

# **Critical Pedagogy: Origin, Vision, Action & Consequences.**

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## **Abstract**

Critical pedagogy is a transformation-based approach to education. The aim of this article is to introduce the origin, vision, action and consequences of critical pedagogy. It also aims on finding out about educators' possibility of actualising it in their practice. As a source materials articles, book chapters and books are used. The literature shows that critical pedagogy has its origin in the tradition of critical theory of the Frankfurt School and the work of the Brazilian pedagog Paulo Freire. According to the literature, its major theses is that education should go beyond transfer of knowledge and training the future labour force; to help developing critical consciousness, which leads to transformation of the individual, learning environment and society at large. Critical pedagogy is criticised for a focus on macro level system, for not having a model for classroom implementation and for being abstract. Despite some critics, I argue that critical pedagogy has still the potential to empower those in the field of education to increase their consciousness about the injustice in their society and to involve in transforming it.

Keywords: Critical pedagogy, critical thinking, critical theory, dialogue, Frankfurt School, transformation.

## **Introduction**

In this article I discuss critical pedagogy, which I believe is relevant for various reasons. One major reason is when the present education systems are considering consensus, non-critical approach and preservation of what is already at hand, there is a need for a pedagogy that is more radical and aspiring for transformation. An equally relevant issue is these days when individualism is emphasized in the expens of injustice to largare sectors of society, there is a need for a solidarity-based pedagogy, where disadvantaged social groups and society at large are given sufficient focus. It is also important today, when we are overloaded with the information from different medias to convince us on various issues, there is a need to scrutinize them critically to find out whose

interest they are serving and how to react to them, critical pedagogy will be a powerful instrument for this purpose.

The article is structured as follows. First I will present the origin of critical pedagogy followed by its vision for pedagogical activities. In addition to knowing its origin and vision, the article will proceed to looking at the possibilities of its implementation and its consequences. Following the part dealing with action and consequences some critics to it will be addressed. At the end concluding remarks will be given.

## **Origin**

Before critical theory was developed as one major theoretical field, critical thinking as a way of viewing reality was exercised among intellectuals of different generations. The relevance and the acts of critical thinking were subjects for discussion among the Greek philosophers, among the renaissance scholars and among the intellectuals of the 19th and 20th century.

Critical theory, which is a source for critical pedagogy, has its roots in Hegel's work, Kant's critical philosophy, which was introduced in his book *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, and Karl Marx's and Fredrik Engels *Communist Manifesto* from 1848 and *Capital Volume 1* from 1867 (McKernan, 2013). Later on the Fabian Socialism, which was started in Britain in 1884 in rejecting "direct confrontation and violent revolution", also contributed to the development of critical theory (ibid, pp. 417-418). According to McKernan, Fabian Socialism:

...focused upon a wide-ranging critique of social policies and aimed at solving economic and social ills. It became linked with the Labour Party in 1900 avoiding Marxist revolution by spreading socialist ideas through labour unions and the intellectual elite. Fabianism is rooted in Marxist socialist thought, emerging as the first tangible ideological movement fostering equality and community action in public policy and education in British society from about 1885 onwards. The work of a whole host of social thinkers, sociologists and intellectuals, ... brought a critical perspective to cultural and educational issues. (Ibid, p. 417).

Critical theory is mainly associated with the Frankfurt School (institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt on Mein), established in 1923. Some writers divide theorists from this school in different generations, while

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others call these few earlier intellectuals as the members of the “inner circle” (Burill, 1987). Those who divide them in generations, included in the first generation theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor W Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Bejamin, Erich Fromm, Friedrich Pollock and Leo Löwenthal (Burill, 1987 & Wiggershaus, 1994). The first generation theorists from this school , ”...argued that advanced capitalism had managed to contain or liquidate the forces that would bring about its collapse and that the revolutionary moment, when it would have been possible to transform it into socialism, had passed....”. (McKernan, 2013, p.424).

According to McKernan, one of these theorists:

Max Horkheimer ...along with Eric Fromm, ...was perhaps the first critical social scientists to offer a critical theory of society. Max Horkheimer suggested the important distinction between ” traditional theory” and ”critical theory” –which had, above all, a practical or utilitarian purpose. For Horkheimer a theory is ”critical” to the extent that it not only seeks to explain, understand and interpret society, but also to the extent it seeks to change and ’to liberate human beings from circumstances that enslave them’ (Horkheimer i McKernan, pp.424-425).

Because of the Second World War and the Nazis take over in Germany the intellectuals of the Frankfurt School moved to the US and continued developing their theory. After the war when they returned and established themselves in Germany one of their front figures, among second-generation theorists was Jürgen Habermas who in his later works mainly focused on communicative competency (McLaren, 1995; Wiggershaus, 1994). Among those who followed the traditions of this school with focus on education is Paulo Freire.

