

Peter McLaren, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture: Oppositional Politics in a Postmodern Era*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, ISBN 0-415-11756-9 (pbk).

This book demystifies the predatory elements of an education process that claims to be neutral. It also disturbs the educator who considers his/her role within the education process as a transmitter of knowledge and moulder of values and attitudes. This is a book that will disappoint the *how-to* freak. On the other hand, it should excite those educators who are refusing to be deskilled by education systems that are becoming increasingly keen on pushing competency-based curricula.

By writing simultaneously about the hegemonic and liberatory potential of curricula, McLaren constantly challenges the reader to position him/herself politically. Readers are asked to choose from, on one hand, participation in an educational process that is oblivious to the fact that curricula select, privilege, support, and reproduce hegemonic forms of knowledge, visions and experiences, and, on the other hand, an educational experience that centres around the notion of curriculum as a site of contestation. The latter scenario provides educators and students with the possibility of questioning, problematising, countering and transforming predatory culture.

In his characteristically explosive and impassioned style, McLaren invites educators to 'dare conspire' to create a critical pedagogy that is able to provide a context for students to reject what they experience as given, normal and legitimate. For this pedagogical dream to materialise, the author argues that curriculum ought to be understood within a theory of 'interest and experience'. This means that curriculum is to be considered as a site of production and organisation of student experiences. These experiences unfold within historically-informed social forms such as language, organisation of knowledge and methodologies.

In diametric opposition to the hegemonic practice of silent and passive reception of official knowledge, McLaren considers the concept of voice as central to a critical pedagogy that is entrenched in experience. In keeping with Freire, who authored the preface, McLaren argues that student voice must be integral to a pedagogy that allows students to embrace and engage in the emancipatory politics of difference, described by McLaren as a 'fundamental condition for critical dialogue and the development of forms of solidarity rooted in the principles of trust, sharing, and a commitment to improving the quality of human freedom' (p. 45). An educational experience which is far superior to democratic tolerance.

While the concept of difference and voice guard against a melting-pot scenario, McLaren argues that the notion of border identity provides the framework for student-teacher-student exchanges. The concept of border identity addresses the problem of binary systems of thought. Border identity provides a more fluid interpretation of difference as opposed to the binary experience that is rooted in 'fixed difference'. Border identity invites students to mediate their own stories and assume 'narrative authority'.

A fundamental pedagogical dilemma associated with critical pedagogy is the educator's reconciliation of his/her authority with student's right to occupy space. In other words, how can an educator guard against unintentional devaluing of students' experience without turning the pedagogical process into a celebration of anything-goes pluralism? In keeping with Freire, who suggests that 'I don't hide my options from the students. But I also respect their choices' (in Schugurensky, 1998, p.23), McLaren consistently confronts this pedagogical dilemma by stressing that while educators cannot impose their subjectivity on their students, they should refuse to remain neutral or hide their agenda from them.

The importance of an ongoing research agenda to sustain critical pedagogy is highlighted in McLaren's dialogue with Kris Gutteriez. Gutteriez argues that critical pedagogy ought to be sustained by action-research that identifies how knowledge is constructed and legitimated in classrooms. While a better understanding of the social construction of classroom represents a selective, albeit very important, selection from the vast research agenda associated with critical pedagogy, the issue here is how schools could be transformed from 'the bottom up'? McLaren and Gutteriez rightly argue that direct participation of teachers in the research agenda of critical pedagogy should help them overcome the 'fear of theory'. Unless this hurdle is overcome, I will continue to agree with both authors that privileging of personal experience, combined with 'fear of theory', tends to degenerate into a space for sharing anecdotes or stories. In addition, 'fear of theory' cannot sustain a sophisticated analysis since it bars teachers from sharpening the language of critique.

Finally, McLaren's book constitutes a persistent attempt at answering the the question often asked by students of critical pedagogy – 'empowerment for what?' While describing some of the most humiliating moment of predatory culture, the author suggests that critical pedagogy should transform and redirect the counterproductive manifestation of resistance evident in, for example, the lads in Paul Willis's case study. Unlike the resistance manifested by the lads, which is counter-productive and hegemonic, productive resistance, a by-product of the process of critical pedagogy, leads to self- and social empowerment. The ultimate goal is the formation of 'communities of resistance' with the specific aim of

'de-othering subjugated groups' and strengthening the project of democracy and social justice.

Peter McLaren's confluent contribution to educators engaged in transformative action is wide-ranging, stimulating and engaging. Unfortunately, however, the uninitiated may struggle to access the transdisciplinary language in which his ideas are couched.

References

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- Willis, P. (1981) *Learning to Labour*, Hampshire, England: Gower.

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