

# Critical Pedagogy and Critical Interculturality

## Democratic Education and Empowerment through Diversity at School

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**Abstract:** Diversity in the classroom among students or regarding knowledge is often perceived as being a source of conflicts and tensions. However, diverse knowledge and experiences should be addressed at school as being part of a process of empowerment and as supporting democratic values at school, both among students and teachers. Critical pedagogy and critical interculturality try to provide theoretical tools for this purpose.

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy; critical interculturality; diversity; empowerment; democratic values



According to the last census of the German Federal Statistical Office (Federal Office of Statistics of Germany, 2021), 38 percent of the students have a migrant background; that means, they were not given German citizenship by birth or at least one of the parents does not have German citizenship by birth. The percentage of teachers with a migrant background is estimated to be around four percent (Ova et al., 2020, p. 112). Global processes, such as migration or global warming, have an important impact on students' lives. However, schoolbooks, information, or pictures reflecting diversity (cultural, religious, sexual orientation, etc.) or analyzing global developments are still lacking (Niehaus et al., 2015, p. 13). Owing to this divergence, students' experiences and pieces of knowledge acquired out of the school context are missing. In the name of individual development and social progress, the path to homogeneity is imposed in classrooms, understanding diversity as a threat to national unity. However, the acknowledgement of differences, as well as similarities, and critical thinking are part of the foundation for the spread of democratic values and education among younger generations.

Under these circumstances, critical pedagogy might bring light into the discussion. This philosophy of education, developed in Latin America in the 1970s based on the experiences of socially marginalized groups, aims to create a theoretical framework to value diversity in the classroom, empower students, and support democratization processes in marginalized communities. The Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1921–1997) is the most outstanding author in this first period. He argued that schools should fight against oppression and empower students. In the last decades, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and Antonia Darder have become important references in this area and have introduced new topics and concepts to critical pedagogy, such as race, ethnicity, and gender. Moreover, new theories have been developed in the Americas based on Freire's work, for example critical interculturality, which focuses on the entanglements between colonial heritage and diversity of knowledge, the main representative of which is Catherine Walsh; or red pedagogy, which deals with indigenous education and knowledge. The book *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought* (2004), by Sandy Grande, is the most distinctive publication with this perspective.

Due to the hierarchies in the academic and knowledge producing sphere, it is common to apply theories developed in Europe for the analysis of other regions, such as Africa, Asia, or Latin America. However, theories elaborated in these other regions are rarely used to understand European concerns. In this article, I will present the concepts of critical pedagogy and critical interculturality. Both originated in the Americas, with the purpose of motivating critical thinking among educators and personnel of the educational system. Lastly, I will present the exercise "Power-Flower" as an example for encouraging debate among both students and teachers.

## 1 Principles of critical pedagogy

### 1.1 Banking model of education

In order to promote structural changes in the educational system, it is necessary to understand the basis and foundations of the current system. Critical pedagogy describes it as "the banking model of education". Its structure is characterized by the hierarchy of knowledge. The latter lies in the hands of those who regard themselves as wise and who are considered as such also by the system, i.e., the teachers. Their aim is to pass their knowledge to students, who are considered ignorant (Freire, 2012, p. 52). It is assumed that students have no prior knowledge or useful experiences, and they must accept as universal and true what is taught in the classroom. Thus, students are perceived as a repository to be filled with the school content, exclusively imparted by teachers. Consequently, the students' task is to learn by heart what is taught in the classroom, without questioning it, while teachers should neither stimulate their students' critical perspectives, nor their creativity (cp. Freire, 2012, p. 50).

In this way, the oppressed population adapts the dominant mentality and values, which does not only reinforce their situation, but reinforces the domination upon them (cp. Freire, 2012, p. 54). Based on these principles, the success of the school is measured by its contribution to economic growth and cultural uniformity (Giroux & McLaren, 1998, p. 95). It is thus the aim of the school to integrate those persons, who are considered “out of the system”, such as minorities or socially marginalized groups, by transforming their way of thinking through education. However, it is important to point out that those considered “outsiders” are actually part of the system and usually take charge of socially discredited activities. Thus, it is not their integration into the system, but rather their transformation according to the interests of the ruling classes and power structures that is deemed to be necessary (Freire, 2012, p. 54).