Critical pedagogy did not inherit the Frankfurt School as it is. According to Kincheloe, “Emerging from Paulo Freire’s work in poverty stricken northeastern Brazil in the 1960s, critical pedagogy amalgamated liberation theological ethics and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School in Germany with the progressive impulses in education...” (Kincheloe, 2007, p.12). In addition to Freire scholars such as Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, Donald Macedo, Peter McLaren and Ira Shor have contributed to enrich it.

As the focus of this discussion is on critical pedagogy, it did not include other critical theory traditions. The contributions of post-colonial theory, critical race

theory, critical feminist theory and other critical approaches are vital for the development of the field. However they will be subject for discussion in other occasion than in this brief article.

## **Vision**

As mentioned earlier critical pedagogy has its roots within critical theory. One of the main figures that contributed to critical pedagogy is the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire. He contributed to both its theoretical and practical development. One of his major contribution was a discussion about critical consciousness, conscientizacao, a consciousness beyond understanding which leads to action (Freire, 1970).

McLaren defines critical pedagogy as follows:

Critical pedagogy is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structure of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and, nation state (McLaren, 1998, p.45).

Critical pedagogy is presented in the quotation above among other factors as a way of thinking. The depth in this way of thinking is described by Shor as "Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, ..." (Shor in Rexhepi & Alberto Torres, 2011).

In McKernan (2013) we read:

...Critical pedagogy is a movement involving relationships of teaching and learning so that students gain a critical self-consciousness and social awareness and take appropriate action against oppressive forces. This idea is central to Freire's notion of "conscientization" or the coming to personal critical consciousness. According to Herbert Marcuse, a major figure in the Frankfurt school, that there could be no qualitative social change, no socialism, is possible without the emergence of a new rationality and sensibility in the individuals themselves: no radical social change without a radical change of the individual agents of change (Marcuse, 1972)... (McKernan, 2013, p.425).

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The relationship of learning and teaching more than anything considers the teacher and pupils/students relation. Many critical pedagogics in their discussion of this relationship mentions that it should be based on compassion, mutual understanding and common goals (Darder, 2003, Zembylas, 2013). Freire emphasises the importance of "just, serious, humble, and generous relationships" for well-functioning educational practice (Freire, 1998).

The critical teacher understands her/his responsibility of preparing the pupil/student for more than the profession she/he is going to exercise. She/he equips them with the capacity to transform their society. It is also expected from such a teacher the willingness to learn as she/he teaches. This is in line with Gramsci's thinking of organic intellectual (Rexhepi & Alberto Torres, 2011). These organic intellectuals prepare their pupils/students not only as agents of change that only resist injustice. As it was mentioned earlier they will prepare them rather as agents of change that will transform society (Fischman & McLaren, 2005). The increased consciousness will contribute to understanding of the society's shortcomings, which need to be transformed, and in Freire's words, "Critical understanding leads to critical action" (Freire, 1974).

Teachers as "citizen scholars" are also expected to take critical positions and to relate their work with major social issues in the society for the purpose of creating hope for pupils/students to transform society to the better (Giroux & Giroux, 2006). These authors further extend their thought on what goals education should fulfil:

...Although we believe that public education should equip students with skills to enter the workplace, it should also educate them to contest workplace inequalities, imagine democratically organized forms of work, and identify and challenge those injustices that contradict and undercut the most fundamental principles of freedom, equality, and respect for all people who make up the global public sphere. Public education is about more than a job preparation or even critical consciousness raising; it is also about imagining different futures and politics as a form of intervention in public life... (Giroux & Giroux, 2006, p.29)

In general "...critical pedagogy... encourages critical thinking and promotes practices that have the potential to transform oppressive institutions or social relations (Breunig, 2005, p.109).

## **Action and Consequences**

Educators on all levels should ask themselves if their assignment is only transferring knowledge to their pupils/students? Only training the labour force that will engage in material and service production? The answer to these questions could be a dividing line between traditional and critical pedagogy. The former may conclude that there is nothing more than knowledge transfer and skills training that are parts of an educator's assignment and role. The later will recognise something more that belongs to its assignment (Giroux & Giroux, 2006).

Critical pedagogy could be exercised on different levels of education. McLaren considers as misconception to have a division of labour that, "...theorists who produce knowledge are limited to the university, those who merely reproduce it are seen as public school teachers, and those who passively receive it at all levels are students" (McLaren, 1995, p.42). Doing away with such misconception strengthens the basic thesis of critical pedagogy that knowledge could be produced on all levels of education through dialogue and critical endeavour.

