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Using critical pedagogy in English education: Disjunctures between pre-service teachers' preparation and opportunities for implementation

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Abstract

In many universities offering qualifications in education, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy features prominently in curricula for pre-service teachers of English. Student teachers are prepared with the knowledge and skills that enable them to use approaches from critical pedagogy to teach English effectively in their classrooms upon graduation. Critical pedagogy affords pre-service teachers of English training in teaching critical literacy, a pedagogy of self-empowerment, and tools for teaching critical thinking. However, student teachers may not easily exploit these affordances when they start to teach since many constraints in the school system may impede the effective implementation of critical pedagogy in the English classroom. These constraints include the inflexible Annual Teaching Plan, the practice of teaching for assessment, and contradictions in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). As a result, there is a disparity between the vision of teaching English in critical ways on the one hand and opportunities to realise this vision within the structures of South African policy on the other. In this article, we explore this disparity and its implications for learning to teach English within a critical pedagogy framework.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, English education, learning to teach, teacher preparation, teacher opportunity

Introduction

Critical pedagogy, as a philosophy, informs, in part, teacher education in the global South. This educational approach is steered by the need to help students develop a profound awareness of the injustices around them based, for example, on class, race, and gender, and to

become conscientious of their role as critical subjects (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2007; Nelson & Chen, 2022). By relating English content to their own contextual realities, students learn to think critically about how power relations work to include some people and marginalise others and are invited to interrogate these practices of exclusion and marginalisation.

In the field of English education, critical pedagogy informs curriculum design and delivery of courses aimed at training pre-service teachers of English to be reflective about their practice and to be critical about the texts they teach because texts are not neutral (Behari, 1997; Janks, 2010). South African studies by Mendelowitz (2017), Mendelowitz et al. (2023), Motlhaka (2016), and Pillay (2014, 2021) provide evidence that curriculum design informed by critical pedagogy has been instrumental in capacitating pre-service teachers of English and preparing them for the classroom. These success stories point to the agency of university teacher educators in mitigating various challenges in their contexts of practice in preparing student teachers for the field of work. Mendelowitz et al. (2023, p. 8) stated that "as language teacher educators, we are constrained by school language policies. . . [but] we still need to prepare our students to teach in schools that are subject to these policies." Through various critical pedagogy approaches, teacher educators can overcome constraints to develop critical literacy in their pre-service teachers, motivate them to teach for social transformation, and empower them to reflect on their own practice so as to make needed improvements as they progress.

However, once students graduate, they enter a school context that is different from the university one of teaching and learning. While English curricula at university are flexible and allow teacher educators to have some level of academic freedom in choosing their own topics and methodologies of teaching (Le Grange, 2011; Monchinski, 2008), the school system in South Africa is less so since teaching is regulated by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). In this article, we explore the tensions between teacher preparation and teacher opportunity to teach English using critical pedagogy approaches and the complexities of learning to teach that arise out of this situation.

The rigidity of the school system raises the fundamental issue of whether student teachers are given the opportunity to implement in their classroom what they learned at university. It is one thing to study critical pedagogy and know how to design English lessons informed by its approaches, but it is quite another to have the opportunity to teach English in ways that allow the implementation of such knowledge and skills in practice. The constraints to English teaching in schools are: (1) the inflexibility of the Annual Teaching Plan provided by the Department of Basic Education; (2) the dominant practice of teaching for assessment; and (3) the contradictions in CAPS. While the Annual Teaching Plan pushes English teachers to adopt a textbook-centred approach to teaching that neglects learners' own contextual experiences, the dominant practice of teaching for assessment as well as the contradictions in CAPS often leave teachers unmotivated to be creative in designing their lessons (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020). These constraints make it vital to consider teacher opportunity as an important issue in any discussion of critical pedagogy in the English classroom. The problems related to opportunity—its absence, shortage, ephemeral nature, and links to power

and control—create an uneasy relationship between pre-service teacher preparation and the opportunity to teach English. This incompatibility prompted us to develop a deep analysis of the complexity of learning to teach from the perspective of critical pedagogy in South Africa.

