Journal of Teaching and Learning

Critical Moments in Education

Lana Parker

Volume 16, Number 1, 2022

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088948ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v16i1.7293

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

University of Windsor

ISSN

1492-1154 (print)
1911-8279 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Parker, L. (2022). Critical Moments in Education. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, *16*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v16i1.7293

Journal of Teaching and Learning
Vol. 16, No. 1 (2022), pp. 1–4
jtl@uwindsor.ca

Editorial Comments

Critical Moments in Education

Lana Parker
University of Windsor

I was recently leading a professional development session with senior administrators and teachers at a local school board. We were examining opportunities for responsive pedagogy when we stumbled into a discussion of what is meant by the term "critical." The educators talked about "critical pedagogy" and "criticality" as a shorthand for the ongoing work of critique in their schools. They described, using curriculum as a heuristic, how critical pedagogy is part of both the formal and informal teaching and learning practice across K–12 classrooms each day. And yet, when we looked closely at the word "critical" and began to unearth the contents of this densely packed concept, there was less certainty. What does it mean, then, in contemporary education, to be critical? What does it mean to teach critically? And what, for scholars of education, does it mean to research with a critical lens?

These questions arise at a time of competing tensions: information abundance on the one hand and censorship, polarization, and intolerance on the other. Recuperating—or reconstituting—the meaning and relevance of criticality, critical theory, and critical pedagogy is urgent, if only to give us better sense-making tools for meaning, knowledge, and relationality. The current information landscape can be characterised by unceasing and immediate access to information online, the proliferation of mis- and disinformation, the background intelligence-gathering operations of hidden algorithmic technology, and a virtual consumption/production model that increasingly dominates how we spend our time (Parker & Liu, 2021). In response to these conditions, and perhaps in an attempt to sort the cacophony of clashing perspectives into a more manageable epistemic frame, people are increasingly polarized in their interpretations of the world, in their views and beliefs. They are decreasingly tolerant of dissent.

We see evidence of this division in the ongoing catastrophe of the pandemic, where collective actions for public health have been undermined by incoherence. We also, troublingly, see it in the coordinated efforts in education to narrow what constitutes acceptable learning under an increasingly restrictive mandate. Across the US, there has been disproportionate moral panic over the teaching of Critical Race Theory, seen by some conservatives as a way of harming Americans by undercutting patriotism with the suggestion that the US is racist (Morgan, 2022). Also in the US, school boards are struggling with growing calls for censorship. The American Library Association has seen an "unprecedented" rise in calls to ban books (Yang, 2022). For example, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* have been banned due to content deemed inappropriate for children. In this era of information abundance, the rush to police

the boundaries of what children learn about is euphemistically framed as "parental rights" (Canady, 2022). In Florida, for example, the "Parental Rights in Education" legislation, dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill by critics, prohibits classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity from Kindergarten through Grade 3 on the basis that this content is age or developmentally inappropriate (Berger, 2022). Such movements are also well underway in Canada. In Alberta, a recent overhaul of the elementary curriculum refocused curriculum content on rote learning. Peck (2021) notes,

> [Education] Minister LaGrange stood in front of a podium that was affixed with a sign that read, "teaching essential knowledge and skills." This phrase is key to understanding the ideological orientation toward curriculum development under the UCP. The assumption is that before students can be taught how to think critically, creatively, or deeply, they must first amass a body of "core knowledge." This assumption is not borne out in the Social Studies research literature. (Overall impressions of the draft curriculum section)

Other critics of the draft curriculum have alleged a racist, Eurocentric framing (Frew, 2022) and an absence of recognition of gender identity (Kanygin, 2021). Most tellingly, Peck (2021) writes, "Alberta is retreating to a curriculum that is about accumulating bits and pieces of information, not deep understanding" (Some concluding thoughts on the K-2 Social Studies (draft) curriculum section).

The sorting of information into neat, bordered categories of appropriate or radical, right or wrong, posits information control as a solution to information abundance. It suggests to anxious parents that the best option to "protect" children is to stem the flow of discussion and teaching in the classroom. But such restrictions fail to consider that by removing the space and time for discussion of difficult topics in schools, one is not removing children's exposure to the difficult topics at hand. Instead, one is merely removing a child's affordance at sense-making in an open, supported, discursive field. In other words, the push for control is a false solution. What is needed is, as I argue above, a re-engagement with what it means to be critical—at all ages and across all curricula.

