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ABSTRACT

This study documented the critical practices of four bilingual elementary teachers through ethnographic methods. The research questions focused on their definitions of critical pedagogy and on the influence of the teachers' biographies and school environment on their practices. Data collection at two California Bay Area schools included individual interviews with the teachers, the school leaders, and the students, as well as weekly observations of the schools and classrooms. The multiple case study analysis unveiled practices centered on: respect for the students' families and language; teaching to embrace difference; a curriculum inclusive of the students' life experiences; the planning of self-directed learning experiences; and the inclusion of student choice. The school environment influenced the implementation of critical pedagogy in positive and negative ways. Although the leadership at these liberal schools encouraged critical practices, the lack of resources and time to plan consumed the teachers' energy. (Contains 48 references.) (Author/SM)

Is It a Dream? Critical Pedagogy In Bilingual, Elementary Classrooms

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Abstract

Teachers' work conditions increasingly conspire to eliminate planning time and curriculum design. Is it still possible to teach critically in Califonia's urban public schools? This study documented the critical practices of four bilingual elementary teachers through ethnographic methods. The research questions focused on their definitions of critical pedagogy, and on the influence of the teachers' biographies and school environment on their practices. Data collection at the two Bay Area schools included individual interviews with the teachers, the school leadership and the students; and weekly observations of the schools and classrooms. The multiple case study analysis unveiled practices centered on: respect for the students' families and language, teaching to embrace difference, a curriculum inclusive of the students' life experiences, the planning of self-directed learning experiences, and the inclusion of student choice. The school environment influenced the implementation of critical pedagogy in positive and negative ways: although the leadership at these liberal schools encouraged critical practices, the lack of resources and time to plan consumed the teachers' energy.

Is It a Dream? Critical Pedagogy In Bilingual, Elementary Classrooms

> ...the students don't see themselves constructed intellectually and emotionally by the 'system' and its machinery. It sometimes feels to me like we are living in two different worlds, theirs blithely ignoring hegemony and mine ferociously foregrounding it....Perhaps everyday life is too complex for critical theory to explain it or for critical pedagogy to transform it. (Shor, 1996, p. 103).

Ambivalence is a familiar feeling for many of the teachers who, like me, at some point of their careers have attempted to flesh out Freire's vision of a compassionate, democratic and inclusive practice. Encouraging students to get involved in the daily decision-making takes a lot of energy and seems unpractical to some teachers. Coaxing dissent and criticism out into the open takes skill and courage. And, as some of us have discovered, not every student (or parent) welcomes deviations from the familiar and traditional.

Outside of the classroom, the conditions in which teachers work conspire to eliminate planning time and the ability to design the curriculum (Ohanian, 1999). In post-227 California, standardized test results and state-prescribed standards are now used to rate schools and students (Garcia, 2000; Sacks, 1999), and bilingual education is no longer offered in many districts (García, Curry Rodríguez, Paredes, Pazmiño, & Stritikus, 1999).

This article will discuss whether it is possible to teach critically within a school system where teachers' work is increasingly regulated. It is based on a study which documented: a) the critical classroom practices of four Spanish Bilingual teachers b) their definitions of critical pedagogy, and c) the way in which their biographies and school environment influenced their practice.

Teacher education literature of the past three decades offers many studies on elementary teachers fossilized in instructional practices reflecting the authoritarian (Sarason, 1990) power structures of their work environment. While most teachers are aware of the need for equity and justice in our educational system, many continue to internalize criticism better directed at the system constraining their efforts (McLaren & Tadeu Da Silva, 1993). The teachings of Freire (1993) in particular have spawned a generation of educators who believe in critical pedagogy as an educational philosophy capable of reversing this trend.

The Role of Teacher Beliefs

Most teachers base their instructional practices on knowledge or beliefs they bring to the profession or develop as a result of practice (Lortie, 1975). Not only do beliefs strongly affect teachers' behaviors (Goodman, 1988; Tabachnick and Zeichner, 1984), the beliefs teachers hold influence the structure and quality of their relationships with the students, colleagues and other adults in their work environments (Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1991).