Regarding the contents of textbooks, students only have the opportunity to learn “snippets of reality”, since information is given only fragmentarily and detached from its context (Giroux & McLaren, 1998, p. 62). Consequentially, these fragments do not help students understand their reality or question the situation around them. The lack of content related to the German Colonial Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the relationship between African countries and East Germany in German textbooks is a case in point. Names of streets (Bismarck-, Große-Kurfürsten-Straße) or monuments remembering colonial events are not questioned; in the common perception, there is no place for black German people, usually identified as migrants or foreigners.

Moreover, contents are presented as universal and objective. In this way, their localization (why, when, where, by whom, for what purpose is knowledge produced?) is forgotten (Mignolo, 2010, p. 33), while other knowings are branded as subjective or irrational and marginalized. Knowledge and know-how acquired outside the official educational system, which do not follow scientific methods, are not considered and they are usually described as traditions or cultural habits (de Sousa Santos, 2014, p. 313). The perception of languages shows this situation. Learning dominant languages (e.g., English, Spanish, French) is positively considered, while speaking a so-called minority language (Kurdish or Arabic in Germany) is often perceived as controversial or conflictive for students. The label “minority language” refers to the social and political subordination of a language in a particular society. The number of speakers is not a crucial factor, and this perception varies from region to region; for example, Arabic is not a minority language in Egypt or Morocco, but it is in Europe (Cormack, 2007, p. 2).

McLaren and Giroux consider this type of education a violent act. They argue that the memorization of data does not stimulate the questioning of the content taught at school. At the same time, students do not have the option of seeking, valuing, and using their own knowledge and experience. The school’s success is measured by its contribution to economic growth and cultural uniformity, which is characterized by “the glorification of hard work, industrial discipline, restrained desire, and cheerful obedience” (Giroux & McLaren, 1998, p. 95).

To counteract these circumstances, it is necessary to promote a kind of education that does not only challenge the hierarchy of knowledge, but also encourages students as well as teachers to question the content and methods of textbooks.

## 1.2 Problematizing education

In opposition to banking education, critical pedagogy proposes a “problematizing education” to empower oppressed students. Its main characteristic is that it is based on students’ lives and situations, as students themselves become the object of study. The aim is to understand their realities in order to question and transform them. In this way, schools and the education system will turn into a key element in the process of empowerment (Freire, 2012, p. 64).

The subject matter, the students’ situation, must not be understood as a static object, but as a process of change and continuous transformation. To drive change, knowing the

past is fundamental. Understanding the factors and historical axes that have created and kept the circumstances of oppression should help to build a better future (Freire, 2012, p. 67). The project of change for the future should not only aim at transforming the educational system, but also other aspects of life and society.

Regarding teachers, their role in the context of problematizing education changes utterly as they are no longer considered the exclusive source of information. Their duty is not to fill students with information, but to share it so that this knowledge becomes a matter of reflection. Hence, the hierarchy of knowledge between ‘wise teachers’ and ‘ignorant students’ is broken. In the process of reflection and questioning, both groups learn from each other and transform the school into a place of continuous training (Freire, 2012, p. 62).

In order to promote this change, it is necessary to overhaul teachers’ instruction, which currently separates them from their personal experiences (Giroux & McLaren, 1998, p. 85). The first step in this process is the rejection of the concept of “universal knowledge” (Restrepo, 2014, p. 25). Different experiences or necessities result in different knowledges, as diverse paths can have similar outcomes. In the exchange of these diverse knowledges, students, as well as teachers, learn. Moreover, categories like race, ethnicity, gender, or class have to be analyzed from a critical perspective. In what way these classifications influence life experiences should take a central stage in class.

Another important factor to be modified is the curriculum. Teachers usually have little control over textbooks or programs. The structure and contents of both elements rely normally on political decision-makers or administrative personnel. This division between those who conceptualize (decision-makers) and those who actually implement the curriculum (teachers) results in a disconnection between contents and students, since their situations and interests are not considered. Programs are usually designed to consolidate the standardization of the population and maintain national unity; so they are applied in any context without taking into account the historical, cultural, and socio-economic circumstances of the population (Giroux & McLaren, 1998, p. 99).

