

# Problematizing Critical Pedagogy

by  
Mary Breuing

This article presents the results from a qualitative research study that examined the ways in which 17 self-identified critical pedagogues actually define critical pedagogy and their identification of its central aims and purposes. This article problematizes the overlapping and contradictory definitions of critical pedagogy and its historical roots. It critically examines the ways in which professors explicitly communicate the “critical” or justice-oriented intent of critical pedagogy.

## Introduction

Numerous critical pedagogues, including Ken Osborne (1990), Henry Giroux (1997), and Stephen Sweet (1998), among others, argue that critical theory needs to move beyond educational ideology, examining how it can be meaningfully employed in classroom practice. I recently conducted a qualitative research study that examined the successes and challenges that 17 self-identified critical pedagogues encounter as they endeavor to turn the theories of critical pedagogy into post-secondary classroom practices as one means to address the above critique. The study revealed some surprising results related to post-secondary classroom praxis, including the ways in which self-identified critical pedagogues actually define critical pedagogy and their identification of its central aims and purposes. Specifically, this paper will present the results from the following study queries:

International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, Vol 3 (3) (2011) pp 2-23

In what ways do you self-identify as a critical pedagogue?; How do you define critical pedagogy?; If you were to identify one or two aims of critical pedagogy, what would they be?; and who are some of the critical pedagogical theorists who have influenced you?

This paper will present the results related to those central queries as a means to add to the discourse on the multiple and varied definitions of critical pedagogy which are both overlapping and contradictory (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Kincheloe, 2004; Lather, 1998). The intent is to further elucidate the central aims and purposes of post-secondary critical pedagogical praxis and to critically examine them.

## Literature Review

This literature review literature will explore the multiple and varied definitions of critical pedagogy, including some mention of the central aims and purposes of critical pedagogy. An examination of the historical roots of critical pedagogy will serve as the foundation for this discussion.

Few empirical studies to date have examined the ways in which self-identified critical pedagogues define critical pedagogy. Beatriz Ruiz and Juan-Miguel Fernandez-Balboa (2005) conducted a study with 17 physical education teacher educators and their personal perspectives regarding their practices of critical pedagogy. They concluded that 11 of the 17 self-identified critical pedagogues in the study had vague definitions of critical pedagogy, its principles, and its purpose and three of the study participants had no definitions for it at all.

Since the intent of their study was to examine professors' critical praxis, Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa (2005) concluded that it was no wonder that many of the physical education teachers actually "floundered" when trying to implement critical pedagogy in the post-secondary classroom, since they struggled to even define it. Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa noted that these self-identified critical pedagogues most often actually reverted back to the type of transmission-based pedagogy they knew best from their own formal school experiences. "As a result, their emancipatory intentions sometimes translated into oppressive practices" (p. 258). Given this actuality, there exists some rationale for exploring the definitions of critical pedagogy as a means to examine the ways in which self-identified critical pedagogues engage in post-secondary classroom praxis.

## Historical Roots of Critical Pedagogy and Definitions

While an attempt to seek out the "founding fathers" of critical pedagogy has come under some criticism (Giroux, 1992; Lather, 1998), and attempts to establish an "authentic" version or definition of critical pedagogy through such means simply reinforces the patriarchal notions that critical pedagogy in part attempts to negate, to wholly ignore the historical roots of critical pedagogy would be an oversight, particularly in light of the above.

While there are numerous definitions and versions of contemporary critical theory and critical pedagogy (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Kincheloe, 2004), most of the related literature begins with a discussion of the roots of the theory of critical pedagogy. Historically, critical pedagogy was perceived to be one realization of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Gur-Ze'ev; Kincheloe; Lather, 1998; McLaren, 2003). The critical theoretical tradition developed by the Frankfurt School was greatly influenced by the work of Karl Marx, and particularly his views about labor. According to Marx, the essential societal problem was socio-economic inequality. Marx believed that all people needed to work toward a socialized economy, within which each individual received according to her needs and contributed according to her ability (Eisner, 2002). In essence, Marx argued that social justice is dependent upon economic conditions.

The "Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School," established in 1923, adopted a less unified social criticism, while still embracing some of Marx's views as they related to schools and education. In its beginnings, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and perhaps most significantly, Herbert Marcuse, argued that the process of schooling withholds opportunities for students to formulate their own aims and goals, and essentially serves to de-skill students (Apple, 1982; Kincheloe, 2004). The "Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School" argued that schools encourage dependency and a hierarchical understanding of authority, and provide a distorted view of history and other "taken-for-granted truths" that in turn, undermine the kind of social consciousness needed to bring about change and social transformation (Eisner, 2002).

One key figure in the Latin American liberation movement was Paulo Freire, who is commonly regarded as the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2000). Freire's work with the poor in Brazil introduced him to the lives of impoverished peasants. His experiences compelled him to develop educational ideals and practices that would serve to improve the lives of these marginalized people and to lessen their oppression. Freire understood schools to be impediments to the education of the poor, and thus sought to find strategies for students to intervene in what he considered to be a dehumanizing process (Kincheloe, 2004). Freire (1970) referred to this educative process as liberatory action or praxis. He argued that people need to engage in a praxis that incorporates theory, action, and reflection as a means to work toward social change and justice, and he devised a literacy program based on this ideal as well as the practical needs of his students.

In North America, the "New Left Scholars" began to focus their attention increasingly on critical pedagogy as well. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Henry Giroux (1981) began to formulate a critical pedagogy that synthesized the more progressive elements of John Dewey's philosophy and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Giroux, along with Roger Simon, Michael Apple, and Peter McLaren focused their efforts on examining and better understanding the role that schools play in transmitting certain messages about political, social, and economic life believing that a revolutionary critical pedagogy will allow educators to

realize the possibilities of democratic social values within their classroom (Kincheloe, 2004).

