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The Meaning of Criticality in Education Research

Reflecting on Critical Pedagogy

Edited by
Ashley Simpson
Fred Dervin

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ISSN 2662-7345 ISSN 2662-7353 (electronic)
Palgrave Studies in Education Research Methods
ISBN 978-3-030-56008-9 ISBN 978-3-030-56009-6 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56009-6

Contents

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List of Figures

List of Tables

1

Introduction: Beyond Impotent Criticality in Education Research?

Ashley Simpson

Criticality appears to be everywhere. The urge to be critical is also omnipresent in education and in, for example discussions of (social) media around the world. But calls to be critical tend to result in a cacophony of rhetoric and ideologies.

In this volume, the authors discuss different ways of problematizing critical thinking in education, arguing for multipolar versions that acknowledge different contexts, beyond dominant hegemonies and impositions of (symbolic) power relations. This introduction provides some preliminary answers to the following questions: what is meant by the notion 'critical', especially in education? What are the uses, abuses, and misuses of this polysemic notion? The final section of the introduction problematizes theoretical and practical means to break with the anaesthesia and impotence surrounding criticality.

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A. Simpson, F. Dervin (eds.), *The Meaning of Criticality in Education Research*,
Palgrave Studies in Education Research Methods,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56009-6_1

What Is Meant by 'Critical'?

The term 'critical theory' has a long history: Traditionally—often in the singular and upper case—it refers to the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, the generations of philosophers and sociologists who have succeeded one another at the *Institut fur Sozialforschung* (including Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Enrich Fromm, Jurgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, and Fredrich Pollock) (Keucheyan, 2013). However, today the term critical theory is used in a much broader sense and always in the plural to encompass different theoretical, methodological, and practical strands of research. Today critical theory can relate theoretical strands of research such as Queer and Gender studies, Existentialism, Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Psychoanalysis, and Postcolonialism (ibid.). In his (1972) book *Traditional and Critical Theory* Max Horkheimer opened with a discussion about 'what is theory?' Horkheimer went onto map the methodological and analytical basis of what should be constituted as Critical Theory. This included rejecting positivism, rejecting objectivity, and rejecting the separation of theory from social praxis (Horkheimer, 1972). Keucheyan (2013) asserts that

> Critical theories reject the epistemological axiom of 'value neutrality' posited by Max Weber in the early twentieth century in his essays on the methodology of the social sciences. (Keucheyan, 2013, p. 2)

In this sense, researchers and research which fell within the realm of Critical Theory were understood as a form of social criticism, thus 'the "critical" dimension of the new critical theories consists in the general character of their challenge to the contemporary "social world". This generality is itself variable' (Keucheyan, 2013, pp. 2–3). Critical theories more or less challenge the existing social order (Keucheyan, 2013).

It is not the purpose of this book to propose one form of criticality; in fact I would be against suggesting there is one universal form of criticality, instead, one must always ask: Criticality for whom? Criticality by whom? Criticality for what purpose? Despite the fact that some have heralded previous decades as 'The defeat of Critical Thinking 1977–1993'

(Keucheyan, 2013), perhaps ironically, critical thinking and criticality in its various guises are now somewhat omnipresent in education (and many aspects of society). At the end of his book Keucheyan asserts that since the 1970s onwards forms of critical thought have been disseminated throughout the world (ibid.). Keucheyan strongly argues that critical thinking is inseparable from the Americanization of the notion (including knowledge production and the financialization of higher education), meaning it is difficult for scholars from India, South America, China, and Africa to resist dominant hegemonies about how critical thinking is thought about (ibid.). Thus, 'the Americanization of critical thinking contains the seeds of its political neutralization' (Keucheyan, 2013, p. 255). In order to deconstruct (my word) the knowledge production of Anglo-centric and Americanized forms of critical thinking, echoing Chantal Mouffe (2013), Keucheyan argues that critical thinking should reflect a multipolar world order (Keucheyan, 2013). Multipolarity is grounded in rejecting liberal universalism and cosmopolitanism as ideologies in terms of how supranational institutions impose rational and legitimate arguments upon countries and/or contexts (Mouffe, 2013). By imposing states of being, whether it is about how society should be organized, what forms of democracy and human rights countries should adopt, or concerning the social values that citizens should abide by and adhere to, such impositions deny the very power relations which constitute the political (Mouffe, 2008). Such imposed forms of homogenization mean that some societies around the world are deemed illegitimate in terms of how they are incompatible with certain ways of thought or behaving. One example of this from my own teaching and research would be that I often hear discourses such as Chinese students lack critical thinking skills (and criticality in general sense) in higher education, which is often used as a biased and prejudiced argument relating to the country's political system. Instead, Mouffe (2013) calls for a multipolar world order (different units which coexist and inhibit different values and identities) to reject universalist thinking about how notions (e.g. liberal democracy, human rights, justice, and so on) should be practiced and understood (ibid.).

