Critical theory and educational research

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This paper explores the concept of 'socially critical' research in education as this term is used in action research. The paper takes a critical incident from a mathematics lesson reported by a teacher in her journal. An analysis is presented of this observation and the teacher's subsequent reflection on the incident in dialogue with the writer. This incident is used to exemplify methodological principles of this research approach, which are briefly outlined at the beginning of the paper.

I have been asked to write about the 'critical paradigm in educational research'. Clearly in the space that I have I can but point to a few features of what is a huge and rapidly growing literature. I think the best way to do this is to begin with a definition, look at some of the implications of it, and then give an example of the kind of methods I use. This I will do through a very brief analysis of an observation made by a teacher, and her reflection upon it First, then, to a very short account of critical theory.

The term *critical theory* is used to refer to the work of a group of sociopolitical analysts commonly referred to as *the Frankfurt School*, whose prominent members included Adorno, Marcuse and more recently, Habermas. They were all interested (in both senses of the word) in the idea of a more just society in terms, not just of all people having equal access to the good things of life, but also and perhaps more importantly, of people being in cultural, economic and political control of their lives. They argued that these goals could only be achieved through *emancipation*, a process by which oppressed and exploited people became sufficiently *empowered* to transform their circumstances for themselves by themselves. It is called 'critical theory' because they saw the route to emancipation as being a kind of self-conscious critique which problematises all social relations, in particular those of and within the discursive practices of power, especially technical rationalism.

This work has been taken into education in a number of different ways, but most notably by Paulo Freire in his work with oppressed minorities which gave rise to the term *critical pedagogy*, meaning teaching-learning from within the principles of critical theory. Henry Giroux and Michael Apple have provided excellent theoretical accounts of the nature and working of critical theory in their work on the political, institutional and bureaucratic control of knowledge, learners and teachers. Giroux's (1983) *Theory and resistance in education: A pedagogy for the opposition*, is perhaps the most comprehensive, accessible and succinct introduction currently available.[1] Another group to use critical theory in education is those working in action research, a movement which has been particularly strong in Australia, largely initiated as it was by Stephen Kemmis of Deakin University and developed by others, particularly Shirley Grundy, now of The University of New England.[2] It is with this last approach that my own principal interests lie and therefore about which I will be writing. Note that I tend to write about 'socially critical' rather than 'critical' research, as there are many other ways of being critical, so it is necessary to emphasise that this work is social both in terms of what and how one critiques.

Second, then, a definition.

Socially-critical research in education is informed by principles of social justice, both in terms of its own ways of working and in terms of its outcomes in and orientation to the community. It involves strategic pedagogic action on the part of classroom teachers, aimed at emancipation from overt and covert forms of domination. In practical terms, it is not simply a matter of challenging the existing practices of the system, but of seeking to understand what makes the system be the way it is, and challenging that, whilst remaining conscious that one's own sense of justice and equality are themselves open to question.
(Modified from Tripp, 1990a, p.161)

In practical terms, some of the major methodological principles of socially-critical research that come from that definition are as follows:

1. Participation: Socially-critical research is most effective when done by mutually supporting groups.

2. Direction: Whether group or individual, socially-critical research is always self-directed because the emancipatory interest of the participants will inform the way they themselves work as well as inform what they aim to achieve.

3. Consciousness: Consciousness creates 'problematics' (the viewpoints that make certain things a problem for us) and hence composes the way in which we compose our teaching and research.[3] The problematisation of consciousness and the values embedded in it is therefore the key characteristic of socially-critical research.

4. Meaning: Rather than regarding knowledge as the cumulation of subjectively neutral objectively verified facts, socially-critical research sees knowledge as socially constructed and therefore artificial and held differently by different groups. It aims at understanding people's values and uses of their meanings rather than 'finding "the" truth'.

5. Constraints: A constraint is something which determines some other aspect of a situation. Research becomes socially-critical when one works on changing a constraint rather than simply working within it.