It is important to point out that the main objective of critical pedagogy is not self-confirmation. Valuing and reinforcing self-knowledge should help students question contents and aspects of the dominant culture, as well as appropriate useful knowledge for a broader transformation (Giroux & McLaren, 1998, p. 114). In order to address diversity and to promote this process, critical interculturality may give some insights.

## 2 Critical interculturality

Since the decade of 1990, numerous policies and programs have been developed on behalf of interculturality or multiculturalism around the globe, seeking a cordial coexistence of different cultural groups in society. However, these programs and policies have been put into question in the last years due to ongoing tensions in Europe, as well as in the Americas or East Asia (Tiryakian, 2003, p. 22). One of the major limitations of multicultural or intercultural policies has been their unidirectional perspective; that is to say, social minorities were expected to learn from the system, yet dominant groups did not have to learn from others. Presumably, oppressed groups had nothing to contribute to society. In addition, social minorities or outsider groups were expected to learn how to interact with others in discriminatory contexts (Walsh, 2010, p. 80). Moreover, the focus was often on rather superficial aspects, such as food or language diversity, while other knowledges, world views, or methods of transmission were not taken into consideration (cp. Walsh, 2010, p. 81).

In this situation, new perspectives on interculturality have been developed. Among them, critical interculturality stands out. The origins of this tendency can be found in the critical pedagogy, as well as in the experiences and movements of indigenous and afro-

descendants in the Americas. The first debates originated in the context of social movements, especially in Ecuador and Colombia, rather than academic or policy-making processes. These mobilizations questioned coloniality, the power and knowledge structures based on the racialization of the population, which was implemented during colonial times and continues until today (Walsh, 2012, p. 17), and highlighted their counter-hegemonic character.

One of its main representatives is the sociologist and pedagogue Catherine Walsh. Despite of the differences between the German and the American contexts, her perspective might be helpful to address diversity and encourage critical thinking among students in German classrooms.

The main characteristic of critical interculturality is that the focus lies on power relations and hierarchies, both socially and in terms of knowledge (Walsh, 2009, p. 35). By understanding their own situation, students should be able to develop relationships in conditions of symmetry with other social groups and promote structural changes (Walsh, 2009, p. 35).

As pointed out earlier, the first step in this process is to recognize that there is no universal knowledge to acknowledge the diversity of the students and their experiences. This acknowledgment should also reinforce the knowledge of social minorities, which have been often considered 'folkloric' or reduced as cultural expressions by the majority society and educational programs. By strengthening this position, it is possible to create a dialogue between different knowledges, so to say, put critical interculturality into practice (Walsh, 2007, p. 32).

In addition, categories, such as gender, race, ethnicity, or class, which are neither locally nor nationally restricted, should also be questioned since they influence daily life experiences and knowledges. This debate will contribute to a better understanding of students' contexts at a personal and collective level, as well as to the awareness of the connections and entanglements between local and global processes. For example, learning about enslavement in the early modern times will help explain current racism and inequalities regarding the black population in Germany and connect their experiences with afro-populations in other states/nations. Therefore, broadening national content and implementing global perspectives in schools should be part of the intercultural project. This might contribute to the strengthening process, as well as to the improvement of teachers' and students' competencies (for more information see the contribution by Nicole Schwabe in this issue).

It is important to clarify that these contents should not only be addressed to students suffering from particular inequality, but to all groups. In this way, critical intercultural projects will contribute to the disruption of the often prevailing image of isolation of minority groups (Walsh, 2009, p. 34) and to the impulse of learning from others' experiences.

### 3 The Power-Flower-Exercise

Finally, I will present an exercise that can be useful to initiate debates and raise awareness on diversity in school. The exercise is known as “Power-Flower” and consists of a drawing of a flower where different social categories or characteristics (gender, sexual orientation, religion, economic status, etc.) are shown. Privileged groups are in the outer petals, whereas groups that tend to be deprived are in the inner petals. Participants should color outer or inner petals, considering their sense of belonging (Europahaus Aurich & Anti-Bias-Werkstatt, 2007).

