

THE MASTER'S TOOLS

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AS A MEANS OF BATTLING EDUCATIONAL DETERMINISM

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Abstract

The majority of student bodies in U.S. independent schools come from the elite, wealthier members of society, and the goals of institutions called ‘independent schools’ are largely combinations of elite college admissions success and fostering social connections with other cultural elites. Primitively, the goals of critical pedagogy in the classroom—using critical pedagogical practices to encourage the transforming of oppressive relations of power in a variety of domains—seem inimical to the objectives of most independent schools. Yet, critical educators working at independent schools are as equally mandated as their public school counterparts to embrace and adapt critical pedagogical methodology in our classrooms, requiring the students belonging to the power group to debate and engage with all students in the classroom. This process limits the power of schools to see students as cultural capital, but rather creates a non-stratified community, so that “social mobility” becomes unnecessary, thus resisting the idea of the role of private school education as a means of becoming more social and economically mobile. Critical pedagogy in independent schools allows for a unique type of praxis that removes all students from the cycle of having to exist as cultural capital.

Keywords: independent schools, critical pedagogy, educational determinism, critical education, liberatory education

While much has been written and discussed examining the fierce and pressing need for critical pedagogy in various groups and venues that empower students from historically disenfranchised groups, independent (non-public) schools (because of their private funding and “elite” populations) are not usually considered in the world of critical pedagogy. Given the general goals of critical pedagogical theory, pedagogy considering the independent school demographic seems like a less immediate need. However, the critical exploration of knowledge (and power) among mixed groups of students in independent schools, which largely contain but are not limited to students from the in-power base group, is a necessary part of the critical pedagogical praxis of action and reflection and thus necessary to the ultimate goal of societal change.

For the critical independent school educator, this pedagogy provides opportunities for the most privileged of students to engage with their peers, with other members of their classroom community, and with their own ideas about privilege, power and equality in a way that encourages critical engagement while providing space for students to be a part of a community of thinkers “who assist each other while at the same time check each other’s tendencies to purely idiosyncratic or self-interested thinking” (Young, 1992, p. 8). Non-public schools are often (and accurately) seen as a place for the wealthy and well-connected to educate their children in an exclusive, tightly controlled environment of their peers (Cookson & Persell, 1985), and at first it feels incongruous to consider private and parochial schools as places of possible liberatory thought and method. However, the independent school experience need not be in opposition to critical pedagogical efforts and successes, but rather offers a unique and important critical experience. *Critical practice is crucial in independent school classrooms because it provides the all too rare opportunity for equal dialogue between the historically disenfranchised, the subordinated and the privileged.* The classrooms of independent schools and the unique teaching opportunities they provide are the very tools critical pedagogues can use to help private school students develop a “profound commitment to humanity and a recognition of the dialectical relationship between cultural existence as individuals and

political and economic existence as social beings” (Darder, 1998)—using the private school classroom, the “master’s tools” to which Audre Lorde (1984) famously alludes—as we strive to dismantle the hierarchical social structure and other hegemonic systems that make up the “master’s house” of students, parents and schools who equate educational success with lofty college admissions and high paying future job potential.

It is always complex to take a philosophy or theory for the betterment of the public and apply it to the private world. As educators, however, we have a specific responsibility to our students and their place in a just and equitable society, a world that meets their needs. What becomes crucial in considering the value of critical pedagogical and liberatory practice in schools is the idea that every student experiences *educational determinism*—that the type and amount of education experienced by a student predisposes them towards their future social (and often economic) roles in society. It therefore becomes our social mandate to make sure **all** students are educated critically; because of the unique mix of student backgrounds, private schools and private school educators are uniquely positioned to implement critical teaching. Perhaps this challenge is best expressed in a recent article discussing the lack of democracy in private schools by Dr. Jack Schneider, when he states,

No school, if it is to realize its full potential, and if it is to foster the public good, can be conceived of as private, parochial, or even independent. These terms imply ownership, competition, disunity, disconnection. Schools with the most freedom to act and the greatest power to affect change must not be fortresses and silos. They must be laboratories and lighthouses. (2018)

He goes on to discuss how private schools can be used to further the public good, suggesting that in order to do so, private schools must both prioritize diversity and use their positions of places of both resources and teacher autonomy to focus on educational practices rather than strategic based outcomes (Schneider, 2018). But do teachers in private schools have more autonomy than their public school counterparts?

