

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHER EDUCATION IN NEO-LIBERAL TIMES: EXPERIENCES FROM ETHIOPIA AND NAMIBIA

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ABSTRACT

This article combines analysis from teacher education in Ethiopia and Namibia with recent examples of neo-liberal influences on national education sectors. The article describes the national teacher education reforms and analyses the forces and damages of the 'liberal virus' by looking at the plasma teacher phenomenon in Ethiopia and the travel and traverse of critical practitioner inquiry in Namibia.

Our findings show how neo-liberalism when entering the education arena reduces teachers to technical caretakers and transforms what was once introduced as progressive and critical practices of education into separated entities following technical rationalities. Teacher education is also silently transformed to develop students and teachers alike into consumers in the educational marketplace through the neo-liberal governmentality that turns people into tightly controlled individuals who persist in claiming to be free in a globalised world. This article does not only bring out the damages inflicted by the liberal virus but also makes its exit by recommending the practice of contextualized critical thinking at all levels of education as proposed in Critical Practitioner Inquiry practices.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHER EDUCATION IN NEO-LIBERAL: EXPERIENCES FROM ETHIOPIA AND NAMIBIA

As critical scholars of these difficult days of neo-liberalism, we have the responsibility more than ever before, to counter attack neo-liberal hegemony, following the traditions of Fanon (1967), Rodney (1989), Bourdieu (1995), Amin (2004), and others by putting our knowledge at the services of the dominated social strata as organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971), outsiders from within (Griffiths, 1998) or intellectual defectors (Leonard, 1993). Our present inquiry into teacher education and related issues in Ethiopia and Namibia is part of this responsibility and our outlook starts from an 'infected' global perspective.

THE LIBERAL VIRUS

Towards the end of the twentieth century a sickness struck the world. Not everyone died, but all suffered from it. The virus which caused the epidemic was called the 'liberal virus' (Amin, 2004: 6).

The liberal virus continues to influence our experiences in the twenty first century to the extent that we today can consider it pandemic and part of common sense, as defined by Gramsci (1971). The liberal virus turns human activities and endeavours into commodities following the discourses of free trade and freedom of choice. By coupling this commoditization process to positive concepts like 'free' and 'freedom' it easily becomes accepted as token for liberal democracy and taken for granted by many as a normal and positive ingredient of all aspects of life, including education. However, behind the scene in the Western core countries the welfare state and with that common public education that was introduced around half a century ago as a humanitarian project of solidarity, which was part of the historical compromise between labour and capital after World War II, is about to be dismantled as a consequence of the liberal virus. Public education systems are undermined through the introduction of measures like voucher systems, emphases on competition, testing, and efficiency demands following the leading trends in the U.S., which Zeichner (2006) has characterised as a reintroduction of apartheid education. A similar erosion of the public education system is taking place in other core countries like Sweden, through a combination of a voucher system and the so called detached or independent schools (i.e. private schools). It is estimated that around 50% of all secondary schools in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, will be run by private enterprises as from 2008 according to data based on information from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2007). Further on, the effects of neo-liberal policies on education in Australia and New Zealand are thoroughly analysed in a recent issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (Volume 20, No. 3). Davies & Bansel (2006:249) confirm the trends in Western core countries of the "largely invisible installation of neoliberal technologies and practices" of surveillance and end-product-driven teaching that is supposed to turn individuals into free competitors

on an 'open' market, where education is expected to work as one of the invisible forces creating the new market adjusted individuals.

Meanwhile, development in peripheral countries in the South continues to be marketed as a repetition of the Western development paradigm not least by measures installed by their own governments with the effect that development is understood as becoming part of the global system of trade, production, and profit. Less is mentioned about the unspoken systemic humanitarian side-effects that are reduced to individual dysfunctions when the neo-liberal promises are not fulfilled. Even though education in the mainstream is today part of the liberal decease, it can also be turned into the cure both in core and peripheral countries, provided we challenge the present mainstream practices in all their forms and develop educative alternatives.

GLOBAL TRENDS ON NATIONAL GROUNDS

The above references, on educational developments in the U.S., Sweden, Australia, and New Zealand show that the general trends of neo-liberal expansions are played out differently in the social and cultural fields on the national arenas due to the dynamic interplay between power structures and cultural traditions (Steensen, 2006). This also happens in countries like Ethiopia and Namibia, when claims for commoditization and privatisation, management and efficiency, and learner- or student-centred education enter the field of education as integral parts of the neo-liberal agenda in peripheral countries. The following analysis started in teacher education reforms and moved into recent areas of neo-liberal influences that has endangered the humanitarian aspects of national teacher education policies and programmes.