Critical pedagogy: Toward an understanding

Critical pedagogy arose from the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire whose two books, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (1970) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), set out approaches and a rationale for this way of teaching. Context is important here because, as Monchinski (2008, p. 123) noted, "[A]ll forms of critical pedagogy respect the context in which knowledge creation and transmission occurs." Both Giroux (1988) and McLaren (1989) explored the theory and practice of critical pedagogy in the North American context in relation to schooling and democracy, citizenship, and social problems. Borg and Mayo (2006) theorised critical pedagogy based on the Maltese context with its subaltern communities of colonised Indigenous people and othered immigrant populations. Engagements with critical pedagogy based on the South African context have also taken into consideration the country's history of colonial domination and apartheid-based discrimination against Black, Indian and Coloured people, and have emphasized the important roles of emancipatory education, critical literacy, and multilingualism in transforming post-apartheid South Africa (see Dixon & Mendelowitz, 2016; Isaacs & Waghid, 2015; Mayaba et al., 2018; Thomas, 2009). In this country, critical pedagogy is projected as teaching for social justice. It positions the school as a site in which inequalities can be challenged or maintained (Giroux, 1989; McLaren 1989, 2007). Freire (1972, p. 9) believed that "critical pedagogy is the technique that can provide teachers, learners and researchers with a better means of understanding the role that schools play within a race, class, and gender-divided society." Understanding the role played by schools in society can help eradicate the tendency of learners and parents to view schools as islands detached from their reality and see, instead, the integration between home and school as essential to the development of a holistic knowledge economy (Edwards, 2018) and as bridging the gap between home literacies and public philosophies.

Critical pedagogy is more than just theory and philosophy; it is also a practice and a praxis (see Monchinski, 2008) enacted in learning spaces. Fobes and Kaufman (2008, p. 27) noted that critical pedagogy "is both a form of practice and a form of action [because] it beseeches us to use our teaching and learning to work towards a more equitable society." For Siqueira (2021, p. 4), critical pedagogy "is not a theory or a method, but a way of life, it is a form of doing teaching and learning, it is teaching with an attitude." There is general agreement that the goal of critical pedagogy is to offer an approach to teaching that empowers learners to become thinkers on their own, not just recipients of information. Burbules and Berk (1999, p. 46) explained that "to be 'critical' basically means to be more discerning in recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concepts, and so forth." Critical pedagogy helps students become critical thinkers, in its promoting education for social change and intellectual liberation. We go on to look at some empirical research that shows how different

approaches to critical pedagogy have been deployed in university courses to prepare pre-service English teachers for the classroom.

The affordances of critical pedagogy in teacher preparation

Critical pedagogy has much to offer towards the preparation of pre-service teachers to teach English across grades in South African schools, in both English Home Language (HL) and English First Additional Language (FAL) subjects. While there are different bodies of knowledge that inform the South African higher education curriculum for B.Ed. programmes at universities, teacher educators in the field of English education have used critical pedagogy approaches to effectively prepare pre-service teachers of English for the teaching of literature, language, media texts, and creative writing in South African schools. Critical pedagogy affords pre-service teachers of English: (1) training in teaching critical literacy; (2) a pedagogy of self-empowerment; and (3) a tool for teaching critical thinking.

Training in teaching critical literacy

In B.Ed. programmes based on critical literacy, teacher educators teach student teachers about the relationship between language and power and show them how to explore the intricacies of this relationship in literary texts, language textbooks, media texts, and screen narratives. Janks (2010) explained that critical literacy is the process of reading the word (language) and the world (society) critically. To do so is to uncover what is hidden in textual and social practices, to ask questions about who benefits from these practices and who is disadvantaged by them, and to challenge, ultimately, the power ideologies at play in these practices. Because teachers of English work mainly with texts as tools of teaching, critical literacy enables them to see how language choices in texts "are designed to convey particular meanings in particular ways and to have particular effects" (Janks, 2010, p. 61).