6. Outcomes: Socially-critical research tends to seek to develop quite new practices, rather than to simply make existing ones more efficient. Outcomes will often be incorporated in political action as well as in the development of academic knowledge.

7. Audience: The primary audience for the research 'findings' is the participants themselves.

There are two key features of my work that follow from these principles: one, I always try to make my research collaborative; two, I always encourage teachers to keep journals about their professional practice. With regard to collaboration, there are, of course, many different forms in educational research, but the kind I prefer has the following characteristics:

1. that there is a shared commitment to the necessity for the research;
2. that the research agenda concerns topics of mutual concern;
3. that control over the research processes is also equally shared;
4. that outcomes are of equal value to all participants in professional terms;
5. that fairness informs matters of justice amongst participants.

Teacher journals I regard as being essential as a means both of ensuring that the participants are the principal audience for their research, and as a means of enabling them to set the research agenda. As I have dealt with both these features in more detail elsewhere (Tripp, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990), I would like to move straight on to look at what all this means to a classroom teacher engaged in socially critical research. Perhaps the best way to do this is to demonstrate the kind of analysis that we would perform on an entry in a teacher's journal. Here is an example:

Today I conducted a lesson on measuring. It was a grade 3 class. Predicting was involved and many of the children found it difficult to predict first. Most children went ahead and measured the item first. Constant attention and guidance was gi ven to these children.

Another unusual thing which happened was that when they had predicted and then measured, some looked back at their prediction and crossed it out! The children didn't have to be correct. Somehow I don't think they understood the relationship between predicting and measuring. If I could have done this whole lesson over again, I would have made the whole class go over the different stages together. This step by step introduction would allow the students to see that adults predict without getting the 'right' answer.

However, I must admit that there were a few children who were predicting quite well. It was obvious that

these children understood the concept behind predicting and measuring, without having wild guesses. Predicting is a very hard concept to do properly and understand. I guess a way to overcome it, is to do it informally. For example, guessing how many jelly beans in a jar. This certainly would be a good starting point.

The question to ask of this teacher's journal account of the incident is why it happened, which in this case is why "many of the children (find) it difficult to predict first" the answer they would get from measuring. Asking 'why' necessitates a closer look at what happened, which was that the children did not find the actual process of making predictions difficult, but to estimate rather than measure ("Most children went ahead and measured the item first."). The most obvious answer as to why this was happening is that the children strongly believe that to do mathematics well means getting the right answer. The description can then be checked for evidence to support or counter that hypothesis, and the way in which some of the children crossed out their predictions when they found them to be 'wrong', strongly supports it. Further support comes from the words, "adults predict without getting the 'right' answer", for although 'right' is in inverted commas, underlying the statement is the idea that a prediction that differs from a measurement is 'wrong'. Further, "wild guesses" imply the presence of right answers, for guesses can only be 'wild' by being too far off a 'right' answer. If this is how the teacher writes about the situation, then it is probable that these mixed messages would have undermined teacher's saying to the children that 'right' answers were not important.

We now need to go in two different directions with this analysis: one towards the social implications and the other towards the practical implications. Dealing with the latter first, it is reasonable to assume that these Grade 3 children were not trying to thwart the teacher's intentions by deliberately doing the 'wrong' thing, but had misunderstood her. This means that what the children thought the teacher wanted them to do differed from what the teacher actually wanted them to do. Again, we need to check this hypothesis out with the account, and it seems that she thinks it would be useful for her to also show them what they should do because they haven't understood the instructions (predict first) or some necessary fact (the prediction-measurement relation). We can also bring other knowledge to bear to explicate the situation, and in this case I would suggest that the problem arose because the children had already had some practice at estimation, and did not realise that this was something different. One can therefore agree with the teacher's recognition that the children should have been prepared for this activity in a different kind of way, but I would disagree with her suggestion as to what that should have involved, particularly the use of the bean jar for the introduction to a lesson on measuring.

