Critical Agency in Educational Practice: A Modern South African Perspective

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It is a serious allegation to suggest that through perpetuating inequality in a society, we violate students’ rights, particularly the inalienable and unassailable right of human dignity. By infringing upon human dignity, we unleash the potential to tolerate poverty and unemployment, we transgress language and religious rights, and we accommodate inequality. In this context, it becomes apparent to ask the question: How could students utilize critical agency to mitigate the effects of capitalist hegemony and ideology, to bring a measure of equality in a South Africa classroom, community and society? This research question serves to highlight the plight of disadvantaged and marginal students in the schooling system as they are the most vulnerable and threatened participants in the schooling experience, whose human rights are brought into question every time they encounter the schooling situation. These students often have to contend with sub par realities in the dimensions of education resourcing and educational achievement which further marginalize them in society.

Poverty sets them apart from their more affluent peers in the society as they do not display the level of success envisioned by curriculum planners and administrators. But poverty to the exclusion of capitalist hegemony would be surmountable. Since ruling class hegemony is so pervasive and intrusive in the lives of economically, culturally, and linguistically marginal students, they are measured against the markers of values, beliefs, norms and standards that are alien to their lived realities and experiences. The omnipresence of capitalist or ruling class hegemony makes it almost insurmountable in overcoming poverty and inequality.

Through the process of collaborative action research entrenched in a philosophical tradition, the researcher aims to address the central research question. The focus of the project will be to investigate the indicators of critical agency in students and whether students are able to identify the causes and effects of their current realities in order to devise strategies to positively transform certain realities. Further to this, the investigation seeks to reveal whether critical agency is able to expose the character of the students in becoming individuals, critical thinkers who strive for personal freedom and equality, as they are confronted with the stark reality of their lived experiences (specifically the causes, and effects of their lives and the possibility for change).

Keywords: human dignity, inequality, capitalist hegemony, change.

Educational inequality

Equality in education is an inescapable and intractable challenge not only in South African society. As an issue impacting education worldwide, the issue of equality is steadily gaining greater significance as researchers in the United Kingdom investigate “Social Inequality: Can Schools Narrow the Gap?” [Ainscow et al., 2010]; while in the United States educational publications produce work entitled, “Inequality in Teaching and Schooling...” [Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000]. In this context, it is not remiss to ask: “How could equality in education contribute towards a more equitable society?”

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By equitable, it is meant a society that provides justice and freedom from bias and favouritism. It could be assumed that the matter of equality in education has suffered much neglect because the process of education in South Africa does not deliver justice and freedom from bias. The preceding reality is illustrated by the fact that sadly, missing from the four areas of focus for the new school year, 2012 as stated by the Minister of Basic Education was the crucial issue of equality in education [Downey, 2011]. While equality in education might seem like a utopian (understood in its classical definition as a place that does not exist) pursuit, achieving equality in education is one of the most important elements necessary to transform a very economically, politically and culturally fragmented South African society. I will now attempt to demonstrate how educational inequality has manifested itself through its outcomes, resources, and the curriculum.

Educational inequality becomes apparent when analyzing previous years’ Matric (National Senior Certificate Exam) results, in that those students from historically disadvantaged communities do not have parity in terms of performance on the standardized national examination. ¹Statistics shared during the Minister’s address on the 2011 Matric (National Senior Certificate Exam) results reveal that white and Indian students outperform black and coloured (mixed race) students in the nation’s schools [Motsheka, 2012].

The disparity of resource allocation was highlighted by the fact that in certain provinces, students were not provided with the necessary materials and circumstances for effective teaching and learning to occur [Bule, 2012]. While this may appear as an isolated incident, it is embedded in the apartheid legacy of unequal resourcing and continues today, as schools in more affluent communities charge school fees, and are consequently better resourced [Van der Berg, et al., 2011; Keswell, 2005, Spaull, 2012]. This failure on the part of the state to provide adequately for certain students does not end exclusively with the lack of service and material delivery. Consideration of the state’s responsibility to economically disadvantaged and marginal students has to extend further to the questions of curriculum design, quality of educational experiences, access and inclusion, and whether poor and marginal students have been herded into a state and capitalist hegemony that does not serve their particular interests [Gramsci, 1971]. This disregard for underprivileged students and the subsequent inequality it reproduces, seems to confirm Gramsci’s argument that the power of the ruling class (through state agency), produces ideological hegemony through consent [Gramsci, 1971]. This ideological hegemony is translated as the values and beliefs of the ruling elites that is mediated and transmitted via cultural organs such as schools to the popular classes, in order to perpetuate and maintain class subjugation. The insidious nature of ideological hegemony is that in democratic societies it takes on the guise of the natural order of things in society and the popular classes come to regard it unquestioningly as natural and commonsensical.