The relationship between language and identity is also important in critical literacy. For Mendelowitz et al. (2023), it is important to train pre-service English teachers to understand the different ways in which language impacts on identity. In their effort to help students develop an awareness of the relationship between language and identity, they adopted a critical social justice approach that shifted the focus from language as grammar to language as social discourse. As they put it, "[W]e began by explicitly rejecting the usual language-as-grammar-and-lexis approach found in schools and encouraging students to think deeply and critically about what language really *is*, what it *does* and how it *works*" (p. 26, emphasis in original). What transpires then in the critical literacy classroom is "the introduction of students to sophisticated linguistic and aesthetic metalanguages for talking about, critiquing, and reconstructing texts and discourses" (Luke, 2004, p. 21). By exposing pre-service teachers of English to the practice of critical literacy, teacher educators equip them with skills to use different texts effectively in the classroom for addressing questions of social injustice, exclusion, and marginalisation while also empowering them to voice concerns about personal issues.

A pedagogy of self-empowerment

Critical pedagogy offers pre-service teachers of English a pedagogy of self-empowerment, thereby preparing them to deal with the challenges of the classroom. Evidence of this claim can be found in a study in which Pillay (2014) applied critical pedagogy in teaching English in a B.Ed. programme at a university in KwaZulu-Natal. She noted that critical pedagogy enabled her students to reflect on and debate issues of transformation in South African society (e.g. gender, race and linguistic transformation) and to share ideas for using literary texts in their classrooms to promote emancipatory education. In addition, students were empowered to overcome their fears about lesson preparation and take charge of their learning. In another article in which she reflects on teaching Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to her students, Pillay (2021, p. 287) reported that she "used a critical pedagogy to help students talk back to, question and challenge the beliefs and practices that emanate from the play." The result was that students could draw on their knowledge of the text, their indigenous knowledge and languages, and their profound knowledge of many types and levels of oppression in the world around them to talk back to Shakespeare as the messenger of colonisation and to do so in intellectual, emotional and critical ways. Pillay's work illustrates that critical pedagogy can empower pre-service English teachers to take charge of their learning, gain self-confidence in lesson design, develop critical consciousness, and talk back to colonial knowledge systems in postcolonial South Africa. Critical pedagogy, therefore, offered students a means to self-empowerment.

Tool for teaching critical thinking

Critical pedagogy assists pre-service teachers of English to become teachers who possess critical thinking skills, creative skills, and problem-solving skills. This is the same skills set teachers are expected to develop in English learners. The CAPS document for English FAL (Grades 10–12) states that the Additional Language must be taught in ways that give learners

> opportunities to speak the Additional Language for interpersonal reasons (e.g. a conversation), to develop their creativity (e.g. performing a poem, role playing, etc.), to develop cognitive academic skills (e.g. taking part in a debate) and to prepare for the workplace (e.g. taking part in an interview). (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 11).

Such critical skills can be acquired through dialogic teaching methods that encourage learners to participate actively in the lessons since dialogic education is fundamental to a critical pedagogy approach (Freire, 1972). Moreover, critical pedagogy is all about education that produces critical thinking in learners.

The relationship between critical pedagogy and critical thinking is that both are concerned with identifying and explaining inaccuracies, distortions, and falsehoods in society that limit freedom and create unequal power relations (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Critical pedagogy then affords pre-service English teachers critical thinking skills that they can impart to their learners. Burbules and Berk (1999, p. 46) observed that "the prime critical thinking tools are

the skills of formal and informal logic, conceptual analysis, and epistemology." In a study involving language education students at a university in the Free State, Motlhaka (2016) aimed to find out how the practice of critical pedagogy in the training of English FAL pre-service teachers helped them to develop critical thinking skills. He found that critical pedagogy enabled the student teachers to gain critical thinking skills such as organising and synthesising information, explaining a point of view, evaluating evidence, understanding alternative perspectives, and justifying a particular reasoning. These findings illustrate that the use of critical pedagogy in the training of pre-service English teachers may capacitate them to improve the quality of English education in schools. These student teachers become able to teach literature and language in ways that foster critical thinking about problems that plague contemporary society (Crookes, 2010; Mendelowitz, 2017).

