

“Urban” Education in the 21st Century:

A Critical Approach through a Social Education Lens

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Education is properly a process of learning to ‘read’ the world, and therefore, education and activism are one and the same thing.

Paulo Freire, 1970

Introduction

“Urban” Education (a working description) – Addressing economic, social/cultural, political, and environmental issues in education (often in an urban setting) through a culturally responsive lens and in a local to global context focusing on diversity, equity and social justice leading to critical consciousness and civic engagement.

Social Justice Education (a working description)- Addressing economic, social, political, environmental and equity issues in education in a local to global context connected to ethnicity, race, class, gender, age, ability, orientation, and culture leading to critical consciousness and civic engagement.

These working descriptions of “urban” education and social education are suggested as a starting place for the critical investigation of education in the 21st century. These descriptions include important concepts impacting society, education and its stakeholder, particularly students and educators. Far too often we attempt to impose definitions thus limiting the possibilities for investigation, critical discourse, and ultimately transformation. If we are interested in advocacy leading toward progressive change, then lenses such as these provide a much needed approach.

Critical approaches inform social education through a lens that ensures the investigation of issues in education tied to power and privilege, ultimately leading to

advocacy and activism. The concept of critical is increasingly challenged in this age of neoliberal reform; nevertheless, critical implies questioning, investigating and challenging in terms of equity and social justice, leading to critical consciousness and “reading the world” (Freire, 1970). While we resist defining social education, as hopefully these ideas / concepts are fluid, the idea stems from a continual analysis and synthesis of critical theory/ critical pedagogy, media and cultural studies, social reconstruction / social justice, and social studies education framed by culturally responsive pedagogy. A social education take on “urban” education thus suggests multiple truths and perspectives and focuses on questions rather than answers, again within an equity and social justice framework.

While many have written on critical approaches in education and some have attempted to integrate critical pedagogy and social studies, few have explored the specific idea of “urban” education, social education and critical approaches. A major issue is that social education claims that there are no set procedures, scripted approaches, or narrow definitions as to the possibilities of critical learning engagement. Social educators and their students endeavor to make the process and investigation within teaching and learning their own and adapt questions, procedures, applications, and strategies throughout the experience. This reflects an ever-changing criticality in the bricolage of the research (Steinberg, 2011).

A “schism” of sorts is still perpetuated by the either / or debate regarding the efficacy of information as knowledge. The claim here is that humanity cannot and should not be continually subjected to quantification, or a simple right / wrong framework– that it reduces human endeavor to meaningless claims in the guise of objectivity. A particular

argument made in social education is that education and U.S. society in general is so dominated by a positivist, quantitative framing that often impedes educational progress. Therefore, we adamantly argue that in doing social education one must focus on critical approaches, leading to debate, dialogue, investigation, and questioning that is project and problem-based.

Social education is interested in empowering the disempowered, so that education and schooling should be about addressing societal issues tied to race, ethnicity, gender, age, and orientation. When we have a society that continues to struggle with mass incarceration, gun violence, lack of voting rights, 19th century immigration policy, entitlements to the military, corporations, and the rich, perpetual war, and non-stop imperialism, then societal transformation can be the only goal. In other words, a particular critique made by social educators is that humanity and efficacy have been divorced from education.

Many great educators, theorists, and philosophers serve as the grounding for critical qualitative research through a social education perspective. Marx and Dewey are perhaps the most important theorists as they provide the foundations for most everything since. A second wave includes the likes of Gramsci, Freire, Green, Apple, Giroux, and McLaren. Still more include Zinn, Kozol, Banks, hooks, Noddings, Nieto, Sleeter, and Duncan-Andrade. Each of these, and many others, are vital for any social education literature analysis.

As Kincheloe, McLaren and Steinberg (2012) state, a form of social or cultural criticism is the basis of such research. They go on to suggest seven assumptions in critical qualitative research in social education:

1. Social and historically constructed power issues affect all human endeavor;
2. Ideology and value judgments knowledge, skills, and dispositions;
3. Capitalism affects the construction of individual and group process / products;
4. Objectivity is a myth and that language and culture necessitate subjectivity;
5. Privilege and oppression are rampant and critical consciousness is a primary focus;
6. Traditional and mainstream practice contribute to reproduction of issues tied to equity and social justice.

These assumptions should be addressed within a local to global context.

Nevertheless, the argument herein is that all education is or should be social education.

We are all social “human” beings struggling to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions through lifelong education, both in and out of “school” in order to make the best of life, hopefully for ourselves and others. Critically active citizens is a particular goal.

