

## ***Looking back, but not in anger***

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Working with education in Ethiopia is a wonderful and painful experience certainly for Ethiopians, but also for participating foreigners. It is wonderful to discover or rediscover a patchwork of regions, societies, cultures, languages, religions and most of all the people who live them. As a European you will soon discover that much of what you believe is your own particular European culture, apparently pretending to become the global culture, was already in full bloom in Ethiopia when your own ancestors were still living their primitive way of life in the forest. You will discover an African country without a colonial past. As an educationist you will perhaps for the first time in Africa work with faculty lecturers and students who have the same educational level as yourself and your own students in Europe. But at the same time, your experience will soon be accompanied by an underlying suffering, when you discover that even here you will meet what may become the tragedy of our time, the radical change from education by educationists to education by neo-liberal management. This radical change, which you have met in the USA, the UK, Scandinavia, Namibia and Mozambique, is constantly disrupting our combined professional efforts across national borders to achieve both a broader competence and social justice. This turn in education has been initiated and constantly fed by the blessings of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and even at times by bilateral donors and their governments.

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That also explains its unexpected omnipresence in a standard format in countries and educational systems that are totally different.

Educational reforms have been presented in Ethiopia as necessary breaks with a pre-modern and modern conservative tradition, in the name of late modern progressive educational ideas and practices like learner-centred education. However, in fact, what may come about looks very much like technocratic submission to a globalising market economy and not like emancipation of people, be they students or teachers.

The team of national and international experts in education that contributed to this book came together in Ethiopia in order to organise a Master's course for faculty lecturers through a specific form of action research called Critical Practitioner Inquiry (CPI), working through the International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA), a UNESCO institution in Addis Ababa. That the team was invited to participate in the reform efforts, selected for its more action-oriented approach to education and research, was without doubt because we were supposed to train lecturers so they could train student teachers, who could then implement the technocratic changes to come. One example of such a technocratic change is the introduction without any professional or democratic discussion of teacher-centred South-African lessons in key secondary education subjects with the help of satellite broadcasts to plasma TV screens all over the country. Fortunately for this CPI Master's course, the training was not in educational technology, as can be seen from this book, but provided a way to empower all the participants in whatever their educational circumstances to act upon their situations on the basis of critical societal and educational analysis in dialogue with the community.

Reflecting at the end of this experience, I will try to highlight some of the more specific difficulties and dilemmas of a theoretical or practical nature that we have met.

***Difficulties and dilemmas – CPI in context***

First of all we must notice that right from the start the government excluded lecturers of teacher education colleges that train teachers for basic education, who were expected to participate in the course. The argument was that they did not need a higher education, not even in action-oriented

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research. This was an unwelcome warning, since our experience was mainly based on work with colleges and not with faculties of education. It was a new challenge to convince faculty lecturers with academic degrees of various levels to deal with a programme intended to re-orient their relations to teaching, research, and practice, along with the relations between these entities, instead of convincing college teachers with no research background to base their teaching on inquiry and participatory involvement aiming at intervention for change. Faculty lecturers who have some research background have a tendency to believe that research is something done by pure researchers, like themselves, and that the application of research results is done by pure practitioners, which they are not. In the Critical Practitioner Inquiry course they suddenly find themselves to be both researchers and practitioners of their own teaching, who together with their student teachers or the learners of their student teachers in the practicum schools, will all try to find on the spot why some things do not work, discover what knowledge is available that can help to describe and explain the causes, and plan, execute and evaluate interventions assumed to have an effect for the better.

In this case, the international and national experts, the faculty lecturers, their high school student teachers and finally the high school learners are constantly in turn researchers or practitioners in the action research model. This role-switching is extremely difficult to achieve, most of all if it is to become a habitus, a second nature that operates without first being reflected in the moment of action; but it is also the only way to really get to the bottom of the exercise of two contradictory logics at once: the logic of description and explanation, and the logic of commitment, practical sense and action.

