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Teachers' Reflections on Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom

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Author
Katz, Leanna

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Many critical pedagogues contend that there is a need to move beyond theory to consider the practical applicability of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1997; Osborne, 1990; Sweet, 1998). Ira Shor argues that teaching is a highly practical activity, and thus "teachers are more interested in practice than in theory" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 2). Yet, studies on the practice of critical pedagogy tend to be written from the perspective of those who already identify as critical pedagogues (Shor, 1987). This study investigates the perspective of teachers who do not self-identify as critical pedagogues to get a sense of the theory's usefulness for a wider range of teachers. Although most critical pedagogy research focuses on students of lower socio-economic status (Ainsa, 2011; Markovich, 2013; Shor, 1987; Yilmaz & Altinkurt, 2011), this study examines students from relatively high socio-economic backgrounds to understand how critical pedagogy can be applied to them in classroom teaching.

I conducted interviews with nine high school teachers in a suburb of a major Canadian city to get a sense of the aspects of critical pedagogy they find valuable based on their experiences. The themes from critical pedagogy that I focused on in the interviews were

- integrating students' personal experiences into classroom lessons;
- deconstructing the student-teacher hierarchy;
- avoiding the banking method of education and embracing an environment where students and teachers are both educators and learners;
- deconstructing the idea of knowledge as neutral and acknowledging the political nature of education;
- making social justice an explicit focus in the class; and
- considering how the classroom can serve as a model for promoting democracy.

The intention of this study was to understand the range of responses toward critical pedagogy by teachers who do not have much, if any, formal training or prior experience with critical pedagogy and who work with students who have not had a political awakening because of their positions of socio-economic privilege. The broader question motivating my research is to find out how desirable and feasible it is for these teachers to use critical pedagogy in the classroom.

Positionality Statement

I was driven to conduct this study based on my personal experiences as a student. Having just completed my undergraduate degree, I had been in school for the past 18 consecutive years and exposed to dozens of different teachers and teaching styles. I felt that my most valuable learning experiences tended to be in settings where the teacher engaged my existing understanding of the world, asked

me to question the reasons why we were learning what we were learning, and incorporated relevant social justice issues into classroom lessons. In a fourth-year university seminar, the professor seemed to use these teaching practices and referred to the term critical pedagogy. I wanted to learn more, so I began to read theoretical works ranging from Paulo Freire to bell hooks.

I found some aspects of the theory persuasive, such as acknowledging the political dimension of the education system, but others struck me as dogmatic, for example, the insistence on revolutionizing classroom teaching, which seemed nearly as dangerous as a staunch commitment to the status quo. I grew interested in what teachers who had not necessarily read critical pedagogy theory, but who were in my estimation effective teachers, would think of the common themes in critical pedagogy based on their years of teaching experience.

I approached teachers at the high school I attended to share their teaching experiences, especially insofar as it would help me understand the value of critical pedagogy. To protect their anonymity, the teachers' names have not been used in this paper. I decided to interview teachers rather than students since pedagogical theory is generally aimed at teachers and I believed that speaking with teachers would give me a sense of whether critical pedagogy theory matches up with the practice. My initial, perhaps mistaken, assumption was that as a student I had a sense of what other students find to be effective teaching practices. I have not tried to determine in a systematic way whether other students find the same teaching practices effective as I do. Learning more about students' experiences with critical pedagogy would be a worthwhile next step in this research.

Literature Review

There are many definitions and versions of critical pedagogy and attempting to establish a single definition or version contradicts the aim of critical pedagogy—to avoid a one-dimensional narrative (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Kincheloe, 2004). To avoid being overly reductive, I framed critical pedagogy as rooted in what students know based on their daily lives. A critical education begins with students exploring their concrete reality, sharing those experiences and linking themselves to their socio-political context. Critical pedagogues like Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, Donaldo Macedo, and bell hooks reason that by addressing issues that affect students' daily lives, students become more engaged with the ideas they are learning, thereby becoming more critically conscious. Critical pedagogues also emphasize the importance of teachers learning about the students—what their personal and work lives are like, what their authentic language sounds like, what degree of alienation they have experienced—and basing courses on students' experiences (Florence, 1998; Freire & Macedo, 1998; hooks, 1994; Shor & Freire, 1987). This practice contrasts with the standard "banking" concept of education

where the teacher's task is to fill the students who act as receptacles of information (Freire, 1998, p. 67). With the banking model of education, students are passive recipients of information that is detached from the context that gives it significance, while teachers are a privilieged voice responsible for imparting this information. Shor and Freire (1987) argue that rather than having knowledge produced at a distance from the classroom by researchers, textbook writers and curriculum committees, knowledge should be "created and re-created by students and teachers in their classrooms" (p. 8) with students and teachers playing both roles simultaneously.