Goodson (1992) and Knowles (1992) have demonstrated how the connections between the teachers' beliefs and life histories should be researched in order to understand their teaching practices. The socio-economic context in a community can also shape inner city teachers' beliefs (Anyon, 1997). For these reasons, the research explored each teacher's conception of critical pedagogy from an individual and social perspective.

Freire (1989) contrasts "authoritarian' teachers who choose to retain the power to make most classroom decisions with "democratic" teachers who include their students in the decision-making in his case for a critical pedagogy. Power management is indeed one of teachers' primary concerns and a performance assessment criterion (Jones, 1996). Although Richardson (1996)

points out how idealist and behaviorist views have dominated this field for most of the century, a search conducted for this review showed an increase in literature being devoted to student-centered practices (García-González, 1999). Even if these practices increase student choice and participation, do they encourage students to question accepted truths?

Implementing Critical Beliefs

Freire proved that an increase the participation of marginalized populations in educational policy-making can be achieved through the introduction of an active and critical method, a change in the curriculum, and the use of techniques facilitating a connection between the student's reality and larger societal issues (1993), and other critical theorists have agreed (Apple 1979; Giroux,1988; Shor 1992). Yet more than twenty years after its appearance, critical pedagogy remains outside of mainstream teacher education. Critics have questioned its white, middle class orientation (Buckingham 1991; Orner 1992); the students' presumed freedom to adopt a critical discourse (Buckingham, 1991; Rode, 1995); the assumption that others are in need of empowerment (Johanesson, 1992); and the lack of a commitment to a women's perspective (Ellsworth 1989; hooks 1994, Luke 1992).

Another important obstacle in the implementation of critical pedagogy is the lack of clear, specific guidelines for practitioners (Gore, 1992). Freire avoided specific recommendations in his concern about the decontextualized, route application of his principles (McLaren, 1993), One of the best critiques of this stance was issued by Facundo (1998). Her provocative analysis of Freire's work and life is important to educators in light of the years she and others spent implementing his teachings in the US and Puerto Rico. Facundo mentions the difficulties faced by organizers attempting to interpret Freire's writings, the limitations in the

dualism present in his work, and the lack of accountability that may result from his intentional vagueness.

Judging by the available literature, the practice of critical pedagogy presents several problems to interested educators. Not only do teachers need to be willing to read and understand literature written for an academic public, those searching for illustrations detailed enough to enable reproduction will encounter few models (Facundo, 1998; Gore, 1992). This review uncovered few such examples, published mostly as anthologies (Edelsky (1999); Fredrickson 1995; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Weiler & Mitchell, 1992; Wink, 1997).

The result of a search for studies portraying practices shaped by the students' needs and including a degree of explicitness enabling replication, is in itself an example of diversity in the interpretation of Freire's work: Balderas (1995), Moreno (1990), Pérez (1994), Pruyn (1994), Sylvester (1994), Sugishita (1995), Zaragoza & Scardina (1998).

The practices of the elementary level teachers in this study also had some elements in common: the presence of dialogue and critical reflection, problem-posing as a means to encourage critical analysis, inclusion and validation of student experiences, democratic formats for decision making, social action as a response to inequity, and the role of teacher as facilitator These elements were used in the analysis of the participants' practices.

Methods

Data collection methods taken from ethnographic inquiry enabled in-depth exploration of the participants' beliefs, biographies, school environment, and practices (Fetterman, 1989). This desire to describe the work of the participants was fueled by the longstanding marginalization of teachers' voices in critical literature. In this sense the study follows the spirit of critical

ethnography, since it seeks to understand not whether or not the participants are marginalized, but how are they "positioned in material and symbolic relations, how do they participate in these relations, and how can our understanding work toward the restructuring of these relations" (Quantz, 1992, p. 468).

My dual status as teacher and researcher within the school district afforded certain advantages (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). I gained access to the schools and the teachers' trust without major difficulties. The two schools, known as "magnets" for progressive educators, were located within a working class, overwhelmingly Latino community, Estrada. Their student population, however, differed considerably. Rogelio Silva is a large school with six hundred children, most of whom are immigrant and poor. Loma Linda Alternative is half of Rogelio's size, with a mostly White, middle class student body.