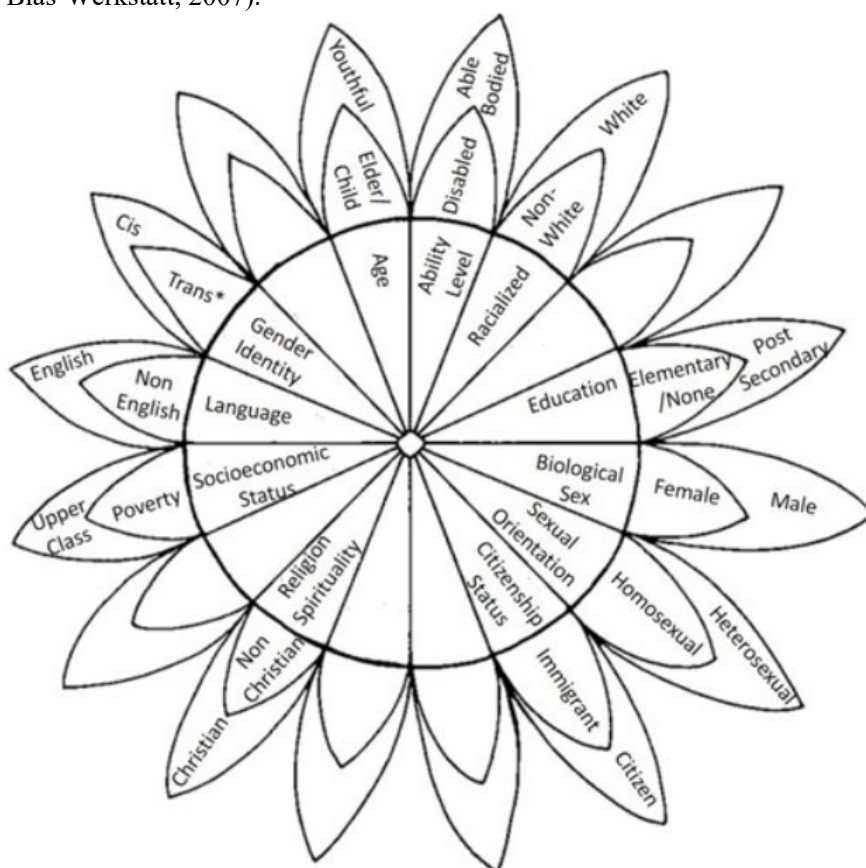


Figure 1: Power-Flower Exercise (“Flower Power,” n.d.)

Through the coloring, each person can see his\*her position in society, and social asymmetries are visualized. The drawing should be an impulse to debate power relationships and social inequalities in the group.

However, the dualistic representation of the categories might cause some doubts or conflicts. For example, a person from another country of the European Union living in Germany does not belong to the most privileged nationality (German); for instance, he\*her cannot vote in the federal elections. Yet this person is in a better position than others coming from the so-called ‘third-world’ countries, e.g., she\*he does not require a visa.

Moreover, the visual division of the groups does not represent the interaction between them. Some privileged positions could be ignored, such as a black man with German nationality or a disabled white woman. Their socially favorable characteristics (German nationality and whiteness) might go unnoticed since their non-privileged characteristics are more visible (blackness and disability), which will influence their experiences and people’s perception of them. These two weaknesses of the method are at the same time the promoters of the debate.

## 4 Conclusion

Diversity is sometimes perceived as a threat, to national unity for example, or as a source of conflicts. However, as we have seen, different know-hows are an opportunity to learn from each other and to expand our knowledge, as well as to drive democratic values at school.

For this purpose, students' heterogeneity must be addressed at school. Critical pedagogy and critical interculturality try to provide teachers with theoretical tools based on the experience of minority and marginalized groups in the Americas. Reinforcing knowledges and experiences learned at school is a key step in this process. Furthermore, the awareness of the individual as well as the group situation regarding social categories, such as gender, ethnic or religion, and global processes should empower students. This awareness and acknowledgement of diversity and similarities reinforce democratic education through debates and symmetrical dialogue between groups. The Power-Flower exercise is just one example that might help to initiate this debate and try to drive critical thinking and democratic values among both students and teachers, because teachers should also learn in this process. Thus, the school may become a place for continuous training and exchange not only for students, but also for educators.

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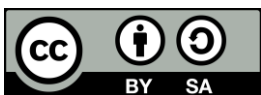
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