



Commentaries in Urban Education

Student Perspectives: Educational Autobiographies

Abstract

The following piece is a lightly edited selection of reflection papers from Mychal Pagan, a recent New York University alumnus of the NYU Prison Education Program (PEP), and Chauncy Ramos, a current student with NYU PEP. In response to Paulo Freire's seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Ramos and Pagan reflect on their own relationship with schooling and how education has liberatory potential and can occur in unlikely sites.

Keywords

[lived experience](#), [freedom](#), [empowerment](#), [learning](#)

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Figure 1. "The Nazare" by Sam Goodman, inspired by Associated Press Photo taken by Michael Probst.

Learning as a Practice of Freedom

Mychal Pagan

Learning, as a multifaceted and deeply personal journey, intersects significantly with our environments, relationships, and the broader sociocultural landscapes we navigate. In reflecting on my own educational trajectory, two pivotal experiences stand out, each embodying the complex interplay between learning as an act of personal development and learning as a relational phenomenon. These instances not only highlight the profound impact of our teachers—be they people, communities, or circumstances—but also underscore learning as a practice of freedom, enabling us to carve out spaces of autonomy and self-

determination even in the most constrained conditions.

The first chapter in my story of learning unfolded in the vibrant, albeit challenging, corridors of William Floyd Elementary School. The transition into music class symbolized a beacon of hope and a potential anchor in my otherwise tumultuous childhood marked by frequent relocations. Choosing the trumpet was more than a mere selection of an instrument; it was an act of envisioning a situation where I belonged, connected by a positive shared interest. Yet, the reality of my situation—a life in perpetual motion, devoid of stability—meant that this desire would remain just that. The episodic engagement with music, punctuated by moments of joy in school concerts, underscored a critical lesson: learning is inherently tied to freedom. The freedom to practice, to immerse oneself fully in the pursuit of mastery, and to have the physical and emotional space to do so, are indispensable. My journey with the trumpet taught me that without the liberty to engage deeply and consistently, learning could become an exercise in futility, reinforcing the importance of stability and supportive environments in the educational process.



Figure 2. VUE contributor, Mychal Pagan, hugging two of his loved ones.



Figure 3. VUE contributor, Michael Pagan, as a child.

The second, more transformative learning experience came at a time when freedom was ostensibly stripped away—during my incarceration at Fishkill

Correctional Facility. Confronted with the harsh realities of prison life and the looming uncertainty of the future, I turned to education as a means of liberation. Welding, a trade I had no prior knowledge of or experience in, became my solace and my escape. Convincing the foreman to take a chance on me was the first step in a journey that would redefine my understanding of freedom and learning. The process of mastering welding, of turning raw materials into something of value and purpose, mirrored my own transformation. Through dedication, practice, and the relentless pursuit of proving myself right (I told the foreman I could learn to weld and that it wouldn't take long), I discovered that learning could indeed be a practice of freedom, a way to transcend physical confines and societal labels.

These experiences, starkly different yet connected by the underlying theme of learning as liberation, have profoundly shaped my understanding of education. The realization that learning extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge to become a vehicle for personal empowerment and freedom has been pivotal. It has taught me that our teachers play a crucial role in shaping our learning journeys, offering insights, challenges, and opportunities for growth.

Reflecting on these chapters of my life, I now see that learning is not just about the accumulation of facts or skills but is intrinsically linked to the quest for freedom and all the other freedoms that are born through study and practice. It is through learning that we can challenge our limitations, overcome adversity, and shape our own futures. The act of learning, therefore, is not just an individual endeavor but a collective one, where the support, stability, and freedom provided by our environments and relationships are crucial for personal growth and fulfillment. My journey underscores the transformative power of learning, not only as a path to personal development but as a practice of freedom that enables us to navigate and redefine the landscapes of our lives.

My Educational Autobiography

Chauncy Ramos

I was born in Detroit, Michigan, during the 1960s. There is an old saying, "God

looks out for babies and fools,” and for me, the blessing came in the form of Mr. Lee Townsend (Big Daddy) and Mrs. Queen Townsend (Big Mama), an older married couple who migrated from the South to the North in search of a better life.

From a very young age, they were the people who taught me right from wrong, how to read and write, and do arithmetic. To be respectful to my elders and have a strong work ethic. Big Daddy worked at the automobile factory, then would drive a cab at night. At the time, we had a big 20-seat bar in the basement where drinks were sold and [there were] gambling rooms for poker and dice. That is where I learned the art of the hustle.

In my formal schooling, I was introduced to the “banking model” of education that Freire described. The teachers just deposited information that I would receive, memorize, and repeat in order to pass the standardized test. I was pushed through elementary all the way until my last year of high school. In the 12th grade, I was introduced to the “school to prison pipeline.” I was arrested at 17 and held until I turned 18 and shipped off to the NYS DOCCS [New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision]. This was when I began my journey of self-education.

When I was first imprisoned, I signed up to take my GED and passed within the first six months of incarceration. Then I immediately signed up to take classes with Skidmore College during my second semester. Soon after, I was granted work release and six months later was released on parole. This became a pattern—get arrested, go to prison, and take more classes. I was only able to access higher education while in prison, under conditions not of my choosing. As soon as I was released, there was no support for me to reacclimate to society. I needed a job, stable housing, and money to feed myself and to help my family. I was oppressed, powerless, and without a voice to be heard.

I began asking when did it become normal for a human being to be made invisible; to be ignored, abused, and silenced by a powerful racist system? When did this dehumanization become “business as usual”? Through studying history I found an answer—this began when America was first colonized. The system was designed to take human life, deny individual liberties, and restrict freedoms—including the freedom of education.

While in prison, I found education to be a key to success. In 2004, one of the first books that was given to me was Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass*

Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. After reading this, I knew I had been denied justice. After reading this book, I made a vow to fight. I taught myself how to litigate and represent myself, and I'm still fighting, not just to win my freedom, but to demand the freedom of others. Today I teach, educate, and advocate to empower others to think critically about the need for social change. Incarcerated people know where the problems are, and our voices have been silenced for too long. I want to be a part of the solution—and I will teach others to be part of the solution, too.

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