

The Practical Critical Educator

**Critical Inquiry and
Educational Practice**

Edited by
Karyn Cooper
and Robert White

 Springer

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DEDICATION

To
Jamilla Arindell, Cindy Bird,
Dianne Riehl, Suzanne Thomson,
and Robert White
who formed the
Critical partnership that was the inspiration for this book -
and to Dr. Sandra Monteath for her unflinching support

- Karyn

and

To
Robert, Alexander, Elizabeth, Callie
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for helping to teach me throughout the years.
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Thank you.

- Robert

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FOREWORD

I am delighted to have the opportunity to write this foreword for Karyn Cooper's and Robert White's splendid and compelling edited text on *The Practical Critical Educator*.

Critical practice in education is grounded in two bodies of thought and action: *critical theory* and *critical pedagogy*. Drawing on classical Marxism and its articulation of how oppression and injustice arose through capitalism's economic exploitation of labour, *critical theories* of society took a cultural turn in the writings of Adorno and Horkheimer, European Jewish refugees who fled to America, where they articulated how the power relations and oppressive forces of capitalism expressed themselves in the alienating symbolic forces of culture, music and art.

When booming demographics and an economic surplus fuelled the student movement of the late 60s, and in to the 70s, in many Western nations, new forms of cultural Marxism were added to this body of critical theory, extending beside but also far beyond the classical Marxist preoccupations with economic equalities of social class. British writers, such as the articulate and elegant cultural Marxist Raymond Williams, revived and refined the "lost" work of Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci from the 1920s, and his concern with the influence of what he called hegemony – the force through which ruling classes could maintain existing structures of domination by defining, through language, media and culture, what was normal, natural, true, beautiful and defensible, and what was eccentric, unreasonable, or unworthy of serious consideration.

French sociologists, such as Louis Althusser argued that the modern state (and its educational system) had a degree of "relative autonomy" from the economic base of capital accumulation and exploitation, and could "act back" on it and modify it from time to time, yet it still supported the interests of this economy "in the last instance". British and French writers Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas debated whether the state served the interests of capital because of how privileged elites were recruited into top state positions, or whether this relationship was a structured inevitability irrespective of who occupied powerful state positions – since the state was always necessarily destined to serve the interests of capital. Another French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, in work of lasting educational impact, presented arguments and evidence that social class structures and inequalities were perpetuated from generation to generation not just because of sheer differences of *economic* capital, of income, property and wealth; but also because of differences of *cultural* capital – of people's differential access through the family, then through education, of what dominant groups counted as being the legitimate symbolic tools of culture, taste, distinction and discernment that subtly distinguished and demarcated powerful groups from powerless ones in capitalist societies.

In the 1970s, British sociologists of education such as M.F.D. Young drew on many of these cultural and critical theories, and combined them with studies of classroom interaction, as well as investigations into how social groups created

different kinds of knowledge together, to develop critical theories of classrooms, cultures, and curriculum in schools. The school curriculum, they argued, presumed and perpetuated elitist forms of cultural capital in valuing those forms of knowledge in which elites excelled – knowledge that was abstract, impersonal, hierarchically organized and separated from commonsense everyday life. Historians of education like Ivor Goodson in the United Kingdom and Barry Franklin in the United States subsequently provided empirical reinforcement for these claims by demonstrating that what counted as valid school subjects (chemistry, rather than astronomy, for example), what counted as valid content for school subjects (such as abstract and decontextualized laboratory experiments rather than studying the science of “common things”), and what counted as valid realizations of school knowledge (paper and pencil tests and arguments, rather than projects or performances), were the subject and the outcome of struggles between dominant and subordinate groups in society, and the kinds of knowledge and understanding that each of them valued. Weaken the boundaries between subjects, said curriculum theorist Basil Bernstein – soften the distinction between school knowledge and non-school knowledge – and you began to threaten the fundamental structures of power and control in society by challenging the privileged forms of knowledge in which dominant groups excelled.

In subtle and less subtle ways, critical theorists and their fellow travellers in education showed how schools “reproduced the social relations of production” in capitalist societies, perpetuating class inequalities and the long standing opposition between capital and labour. For some, this process was all encompassing and inescapable. Others, most notably Paul Willis, who authored a compelling critical ethnography of a dozen working ‘lads’ in the English Midlands, which documented their inarticulate and sometimes offensively expressed capacity to “see through” the inequalities of the secondary school experience that was inflicted upon them, pointed to the ability of working class students, (and later the teachers of such students) to become ‘resistant’ to educational oppression and exploitation.