Given Gramsci’s notion of ideological hegemony, the nexus between a capitalist hegemony and academic achievement may seem abstract and immaterial, but empirical evidence indicates that white and Indian students historically performed better and

¹ No verifiable data is published on this topic as a political manoeuvre. Academics (Rukshana Osman, and representatives from Equal Education) queried why full disclosure was not given to reveal a truer reflection of academic achievement amongst economically marginalized students.
continue to do so, over black and coloured students because traditionally these stu-
dents have had and continue to have greater material affluence or private resources,
and they have had and continue to have higher educated parents [Van Der Berg,
2008; South African Institute of Race Relations, 2010].

While I have laboured through descriptive analysis to illustrate social and educa-
tional inequality in relation to outcomes and resources, it now becomes crucial to
uncover the structural and ideological matters that give rise to such inequality, and
how this manifests through the curriculum. In this regard, the immediate questions
that emanate around the curriculum are: “Who develops it and for what purpose is it
created?” Does it serve and promote middle class or bourgeois hegemony as ex-
pressed through language, cultural background and experiences?”, and finally: “How
are poor students marginalized because the curricular content does not admit the
reality of their experiences, yet their success is based on mastering curricular con-
tent embedded in the dominant culture?”

Curriculum
Now I will strive to illustrate the relationship between the curriculum and (dominant)
culture and the nature and process of curricular design. Firstly, I will focus attention on
the answers to the questions posed above. The probable answers to the questions may be
explained by the fact that students from the dominant class have the requisite cultural
capital [Bourdieu, 2007] to succeed academically. Cultural capital is defined as the inhe-
rited meanings, qualities of style, modes of thinking and types of dispositions that are
most valued by the dominant class [Bourdieu, 2007]. The advantage of the middle class
student becomes more apparent as they are not only financially more privileged to meet
the demands of school (fees, materials etc.), but they are also more familiar with the sub-
ject content to display the skills learned from their family background and social class. In
contrast, the historically and economically disadvantaged student lacks the familiarity
that comes from possessing cultural capital. In other words, these students lack the lan-
guage, meanings, style and modes of thinking that schools legitimate and reproduce that
are characteristic of the dominant culture [Giroux, 1983]. Consequently, these students
suffer the inequality of opportunity not only in a material (financial) way, but also
through academic disadvantage.

The nature of curricular content is not neutral; instead it is ideologically driven with un-
stated norms, values and beliefs which are embedded in the values of the dominant classes
[Giroux, 1983]. These values are transmitted to students in schools and classrooms directly by
way of the formal curriculum as well as implicitly through the “hidden curriculum” [Jackson,
1968] as a means to ensure social control [Vallance, 1973]. The insidious nature of the “hid-
den curriculum” could help further elucidate the consequences for the poor educational per-
formance on the part of economically marginalized students, as the focus of their learning is
to unquestioningly follow rules in preparation for their future roles as workers in society.
These subjugated students would have limited personal involvement with curricular content
as they cannot relate to the lived experiences presented as their own through the content,
when in fact the experiences reflect the experiences, values, beliefs and norms of the elite class
[Giroux, 1983].

