

## RECLAIMING AN EDUCATION THROUGH CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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*ABSTRACT: This article uses resistance theory to explain how it contributes to our understanding of some students' resistance to schooling. We present a description of an alternative school in Montreal, Quebec, and discuss how critical pedagogy could effect changes in resisting student subcultures. There are new and creative means of addressing student needs through unraveling and rethinking established school practices. We then discuss the implications for child and youth care workers when addressing the needs and challenges of at risk students.*

*Key words: resistant youth, resistance theory, critical pedagogy, child and youth care work*

In this descriptive study we describe how youth, who are regarded as a problem in the educational system and who have chosen to resist formal schooling, have willingly reached out to enter an alternative school. This non-traditional school draws on critical pedagogical practices to address the problems of resistant youth subculture and their needs. The school illustrates how critical pedagogy empowers the resistant youth to become motivated and active agents in changing and transforming their lives. The intent here is also to make recommendations to child and youth care practitioners who work with school personnel committed to re-integrating "resistant," "at risk" youth.

### SCHOOLING AND RESISTANCE THEORY

Resistant student subcultures have been examined from many perspectives. Here we would like to point to how some educational theorists help us understand why students resist the dominant values, beliefs, culture and curricula of schooling. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) point out that resistance theory emphasizes conflict, struggle and resistance. The notion of human agency is central to their research on student subcultures. Fundamental to this concept is the recognition that individuals

must have and accept some responsibility for their decisions and actions and the consequences of these. The authors focus on the role students play in challenging the oppressive aspects of schooling, and the way in which they participate in oppositional behaviour, which in some cases, puts them in "position of class subordination and political defeat" (p.67). Thus the concept of human agency must also address how schooling and perhaps other social situations, set parameters around resistant youths' decisions and actions as well as their consequences.

Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) argue that there are often contradictory discourses and values between students and teachers. They note that we should not focus too much on overt acts of rebellious student behavior. Rather, the primary focus of resistance theory should be on the role it plays in emancipatory or liberatory education. They write: "...the concept of resistance must have a revealing function that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and struggle in the interest of social and self-emancipation" (pp.99-100). For instance, allowing students to develop their own "generative themes" that is, using their own life experiences and relating these to a particular subject engages them in the subject matter and development of their studies.

Within this framework of resistance, what is offered is the possibility of education producing creative agents capable of changing social structures (Munns & McFadden, 2000). "Given the existence of social structures that impinge on individual and group consciousness, and action, how free action is possible and how oppressive structures can be changed becomes the central issues" (p. 73).

In other words, freedom and rejection of domination are the concern of resistance theory. What is necessary is developing a language of possibility, which is .... a language that engages schools as sites of possibility, that is, as places where students can be educated to take their places in society from a position of empowerment rather than from a position of ideological and economic subordination (Giroux, 1996, p.49). Critical pedagogy is grounded in the language of possibility.

### **CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: CAN IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

Many argue that critical pedagogy is a method of teaching, which recognizes students' subjectivities (personal history, subjective experiences), through dialogue (Freire, 1970; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Shor, 1993; Weiler, 1988). Critical pedagogy encourages reflective self-examination of attitudes, values, and beliefs and emphasizes the questioning of the power of the dominant group in society (such as government, corporate elites, education and other institutions of ideological control). Giroux (1989) writes:

Pedagogy is not concerned simply with creating classroom knowledge produced through oppositional readings of a text, but also with a recognition of the importance of understanding the various ways in which teachers and students produce different

forms of knowledge through complex patterns of exchange they have in their interactions with each other over what constitutes dialogue, meaning and learning itself (p.148).

Students, through critical pedagogy, become aware of why things are the way they are and how they became that way. Freire (1970) notes that students and teachers must acquire a voice, representation, validation and empowerment. The notion of representation refers to providing teachers and students with a voice, which is recognized as valid. That is to say their voices are heard and become part of the decision making process in educational settings. Stated another way, representation and validation of their voices leads to empowerment that essentially refers to providing teachers and students with knowledge, skills, and values required to become social critics who can challenge institutional power.