Inspired and influenced by the work of the Europeans, North American writers like Michael Apple, Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux developed critical perspectives in education by showing how the curriculum-in-theory and the curriculum-in-everyday use were suffused with the ideological influences of capitalist societies, and how youth cultures and teachers could create pedagogies and practices of resistance in response to these ideological and hegemonic forces.

Lacking the research resources of more liberal European academic and government regimes, American critical theory in education was not strongly supported by an empirical research base. Apart from just a few exceptions of published critical ethnographies by Jean Anyon and others, arguments were developed largely at the level of theory itself or were occasionally connected to individual ethnographic studies of the authors’ doctoral students. This made a lot of the work in critical theory intellectually invigorating – but it also lent it a tendency to become disconnected from and insufficiently informed by the complex and mundane everyday realities of ordinary schools and their teachers.

The sometimes opaque and impenetrable language of critical educational theory often seemed to be addressed more to intellectual peers and associates, than to the practical needs and discourse of educators in schools. Like in most intellectual communities, bibliographies contained a high degree of self-referencing of fellow

critical theorists, with insufficient acknowledgements of related work elsewhere. Many analyses seemed susceptible to the 'left sectarianism of intellectual as well as political certainty and superiority which Paulo Freire attributed to much critical theory and which had driven critical change theorist Seymour Sarason out of the American Socialist Workers Party in his early adulthood, long before critical theory itself had been invented. Some of the claims of critical theory did seem overextended – as when theorists interpreted every act of teacher skepticism or pupil misbehavior as resistance to capitalist domination, for example.

Over time, critical educational theory addressed many of these shortcomings. As it matured, the writing of its most senior proponents became increasingly accessible. Postmodernism and post-structuralism also lent critical theory greater openness and complexity, acknowledging other significant sources of inequality and injustice as well as social class – especially race, gender, sexual orientation and disability.

In the 1980s and 90s, a number of critical educational theorists in the areas of language and policy discourse, as well as action research further broadened the understanding of power imbalances in education by drawing on the critical theory of German sociologist Jürgen Habermas who explained how social action was guided by three different kinds of interest – *technical interests* directed at improving efficiency (as in the school effectiveness movement), *human or communicative interests* directed at increasing mutual understanding (as in the field of school improvement), and *critical or emancipatory interests* directed at rectifying injustice and transforming power relationships. In some cases, the search for other theoretical interpretations became so broad as to lose its usefulness – as in widespread intellectual adoptions of Michel Foucault's argument that power was diffused everywhere through discourse and society, rather than being embodied in particular positions and relationships. In this interpretation, power was everywhere and also nowhere – at a time when capitalism began closing in on public education and public life in the 1990s, postmodernism and poststructuralism avoided rooting power in groups, interests and systems that were widening inequalities between people in the world, and between different social groups of pupils and their achievements in schools.

If *critical educational theory* addressed and articulated the widespread nature of oppression, injustice and imbalance of power in education, the *critical pedagogy* movement developed and applied strategies of teaching and learning to rectify these imbalances. Working with illiterate peasants in South America, Paulo Freire advocated a program and practices of conscientization in which learning would be rooted in and connected to deep-seated contradictions in the lives and experiences of the people. While, as Elisabeth Ellsworth argued, any contemporary applications of Freire's critical pedagogy have been more haranguing than empowering – horrible examples of the Left Sectarianism of which Freire complained – Freire himself saw critical pedagogy as being absolutely connected with pedagogies of collaboration, love and hope.

Cooper and White's inspiring and imposing collection brings together and publishes for the first time some of the best writers and writing from across the world in critical theory and critical pedagogical practice. In large part, this writing is accessible, not impenetrable. The worlds of critical practice it portrays seem

ordinary and achievable, not outrageous or extreme. The empirical papers in particular, reveal critical pedagogy to be not just a litany of intellectual dissatisfaction enunciated from the sidelines, nor a call to martyrdom and self-denial in a world bereft of pleasure. Critical pedagogy, rather, is presented as a field of theory and practice which can and does inspire thoughtful and morally committed teachers to make real differences for their most vulnerable students, and to extend the impact of their social justice agenda beyond their students.