One way that these dominant ideologies become normative is through the sociali-
ization function of schooling and education. The school is instrumental in
transmitting the values required by the existing society or ruling elite. The ruling class remains uncompromising in perpetuating their beliefs (to maintain power, domination and hegemony), and does not delegate this responsibility to the family but ensures that other civic organizations such as the church reinforces these beliefs. The above scenario gives insight into the definition and mechanism of hegemony, which Gramsci [as cited in McLaren & Leonard, 1993] describes as a world-view that is diffused by agencies of ideological control and socialization into every area of social life. Hegemony therefore proves to be so pervasive that its manifestations become to be seen as organic and common sense by even those who are subjugated by it. Yet an often neglected understanding is that marginal students bring valuable lived experiences that enrich the learning environment as they provide insights into different perspectives of what exists, what is good and what is possible. Hegemony works to eviscerate certain student perspectives as it serves as an inhibitor to explore these valuable perspectives and leads to a “waste (of) their social wealth” [Santos, 2004], robbing us of the chance to entertain subjugated views of what exists, what is good and what is possible. In opposition to hegemony, a counter-hegemonic position would be essential to ensure a functioning, emancipatory democracy, by interrupting the dominant ideologies of the bourgeoisie.

Althusser (1970) expounds the concept of state repression by introducing a theory on Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). According to him, states are able to maintain control over citizens by reproducing human subjects, who through certain beliefs and values, observe and accept the prevailing social order as organic and pure.

So far I have attempted to illustrate features of curricular content by focusing on the ideological dimensions that undergird the curriculum. Now I will turn to the people participating in curriculum development and design. Curriculum design is taken to mean the completed curriculum plan as issued by the national education authority, which falls outside the limits or locus of control of the key role-players [Fiske & Ladd, 2004]. The centralized nature of curriculum-making by national education authorities is not participatory and excludes key role-players such as teachers, parents, students and affected educational communities, rendering these agents powerless. The teacher, as education facilitator at school, has no valuable and recognized participation in curriculum design. Nor does the student as the intended recipient of the education, contribute in delineating the things he or she would like to learn, since the curriculum has been predetermined. In this way, the process of education may take on a rather deterministic nature when it comes to educating the young. Determinism is explained as the inevitability of causation; in that everything that happens is the only possible thing that could happen [Burmeister, 2009].

Therein lays the problem, that even to consider the curriculum as deterministic disregards any notion of agency, yet we cannot simply discount the curriculum’s seemingly fixed character. Thus, the curriculum expressed in its aims, content and pedagogy reinforces specific, defined roles with limited agency for teachers and students, and imposes the methods of assessment which suggests unalterable predetermination, predictability and strict uniformity. Determinism could further advance the question of whether curriculum designers ensure that certain groups of students graduate to be workers while others are destined to become leaders?

The official processes establishing the content and design of curricular programs do not involve the community, parents, teachers or students, but instead are determined
by the state, influential academics and those with commercial or industrial interests [Kanpol, 1994; Giroux, 1983; Hoadley & Jansen, 2009]. This scenario gives an illustration that educational inequality has a hierarchical structure. The power to influence the curriculum design process is located at the macro level of education planning (with powerful interests vested in the state, academics, etc) to the exclusion of the micro level experiences of particular students and communities.

Negotiating the Curriculum

Given the above information, that outside influences (from labour, industry, academics to government) have greater control over the curriculum organization, it would appear as though curricular matters are shut and impenetrable. If that were the case then economically disadvantaged students would have no hope of escaping the hegemonic nature and influence of schooling. But Cornbleth (1990) provides hope, in addressing the inequalities in society at large and how to attempt to disempower ideological hegemony as mediated through the curriculum. She describes the curriculum as an ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and the educational context or setting. By this definition, gaps are presented for teachers to interpret the curriculum and through practice (teaching) at the micro level of the individual student, to affect teaching and learning. This fissure opens the curriculum up to interpretation by the teacher as she is afforded the opportunity of presenting counter-hegemonic knowledge to contextualize student learning.

Contextual positioning of the curriculum by the teacher presents a way to introduce students to alternative views, issues apparent in the “hidden curriculum”, and ways to confront the real problems of their existence [Freire, 2005; McLaren, 1993; Giroux, 1983; Smith, 2000] through praxis. Praxis presents the opportunity for students to reflect on subject matter during learning routines, then to act on the subject matter through performance or application of a skill, and to culminate the process with further reflection on the impact of the aforementioned action.