THE ETHIOPIAN EXPERIENCES

The present system of teacher education in Ethiopia goes back to the objectives and strategies of the Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia of 1994. Some years later a task force was created and one of its findings among others was un-professionalism of teachers, who also naggingly demand salary increase, let quality of education fall and are elitists denying room to the motto of education for all, led to the development of the Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO) policy programme that was initiated in 2003. The TESO policy represents a paradigm shift according to its own writings (MOE, 2003) that officially follows the international trends of active learner-focused education operationally installed through a neo-liberal filter. The implementation strategies include changes both in structure and content of curricula, such as through reductions of programmes from 4 to 3 years at the universities and a move from subject to professional emphases including practicum. New areas are also included like action research, civics and ethics, English communication skills and ICT. Furthermore, teacher education institutions are expected to become centres of excellence and to establish effective means of 'quality' control starting of course with the centrally planned and

standardized curricula (at the Ministry of Education) for all schools and universities in the country, despite the differences in experience and resources (expert specializations and materials). However, observations and findings from interviews with teacher educators who are expected to implement the new policies show gaps between what are stated in the policy documents and what are practiced, not least because of system overload (Engida, 2006; Kassahun, 2006).

Critical scholars who are familiar with the situation in Ethiopia worry about educational development in the country. Negash (2006:48) claims “the Ethiopian experience is that of mistaking modernisation for Westernization, that is, a process whereby the borrowing of Western technology and rationality meant the progressive dissolution of the Ethiopian mentality”. Hussein (2006:13) examines the value conflicts in teacher education practices in Ethiopia and concludes “the practice of pedagogy as a process of transferring and learning as a process of consuming knowledge are what neo-liberals reinforce” and “that our education is under a battering influence of neo-liberalism of variegated local manifestations”. One of these manifestations will be discussed in greater detail as it has far-reaching consequences for teacher education in the country.

The plasma teacher phenomenon

This phenomenon is officially called Educational Satellite Television Programmes but is commonly known as ‘plasma’ or ‘surrogate’ teachers. All students from Grades 9 – 12 are watching lessons in natural sciences, mathematics, English, and civics that are presented over plasma televisions. In principle, the role of the ordinary teacher in the classroom is to unlock the cage where the screen is placed and to slide the screen in front of the class and eventually to introduce ‘the topic’ by writing it on the board. The teacher has five minutes for this work before the transmission starts following a nationally directed time schedule. During the entire lesson the teacher is then reduced to a spectator just like the students until the plasma television programme ends. This is followed by an 8-10 minutes summary by the teacher on the lesson just transmitted until the next subject with another teacher and the whole cycle exercise resumes. Throughout this process, 80 to 90 students remain seated in a room designed for 35 students. The analysis of this situation is based on classroom observations and discussions with teachers at two occasions separated by six months. (Lemma, 2006; Dahlström, 2006)

The general impression is one of passivity and uni-directional lectures, contrary to the officially proclaimed student-centred policy, unless you define student-centred education as a practice where the teacher is seen as an obstacle in the classroom. Teachers have nothing to do during the lectures of the plasma teacher and students try to follow the speedy lesson tempo at the beginning of each lesson but many eventually lose interest and turn into passive spectators of the plasma teacher as the TV lectures progress. Occasionally, students are asked to carry out tasks that are framed by a ticking clock at the screen indicating the 20 or 40 seconds allocated per task are elapsing. Most students do not cope up with the situation

and are not able to finish the tasks on time. After all, it does not matter if students attempt the tasks or not; the answers will anyway appear on the screen at the end of the allotted seconds. To this we can add the following observations: The plasma teachers are not Ethiopians but South Africans, the lessons are carried out in perfect English, but with a South African accent alien to students in Ethiopian secondary classrooms, lessons are culturally framed within alien contexts (e.g. in a civics TV lesson by referring what happens among the audience in the darkness of a cinema theatre in South Africa), and classroom teachers are dehumanised and deskilled. The introduction of plasma teachers has been very successful, if the intension has been to bypass what have been evaluated as inefficient classroom teachers. Teachers claim that their job has become much easier as they do not need to prepare lesson plans any longer and do not have to execute the lessons in class. Instead, the readymade plasma lessons that are uniform to all students in all parts of the country enter the classroom despite the contextual differences of students. The policy of continuous assessment has been turned into one multiple-choice final examination per subject given at the end of each semester, since the whole semester is taken up by plasma teacher lectures. Our observations also pose many contextual questions related to the future role of teacher education, the status of the teaching profession, and the vulnerability of high-tech solutions as the remedy to educational problems in remote African situations. We also leave it to readers of this article to put themselves in the shoes of the Ethiopian students who must watch TV sets for hours 5 days a week over 4 years of high school completion and imagine what it feels like to be put up against an inanimate object that does not have any feelings or that never interacts with you.