Patti Lather's work in the field of critical education has revolved around characterizing the relationship between feminist and critical pedagogy, feminist ethnography, and poststructuralism (Kincheloe, 2004). Lather (1991) examines the ways in which many of the "post" discourses can help critical pedagogues explore and critique the role of power and hegemony in research methods and modes of knowledge production. "The practices of poststructural deconstruction associated with Derrida; and postmodern currents associated with Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Ebert, and others" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 305) have also problematized the social, cultural, and economic contexts of sources of knowledge and pedagogy.

Caroline Shrewsbury (1987), bell hooks (1994), and Kathleen Weiler (2001), alongside other feminist pedagogues, argue that education should challenge the structure of the traditional canon and develop and offer alternative classroom practices. Feminist pedagogy reinforces the idea that both the content of the curriculum and the methods of pedagogy employed teach lessons. Feminist pedagogy "emphasizes the importance of consciousness raising, the existence of oppressive social structure and the need to change it, and the possibility of social transformation" (Weiler, 2001, p. 68).

Ira Shor (1996) explicitly brings the theory of critical pedagogy to the post-secondary classroom, attempting to address similar concerns to those that Lather expressed regarding the shortcomings of transmission-based pedagogies. Shor became fascinated with the work of Freire and worked to integrate notions of social critique with classroom techniques of pedagogy in ways that create new educational possibilities (Kincheloe, 2004). Shor integrates instruction about the theory of critical pedagogy with a classroom praxis that emphasizes the potential for teachers and students to act as agents of social change.

While this historical overview may represent an oversimplification of many aspects of critical pedagogy, they provide one way to view some of the pedagogies that are central to a relevant review of literature for this present study. Within this "history," there is contradiction, overlap, and resistance to the attempts of some critical theorists and pedagogues to identify the "one perfect" definition or a narrow set of prescriptive practices that constitute the field of critical pedagogy.

It was interesting to discover the multiple and varied definitions of critical pedagogy as I engaged in a review of related literature. It was also interesting to note the paucity of empirical studies related to definitions and aims and purposes of critical pedagogy. This study was thus designed to specifically examine the ways in which critical pedagogues define critical pedagogy (MacDonald & Brooker, 1999; Ruiz & Fernandez-Balboa, 2005) and to examine the overlap and contradictory definitions of critical pedagogy (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Kincheloe, 2004) as a means to better understand peoples' conceptions of critical pedagogy and the ways in which these conceptions inform classroom practice.

## Methodology

The following key query guided the research study: What are the ways in which self-identified critical pedagogues actually engage in critical pedagogical practices within the post-secondary classroom? This section will outline the research participants, materials, and the research design for this study.

### *Participants*

I sent out several “calls” for research participants to the listserv of the Critical Educators for Social Justice Special Interest Group (CESJ-SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in September, 2005 to recruit self-identified critical pedagogues who were interested in participating in this study. In total, there were 17 self-identified critical pedagogues from that group who participated in this study. Of those 17 people, ten were female and seven were male. There was a wide age range, with one participant being between the ages of 30-40 and one participant being over 70 years old. Most participants were between the ages of 50-60. Ten participants were non-tenured professors and one of these was a full-time lecturer and doctoral student. Seven participants were tenured professors.

Thirteen participants self-identified themselves as Caucasian; one as Latina; one as Native-American; one as Chicana; and one as Asian American. Two research participants were Canadians, teaching in Canadian universities and the rest (15) were from the United States, teaching in universities in the United States.

Participants were made aware of the nature of this study, their roles in it, provisions for confidentiality, and their option to withdraw from the study at any point. Signed informed consent was obtained prior to the collection of data. Participants’ names were changed for the purposes of anonymity and pseudonyms are used within the Results section of this paper.

### *Materials*

I conducted phone interviews with the 17 participants between October, 2005 and February, 2006. The length of each interview varied only slightly, each one lasting approximately one hour. The interviews were semi-standardized (Berg, 2004). The value of this form of “less structured” interview was that it allowed for opportunities to explore areas I had not previously considered (Reinharz, 1992).

As previously mentioned, the specific purpose of this paper is to present some of the key findings related to the definition of critical pedagogy and its central aims and purposes. These findings represent only part of the results from a larger qualitative research study which explored the ways in which 17 self-identified critical pedagogues actually engage in critical pedagogical praxis within the post-secondary classroom.

Because this paper focuses on critical pedagogy definitions and its central aims and purposes, the list of guiding questions specifically related to that aspect of the study consisted of a small set of queries lifted from a larger set of interview questions from the study as a whole. The questions were:

- In what ways do you self-identify as a critical pedagogue?
- How do you define critical pedagogy?
- If you were to identify one or two aims of critical pedagogy, what would they be?
- Who are some of the critical pedagogical theorists who have influenced you?

### *Design*

The study employed Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as the methodological framework. AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen either a system's or a person's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003). It seeks to build upon achievements, unexplored potential, innovations, strengths, competencies, stories, lived values, traditions, and visions. Taking all of these together, AI seeks to link these positive insights directly to a change agenda (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2003).

### *Data analysis*

All 17 interviews were transcribed by a transcriber. I sent a copy of the transcripts back to each interview participant for his or her review. The process of data analysis was guided by the main objective of the study and by the review of related literature. I thus began data analysis by establishing some initial categories and themes related to the objectives and the literature. I next read through all of the transcriptions in the spirit that Berg (2004) suggests – “as a passport to listening to the words of the text and understanding better the perspective(s) of the producer of these words” (p. 269). I read through the transcriptions with a view to identify other categories and themes that emerged out of participants' responses to the interview questions.

## Results and Discussion

Participants' self-identification as critical pedagogues, their definitions of critical pedagogy, their identification of the central aims of critical pedagogy, and the influential theorists who inform their practices overlapped significantly within their individual responses. For example, often a participant would cite an influential theorist at the outset of the interview as a response to my query about the definition of critical pedagogy, and this theorist would come up repeatedly throughout the interview. For example, Freire was mentioned 54 times throughout the course

of the 17 interviews. Clearly, Freire’s influence on the field of critical pedagogy was significant from the viewpoint of these participants. McLaren received the second highest number of citations (18). Many theorists were cited less frequently but clearly influenced participants’ perceptions of critical pedagogy theory and practice. For example, Dewey was cited eight times throughout the course of the 17 interviews but clearly had a significant influence on Larry, Mark, and Jeff, all of whom purported that the main purpose of critical pedagogy is to prepare citizens for democracy and teach courses that “speak to” that purpose.