hooks (1994) emphasizes the need for educators to consider students as whole people with complex experiences. This fits with the understanding in critical pedagogy that education is about more than achieving academic success or becoming professionals, but rather about becoming engaged in public life. Freire and Macedo (1998) argue:

> [I]t is impermissible to train engineers or stonemasons, physicians or nurses, dentists or machinists, educators or mechanics, farmers or philosophers, cattle farmers or biologists, without an understanding of our own selves as historical, political, social and cultural beings—without a comprehension of how society works. (p. 263)

Shor goes further, saying that it is naive to see the classroom as a separate space from the rest of society where inequality does not affect learning (Shaw, 2010).

hooks (1994) rejects a view of education as either separate or neutral, and instead begins with the assumption that schools are sites for organizing knowledge, power and desire. Educators determine what is passed on to students as legitimate knowledge and culture, thereby reproducing existing culture and beliefs (Shaw, 2010). This system has the effect of privileging Western European accomplishments over others, which keeps these forms of knowledge entrenched in the dominant culture. The result is the naturalization of an unequal society, where some students are empowered while students outside of privileged groups are pushed further into poverty and powerlessness (DeLeon, 2007). DeLeon advances a new aim for education: to challenge existing social structures and work toward social transformation. A critical education encourages students to think of themselves as agents capable of shaping their own education and society (Shor, 2012). Giroux (2011) argues that educators are responsible for working toward a more socially just world, while McLaren (1997) argues for "a revolutionary movement of educators informed by a principled ethics of compassion and social justice, a socialist ethos based on solidarity and social interdependence" (p. 1).

Given this revolutionary mandate, it is important to take critical pedagogy beyond the theory and consider its applicability. Shor does this in his 1987 anthology of essays *Freire for the Classroom*, recounting the experiences of

critical pedagogues in North America. However, these essays are written by self-identified critical pedagogues, all of whom are successful in applying the pedagogy. There is no dissenting voice and scant evidence of struggle in applying the theory. More recent studies also examine the implementation of critical pedagogy, but the focus remains on self-identified critical pedagogues (Ainsa, 2011; Markovich, 2013; Yilmaz & Altinkurt, 2011).

Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa's 2005 study consisted of 17 teachers who identified as critical pedagogues. The study set out to examine the teachers' critical praxis and found that many of them struggled even to define critical pedagogy and thus also struggled in its classroom implementation. According to Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa (2005): "[teachers'] emancipatory intentions sometimes translated into oppressive practices" (p. 258). Based on these results, Breuing (2011) saw a need to further explore the critical praxis of self-identified critical pedagogues by investigating their definitions of critical pedagogy. Breuing also found that teachers responded with overlapping and contradictory definitions of critical pedagogy, and concluded that her attempt to universalize "truth" may contradict the possibility of a critical pedagogy that is "multiple, overlapping, and contested" (p. 20). Ultimately, Breuing seeks not to resolve the tensions between the varied definitions of critical pedagogy, but rather to acknowledge them and affirm the need for critical pedagogues to broaden their understandings of critical praxis. My study takes a step back to answer the question: how desirable and feasible is it for teachers to use the common themes from critical pedagogy?

In answering this question, I specifically examine the applicability of critical pedagogy to students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Freire (1970) wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to empower poor, illiterate, oppressed Brazilians, and teachers may be uncertain how to apply the theory to students from privileged backgrounds. Most critical pedagogy applies the theory to students in marginalized positions, such as immigrants and those from low socio-economic backgrounds, rather than to students in the oppressor group. The widespread study of critical pedagogy among marginalized students is unsurprising considering that underprivileged students suffer more from the oppression that critical pedagogy seeks to address.