Concrete examples of critical pedagogy can be found in many schools across the country. Every day, teachers walk into their classrooms with curricula designed to challenge students about the social issues that directly impact upon their lives. Lesson plans are built around generative themes; pedagogical approaches are founded on student-centered dialogue. Classroom practices lead students to heightened levels of consciousness and empowerment. One such school, which implements the various elements of critical pedagogy, is a Montreal based alternative school.

Most of the students present at the alternative school use their former schools as sites of conflict where they drew on foul language, violence, vandalism, etc. to reflect their intense dislike of school authorities in the traditional school system. Most of the students were aware of their educational powerlessness and the social disadvantages that this particular situation places them in. These are students that have become increasingly aware that school was not a place that worked for them, that the community anticipated their failure as well, and that as a result, their opposition and resistance to school as an institution, grew. The rejection of schooling for these students and the presence of an "alternative place" articulates the possibility of a second chance. Furlong (1991) makes the argument that schooling is a highly demanding experience that inevitably gives rise to many "emotional injuries." Some children repress these emotions and carry on with the business of schooling. Others on occasion give vent to their aggression and challenge those in authority; they become the focus of conflict and rejection (Furlong, 1991). Once students have chosen to reject school, it is more difficult to bring them back unless an alternative system is devised that espouses a philosophy of caring and respect unlike any other system that they have experienced before. Students who have chosen to attend such an alternative school have taken control of their schooling.

### THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

Established in 1981 and fully recognized by the Quebec Ministry of Education, this school specializes in working with the marginalized students demonstrating, negative resistant attitudes, and experiencing specific socio-emotional, maladjustive behaviours. Whatever the label (i.e. delinquent, drop-out, at-risk, dysfunctional), these disenfranchised students tackle their academic obstacles as well as confront their personal issues (i.e. criminal behaviour, sexual/physical abuse, etc.) through the school's curriculum.

The Alternative School is known as the school without bells, without a lunch hour, without strata (there is no staff bathroom or staff room). It is known as the "turn-around school," the strict school, the fair school. Its 75 percent success rate speaks for itself; students turn their lives around, graduate from high school and enter college and universities.

School life at the Alternative School revolves around the students. Since the student population is small (70-90 students per year aged twelve to twenty-five,) students and teachers develop safe, positive relationships allowing for constructive social, personal, academic and behavioral interventions. All decisions involving a student are made only with the student's presence and consensus. In order for these adolescents to effect changes within their troubled lives, they must be recognized and trained as competent partners, critical thinkers, and responsible judges capable of analyzing their academic circles and their life spaces.

Students must make the initial phone call requesting an interview for entry into the school. It is essential that they demonstrate a willingness to change, even if under a court order. Following successful completion of a probationary period, the student then enters a "core" group. It is here that the student will find a "second family" which offers support, compassion, and positive recognition for work well done. Teachers develop strong partnerships with their core students (no more than twenty students per core group). These teachers become advocates for their students in the community, the family, the courts, etc. Students are maintained within these core structures as long as they abide by the school's four non-negotiable rules (no skipping classes, lying, drugs, and alcohol). Students are forced to take responsibility for their actions and their decisions. For example, report cards are given to students only; it is up to their discretion to show these to family members or not.

Because the school emphasizes critical consciousness students must perform 140 hours of community work, working with senior citizens, battered women, the homeless, the sick, the mentally challenged, etc. They quickly learn that social inequities should be challenged and that the efforts of one individual can affect some measure of change. School activities must originate from the students. They are asked to think and analyze the deeper meanings of social issues in order to understand the context within which the social issues emerge, and to determine their importance to them. Finally, they are encouraged to articulate a response in

their own voice, and to create an innovative curriculum, which speaks to their concerns in everyday life.