This next section will thus present the results related to critical pedagogy definitions, the central aims and purposes of critical pedagogy, and influential theorists, including some initial mention of the ways in which participants self-identified as critical pedagogues. The results will be integrated with a discussion that links the findings from this particular study with the relevant literature. Finally, the definitions and aims and purposes of critical pedagogy will be problematized.

Table 1 below is intended to help provide an overview of the general ways in which the 17 participants self-identified as critical pedagogues, participants’ definitions of critical pedagogy, and their identification of the influential theorists.

*Table 1: Overview of Self-Identification, Critical Pedagogy Definitions, and Influential Theorists*

<b>Name and Gender (F/M)</b>	<b>Self-Identification</b>	<b>Definitions Central Purposes</b>	<b>Influential Theorists</b>
Bob (M)	Difficult to self-identify and define	Classroom as an arena of struggle	Marx
Catherine (F)	Constructivist	Student engagement/ Critical thinking	Kozol
Meg (F)	Constructivist	Lifelong learning and ownership of learning	Shor Horton
Nancy (F)	Constructivist	Social change	Kohn Paley
Graham (M)	Constructivist/ Experiential education	Activity/field-oriented classroom practices to attain democratic and just citizens	Kincheloe Kanpol Steinberg
Linda (F)	Critical pedagogue “in progress”	Working with and through crisis toward social consciousness	Kumashiro Wink
Donna (F)	Critical pedagogue	Social consciousness and activism	Brophy

<b>Name and Gender (F/M)</b>	<b>Self-Identification</b>	<b>Definitions Central Purposes</b>	<b>Influential Theorists</b>
Larry (M)	Critical pedagogue	Examining hidden assumptions as means to work toward social justice	Freire
Anne (F)	Critical pedagogue	Critical responders through praxis and research	Ellsworth Giroux McLaren
Bailey (F)	Critical pedagogue	Multicultural education/ Sociocultural examination of education	Tatum Spring Wink
Sarah (F)	Critical pedagogue	Social change Democracy	Dewey
Jack (M)	Critical pedagogue/ Curriculum theorist	Emancipation	Marx
Sam (M)	Critical pedagogue/ Social reconstructionist	Promotion of critical thinking	Kuntz McLaren
Laurie (F)	Critical pedagogue/ Problem-posing pedagogue	Social justice and change through critical praxis and research	Freire
Jeff (M)	Critical pedagogue/ Freirean pedagogue	“Conscientization”	Freire Giroux
Mark (M)	Freirean pedagogue	“Reading the world by reading the word”	Freire Dewey
Taylor (F)	Freirean pedagogue/ Constructivist	“Reading the world by reading the word”/ Empowerment	Freire Vygotsky

### Self-Identification

While research participants all self-identified as critical pedagogues, there was some disparity in the ways in which they self-identified and this was often related



to their definitions of critical pedagogy. When queried about the ways in which they self-identified as critical pedagogues, many research participants responded that they teach *about* the theory of critical pedagogy.

Others talked about the ways in which they “practiced” critical pedagogy within the post-secondary classroom, citing examples of their use of dialogue, the importance of building a classroom-community, their focus on taking a constructivist approach when determining the course content, and the field activities that were offered within their courses. Some research participants talked about the ways in which they strive for congruency between their teaching and research and the theory that they teach about.

Anne provided one specific example of how she tries to “practice” the theory that she teaches about in her research course. She said that students do “observation in my research methods class; they go out and collect data and then analyze the data.” She said that they engage in a real research project rather than just learning about research.

Laurie said that she teaches about activism and social change and models this by being an activist herself. She said that she self identifies as a critical pedagogue through her teaching, research, and community activism. When queried about the way that she self-identifies as a critical pedagogue, Meg concluded:

I mean I wouldn't go around and you know put it on my name plate or something. But particularly in regard to the way in which I approach doing research, I do identify myself as an action researcher and critical pedagogue.

A critical query that I am left with post-analysis is, “Is self-identifying as constructivist automatically or necessarily justice-oriented or might self-identification as constructivist point toward a focus on student-centred teaching practices?” At its core, constructivism (at least according to the participants’ reports in this study) emphasizes that people construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences. In this sense, constructivism has no direct relationship with social justice; rather, the emphasis is on student experience and co-constructed knowledge. Some further exploration of this may be warranted.

## Definitions of Critical Pedagogy

As previously mentioned in the literature review, Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa (2005) cited concerns regarding professors’ difficulty with naming the justice-oriented nature of critical pedagogy in a study they conducted with 17 physical education teachers and their personal perspectives regarding their practices of critical pedagogy.

The results from the Ruiz and Fernandez-Balboa study suggest that while some people may self-identify as critical pedagogues, they may have little ability to articulate any clear definitions of the principles, let alone the justice-oriented nature of the pedagogical approach. Overall, this lack of understanding of the

central aims and purposes of critical pedagogy and its social justice orientation may point to the value of broadening people's understanding of the central aims and purposes of critical pedagogy by encouraging an increased self-examination and assessment of one's own view in this regard.

In this study, when I first asked participants how they defined critical pedagogy and asked them to identify one or two of the central aims of critical pedagogy, there were a number of participants who echoed Gur Ze'ev's concerns (1998) about trying to identify the one "true" definition of critical pedagogy. Bob said that he didn't think that he could be clear or brief enough for it to be a definition and Larry stated that, in his view, there are many different definitions of critical pedagogy.