Critical thinking goes hand-in-hand with critical writing and critical pedagogy affords pre-service English teachers imaginative writing skills. In such writings, they can question hegemonic and misogynistic practices in their families, schools, communities, and the state. In a first-year sociolinguistics course for pre-service teachers of English at a university in Johannesburg, Mendelowitz (2017) implemented a critical writing pedagogy that centred on critical imagination and its value in English teacher education. She found that enhancing students' imaginative thinking and dialogic engagements through creative writing generated opportunities for students to counter misogynistic discourses in everyday life. Students' creative and reflective writing used dialogue between characters to problematise cultural notions of masculinity, sexist and patriarchal discourses, and sexual labelling. These are gender concerns that are often part of the hidden curriculum. Students may miss interrogating them if teachers do not create opportunities for incidental learning and for conversations about gender (Vu & Pham, 2022). Mendelowitz's (2017) critical writing pedagogy helped pre-service teachers of English to put gender on the agenda when they were writing about self and fictionalised others.

Critical pedagogy and constraints in implementation

The empirical studies discussed in the previous section point to significant efforts by teacher educators to prepare pre-service English teachers for the classroom. However, as noted in the introduction, there is no guarantee that pre-service English teachers will have the autonomy and opportunity to use critical pedagogy approaches in their classroom teaching once they enter the workforce. As Monchinski (2008, p. 123) noted, university teachers "may have opportunities of negotiating syllabi and curricul[a] with their students that high school and primary teachers may lack." In South African schools, there are several constraints to implementing critical pedagogy in the English classroom that gesture towards understanding teacher opportunity as volatile. These constraints are structural, systemic, policy-based, and operational and it is hard to isolate one from the other since they are necessarily intertwined. Teaching according to the Annual Teaching Plan, teaching for assessment, and contradictions in CAPS are three major constraints that significantly impact teacher opportunity to put critical pedagogy into practice in the English classroom. While these challenges are not

peculiar to English, they do provide insight into the ephemeral, evasive, and unstable nature of teacher opportunity in enacting critical pedagogy.

Teaching according to the Annual Teaching Plan

Provided by the Department of Basic Education and enforced by its officials, the Annual Teaching Plan prescribes for teachers what subject content needs to be taught when and for how long. It specifies the topics, skills, requisite pre-knowledge, resources, and assessments for each week of teaching. To illustrate, the 2021 plan for English FAL Grade 12 specifies 10 weeks of teaching for Term 1 and the CAPS topics for these weeks are (1) listening and speaking for Weeks 1 and 2; (2) reading and viewing for Weeks 3 and 4; (3) writing and presenting for Weeks 5 and 6; (4) language structure and conventions for Weeks 8 and 9; and (5) revision for Weeks 9 and 10. Topics are further broken down into smaller topics, concepts, skills, or values. For example, in Week 5 that focuses on writing and presenting, teachers are expected to teach reading comprehension, listening comprehension, vocabulary, literary texts, process writing, direct and indirect speech, and cartoons (Department of Basic Education, 2021).

On the one hand, the Annual Teaching Plan ensures that all curriculum content is covered within a desired timeframe and provides a helpful structure for new teachers who may find it useful to know what they need to teach when (Bower, 2019; Letshwene & Du Plessis, 2021). On the other hand, it has been found by teachers to be inflexible since it leaves little room for teacher manoeuvres such as bringing in creative activities (Bower, 2019). Furthermore, it is too fast paced and therefore does not allow teachers the time to diagnose learners' knowledge and skills gaps and then design teaching to meet these needs (Bower, 2019; Letshwene & Du Plessis, 2021). Ultimately, it does not promote equal education because it adopts a one-size-fits-all approach whereas learners have different cognitive abilities. As Bower (2019, para. 8) observed, "[M]any experienced teachers feel that it undermines their professional judgement because it allows no room for responsiveness or creativity."

For new English teachers who have been trained to use critical pedagogy in teaching English, the inflexible and fast-paced nature of the Annual Teaching Plan means that they have little opportunity to experiment with the diverse critical pedagogy approaches they encountered at university. In Pillay's critical pedagogy work (2014), she used dialogic and reflective activities to get her students to talk about how they felt about literary texts and to think about why they felt that way, and through these learning strategies she was able to empower her students to be agents of their own self-transformation. Similarly, Mendelowitz (2017), in her critical writing pedagogy for her first-year sociolinguistics course, employed embodied activities involving role play and reflective narratives to get students to engage with linguistic and social practices that affected them personally. While these teacher educators had the autonomy to use these critical pedagogies in their university courses, a Grade 11 English teacher in a school, for example, has neither the latitude nor the time to do similar critical pedagogy work because this may hinder them from completing their weekly teaching tasks and may incur reprisals from school authorities, as well as Department of Basic Education

officials, for not sticking to the Annual Teaching Plan. Mavhiza and Prozesky (2020, p. 5) highlighted the extent to which English teachers are handicapped when they stated that