The school staffs nominated colleagues who had been exposed to Freire's work in some form (readings, workshops, conferences), and intended to practice critical pedagogy during the time of the study (see Table 1). Each teacher completed three interviews and a total of approximately 19 hours of weekly classroom observations. Document analysis, interviews with school leaders and staff, and school-wide observations were also conducted before and after the eight-week intensive classroom observation period.

The teachers' practices were not compared to the models described in the few works aimed at elementary critical practitioners. Rather, each teacher's conception of this pedagogy, together with elements taken from Freire's work, constituted the foundation from which their classroom practices were studied (Table 2).

Connections between each of the teachers' beliefs and life histories were determined through the use of a matrix based on the work of Goodson (1992) and Knowles (1992). As an example, Table 3 shows a matrix with data from the practices of one participant.

Inspired by Anyon's (1997) study showing a community's socio-economic context as an agent shaping inner city teachers' beliefs, a list of factors mentioned by the teachers as influences on critical practice was generated. This list was compared to the researcher's notes from the school observations and staff interviews, and any additional factors observed but not mentioned by the participants were included in the final matrix (Table 4).

Findings

The findings are organized around the study's four research questions:

1. How have the teachers' biographies influenced their adoption of critical pedagogy?

Coursework introducing critical philosophy, and working in strongly oppressive or supportive workplaces enabled the participants to identify some of their core beliefs as "critical." For two of the teachers, staff development of Freire's writings was also a strong influence. The teachers' accounts of membership in an oppressed group (Gay, immigrant leaving dictatorship, or Latino in the US) later influenced their view of society as a place of unequal opportunities for many of their students.

2. How did the teachers define critical pedagogy?

Certain themes or biographical connections resonated within the bilingual teachers' definitions of critical pedagogy, most of whom saw a direct connection between their commitment to language and cultural maintenance and a critical perspective. All participants

mentioned communicating awareness of identity, race and culture, teaching through the students' experiences and languages, and incorporating student-centered structures as part of their definition. Less frequently mentioned were non-authoritarian and caring practices, self-reflection, and the importance of including student choice throughout the day.

3. In what ways did they choose to implement critical pedagogy in their classrooms?

A democratic atmosphere was developed in different ways. At Silva, the teachers planned small parts of the curriculum together with their students. At Loma Linda, the participants actively encouraged the students' feedback by calling on both genders, making sure everybody had a turn, and in the intermediate grades, including student reflection and evaluation in most lessons.

Changes in the curriculum occurred in two major forms. An emphasis on teaching reading and writing through the students' personal narratives and informal discussions was observed in most classrooms, as a way to include the students' experiences in the curriculum. All but one of the teachers taught about Latinos as an ethnic group.

There was, however, ambivalence among two of the teachers regarding the ability of a critical pedagogue to instill lasting change in the students' thinking. One teacher felt the work conditions in the profession inhibited this capacity, while another described the difficulties he experienced balancing student choice and accountability: "How do you hand over that power and really feel free to kick back...There's also the pressure, hey you gotta teach multiplication, division..." (IN 8/25, 4).

4. In what ways did the school environment influence its practice?

Structural influences were the strongest factor influencing the practice of critical pedagogy at both schools. Perhaps the most mentioned factors were the quality of the leadership and affective influences. Not only were principals at both schools strongly supportive of language maintenance and culturally relevant teaching, their support of a collegial atmosphere, use of consensus decision-making, inclusion of teachers' voices and sharing of critical methods and techniques was mentioned by the teachers and other staff members as factors encouraging critical practices in the classroom.

Most of the participants also mentioned affective influences such as teacher satisfaction with the school as a workplace, and the feeling of teacher empowerment experienced by some of the staff.

The schools encouraged the practice of critical pedagogy through their common liberal views, and the involvement of their parents and staff in community issues. Loma Linda, for example, raised funds to defeat an anti-bilingual initiative on the ballot, while Rogelio Silva's parents accompanied their children to a day-long celebration of bilingualism and cultural pride.