A number of participants, however, defined critical pedagogy quite clearly and succinctly. Bailey seemed to echo Gore (1993), Lather (1991), and Kohli's (1998) contentions that the theory and practice of critical pedagogy provide mechanisms for a sociocultural examination of schools. According to Bailey, this sociocultural lens focuses on social structures, including race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality, and examines how these factor into life in schools and the larger society. Mark expressed a similar conclusion, stating that critical pedagogy provides a theoretical foundation for students to evaluate their social, political, and economic standing, and Donna contended that critical pedagogy allows students to question societal norms and how these norms perpetuate societal injustices. These participants believed critical pedagogy provided them with a framework for teaching and learning that focused on power, hegemony, and social justice.

Other participants focused their definitions on the importance of praxis. Linda stated that for her, the basic components of critical pedagogy were critical reflection and action. Sarah concluded that critical pedagogy involves the outside world and transformation, asserting the importance of activism. Both Linda and Sarah seemed to echo the ideals of Gore (1993) and Shor (1996), among others, who assert the importance of turning the theory of critical pedagogy into a critical pedagogical praxis. Catherine's definition seemed to focus on student-centered practices and constructivism and less on the political nature and transformative potential of critical pedagogy during the interview.

## Central Aims and Purposes of Critical Pedagogy

Participants' definitions for critical pedagogy were closely linked with their identification of its central aims and purposes. When participants were asked about the overarching aims of critical pedagogy and to identify its main purpose, there were a variety of answers including: democracy; emancipation and/or transformation; critical thinking; social justice; profound learning experiences; empowerment; critical responders; social consciousness and activism; social change; and student-centeredness (see Table 2 above).

Student-centeredness, which some participants perhaps oversimplified as constructivism, was mentioned most often as a central aim of critical pedagogy, receiving 42 responses. Social justice was mentioned 33 times and social change and social consciousness and activism were mentioned 24 times. Democracy was also frequently mentioned, receiving 27 responses (see Figure 1 below – first number in parentheses reflects frequency).

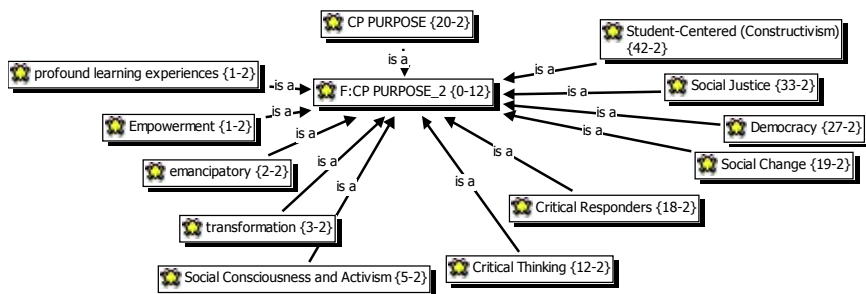


Figure 1. Purpose of critical pedagogy

Britzman (2003) would most likely express some concern about this emphasis on constructivism and student-centered teaching techniques, asserting that pedagogues should be cautious about identifying this “methods as ends” approach to teaching and learning critical pedagogy. She asserts that focusing on constructivism as an end in and of itself may reduce “the complexity of pedagogical activity to a technical solution and ‘forget’ that methods are a means for larger educational purposes” (p. 62). Danvers (2003) also discusses the need for critical pedagogues to recognize that classroom techniques and strategies clearly have a role to play in learning and teaching, but they should not become an end in themselves or be the sole agenda.

Boyce (n.d.) may be less concerned with participants’ focus on constructivism, arguing that perhaps the central idea of constructivism logically precedes the ideal of social transformation. If the premise of a liberatory education is to help learners realize that the social construction of knowledge serves some groups while disserving others (Boyce, n.d.), then the purposes of constructivist learning and issues of justice are intimately conjoined.

Overall, the results from my study point to the need for critical pedagogy to work toward better explication and communication of its social justice orientation, alongside its constructivist orientation. There may still be some work that needs to be done to encourage educators to recognize that critical pedagogical praxis must go beyond a set of teaching techniques and attend to the political, social, and economic factors that have conspired to marginalize people in the first place (Macedo, 1994).

As indicated in the results, participants did mention critical consciousness, transformation, and democracy as some of the other central aims of critical pedagogy. Taylor asserted that critical consciousness was central to her conception of critical pedagogical praxis. She said that developing a critical consciousness within a community of learners, versus developing this consciousness as part of an individual self-reflexive process, resulted in a critical consciousness that is socially constructed and reflects a multiplicity of diverse “voices.” For Freire (1970), this critical consciousness or “conscientization,” focuses on perceiving and exposing social and political contradictions and taking action against oppression. Sarah concluded that the purpose of critical pedagogy is to work toward praxis which involves interaction with the outside world and transformation of that world into something new and better.

“Democracy” was also cited frequently as one of the central aims of critical pedagogy. Although I did not push participants to define what they meant by democracy, I had the sense that the word was sometimes used as if we all shared the same meaning and that the participants’ themselves assumed that the definition of democracy was somewhat self-evident. Not surprisingly, those participants who cited democracy often referred to Dewey or Freire within their discussion of the purpose of critical pedagogy.

Participants’ reference to Dewey and Freire provide some insights into their assertion that democracy represents one of the central aims of critical pedagogy. Dewey (1916) believed that a just and democratic form of schooling could pave the way to a more just and free society. He argued that reforms in early education could be, in themselves, a major lever of social change. In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey asserts that a democracy is “more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 87). He believed that democratic practice takes into account one’s own actions and their influence on others. These actions may serve to either build barriers out of difference in class, race, and national territory or break them down. In Dewey’s view, a democratic educational ideal would modify traditional ideals of culture, traditional subjects of study, and traditional methods of teaching and discipline.

Freire (1998) believed that the critical educator who incorporates a democratic vision or posture in her teaching praxis cannot avoid an exploration of the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner. Freire (1985) argued that educators should not be afraid of using the word democracy. He asserted that many people have become skeptical about the word because they relate it to social democracy and reformism. Instead, Freire (1985) suggested, democracy can be associated with socialism and with revolution.