Giroux (1988) echoes the sentiments of Cornbleth that teachers should challenge the curriculum as it is not a neutral, unbiased element or body in education. According to Giroux, the curriculum is a way of organizing knowledge, values, and relationships of social power. His position is that teachers should not assume passive roles by merely accepting the technical imperatives of the curriculum but that they should challenge these so as to advocate meaningfully for students. He further suggests that students and teachers take critical reflection of their real world in order to generate a curriculum that reveals possibilities and transformative solutions that are counter-hegemonic and do not enforce social reproduction or economic production.

RELATION TO PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Preliminary literature review and theoretical framework

Critical Pedagogy

In order to confront and attack acerbic hegemony, we would need to start embracing themes such as participatory democracy, even in schools, and envision alternative productive systems and naturalize differences in order to abolish racial, sexual, and social classifications [Santos, 2004]. Critical Pedagogy represents a form of hegemonic
resistance in schools to address educational, political, economic, and social inequalities. To expand on the term hegemonic resistance, Kanpol (1994) elaborates that resistance in this sense, encompasses acts that counter the oppressive and dominant structural and cultural values (such as individualism, rampant competition, success-only orientations, and authoritarianism) in society. This resistance could be achieved through various social constructs such as the school, church, the family, and community. Just as these social structures serve hegemonic ends in maintaining the status quo, they can be transformed as agents and mediums for counter-hegemonic potentials and possibilities for marginalized and subjugated people.

Critical Pedagogy as a counter-hegemonic response has its theoretical origins with Paulo Freire, who proposed the theory in the political and social climate of the 1960’s and 1970’s. This historical period was characterized by social movements concerned with transformation, liberation from colonialism, civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, environmental issues, and anti-war movements. Against this backdrop Freire suggested Critical Pedagogy as a process through education, to address social problems and as a means through which society could be transformed along inclusive or participatory, democratic lines. This seemed apropos since the resistance movements chose to challenge the established, unjust, and unequal order apparent in their world. More specifically, Freire used reading and writing to aid thinking among economically disenfranchised slum dwellers in his native Brazil. The critical dimension in his literacy approach was evidenced as he utilized pictures to help illiterate adults interpret the problems of their lives by examining the causes, effects, and possibilities for action to change [Temple, 2011].

By examining causes, effects, and possibilities for change, through critical literacy, a central theme in Critical Pedagogy is erected in the form of “conscientization” which, by Freire’s definition is to mean the awakening of critical awareness. This critical awareness is used through literacy to heighten the student’s ability to deconstruct the capitalist hegemony of the ruling elite towards the goals of developing “critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice, social transformation and a revitalization of the public sphere” [Freire, 1994]. The invoking of consciousness in the South African educational scenario might have significant and telling results. To students it could possibly be reminiscent of the Soweto student uprisings of 1976, where critical consciousness was raised about the injustice of Afrikaans language (the language of white Afrikaners and the ruling party) instruction in black schools and where students organized resistance through student-led protests. This event in South African history may serve to be instructive, inspiring and empowering to students as they will be afforded the opportunity to practically see the verifiable efforts in human, and specifically student agency [Alexander, 2012].

Schools could be considered as sites where the ideologies of capitalist hegemony become entrenched in students, as they unconsciously assimilate and acquiesce to the dictates of the market fundamentals of consumerism and materialism. Therefore schools could be complicit in rendering the service of repressive state apparatus [Althusser, 1970] as it acts in the interest of the state and ruling elite, to maintain control over citizens by reproducing human subjects, who through certain beliefs and values, observe and accept the prevailing social order as organic and pure. However, schools could possibly be seen as the sites where the prevailing social, political, and economic
order is challenged and transformed, thus they present an opportunity to address
social inequality as evidenced in student agency during the Soweto (a black urban

Another critical theorist, Henry Giroux locates youth as being “scapegoated” for the
problems of society like violence, social degradation, poverty, crime and poor educational
performance (2000); while Freire (1970) positioned the vulnerability of youth, as the
schooling experience leaves them “anesthetized, a-critical and naïve” in the face of the
material reality of their lives and the world at large. To further this thinking, alienation
and distance from reality is seen primarily in the light of the fact that the authoritarian
ideology of the ruling elite produces programmed and conditioned subjects through the
education system, rather than emancipated, empowered individuals who operate in a
functional democracy. Student conditioning is seen to encompass the norms, values and
beliefs of the dominant elite, and how these become so entrenched in society, and are
effectively disseminated through media and political establishments as legitimate. These
norms, values and beliefs of the elite are believed to become so well-established and un-
questioned that, students become inclined to accept it as their own. As such Giroux iden-
tifies youth as a complex site of hope and possibility, as well as a site of domination and
exploitation (2000), since they possess the power to transform society and address in-
equality, yet they are also vulnerable to the onslaught of hegemonic ideology.

