

Critical Practitioner Inquiry – Creating voice amongst subaltern professionals

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The concept of Critical Practitioner Inquiry (CPI) started to be used in Namibia during the national teacher education reform in 1993 as an alternative to the more commonly used concept of action research. At the beginning CPI was motivated by the will to develop a concept that was in line with the experiences of those who had been involved in the efforts to change educational practice during the liberation struggle that preceded independence, rather than to import something from the West with less obvious contextual relevance.

As an educator involved in the background of CPI as well as its conceptual development over a period of twenty years, I recognize that the foundation for CPI is moulded as an act of solidarity in an effort to give the subalterns a recognized voice and place in the official discourse of education and by that move them away from their subaltern position. This was initially an integrated part of the liberation struggle for independence through the ways we operated in the exile situation.

One of the most significant characteristics of the exile situation was the persistent lack of study material. Therefore, we encouraged teachers to produce their own material from an early stage. The first group of teachers that we worked together with wrote and collated short texts about common events in their surroundings to be used in the learners' language lessons.

When we were folding and stapling the texts together as a small booklet one of the teachers approached me and said, “I have always wondered where books come from and how they are made. Now I know that books are made by ordinary people like myself.”

The simple act of collating folded paper into a booklet can influence emancipation and the way we look at knowledge.

The hierarchy of knowledge

There has always been a hierarchy of educational knowledge depending on the power that has been attached to different types of knowledge in society. Knowledge produced by academics still occupies the highest rank even though it is heavily challenged these days by the language and power of neo-liberal political and economic thinking. The position of academic knowledge is maintained by traditions and common sense even at instances where the neo-liberal powers try to dress their arguments in an academic costume.

Every field has its internal hierarchy and by that the natural sciences have a higher status than the social sciences within the academic field. Further, the status of social science from the West is higher than the status of what is produced in marginalised countries. Below all kinds of academic knowledge you will find the knowledge of educational practitioners like teachers, who are looked upon as subaltern consumers and not creators of knowledge that counts.

Knowledge amongst subalterns is sometimes characterised as silent or tacit knowledge following the writings of Michael Polanyi.¹ This type of knowledge can also be characterised as silenced knowledge in the Freirean tradition, meaning knowledge that is not recognised by powerful social groups.²

Further below in the hierarchy of knowledge we will find community funds of knowledge, which are at best acknowledged as an object of study by academics. This hierarchy of knowledge cannot be changed easily as it is

¹ Polanyi, Michael (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*. London: Routledge & Keagan.

² Freire, Paulo (1970/2003) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum. See also Grensjö, Bengt (2003) *Pedagogik i arbetslivet – Tysta, tystnande och tystade kunskaper*. Department of Education, Umeå University.

inherited in the fabrics of societies. What we can do at least from a short-term perspective is to support the efforts of the subaltern professionals to make their voices heard as a counter-hegemonic force based on their own inquiries, and by that help practitioner knowledge to be recognized in its own right.

The present hierarchy of knowledge is closely related to the power of the preferential right of interpretation over educational practice, i.e. the right to define what counts as appropriate knowledge about practice. Therefore, the habit of carrying out an inquiry needs to be expanded to subaltern professionals to create a basis for their claim of the preferential right of interpretation over their own practice.

The preferential right of interpretation

It is through inquiry that subaltern professionals can change the status quo of the preferential right of interpretation. Academics, whether they are psychologists, sociologists, educationalists or as recently economists, have traditionally claimed and still claim the preferential right of interpretation over educational practice. The academics claim their right based on the hierarchy of knowledge that, according to them, gives them the power and the knowledge to define the parameters that count in the analysis of educational practice from the outside. However, the hegemonic traits of such power are what silence practitioners and contribute to their subaltern position to the extent that they start to believe that they must transform themselves into academics before they can make their voices heard. Some do, but with that they also change their perspective and adopt an outsider hegemonic position with even stronger condemning traits against the 'naïve' perspective of subaltern practitioners. This transformation is a counter-productive trend, particularly within the field of teacher education because it is made more academically abstract but not more critical. From a long-term perspective Critical Practitioner Inquiry can change the distribution of the preferential right of interpretation to the benefit of the subaltern professionals.