What is the future of teacher education, when plasma teachers perform the lessons? At one occasion we found a school totally deserted by teachers and the administration (Lemma, 2005). We were told that they had gone for a meeting and the caretakers or guards (as they are called in Ethiopia) of the school have been instructed to open the classrooms for the students who then arranged their own lessons with the plasma teacher. It has also been observed that eventually out of frustration or neglect from lesson planning and curricula organization, teachers started to appear late at school or even be absent for petty reasons. This makes very little difference for the students since the surrogate plasma teacher replaces teachers and since teachers are systematically pushed out of their profession where they are paid meagre salaries for 'doing nothing', let alone instilling critical thinking in the growing minds of students. What kind of teacher education is needed in such situations or is it enough to engage caretakers as teachers? Parents are worried about the teachers' responsibilities in school, as they do not know who is accountable for the education of their children. Purely out of concern and professional commitment, many teachers had developed their own schemes of tutoring students during evenings and weekends to compensate for the lack of learning during plasma lessons and this at times became even contradictory to its purpose as there arose further questions about teachers' activities during ordinary school hours amongst parents, and as students and teachers are engaged in education seven days a week. These extra efforts eventually died out since they

are not remunerated or officially acknowledged as part of career development for teachers. In fact they were indirectly de-motivated since they undermined the efforts put into the plasma teacher by the government. Total media solutions to educational issues are hence questionable mainly because of educational concerns and its technical vulnerability becomes obvious in contextual situations that are affected by the uncontrolled power of nature as we have been told about schools that have 'lost' their plasma teachers because of the inconsistency and unpredictability of electric power supply, repeated failures to receive satellite images, and other schools that have missed lessons for weeks when they have run out of petrol for the generator.

It is therefore difficult to refrain from commenting when you realize the damages the plasma teachers do to students, teachers, and education in general. Outrage comes forward when you understand that it is deliberately planned and installed through neo-liberal common sense under the official banners of development and improvement through efficiency and transparency for the good of the citizenry, but operates to create external control and ultimate profits for some, because plasma screens and pre-recorded media lessons are expensive and need the involvement of World Bank loans, while still local government revenues are paid for teachers who are reduced to plasma television operators and who are today nicknamed as DJs (disc-jockeys) by students. And most importantly, plasma teachers reduced the whole exercise of the teaching and learning process from critical thinking to delivery of packages to qualify students for certain grades. The lessons from the Ethiopian scenario clearly show that education purely is a commodity available on the global market for students (including the worldwide web) be it in South Africa where the lessons are developed or anywhere in the world, as in Ethiopia.

THE NAMIBIAN EXPERIENCES

The teacher education reform process in Namibia started on a national level in 1993 with strong support from international donor agencies like DfID (UK), NORAD (Norway), Sida (Sweden), and USAID (USA). The national teacher education reform was both an attempt to continue what had been developed in exile as part of the liberation struggle and an attempt to disrupt the second-tier legacy of apartheid education, complicated by the new marketplace for international actors that Namibia's independence created, seen by some donors as a testing ground and springboard for future support in a 'new' South Africa (Dahlström, 2002).

The Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD) was developed as a national programme during the 1990s when the neo-liberal tendencies in the education sector were not as aggravated and aggressive as today. Rather, the most significant influence came from the changes in the East-West dichotomy that had started to be dissolved and was replaced by the discourses of globalisations that from a subaltern perspective initially was discursively recognised as an indication

of inclusion, but with obvious displacements in the political arena. At that time, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) was transformed from a liberation movement into a political party with governmental power and attached long-term effects also on educational influences and outlooks.

Dahlström (2002) identified three major areas for the war of position over the preferential right of interpretation in the teacher education reform process. These were the creation of an imperative reform framework, the altering of programme imprints, and the shaping of institutional agency. The two power blocs in this war of position included both international and national identities that at times strategically operated together and at other times followed their own agenda, with the effect that the reform developed into a transposed reform in a layered society. The transposed reform was moulded through a prolonged reform process and an intellectual war of position framed by a conceptual basis of a visionary society carried further from the liberation struggle through critical pedagogy and a structural basis of a layered society with roots in the previous apartheid system through neo-liberal educational ideas. The question posed today is what has happened with some of the traits that had their background in the 'visionary society – critical pedagogy' bloc of counter-hegemonic ideas and practices? To look into possible answers to this question we will analyse the travel and traverse of the conceptions and practices of Critical Practitioner Inquiry.