Another example of a study applying critical pedagogy to marginalized students is Markovich's (2013) investigation of the scholastic achievement of students from a predominantly socio-economically disadvantaged group in Israel, the Mizrahim Jews, those of North African or Middle Eastern origin. According to Markovich, the graduation eligibility of Jewish Mizrahi students is less than 20% that of students of Ashkenazi (European or American) origin (p. 4). Markovich studied one secular Jewish high school, the Kedma School, which applies critical pedagogy with the aim of promoting a critical consciousness

among its students to empower them to achieve greater academic success. Now, 18 years after the school opened, the Mizrahi students are succeeding at rates higher than the national average with a 48% matriculation rate compared to the 41.4% national average and less than 10% in the neighbourhood surrounding the Kedma School (Markovich, 2013, p. 5).

Such studies examining the effectiveness of critical pedagogy among marginalized students help prove the value of critical pedagogy. But examining the perpetuation of oppression by looking only at the situation of the oppressed is to miss half the equation. Would it not be more effective to tackle oppression by also exposing students from privileged backgrounds to the ideas in critical pedagogy? Allen and Rossatto (2009) write: "Paying theoretical and practical attention to oppressor students must coincide with a new belief in the possibility that oppressor students can change and that their transformation is a major component of counterhegemonic projects" (p. 171). I undertake my research with the belief that engaging oppressor groups is an important part of achieving the goals of critical pedagogues, namely ending the reproduction of an unequal social order. I thus aim to understand the effectiveness of applying critical pedagogy among privileged students and teachers who have not been trained in critical pedagogy.

Methods

Because this research focuses on examining the applicability of critical pedagogy among privileged students and teachers who have not been trained in critical pedagogy, my study is based on teachers' lived experiences. My interview questions served as starting points for discussion. I avoided academic jargon in the interviews and based the conversations on teachers' experiences in the classroom. Taking a constructivist qualitative approach, I attempted to understand the teachers' experiences from their perspective (Costantino, 2008). Constructivist qualitative research emphasizes participant observation and interviewing such that I, as the researcher, tried to understand the perspective of the interviewee. Following the constructivist qualitative approach, I perceived my understanding as co-created with the participant through our interactions, and I trusted the participants' account of their experiences.

The following questions served as starting points for discussion with teachers:

1. Do you incorporate students' experiences into your teaching? If so, how?
2. How often do you teach your students while they learn as compared to students teaching their peers and teaching you?

3. In your teaching, to what extent do you openly acknowledge the political nature of education and the social and historical context that serves as a framework for the knowledge being taught?
4. Do you incorporate learning about social justice issues in your lessons? If so, how?
5. Would you like to add anything else about your teaching that is relevant to our discussion?

Teachers knew from the outset that the aim of my study was to get a sense of their experience with critical pedagogy so that I could understand the desirability and feasibility of the common themes in critical pedagogy.

I initially emailed 11 teachers all of whom I had contact with when I was a student, and all of whom I knew from personal experience or had heard to be excellent teachers for a variety of reasons. Two teachers did not respond, but the other nine were willing to participate. The nine teachers—four men and five women—were of a wide age range, from early 30s to 60s, and had anywhere from 5 to over 25 years of teaching experience. Teachers were of different ethnic backgrounds, including Asian, African, South American, Eastern and Western European. The teachers worked in various departments, from social science to humanities, science, and alternative education courses (smaller classes on a variety of subjects for students at risk of dropping out). I deliberately sought representation across disciplines by emailing teachers from different departments, but did not intentionally seek out any further diversity in choosing the participants. I believe, however, that having such diversity in age, ethnicity and teaching experience was valuable to broaden the perspectives represented in my research. This fortuitous outcome arose despite the fact that participants were selected based on convenience sampling. I approached teachers I believed would be willing to participate and my sample ultimately consisted of the teachers within that group who agreed to participate. There are some drawbacks to such an approach, which are discussed in the limitations section below.

All of the teachers interviewed work at the high school I attended in the suburbs of a large Canadian city. The school has an enrolment above 1,000 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011) and the average parent income is nearly $90,000 CAD (Fraser Institute, 2010), compared to the average personal income per capita in Ontario of $38,535 CAD (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2012). Interviews took place in May and June of 2012. The individual interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and one 75-minute group interview was conducted to follow-up on ideas and generate informal discussion between teachers. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for organic discussion. After transcribing the interviews, I organized the responses into the themes that emerged most strongly and that aligned with ideas in critical pedagogy.

Findings

The three themes that commonly arose in the interviews were 1) power and authority among students and teachers, 2) the political nature of education, and 3) teaching about social issues in the classroom.