Pillars of Social Education

There are five broad pillars or themes that comprise social education. These include Social Reconstruction / Social Justice, Critical Theory/ Critical Pedagogy, Media / Cultural Studies, Social Studies / History Education, and Culturally Responsive / Multiple Perspectives. Each of these have contributed to a transformation from traditional social studies education approaches to teaching and learning, curriculum and instruction to one that is first critical in the sense that deconstruction and multiple truths are championed with the hope for emancipatory education practice. This is turn will also

hopefully lead to challenges to the current neoliberal, privatized and globalized “vision” / direction of much within education. The idea is that the public sphere remains the place where the true potential for human transformations can take place (Giroux, 2004).

Social Education stems from a social reconstructionist / social justice philosophical foundation. The idea suggests that democracy and capitalism are antithetical and that unbridled capitalism has usurped democratic practice (Apple, 1990). Equity and social justice need be the ultimate goal of any education endeavor focusing on race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, age, and ability when addressing any social issue; and thus should be prevalent in any critical qualitative research. Rethinking, reconceptualizing, and restructuring schooling, education, curriculum and instruction is stressed if we are truly interested in equity and meeting basic human needs (McLaren, 2003). An issue and problem based approach to research is also warranted.

Critical theory / critical pedagogy take the social justice / social reconstructionist pillar and apply it as praxis in education. Specific education practices that do not deal with issues of power and privilege are subject to challenge. Investigating the human story champions subjectivity as it allows for multiple perspectives, deeper inquiry, and critical endeavor. The assumption is that most human endeavor, especially in education is political, and that we must accept this and understand these issues and deal with the biases and issues inherent in the political nature of things. Education must always be aware and engage in the struggle for social justice in addressing issues of race, ethnicity, gender, age, orientation, perspective, and basic rights and responsibilities in this age of neoliberal reform (Kinceloe, 2008).

Media and cultural studies assumes that art and culture are central to humanity and that each struggles with the assumed public / private binary. Increased commodification and assimilation of media and culture through globalized impositions warrant critical investigation in education, as media and culture greatly influence human interactions. Media is a powerful entity in the education process and also in impacting individual and group identity – thus the need for critical media “literacy.” Linking cultural studies is vital in that culture is the result of human interaction and progress with issues of acculturation and assimilation constantly affecting society. Social education claims media and culture are primary texts for critical qualitative research (White & Walker, 2008).

Social studies / history education is the content tradition whereby social education stems. Knowledge, skills, and dispositions gained from one’s social studies and history education experience should facilitate rights and responsibilities of local – global citizenship. Social education suggest that traditionally social studies and history education have served the status quo in that a grand narrative has often been imparted leading to ethnocentrism, exceptionalism, imperialism, and a challenge to the public good (Zinn, 2005; Loewen, 2007). A critical investigation of social studies history education thus brings to light issues of equity, power, privilege, hegemony and social justice.

Culturally responsive / multiple perspectives are linked to critical pedagogy and social justice issue in that curriculum and instruction has often been limited to white privilege, power and lack of choice. Social education insists that education focus on being responsive to culture (in the broad conception of the term) and allow multiple perspectives so as to awaken an appreciation and action tied to diversity (Gay, 2010). A

critical multiculturalism requires a rethinking of curriculum instruction and ultimately a transformation of schooling (hooks, 1994). Any practice or institution that threatens these should be subject to deep critique and investigation.

Critical Approaches to “Urban” Education

“Urban” education is fraught with impositions, deficit approaches, and even racist mindsets in dealing with teaching and learning tied particularly to ethnicity, race, gender, ability, and choice. And with the neoliberal reform movement equity and social justice is discarded as the priority is not about human endeavor. Achievement and accountability since Sputnik really, have become the education mantra for any and almost all “reform.” Challenging the public framing of education has also been the constant approach from the right since *A Nation at Risk* at least, with these “reformers” using quantitative data as their fodder.

Issues of generalizability, objectivity, reliability, validity, essentialism, accountability, achievement and the like are often applied in a business model. Such approaches deny the richness in education of detailing human experiences. Again, within a social education framework, critical implies consistent exploration and investigation of social issues through a social justice lens. The idea is that most human endeavor is socially constructed and that both individual and collaborative experiences are needed for us to develop into socially conscious beings focusing on advocacy and activism. Citizenship necessitates awareness first, but most important, critical action allowing for multiple perspectives, questions rather than answers, and ongoing flexibility regarding the mediation of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Hickey (2012) suggests several epistemological commandments for critical approaches to “urban” education.