The preferential right of interpretation is closely related to publication and written documentation. Therefore, the habit of writing about inquiry needs to be expanded to subaltern professionals as well.

The importance of production

The power and centrality of the text is becoming more crucial at all levels in these days of information euphoria. ‘Publish or perish’ is a commonly known saying amongst academics who want to foster their own careers. Producing educational texts for purposes beyond the classroom, lecture hall or the teacher workplace is facilitated today by the latest information technologies. While much of the web-based information available today is of a ‘fast food’ type based on instant responses to events of individualised, atomized, and imaginary happenings or realities, Critical Practitioner Inquiry intends to contribute to a different type of information with traits from the academic world but going beyond a slavish adherence to that tradition. Furthermore, Critical Practitioner Inquiry is contextualised, social, reflective and includes action with the potential for change.

The relation between education and production can be traced back to the ideas and work of Nadezdha K. Krupskaya in the early years of the Russian revolution. Krupskaya advocated the “complex method” of teaching.

According to the ‘complex method’ teachers were not to teach according to formal curricula for academic subjects. Instead, they were encouraged to take the problems of the children, of local production and of daily life as their starting point, and to examine them in the light of various disciplines simultaneously. Instead of learning geography or history children were, for instance, to study the village they lived in by taking part in work, talking to farmers and workers and the like. The findings of the children’s research were to be discussed and systematised at school.³

The “complex method” was soon drawn into the state apparatus and polytechnic education in Soviet Union and by that its critical and humanitarian message was diluted. Patrick van Rensburg introduced a refurbished “complex method” initially in Botswana in the 1960s through

³ Castle, Stephen & Wustenberg, Wiebke (1979) *The Education of the Future*. Pluto Press. p. 50

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the Brigade movement, and later on through the concept ‘education with production’.⁴ Van Rensburg’s ideas were taken up in many Third World countries in the 1970s and 80s as an alternative to common education systems or as part of progressive national movements, like in the case of Grenada. In many cases these attempts did not last long because of external factors like political marginalisation, lack of government funding, conservative state manipulation, and external military force, or a combination of them.

Attempts to work ‘subversively’ within the boundaries of ordinary education systems, i.e. to accomplish change from within capitalist Western countries, have been more successful to a certain extent, as shown by the French educator Célestin Freinet and his followers, even though such efforts were sometimes mainstreamed into ordinary bureaucratic change efforts and lost their critical edge. Freinet’s work was presented beyond French borders in 1969 through the book *Pour l’école du peuple – For a school of the people*. The hand printing press soon became the hallmark of Freinet pedagogy, even though this approach goes far beyond the printing of texts.⁵ There is a need for Freinet pedagogy and the advancement of knowledge in and through cooperation in today’s society, which according to Louis Legrand is marked by selective education, power accumulation, consumption, individualism and self-enrichment. Legrand also expresses the view that

What might have seemed an idealistic dream fifty years ago is today the only possible road to survival for vulnerable, precious humanity – the choice between them [cooperation or individualism], formerly a matter of aesthetics, has now become a vital necessity. Now more than ever Freinet opens up to us, in education, the path of reason and feeling.⁶

⁴ Patrick van Rensburg (1984) *Looking Forward from Serowe*. The Foundation for Education with Production. Botswana

⁵ Louis Legrand (1993) Célestin Freinet. *Prospects: The Quarterly Review of Comparative Education*. Vol. XXIII, No. 1/2. 403-418.

⁶ Op. Cit. p. 13

Critical Practitioner Inquiry has a background in a concern amongst subaltern professionals, practitioners who are seldom recognised for their struggles towards just practices, and those who are marginalised or are the victims of blame globally and locally. Critical Practitioner Inquiry as an effort to create voice amongst the subaltern is itself through those efforts positioned at the margin by mainstream neo-liberal and academic tendencies in education.

