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## Of Course, My Own Teacher Education Impacts Others: The Quest Toward Erasing "Erasure"

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## Of Course, My Own Teacher Education Impacts Others: The Quest Toward Erasing "Erasure"

### Abstract

The author uses an autobiographical approach in this article to discuss and reflect on his own past, that is of course filled with acts of erasure (by sitting still, living in ignorance, and remaining "neutral," all acts of erasure that we routinely commit), by revealing a set of turning points in his life and life's work. One particular recent experience has helped the author to recognize past mistakes, and to continue a significant amount of personal and professional movement that has been ongoing for several decades and has challenged many of his past assumptions about teacher education, public education, and the importance of these endeavors for the maintenance and enhancement of a democratic way of life.

### Keywords

autobiography, teacher education, reflection, erasure

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I got into Teacher Education on purpose about 30 years ago, give or take. At the beginning, I knew that I had a lot to learn about working with young teachers, and that has never changed. Early on I envisioned my positionality as a teacher educator, in many ways, through a very technical lens, though I positioned myself as at least progressive in how I viewed my field and the work at hand. I felt deeply as though I had to know and understand the most effective and recent approaches to teacher supervision and be up to date, of course, on trends in the school subject areas, both curricularly and pedagogically, to help myself and our students of teaching make sense of the journey as a teacher in real classrooms. In short, I thought the journey was about learning the content of teacher education and teaching more completely, like an expert, in order to help beginning teachers navigate their fledgling day-to-days so they wouldn't get frustrated and quit.

All of that, of course, is important in teaching (Poetter, 2021). But, as the years passed, with successes and failures and missteps along the way, side-by-side with my own developing maturity as a human being and scholar practitioner, I realized while practicing teacher education with students and while reading for classes and for my own production of scholarship in teacher education and curriculum studies (Palmer, 1997; Banks, 1994; Britzman, 2003; Lindsey, Nuri-Robbins, & Terrell, 2003; Bullough & Gitlin, 2001; Freire, 1970) *that technical knowledge pales when compared with knowledge of the self*. Meaning, to be effective with all learners, to connect with them, to earn their trust, and to engage in a journey that yields collaborative and mutually beneficial learning in the classroom, the teacher must be aware of their own cultural and racial and gender biases, among others, and as a result be open to learning, to accepting and valuing others, and to *becoming* alongside the learner. That is: growing beyond the past, all that has shaped us, and maybe even in spite of it.

The processes of interrogating the self, valuing the self while challenging the self, and understanding the self, constitute the core processes of becoming a teacher for me, now (Berman, 1968). And I try to communicate this with my students. All else may be important and even essential—maybe convergent and confluent for becoming a teacher—but without the self, the healthy though perhaps beleaguered self, the enterprise of teaching is fraught at best. To all those rookies and veterans alike who said or thought while they made their way through teacher preparation and their teaching careers with me alongside, “I kept my sanity by keeping my distance from children, avoiding conflict, just transferring knowledge, that is doing my job—I’m not a babysitter,” I say back, “Any computer could have done that.”

Students need teachers, human beings who are alive and well enough to challenge the status quo and to be in relationship with the young. By extension, this key aspect of schooling and education, teaching, is one of the most important levers for keeping a free and open democracy growing, thriving through a third century and beyond.

And so, as I reflect on my own past which is filled with ignorance and erasure (by sitting still, living in ignorance, and remaining “neutral,” all acts of erasure that we routinely commit), I have come upon a set of turning points that I would like to reveal. One particular recent experience has helped with this move that has been ongoing for more several decades and has challenged many of my past assumptions.

The set up: I have lived for many decades with the pride of proximity that has worked for me as a source of inspiration in my life and work. I wrote about my connection to NASA’s mission to the moon in 1969 in my first published scholarly article entitled “Making a Difference: Miss Conner and Bunker Hill School” (Poetter, 1994) after being encouraged by my doctoral advisor and professor at Indiana, Norm Overly, to chronicle in a course assignment (a

paper) a key autobiographical story that served as motivation for my approaches to teaching and curriculum. After reading it and commenting on it, Professor Overly suggested that I send it for peer review. Seeing that project through to publication was transformational for me. I found my voice, so to speak, and enjoyed participating in the publishing process. That first piece sparked my long career in academic publishing.

