Critical Pedagogy for Beginning Teachers: the Movement from Despair To Hope

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Introduction

Over the last 30 years or so, there has been a strong response by critical theorists to traditional public school ideology. With the advent of progressive British schools of thought and subsequent American responses, which viewed schools as forms of social control (Young, 1971, Bowles and Gintis, 1976, Apple, 1986), to critical ethnographic studies which described how schools merely mirrored social class distinctions (Willis, 1977, Anyon, 1980), to other social issues that depicted schools as enclaves of race, class and gender inequity (Giroux, 1996, 1997, McLaren, 1994, Yeo, 1997, Kozol, 1991, 1994, Kanpol, 1994), critical pedagogy as a concept and resulting practices has arisen as a form of thought and action to challenge the dominant and oppressive ideologies contructed historically, for our purposes, around public school concerns.

As a form of social action, there has been much criticism leveled against critical pedagogues and critical pedagogy (Webster, 1997, Ellsworth, 1989). These criticisms revolve around at least three central themes:

1. What right do critical pedagogues have to speak for the oppressed and marginalized, particularly when "speaking" comes out of a middle class university or other teaching position.
2. The language used by critical pedagogues is so opaque that the average teacher cannot understand some basic critical' premises made. This would contradict the basic message of challenging forms of oppression, subordination and domination. What's more, the language itself becomes a form of domination!
3. Critical pedagogy is theoretically visionary but lacks the practical tools to accompany it.

The above three criticisms are poignant. On a very simple level I could answer these claims in this manner:

(1) Any one has a right to struggle for democracy, from whatever social class position one is situated in. As long as the intent is for social justice, then who cares.
(2) While the language is opaque, don't we as a new social movement have to create a new and vibrant language to challenge old forms of language and therefore thinking?
(3) A part of critical pedagogy IS to struggle against formulaic enterprises. One cannot be practical in the traditional sense because every context and reality differs. In other words,

one cannot give the "ten" steps for a critical pedagogy, especially if critical pedagogy differs in different arenas.

Earlier in my career, the above responses would have justified my theoretical constructions. They would have guided my teaching, and perhaps been a normative platform under which I would have lived my life. Nothing wrong with that!! At least I have a platform that intrudes in some significant way into the dominant ideology! While I am not in any way "old," I am certainly not the same zealous creature I was over ten years ago when I started to write about critical pedagogy. I do see the need to tone down the level of theory so as to make understandable a very important socially just position. I do see my middle class upbringing as, at times, an impediment to the issues I am discussing. And, I do see the need for areas of practicality that would allow the in- or pre-service teacher to grapple onto as they head out into the "real" world, so to speak.

With the above in mind, I want to make one very important point about critical pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy is the challenging of any or all forms of alienation, oppression and subordination - no matter from what identity position one is coming from. Regardless of social class or work rank, those people (in our case teachers) who take it upon themselves to situatedly challenge oppressive ideologies are, at least in part, acting from a critical pedagogical position. For the remainder of this paper, I want to accomplish three things. I want to lay out what I consider a theoretical platform using the concepts of schooling and education. I use both these concepts in my foundations classes. They could indeed be classified as a possible introduction to critical pedagogy. Second, within this theoretical discussion I will allude to the practical facets that I would consider as valuable to use in the real world of teaching, thus making critical pedagogy more doable. Finally, I will argue, that to understand the concepts of schooling' and education' as a beginning to a critical pedagogy normative platform, there is hope for teachers to move on as social and critical change agents. In starting this enterprise I want to set up some theoretical oppositions. What must be realized is that while these concepts look antithetical, they are intertwined at various aspects of the school day. They are, for the most part, the generation of a critical pedagogy platform.