Critical Practitioner Inquiry is a constructive opportunity, if one is convinced that these two logics are not only different, but to some extent contradictory, and must be put on line in their own right, instead of conflating science and professional knowledge, practical knowledge and technologies. The main problem is normally to find academic researchers who want and are able to engage in action research, and practitioners who still believe, against all odds, that research matters. Here both actors are one and the same person in the roles of both researcher and a practitioner. The CPI course prepares the participants to address problems of their teaching that they have faced for years but never acted upon seriously or deeply. The

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CPI course refuses the participants their natural tendency to believe that they know everything about their problems, that they cannot solve them, that they are the products of all factors other than themselves, and invites them to an inquiry that is critical of all these self-evident and obvious explanations, and commits them to an action that will cost them ‘blood, sweat and tears’.

This special model avoids many problems of classical action research, where researcher and practitioner are different but collaborating persons. Such problems start with discussions regarding to what extent the researcher must have practical experience and the practitioner some research education, they go on to question to what extent practitioners ought simply to deny academic researchers access to the field, in order to acquire a research education themselves so that they can either manage everything alone or be able to collaborate better with academic researchers. These questions are very important since they have to do with the basis of a class society, of the social and gender-based division of labour, and with union struggles.

In the CPI context, other problems may arise from the personal identity of being both researcher and practitioner. Sometimes the inquiry may be like a sort of self-reflective auto-therapy and become a process of personal development of the practitioner-researcher, rather than being an introduction to social change made possible by an active use of counter-hegemonic opportunities offered by a society more or less in crisis.

The interventions considered may also tend to initiate emancipative processes of a dangerously therapeutic character among practitioners, for example if the blame for student passivity is moved from the teacher to the learner, and social, cultural or gender traits of the students are invoked. The problem is not only that one is dislocating the problem away from oneself, but that one is considering oneself as the natural promoter of the emancipation instead of the likewise natural oppressor of the students.

Some of these inconveniences may be avoided if CPI participants, against their tradition, are observing and criticising both their routines and their new teaching, and if students are included as well as a sort of collective researcher.

Another difficulty with Critical Practitioner Inquiry is to maintain during the inquiry phase a broad perspective of objective description and universal explanation, instead of immediately limiting the approach to

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narrow, contextually and subjectively workable understandings, which will inevitably miss the principal causes of the problem. As Pierre Bourdieu indicates in all his works, the explanation of what happens on the spot is not to be found on the spot (alone). At the same time, it is necessary to maintain that it is always possible to do something in a given situation, even if the researcher-practitioner is mostly out of touch with the direct manipulation of the most important central causes. People have to live with the problem and suffer from it, and it makes a difference how they deal with it.

That means also that Critical Practitioner Inquiry has to maintain its political and scientific platform. Having a political platform means that it is not just a new smart management device in the hands of leadership of different kinds, but a way of making productive situations of crisis by creating some unusual opportunities. Having a scientific platform means that CPI must protect itself against an in-built tendency to give priority to qualitative aspects and methods, as distinct from and/or antagonistic to quantitative aspects. It must also protect itself against the constructivist, interpretative, subjectivist, and relativistic wave, almost a fashion, at stake in the human and social sciences. Finally, CPI must protect itself against the new hegemonic promotion by organisations and governments of positivistic research that imposes on practitioners “best practice” solutions, which are in principle to be found in computer programs, on the basis of so called “evidence“ produced by double blind controlled experiments. Since it is the last tradition that has been strong in education in Ethiopia up till now, and since it is the first tradition that people may propose as an alternative to positivism, Critical Practitioner Inquiry, which is different from both, can make an important contribution.

An important problem arises from the context of a part-time distance course of a couple of years, or the context of a Master’s or even a PhD course. To acquire the basics and get working on one’s own account takes time. It includes the determination of the real problem behind the focus of interest, the inquiry, and the construction, implementation and evaluation of an intervention. In most instances it does not make sense to evaluate an intervention if it is not allowed to work for at least several years. Institutions and governments that want to use the model need to extend the time available, though not necessarily at full time, in order to let changes work and the effects, positive and negative, to become visible. Otherwise one is

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just measuring the effects of the noise one has organised with extra resources, not the effects of a sustainable social change.

A few days after we finished the last seminar of the course and left through the international airport, people and students were shot in the streets of Addis Ababa, protesting against the delayed publication of the election results and the alleged manipulation of these results. As said: Ethiopia is wonderful and full of suffering, but not without hope that real education may prevail one day.

## **Notes on the authors**

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