Obstacles in Implementing Critical Pedagogy

Elisavet Chlapoutaki & Kostas D. Dinas

Obstacles in Implementing Critical Pedagogy

Elisavet Chlapoutaki & Kostas D. Dinas

Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Western Macedonia, Florina, Greece
Emails: xlapout@sch.gr, kdinas@uowm.gr

Abstract
Critical pedagogy is considered quite challenging to be enacted both for academicians and professionals in education. This paper focuses on the exploration of the obstacles educators have faced in their efforts toward implementing a critical pedagogy in different educational settings. After reviewing the relevant critical literacy literature, suggestions to overcome the obstacles are made. In our view, this study is contributing to the discussion concerning the update of curricula and teaching practices by embedding a critical perspective.
Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Critical Literacy, Obstacles.

Introduction
Literacy, that is "the uses of reading and writing to achieve social objectives in specific contexts of use" (Baynham, 2002: 12), as an object of education at all age levels is a matter of study and academic debate in developed societies. A number of national reports and other specialized researches provide pedagogical recommendations that, according to Fang (2012), reflect four distinct approaches –cognitive, sociocultural, linguistic and critical– each one with its own epistemological acknowledgements and practices. In the present paper we choose to talk about critical pedagogy considering that in the context of a globalised and constantly changing communicational reality, modern teachers should help young people to "read critically" the plethora of texts they encounter every day (Morrell, 2011: 158). In our view, critical reading is not identified with critical thinking but it is extended through the concept of literacy according to Freire (1977), who argues that students must learn to read the word through reading of world. Reading the word requires basic knowledge and skills, but for reading the world the students are asked to challenge the institutionalized knowledge and to use their knowledge to take action for a fairer world. In other words, teaching should combine criticism with hope, because, when students are taught how to criticize injustice, they should at the same time be supported to become active in order to make the world more democratic and fairer. Educators' efforts, however –especially of the novices at critical pedagogy– "*toward implementing a critical literacy curriculum are often shadowed by hesitations and uncertainties of what critical literacy looks like in classrooms*" (Lewison et al. 2002: 390).

In the present study, after clarifying the concept of critical literacy and its relation with

critical pedagogy, we will focus on the difficulties encountered in the implementation and during the implementation of critical pedagogy in various educational settings. Instead of a theoretical and general discussion on the difficulties of implementing critical pedagogy, we chose to look up the international bibliography and put together in one text the discussion about the obstacles in implementing critical pedagogy, detecting at the same time their possible causes. Then, we will try to make some helpful –we hope– suggestions to overcome the obstacles, for those educators who (should) follow curricula in accordance with the principles of critical literacy or for those who are convinced that the future literate citizens must have gained critical awareness of their world.

Critical Literacy and Critical Pedagogy

Critical literacy is defined in two main directions: on the one hand as high class comprehension skills, based on objective analysis and rational reasoning and on the other, as an attitude towards the world that focuses on socio-political issues and suggests undertaking of action to promote social justice. The two directions stem from different philosophical traditions that inevitably affect teaching practice as well. The first presupposes that the correct interpretation can be distinguished from the incorrect one and that the texts are pervaded with authorial intent or meaning which could constitute the basis of understanding. On the other hand, the definition of critical literacy as a political practice means that social inequalities that pervade the texts need to be detected in order people to acquire moral responsibility for the transformation of society. It is obvious that critical literacy provides apart from intellectual practice when reading texts – critical thought, the culture for moral values which are necessary for the social change (Cervetti et al., 2001).

Social critical theorists express the point that people are never free, since "*they inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege*" (McLaren, 1988: 175). The dominant culture through social interaction legitimizes certain forms of knowledge that serve its interests, perpetuating this way unequal power relations. Knowledge, on the one hand, has got historical and social roots and links of interests (McLaren, 1988: 178) and language, on the other, never carries a neutral perspective of the world, since it constructs the power –social, cultural and ideological– and it is at the same time constructed by it, through daily interactions (Rogers, 2002: 774). Transmitters of social change, according to the social critical theorists, are those individuals who will develop critical awareness as a prerequisite in order to wonder why some cognitive structures are legitimized while others are not and thus they will challenge the status quo and will find solutions to existing social injustices.

