

Chapter 3

Moving Away From the “Chalk and Board”: Lessons From a Critical Pedagogical Standpoint

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ABSTRACT

Freire contended that teachers' knowledge sets are incomplete without the critical engagement and dialogic exchange with students. Such non-hierarchical and collaborative arrangements are perceived to be at the crux of transformative praxis. As a way of testing the possibilities around this pedagogical alternative, this project encouraged teachers to creatively explore critical pedagogical approaches (CPA) in the classroom and the extent to which this enhanced the engagement of students, and, ultimately, their ability to critically apply their understanding of existing knowledge frames to the formation and presentation of new forms of knowledge. Written observations and self-reflections point to the salience of systemic constraints that were rooted in the structural and cultural facets of the school system, and the effect of these both on teachers' adoption of a bimodal model of instruction, and, on their partial success in this endeavor. Implications for theory and practices are herein discussed.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world today that is fast paced and ever-changing and where success is largely dependent on our ability to creatively apply our knowledge, skills and abilities to further our economic development. However, teachers in the classroom face an everyday conundrum. That is, they are challenged to prepare students for standardized assessments, “while still adding creativity to the curriculum” (Longo, 2010, p. 54). This is on account of the growing movement towards an instrumental approach to education where

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the emphasis has been on increasing pass rates, standardizing formal testing systems, and enhancing existing levels of efficiency and effectiveness within schools. With increasing calls for accountability, schools are further pressed to provide high quality instruction with increasing structures of surveillance (UNESCO, 2007). The inherent emphasis in this case is on ensuring that students are given the necessary skills and knowledge sets that are deemed necessary to function within the labor market, and, by extension, the broader society. In fact, citing the early works of Apple (1979), Cho (2013, p.19) contended that such a system “treats educational issues-curriculum, teaching, learning, evaluation, discipline and classroom management-as both technical and non-political, and thus has focused on coming up with procedural models.”

Such technical rationality presents a challenge for education systems to equip students with the ability to think critically, act constructively, and aptly adapt to move their societies forward. The persistence of such instrumental logic challenges the potential for criticality and creativity in the classroom (Craft, Jeffrey, & Leibling, 2001; Burnard & White, 2008; Hove, 2011). This is particularly the case for teachers who struggle with creative strategies in their teaching (Fleith, 2000; Robinson, 2006), the critical engagement of students (Sternberg, Grigorenko & Singer, 2004), and the possibilities for self-directed learning (Robinson, 2006; Hove, 2011; Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014). Given the importance of creative teaching to critical thinking (Meyer, 1986; Mayfield, 1997; Eckhoff & Urbach, 2008; Rinkevich, 2011), student engagement (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014) and academic success (Schachter, Thum & Zifkin, 2006; Vasudevan, 2013), the question then becomes that of whether teachers are trained to promote critical thinking in the classroom. We also argue for deeper interrogations of the underlining philosophy of teacher training programs, the processes through which teachers are prepared to creatively and critically engage students, the actual realities of the classroom, and, the collective effects on teachers ability to move beyond or to transform the chalk and board of the classroom.

TEACHER TRAINING AND PREPAREDNESS

We contend that the issue of teachers’ pedagogical approaches within the classroom requires an examination of the teacher training programs. The authors start therefore, with a recognition of the many reforms of teacher training programs in Trinidad and Tobago. To a large extent, the authors note these reforms have been locked within attempts to regularize teacher education in Trinidad and Tobago, to standardization of the criteria for employment or promotion of teachers in the service, to increase access to teacher training institutions. The latter has resulted in the particular expansion of many teacher training institutions, programs, and specializations in Trinidad and Tobago.

Despite such enlargement, teacher training programs remain somewhat fragmented with conflicting epistemological assumptions that drive teaching practices (George, Worrell, & Rampersad, 2002; Steward & Thomas, 1997). A key issue that remains therefore, is the lack of consensus on the “essential knowledge, skills, and competencies that new primary teachers should acquire during pre-service training (Lewin & Stuart, 2003, p. 699). A related matter is also a lack of more pointed discussions of the ontological role and purpose of teacher education and that of how do teachers contribute to the betterment of the wider society that schools serve. These raise many related questions on the type and level of preparedness of teachers to engage in the everyday classroom, and, with the specific concern of whether they are prepared to creatively and critically engage students in the classroom.

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