In a broadly distributed anonymous survey conducted in the spring and summer of 2018, of over 100 independent school teachers in the United States were asked demographic questions, information about their knowledge base in critical education, and were tasked with answering questions about their beliefs about their schools and students and about larger philosophical issues surrounding teaching and learning. The results are fascinating.

The majority of educators surveyed report that they had been working as an educator for more than a decade, and about one-third report they had logged closer to twenty years. This is a population that tends to have low attrition, especially compared to the national attrition rates of their public school peers. In addition to this low-rate of attrition, independent school teachers report that they have “much autonomy” in their classrooms. This autonomy is hopeful; teachers that report they have control of both curricula and pedagogy also report that they adhere to the idea that the beliefs and pre-experiences of their students are as important as their own, already synchronous with a major tenet of critical pedagogical practice. Perhaps this is due to their comparably high levels of exposure to the philosophy of critical pedagogy, both formally (via teacher education programs or other higher education) or informally (self-teaching and exposure to critical texts, either independently or as part of a prescribed professional development). Possibly the most surprising is that while private school teachers almost unanimously report that private schools are problematic in their mission statements and objectives, they also report that they personally feel that the primary and paramount purpose of education is to “empower students to create a more just and equitable society”.

Here we have a population perfect for critical teaching: they are experienced in the classroom, they have autonomy to teach how they wish, they have familiarity with critical pedagogy, they believe in the equity of their students’ experiences with their own, and they see their main goal as a betterment of society. However, only 20% of teachers surveyed report that private schools are “successful at empowering students to create a more just and equitable society”. We must ask ourselves why this population does not already teach

critically. Where is the disconnect? While there are many possible reasons for this misconnection, perhaps the most telling comes from a question in which teachers were asked whether or not knowledge was neutral. While the solid majority of teachers asked feel that their work has political connotations, 60% of teachers I surveyed believe that knowledge itself is neutral. Certainly, knowledge and instruction about the political nature of knowledge will aid all educators towards more critical praxis. If it is true that in American non-public schools a group of educators exist that are ready and willing to implement this type of pedagogy of liberation, a question arises as to the impact of critical education on independent school students. Again, this idea is solidly supported.

An implementation of critical pedagogies in private schools would limit the power of schools to see students as cultural capital, and would help create a non-stratified community, so that “social mobility” becomes unnecessary, thus resisting the idea of the role of private school education as a means of becoming more social and economically mobile. Critical pedagogy in independent schools allows for a unique type of praxis that removes all students from the cycle of having to exist as cultural capital. One of the reasons private school critical pedagogy is crucial is because of the changing populations of the private school community.

As the public system of education in the U.S. continues to be driven towards terrific ineffectiveness, the numbers of students entering non-publicly funded schools continue to increase steeply, at an average of seven to twelve percent per year (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In addition to a middle-class exodus from American public schools in the last few decades, students of color have turned to non-public schools in greater numbers than before. Independent schools in the U.S., as well as many of their counterparts abroad, are participating in programs and initiatives that provide opportunities for students from historically disenfranchised populations to attend elite private schools. While white students make up approximately 60% of non-public schools in the U.S., there have been increases in Black, Latinx, Asian and students identifying as “mixed race” since 2016 as many independent schools begin to value diversity in

their communities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Consequently, many minority students acquire scholarships to attend independent schools. The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) reports that “the average merit award given has increased in each of the previous three years.” The number of schools offering merit aid is about 300 nationally (NAIS 2016) while all independent schools in the United States offer some form of financial aid and/or income-based scholarships. Over half of independent schools (closer to 65%) offer merit scholarships and state-sponsored tuition scholarship, usually offered to communities of color and other historically disenfranchised populations. To assume that this is offered as a means of furthering justice is faulty; these systems are systems of charity and should be seen as such. As Allen Buchanan stated in *Justice and Charity*, “justice is a matter of rights; charity is not and what is one’s right is owed to one, that lack of which gives one justified ground for complaint that one has been wronged” (1984, p. 558). This is not to say that the increase in the diversity of students that occur from these programs are not positive, in fact, they are crucial to critical education. Currently, almost 70% of private school teachers surveyed say they “teach a diverse population of students”. It remains necessary that we do not forget the inherent wrongness of a “charity” instead of a “mutual aid” when discussing these types of populating elite private schools with students of color; rather we must remember the injustice of “charity” to communities of color, instead choosing to believe that as all students have equal pre-knowledge and experiences, the sharing of educational space works to the benefit of all students participating in private school desegregation programs.