Critical Literacy and Agency

Whilst I have characterized schools as institutions of repression above, Freire’s
approach of Critical Pedagogy through critical literacy seems to suggest that schools
present the opportunity to be transformed as centres for individual and social eman-
cipation.

Freire’s work with the poor in “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1970) is instructive
on the effectiveness of critical pedagogy. Through his work, he determined that criti-
cality involves the student or citizen being critically astute of social relations, social
institutions and social traditions that create and maintain conditions of oppression,
and being in a position to interpret it, critique it, and change it.

In the tradition of Paulo Freire, literacy provides an opportunity to read the “word”
(the literal text with its associated symbols) and read the “world” (the discreet, hidden
messages that promote certain values, beliefs, assumptions) and to make meaning by
deep and active interrogation of the implications on the lived experiences of those who
encounter the texts. As opposed to the traditional approach to literacy where the empha-
sis is on mastery, meaning the memorization or archiving of facts, this critical approach
to literacy and literature will help students create their own meaning, probe, question
and critique words and symbols presented in literary materials.

In this study a distinction will be made in terms of terminology between Critical Pe-
dagogy and critical agency. Critical agency as an offshoot of the central theory (of Critical
Pedagogy) will assume a particular focus within Critical Pedagogy. Critical Pedagogy will
refer to the science and art of teacher preparation and training as proposed by Freire.
While the teacher is instrumental as the facilitator of the learning encounters, greater
agency and emphasis is placed on teacher roles and responsibilities in Critical Pedagogy.
Critical agency, on the other hand will be characterized by the more
numerous instruments used to exercise Critical Pedagogy, such as teachers, students, curriculum, community etc. The special emphasis in critical agency is to be placed on student roles (student as learner-participant, student as co-teacher, student as researcher, student as collaborative lesson planner, student as evaluator, student with equal power in a democratic classroom, student as activist, student as co-creator of meaning, etc). Learner prominence during instructional encounters relies on the student-centred approach to education versus the teacher-centred approach [Jones, 2007]. The student-centred approach to education has the following characteristic features: learners who value each other’s contributions with emphasis on cooperation and a willingness to learn from each other. A cooperative learning community is created in the class where students help each and work collaboratively in pairs, groups or as a whole class group. Student activities and behaviours allow students opportunities to compare, discuss, negotiate, respond to each other’s work, and make suggestions on how improvements could be made. The features of a student-centred approach are conducive to fostering autonomy in students by empowering them to make meaning, express opinions and experiences, and ask critical questions, rather than being dependent on the teacher as the sole possessor of information and facts. This approach to learning also motivates students positively to become co-creators of instructional materials and procedures as cited previously. The decided shift to student agency, student empowerment and the student-centred approach in education looks to establish some of distance with the traditional practice of Critical Pedagogy. Whereas with Critical Pedagogy more reliance is placed on teacher agency, it does not prove to be progressive or democratic enough to fully achieve the potency dormant in student agency.

Critical agency could present itself as a medium to initiate and institute the change and action alluded to by Freire with a more dedicated focus of human agency bestowed on student empowerment and the student-centred approach. Critical agency functions in the duality of firstly, a theory in the broader context of Critical Pedagogy, and secondly as a practice in the school and classroom. In its practical dimension it may provide an educational alternative (solution) for the current student, who may be a future exploited worker, as it could be an awakening of his or her individual potentialities through the reconstruction of curricula away from the established dictates, that serve the elite, toward a greater measure of socialist democracy, which may result in a more just and humane world.