> as much as CAPS stipulates that there should be creativity in the literature classroom, the structure of the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) makes such creativity almost impossible; the teacher is compelled to emphasise assessment, as this is the tool used by school management and subject facilitators to determine the work done in the classroom.

Effectively, to stay safe, new English teachers strive to adhere strictly to the plan and, in time, teaching to the plan becomes their standard practice. The limitation placed on their opportunity to practise what they learned at university supports our argument that there is no one-to-one relationship between teacher preparation and teacher opportunity.

Teaching for assessment

The second constraint to implementation, as noted earlier, is the school culture of teaching for assessment that poses a significant barrier to critical pedagogy in the English classroom. In English language teaching, CAPS distinguishes between questioning that happens every day during lessons (assessment for learning) and questioning that occurs at the end of a learning unit or term (assessment of learning) (Department of Basic Education, 2011). While both forms of evaluation are essential and should be used integratively, several studies have shown that assessment of learning is practised more than assessment for learning in the teaching of the English language in South African schools (see Chavalala, 2015; Kanjee, 2020; Reyneke, 2016). The underlying problem, according to Reyneke (2016), is that South Africa sees learners' performance in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations as a yardstick for measuring the success of the public schooling system. Thus, CAPS and the Annual Teaching Plan are designed to promote high-stakes assessment and to align all formative assessments with the summative assessments offered at the end of the year at all levels of the FET phase and, ultimately, with the final NSC examinations at the end of Grade 12. As Reyneke (2016, p. 5) stated,

> [T]he result is that teachers, who are held accountable for learner performance in national examinations, mechanically adhere to stipulations regarding [school-based assessment] in the CAPS instead of creating worthwhile learning experiences or generating assessment tasks aimed at the promotion of deep learning.

This means that teachers teach to assessment because they need to achieve high pass rates for their schools, thereby giving the Department of Basic Education a positive public image. Perhaps, inadvertently, they do this to defend their jobs. This kind of teaching does not encourage critical analysis of content for critical thinking and transformation of learners' ways of thinking, because it focuses on transmitting information rather than making learners co-creators of knowledge as Freirean critical pedagogy demands.

With regard to teaching literature specifically, even though CAPS suggests that both formative and summative assessments are meant to help learners develop creative thinking (Department of Basic Education, 2011), the irony is that the assessment questions used during lessons, as presented in study editions of literary texts, are context-based short questions that require merely the remembering of information. Learners then read literary texts only to regurgitate content knowledge during assessments. Mavhiza and Prozesky (2020, p. 5) observed that "many teachers keep to a teacher-centred drilling of learners so that they fare well in the examinations." Assessments that empower learners to apply creative imagination in connecting the experiences of characters in literary texts to real-life experiences in their communities are inhibited by the Annual Teaching Plan that comes with fixed types of assessment. Consequently, English teachers are constrained in using formative assessment that requires the application of critical pedagogy approaches.

Contradictions in CAPS

Inconsistencies within CAPS present challenges to applying critical pedagogy in the English classroom. In their study on the challenges of implementing CAPS in accounting, Letshwene and Du Plessis (2021) found several problems with CAPS, one of which is the integration of subjects (economics, accounting, and business studies) at Grades 8 and 9, that forces some teachers to teach outside their fields of knowledge and expertise. Similarly, our close analysis of the CAPS document for English FAL reveals contradictions in terms of implementation in the classroom. According to CAPS, learning English as FAL should enable learners to "express and justify, orally and in writing, their own ideas, views and emotions confidently in order to become independent and analytical thinkers" (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 9). However, the approach prescribed for the teaching of literary texts cannot help English FAL learners to become the independent and analytical thinkers envisaged. CAPS requires teachers to "make every attempt to read as much of the text in class as possible without breaking for any other activity" (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 17). As a result of this policy injunction, teachers tend to read English literary texts aloud with their learners in class, and the reading aims solely to help learners acquire the most basic knowledge of the texts (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020; Simango, 2020). The activities that accompany the reading seldom stimulate learners to think independently and analytically; learners are made to answer questions that require them to merely identify figures of speech in a text, recall plot details, and know characters' names. The reading aloud, explanation, and narration of content strategies that teachers tend to use in the English FAL classroom because of CAPS are not in sync with critical pedagogy approaches that promote critical thinking.