Progress made in Critical Practitioner Inquiry (CPI) in developing countries

The background to CPI is found in educational initiatives in Botswana and Angola in the 1980s. Local school-based alternatives that followed a critical tradition of learner-centred education were developed as joint activities with teachers and students in village primary schools in northern Botswana. These attempts were different from the activities analysed by Tabulawa (2003) as part of the spread of neo-liberal capitalism and learner-centred education through a contemporary USAID sponsored project, which eventually got a hegemonic position in Botswana during the 1980s. The localised attempts to establish a critical alternative developed into a series of reading materials both in Setswana (the national language in Botswana) and English, based on contributions from teachers and students, and printed by the Teaching Aid Production Unit (TAPU) in Francistown, under titles such as 'Makaleng – our village', 'Mr. Molobe's minibus and other stories', and 'Voices from children – voices from children in Cape Town, South Africa', the last example based on an exchange cooperation with a children's magazine, Molo Songololo, in Cape Town.

The initiatives in Angola were carried out as part of a teacher education programme called the Integrated Teacher Training Programme (ITTP) for untrained and exiled Namibian teachers working in a refugee camp organised by SWAPO during the liberation struggle. The school projects that these teachers carried out as part of their training were embryonic versions of future CPI reports dealing with issues related to the teachers' daily activities in the classrooms,

integrated with contextual and theoretical perspectives. When independence came in 1990 the ITTP continued as an alternative programme for the training of primary school teachers in the northern part of Namibia, up until the national reform process started in 1993. During the period of 1990 – 1992 the CPI approach was further developed through school support projects, a teachers' magazine, and other publications as integrated parts of the training programme to further the community related and critical pedagogical practices that have been started in exile and furthermore to show examples of alternative developments before the national reform process started.

CPI became a concept in the new BETD programme in Namibia, developed jointly by the then two ministries of education, namely Ministry of Higher Education, Vocational Training, Science and Technology (MHEVTST) and the Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (MBEC), organised under the National Institute of Educational Development (NIED), where also many of the international donor agencies were housed. The general steering document for the programme, the BETD Broad Curriculum, identifies eight professional themes that are the central focus around which the content of the studies are organised throughout the three years of studies. One of these themes is: “developing a critical inquiry approach into one's own practice and context” (MHEVTST & MBEC, 1998: 6). CPI is mainly related to the students' school-based studies and studies in Education Theory and Practice, two central parts of the programme. CPI originates from critical pedagogy and its introduction in the BETD represented ideas that according to Dahlström (2002:186-187)

- “Attempted to break with the common reductionist view that educational practice was applied theory.
- Challenged the preferential right of interpretation, which academics had assigned to themselves over educational practice.
- Acknowledged the development of theories *about* practice as an academic area in its own right, but did not recognise the reduction of these theories to technical dogma that practitioners were expected to follow.
- Supported the development of a theory *of* practice based on practitioner inquiry.
- Supported the documentation of accounts of educational change, which collectively contributed to a written knowledge base of education.”

The report on the impact of CPI in the BETD programme published as an Association for the Development of Education in Africa - ADEA (2005) document shows that there are inherent potentials in the CPI approach but also problems with its application in the BETD programme. van Graan (2005:63) concludes her assessment of the impact of CPI in three points:

- “Being critical and critical reflection do not happen automatically, although all educators interviewed are aware that it is good practice and realize the need for it to happen more continuously.

- A CPI model cannot be adopted if teacher educators feel unsure of the model. To get more confidence in the model is to have at least a thorough understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of critical theory and constructivism that inform this model.
- Critical reflection is not going to happen overnight; those committed to its implementation need to keep the vision alive. However, this can only happen within a clearly defined policy framework for Educator Development and Support.”

A review by Carneal (2001:1) of a publication with selected CPI reports written by Namibian educators (Dahlström, Ed., 2000), including teacher educators and teachers, states

“... instead of scholars passing down knowledge, the practitioners in this book are creating it on their own by accessing and reflecting on academic literature and their personal experiences. It is a book about people involved in education and the daily life of a classroom practicing what they preach through the use of “practitioner inquiry” and “action research” to improve their teaching techniques, get messages across, and ameliorate the educational environment.”