As my principal form of analysis, I considered how the interviewees' responses aligned with the practices proposed in the critical pedagogy literature. Teachers signalled a positive response to the ideas from critical pedagogy if they already practiced or were interested in practicing critical pedagogy. This existing commitment or interest in critical pedagogy offered an indication of how desirable and feasible it was to use ideas from critical pedagogy among teachers who do not already subscribe to the theory while working with students largely from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds.

In my study, teachers were particularly enthusiastic about grounding their teaching in real-world social issues. In contrast, teachers' hesitation or opposition to the theory at times indicated either an unwillingness to move away from oppressive practices or a lack of knowledge about how to. I found this to be the case with sharing authority between students and teachers and making room for students to be experts in the classroom. At other times, teachers' opposition to the theory highlighted an area where critical pedagogy may develop, for instance, by focusing more on promoting critical thinking skills in students as a way to push for social change rather than being dogmatically revolutionary.

Limitations

These findings raise important issues in critical pedagogy that may resonate with teachers. However, there are several limitations to my study that must be acknowledged. The small sample cannot be said to represent the views of teachers more broadly. Moreover, the fact that participants were selected through convenience sampling based on who I believed would be willing to participate and who ultimately volunteered for the study may have introduced a systemic bias. As such, the results from this study may differ significantly from what would arise in discussion with a different group of teachers, and it may not tell us much about the entire population of teachers. Moreover, there was regrettably no observational component to my study. Future work to complement this study would involve classroom observation and a comparison with another field site. This could help shed light on discrepancies between how teachers articulate their beliefs and classroom practices.

Because of such limitations, the findings from my study cannot be extrapolated beyond these nine teachers. Yet, the themes raised in my discussions with teachers seem to go to the core of the issues that arise in applying critical

pedagogy, and as such will hopefully be of interest to a wider audience of scholars and teachers.

Analysis

When analyzing the content of the interviews, several themes emerged, including power and authority among students and teachers, the limits to student contributions in the classroom, the political nature of education, and social justice issues.

Power and Authority Among Students and Teachers

Many teachers mentioned the importance of student contributions in the classroom: one, Teacher A, going so far as to say, "In my class we have 31 teachers and 31 students." But a common challenge is how to negotiate the parameters for student and teacher contributions to classroom learning. In the interviews, teachers discussed the importance of relating course content to students' experiences and gave examples of how they try to encourage student participation. But, they narrowly defined the areas to which students could contribute, often limiting student contribution to shared social experiences and excluding students' personal experiences. These exercises can be valuable, but can also restrict students from fully immersing themselves in and benefiting from their education. For instance, Teacher A, a humanities and social science teacher, described a lesson in which he deconstructs race without explicitly tying in students' personal experiences. While he said many students find this lesson valuable, students stand to gain even more by using personal experience as a starting point for learning about concepts like the social construction of race.

Some teachers demonstrated more openness to students interacting with the curriculum in a direct and personal way. For example, Teacher B, a humanities teacher, explained that the best way to study a novel is by connecting it to personal experiences, and so he shares personal anecdotes with his students. When I asked why he shares his experiences with students, whether he means to encourage students to share their own stories or model how students can engage with the text, he responded:

> To me the humanity of the teaching experience is the bottom line…I see the literary text as secondary and…I see communication with my students as the primary objective, their humanity and their understanding of life. I see their understanding of the literary work or the fiction or non-fiction piece as a prop…The stories are not real, our experiences are.

This teacher believed that the students' experiences should be the basis of and the reason for classroom learning.

In contrast, Teacher C, a social science teacher, was vocal about the importance of exercising caution in integrating students' knowledge into classroom lessons. She insisted that the teacher is the authority and that students do not have sufficient knowledge to contribute to classroom learning. She offered the example of a student who read about Holocaust denial online and was convinced that the Holocaust never happened. In recounting this story, the teacher highlighted that students gather information from all types of sources and may not have the critical faculties or judgement to determine the validity of the information. This is why, she explained, it is paramount for teachers to discern what is true from what is not. This teacher also noted that although the social science courses she teaches lend themselves to integrating students' experiences, she does not encourage sharing personal experiences. She does, however, think about students' experiences, for instance she knows that students are increasingly facing mental health issues, so she teaches about mental health, but does not invite students to discuss their experiences, nor does she share her own experiences with students. She also reasoned that many students are private and do not want their peers or teachers to know personal information about them. This teacher's sensitivity to introverted, private students is important and goes some way to integrating students' experiences. But, she fails to consider that more direct and personal sharing may be a valuable part of learning for some and allow for classroom bonding. In asserting herself as the sole authority in the classroom, she ignores that students' understanding is a significant source of knowledge. Not all student ideas should be affirmed, some must be challenged, but excluding students from the process of knowledge creation in the classroom undermines their ability to learn. It is worth highlighting the distinction between challenging and excluding students' ideas: challenging students' ideas means engaging and working with them, whereas exclusion does not invite students to become personally involved in the learning process. Excluding students' knowledge from classroom learning restricts the possibility of a fuller, more profound education for both students and teachers.