Acceptance of admission into these programs is celebrated as a positive experience, and justly so, as Hume reflected in his comment that “parents in communities everywhere want better educational opportunities for their children” (Putnam, 1993, p. 36). The students of color that earn these opportunities (these scholarships being offered based on academic performance in public schools) tend to be accepted into more exclusive universities (Bergman, 2017) and maintain a higher socioeconomic status than their parents and peers (Holmstrom, Karp, & Gray, 2011). These programs are increasing,

both in number and how many students are annually served by this system. New York City, for example, offers the *Prep for Prep* program, with nearly 80 NYC public schools enrolling over 700 students in independent schools along the Northeast coast each year with a 75% graduation success rate, almost always including college admission. These students nearly always matriculate from elite universities across the country and tend to settle in the fields of business, law, education and medicine. (PrepforPrep.org). In the standard, capitalist definition of “success”, this organization is a success story. And to be sure it is successful—these students return to and contribute towards their home communities in a multitude of positive ways. However, any and all students lauding an educational model that considers “success” as economic and social mobility within the hegemonic hierarchy are often unwittingly, or at least indirectly, furthering a system that boosts and supports the current unjust and unequal power structures. This leaves the uncomfortable possibility that students from the non-elite power base unwittingly further (and judge their own successes by) the totems of social injustice and inequality that are imprisoning and compromising their communities in the name of economic success.

Given this, critical pedagogues will agree that what is needed for the end of neo-liberal power structures in education is certainly not more students in “prep schools” but rather the eventual emancipation of *all* students from the hegemonic model currently in place in all American school systems. This begins with all students becoming cognizant of their roles in the larger world. Critical pedagogy seeks to support educational systems based on the human responsibility of mutual aid, but this does not mean it cannot use current systems of charity to assist in the dismantling of any educational system that is founded on injustice and unfairness and inequality.

What programs like Prep for Prep do provide are critical opportunities at non-public schools for praxis, compassion and conversation between teachers and students from a variety of economic backgrounds and conditions. So, while the charity vs. mutual aid conundrum persists, and it is clear that these support programs serve to empower specific members of under-advantaged communities,

the diversity of non-public schools is a crucial component that will help allow for critical teaching and Freirian praxis.

In the traditional independent school ethos, students from socio-economic “elite” power bases often do not experience opportunities to discuss and reflect on alternatives to what they are told are the goals of their educations: getting into “good colleges” obtaining “well-paying jobs”, and “knowing the right people”. As Juan-Miguel Fernandez-Balboa (2003, p. 219) maintains, “One of the first steps in the empowerment of people is to help them realize that their status is due, to a great extent, to systemic forces.” By offering critical pedagogy in the independent school classroom, the students in the class community are all empowered, as we take steps together to realize that our positions on the spectrum of privilege are greatly due to forces outside of ourselves. In every classroom, this involves careful, thoughtful and difficult dialogue-based growth. In my experiences as a teacher in both private and public urban and suburban classroom communities along the American East coast, when students participate in dialogue and as these dialogues open and unfold, we begin our praxis; students become aware of and begin to explore their own positions, conditions and roles as part of our classroom. In contrast with my critical experience in public schools, as my independent school students and I reflected about which systematic forces brought us together in that particular classroom space, I saw and heard many learners in the independent school classroom community that *self-identified* as part of the privileged power base. In fact, as critical discussions continued in multiple classes, members of our classrooms placed themselves on a spectrum of privilege; on one end, students from communities that struggle socioeconomically—then moving towards the middle to some privileged but justice-minded students—to the far other end of our spectrum to students that are members of and solid supporters of the current power structure (or that are attracted to students from this power base as a way to be closer to power).