Two critical pedagogy approaches that would be useful in an English FAL classroom to get learners to think critically about literary texts are cooperative learning and the problem-posing method (Monchinski, 2008; Motlhaka, 2016; Nelson & Chen, 2022). Motlhaka (2016, p. 68–69) explained that "cooperative learning calls for reflection, many responses, as well as change in responses, and allows for group participation to elicit responses which provide a source of information and learning for further discussion." This approach not only counters the boredom induced by having the teacher read the text aloud and explain the content, it also

allows learners to work with each other to consider meaning from the text. As Motlhaka (2016, p. 69) argued, "[C]ooperative learning enhances students' critical thinking skills, as they tend to have a deeper understanding of the material and remember it by using the language of the discipline, explaining, providing feedback, understanding alternative perspectives, and organising and synthesising information." An alternative approach is the problem-posing model. According to Nelson and Chen (2022) who applied this model in their Grade 4 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class in the United Arab Emirates, the model is sensitive to learners' unique realities and promotes critical thinking while enhancing their language productions. This assertion echoes that of Monchinski (2008, p. 123) that "a problem-posing education encourages critical learning." The application of this approach in the English FAL classroom, therefore, gives learners a voice, making them agents of learning, in contrast to the teacher-centred approach that makes the teacher the custodian of knowledge. That CAPS prescribes teaching approaches that are in direct opposition to critical pedagogy approaches makes teacher opportunity in the school system an elusive possibility.

Another contradiction in CAPS is that it encourages the concept of critical reading that promotes the idea of critical engagement with textual content, while simultaneously discouraging literary interpretation of texts in its stating that "literary interpretation is essentially a University level activity, and learners in this [FET] phase do not have to learn this advanced level of interpretation" (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 17). Effectively, CAPS promotes a superficial explanation of content by teachers because, in its view, literary interpretation is reserved for higher education. An artificial dichotomy is forced between critical reading and literary interpretation as if one is independent of the other. The challenge for new English teachers with critical pedagogy training will be how to work around this contradiction in order to engage learners in interpretations of texts that challenge hegemonic knowledge, especially about race, class, gender, sexuality, and language practices in everyday life. While teacher opportunity is severely limited by this contradiction, English teachers need to find ways to enhance teaching based on using critical pedagogy strategies. In the case of teaching drama texts, teachers can use the talk-back approach that Pillay (2021, p. 289) said she used as a high school teacher "and [that] worked very well in interrogating issues on both an intellectual and emotional basis." According to Pillay (p. 289), "[T]alking-back involves speaking as an equal to an authority figure and daring to disagree and/or have an opinion." She further explained that "within the process, students pose questions, offer alternatives, take liberties, fill in gaps, and challenge assumptions, among others, related to the subject matter and text" (p. 289). Talking back in the drama class gives learners voice and agency in making meaning out of texts. By creating the opportunity to use such critical pedagogy approaches in the English classroom, teachers could possibly collapse the CAPS-enforced binary between critical reading and literary interpretation.

Preparation vs opportunity: Critical pedagogy and learning to teach

We established earlier that teacher preparation to practise critical pedagogy is ensured by the work of teacher educators whose curriculum design is underpinned by critical pedagogy principles. As shown earlier, critical pedagogy empowers pre-service teachers to carry out transformative teaching when they graduate and become practitioners. However, as illustrated in the preceding section, these pre-service teachers may need help finding opportunities to practise what they have learned at university since the school system is riddled with constraints on critical education. There is an evident mismatch between teacher preparation initiatives and opportunities for pedagogical enactment regarding critical pedagogy in the classroom. This incongruity has implications for pre-service teachers as they learn to teach English. We go on to discuss some of the complexities in learning to teach that have significance for English education.