Limiting the areas where students contribute to classroom learning can be appealing to teachers because it means their ideas are less often challenged, they are not forced to contend with opposing viewpoints and they can stick to a version of knowledge that they are comfortable and familiar with. Or, as is likely often the case, teachers may not know how to effectively incorporate students' contributions into classroom learning. This social science teacher rightly acknowledges that ultimately the teacher is in charge of the classroom, but students benefit from a space where they can contribute. hooks (1994) notes: "I'm not suggesting that I don't have more power [than my students]. And I'm not trying to say we're all equal here. I'm trying to say that we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context" (p. 153).

What Teacher C dwelt on that hooks does not are the areas in which students and teachers are not equal. Teachers have a more developed sense of judgement and critical faculties, but they should help impart these to students by engaging with students' experiences and ideas. The balance comes in respecting students as knowledge producers and expecting them to be accountable for their views.

hooks (1994) takes issue with teachers claiming their voice is the sole authority, and argues that students' voices should be affirmed. She says: "You can't deny that students have experiences and you can't deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful or whatever. Students have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages and cultures that give them a distinctive voice" (p. 88). But teachers in the study expressed misgivings about endlessly affirming students' ideas, coddling students and allowing incorrect notions to slip by.

In interviewing Teacher C about the knowledge students can bring to the classroom, her responses highlighted the value of a teachers' expert knowledge and skill, and the importance of teachers using their expertise to engage with students' knowledge rather than simply dismissing or seeking to replace it.

When I asked about the value of the knowledge students bring to the classroom, Teacher C responded: "Students don't have expertise yet. They're 16, they're 14, and their source is the Internet. [I can correct them] because of the education I have, they don't yet have that ability." I followed up by asking: "How would you respond to the idea that there are different types of knowledge that can be valuable? You have a strong academic background, and that is part of your expertise, but it may also be valuable to integrate a student's knowledge which would come from their parents, family, and culture." Teacher C answered: "I think that starts to get into opinion… you have to be objectively correct." She illustrated her point with an example of a student who researched domestic abuse on the Internet and concluded that men suffer more from domestic abuse than women.

This discussion brings to light a point that is not often brought to the fore in critical pedagogy: students' beliefs sometimes need to be corrected because they are outright wrong. In such cases, teachers must still engage with students' knowledge, but without indicating to students that they are right. Correcting students need not amount to the banking method of education. Rather, teachers should call on students to contribute their experiences so that teachers can critically engage with students' ideas. In turn, teachers should invite students to critically engage with the ideas presented to them so that students can incorporate what they are being taught into their understanding of the world.

This conversation also raises questions about how different teachers understand knowledge as compared to my understanding of knowledge and the

understanding of knowledge in critical pedagogy. The gap here is that critical pedagogy considers students' experiences a valuable form of knowledge whereas this teacher sees them as subjective opinions. Critical pedagogy does not dispute the subjective dimension, but argues that such experiences (or knowledge) must be engaged for students to learn in a meaningful way.

Exploring the Limits to Student Contributions in the Classroom:
The Importance of Engaging Students' Questions

How do we establish parameters so that student contributions to classroom learning are productive? What knowledge and skills can high school students contribute to the classroom? While critical pedagogues emphasize students' knowledge based on their lived experiences, teachers often raise the point that students lack knowledge in the areas prescribed by the curriculum. And the teachers are right in many cases. But, there is nevertheless room for students to contribute to classroom learning in every discipline if teachers invite students to ask questions and if teachers are willing to let these questions have power in guiding classroom discussions. My conversations with teachers revealed that this is a difficult task, particularly in disciplines that are more remote from students' daily experiences.