Despite the successes of critical education, pressure from parents and administrators to “teach traditionally” can be severe in schools like mine where tuition averages \$45,000 a year. However, the importance of critical method in private schools should not be minimized. The

introduction of critical dialogue in the independent school classroom community moves *every* student closer to a place of liberation, even with the fulcrum of the critical pedagogical spectrum starting farther towards the existing power base.

The very introduction of critical dialogue, along with the direct involvement of the teacher, shifts all students closer to a perspective of balance and equity. Even when the most ardently resistant members of the student group choose to remain apart from critical ideals and discussions, or when others are actively critical of critical classroom experience, simply by being present in the space where these discussions take place, and by being part of the group dynamic (even passively or negatively), the experience of the classroom community provides for *every* student's movement towards praxis, and the movement of all students and teachers towards a liberating experience.

Again, this pedagogy offers particular challenges in an independent school environment. Many students are nervous or defensive of their family's role in a repressive capitalist system, but as Curry Mallot suggests, "rather than feeling guilty or cynical for past and present injustices, the correct response is to better understand one's own relationship to capital and join the push toward a post-capitalist, more democratic, and socially just future" (as cited in Porfilio & Ford, 2015, p. 69) and with time, even students of privilege move towards understanding themselves in this way—as able to move past their backgrounds, and towards a new and equitable future. As conversations continue, and as students from all backgrounds begin to expect critical discussions as part of their class routine, there is less resistance.

When defining independent schools as any privately funded institutions, we see disturbing similarities in independent school philosophies, "mission statements" and objectives. The majority of independent school organizations like the United States' National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS, 2017), self-describe their goals with a sparkingly clear vision of their students as cultural capital. The American NAIS lists on its "best practices" webpage that member schools "define high standards and ethical behavior in key areas of school operations to guide schools in "embed(ding)

the expectation of professionalism” (NAIS Board). This focus on (academic) excellence and “professionalism” is an example of the mission of most private schools—college acceptance and later success in a capitalist job market. The importance of critical private school education is to make sure that students in independent schools do not continue the cycle of students as cultural capital, a role in which student value is judged by social mobility in what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as a stratified society (1996) rather, an environment must be created in which the “subordinate” and the “privileged” are in the same room and engaged in conversation. Not only does the critical educator refuse to see her students as cultural capital, but with continued discussion, students will become closer to refusing to view *themselves* in this way.

Joe Kincheloe states “cultural capital is deployed to keep the marginalized in a subordinate position and the privileged in a dominant one” (2004, p. 110). With so many students in positions of dominance and privilege, to deploy this idea in a private school is challenging, but in a dynamic critical classroom, by listening and learning together from each other, it is much more difficult for students to claim their privilege as earned, as necessary or as fair. With a focus on individuals and individual experiences through dialogue, understanding occurs, and we slowly move away from the types of thinking that allow the existence of students as any kind of capital.

Current models of education in the United States have not changed for 200+ years and continue to perpetuate antiquated, unjust and unenlightened conditions that result in the continuation of an inherently unequal and unjust society. Neoliberal hegemony aims for the reconstruction of society in accordance with unrestrained global capitalism and opposes conceptions of a just democratic society which would enact the abolition of all forms of oppression (Bourdieu, 1996).

This expectation of students—that their primary function is to further traditional and unyielding capitalism—results in a lack of growth that locks students into almost complete social and economic stagnation, regardless of their social and economic class experiences. Almost a century ago, Henry Cope asked the question “how can our splendid vision be brought to earth and men become willing and

able to solve their problems of living together” (Cope, 1920, p. 1). The answer is by refusing to perpetuate the current suppressive and restrictive educational models in ALL schools. Critical classrooms can predispose students towards a free, equal and just social model, rather than the perpetuation of the hegemonic norm, and the independent school classroom offers a unique opportunity for exploration and discussion among groups that are often kept apart by systems of power, facilitated by educators that have the autonomy and the knowledge base to birth such classrooms. Private school critical pedagogy provides the opportunity for the master’s tools to help dismantle the master’s house.

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