1. Demonstrate incredulity toward claims of grand truths or meta-narratives.
2. Resist contexts that marginalize people in any situation.
3. Commit to betterment, assistance, hope, and emancipation in all human experiences.
4. Challenge any practice that marginalizes based on race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, class, age, ability, or belief.
5. Question unbridled capitalism and neoliberalism.
6. Champion multiple perspectives, diversity, and human experiences.
7. Promote advocacy and activism for basic human rights and democracy for all.
8. Continue a lifelong work for societal transformation toward equity and social justice.

A primary goal is to investigate the world critically with the hope of ultimate transformation for social justice. A process that integrates awareness, advocacy, activism/ action, and assessment is a model for educators and their students to address societal issues. This process for learning and engagement is ongoing in that once through the process one (or the group) should begin again with new questions or issues. Everything can and should be adapted depending on what is investigated and discovered along the way. According to Kincheloe (2005), such strategies seek historical contextualization, multiple perspectives, individual and collaborative approaches and a diversity of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Social education requires a personal connection in all teaching and learning, allowing for continuing dialogue, questioning, discussion, and even controversy. A primary focus within any educational context, but especially within “urban” education are the ultimate goals of addressing social justice and equity. The inherent “bias” within teaching and learning is acknowledged, championed, and applied as a device to encourage critical engagement. Knowing that much in society and the institution of education serves the status quo and those in power, in addition to perpetuating the commodification of humanity, issues of activism, change, and sustaining critique emerge. Critical approaches in our schools provide the needed foundation for students to become active participants in their world.

Implications for the 21st Century

Critical approaches in education, social education, and addressing issues in “urban” education are vital for the world of the 21st century. The onslaught of neoliberalism, corporatization, standardization, testing, and the continuing attack on public schools and educators necessitate critical approaches to teaching and learning along with critical qualitative research in social education. Ongoing issues with equity and social justice tied to race, ethnicity, class, orientation, age, and ability linking to schooling, education, teaching and learning must be addressed. The struggle between unbridled capitalism and democracy warrant these investigations in the 21st century, hopefully leading to advocacy and activism.

Empowering and emancipating educators and students requires a redesigning of schooling to demonstrate a truly democratic way of life, to be consistent with the ideals

of equity and social justice, to be informed by research that is “educative” (Zeichner, 2009). According to Goodman, Ullrich and Nana (2012), a “triple consciousness’ based on Freire’s critical consciousness is much needed for equity and social justice in a teaching and learning context. We must model critical multicultural, social justice education (culturally responsive pedagogy), work to transform perspectives of all education, society and its stakeholders, and engage in critical emancipatory research leading to advocacy and activism.

We must continually challenge the corporatized, unequal, and essentialist framing of education. Education is both a political and ethical endeavor hoping to facilitate critically active students anxious to engage in the world. Linking the process to the community and the world provides the context we all need to understand and advocate for equity and social justice. A critical qualitative research in social education that investigates these hard issues locally and globally can only lead to empowering educators and students as change agents.

Theoretical underpinnings originate from Dewey (1997), Freire (1970), Kincheloe (2012), Giroux (2014), and Gay (2010) among many others. While each uniquely adds to the critical pedagogical approaches to education praxis, taken together, they contribute a strong theoretical foundation that stresses continued investigation and questioning. Each also suggests that current education practice serves the interests of those in power and merely contributes to issues in urban education and equity and social justice. It is therefore vital that educators and students conduct ongoing investigations by addressing curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the “big picture” of education through questions such as the following:

What issues emerge in making sense of “urban” education?

How do equity and social justice “fit” into this struggle?

What are the implications given the current neoliberal directions of education?

How does awareness, advocacy, action / activism and assessment play into efficacy and participation as citizens of the world?

How can we better empower students and educators in “reading the world”?

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Urban Education

The Urban Institute

<http://www.urban.org/education/index.cfm>

Education Week – Urban Education

<http://www.edweek.org/topics/urbaneducation/index.html>

Education World – Urban Issues

http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/archives/urban.shtml

Facing History and Ourselves

<https://www.facinghistory.org/for-educators/school-and-district/urban-education>

Council of the Great City Schools

<http://www.cgcs.org/site/default.aspx?PageID=1>

NCES

<http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/urbaned/>

Dell Foundation – Urban Education

<http://www.msdf.org/programs/urban-education/>

Broad Prize

<http://www.broadprize.org/>

Carnegie

<http://carnegie.org/programs/pathways-to-education-opportunity/>

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