A multipolar vision for criticality is important in terms of breaking away from universalist logics and practices that exacerbate the notion

that one country's form of criticality can be 'better' than the other. Such power relations can be used to stigmatize, marginalize, and potentially discriminate against the other as they become susceptible to the process of othering (Simpson, 2018, 2019). Othering means 'turning self and other into an 'other' by using stereotypes, representations, and prejudices. Othering often leads to hierarchizing the world' (Dervin, 2016, p. 115). In this sense, when criticality is assumed as being present it can be manipulated for different political and/or ideological means (Keucheyan, 2013).

One way of problematizing criticality can be through the work of Nathan Ross (2017):

> (1) To think critically means to resist making the object of critique into a means to an external end, and to resist making thought itself into a means to an end. (2) To think critically means to discern the pernicious role of mythology in modern life in such a way as to immunize oneself against it. (Ross, 2017, p. 351)

Criticality, understood as an adjective rather than a noun—through the suffix *ality* means that the condition of being critical (i.e. Criticality) should be understood as a process in the making, a continuous process of becoming. Criticality cannot be a normative fixed or static state nor can the notion be an 'end' in itself. Thus, being critical involves contesting normative (mythological and ideological) values, concepts, principles, and the ways knowledge is produced and reproduced. Myths are not defined by the object of the message 'but in the way in which it utters its message' (Barthes, 1972, p. 107). A myth therefore cannot be classed as neither misinformation nor disinformation, neither a truth nor an untruth, a myth is a form of communication (ibid.). In *The Rustle of Language* (1989) Roland Barthes argues the science of the signifier (i.e. the physical form of a sign versus its meaning) is not merely to 'de-myth' mythologies in the guise of de-mystification or de-mythification through 'unmasking' and or 'revealing' myths; rather, the science of the signifier must 'contest the symbolic' (Barthes, 1989, p. 66). Barthes (1989) argues that one must enter into a dialogue in terms of questioning the very essence of things and our being in relation to myths—in this sense, with regard to criticality, this involves me questioning how my criticality is

constituted and whether I am imposing my version of criticality onto others.

Perhaps when it comes to criticality it is (im)possible not to make judgements (whether they are moral judgements, ethical judgements, political judgements, etc.) but the focus instead should be on questioning our own judgements and our own sense of criticality. With this in mind, Keucheyan's (2013) multipolar vision for critical theories and criticality, in a general sense, should be aspired towards. It is important for inspiration to be sought interdisciplinary from outside traditionally Anglo-centric and Americanized scholarship in revitalizing the notion.

What Do We Mean by Criticality in Education Research?

There are many criticisms of some forms of critical theory and of criticality itself. One example can be found in Thompson's (2017) Marxist critique of postmodern critical theories, Thompson argues

> To be sure, much of this aberrant use of the term [Critical Theory] stems from the destructive impulse of postmodernism and its project of destroying reason as a privileged position from which to judge and to understand power, domination, freedom, and human progress as well as the pseudo-political radicalism of academics alienated from real politics. (Thompson, 2017, p. 2)

What should resonate from this quote is that criticality is never an uncontested notion either. It should always be deconstructed and be understood as a continuous process in the making. Criticality just like critical theory is inherently polysemic meaning it has different meanings from person to person, from context to context.

There are many ways of doing criticality in (education) research, not all of which are consistent from theoretical positioning to research application and implementation. Discussions on critical theories, being critical, critical thinking, and other forms of acting or behaving critically in education research are synonymous with the scholarly field of critical

pedagogy. The term critical pedagogy usually always makes reference to the work of Henry Giroux (2020), Paulo Freire (1970), Joe Kincheloe (2008), Peter McLaren (1995), Sherry Shapiro (2005), and Joan Wink (2005), amongst others. For Kincheloe critical pedagogy is not 'learning a few pedagogical techniques and the knowledge required by the curriculum, the standards or the textbook' (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 8). Kincheloe (2008) articulates that it is difficult to pin down a definition as critical pedagogy involves questioning bodies of knowledge and political structures. Peter McLaren argues that there are many different articulations of critical pedagogy (i.e. Freirean pedagogy, feminist pedagogies, ludic and resistance postmodernist pedagogies) (McLaren, 1995). Kincheloe asserts that even though there are different theoretical strands of critical pedagogy on the whole the approaches adhere to the following principles (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 10):