**Current Research on Critical Agency within Critical Pedagogy**

Current research within the context of Critical Pedagogy in the education field has begun to address pertinent questions on education reform as it relates to nonconformity to the established capitalist-centred approach and outcome, and it creates the ideal environment to initiate critical agency. To this end critical educational theorists such as Peter McLaren and Joe L. Kincheloe identify the reconstruction of education as taking on a decidedly more social approach as they look at alternatives to the established system of imposed ideologies and bring about transformation and equality along democratic ideals. In their book, “Critical Pedagogy, Where are we Now?” [McClaren & Kincheloe, 2007], teachers are given practical evidence of Critical Pedagogy in real life classrooms, as Duncan-Andrade & Morell, Quintero, and Grande (2007) share...
documented proof of their encounters using critical agency. The episodes contained in the volume indicate the application, functioning, and challenges of implementing criticality or critical agency in practice. Critical theory, practice, agency and critical education is the resolute exploration of a distinct synthesis and collaboration of a critical educator and critical students in combating hostile inequality, unfamiliar curricular content, indistinct educational outcomes, unrealistic aims, entrenched hegemony, and sinister ideology.

The purpose of this study is to scrutinize the focal issue of social equity through educational reform (using critical agency), and whether social equity is indeed attainable. There is no demonstrable evidence or data to suggest that research on critical education and critical agency (which includes Critical Pedagogy, critical theory, critical consciousness etc.) has been carried out in a working-class English Literature class in South Africa. This creates a vacuum in which to explore critical educational dimensions by using critical theory to an extent and critical agency to a greater extent as the theoretical and conceptual framework.

**Possible Collaboration between Critical Pedagogy and Cosmic Pedagogy**

As argued by Abrams and Primack (2001): “Science undermined all traditional pictures of the universe in the Renaissance”, and has thrown into obscurity the indigenous knowledge systems and ancient cosmologies of the Incas, Indians and African civilizations to name but a few [Classen, 1957]. It is in the flourishing of these human potentialities that expression was given to the Egyptian and Inca Pyramids, mathematics (through the calculation of time), Stonehenge and Great Zimbabwe.

The honourable mention made above challenges the totality and hegemony of (Western) Science, as these presumably primitive civilizations were able to produce monuments of exacting scientific and mathematical dimensions that still rival modern conventions. Could it be that these ancient people were attuned and loyal to their vision of the whole universe rather than the greater terrestrial limitations of modern science and its reliance on infallibility? More significantly, how do we recuperate this imaginative, cosmic consciousness that defies the singular logic of science to reintroduce us to man as the “transforming agent” [Montessori, 1973]. The new cosmic conscious individual has a purpose to establish a “new picture of reality that excludes no one and treats all humans as equals” [Abrams & Primack, 2001].

It with this “new man” in mind that Bazaluk and Blazheivich (2012), propose the distinct development in children of the formation of a planetary and cosmic personality, one which characterizes the harmonization of mind, body and soul. According to the authors, this synchronization is directed at activating students’ internal creative potential of mind to the benefit of the intelligent matter of the entire planet and universe. This signals a severe break with the tradition of Western thought where there is a considerable disconnect between mind, body and soul.

In this particular approach to education termed “Cosmic pedagogy” which was conceptualized by Konstantin Wentzel (1993), we are called upon to envision a new human personality in the context of modernization’s demand for greater human interdependency, unity and integrity (Bazaluk & Blazhevich, 2012). This kind of pedagogy is based on the principles of anthropogenic cosmosim, cultural relevance, freedom, non-violence, and harmony (ibid.). It is therefore, on the basis of these
values that greater convergence can be sought and established between Critical Pedagogy and Cosmic pedagogy. Furthermore, the striking similarity between the aims of these two pedagogies serves to unify the democratic ambitions of particularity (meaning here on earth) in Critical Pedagogy with the universal and cosmic aspirations of Cosmic Pedagogy.

It is within this particular context that new possibilities can be revealed in terms of educational equality, curriculum reform, potentials for alternate imaginings of life and the human image. Of capital import of course would be the deep penetration of counter-hegemonic ways of thinking, access to quality information, complete cosmic and Earthly historical perspectives (such as admitting indigenous knowledge systems), and the pursuit of the purposeful nature of activity (ibid.).