- **Schooling vs Education**
- **Control vs Democracy**
- **Authoritarianism vs Authority**
- **Individualism vs Individuality**
- **Deskilling vs Reskilling**
- **Traditional Literacy vs Critical Literacy**

Schooling Vs Education

Critical pedagogy roots itself in the belief that every citizen deserves an education. The distinction between schooling and education is important here. Given the structure of schools, in which a socially efficient system of management and control is in place (rigid rule structure, standardized curriculum, etc.), schools often forget about the role of an educated person and rely more on what I term "schooling" methods to secure a future for

students. Schooling has a number of components to it. The basic logic for schooling relies on preparing students for a market economy. And, this logic is fuelled by many national education reports, both past and present (Kanpol, 1994). This form of reasoning is also exacerbated both in and out of schools - parents signifying to their children that what is needed for a better job is an education, tracking systems in school that in hidden ways prepare students for differentiated social class divisions, excessive competition to prepare students for the economy (SAT scores and other standardized tests) and a market logic of the survival of the fittest mentality. Underneath this rubric of market logic lies the students need to be purely extrinsically motivated to learn. Grades, pop quizzes, fear of their results, cheating systems, reward structures that filter a immediate gratification logic, strict accountability models for teachers, demeaning stereotyping, sterile teaching methodologies, rote learning, forgetting information the next day or simply after a test, and the like, place the student and teacher in the awful predicament of using schooling as a socialization mechanism that loses sight of the many reasons for attending schools in the first place - nurture, care, community, citizenship preparation - in short, a broad education. One would be remiss to suggest that schooling and all its implications, both positive and negative, isn't an important element (and at times needed) of any child's structure. I would, for example, want my child to receive schooling so as to attain a good paying job. But, the promise of the enlightenment doesn't reside in schooling. It simply resides in receiving an education.

Education presupposes intrinsic motivation - that the student is intrinsically motivated to learn and the teacher intrinsically motivated to teach. While grades and the like are an important element to school structures, the reason for teaching and learning are not fuelled by numbers - but by a sheer desire to attain knowledge for knowledge sake. Put differently, an education in public schools as well as in the higher academy involves passion for one's subject matter, the ability to get student to think critically, being creative about subject matter content, creating a classroom of an active community revolved around the learning of material, and the strong desire to teach and to learn. Above all else, education involves the teacher understanding the schooling structure that wouldn't allow education to ensue. Thus, the ability to create an education involves the understanding of schooling mechanisms. Challenging its very presuppositions, particularly its negatives, means becoming a transformative intellectual - and that is for both teachers as well as students (Giroux, 1988). Put another way, to educate rather than school is to resist the very base of school value structures. On the one hand, creating transformative intellectuals means being critical of all forms of schooling. On the other hand, being a transformative intellectual puts the teacher into a moral bind. What kind of education can I give my students that can create a space for them so as they can be critical citizens, so I can generate democracy in my classrooms, so I can open up options for them, given the pervasiveness and need for schooling to survive in this country?

It seems to me that many reasons teachers want to become teachers is because they desire to educate their students. But, as they enter into the system, often times they are led to "school" their clientele, much like they were schooled both in their public school history as well as their teacher education departments. The following dichotomies discusses

schooling and education from different angles, citing examples of how we presently do both.

Control Versus Democracy

Under the guise of schooling, schools become control mechanisms. On many levels, this contradicts the message of democracy that we believe America is supposedly all about. Comments Purpel (1989):

> Schools have been captured by the concept of accountability, which has been transformed from a notion that schools need to be responsive and responsible to community concerns to one in which numbers are used to demonstrate that schools have met their minimal requirements - a reductionism which has given priority to the need to control than to understand educational considerations. The need to control produces control mechanisms, and for schools this has meant a proliferation of tests - a kind of quality control mechanism borrowed crudely and inappropriately from certain industrial settings. We control the curriculum, teachers and staff by insisting on predefined minimal performances on specified tests ... in this case it means metaphors like efficiency, cost-effectiveness, quality control, production ... obsession with control also gets expressed in school policy on Discipline," an interesting term which transfers to gain control over behaviour (p. 48, 49).

Even further than Purpel suggests, the issue of control is compounded when schools control the way we act, feel and think. Control of ideas, values and stereotypes (race, class and gender), often exacerbated by media culture, are portrayed in schools in no uncertain terms. When I view a beer commercial on TV, I learn what macho behavior is. Similarly I learn the rewards of being a jock, the let down of being a nerd, male dominance in schools (and society, Apple, 1986) and the story goes on and on. Simply put, schooling at its worst here, is the replication and/or the promotion of these stereotypes as forms of control mechanisms. Additionally, "schooling" will under the guise of "control," determine social class through standardized testing, create national reports to support these tests (read Nation at Risk), presuppose that to control by extending homework and a longer school day will automatically lead to an education and so on.