One of the ways to think criticality anew is to turn back to the roots of Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School, who were some of the first critical social theorists "to analyze the new configurations of the state and economy in contemporary capitalist societies, to criticize the key roles of mass culture and communications, to analyze new modes of technology and forms of social control" (Kellner in Marcuse, 2007, pp. xviii–xix). Marcuse's work is particularly useful for the present moment, speaking as it does directly back to logics of control and domination. His critical theory is always dialectical, examining structures of oppression while seeking liberation. It is notable for its characteristic as an ongoing process rather than as a blueprint for the future (Yoels, 1971), its overt opposition to totalizing domination (Marcuse, 2007), and its rendering of epistemic and ontological possibility in lieu of a "universe of discourse [that] closes itself against any other discourse" (p. 94). Marcuse's critical theory foregrounds potentialities—that which is possible against that which is—in pursuit of liberation and justice. For education, Marcuse's (2007) conception of "critical" takes us out of the "smooth operation of the whole" (p. 4), of techno-capitalist regimes, and into the possibility of unanticipated futures. If we absolve education of its responsibility for criticality, then we foreclose children's futures, for, as Marcuse (2007) asks, "how can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions of freedom?" (p. 9).

With the invitation for a renewed understanding of criticality in mind, this journal recommits itself as a space for the consideration of teaching and learning for freedom. To that end, the Spring 2022 issue centres critically inflected research on a variety of educational topics. In "Preservice Teachers Engage Parents in At-Home Learning: 'We Are in This Together,'" Lori McKee, Anne Murray-Orr, and Evan Throop Robinson present a multi-case analysis of how pre-service teachers engaged parents in their child's at-home learning during the pandemic. Their article highlights the value of family vibrancy and asset-oriented pedagogies through the pandemic and beyond. At a time when many front-line workers, especially those in public health and education, are grappling with pandemic burn out, Melissa Corrente, Kristen Ferguson, and Ivy Lynn Bourgeault bring us a timely piece in their article, "Mental Health Experiences of Teachers: A Scoping Review." The authors note gaps in the literature, particularly pertaining to teacher absences and leaves, and suggest that more research is required to better understand teacher mental health needs and possible supports. In "The Rise in Demand for Special Education in Ontario, Canada: A Focus on French-Language Schools," Brittany Guenot and Lindsey Jaber offer a conceptual paper examining the premise of inclusive education for students with exceptionalities enrolled in French-language schools. Lastly, in "School Environment and Academic Persistence of Newcomer Students: The Roles of Teachers and Peers," Reza Nakhaie, Howard Ramos, and Fatima Fakih draw on survey data to examine the relationship between newcomer students' academic persistence and teacher support. They highlight the significance of cultural awareness and of representation in schools. In addition to our research articles, in this issue we introduce "Dialogue and Commentary," a section that permits timely response to current education topics. This issue, Jim Cummins writes a response to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's *Right to Read* inquiry report. This issue also features artwork exploring questions of identity and inheritance. Biljana Vujicic explores the post-Socialist subject and the subconscious in her work, *On (He)*. Tashya Orasi, in *Lessons From Grandfather*, asks questions of identity in times of crisis. Lastly, this issue features three book reviews, which will be of interest to practitioners and scholars alike: Shezadi Khushal reviews *Decolonizing Educational Leadership: Exploring Alternative Approaches to Leading Schools*, Lucas Johnson offers a perspective on *Failure to Disrupt: Why Technology Alone Can't Transform Education*, and Ardavan Eizadirad writes about *The Effectiveness of Educational Policy for Bias-Free Teacher Hiring: Critical Insights to Enhance Diversity in the Canadian Teacher Workforce*.

References

Berger, E. (2022, April 4). How Florida's 'don't say gay' law could harm children's mental health. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/apr/04/florida-dont-say-gay-bill-children-mental-health

Canady, V. A. (2022). Mental health concerns raised over Parental Rights legislation. *Mental Health Weekly*, *32*(14), 7–7.

Frew, N. (2022, April 2). *Protestors call for Alberta government to scrap K-6 draft curriculum*. CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-education-k-6-curriculum-protest-1.6406653

Kanygin, J. (2021, March 29). *Alberta releases draft of new kindergarten to Grade 6 curriculum*. CTV News. https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/alberta-releases-draft-of-new-kindergarten-to-grade-6-curriculum-1.5366715

Marcuse, H. (2007). *One-Dimensional Man*. Routledge.

Morgan, H. (2022). Resisting the movement to ban Critical Race Theory from schools. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 95*(1), 35–41.

Parker, L., & Liu, H. (2021). TMI! The new information environment. *Education Forum*. https://education-forum.ca/2021/10/22/tmi-the-new-information-environment/

Peck, C. (2021, March 29). Analysis of the draft Alberta K-6 Social Studies curriculum (Part 1). *Carla L. Peck, PhD Blog*. https://carlapeck.wordpress.com/2021/03/29/analysis-of-the-draft-alberta-k-6-social-studies-curriculum-part-1/

Yang, M. (2022, February 4). Tennessee pastor leads burning of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* novels. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/04/book-burning-harry-potter-twilight-us-pastor-tennessee

Yoels, W. C. (1971). Chasing the future: An essay—review of Herbert Marcuse's *An Essay on Liberation*. *Labor History, 12*(1), 144-153.