The coupling of Critical Pedagogy and Cosmic pedagogy in a critical study of marginal students might reveal rich responses and insights from students who currently do not derive optimal benefit from traditional schooling. Since these students are robbed of their democracy and integrity in current schooling encounters, it is precisely them whom one would imagine apposite to embrace a cosmic consciousness that ruptures the restrictions of capitalist hegemony.

**Justification for the research**

The size of the industry involved regarding Critical Pedagogy is by no means elaborate. Many educators regard Critical Pedagogy with suspicion and scepticism either because of lack of understanding and or inadequate exposure to the dimensions that this critical theory claims to support. Since its first appearance with Paulo Freire in the 1970’s, Critical Pedagogy has made incremental steps toward visibility, specifically in North America where the majority of modern theorists reside and further define and enhance the theory as an alternative educational approach. While Critical Pedagogy has been a feature in educational programs in Latin America and Africa during the post-colonial period, it has had scant resurfacing in modern times. In South Africa particularly, it was instrumental in fuelling student resistance during the 1970’s and 1980’s but it has lay dormant since this time while social and historic conditions demand a return of such confrontation in defence of democracy, equality, and human emancipation.

Given the considerable respite in activity regarding Critical Pedagogy and critical consciousness, gaps in the literature, especially evident in the South African context have emerged. The literature of the struggle for democratic education during the 1970’s and 1980’s may have been suppressed by the oppressive apartheid government and these covert actions created a dearth in the archives of Critical Pedagogy in South Africa. It has been documented that the Teachers’ League of South Africa endeavoured to employ Critical Pedagogy with a focus on non-racialism in Cape Town schools and prisons, but no formal literature is available for academic scrutiny. To elaborate on the work done by the Teachers’ League of South Africa, Alan Wieder, (2003) prepared work entitled “Voices from Cape Town Classrooms: Oral Histories of Teachers Who Fought Apartheid.” This and other efforts to address Critical Pedagogy in South Africa by Moloi, et al (2010) and Mc Kinney (2005) still does not make up for the deficit in authoritative voices to help understand and enumerate the manifestations of Critical Pedagogy in South Africa in a present day context.
Unusual methodology
The project will have two distinct features as one will have the specific emphasis on action research while the other will use the data collected from action research to help answer the research question. The action research aspect of the investigation gives prominence to practice and has outcomes of reflections which include propositional knowledge, practical and experiential knowledge.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PLAN

Problem Statement
The main problem addressed in this research is:
How could students utilize critical agency to mitigate the effects of capitalist hegemony and ideology, to bring a measure of equality in a South Africa classroom, community and society?

Subsidiary questions that emanate from the main question are:
1. How could students help us discover the meaning of critical agency, (compared to its theory)?
2. How might critical agency manifest in working-class student’s:
   a) Cognitive functioning and intellectual ability, (to develop the capacity for criticality)
   b) Academic performance, (to increase Matric results)
   c) Civic participation? (to alleviate poverty and inequality)
   d) Affective functioning (emotions, ethics-values and virtues, dispositions)
3. Could students use critical agency to reveal the gaps within the current hegemony (in education, culture, media, capitalism etc.) available that dominant ideology has not succeeded in filling, and how will this inform critical theory as it manifests in South Africa?

Rationale
This particular research project is inspired by the instructional and learning episodes and routines found in the practice of Critical Pedagogy as it situates students from a specific demographic and proposes an educational intervention that could possibly transform the way they think and act and that impacts their lives significantly or positively.

The aims and objectives as spelled out above will be achieved by:
1. Describing whether critical agency could impact students, teachers and the community meaningfully. For example would critical agency help develop a student who is an individual, and a critical thinker who strives for freedom and equality?
2. Representing the behaviour and attitudes of all participants exposed to and applying critical agency throughout the investigation.
3. Highlighting the experiences of all stakeholders (at school, in the class, in the community) while explicitly using critical theory and its adaptive applications.
4. Identifying the potentials of critical agency through its evident strengths and its limitations.
5. To contribute to the field of research in Critical Pedagogy as observed in South Africa, since limited research of this kind currently exists or is not available for scrutiny. More directly, the narrow, available research set different aims and objectives and studied dissimilar circumstances using Critical Pedagogy.
6. If indeed, it does impact a group of students meaningfully, by replicating critical agency could it have broader appeal in other classes, in the school, in a community of schools?