Edelsky and Cherland provide actual examples of outstanding teaching to push our understanding of what distinguishes good and even great teaching, from the still greater teaching that addresses and embeds social justice concerns within the everyday literacy practices of the classroom. Barbara Comber movingly describes how making movies about “Cooking Afghani style” can present cultural difference as a source of strength and empowerment, not as a bunch of deficits which portrays refugees as pitiable, and asylum seekers as trouble. Patrick Inglis and prize-winning author John Willinsky show how student acts of community service in a soup kitchen can also be used as an opportunity to teach about democracy. And in post-apartheid, but still profoundly poor South Africa, Hilary Janks and Paulina Sethole, tell the inspiring story of a school principal who overcame teacher resistance and even death threats, by then working with her staff, her community and even a high class business partner, to transform her school by building a vegetable garden and demonstrating principles of sustainable development that spread throughout her school and community.

Theoretical giants like Bill Pinar and Peter McLaren, and a number of other authors such as philosopher Richard Brosio, leadership theorist Duncan Waite and school improvement critic Terry Wrigley, add theoretical introspection and exploration to these activist examples – giving us examples of scholars and specialists at the leading edge of their latest thinking as they push the field further forward.

Karyn Cooper’s and Robert White’s book makes critical theory practical for any and all teachers who are authentically concerned about promoting social justice among their students and in their world. Modest, not messianic in personality, witty not weary in disposition, compassionate rather than cutting in their engagements with those around them, Cooper and White have produced a book that reflects their vision as professionals and their values as people. If you want to make a difference, and want to change the world, this is the book that will get you started and keep you going.

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May 2005

PROLOGUE

This text is about being sensitive to, respecting and honouring differences among individuals and groups of individuals. But how are professionals — pre-service and in-service educators as well as teacher leaders and educational administrators — able to bridge the gap between democratic educational practice and Critical pedagogic theory? We ask how one begins to connect the professional lives of educators with a Critical democratic practice for the pluralistic milieu of the twenty-first century. The following quotation from Chambers may be an appropriate place to begin this text.

To inhabit the multiplicity of cultural borders, historical temporalities and hybrid identities calls for a state of knowledge, an ethics of the intellect, an aperture in politics, able to acknowledge more than itself; a state of knowledge that is prepared to suffer modification and interrogation by what it neither possesses nor can claim as its own...and permits us to lend our ears to what is unsaid in the discourses we employ (Chambers, 1996, 50).

What Chambers refers to as a “state of knowledge” reveals a growing critical awareness of one’s self and one’s relationships to others within any enclosed system, educational systems not excepted. This critical perspective may be characterized by Habermas’s (1990) ideal speech situation, in which any conversation must be able to be intelligible, truthful, sincere and justified. As a result, in essence, “Critical” has as its earmarks not only an ability to think Critically, but also a disposition to do so (Capper, 1993). The result of this process of Critical pedagogy is the development of voice – a voice that is not only heard, but also listened to and acted upon (Vibert, Portelli, Shields, LaRoque, 2002). The emergence of such a voice would acknowledge ‘the multiplicity of cultural borders, historical temporalities and hybrid identities.’ Such a voice, to be truly Critical, must be an ethical voice and must therefore recognize the politics of power in any given situation. This voice extends to the examination of one’s own life and to the roles that one plays in emancipation and other issues of social justice.

While the editors of this volume come from different educational disciplines – that is, literacy and educational administration - they share common philosophies, common educational practices and common educational goals premised upon a democratic Critical education. However different these vantage points may appear, they are both rooted in the desire for positive social change. This blended view regards the opportunity to challenge educational policies and practices that are becoming increasingly less democratic in these globalizing times. The two vignettes that follow serve to situate our vantage point(s).

Karyn Cooper: Education is not Always Democratic

I grew up in a remote part of Northern Alberta, Canada, populated predominantly by French, Aboriginal, and English families. Not unlike most of the children I went to

school with, I was born into a working class family; yet unlike many of my classmates, I went on to pursue a post-secondary education. I am not altogether certain why I was one of the few who went on to a post-secondary education or even whether this is necessarily a good or bad thing. I do know that my father, like many immigrants, dreamed of a better life for his children and education was the vehicle, or so I was told. When I was thirteen and in grade nine my father's dream nearly vanished when I very narrowly escaped being streamed into vocational education. I had failed the mathematics component of a province-wide examination, and at that time in Alberta, Canada, this exam determined it all. Needless to say, my father was devastated. My mother courageously took on the role of advocate, determined to prove that her thirteen-year-old daughter would be more than able to handle the "academic stream". Her argument focused on my strengths; the fact that I had scored well on the English standard of the examination, my track record (old report cards) and strong test results from other standardized examinations in elementary school. My mother ended up persuading the "powers that be" and so I was able to eventually go on to pursue a career in teaching.