A factor hindering its practice at both schools was the lack of time to plan. None of the teachers had prep time. At the time of the study, the state had eliminated the eight allotted staff development days and increased its expectations of teachers and students (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2000), and the class-size reduction program had brought in more inexperienced teachers to mentor (Ross, 1999). At Rogelio Silva in particular, the lack of resources and materials, and the difficulties associated with consensus decision-making at a large school were mentioned as negative influences.

Is It a Dream?

In the beginning, the teachers expected to compare their own conceptions of critical pedagogy against a standard they thought I held through my role as a researcher. As they began to anticipate our sessions with reflections and more articulated beliefs, this body of knowledge became a platform from which they examined the difficulty—some would say contradiction—of building a democratic classroom community within a school system based on the perpetuation of social inequalities. While three of the participants mentioned the classroom as a starting point for social action, one disagreed. She stated that the schooling system makes it very difficult to avoid communicating injustices and oppression, and mentioned social movements as the real spark for social action.

The relationship between good and critical teaching appeared often in our dialogues. For each of the participants, the difference lied, respectively, in the students' freedom to question and make choices, on the use of anti-authoritarian processes, on the exchange of knowledge between home and school, or on the development of a healthy language and cultural identity.

The study brought light into the specific processes, routines, and curriculum which practitioners may use to build a democratic learning community at the elementary level. Material and administrative support however, remains of critical importance.

The fact that Freire developed his method in a rural environment with few conveniences should not lead us to assume that the implementation of critical practice can take place in urban schools increasingly regulated by the state and lacking, according to the four participants, planning time, collegial support and teaching resources.

Teachers interested in developing a democratic classroom at a prospective school may first want to evaluate the leadership's interest in critical pedagogy or assess the strength of teacher networks, in view of the important role they played at the two schools in this study.

These findings also validate teacher demands for staff development on the goals and purposes of schooling.

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Table 1

The Sample

Participant	Ariana	Ben	Dolores	Ricardo (Ché)
Age	Late thirties	Late thirties	Early forties	Late twenties
Ethnicity	White	White	Latina	Latino
Present Assignment	Spanish immersion teacher, 2nd grade	Spanish immersion teacher, 4/5th	Spanish Bilingual Teacher, K-2nd	Spanish Bilingual Teacher, 3-5th
Teaches at	Loma Linda	Loma Linda	Rogelio Silva	Rogelio Silva
Years of Teaching Experience	2 years as aide 7 years as a teacher	1 year as aide 11 years as a teacher	13 years as a teacher	5 years as a teacher

Table 2

Dolores' Critical Practices During the Observation Period

Freire	Dolores' Classroom Practice	Observed	Comments
Changing the program content of education (1993, p. 45)	*Integrated theme teaching (IN 8/25, 2)*	10/8 10/16 10/22 10/29	Social Studies Language arts
	Having the students bring in their life experience. (IN 8/25, 2)	Yes 9/10	Daily news Community circle Math
Dialogical, criticism-stimulating method (1993, p. 45)	*Validating what other people already know. (IN 12/11, 1)*	10/8 10/9	Columbus lesson Homework
	Plans some of the curriculum with the students.	9/17 10/1	Plan do and review
Use of techniques for 'unveiling' the material (1987, p.13)	Use the students' writing to teach grammar and syntax (1987, p. 27)	9/10 9/17 9/24 10/1	Through writer's workshop, guided writing, interactive journals
	Start from concreteness, from common sense, to reach an understanding of reality (1987, p. 106)	9/17	Writer's workshop list of ideas.
Fight against sexism, fight against racism (1997, pp. 157-159)	Examines sexist play and expressions with her students	No	
	Teaches about the students' ethnic group	10/16 10/22	Indigenous people
Teacher develops a democratic atmosphere in the classroom (1987, p. 90)	Teacher assumes the necessary authority without becoming authoritarian (1987, p. 91)	Yes	Students respected Dolores but were not antagonistic.