The need for teacher educators to experience CPI in their role as practitioners was soon realised in the reform process in Namibia. Therefore, all teacher educators at the four colleges were offered the opportunity to attend courses with the aim to carry out inquiries into their own situation as teacher educators. This opportunity was used by a total of 78 teacher educators during the period 1992 - 2000, i.e. around 50% of all teacher educators from the four colleges of education, even though the large majority came from the three traditionally Black colleges in the northern parts of the country. The executive summary of the ADEA (2005:15-16) document reports that “teacher educators value critical reflection as a strategy for solving problems and changing practice”, but also that many teacher educators “have a shallow and poor understanding of critical-practitioner inquiry, in that it operates on the technical rather than the critical level”. The ADEA report also concludes that some BETD graduates continue to use critical practitioner inquiry in their teaching after training. As Dahlström (2002) notes following a Gramscian analysis of the reform process, a core group of organic intellectuals, grounded in conceptions about liberation that was engraved through the opportunities in the reform process, carried the reform further through individual and institutional agencies. However, a combination of new career opportunities amongst the organic intellectuals, thus leaving the colleges or moving to administrative posts, and the recruitment of teacher educators from the traditional intellectual camp (read: University of Namibia), undermined the reform inscriptions and created transposed practices also in the area of CPI, which was moved closer to a technical rationality, in line with neo-liberal ideas. In addition, the introduction of the BETD programme was an uphill struggle for those who believed in its

philosophical, political, and educational intentions. The historical imprints in the minds of those who had served the previous regime of truth had created an educational tradition based on “religious metaphysics and Anglo-Saxon empiricism” according to Callewaert (1999:228), powerful donor representatives who carried with them neo-behaviourist or neo-liberal preferences of modernisations, and academic scholars (sometimes named ‘suitcase academics’) riding high on their powerful positions were all sceptical to CPI and similar ‘progressive’ ideas. This led to a situation where the philosophical, political, and educational basis for the new reform were soon left behind at the drawing table, i.e. as promises in steering documents, while the invisible crafts of the liberal virus surfaced as worries about efficiency, control, and observable outcomes and competencies, which soon became implemented through implants of more neo-liberal managerial aspects, teacher-proof control mechanisms, reductionist views on curricula and syllabi issues, testing, and the transformation of programmatic initiatives like the CPI into technical rationalities. However, the CPI is still a critical force in Namibia and elsewhere as proved by teacher educators like Hussein (2006).

TRANSFORMATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LIBERAL VIRUS

The liberal virus has a tendency to transform what have been introduced as critical pedagogical alternatives like action research (including its ‘progressive’ branch like CPI) and learner-centred education into technical rationalities that better fits the commoditisation of education. Thus critical practitioner inquiry is stripped to a devise for more efficient classroom management and learner-centred education becomes a way for teachers to escape their educational responsibilities either through meaningless group work that recycles ignorance or to replace teachers by an image on a screen telling alien truths.

The transformative character of neo-liberalism contributes to its invisibility by creating a consensus (even though temporary) that gives the impression that we are all talking the same language and that we in principle also want the same things to be accomplished. For example, who can question learner-centred education if we by that discursively mean that the learner is at the centre of education? This consensus gets under our skin as common sense and then taken for granted and when it has entered this docile stage the road is open to reduce educational practices into technical formula easy to measure and manage them to create the wanted efficiency and control. This process, following in the footsteps of Thatcherism, will also wash away all tendencies to critical pedagogical perspectives and practices that practitioners and scholars might want to bring into the educational arena.

Neo-liberal processes in transition are difficult to detect. They have a treacherous face validity that is often coupled to the ‘freedom’ discourse, which can be theoretically analysed through the concept of governmentality. The neo-liberal governmentality reconfigures people as productive economic entrepreneurs of

their own lives and the education system is an efficient institution for such reconfigurations to create the “docile subjects who are tightly governed and who, at the same time, define themselves as free” (Davies & Bansel, 2006:249).

It is only when we are faced with examples of the ultimate solutions of the neo-liberal processes of transformations of educational practices, like the plasma teacher, that we realise the enormous damages it creates for students, teachers, teacher education, and the populace at large. However, there is still hope that critical practitioner inquirers and other dedicated educators, who continue to subscribe to their responsibilities as organic intellectuals, can make a difference and use the degrees of freedom available in hegemonic times, and remain optimistic as suggested by the title of a book by the renown oral historian Studs Terkel (2003) *Hope Dies Last: Keeping the Faith in Difficult Times*.

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