar smile. In her home, she seemed eager to communicate. Her words came out fast as she introduced her family. As I stood there, out of place in her home, my resentment that she had not come to camp that day began to melt away. It was only after visiting the girls in their homes that I began to understand that they had a much larger obligation to their family than I had experienced as an American teenage girl. They looked after their younger siblings and helped their mothers cook and clean. They could not venture out alone, so their mobility was limited. My view of their needs and responsibilities felt insignificant in the face of what their families expected. Their lives, informed by different narratives, had been hidden behind my own assumptions.

I had spent all summer feeling personally slighted when they skipped camp. I envisioned them hanging out with their friends and watching television. What I failed to account for was that they came from different family structures. They were the caregivers of the family; they cared for younger siblings, and they had limits on socializing with friends. They could not walk to camp alone, so if one girl had to stay home to help the mother, another did too. Furthermore, these girls had been exposed to violence and chaos that I simply could not comprehend. The cell phones that caused me to feel jealous for monopolizing the girls' attention were their connection to the people they had left along the way.

After visiting their families, I realized that I was judging these girls and their actions by my own upbringing. When they looked at me, I interpreted them with my own biases. Did Rosa really glare at me, or did she look at me intently as she decoded my words? Were these girls more interested in chatting than in my lessons? Did they just not understand? Were they simply helping one another? For the first time, I reflected with empathy and tried to see situations from their perspective. Suddenly, Tina's silence became complex. I merely assumed that it had been indifference, but it may have been a sign of her own frustration, her effort to overcome a language barrier—her disengagement was a result of misunderstanding, her gravity to friends was comfort. In the place of empathy, I had met her silence with contempt.

On one field trip, the interns and I decided we would force English by drastically mixing up the groups. Girls from a local high school taught everyone how to code robots, and they made a series of mazes for the robots to navigate. I saw Tina, arms crossed, at the table as her group went to test their robot. Moments before she had seemed interested, but as her team came back, I noticed how lost she looked without her friends while trying to make sense of code in a language that she was still learning. Instead of speaking more English, she seemed isolated. I had been a student of cross-cultural education and thought of myself as an educator devoted to creating a climate conducive to diverse learners, and somehow I had failed in that moment.

I wanted to teach with the tenants of humanizing pedagogy, which Freire described as a response to the diverse needs of students that “builds on the sociocultural realities of students' lives” (Salazar, 2013, p. 128). Humanizing pedagogy challenges deficit ideologies, focusing instead on additive approaches to teaching. Contrary to the humanizing pedagogy that I had hoped to embody, my undeterred focus on what was best for Tina, Rosa, Kay, Amy, and Patty was pushing assimilation and robbing them of their personal experience, their culture, their history, and their values. What I had not understood was that humanizing pedagogy was just one input in

my worldview, and for the first time, I felt the tensions between what I believed and how I taught.

In reflecting on my teaching that summer, I can now see the moments of tension with more clarity. I see how these moments have come to shape my practice and moved me toward humanizing pedagogy. This story is a snapshot from my own ideological becoming. The process of becoming is lifelong, constantly reflecting on the past to make changes in the future. More importantly, if I want to study the ideological becoming of other teachers, it is essential that I also turn my gaze to my own teaching experiences. My own lack of empathy and the influence of larger hegemonic forces had impacted my relationship with the girls from Syria. At the beginning of camp, I was conscious of my position on native languages. I was very supportive of native-language use, hoping to inspire authentic English use while not devaluing the native languages that my students brought with them. This position came under attack from my interns, who started questioning my approach, insisting that I was doing a disfavor to my students by not enforcing English-only rules. From my perspective, not providing access to their native language threatened to alienate students who had no other way to communicate. Which was correct? The conflict between what I believed and what was widely believed to be true had created tensions on the field trip as in other lessons. By giving way to a sink-or-swim approach, I had isolated Tina. Thus, I found myself caught between my personal philosophy and conceding to authoritative discourses.

What have I learned from my summer with these girls? To start, I should have questioned my own narratives and entered the classroom with a beginner's mindset, especially given my limited knowledge of the experiences that had led each of the girls to central Texas. At the beginning, I had been aware of how little I knew about the experiences of refugees, but they were not just refugees, they were unique individuals. Knowing students on a personal level is an important part of the teaching role. Humanizing pedagogy focuses on the relationships formed between educator and student, addressing the needs of students beyond academic objectives, and also knowing their stories and challenges, creating a safe space, and facilitating connections. Both students and teachers bring with them their own personal and cultural narratives, and the classroom should be a space where these can intermingle. As an educator, I believe it is also my role to model patience and kindness.

Looking back, it is easy to see my shortcomings as well as how reflection and change arose through conflict and tension, moving me closer toward humanizing pedagogy. In ideological becoming, the different discourses I have acquired are put in conversation and enacted in my teaching. In the process, ideologies evolve. Progress is not linear and has no endpoint; rather, it is iterative and reflective. With each reflection, I find faults in my practice and faults in the system, and I encounter obstacles that seem insurmountable. To give up in the face of such obstacles would be to give up on Kay, Rosa, Patty, Amy, and Tina—many times I wanted to, but I never did. I may never know what they learned that summer in my classroom, but my honest reflections on my teaching practices can help inform educators and my own practice about the journey to critical consciousness.

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