Positioning Critical Practitioner Inquiry

Critical Practitioner Inquiry acquired a unique position in the Namibian teacher education reforms of the 1990s. In its early history Critical Practitioner Inquiry was characterised as a merger between critical theory and action research.⁷ Critical Practitioner Inquiry was described in the following way:

It is understood as an educational approach based on a critical pedagogy, which addresses unconventional educational issues, broadens the base for what is recognised as common knowledge about education and develops a more dynamic relationship between education theory and practice. It also goes beyond conventional research methodologies in an attempt to develop tacit educational knowledge into professional educational repertoires.⁸

Kenneth Zeichner & Bob Tabachnick have analysed approaches to teacher education in Africa and Third World countries in general.⁹ They identify the

⁷ Peggy Shilamba & Lars Dahlström (1999) Critical Practitioner Inquiry and Staff Development for Teacher Educators. In Kenneth Zeichner & Lars Dahlström (eds) *Democratic Teacher Education Reform in Africa. The Case of Namibia*. Westview Press. USA. 117-122.

⁸ Lars Dahlström (1999) Critical Practitioner Inquiry and Teacher Education in Namibia: The First Attempts to Build a Critical Knowledge Base for Education. *Perspectives in Education*. Volume 18, Number 1. p. 84-85.

⁹ Ken Zeichner & Bob Tabachnick (1999) Participatory Development and Teacher Education Reform in Namibia. In Kenneth Zeichner & Lars Dahlström (eds)

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behavioural skills training approach as the dominant model of teacher education. This approach focuses on “discrete teaching behaviours such as questioning strategies and lesson pacing” as a way to train teachers to behave in certain ways instead of exercising their own judgement.¹⁰ Similar approaches, such as ‘the transmission approach’ and ‘the academic approach’, see teaching and learning as a linear process of transmitting knowledge from the teacher or the textbook to the learner. If anything goes wrong on this conveyor belt, the learner as the supposed receiver of the goods is to blame. Zeichner & Tabachnick conclude that in none of these approaches “has there been a serious effort to actively involve student teachers in their own education for teaching and to encourage them to question the received knowledge that is distributed in teacher education programmes”.¹¹

Zeichner & Tabachnick also identify another cluster of approaches to teacher education that are less common. One is the ‘inquiry-oriented approach’ where the emphasis is on preparing teachers to exercise reasoned judgement and to look at knowledge as socially constructed. Another is the ‘transformational approach’, which looks at education as a vehicle for equity and social justice beyond the classroom. Zeichner & Tabachnick’s assessment consider the teacher education reform in Namibia to be generally part of a participatory and social reconstructive agenda within which Critical Practitioner Inquiry would be found.

In an overview of practitioner inquiry/teacher research movements Julio Diniz-Pereira has identified a number of ways in which practitioner research has been conceptualised and used for a range of purposes.¹² Diniz-Pereira’s overarching question is whether practitioner research has created a disruption with the common sense and in the hegemony of scientific knowledge? The overview starts with a global contextualisation and

Democratic Teacher Education Reform in Africa. The Case of Namibia. Westview Press. USA. 207-221.

¹⁰ Op. Cit. p. 215.

¹¹ Op. Cit. p. 216.

¹² Julio Diniz-Pereira (2002) ‘Globalisations’: is the teacher research movement a critical and emancipatory response? *Educational Action Research*, Volume 10, Number 3. 373-398.

identification of three globalisations with reference to an analysis by Boaventura Sousa Santos.¹³ The three globalisations are ‘globalised localism’ (e.g. the spread of the American fast food concept); ‘localised globalism’ (e.g. deforestation in Brazil due to transnational demands); and ‘counter-hegemonic cosmopolitanism’ (e.g. international movements like Attac). What we call ‘globalisation’ on a daily basis is actually a set of arenas composed of different types of competing ‘globalisations’, forming the context in which the practitioner inquiry movement has the potential to operate as a counter-hegemonic cosmopolitan force. As Diniz-Pereira (op.cit) concludes:

...in spite of attempts by conservative international organisations [like the World Bank – *author’s example*] to appropriate its discourse ... it is possible to imagine communities of teacher researchers and networks of individuals from different parts of the world, sharing their experiences, struggling for better working conditions and higher professional qualifications and trying to create collective, as well as collaborative and emancipatory teacher education alternatives.¹⁴

Critical Practitioner Inquiry is an attempt in that direction.

Traits of Critical Practitioner Inquiry

One way to look into the traits of CPI is to unpack the concepts that it is composed of: Critical, Practitioner, and Inquiry.

Critical

The critical part of Critical Practitioner Inquiry is probably the most significant one. This part includes the *contextual studies* that are an important characteristic of the approach. The contextual studies have three dimensions that together form the framework for an intervention into practice. The contextual studies have the function of developing what can be

¹³ Boaventura Sousa Santos (1997) Toward a Multicultural Conception of Human Rights. *Zeitschrift für Rechtssoziologie*. 18. pp. 1 –15.

¹⁴ Op. Cit. p. 396.

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called a critical situational understanding. The three dimensions of the contextual studies are continuously revisited as a critical situational understanding develops during the inquiry process.

The outer layer in the framework of the contextual studies aims at creating a *critical scholastic perspective*. This layer contains studies of theoretical significance for Critical Practitioner Inquiry. These include critical perspectives on education from a global perspective and the role, functions and effects of global developments such as informal imperialism on educational endeavours; the trends and functions of the donor business of international and national organisations in the field of education; readings of critical international educators; and literature related to the development of Critical Practitioner Inquiry as an alternative approach to common classroom-based action research.

The next layer in the framework is composed of the critical studies of what is commonly known as official policy or *steering documents*. There is an internal hierarchy amongst such steering documents that practitioners are seldom confronted with or informed about. Therefore, in the ideal situation, Critical Practitioner Inquiry includes studies of these layers in the hierarchy of steering documents such as documents produced by international organisations, national policies, curricula, syllabi and other instructions to practitioners, to create for example an understanding of how visions and ideas are reduced to ‘technical’ instructions through such hierarchies.

The third layer in the framework of contextual studies is the closest to the CPI practitioner him/herself because it deals with *practices*. Here the historical luggage of educational practice that educators and educational systems carry within them is unpacked. These studies attend to what is considered as common sense in education and is therefore often taken for granted. There is also an effort to find out where prevailing practices emanate from, on both individual and systemic levels.

The contextual studies aim to create a critical situational understanding that will guide the practitioner in his/her interventions by showing the degrees of freedom, the possibilities as well as the impossibilities, available for educational change.

Practitioner

Student teachers, teachers, teacher educators, and educational administrators normally carry out Critical Practitioner Inquiry as part of tertiary education in the form of academic courses at different levels. Critical Practitioner Inquiry is the counter-hegemonic introduction of a critical and alternative perspective to mainstream technological, neo-liberal and skills development approaches. Therefore, spokespersons for and practitioners of Critical Practitioner Inquiry need to use the degrees of freedom created by the symbolic conceptions of ‘participation’, ‘freedom’, and ‘democracy’ in the neo-liberal agenda to introduce this counterforce. The role of course tutors is to introduce course participants to the Critical Practitioner Inquiry approach. Tutors are also responsible for pointing out the scholastic aspects of Critical Practitioner Inquiry and making literature and inquiry approaches available to the practitioners.

Practitioners who participate in Critical Practitioner Inquiry courses do so on a part time basis. Their own practice becomes the area of inquiry and change, which is carried out independently from the tutors but based on the tutors’ suggestions and inputs during the course work. Practitioners are in that sense empowered to carry out inquiries practically and change independently and in cooperation with other course participants and colleagues, who act as critical friends. The role of a critical friend is to assist with the objectification needed for the inquiry through e.g. classroom observation and feedback.