Both Dewey (1916) and Freire (1985, 1998) believed that the ultimate goal of education was to attain a socially just and democratic citizenry. Education was thus aimed at helping marginalized individuals and groups to use education as a means to bring about liberatory social change. Although I did not push participants to clearly define democracy, I suspect that their conceptions of democracy

were closely linked to that of Dewey and Freire since they referred to both these theorists and their educational ideals in their responses. I now wish that I had asked participants to define democracy. I additionally wish that I had queried them about whether they regard democracy as an “end” of education in and of itself, or as a means to work toward issues of justice.

The overlapping and perhaps somewhat conflicting views of the participants’ responses regarding their definitions and identification of the central aims and purposes of critical pedagogy seem to align with the review of related literature. Critical pedagogical discourse emphasizes democracy (Dewey, 1916; 1938; Freire, 1998), cultural literacy (Kellner, 1998; Macedo, 1994), poststructuralism (Lather, 1991, 1998; Pillow, 2000), and the politics of identity and difference embodied in the discourses of class (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 2003), gender (Shrewsbury, 1987; Weiler, 2001), race (hooks, 1994, 2003), and sexuality (de Castell & Bryson, 1997).

Kanpol (1999), Kessing-Styles (2003), and Kincheloe (2004) would argue that despite the multiple and varied meanings of critical pedagogy, the central purpose of critical pedagogy is to use education as a means to bring about a more socially just world. Both the participants in my study and the review of related literature seem to suggest that there may be a need for critical pedagogues to continue to broaden their understandings of the “critical” or justice-oriented nature of critical pedagogy and to begin to articulate this intent more explicitly within their post-secondary classroom practices.

Findings from my study related to critical pedagogy definitions point to the need for interrogation of the overarching purpose of critical pedagogy. The results from my study point to the need for critical pedagogy to work toward better explication and communication of its social justice orientation, alongside its constructivist orientation. There may still be some work that needs to be done to encourage educators to recognize that critical pedagogical praxis must go beyond a set of teaching techniques and attend to the political, social, and economic factors that have conspired to marginalize people in the first place (Macedo, 1994). This need is particularly true if the intent of critical pedagogical praxis is to use education as a vehicle to bring about a more socially just world (Kanpol, 1999; Keesing-Styles, 2003; Kincheloe, 2004).

## Influential Theorists

As one would imagine, the theory of critical pedagogy and the theorists who influenced participants were interrelated to the ways in which participants defined critical pedagogy and the central aims that they identified. Much of the contradiction and overlap regarding participants’ definitions and identification of the central aims of critical pedagogy is a result of the central ideologies and influential theorists that guide individuals’ work.

For example, some critical pedagogues approach critical praxis from a Marxist perspective that focuses on class (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 2003). Freire (1970, 1994) identifies the liberatory potential of critical pedagogy while some of Lather’s (1991) writing focuses on neo-Marxist theories. Pillow (2000) employs a poststructuralist lens in her approach to critical pedagogy. Hooks (1994, 2003) and Weiler (2001) adopt a feminist pedagogical perspective and Shor (1996) and Gore (1993) assert the need for the theory of critical pedagogy to move into the realm of praxis. As mentioned above, those participants who mentioned “Democracy” as a central aim of critical pedagogy cited the influence of Dewey on their thinking.

Figure 2 below identifies the influential theorists whom participants reported as central to their definitions and conceptions of critical pedagogy. The first number in brackets represents the number of times that a particular critical pedagogue or theorist was mentioned. In other words, Paulo Freire’s name came up on 54 separate occasions when participants were talking about how they defined critical pedagogy while Elizabeth Ellsworth was only mentioned on two occasions.

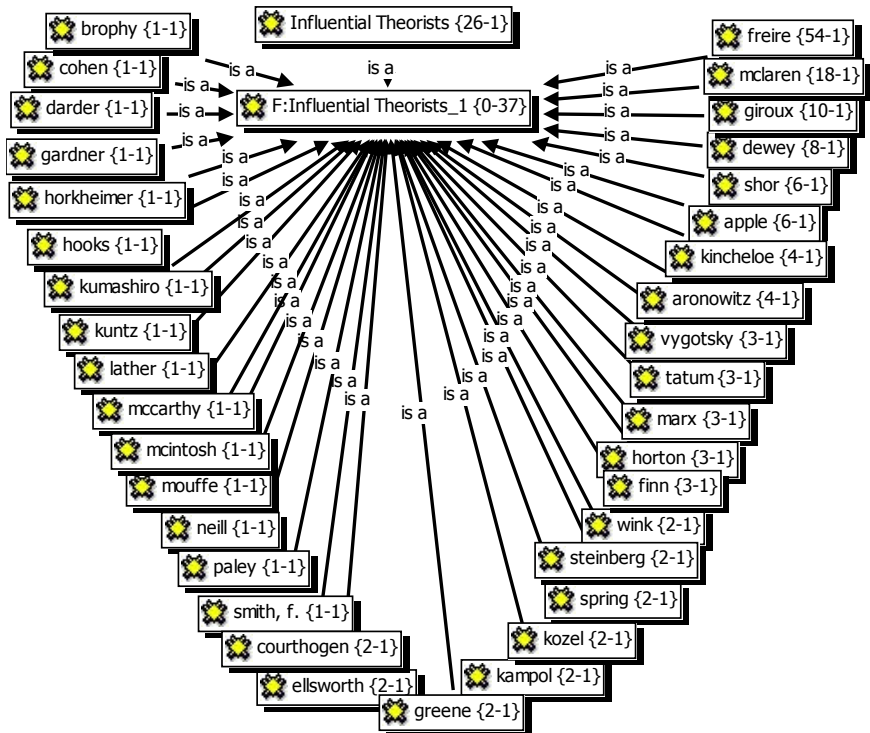


Figure 2. Influential theorists

The results from my study revealed that some of the theorists who appeared repeatedly in the review of related literature, and who I would regard as central to the theory of critical pedagogy, were mentioned with a relatively low level of frequency. For example, hooks (1994), Lather (1991), and Ellsworth (1992) were not mentioned as often as I would have expected. I wonder whether this is just a function of this particular participant sample.