In a dialogue with McLaren the educationalist Kris Gutierrez gives example of how he worked with teachers in school in his intention of developing critical pedagogy.

...Simultaneously, we, along with other educators and classroom teachers are developing a theory and a language to help us describe and critique the process we observe in schools that affect both teachers and students. For example, in a qualitative study with nineteen novice teachers last year, I gathered empirical data that substantiated what I already knew from my experience as a classroom teacher and my continued experience with teachers. When teachers are treated as intellectuals, are provided occasions for reflective and informed practice, and are assisted in developing informed ways of "knowing and doing teaching," they begin to understand the political, social and cognitive consequences of schooling. They develop new understanding of how classroom culture is constructed, of how certain contexts for learning deny or increase access to particular forms of literacy, and new understanding of the importance of developing agency and new frames of reference for both students and teachers. These teachers are not intimidated by research and theory; instead, they co-construct the discourse of theory and practice. In this way, we are attempting to conduct research that has multiple agendas, that is,

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research that has academic, social, and political consequences (Ibid, pp.166-167).

The focus of the study mentioned above is teachers while the intention is to benefit both students and teachers. In the process mentioned above the teachers are co-researchers and developers of critical and applicable knowledge to their reality. It could also be considered that they could continue with the similar process for co-production of critical knowledge in cooperation with their pupils/students.

Introducing a critical pedagogic perspective in the classroom does not stand in opposition to the assignment of training skilled professionals. It is rather an additional and relevant component that the education system can provide its pupils/students with. This ability that pupils/students develop, are vital for transforming themselves and their society.

As Gramsci indicates there is a need for "organic intellectuals" to carry the responsibility of transforming the classroom. A classroom where the educator is showing respect for her/his pupils/students, where instead of teacher dominance, understanding each other is the norm and willingness to learn from each other is appreciated, knowledge development will benefit.

In such a classroom the pupil/student is helped to understand in addition to the content of the subject, the general working mechanism of the society. She/he will get the general picture of the historical, social, political and economic mechanisms. Depending on the level of education, she/he will be encouraged to critically review these mechanisms to be able to critically reflect on them.

As a consequence of critical consciousness, sympathising with the disadvantaged in the society and moving from showing sympathy to having a compassion for their case is inevitable. From resisting what happens to the disadvantaged moving to being an active agent who takes measure in collaboration with them will be expected from pupils/students who develop critical consciousness.

## **Critics**

As mentioned earlier in the text, critical pedagogy has a vision that opens up the possibility of engaging educators and their pupils/students in developing critical

ability, aimed at transforming society. While having these visions for action, critical pedagogy is criticized for various reasons. One of the major criticisms is that it is mainly focusing on a macro level system critic than engaging in an action at a micro level in a classroom reality (McArthur, 2010).

Another point considered as a weakness, is that it is more engaged in critic than creating a "substantive vision" (Giroux in Breunig, 2005). The critic extends even further, that critical pedagogy more than criticizing the existing system, for not "having model towards which schools aspire". It is also criticized for being "...excessively abstract and too far removed from everyday life of school" (Breunig, 2005, p.110).

I consider macro level system critics as essential and that it needs to continue. On the other hand as some critics pinpoint, critical pedagogy as a field must strive for making its concepts and analysis easily accessible to pupils/students, teachers and other scholars. Through constant research and analysis it should facilitate the ground for making itself implementable in praxis.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As discussed in the earlier parts of this text, critical pedagogy has developed from critical theory through relating it to objective realities and the contributions of many theorists. In considering the development of critical pedagogy from critical theory, I would not like to think this development as a linear. As for developing it, critical thinking skill was used and this skill will be needed in the future too. But one should keep in mind that there are distinctions between critical thinking as epistemology and critical thinking skill that will serve the purpose of critical pedagogy. The goal of critical pedagogy is beyond just critical thinking, its major emphasis is on transformation (Burbules & Berk, 1999).

Even if critical pedagogy was criticised for being more theoretical, for me its relevance weighs much more than its shortcomings that could be dealt with through dialogue. Each and every educator should ask herself/himself if they are fulfilling their duty as organic intellectuals, developing together with their pupils/students the ability that will help for looking critically to the present and for transforming society into the better.

It is not difficult to imagine that using critical pedagogy may not be interesting for all academicians. Some would like to believe that this is not a part of their assignment. While others believed in the importance of critical pedagogy for



their pupils/students to understand the objective reality of the society they live in and to contribute to its transformation.

The education institutions and individual educators have the responsibility to introduce critical pedagogy. Students have the right to be introduced to it and participate in the process of developing skills for critical understanding of the reality of their society. As to my understanding critical pedagogy has the potential to develop this skill and to transform the educator, the learner, the classroom and the society at large.

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