Briefly then, teachers at the Alternative School consciously try to implement the essential aspects of critical pedagogy. They encourage students to critically appropriate knowledge, which exists outside of their own personal experiences. Teachers emphasize student-centered dialogue. They lead and direct the curriculum with the participation of the students. Courses generated and developed from student interests have been approved and accepted as accredited secondary learning courses by the Ministry of Education of Quebec.

The Alternative School, through the implementation of critical pedagogy, demonstrates a concern for troubled students and their negative reaction to the existing educational structure, which imposes the values, beliefs, and interests of the dominant groups in our society. It actively creates partnerships with parents, the community, police, businesses, psychologists, social workers, the media, and local universities. Because students are engaged in dialogue they develop a voice, freedom and empowerment, which can help transform their resistance to the formal educational process, and see themselves as agents of social change.

The following students' reflections on their experiences at the Alternative School reveal the positive effect the school has had on them as well as the implications for working with resistant youth:

"Reflecting on my experience at the Alternative School, I have come to realize what an essential part of my schooling, and education it has been. I am able to appreciate the fact that apart from study skills that I learned here I also learned critical thinking which is a skill that I have found to be key in my studies since then. The one-on-one learning environment is something original to the Alternative School. Students fortunate enough to be accepted here are presented with an opportunity that they will not find elsewhere."

"In retrospect, my experience at the Alternative School shaped a major part of my life and my character. The experience was challenging; it allowed me to grow into an individual that, as an adolescent, I did not believe or could not imagine growing into."

"As an adolescent I appreciated the individual attention, the care they provided and the challenges they set for me, as well as acknowledging my strengths and helping me strengthen my limitations. As a university graduate and mother, I could not have recognized that the skills learned and developed at the Alternative School would have been so pertinent and influential in my life as an adult."

"There is no question the Alternative School and more importantly the staff of the school have been able to turn a light on within myself that has continued to shine outside the school. It is not only an educational institution that persuades its students to 'hang in' until graduation. It provides lessons that most do not learn; it provides lessons crucial to managing our everyday lives."

It is clear that the Alternative School has had a profound effect on students' motivation. Teachers recognize their responsibilities as active agents in creating educational practices, which address students' concerns. They 'bracket' their biases and call into question the students' perspectives. Resistant youth at the school actively participate in creating their own learning experiences, and in changing or transforming the schooling process. Student resistance to the traditional school curriculum can be addressed through engaging students in discussions about their ideas, thoughts, and feelings about what is important to learn. When students become active in redefining their role in the schooling process they engage themselves in their own social concerns, development and participation in the school and the community.

### CONCLUSIONS

This paper addresses the continuing challenge of engaging "disengaged" learners to take up educational success. Drawing on "critical pedagogy," the present article promotes a theoretical and practical perspective by using the insights provided by students, who are at risk, to help us construct clearer solutions to support them throughout their high school education. The students in this study have shared their personal struggles and experiences and ultimately their successes, in the hopes of beginning a discussion on the planning and delivering of educational programs that are relevant to their needs. The results have implications for child and youth care workers who are inevitably involved in the inclusive discussions that take place when one addresses the needs and challenges of students who are at risk for school failure. Child and youth care workers attend to and work with school personnel, parents and teachers. This enables them to provide a more effective and integrated continuum of services as well as appropriate advocacy for the needs of these young people (Beker, 2001). When dealing with young people who are struggling with issues of dependency, autonomy and self-sufficiency, child and youth workers have the ability to forge an alliance that can nurture positive emotional and social changes by being responsive to their needs and act as practical resources for school personnel and parents. Furthermore, they can act as a bridge between parents, teachers and school administrators and provide feedback to parents and teachers on social skills, remedial programs and behavioral interventions.

As with any program, child and youth care workers have to maintain their primary commitment to the very young people that they service, and be open to the innovation and growth that have nurtured the changes as described in educating resistant youth through critical pedagogy. Child and youth care workers have the professional statesmanship to demonstrate and advocate for the need that all children and adolescents are entitled to quality educational and learning experiences (Reilly & D'Amico, 2002).

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