Table 2

Dolores' Critical Practices During the Observation Period (continued)

Freire	Dolores' Classroom Practice	Observed	Comments
Teacher develops a democratic atmosphere in the classroom. (1987, p. 90)	*Respect for the parents and the students.(IN 8/25, 2)*	*Yes*	No negative comments, disrespect not observed.
	Parents come into her class and express their need.s (IN 9/15, 10)	9/24 10/8 10/22	
	Creates a space for shy or quiet students to express themselves (IN 9/15, 16-17)	9/17	
	Teacher as a director of the process (1987, p. 46)	9/17 10/1 10/16 10/29	Plan do and Review, other lessons
Challenge the students to organize themselves to get power (1987, p. 34)	Engages in social action with the students.	No	But starting to get involved in a project.

Note. Statements in *italics* were made by Dolores. Statements without a citation are my observations of critical practices not mentioned by Dolores. Yes denotes instances too numerous to cite here.

Table 3

Impact of Dolores' Biography on her Teaching

Major components of teacher role identity	**As evidenced by**	**Attitudes, curriculum choices, strategies**
Family		
Traditional, strict upbringing		Her attention gravitates to those who demand it in a negative way. (IN 9/15, 15) Frustrated with undefined roles. (IN 9/15, 12)
Ecuadorian, not American (even though she was US born).		Connection not made
Spoke Spanish only at home Parents didn't speak English		Wants parents to come into her class and express their needs. (IN 9/15, 10)
Grew up in a Latino neighborhood		Community ties are important. (IN 9/15, 20-21)
Became a mother		Children can teach their parents. (IN 12/11, 2)
Teachers and school		
Catholic school, no bilingual education		Reaching kids in their native language. (IN 9/15, 9)
English and drama teacher		Treating the students in a human way. (IN 9/15, 1) "A model of what a teacher could be" (IN 9/15, 1).
Interested in social science		Having the kids share their lives in class; community circle. (OB)
Prior teaching experience		
Big school in LA		Reaching kids in their native language. (IN 9/15, 9) Respect for the parents and students. (IN 8/25, 2)
Competition between Bilingual and English-only Programs		Important to work with a group of colleagues who can challenge and support each other. (IN 9/15, 12)
Experience with critical pedagogy		
Racism in Tracy, CA		Curriculum reinforces Latino identity. (OB 10/8, 1; OB 10/16, 2; OB 10/22, 1; OB 10/29, 1)
Institute with Tsutnabb-Kangas		"This is something I believe and this is something I feel like I'm doing." (IN 8/25, 1)

Note. OB = observation. This code without a date denotes instances too numerous to cite here.

Table 4

Influences of the School Environment as Mentioned by the Staff

	Type of Influence	Loma Linda	Rogelio Silva
Structural Influences	Structures for conflict resolution		✖
	There's listening	❑	
	People have a voice	❑	❑ ✖
	Decision-making by consensus	❑	❑ ✖
	Vision statement		❑
	Collegial atmosphere	❑	❑
	Principal sought teacher backing of her decisions		❑
	Head teacher structure	❑	n/a
	Leadership	❑	❑
	Shared critical methods and techniques	❑	❑
	Principle of self-determination		❑
Material Influences	Time to plan	✖	✖
	Resources and materials		✖
	The school is safe	❑	
Role-oriented influences	Helped to identify beliefs as critical pedagogy		❑
	Training ground		❑
Political influences	A very liberal school	❑	❑
	Participated as organizer		❑
	School works on community causes	❑	❑
Affective Influences	The children feel good about themselves	❑	
	The children feel good about their learning	❑	
	Empowered teachers	❑	❑
	A place where I feel like coming to work	❑	❑
No category	Some staff exposed to coursework, professional development	❑	❑
No category	Some staff exposed to coursework, professional development	❑	❑
No category	Level of awareness among parents	❑	

Note. ❑ = positive ✖ = negative (lack) = not mentioned

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CLEARINGHOUSE ON TEACHING
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October 28, 1999

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Should you have further questions, please contact me at 1-800-822-9229; or E-mail: balbert@aacte.org.

Sincerely,

B. L. Albert

Brinda L. Albert
Acquisitions Outreach Coordinator

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