Learning to teach as learning to maximise preparation and optimise opportunity for implementation

Bringing teacher preparation in conversation with implementation opportunities, we argue that for pre-service English teachers, learning to teach using critical pedagogy means maximising the affordances of their preparation and circumventing the constraints within the school system by creating opportunities for critical pedagogy practice. Since providing a fixed blueprint for doing critical pedagogy goes against its fundamental principle of liberatory education (Freire, 1972; McLaren, 2007; Monchinski, 2008), student teachers need to recognise that what critical pedagogy offers them are possibilities for praxis, not protocols for adoption. It will be up to them to experiment with critical pedagogy approaches in their future classrooms to see what works, how it works, and what the benefits are for their learners. To do this, they will need to create opportunities for critical pedagogy practice in the classroom and capitalise on small windows of opportunity in the curriculum. Robinson and Rusznyak (2020) noted that learning to teach involves student teachers learning to engage with unpredictability and complexity. It involves finding pragmatic ways of being resilient in the face of the tensions and challenges that are likely to erupt as student teachers move from being students to teachers. For Steadman (2021), managing this transition and resolving internal conflicts of commitment and fear are key indicators of teachers' agency in their professional identity formation. Part of teacher preparation should, therefore, aim at preparing pre-service teachers for the complexities, tensions, and challenges they might encounter as novice teachers in schools.

Learning to teach as learning to navigate contradictions in critical pedagogy praxis

For pre-service teachers of English, learning to teach is learning to manage the contradictions and conflicts in critical pedagogy praxis itself. Critical pedagogy constructs teachers as "social actors who engage individually and collectively in the process of opening up greater

democratic spaces and dismantling oppressive structures" (Borg & Mayo, 2006, p. 130). However, this assumes that teachers are committed to fighting systems of oppression that subjugate subaltern groups. Teachers' own positionality in relation to these groups is often left unquestioned. Jeyaraj and Harland (2016, p. 13) noted that "one of the greatest dangers of critical pedagogy is that it can be used as a very subtle Trojan Horse, one which appears to be a gift to the poor but can all too easily contain a hidden agenda." Ellsworth (1992) has warned against the repressive myths of critical pedagogy that has teachers silence diversity or exploit it for their paternalistic agendas under the guise of promoting liberatory education. Vandrick (2014, p. 89) cautioned teachers involved in English second language education to reflect constantly on their social class because it has concrete consequences for pedagogy: "social class status can cause great disadvantage or grant a great privilege."

Therefore, it is important for pre-service teachers of English to see that the terrain of critical pedagogy is not as neatly mapped out for navigation as some of the theoretical literature suggests it might be. As they learn to go out and teach in various contexts, they need to figure out the pedagogical compasses with which they will navigate the complex environment of critical pedagogy praxis. Since critical pedagogy is not a one-size-fits-all pedagogy, they will need to make critical judgments in choosing their critical methods and this requires them to understand their context, and be sensitive to learner diversity, the dynamics of the learning environment, school culture, and community influence. This is where Giroux's (1992) concept of border crossing comes in. Border crossing in this context would entail teachers stepping into the universes of their learners to actually understand their worlds and the challenges therein, rather than trying to assimilate them into a dominant world order (see, too, Borg and Mayo, 2006). Only through possessing accurate knowledge about their learners' socio-cultural contexts would teachers be able to engage learners in meaningful learning activities. Thus, learning to teach means learning to work with and through the contradictions in critical pedagogy praxis.

Learning to teach as learning to reflect on everyday social problems while managing traumatic emotions

English teachers work with texts that are set in various contexts, both local and international. In this regard, learning to teach using critical pedagogy means learning to reflect on everyday social problems from local and international spaces and finding ways to initiate conversations in the classroom where the local speaks with the global and vice versa. According to McLaren (2007), critical pedagogy rejects the teaching of narrow thinking skills and, instead, encourages a pedagogy that brings contentious debates in learners' contexts into the classroom and links these to international dialogue. However, a reflective practice means that English teachers will not just bring into the classroom international news, such as the murder of African American George Floyd by a white police officer in the US in May 2020, and get students to talk about it since such discussions might end up as mere political propaganda. Reflecting on the story first and meditating on all the details will allow the teacher to identify fundamental transgressions of human dignity and social justice that surfaced from the incident (see Pabon, 2018, for example). Then the teacher can design English lessons that

draw on the incident to create talking points for learners and also develop their reflective writing skills. Learning to teach in this case means learning to reflect on the various possibilities surrounding cases of social injustice and asking critical questions such as what happened, what could have happened, and what should have happened.