Under the guise of education, democracy rears its head. Here, control mechanisms are challenged, negotiated and subverted. That does not mean, for instance, that one has to abandon testing. This is a necessary evil in an economically driven country. One has to, however, realize that public schools have been historically charged with the responsibility to sustain and promote democratic principles. Such school curricula as social studies, citizenship classes, humanity courses, and government and history classes are a critical outlet for these democratic principles. However, critical pedagogy holds that democratic principles must become a way of life in all subject areas and all extra-curricular content - be they pedagogically demonstrated in math, science and other content areas. One doesn't have to be a social science teacher to challenge control mechanisms. Examples would

include teachers and students in all subject areas creating limits for behaviour control by writing class rules co-operatively, and teachers and students negotiating forms of testing, other than taking the regular rote, standardized type only.

Democratic education also involves fostering a challenge to all forms of individualism and negative competition - two principles that brush against the grain of civic participation. More co-operative learning, less stress on the value of "success" as the major reason for coming to school, and more individual student participation in written, verbal or math projects will allow for the possibility of student voices to be heard. Perhaps most importantly, an educated teacher and student works within the schooling control mechanisms' boundaries. For example, a critical pedagogue teacher striving for a democratic education will seek to test democratically, negotiate curriculum with administrators and students where appropriate and work within school rules to create a just and fair system.

The issue of control and democracy is an on-going and perplexing dichotomy. More democracy is better than less. And, under the guise of an "education," a critical pedagogue will strive to democratize her/his class as a part of a broader vision for students and the school she/he is teaching in. As a part of this schooling and education complexity I turn to issues of authoritarianism and authority.

Authoritarianism Versus Authority

Within a "schooling" mind-set, control mechanisms, a standardized curriculum, a rigid rule structure, and top-down hierarchy guide the authoritarian nature of schools. Authoritarianism, thus defined, rears its head in a bureaucratic system. Within this authoritarian structure, clearly defined structural leaders and their subordinates form a hierarchical ladder of control and division of labour (teacher tasks, various male or female related student tasks, division of principal and vice-principal tasks, predominant male principals and female vice-principals, etc.). This notion of authoritarianism is embedded in what schools like to believe as "authority." It is usually defined rigidly and unwaveringly. My argument here is not to abandon school structure, but rather to redefine this structure in what I have termed, "educated" ways. Thus, the turn to authority.

A critical pedagogue will seek education first by understanding that "authority" has multiple meanings and can be democratically negotiated. First, the teacher "educator" is an authority over his/her subject matter. Second, the teacher "educator" is not the only authority in the classroom. Teachers and students share each other's knowledge. Learning this way becomes reciprocal and dialogical. That is, teachers learn as well - in particular about student cultures. In other words, students become authorities over their own cultures. As an example, for a white male or female to teach successfully in the inner city, he or she would have to understand and respect the cultural diversity of all students. Third, teachers can use their authority to create relationships that would enhance education - relationships of caring and nurturing - relationships that challenge schooling notions of oppressive race, class and gender stereotypes. Teacher "educators" can be in

charge of how students relate to race, class and gender seating arrangements, language construction in the class, and the abolition of stereotypes. These are just a few examples of how under the guise of "authority" schooling authoritarianism can be challenged.

Teachers as "educators" will also use authority to open avenues to negotiate differences. Superseding the schooling aspect of authoritarianism and control, and under this rubric of authority and education, teachers will explore multiple avenues in which authority can be redefined in the name of establishing social relationships that are not only democratic, but life sustaining and possessing the possibility of opening spaces for "authority" in one's personal and public life. In classrooms, this necessarily means that critical pedagogues interested in "educating" begin to interpret history from multiple ethnic perspectives, allowing literature to take on a life of its own, situated contextually within the life of the student as well as history! In Math this may mean equating economics and social relationships as a form of living rather than only rigid formula as authoritatively the only correct avenue to knowledge. Problem solving must begin to redefine teachers as authorities for a meaningful education, one that has the potential not only of challenging authoritarian teaching techniques, but of also undermining the worst of schooling. I turn to the next distinction to further the critical pedagogical "education" quest.