In the article, I chronicle my perceptions of greatness in my first-grade teacher, Miss Conner, who taught more than 1,000 people if not more in my small town to read, including me, over a 44-year career and was rumored to have taught Neil Armstrong, who lived for four years in my hometown of St. Marys, Ohio, before he and his family finally settled in Wapakoneta, Ohio, just down the road. Neil's wife's family were members of the protestant church my father pastored in St. Marys.

Neil's family had called on my dad on occasion for counsel as he survived through the terrifying near misses in the Gemini missions and his walk on the moon (but especially on that trip, the difficult landing on the moon!). We were invited to the party at the Armstrong family's home in Wapakoneta when the city held his homecoming parade following the moonwalk in 1969. I still remember that day, cheering for Neil when he rode by the house in a convertible in the parade. I employed the age-old trope of the advantaged in the piece when I basically wrote, "Anything is possible if you work hard enough. You can learn to read, be successful in school, and as a result you might even go to the moon (substitute become president, run a company, score a lot of points, etc.)." That is, schools and teachers "read" the dreams they have for their children to them, schooling them in what it takes to make it with skills and beliefs and ideas, and then setting them free in adulthood to do great things... Miss Conner became an allegorical stand-in for success in schooling as a lever to power.

But as I learned more about myself, my privilege, my every advantage along the way—despite my experiences of hardship, as real as they may have been and are—all of my framing crumbles in light of those who struggle with poverty, with racial and gender and sexual identity subjugation, with hunger, with sexual exploitation or prejudice, and with violence in the home and community among other systemic and hegemonic barriers to life and prosperity that plague many millions of people, and especially those who are young and of color, in North America. My idyllic upbringing, though, despite the presence of real and crushing personal losses (Poetter, 2014), hadn't allowed me to even challenge the assumptions behind the story of Miss Conner, my home, my life. Simply put, the story—unchallenged—is hogwash to many and I am merely the victor of a game that is rigged from start to finish. By being myself, static and unmoved by the world outside my bubble, I practiced and participated in a form of erasure.

It's not that Miss Conner wasn't great, she was, or that every student she taught was a success as a result of her teaching. It's that teachers and schools and opportunities were then and remain now a stable, expected, assumptive aspect of middle-class white culture in towns like the one I grew up in. Whiteness and all of the assumptions of power and access are embedded in the piece. I don't at any point challenge or upend that point of view and wonder what might be a counter-experience of children in schools different from the ones I grew up in, and deeper, what might be the negative and debilitating experiences of my own first grade classmates in school as they navigated the same public school system over the next 11 years? How could schools and teachers have been better for them? What might teachers have done to help us frame and challenge the status quo of our own lives? Would we be better citizens today if they had been made that way instead of in the way we were made?

And over the years I had learned more about the small but vocal protestations of the space program taking shape during Vietnam and the Civil Rights/War on Poverty movements of the 1960s. The main criticism then and now is pouring billions of tax dollars into the space race while Americans suffered from poverty and racism and redlining and neglect all around the country.

And then to seal my understanding of my own complicity in erasure, Questlove and his remarkable documentary *The Summer of Soul (Or... When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)* finally hit my TV screen over the broadcast airwaves in February 2022. And the documentary shook me up even further, and moved me even more deeply into the criticisms of our priorities in the 1960s, at least those exercised by those in power, as well as my own assumptions about the world and the ideas that became embedded in me as a result of my journeys through school and life in the subsequent decades.

Well, embarrassingly, I hadn't even heard about the documentary and its tremendous successes at the Sundance Film Festival in July of 2021 along with its Oscar nomination (I had, however, seen all of the nostalgic remembrances of the 1969 moonwalk on film as they showed up front and center in the media and on my own radar). ABC ran *Summer of Soul* in its broadcast debut on a dead Sunday night as the networks acquiesced to NBC's coverage of the Winter Olympics on February 20, 2022. But I tuned in, and spent most of the evening crying. I cry in sadness sometimes, sure, but also when moved by beauty and goodness and then quite often the subsequent recognition of my own ignorance and loss as I ponder, "How could I have missed all of this for all of these years?" Your tears when you watch it, I guarantee it, will be mostly about the beauty, but also no doubt about how long it took to uncover it, show it, and perhaps, un-erase it. Have you seen the documentary? If not, finish reading this article then go straight to the internet to find it and watch it; it will be two of the best hours of your life.