- Grounded on a social and educational vision of justice and equality.
- Constructed on the belief that education is inherently political.
- Dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering.
- Concerned that schools don't hurt students—good schools don't blame students for their failures or strip students of the knowledges they bring to the classroom.
- Enacted through the use of generative themes to read the word and the world and the process of problem posing—generative themes involve the educational use of issues that are central to students' lives as a grounding for the curriculum.
- Centred on the notion that teachers should be researchers—here teachers learn to produce and teach students to produce their own knowledges.
- Grounded on the notion that teachers become researchers of their students—as researchers, teachers study their students, their backgrounds, and the forces that shape them.
- Interested in maintaining a delicate balance between social change and cultivating the intellect—this requires a rigorous pedagogy that accomplishes both goals.
- Concerned with 'the margins' of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and subjugation.

- Constructed on the awareness that science can be used as a force to regulate and control.
- Dedicated to understanding the context in which educational activity takes place.
- Committed to resisting the harmful effects of dominant power.
- Attuned to the importance of complexity—understands complexity theory—in constructing a rigorous and transformative education.
- Focused on understanding the profound impact of neo-colonial structures in shaping education and knowledge.

Critical pedagogy is concerned with the circulation of power, privilege, and oppression which constitutes individual and group subjectivities whilst simultaneously reproducing regimes and bodies of truth (knowledge) (McLaren, 1995; Giroux, 2020). Sherry Shapiro (2005) argues

> Critical pedagogy refers to this process as giving voice to one's own experiences by articulating the "reality" of one's life; coming to critical understanding of the sociocultural mapping of consciousness; and using individual voices collectively to struggle in the retelling and remaking of life stories. (Shapiro, 2005, p. 12)

Within educational contexts 'critical pedagogy works to help teacher educators and teachers reconstruct their work so it facilitates the empowerment to all students' (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 9). Despite its relative popularity, it is also important to pay attention to the limitations and criticisms of critical pedagogy as an approach which extends from theoretical conceptualization to questions surrounding the practicalities of implementing critical pedagogies.

Criticality in Education (Research) Today: Uses, Abuses, and Misuses

Aspects of criticality in education are everywhere and nowhere. Yes, criticality is inherently polysemic as a notion. Yet, continually there are inconsistencies and misapplications in terms of how the notion is

theorized or applied. By asserting that criticality can be incoherent then I leave myself open to the question of whether my own criticality is confused. I argue that criticality should not be understood as an objective 'end', my point here is to ask the question what makes your criticality better than mine? As critical theories and their approaches are still widely American-centric (Keucheyan, 2013), to what extent am I imposing my form (worldviews, ideologies, and so forth) of criticality onto others? This has implications for the language and grammar that criticality uses to articulate the types of oppression it claims to resist.

Research and researchers on critical pedagogy have been criticized as being 'traditional, white, western [and] male' (Shapiro, 2005, p. 19). The implication here is whose voice is really being heard. Is it that predominantly white, 'western' males are deciding what criticality is and what the notion means? The danger here would be that impositions about criticality speak over rather than for people meaning that their agency and subjectivities can be negated. To put this in another way, when we assume and generalize what criticality may mean—critically can become essentialized meaning that individual and group identities are negated because they have an imposed schema imposed upon them; thus there is little space for negotiation and dialogue. In my own research I have also argued about the importance of going beyond identity as self-identity (Simpson & Dervin, 2019a). This means going beyond the formula that 'A is A'. Thus, acts of being and becoming do not correspond as self-identity but the opening of dialogue, an opening which always implies the simultaneous inter-animation of more than one voice (Sidorkin, 1999). In this sense, s/he may say they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transsexual, speak multiple languages, have multiple cultures (all of which may or may not be true), but whether these things are true or not is not the point, a critical perspective means—these aspects of our being, and becoming, are constantly co-constructed, negotiated, and performed as acts of co-being as they are always produced by and with others (Simpson & Dervin, 2019a). The response to such criticisms by some researchers was to call for non-essentialism; this can be characterized by the following quote by Peter McLaren about critical pedagogy, that critical pedagogies

are 'practices that are non-racist, non-sexist, non-homophobic and contribute to the transformation of the wider social order' (McLaren, 1995, p. 232). Of course, non-essentialism is worth paying attention to (and perhaps aspiring to in an ideal sense) but one must also recognize 'non-essentialism is an ideal that cannot be reached' (Dervin, 2016, p. 80). That is because non-essentialism is in itself an ideological imposition that can negate the identities of the people it may be claiming to speak for in the sense that the people and notions are often unstable, as they are negotiated in interaction with 'complex' people and in specific contexts (ibid.). This issue at hand is articulated by Dervin (2016, p. 81) who argues