Individualism Versus Individuality

The progressive "educator," much like the transformative intellectual, possesses the ability to "see" through various oppressive school structures. For instance, the critical pedagogue clearly envisions how schools promote the value of individualism over individuality. On a simple note, individualism signifies the quest for human supremacy, excessive and at times negative forms of competition, self and instant gratification, and narcissism. Here, the belief is that the individual is the center of life. A sort of survival of the fittest mentality fits this theme. The quest for individual material goods (commodities, wealth, grades, etc) becomes a part of this school structure. Those of us reading this article know too well what this translates itself into: Standardized tests and the division of social class, the set-up of a reward system that merely promotes swashbuckling competition between peers, stereotypes based on one's personal achievement, gender bias, basing one's worth on achievement, gifted programs, honour roll societies, stickers, university entrance exams, school cheating systems and merit systems that promote individual antagonism, etc. My argument here is that we cannot avoid the individualism trap all the time. Schooling is a part of individualism. But, we CAN challenge it where necessary. As critical pedagogues, teachers will realize that individualism at its worst will breed contempt, even though it seems like a necessary evil in this economically driven society. Some teachers with whom I am often involved with, are at pains to alter this particular structural condition of their own lives, let alone their day at school with their students. There are no easy answers.

One way, however, to challenge the above form of reasoning, is to fall back on a simple but profound understanding as to why most teachers became teachers in the first place, before they experience burn out - love kids, want to help, want to make a difference, etc. Simply to "love" or make a difference is not enough in the big picture, particularly if one

begins to align with critical pedagogy. The educated and "critical" teacher will acknowledge individual accomplishments, base one's worth on who one is rather than what one accomplishes, listen to and empathize with a student voice' by both understanding student heritage and history and by being critical of one's own history. Typically, some individuals may flourish better in groups. The critically minded teacher who is to educate will understand that structurally there will always be tension between individual and group accomplishment and individual and group worth. The educated teacher, the one disposed to resist individualism, will search for multiple avenues of "authentic" assessment, varying forms of discipline, alternate rule making, divergent forms of classroom management, and will challenge students to think of community, not only selfishly, etc. This "critical" teacher will "open up" in teacher meetings by subtly challenging peers to view what is being done via school policy as promoting an often damaging ethic of competition. This is not to say that critical pedagogues should challenge every policy, but that the right times and spots must be chosen to seek the common good, the ethical responses to forms of the alienation, subordination and oppression that individualism breeds. To me, the best form of resistance to individualism is the "living out" of individuality - the ability to walk the walk and talk the talk. As critical educators, it seems imperative that we find borders of understanding with other individuals who are not on the same ideological path. If progressive changes are to be made, this notion of individuality will have to be harnessed. To deny voices of ideological opposition, for instance, while noble, is still to contradict the very premise of individuality. After all, the essence of democracy is the promotion of the individuality that is so often suppressed by school structures. If we want to work within the structures of oppression, we also have to work with those people who promote those structures! And that becomes the essence of a struggle that critical pedagogues find themselves in both in and out of the classroom!

De-skilling Versus Re-skilling

The "schooled" teacher is deskilled. That is, teachers lack control over their own work. For instance, a deskilled teacher doesn't make curricular decisions, and even if she/he does, doesn't really seriously investigate why certain decisions are made. Deskilling has to do with teachers executing someone else's goals and plans. In industry, this is referred to as the separation of conception from execution. In school this appears as well. Pre-service teachers are taught the skills to teach - to execute tasks, manage the classroom, develop discipline procedures, create assignments, make tests, evaluate tests, disseminate curriculum, build unit plans, and vary teaching methodologies. Ironically, this works in ways to deskill teachers. This happens when the skills teachers are taught in teacher education are unusable in practice, such as in highly populated minority or/and urban areas.