My reason for this lies in her writing that in order to make sure the children did it correctly next time, she would first "go over the different stages" with the class in order to show them that "adults predict without getting the 'right' answer". This suggests that, although she recognised that the 'right answer syndrome' was a problem here (further support for my original explanation), she saw it as a management problem (they must follow this routine) and as a lack of knowledge (they should know adults don't 'get it right' either). In spite of her having given "Constant attention and guidance ... to these children", it was this combination of factors which resulted in the children not knowing what they should be doing.

There's a curious circularity there: prediction, the thing that she says they did not understand sufficiently well to perform the activity is the very thing they were supposed to learn through performing the activity. What seems to have happened here, then, is that her 'theory-in-use' is: children learn through wanting to follow her instructions (rather than by knowing what it is they want to learn), and that this did not work well because she inadvertently set an activity in which an understanding not possessed by all the children was required to perform it.

Although she recognises that they did not understand what they were supposed to be learning ("I don't think they understood the relationship between predicting and measuring"), what she omits from this account is a consideration of the children's relationship to their learning. That is a very significant absence from both a political and a pedagogical point of view, for I would suggest that there is a subtle and covert kind of domination of learners here that actually hinders their learning and disempowers them as (future) learners. It is clear that the learning strategy being offered to these children is to do what the teacher tells them without knowing what they should be learning; and although that does not mean it is a strategy which deprives children of actively intending to learn[4], it is a strategy which deprives children of participation in deciding both what they intend to learn and how they intend to learn it. Thus a kind of double exclusion has occurred: first the children have been excluded from the process of making these

learning decisions and then they have been excluded again by not being told about them.

Returning for a moment to the methodological principles of socially critical research, it is for just such reasons that the problematisation of consciousness is so central to the method. That the teacher saw the problem as one of the children not understanding something (and therefore needing telling) and not as one of their relationship to their learning (and therefore needing to relate to her and each other in a different way) is a matter of the problematics in use. A problematic is the theoretical structure which causes something to be seen as a problematic will therefore also determine the kind of information sought to provide the kind of answers which are accepted as reasonable solutions.[5] Problematics are based on and contain particular assumptions, in this case the dominant idea of the teacher's problematic is that the most important thing in classroom learning is children's (lack of) understanding. Note how, as they usually do, one problematic hid the absence of another here: defining the problem in one (habitual) way prevented certain other considerations. That this is so is shown by the fact that if the lesson had gone perfectly well in terms of what the children did, the teacher would not have felt there was any kind of a problem at all: how could there be a problem if classroom learning is about getting children to understand and everything has been understood? Nevertheless, in that situation the children's relationship to their learning would still have been just as much of a problem though no problem would have been seen. The point is that there can never be a problemless situation: problems are what we think of as a problem, and what we think of as a problem is our 'problematic'.

It should now be clear from the analysis that all paradigms of research operate with different problematics, and socially critical research is no exception: in particular it makes a problem of social relations in terms of freedom and power. Having seen that, we can now look again at what was hap pening in the lesson through that problematic, and we find that the construction of the activity did not maximise at least one of the principles of social justice, namely that the children were not participating in the management of their own learning and were therefore being denied the opportunity to take responsibility for it. So let us now see what happens when we begin to re-plan the same lesson[6] to make the activity more socially just by making it consonant with the principles of participation and direction, lack of which was highlighted in my analysis. One way to do that is to let the children know and decide exactly what it is they are going to learn, and to give them the opportunity to work out amongst themselves and with the teacher a good way of learning it. Here is one way in which that could be done:

1. First, one would have to clarify the purpose of prediction, which is, of course, to enable one to prepare for something. One might then move on to the idea that prediction of a measurement involves estimation. the purpose of which is to check the likelihood of the measurement being correct: too wide a variation between the estimate and the measurement and one should look again to see whether the mistake is an unreasonable estimate or an inaccurate measurement.