## Problematizing Critical Pedagogy

Is it simply a coincidence that more male theorists were mentioned? Out of the 37 influential theorists that participants cited, only seven of these were female. There was no difference in gender regarding participants' references to those female theorists. In other words, both male participants and female participants brought up the names of female theorists with the same level of frequency. What is so surprising in my view is that the overall frequency of citations of female theorists is so low.

That said, in his most recent edition of *Life in Schools*, McLaren (2003) asserts that critical pedagogy must return to its Marxist roots and move away from its present emphasis on other counter-hegemonic praxis, including feminist pedagogy, cultural studies, and anti-racist education that he considers to be diluting critical pedagogy.

McLaren and Farahmandpur (2000) argue that radical and critical theorists "have been disinterred from Marxist soil where they first drew breath, and their graves now sprout the saplings of postmodern theory" (p. 26). McLaren and Farahmandpur further assert that the postmodernization of the Left and its accompanying retreat from class struggle has resulted in a *laissez-faire* evangelism. Rather than joining in the chorus of post-Marxists celebrating the death of universalism and grand narrative, McLaren and Farahmandpur (2000) believe that

A critical reflexive Marxist theory – undergirded by the categorical imperative of striving to overthrow all social conditions in which human beings are exploited and oppressed – can prove foundational in the development of current educational research traditions as well as pedagogies of liberation. (p. 28)

Hooks (2003) and Lather (2001), however, argue that repeated iterations of the preeminence of Marxist Social theory and the historical roots of the Frankfurt School ignore the feminist, anti-racist, and postcolonial educational projects that overlap with critical pedagogy, and discount the work of Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies programs. The practice of tracing the historical roots of critical theory back to the Frankfurt School only serves to maintain the reification of a "founding fathers" mentality of critical pedagogy (hooks, 2003). In hooks' opinion (2003), this version of critical pedagogy is antiquated. Sandy Grande (2003) similarly asserts that an overemphasis on class-based agendas that fail to engage

race relations only leads to further marginalization of the political potential for critical pedagogical praxis.

Gore (1993), Lather (1998, 2001), and Kohli (1998) all assert that a contemporary conceptualization of critical pedagogical praxis should attend to issues related not only to class, but to some of the broader social issues that have historically been less acknowledged, including race, gender, and sexuality. In Lather's (2001) view, the overlapping "projects" of feminist pedagogies, anti-racist education, and poststructuralism and their intersections with critical pedagogy will only strengthen the justice-oriented purpose of these pedagogies.

Lather (2001) explores why critical pedagogy is still very much a "boy thing." She believes that:

This is due not so much to the dominance of male authors in the field as it is to the masculinist voice of abstraction, universalization, and the rhetorical position of 'the one who knows,' what Ellsworth (1997) calls "The One with the 'Right' Story." (p. 184)

A tension exists here. As mentioned, I was initially struck by the fact that, overall, participants' definitions of critical pedagogy and their identification of influential theorists did not include a greater multiplicity of voices and perspectives. I had anticipated that more participants would have cited some of the influential feminist, critical theorists, for example, when queried about the theorists who most influenced their teaching and praxis. I now wonder about participants' responses in relation to some of the related literature.

A gap may exist between my participants' responses and the literature-based assertions that critical pedagogy should embrace the multiple discourses of "other" justice-oriented pedagogies as a means for critical pedagogical praxis to more fully flourish. It may be that McLaren (2003) and McLaren and Farahmandpur's (2000) conclusions better resonate with participants' conceptions of critical pedagogy. In light of this tension, I now wonder if perhaps participants themselves have fallen "prey" to the overabundance of critical pedagogy literature that focuses on a "founding fathers" mentality; the dominance of male theorists in the results of my study only adds to my suspicion. Of course, I also wonder if I am being overly suspicious about the paucity of citations of female theorists as a result of my own inclination to be wary of the "founding fathers" mentality.

Clearly, there is some tension that exists within the review of related literature regarding the preeminence of Marxist theory and its influence on the field of critical pedagogy. Significant complexity lies in the various counterarguments presented by those theorists who believe that all discussions of critical pedagogy are rooted in Marxist social theory, and those theorists who believe that repeatedly tracing the roots of critical pedagogy back to Marxist social theory fails to engage the feminist and anti-racist-based agendas of critical pedagogy. More is said about this tension in the concluding remarks of this section on influential theorists.



Participants also cited a number of educational theorists who focused more on constructivism and student-centered classroom practices than on critical pedagogy *per se*, including Lev Vygotsky, Beverly Tatum, Alfie Kohn, and Jonathan Kozol. These theorists are best known for social development theory (Vygotsky, 1978), theories about students of color in the K-12 school system (Tatum, 1999), the role of discipline and the punishment/reward system in schools (Kohn, 1996), and the inequities in public schooling (Kozol, 1991). Generally speaking, those participants who made mention of these educational theorists were those participants who focused on school practices and more frequently identified student-centered learning and constructivism as the central aim of critical pedagogy.

Those participants who focused on issues of justice, particularly as they related to class, mentioned Apple (1990), Giroux (1997), and McLaren (2003) most often. Those participants who were praxis-oriented mentioned Shor (1996) more frequently than other theorists. Those participants who focused on using “critical works” to teach about critical theory and pedagogy mentioned Apple, Giroux, McLaren and additionally mentioned many of the introductory books on critical theory and pedagogy, including those written by Steinberg and Kincheloe (in press), Kanpol (1999), Kincheloe (2004), and Wink (2005).

Dewey (1916, 1938) was mentioned by those participants who focused on connecting the educational ideals of democracy to those of critical pedagogy. Mark, Donna, and Sarah talked about the influence of Dewey on their critical praxis and said they thought that Dewey’s ideals of democracy and progressive education had a significant influence on the field of critical pedagogy.