> The fact is that as human beings we often end up contradicting ourselves, not being sure about what we think, adapting our discourses to specific situations and interlocutors, using 'white lies' to please the other, and so on. Sometimes what we say shows some level of complexity (e.g. 'I believe that everybody has multiple identities'/'I don't believe in stereotypes'), which can quickly dive back into the simple ('but I think that Finnish people are this or that').

The danger is when criticality gets caught between promising (idealistically) what and how things ought to change or how people ought to be which in turn essentializes the subject of who criticality is aiming to speak for. Saying people ought to be (e.g. non-racist and non-sexist might be something one supports) yet it can be limiting in some instances as it can prevent a dialogue about what can and cannot be problematized. On the one hand, this can lead to the sematic shifting of how meaning is represented; an example of this is race without racism discourses whereby 'non-hierarchical' forms of racial discourse reproduce racism as they are based on essentializing cultural difference (Balibar, 2005). On the other hand, such discourses suffocate the antagonisms necessary for political agency (Mouffe, 2013); instead a politics of sanitized speech is reproduced where antagonism and debate are nullified (Simpson & Dervin, 2019c).

In illustrating this argument further, both editors of this book have written extensively about how supranational organizations like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and The Council of Europe impose global and intercultural competencies as ideologies upon education systems (Simpson & Dervin, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Often the competencies and assessment criteria included in these documents contain discussions and competencies about aspects of criticality. For example, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 Global Competence Framework states

> The cognitive assessment is designed to elicit students' capacities to critically examine global issues; recognise outside influences on perspectives and world views; understand how to communicate with others in intercultural contexts; and identify and compare different courses of action to address global and intercultural issues. (OECD, 2019, pp. 167–168)

The word 'critical' appears 60 times in the OECD PISA 2018 assessment and analytical framework for PISA 2018. Words like critical awareness, critical skills, critically analyse, critical reasoning, and critical stance are common in the document. The document also contains 'measurement instruments of critical thinking' (OECD, 2019, p. 200) which includes a number of differing statistically based assessments on critical thinking—seemingly the OECD is more interested in assessing critical thinking rather than problematizing what the 'critical' means in critical thinking as not one definition about criticality is problematized in the whole document. The danger here is when criticality is assumed as being present it totalizes everything in its path thus essentializing the essence of everyone before it. This totalization can also be used to impose political and ideological doctrines; for example with reference to the OECD PISA assessment in terms of how students and educational systems are assessed as having 'better' forms of criticality than others. Criticality in this sense can serve as an ethico-political judgement criterion to generalize and essentialize the entire population of a given country and its educational system in differing contexts throughout the world.

Impotent Criticality in Education Research: A Way Forward?

That brings me to the problematization of criticality and power. In the autumn of 2019, I ran a PhD course for doctoral students about criticality in education research at a higher education institution in Finland. During one of the sessions, one of the participants reflected on their own criticality and how it had come-into-being. Specifically, they were reflecting upon the different intersections of how they understood their identity as being (in their words) a female, a Muslim, a migrant in Finland researching about the role of Islam in religious education. The person then went on to articulate two positions: The first is about their own position as a researcher as they said they would not be critical of practices that did not necessarily fit with their own worldview in their research context. The second was that if they were to witness or be a victim of discrimination in Finland they would choose not to exercise their criticality. Both positions were justified through the lens that they did not want to get a reputation of being too critical about Finland as this may harm their career mobility/prospects in Finland and whether they will be able to stay in the country after completing their PhD. After the session, when reflecting on the discussions in the class two questions resonated with me: How does power shape one's ability to be critical? To what extent is the exercise of our criticality impotent?

In *The Coming Community* (1993) Giorgio Agamben argues

> Of the two modes in which, according to Aristotle, every potentiality is articulated, the decisive one is that which the philosopher calls "the potentiality to not-be" (*dynamis me einai*) or also impotence (*adynamia*). For if it is true that whatever being always has a potential character, it is equally certain that it is not capable of only this or that specific act, nor is it therefore simply incapable, lacking in power, nor even less is it indifferently capable of everything, all-powerful: The being that is properly whatever is able to not-be; it is capable of its own impotence. (Agamben, 1993, p. 34)