Such critical reflections, however, may also cause trauma for English teachers since their emotions are part of who they are (Steadman, 2021; Zembylas, 2013). Having theoretical knowledge of incidents of social injustice does not spare the teacher from emotional pain, so the teacher will also have to find ways of dealing with such knowledge without being scarred. This situation illustrates what Zembylas (2013, p. 182) referred to as "the complexity of difficult emotional knowledge." For pre-service teachers of English, therefore, learning to teach means learning to develop coping mechanisms for traumatic situations in teaching. Since "learning to teach is emotional" (Steadman, 2021, p. 3), no degree of teacher preparation can eliminate the possibility of emotional trauma. In addition, learning to teach is about learning to accept that critical pedagogy will not always result in positive, exciting feelings in learners. The result will sometimes be a mixture of pleasure and pain (McLaren, 1989; Perumal, 2014). Yet, critical teachers will always need to have difficult conversations with learners in the English classroom. That there is no easy way out of this messy situation points to the complexity of learning to teach English using approaches based on critical pedagogy.

Learning to teach as learning to reconcile empowerment and disempowerment

Although critical pedagogy does not constitute a homogenous set of ideas, critical theorists are united in their objective to promote education that empowers the powerless, challenges existing social inequalities, and promotes social justice for all (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011; McLaren, 2007). The empowerment discourse, however, needs to be subjected to scrutiny if it is to answer the important question of whether this empowerment is to be achieved with the learners or merely intended for them. Gore (1992, p. 63) argued that

> in attempts to empower others we need to acknowledge that our agency has limits, that we might 'get it wrong' in assuming we know what would be empowering for others, and no matter what our aims or how we go about 'empowering', our efforts will be partial and inconsistent.

So, in learning to teach English using critical pedagogy, pre-service teachers must also learn to be critical of their ideologies of empowerment (Breuing, 2011; Gore, 1993). The disparity between teacher preparation and opportunity must compel pre-service teachers to be humble and reflexive about their claims to empower learners (Gore, 1992). Equally, they must be ready to accept that learner empowerment may lead to learner resistance. While teachers may be pushing learners towards taking action to end social injustice, "some students may voice reservations, even resistance, about being required to work for social change" (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008, p. 27). This poses a conundrum where learner empowerment—a fundamental objective of critical pedagogy—becomes the cause of learners' disruptive behaviour in class.

The reverse side of the empowerment discourse in critical pedagogy that further highlights the complexity of learning to teach, is the teacher's own disempowerment. Several South African studies have demonstrated the affordances of critical pedagogy in the empowerment of the youth (Cooper, 2016; Mayaba et al., 2018). But what is often missed is the pervasive sense of disempowerment teachers may experience as they encounter a school curriculum that leaves little opportunity for independent intellectual work with learners. So, while the rhetoric in critical pedagogy is largely attuned to teachers empowering learners, current teaching conditions in schools enforce teacher disempowerment. It is, therefore, hard to see how disempowered learners can be empowered by equally disempowered teachers. This points to a complexity in learning to teach with which pre-service English teachers must contend. They need to understand that as teachers they will be working constantly to empower themselves through training programmes for teacher development, thereby enhancing their capacity to empower learners.

Conclusion

While preparing prospective teachers for the English classroom is being done in laudable, pragmatic ways in many universities in South Africa, the responsibility for creating opportunities to implement critical pedagogy, in whatever context of teaching they find themselves, will remain that of the teacher graduates. They must start by defining themselves as critical teachers and building on this identity. For pre-service English teachers, this requires a strong sense of self to push forward despite the limitations posed by CAPS. For a critical English teacher, learning to teach ultimately means exploiting limitations to create opportunities.

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