Teacher D, who teaches both sciences and humanities, points to a disciplinary divide. In his experience, students are not prepared to make substantial contributions in science classes due to a lack of knowledge and skills. But he noted that students are better able to contribute in humanities courses: "The skills students have in language […and humanities courses] are higher order than their skills in science courses. This is because students have seen a lot of movies, read a lot of books, and this input is different from their daily experience with science and math." This teacher points out that subject areas dominated by facts that are produced at a distance from students' lived experiences are often less accessible to students.

He has found, however, that a lack of knowledge and skills in an area does not exclude the possibility of meaningful student engagement. Learning in such an area should build off of students' existing knowledge. Students can even direct such lessons by asking questions. Teacher D offers an example of a science lesson where students did not have enough substantive knowledge to make significant contributions to classroom learning, but one student asked: "How do we know there was a Big Bang?" This teacher wrote the question on the board and answered it rather than proceeding with the lesson as he had planned. This example demonstrates that there is space for critical pedagogy in the sciences, especially if students' questions are encouraged and if teachers make room by allowing their understanding of scientific concepts to be disrupted.

Teacher E, a social science teacher, takes student-driven learning a step further by inviting students to design guiding unit questions. This is a worthwhile initiative to engage students to contribute to classroom learning. But without reflection or training in an area like critical pedagogy, it can be difficult for teachers to develop strategies for integrating student knowledge and identifying areas where students can be authorities. Encouraging genuine questioning and making space to build on students' knowledge allows both students and teachers to hold power in the classroom. The next theme considers how teachers use their power as authorities in the classroom to frame lessons and teach with a certain political end in mind.

The Political Nature of Education

Few teachers seemed prepared to accept the idea from critical pedagogy that the primary purpose of education is to transform our society into one that is more socially just. In discussions about the revolutionary nature of critical pedagogy, Teachers B and C expressed misgivings about their role in using education as a tool for social justice. Three teachers strongly agreed with the importance of talking about the political nature of knowledge. But the six others seemed uneasy using terms like power, privilege, or politics and shifted to discussing critical thinking.

In each interview, I brought up the notion of education as a political tool for maintaining the status quo and offered the example of a history teacher who only discussed the history of western accomplishments. I explained this legitimizes a Eurocentric culture and keeps the history of students from other backgrounds at the margins. Teacher B responded: "You can take this line of thinking to different extremes; [for instance,] I could right away expect that someone has an agenda against the white establishment." This teacher preferred to teach formal and informal logic to "give students the intellectual tools of reasoning to argue." Nearly all the teachers expressed a preference for teaching critical thinking skills so that students can learn to question issues in society as well as the knowledge taught in the mainstream curriculum.

There seemed to be a generational difference in teachers' views about the political nature of education. Younger teachers seemed more at ease talking about the political nature of education, perhaps reflecting the fact that in recent years the curriculum has more of a critical bent. Teacher F, a science teacher in her early thirties stated: "I try to explain this [what I am teaching] is a science and not all sciences…our curriculum is based a lot on Europe and North America, but there are spaces to talk about things…like Aboriginal medicinal culture." Teacher A, who had prior exposure to ideas from critical pedagogy comments: "We are studying a very particular history and a very particular curriculum, and it is the curriculum of the white male and for the most part Anglo-Saxon, so that's why I

ask the kids to ask very important questions: who is represented in the history text and who is not represented and why?" Notably, as the teacher with the most exposure to critical pedagogy, Teacher A tended to speak from a theoretical perspective rather than offering concrete examples of adopting a critical lens in his teaching. This suggests there may be a gap between theory and practice. In this case, the gap may be attributed to the teacher's difficulty communicating his teaching practices, but it is nonetheless important to explore the challenges of trying to put elements of critical pedagogy into practice.

Some teachers said the curriculum has a critical lens built in, for instance, learning about conflict theory or talking about left-wing and right-wing biases in the news in social science classes. But, these teachers conveyed that while they try to teach students to look at social issues with a critical eye, that critical eye is rarely turned toward course content. Teacher G, a humanities teacher, said she is open to discussion if students ask, "Why are we learning this?" but she does not build such questions into her lessons. These teachers' efforts are reformative in that they are a system maintenance type of change, rather than opening up a space for transformative, or revolutionary, change. Reformative efforts are limited in their objective to change only certain aspects of society, while a transformative approach aims to achieve far-reaching social change. Thus, from a critical pedagogical perspective, while this teacher's intentions may be positive, these efforts do not go far enough toward tackling the power structure perpetuated through the education system.