As previously mentioned, numerous participants brought up Freire’s name. In fact, his name and some mention of his educational ideals were often part of participants’ responses to the very first interview question that I posed about how participants define critical pedagogy. In most cases, by the time that I posed the question regarding influential theorists, Freire had already been mentioned, signifying his influence on critical pedagogy.

The results regarding influential theorists seem to suggest that while Freire is regarded as one of the founding “fathers” of critical pedagogy, there is less universal agreement regarding the centrality of other theorists in respect to critical pedagogy. In fact, the results would suggest that, at least in regard to this particular participant pool, there is one principal theorist, in addition to Freire, who played a key role in participants’ conception of critical pedagogy. The one or two theorists participants did identify were closely related to the “subfield” and ideological perspective of the person teaching about critical pedagogy, whether that be a Marxist, feminist, poststructural, or praxis-oriented perspective.

Regarding these overlapping “subfields” of critical pedagogy, Lather (2001) has argued that ideally, attempts should be made for educators to approach critical pedagogy outside of the oppositional frameworks that are “differently engaged but nevertheless affiliated critical moves” (p. 184) as a means to “keep in play the very heterogeneity that is, perhaps, the central resource for getting through the

stuck places of contemporary critical pedagogy” (p. 184). She asserts the need for critical pedagogical praxis to embrace the multiplicity and overlap of related pedagogies.

Gur-Ze’ev (1998) echoes Lather’s sentiments, concluding that the projects of critical theory and those of some postmodern and feminist thinkers might be united. In his view, the development of a critical pedagogy should be theoretically interdisciplinary and politically committed to social change (Gur-Ze’ev, 1998). Gur-Ze’ev suggests that this new project – one that rejects the “paternalistic” versions of critical pedagogy – be newly coined as well, suggesting that it be called *counter-education*.

## Conclusion

As mentioned above, both Lather and Gur-Ze’ev encourage critical pedagogues to move away from focusing on trying to establish the “right” definition toward embracing the contradictory voices, counternarratives, and competing understandings that constitute critical pedagogy. Lather (1998) refers to this perspective as the move toward defining critical pedagogy as the “big tent” for those in education who are invested in doing academic work that is justice-oriented.

Participants’ responses in my study may either contradict or endorse Lather’s “big tent” metaphor, depending upon how those responses are interpreted. I wonder; could it be that Linda is delving into the work of Kumashiro as it relates to the “subfield” of anti-oppression and crisis within the “big tent” of critical pedagogy? Are Mark, Donna, and Sarah taking up the ideals of democracy and citizenship as a “subfield” within critical pedagogy? Is Taylor looking more closely at issues of race and its relationship to critical pedagogy while Sam is exploring a justice-oriented curriculum that places issues of class at the center? Bailey’s pursuit may reflect her focus on a critical multiculturalism that explores issues of culture, race, gender, and ability. I am troubled by my own difficulties with interpreting participants’ responses as they relate to the overlapping purposes of critical pedagogy and my own desire to draw some substantive conclusion regarding these purposes.

Am I somewhat trapped in my own desire for reassuring certainties related to universal purposes and central theorists? Am I perhaps too antiquated in my own thinking as it relates to the field of critical pedagogy and the recent growth of the “subfields?” Am I expending too much effort on trying to conjoin these “subfields” into a singular overarching critical pedagogical praxis through my attempts to concretize information?

Perhaps my attempt to define, identify, and concretize critical pedagogy is what Lather (1998) describes as an inevitable impossibility of reductionist thinking. She regards the present day task of a critical pedagogical project as a need to “situate the experience of impossibility as an enabling site for working through aporias” (p. 495) and as a means to learn from ruptures, failures, breaks, and refusals. Lather is suggesting that there may be a positive quality to moving

away from universal definitions. She further argues that the process of “working through” some of the overlap, contradiction, and dissonance regarding the one “right” definition and central theorists sets up a positive and productive tension (Lather, 1998).

Lather (1998) concludes that:

As an arena of practice, critical pedagogy might serve a transvaluation of praxis if it can find a way to participate in the struggle of these forces as we move toward an experience of the promise that is unforeseeable from the perspective of our present conceptual frameworks. (p. 497)

In other words, perhaps the very framework that attempts to universalize “truth” excludes the many possibilities of a critical pedagogical praxis that is multiple, overlapping, and contested. Perhaps I need to further critically examine my own concerns with my attempts to maintain a “big tent” mentality of critical pedagogy because it may inherently limit the potential of the more focused and singular agendas of some of the related pedagogies.

Perhaps I need to simultaneously be attentive to why McLaren reasserts the importance of Marxist social theory. As previously mentioned, McLaren believes that the central purpose of critical pedagogy is to work toward issues of justice related to class. In asserting this, McLaren (2003) claims that if class issues were resolved then issues of racism and gender oppression would be lessened as a result. For McLaren and Farahmandpur (2000) differences in class conflate other systems of oppression. McLaren (2000, 2003) believes that if critical pedagogues were to “take up” issues related to social class, then other justice-oriented issues may be resolved. Perhaps some of the claims made within the related literature critiquing that repeated iteration of the importance of Marxist social theory is a “boy thing” (Lather, 2001; hooks, 2003) and the tension this creates needs to be critically examined a bit further. In other words, it may be important not to be too quick to disregard McLaren’s assertions that issues of justice start with class. My intent in these concluding remarks is not to resolve some of the tensions that I have enumerated in this section but rather to acknowledge them.

In terms of future research, a great deal remains to be done. As I was conducting this study, I was talking with a friend who was studying with a critical pedagogue who has been cited throughout my review of related literature and cited throughout participants’ responses in my study. She informed me that, to her surprise, this particular professor taught very traditionally and demonstrated a lack of congruence between his theory and practice. My friend thus saw value in my study.