2. The children would then have to understand three things about estimation: (a) that having verified the accuracy of the measurement one should substitute it for the estimate; (b) that estimates are different from 'guesses' because they are based on experience and some kind of evidence, such as comparison or a sample; and (c) that the only occasion when one would not substitute accurate measurement for an estimate is one in which measurement is unnecessary, is impossible or when one is practising prediction.

3. The children would then have to see why it is necessary for them to practise prediction, and (our new theory is again important here) they could be asked to suggest what would be a good way for them to practise it, making their own suggestions and negotiating with the teacher the instructions to be followed in the activity.

4. Bearing in mind the difficulty some children may have in refraining from getting the 'right' answer immediately by measuring rather than estimating first, it would be good to ensure that they did predict by using the estimates for something other than just checking the measurements. One obvious such activity would be to see if any improvement occurred in the accuracy of the measures over the duration of the activity, whether they were better at certain kinds of estimating (larger units), or what the mean variation was. Such activities would also improve the learning of the purpose of prediction by focusing attention of the difference between the estimated and the measured values.

What we have done so far, then, is to carefully diagnose what happened in the incident, using that knowledge to work

out what theory seemed to be in use, evaluating that theory against certain principles of social justice, in order to work out a new strategy according to those principles. It should be clear from this that socially critical research is intensely practical. Thus far, however, we have been concentrating more upon the particular situation than upon the wider social issues. It is in contextualising this incident and generalising from it that our analysis becomes more traditionally academic and societal.

Moving on to a more general analysis, then, one finds that this incident illustrates an aspect of classroom meta-learning that has broad social implications: the teacher actually wanted the children to do something that they would never do in other spheres of life as a preparation for those other spheres of life.[7] In effect they were not being asked to predict, but to practise prediction and measurement which is a very different thing, especially in terms of the context in which it occurs. Evidence for this is the fact the some of them were crossing out their predictions after obtaining measurements, just as one would in a situation in which they would measure for some purpose other than mere practice. So it seems that the children were actually predicting and measuring rather than merely practising because they didn't know that their teacher wanted them just to practise. So here is another contradiction: the children were seen to be doing the wrong thing in using in school the operation they would use in life outside school.

It is only in school learning that one frequently does this kind of thing, and it is done in spite of the constant complaints in many sections of the media and the community that school is too divorced from other spheres of life, because there are actually very good reasons for doing so. Taking this incident to illustrate the point, few people would argue either that it is not a 'good thing' for children to be able to measure and estimate and use estimates to check measurements, or that all children would learn these things equally well outside school. The activity was therefore a useful and legitimate one, but the way in which the children did not have the processes of school learning that they were supposed to follow made explicit and explained to them, is quite the opposite. What they really lacked was not more easily understood instructions, but an understandable explanation, not just of what prediction is for, how it is done in other spheres of life, and how and why they are doing it in school, but how and why these two differ. So principles of social justice would not only require the use of a different original learning, but would also require the learning of different things. By seeing this incident as typical of schooling and illustrative of an aspect of the school-community relation, we can locate this incident in the wider social context.

Another more general socially critical aspect comes from asking why it was that this obviously diligent and well intentioned teacher did not herself see the contradictions implicit in her practice. Apart from the fact that she had never been shown how to do the kind of analysis necessary, the answer is that it is not so much that there were contradictions in this particular teacher's practice as that there are contradictions in the 'good' practices teachers have been taught and are expected to use. The contradiction that, in order to perform the activity, children already needed to know the very thing they were supposed to learn through performing the activity, is inherent in an approach to mathematics teaching in which the children are supposed to 'discover' things that have been set by a predetermined syllabus. If teachers are supposed to refrain from telling pupils, so that they can find it out for themselves, the contradiction noted in this incident is inevitable.