At the other end of the spectrum, some teachers disagreed with the notion that teachers can or should attempt to question existing power structures. The two teachers with this view have both been teaching for over twenty years. They listed a number of reasons why they do not tackle the political nature of education in their classes. Teacher D stated that there is not a lot of time to discuss the political nature of education because science teachers are "driven to teach factual knowledge." That being said, Teacher D does at times adopt a critical lens; for instance, while teaching about how to generate electricity, he asked his students to consider why regulations are changing in the fuel industry and who is controlling these regulations. But he also questioned whether students are ready to engage with these critical questions because "it doesn't always get them to be their most creative." He wondered if students have the political tools or the "fire in their bellies" to engage with these critical questions. This relates to the issue of class as these students come from relatively privileged positions and thus, have no impetus to question the status quo since they generally benefit from it.

Teacher D sums up what seems to be a shared sentiment: "Perhaps [the students] haven't had a political awakening, and I don't see myself in a position to wake them up. But I do try to make them think on both sides of an issue." I think this insight, which comes from a less ideological stance and puts more of an

emphasis on critical thought, is worthwhile for critical pedagogues to consider because it allows both teachers and students to engage with the theory and put the most useful parts into practice.

Social justice issues

It is also worth asking why many students at this high school have not yet had a political awakening. The vast majority of students at the high school in this study are from privileged socio-economic backgrounds. The school is also very culturally diverse. While some students are likely to have experienced discrimination, many students have not experienced serious social marginalization. Because they have not had this experience of social exclusion, they may lack the experiences that drive the desire for a critical education. Students often need exposure to why the status quo is problematic before they may be compelled to question it or push for change.

As such, for privileged students an important part of a critical education is learning about marginalization and oppression in their own communities and around the world, for instance poverty, slave labour, and violent conflict. All the teachers except Teacher A described the current curriculum as having a strong basis in learning about social issues. Teacher H explained that he previously taught students in a low-income area where it was necessary to focus on issues relevant to students' lives to keep their attention. Now teaching in a school with more affluent students, he still focuses on social issues to make lessons more interesting and because it keeps students grounded. Several teachers noted that discussion about social issues often organically becomes part of the lesson because of student interest in what is going on in the world. Only Teacher A expressed the belief that the curriculum does not facilitate learning about social issues. He stated:

> The curriculum is set up in such a way that doesn't allow us to talk about these things [as in social issues like poverty, sexism, racism]. And that's where you come in as a teacher. It doesn't mean you have to completely throw the curriculum... But if I can show the kids how the curriculum is written, or that some things that are left out, you are definitely talking about social justice.

In contrast to teachers' reluctance to the idea of being revolutionary educators, most seemed comfortable and enthusiastic discussing social issues in their classes. They felt less like ideological crusaders and more as though they were educators informing their students about an issue and encouraging them to develop the intellectual tools to have an informed perspective.

Teacher H leads alternative education classes, which are smaller classes on a variety of subjects for the small, but significant number of students at risk of dropping out of school. He explained that students in alternative education, unlike

the majority of students in mainstream classes at the school, are marginalized and this marginalization is perpetuated by the education system. For many students, their lack of social power and privilege leaves them at the bottom of the classroom heap, and they get caught in a cycle that reproduces the social order with them at the bottom. These students lack social power often both in their socio-economic status and in their difficulty succeeding academically. When I interviewed Teacher H, he had to answer my questions twice—once in reference to students in mainstream classes and again to describe the situation in alternative education classes. The disparity in his answers highlights the considerable differences in applying critical pedagogy among students from high and low socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, Teacher H describes how he takes a different approach to encourage students in his mainstream and alternative education classes to participate. In mainstream classrooms, he finds students are driven by a desire to get high marks, whereas in alternative education classes, marks are not a currency that has value to the students, but students tend to be motivated if they have a good relationship with their teacher.