As a result of my friend’s reaction to her experiences with this so-called “master critical pedagogue” and in reference to my study, I believe in the value of the continual critical interrogation of the practices of self-identified pedagogues. Both the participants in my study and the review of related literature reveal that there is a need for critical pedagogues to continue to broaden their understandings

of the justice-oriented nature of critical praxis and to begin to articulate this intent more explicitly within their post-secondary classroom practices.

## References

- Apple, M. (1982). *Education and power*. Boston: ARK Publications.
- Apple, M. (1990). *Ideology and curriculum* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Boyce, M. E. (n.d.). *Teaching critically as an act of praxis and resistance*. Retrieved March 15, 2005, from [www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/research/ejrot/Vol2\\_2/boyce.pdf](http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/research/ejrot/Vol2_2/boyce.pdf)
- Breunig, M. (2006). Radical pedagogy as praxis. *Radical Pedagogy*, 8(1), 1-18.
- Britzman, D. (2003). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney, D., & Stavros, J. (2003). *The Appreciative Inquiry handbook*. Euclid, OH: Lakeshore Publisher.
- Danvers, J. (2003). Towards a radical pedagogy: Provisional notes on learning and teaching in art & design. *The International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 22(1), 47-57.
- de Castell, S., & Bryson, M. (1997). Queer pedagogy: Praxis makes imperfect. In S. de Castell & M. Bryson (Eds.), *Radical in>ter>ventions: Identity, politics, and differences in educational praxis* (pp. 285-305). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kincheloe, J., & McLaren, P. (2005). Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 303-343). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Eisner, E. (2002). *The educational imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Macmillan.
- Ellsworth, E. (1992). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminisms and critical pedagogy* (pp. 90-119). New York: Routledge.
- Ellsworth, E. (1997). *Teaching positions: Difference, pedagogy, and the power of address*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: culture, power, and liberation*. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey.
- Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope. Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Giroux, H. (1981). Toward a new sociology of curriculum. In H. Giroux, A. Penna, & W. Pinar (Eds.), *Curriculum and instruction: Alternatives in education* (pp. 98-108). Berkley, CA: McCutchan.
- Giroux, H. (1992). *Border crossings: Cultural workers and the politics of education*. New York: Routledge.
- Giroux, H. (1997). *Pedagogy and the politics of hope: Theory, culture, and schooling*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Gore, J. M. (1993). *The struggle for pedagogies: Critical and feminist discourses as regimes of truth*. New York: Routledge.

- Grande, S. (2003). Whitestream feminism and the colonialist project: A review of contemporary feminist pedagogy and praxis. *Educational Theory*, 53(3), 329-346.
- Gur-Ze'ev, I. (1998). Toward a nonrepressive critical pedagogy. *Educational Theory*, 48(4), 463-486.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York: Routledge.
- Kanpol, B. (1999). *Critical pedagogy: An introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Keesing-Styles, L. (2003). The relationship between critical pedagogy and assessment in teacher education. *Radical Pedagogy*, 5(1), 1-20.
- Kellner, D. (1998). Multiple literacies and critical pedagogy in a multicultural society. *Educational Theory*, 48(1), 103-122.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004). *Critical pedagogy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Kohli, W. (1998). Critical education and embodied subjects: Making the poststructural turn. *Educational Theory*, 48(4), 511-519.
- Kohn, A. (1996). *Beyond discipline: From compliance to community*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Curriculum Development.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy within the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lather, P. (1998). Critical pedagogy and its complicities: A praxis of stuck places. *Educational Theory*, 48(4), 487-497.
- Lather, P. (2001). Ten years later: Yet again. In K. Weiler (Ed.), *Feminist engagements: Reading, resisting, and revisioning male theorists in education and cultural studies* (pp. 183-196). New York: Routledge.
- Macedo, D. P. (1994). *Literacies of power: What Americans are not allowed to know*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- MacDonald, D., & Brooker, R. (1999). Articulating a critical pedagogy in physical education teacher education. *Journal of Sport Pedagogy*, 5(1), 51-63.
- McLaren, P. (2000). Paulo Freire's pedagogy of possibility. In S. Steiner et al. (Eds.), *Freirean pedagogy, praxis and possibilities: Projects for the new millennium* (pp. 1-21). New York: Falmer Press.
- McLaren, P. (2003). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundation of education*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- McLaren, P., & Farahmandpur, R. (2000). Reconsidering Marx in post-Marxist time: A requiem for postmodernism? *Educational Researcher*, 29(3), 25-33.
- Osborne, K. (1990). Is there a democratic socialist pedagogy? In D. Henley & J. Young (Eds.), *Canadian perspectives on critical pedagogy* (pp. 43-73). Manitoba, Winnipeg: The Canadian Critical Pedagogy Network with Social Education Researchers in Canada.
- Pillow, W. (2000). Exposed methodology: The body as a deconstructive practice. In E. St. Pierre & W. Pillow (Eds.), *Working the ruins: Feminist poststructural theory and methods in education* (pp. 199-219). New York: Routledge.
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ruiz, B. M., & Fernandez-Balboa, J. M. (2005). Physical education teacher educators' personal perspectives regarding their practice of critical pedagogy. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 24(3), 243-264.

- Shor, I. (1996). *When students have power: Negotiating authority in a critical pedagogy*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Shrewsbury, C. M. (1987). What is feminist pedagogy? *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 15(3 & 4), 6-14.
- Steinberg, S. R., & Kincheloe, J. L. (Eds). (in press). *Kinderculture: The corporate construction of childhood* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Boulder, Co: Westview Press.
- Sweet, S. (1998). Practicing radical pedagogy: Balancing ideals with institutional constraints. *Teaching Sociology*, 26, 100-111.
- Tatum, B. (1999). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? and other conversations about race* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Basic Books.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weiler, K. (Ed.). (2001). *Feminist engagements: Reading, resisting, and revisioning male theorists in education and cultural studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Wink, J. (2005). *Critical pedagogy: Notes from the real world* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.