Deskilling is at its peak when teachers lack autonomy over teaching and decision making processes. By making teachers accountable for state-mandated curriculum (such as basal reading materials) and by promoting competency-based education, system management, and employing rigid and dehumanizing forms of evaluation along with numerical rating scales, teachers are controlled and simply march to the tune of the state.

An educated teacher, a critical pedagogue in the making, fully understands and feels this deskilling process. The notion of reskilling occurs when teachers are both aware and critical of the multiple forms of deskilling. Reskilling occurs when teachers challenge stereotyping, find ways to subvert tracking through alternative teaching methodologies, build curriculum with open and critical spirits, become engrossed in policy-oriented decisions of the state and local school district sites, and form common understandings over issues of value.

In short, reskilling occurs when teachers are able to move around forms of schooling, and ultimately find ways to educate. Acts of reflection on subject matter, on short and long term goals of "educational" transformation as well as searching for those values that challenge forms of personal and institutional oppression will serve the educated and critical teacher well. On the practical side, this means that if social studies teachers are to teach about the tenets of democracy, democratic practice must occur in the classroom. Or, if Literature teachers are to teach Hamlet, then "to be or not to be" is an identity issue that must be grappled with the students in the context of student lives, not only Hamlets'. Math teachers would have to concretize math problems in the context of student lives, with the intent to "reskill" students as well, not get them to be mere robots of formulas and the like. Art must speak to student lives, as would reading and writing. Practically, teachers would have to get students to literally "get over" stereotypes and begin to create exercises that promote empathy. In short, the educator turned critical pedagogue becomes a reskilled practitioner - committed to justice particularly within the confines of the schooling structure. To do this, would make the critical educator more literate! That in mind, I turn to the last distinction.

Traditional Literacy Versus Critical Literacy

Under the schooling rubric, traditional literacy holds schools morally accountable to f provide a technical mastery of skills for students; to be functional in the basics of reading, math, and writing. More than that, "schooling" or traditional literacy also means teaching the above functions on multiple levels (say, 4th, 6th, 9th, or 12th grades), but with little creativity, no sense of purpose other than to go on to the next grade, and little moral vision or insight as to a larger picture revolving around "education."

Critical literacy under the guise of education distinguishes itself from the above literacy in that it begs teachers to teach for analytical purposes, for multiple interpretations, for moral reasoning. Under critical literacy, the educated teacher, as well as student, takes issues such as gender, class and race seriously both in classroom management as well as curriculum content. Critical literacy allows the teacher to connect curriculum to texts as well as to student experience, thus making knowledge more relevant and introspective for both teacher and student. For example, a critically literate teacher will always reskill her/himself by asking if History can be read from multiple ethnic perspectives. The critical math teacher will connect economics and problem solving to student experiences. The critical social studies teacher will always strive for democracy, be critical over the civil war by connecting content to present communities, racial divides and so on. In short,

the critical literate teacher under an educated mind-set, while certainly "schooling" her/his students in the technical sense (getting facts straight, partaking in standardized tests, etc.), adds a necessary clause to their teaching port-folio. There is a committed and visionary understanding that critical pedagogy is a form of education that must be strived for as necessary acts of resistance to oppressive schooling structures!

Conclusion - From Despair To Hope

Simply put, to remain a teacher who relies on schooling is the despair that we all can fall into. School structures - be they time, bureaucracy, hierarchy, curriculum - have a way of deskilling the teacher and robbing her/him of the enthusiasm to proceed with their job creatively. One point I tell prospective and in-service teachers. To begin the "critical" project is to simultaneously be reflective on how one is personally schooling themselves and their clientele, while also attempting to move out of the schooling mentality, both theoretically and practically. Therein lies the hope for teachers in the trenches. We can indeed educate our students if we choose when and where it is appropriate to resist schooling structures. Hope lies in asking and answering this following question, and then, subsequently, taking action. To what end do I teach? When I can truly answer that question, the critical pedagogue will realize that teaching is more than about transmitting the basics of schooling, but really about the vitality of educating for citizenship, democracy and the hope that this can be passed on to future generations. Clearly, teachers, there is a lot of work to be done!

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