A final point worth noting is teachers' assessment of their own socio-political positions. Even though not every teacher thought about the political dimension of education in the classroom, they were nonetheless all concerned about the influence of politics on their role as teachers. Teachers were concerned about who determines the purpose of education and whether the classroom is co-opted by authorities with a particular agenda. Teachers pointed out that in recent years, raising standardized test scores has become a primary goal in the education system. The introduction of grading based on rubrics had students become more focused on getting high grades rather than on the learning process, being creative, or acquiring skills. Standardized tests incentivize teachers to focus on test scores rather than on educational experience. Frustrated, Teacher I said:

> When you ask 'what is the most important purpose of an education system' the answer changes every few years…[is it] graduation rates, or are we [more concerned about] taking care of the whole child and providing them with counselling [or are we focusing on] teaching them to read? It can be whatever we want it to be and politicians know that so they turn it into whatever they want it to be.

Interestingly, this acute awareness of the role that politics plays in shaping the education system does not often extend to teachers thinking about how politics shapes what is taught in the classroom and how they reproduce a set of political beliefs in their classrooms. This may also relate to the notion of privilege. When teachers are in positions of privilege, they do not seem to be aware of their own power perhaps because people tend to be aware of power differentials only when they are subject to someone else's power. Hence, the challenge in introducing privileged students to a critical education.

Conclusion

In this study, I tried to get a sense of the practical usefulness of the theory of critical pedagogy, but throughout the study and in writing this paper I had reservations about excessive theorizing. As Shor correctly points out: "teachers are more interested in practice than in theory" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 2) and given the applied nature of the teaching profession, it is important that future research focuses on what is directly useful to teachers. In my own research when I did a group interview, I witnessed teachers' appreciation for the opportunity to discuss teaching practices with their peers. Teachers need more opportunities to reflect on their practice and engage in discussions with other teachers about their successes and failures. Such discussions can be enriched by drawing on critical pedagogy.

I suggest that teachers may benefit from discussion groups led by a teacher who is familiar with critical pedagogy. It would be particularly useful for teachers to discuss with others in their department, for teaching Grade 12 Physics is significantly different from Grade 9 English, and I found that although teachers had common experiences, some of the most creative practices seemed to be born from experience in a particular discipline. It is important to make room in the discussion for teachers who do not believe that education should be disruptive to the status quo or who are reluctant to discuss the political nature of education in the classroom. These teachers' views come from experience and whether they fall in line with critical pedagogy must be secondary to the fact that a dogmatic application of critical pedagogy undermines the theory's value.

Although the teachers in my study had little prior experience with critical pedagogy, they showed an intuitive awareness of some of the main principles, in particular the importance of rooting education in real-world social issues and discussing experiences of oppression in the classroom—whether the oppression of the students or of other people around the world. In fact, whether part of the curriculum, stemming from a teacher's personal interest, or brought forth by students, social justice issues seemed to feature prominently in science, social science, and humanities courses. In discussions about the roles of students and teachers in the classroom, most teachers described basing lessons on students' experience and including students' knowledge, but the vast majority of teachers were reluctant to include student contributions beyond a narrow set of parameters or a superficial depth. Teachers also seemed uncomfortable discussing what knowledge is taught in the mainstream curriculum, who benefits from the knowledge taught, and who is disadvantaged. Few teachers seemed prepared to encourage students to transform the status quo, revealing that they are not ready or do not currently have the tools to embrace the central goal of critical pedagogy and use education as a tool for social justice.

Instead, many teachers have their own philosophies on education, whether it is helping students see beauty in the world or fostering the opportunity to share and nurture our humanity. None of the philosophies teachers described were entirely at odds with the aims of critical pedagogy to help students become aware of themselves as political, social, and historical beings; question mainstream education that perpetuates the status quo; and work toward creating a more socially just society. But, none of their philosophies go far toward pushing for revolutionary social change either. However, the more appropriate role for teachers is to awaken students' minds by teaching them critical thought rather than persuading them of the need for revolution. Granted, these two may go hand in hand—exposing students to ideas about privilege and disadvantage may compel them to believe there is a need for social change—but it should be up to students to wrestle with questions about how to achieve such change.

In the future, I am interested in re-evaluating the teachers' perspectives after they engage in more critical reflection in discussion groups with their peers either by including a teacher who is sensitized to critical pedagogy or by bringing critical pedagogy literature into the group. Such an approach respects the value of teachers' experiences while introducing the possibility that teachers can broaden, enrich, and disrupt their own practice by incorporating new ideas.

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Author

Leanna Katz is currently working on her J.D. at the University of Toronto. She is a recent graduate of the Arts and Science Program at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Her research interests include pedagogy, immigration and refugee issues, and mental health as well as investigating the legal dimensions of these areas.