The writing up of the Critical Practitioner Inquiry process is not very different from the standard ways of reporting academic work, for example by using case studies, as a conscious way for subalterns to invade the field of academic writing through the process of inquiry.

Inquiry

Inquiry in the Critical Practitioner Inquiry tradition has an emancipation focus that goes beyond traditional research and educational practice. Therefore the critical situational understanding that Critical Practitioner Inquiry aims to provide goes beyond ordinary research theories and academic knowledge. Critical Practitioner Inquiry also goes beyond the methodological abstractions that are often the content of teacher education

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programmes, whether they are based on well-tried and often well-intended practice from previous times with little relevance for prevailing situations, or whether they draw on narrowly defined subject didactics transformed into teaching dogma.

Critical Practitioner Inquiry is grounded in interpretations of contextually situated practice. Through systematic inquiry into contextual layers of influence, situational understanding is developed, which then becomes the basis for improved and conscious educational practice.

Scientific research methodologies and theories can be helpful to the critical practitioner inquiry as they can assist the practitioner in collecting data that will improve her/his critical contextual understanding and therefore contribute to improved educational practices based on visions of social justice and collective emancipation based on social solidarity.

At the service of the subaltern

Critical Practitioner Inquiry has been developed and applied in Third World countries as an attempt to create voice amongst subaltern practitioners. The latest attempt to apply Critical Practitioner Inquiry amongst teacher educators in Ethiopia is a rather successful example. It has been carried out as a Master's course and includes participants from six universities. Continuous assessment of our activities has shown that course participants are overwhelmingly positive toward the critical perspective that the course has developed. As a consequence, two of the universities involved have the intention to offer similar courses that follow a Critical Practitioner Inquiry (CPI) approach at their universities in the future.

The following extracts are responses by course participants when asked to express their opinion about the course in general. They are illustrative of the impact of the course on the participants' way of looking at education in general and on their own role as teacher educators.

Previously we received things as is and we may not challenge it. As to me being a participant of CPI gave me the confidence and the critical eyes to look at things around me. (Participant 1)

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Since I started this programme I have changed a lot. I have developed a consciousness about schooling in general and how schooling affects the life of people. Also the way we get involved in our inquiries is changing us a lot – we did not have this kind of culture before. This kind of education I think is the most important thing that is missing from the conventional type of education in this country. (Participant 2)

It is extremely empowering. I didn't have deep knowledge about action research or the relation of education to society. I critically started to think about education, especially about education for social justice. I was reborn after taking this course. (Participant 3)

I came to change in both how I was doing and thinking because of this course. For example, I was trained in the traditional system of education both as a learner and teacher educator. At that time I didn't get involved in the importance of asking questions about what I and other people were doing. So in the process of doing this course I changed or developed in one respect and that is that we don't have to take things for granted but we have to ask questions and to look into things critically because that is the real way of doing things. The most important aspect of CPI is that while we try to work for change it is very important to involve the stakeholders of that change. (Participant 4)

Subaltern as a concept has a relative meaning in the sense that a subaltern position always depends on the social hierarchy in which it is identified. In today's context of the three globalisations we have to apply a global perspective. From this perspective, teacher educators from a Third World country are in a subaltern position as university employees who work under difficult conditions and with monthly salaries corresponding to 50 USD. At the same time university lecturers represent a growing middle class in their national contexts and are therefore in a privileged position relative to the masses of toiling farmers in rural areas. However, from a national perspective, Critical Practitioner Inquiry can contribute to an important critical mass at the middle class level that might become crucial for future developments if Critical Practitioner Inquiry is allowed to become a sustainable part of the education system. Critical Practitioner Inquiry can then work according to the ethos that says that even academics belonging to the middle class have to make a social choice. This choice is related to the

social capital that academics hold and which they may put at the service of either the dominant forces or the dominated subalterns.

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