At the time, I don't remember discussing the outcome of this provincial exam with any of my classmates other than Luc, someone who challenged my every thought. Luc was surprised to learn that I had plans to go on to attend university and was puzzled as to why my mother should challenge the examination. I can still remember his keen dark eyes and his fresh young face as he said, "only *really* smart people get to go university, Karyn". I was stunned; Luc was one of the smartest people I have ever known. Critiques such as those of Baker & Freebody (1989) serves to remind us that a democratic education entails freedom of choice. Looking back at this incident, I believe that what was so tragic was that Luc did not even know he *also* had a choice to go on to post-secondary education.

As a special education teacher and reading specialist, I have learned first-hand that education is not always democratic with large numbers of children, particularly ESL, indigenous, and the poor continuing to be limited by second-hand dreams of a normative education. Fortunately, I believe, many dedicated educators and teachers, such as those who have contributed to this book, are challenging educational policies and practices that are increasingly less democratic in globalizing times.

Robert E. White: "Trickle Down" Globalization

During my more than thirty years as parent, teacher, consultant and professor spent in the halls of schools and school board offices in Canada, I have often been impressed by the quality of teaching and learning that I have witnessed. Not only is this true of the classrooms dedicated to the exploration of Science and Math, English and History, but it is also true of the more "practical" aspects of schooling. Take for example, the machine shop where I often took my car to be serviced or the teaching cafeteria where the meals were nutritious and delicious, as well as beautifully presented. Over the years, however, changes have occurred. In the aforementioned school districts, the machine shop has become interested in not just servicing automobiles, but aircraft. The school cafeteria is no longer a teaching cafeteria but is now run by a company external to the school. The chef has gone to work in a commercial restaurant and the students who want to learn culinary arts must travel to

the only school in the district that still provides a culinary arts program. In other schools, the only available nutrition, to use the word loosely to connote the notion of “food”, is frequently dispensed from vending machines.

It was simply more *efficient* to have a teaching cafeteria in a central location where students were expected to transport themselves, than to have such cafeterias in every school where there was a significant proportion of students who aspired to a culinary arts background. The social, educational and nutritional benefits of such programs, although costly, were overlooked in an attempt to become more efficient and, in a sense, more global. The hidden costs in terms of students not having access to the centralized programs as a result of transportation or other issues, the social costs of students identifying vending machine wares with actual meals and the long term health costs of such misguidance were largely ignored in a rush to greater efficiency and “effectiveness” in schooling.

As I travelled from school to school, district to district and, ultimately, province to province over the past quarter century, I began to notice similar kinds of transformations occurring. Not only were recognizable market forces becoming more clearly integrated with schools and school districts, it appeared to be the same major corporations that were recognizable time and time again. This led to the idea that this was not a random occurrence or a coincidence, but a pattern.

But what about this pattern – the “big picture” – and how does this “big picture” relate to a democratic education, especially in this pluralistic milieu of the twenty-first century? After numerous attempts to identify a conspiracy in all of this marketization and commodification of schooling, I began to feel that it was a trend rather than a plot. As my doctoral research proceeded, it became clear to me that these effects in our schools were caused by a “trickle down effect” of the world-wide trend towards globalization. What I was looking at seemed to be a pattern, part of the trend towards a more globalized economy, one that stressed effectiveness and efficiency over individual needs, wants and desires. As Jonathan Hale (1994) suggests:

People do have innate standards, but most do not know how to get at them. It is hard for people to separate the important from the unimportant, the primary geometry from the secondary applied symbol, if they do not know about pattern. (Hale, 1994, 25).

Why are Hale’s words so important here? Simply put, it is important for citizens in a democratic society to be *Critical* of patterns such as the trend towards globalization, and the possible harmful effects on schooling particularly for disadvantaged students if one wants to view education in a more democratic and equitable fashion.

Our two vantage points merge, change, and are changed in and through the writing of this book. Yet, “patterns” emerge, which allow for a synthesis of three huge and separate areas: literacy, learning, and leadership framed through a Critical lens in each section of the book, pulled together in the epilogue. While these sections are not mutually exclusive, it is perhaps helpful for organizational purposes to group similar chapters together. As a result, this book is divided into three sections. The first section, entitled “Critical Literacy for a Democratic Education”, focuses on the