7. Applying the newly-learned information about Critical Pedagogy to further advance and intensify the necessity of the theory as an educational intervention or relate the unintended consequences that resulted from it.

8. Investigation of whether developing criticality in students could lead to the furtherance of democratic aims, which in turn could lead to greater social welfare and public good.

**Research design**

The research genre or design type that will be used in the study is collaborative action research/practice-led research, as well as practical philosophy and this will be rooted within a critical framework. Collaborative action research is a student-centred approach to staff development where educators study their practice to improve it [Mills, 2007]. This particular method of inquiry strives to close the gap between research knowledge and instructional practice [Richardson, 2001]. Collaborative action research has merit as a research approach since it provides the opportunity to work in a real-life environment, (as in a social setting) and to address real problems to hopefully find solutions [O’Brien, 2001]. Critical theory examines the processes of gaining, maintaining, and circulating existing power relationships [Henning, et al. 2004] and endeavours to equalize the control of power. Critical theory has its definition in a philosophy that seeks human emancipation, “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” [Horkheimer, 1982]. Thus the study is further located in a philosophical tradition.

**Methodology**

The methodological implications of working within a critical framework present opportunities for participation, involvement, collaboration and engagement between researcher and subject. [Henning, et al. 2004]

1. **Justification**
   
The position of collaboration between researcher and subject is precisely one of the key features of critical agency that the study wants to reflect upon. More directly, this position highlights the subjects (students) as co-creators and as equal partners in the process of making meaning and understanding in the particular context of their lived experiences. This research approach is consistent with qualitative research methods that study its subjects within a specific context in order to interpret data.

2. **Unit of analysis and subjects or data sources**
   
For the purposes of this study, the indicators of critical agency will be whether students are able to identify the causes and effects of their current realities and whether they can devise strategies to positively transform certain realities. Further to this, the investigation seeks to reveal whether critical agency is able to expose the character of the students in becoming individuals, critical thinkers who strive for personal freedom and equality, as they are confronted with the stark reality of their lived experiences (specifically the causes, and effects of their lives and the possibility for change).
The group of students or critical agents involved in the study will be selected from two grade 10 classes to constitute the population. The sampling frame will consist of students enrolled in these two classes and random sampling will produce a sample size of 45 which is calculated as approximately half of the sampling frame.

3. Instruments and procedures

The instruments and procedures used to collect data will include student interviews conducted by the researcher. A questionnaire (based on content, language, themselves, and the world) will be administered during the interview and responses will be captured on laptop. The number of questions could be amended based on observation, experience, and the specific development of how best to answer the research questions. The nature of the questions will be open ended to investigate whether a deepening of a critical disposition has occurred. Observations will be made of students before, during, and after lessons to gauge and record their behaviours, attitudes, and responses to newly gained knowledge and skills throughout the learning encounters. Field notes, sketches, audio, video and perhaps even photo capturing will be compiled during observations to provide raw data. Further to this, student work samples, products and presentations (tests, homework, verbal and written feedback); and student and teacher journals will provide additional data sources.

Collection of data from the various sources will help clarify observations and specific categories can be identified for analysis. For example data could be collected on participant characteristics, such attitudes towards self, and others; statements about commitments, values, and changes to be made etc.

4. Administration of instruments and procedures

The administration of instruments and procedures will be clarified as the time (this to include duration and frequency), the place and the subject of the study in relation to the data collection process. This process is also to consider the rates of response, dates and protocols of interviews so that the research is reliable and can thus be repeated.

5. Limitations

Possible practical limitations for example limitations on the sampling frame or the size of the questionnaire may need to be further clarified or justified as the study commences.

6. Special or unusual treatment of data

Before data is analysed, special scoring of answers may be applied for example, data could be collected in categories and coded numerically to describe certain behaviours and attitudes.

7. Computer programs

No specific computer programs or software packages have been isolated or considered in the data analysis process.

8. Ethical issues

Respondents and participants will provide informed consent in order to participate in the study. The researcher will inform all subjects of the nature of the study and how data is going to be used. Every effort will be made to protect the anonymity, privacy and sensitivity of study participants.
References