Long story short: In the Summer of 1969, Black event promoters in Harlem booked famous musicians to perform in series of six weekend concerts and talented directors and producers and camera/sound crews filmed 40 hours of footage of it. It was called the Harlem Music Festival. It happened during the same summer as Woodstock, which of course gathered prominent coverage and became a cultural icon.

The original producers, Hal Tulchin and Tony Lawrence, who put on and filmed the festival, however, couldn't sell the material to any production company and gave up the quest in 1977 (though short excerpts were shown on broadcast TV in the summer of 1969). Literally no one wanted the project for nearly 50 years. But Questlove fell into the project after his own crew of producers acquired the many hours of tape, and decided to produce the documentary, first because of the musical quality of the performances, then second after realizing how transformational the entire story was because of the deep cultural and political value of the event and how it had been washed away by neglect and time (Questlove Interview, 2021).

Here was a peaceful, beautiful manifestation of Black culture in American society, centered on music performed by some of the most prominent artists of color of our times, taking place in public and in peace and literally nearly no one else knew about it. Basically no one saw it except those who attended in person. And the world *could have seen it*. The subtext is that no one cared. Erasure. Even in New York City, the media barely covered it.

But they covered the moon landing. And they covered Woodstock. And many of us learned that these were the most important cultural moments in our society, indicative of its potential and power. These events occupy pages in our textbooks and memories, but not the Harlem Music Festival of 1969. Until now, perhaps.

Years later, even Spike Lee admitted to Questlove that he had never heard of the Harlem Music Festival of 1969 (Questlove Interview, 2021). Jimmy Fallon had never heard about the festival until Questlove made the film. One of the most beautiful cultural experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a century filled otherwise also with war and death and violence and the paralyzing impact of Jim Crow, in the midst of white America's penchant for demonizing Blackness, was not shown, no doubt because showing it would have undermined every assumption about the world and society being made by those in power in that time. What does that say about us now (Hannah-Jones, 2021)?

I think it says that we, as teacher educators and teachers, need to do all that we can to challenge the assumptions we have about the world, and about education and teaching, because regardless of how valuable our perspectives are, it is likely that our students don't hold those same values or share our point of view. How can we teach them if we aren't willing to grow by considering other perspectives? What does it say about us if all we care to see is what we think is right in front of us or clearly visible in the rear-view mirror or spoon-fed to us by those in power? It doesn't mean that we can't share our stories. But do our stories include the deep valuing and practicing of inquiry into our own assumptions? Do the things that make us tick resonate or connect with our students? If not, why? And if not, what is *their* point of view? What other ideas and possibilities reside in the worlds that we don't inhabit or even visit? What haven't we learned or considered or seen that would help us teach? What has been hidden from view that could potentially liberate us from vile, prejudiced, even hateful perspectives?

My fear is that if we don't adopt this basic commitment as individuals and as programs in teacher education, then whiteness will continue to ravage our practices and that as a result we will operate, unwittingly or not, in ways that erase our students and erase society. How much beauty and potential and promise can we afford to lose in schools, in society? Questlove decided that he couldn't waste another minute in telling a story long forgotten that has such beauty and power and that shows us a picture of a truth that mainstream society buried, discounted, marginalized, and neglected. Erased. How will we decide to unlock the vault of beauty and promise that resides in our students of teaching and in their own future students by extension? It starts in the unraveling of ourselves, in challenging our assumptions, and in working on it continuously (Martell, 2015).

To all teacher educators and teachers reading this: Teach teachers how to learn and how to be in relationship with students; to surface beauty always, as well as the underside, the ugly that also gets erased; and to become anew again and again, each and every day. Learn to dig, seek, and question as your way of life in teaching by surfacing your biases, and by challenging the narratives you take for granted. That is, how do you see the world and what is influencing that vision? There are legitimate, perhaps even necessary alternatives in action, and they shouldn't threaten, but enrich.

Finally, the alternative to this way of life, for me, is erasure. I've done enough erasing. How about you?

This isn't at all new ground for the field, but this journey has taken me a mere 60 years, and it's not over even yet.

How long will it take you? And us?

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