

Critical pedagogy: schools must equip students to challenge the status quo

Teachers should embrace a radical pedagogy and provoke students to demand equality for themselves and others, argues Tait Coles, E.D.Hirsch's pedagogy fails to consider the values and beliefs of any other race, class or gender.

The pedagogy popularised by E.D.Hirsch, and recently promoted by the likes of Civitas, reduces teaching into nothing more than a bleak transmission model of learning. Hirsch's theory focuses on what he calls "cultural literacy". He argues that all students need a "core knowledge" so they can develop into better citizens. In one of his books, he lists various facts, phrases and historical events that he believes all young Americans should be aware of, including the Founding Fathers and Adirondack Mountains.

It's Hirsch's belief that if children aren't taught such cultural literacy at home, responsibility for it should lie with schools. He developed a structured curriculum to deliver this, which is now being advocated by an increasing number of schools and academies in the UK.

But Hirsch's "cultural literacy" is a hegemonic vision produced for and by the white middle class to help maintain the social and economic status quo. It deliberately fails to consider the values and beliefs of any other particular race, class or gender. Young people who enter the educational system and don't conform to this vision are immediately disadvantaged by virtue of their race, income or chromosomes.

Moreover, teaching a prescribed "core knowledge" instils a culture of conformity and an insipid, passive absorption of carefully selected knowledge among young people. It doesn't encourage students to think critically about society – nor does it fire a desire to challenge the views they are taught. Schools that adopt this method become nothing more than pipelines producing robotic citizens, perpetuating the vision of a capitalist society and consequently preventing social mobility.

Social stagnation through education is epitomised by the recent influx of Teach First practitioners. The narcissistic notion that we can help underprivileged students by providing them with teachers who are privileged young graduates from elite institutions is a mistake. This outlook pays no attention to – and fails to value – the backgrounds and identities of the students it intends to save. Rather it continues the problem by trying to inflict the values and beliefs of the dominant social class on others.

Teachers can't ignore the contexts, culture, histories and meanings that students bring to their school. Working class students and other minority groups need an education that prepares them with the knowledge of identifying the problems and conflicts in their life and the skills to act on that knowledge so they can improve their current situations. Now is the

time for our schools to incite a desire in students to challenge the accepted social truths purveyed by media and education.

Schools must develop a commitment to civic courage and social responsibility that ignites bravery in young people to realise they have the power and opportunity to challenge the status quo. School leaders have a duty to promote learning that encourage students to question rather than forcing teachers to lead drill-oriented, stimulus-and-response methodologies. Teachers must awaken the passions of their students and teach the knowledge and skills needed to direct and sustain it.

Students need the freedom and encouragement to determine and discover who they are and to understand that the system shouldn't define them – but rather give them the skills, knowledge and beliefs to understand that they can set the agenda. Educators must be prepared to embrace a radical pedagogy and believe that each school should be one of freedom that provokes students to fight against the corridors of power and enforce equality for themselves and others.

Critical pedagogy is the only way to achieve this. The philosophy was first described by Paulo Freire and has since been developed by the likes of Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and Roger Simon. Critical pedagogy isn't a prescriptive set of practices – it's a continuous moral project that enables young people to develop a social awareness of freedom. This pedagogy connects classroom learning with the experiences, histories and resources that every student brings to their school. It allows students to understand that with knowledge comes power; the power that can enable young people to do something differently in their moment in time and take positive and constructive action.

Education has the power to change social inequality by nurturing a generation with an educated mistrust of everything that has been indoctrinated before. This educational stance is one that we must all strive for as the moral purpose of education.

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