And this raises another important feature of socially critical research: the actions of individuals are always seen as being an intelligent response to more general social determinations. Individual people are regarded more as 'agents' of the ideas inscribed in practices than as wholly autonomous actors. If we accept this view, then we cannot place responsibility for the difficulty experienced by the children in this lesson principally on the teacher: we have to locate primary responsibility on the system that has constructed the practices this teacher employed and which has also been primarily responsible for the construction of her view of those practices.

It is in theorising such general phenomena and why the specific practical changes suggested are necessary, that one moves between micro- and macro- analysis in socially critical research. In other words socially critical research operates at and between both the particularities of this teacher's observations of the activity in this classroom with these children on this day, and the broadly social and political questions of how schools operate and why.

Obviously it is not my intention in this paper to provide a detailed answer to those more general questions, but it is reasonably clear that teachers teach in particu lar ways for two major reasons: they have been taught that is how they should teach, and they are so constrained by their conditions of labour that they have little alternative. Teachers'

professional practice is said to be *over determined*, which means that there are a number of different factors, each of which would be sufficient to produce the same result, and which therefore do so all the more strongly together. For example, in this instance it is not just a matter of making teachers use strategies which are inherently contradictory and unjust, but also of constraining democratic practices by giving teachers so many learners at once that the children are rendered communicatively incompetent, as well as by asking teachers to teach more than can be enjoyably and effectively learned in the time allowed (as the standard 50% pass mark indicates), and so on. Such factors thus combine to place teachers in a situation in which they are largely forced simply to decide what the children will do, and then to ensure to the best of the limited resources at their disposal that they do it. This classroom situation is reinforced by other systems, such as the way in which the majority of classroom contextualised pre- and in-service education of teachers is concerned with questions of managing the implementation of the set syllabus.

And so that brings us to a final feature of socially critical research: how things are is never seen as having occurred by chance and for no particular reason; all social systems and their practices are seen to be as they are in order to serve the interests of particular groups. More than any other large professional group, teachers must be controlled, for they are best placed to change society by changing the habits of and instilling ideas in future citizens. If teachers were taught and given the time to analyse their teaching in the way and from the point of view that I have done here, they would not only replace most so-called 'educational' researchers, but they would also resign, rebel or take other forms of political action. But should that not, after all, be the expected outcome of effective socially critical research?

End notes

1. It is important to note that this work is not without criticism from others working according to the principles of critical theory, especially from feminist perspectives (see for instance, Ellsworth (1989) and Lather, 1991).

2. I find the most useful books here to be: Carr and Kemmis (1983), Kemmis, Cole and Suggett (1983) and Grundy (1987), and of course, Tripp (in press)!

3. For further explanation of this idea, see Barnes (1984), Lather (1990), Popkewitz, (1984) and Tripp (1991).

4. This is because the children can still intend to learn through wishing to follow the instructions till they learn what it is they will have learned by following the instructions.

5. Unfortunately the term 'problematic' has become confused through having been used as a jargonesque adjective; it is now commonly used for something which is a problem: 'You know we were going to meet for lunch on Tuesday? Well, I'm afraid that's a bit problematic now'. Problematic is a noun in critical theory, and I am using it here with that specialist meaning. For a fuller account, see Althusser and Balibar (1977).

6. For the purposes of this paper I am not problematising the content of the lesson itself. Were I working with this teacher on re-planning an actual lesson I would suggest that the term 'prediction' be dropped altogether, and the lesson should perhaps begin with a demonstration of the fact that both estimation and measurement involve approximation. One could then move on to the facts that the accuracy (and therefore the unit) required of a measurement depends upon the measurer's purpose, and that the accuracy of measurement and estimation can be improved with practice.

7. I refuse to make the common contrast between 'real life' and 'school life', because it is a means by which certain interest groups devalue school learning by implying that it is 'unreal', that is, pretend and 'play'. School is but one of a number of spheres of life, all of which are equally 'real'. It is difficult to find a satisfactory alternative, but until a better one is found, I will refer to 'school life' and 'other spheres of life'.

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