In the field of education the principles of social critical theory are applied in *critical educational theory* or *in critical pedagogy*. Critical pedagogy is "*the movement to connect the development of individual ethical responsibility to social change through education*" (Beck 2005: 393). "*It foregrounds the situated, constructed and contested nature of meaning, emphasizes the development of critical consciousness about texts and language use and promotes* [...] *disruption of existing social relations and hegemonic power structures*" (Fang, 2012: 106). Critical literacy and critical pedagogy were connected mainly through P. Freire's theory and his work with adults' education in Brazil.

Reactions-Difficulties

By what has been stated so far, it is clear that the transformation of the critical literacy theory

into educational practice is a very difficult task, since it is expected to encounter many obstacles. Such obstacles are likely to come from the teachers who implement critical literacy programs, from the learners to whom the programs are implemented and by all those –bodies or persons– who think that their dominance or peace and order is at risk.

For the teachers enacting critical literacy in class, pedagogy is a complex network of student awareness of power issues and their resistance to the power in combination with their multiple and often conflicting perspectives. This means that students' experiences are involved in pedagogy as a source of knowledge, but on the other hand, the concepts of power, oppression and transformation that exist in these experiences are important determinants for the course. Teaching students to express their experiences of oppression in a social system of oppression is a common denominator of the various teaching applications of critical literacy (Lesley, 2004/2005: 323). But how can someone –who is a product and part of a culture– stand outside the social system and examine some of its integral and invisible principles (Comber, 2001: 302)? Comber defines a basic obstacle with the above question: to what extent the teacher, who has been brought up in traditional educational systems, will be able to act as a critical reader and reformer of the constructed social reality in order to motivate students to the same direction?

On the other hand, it is not certain that students will accept such an approach. Belzer (2004), through her research in adults literacy classes in an attempt to give an answer to why students may react negatively to a learning process that encourages critical analysis of social data and their redefinition, she resulted in three contextual factors: a. racial differences, b. expectations for the role of school and c. doubts on the possibility of remarkable social changes. The first factor occurs in racially heterogeneous classes, where the educator's attempt to link educational material and activities with the students'experiences can spark conflicts that clearly and unequivocally bring to the surface racial differences (Belzer, 2004: 9). On the other hand, the practices of critical pedagogy opens new ways and, like any radical movement, may trigger the reaction of students towards the unprecedented, especially when they are adults and since they have specific expectations about the role of school based on their previous educational experiences. So when they face new learning experiences, they may experience them in three different ways: they will adapt their new experiences in the already formed context or they will reject it completely, or they will create an entirely new framework for their acceptance (Belzer, 2004: 10). Finally, students' doubts on the possibility of social changes through critical pedagogy could be interpreted as an indication of a realistic consciousness of social conditions and this is actually the first step to proceed to realistic and reasonable decisions about learning and the conditions of their lives (Belzer, 2004: 12).

In the same direction Pirbhai-Illich found that "*critical literacy that investigates issues of identity and power can be problematic for those who have been and are oppressed*" (Pirbhai-Illich, 2010/2011: 262), when she met the resistance of marginalized and at risk for educational failure students, while trying to involve them in a project on the identity of indigenous of Canada. They themselves belonged to the geocultural population group of indigenous (Aboriginal) of Canada, whose linguistic and cultural otherness is not accepted by the dominant colonial culture and the formal education system. The students, who had been integrated in a supportive educational setting, in order to cope with the demands of the first classes of secondary education, rejected the teaching practices used to investigate the construction of racist stereotypes against indigenous, showing indifference or expressing their dissatisfaction. The

researcher attributed the failure of the implementation of critical pedagogy to the indigenous' attitude not to speak about themselves or to their passivity as a form of resistance against the oppression of the dominant class.

The complete ignorance of the philosophy and the utility of critical pedagogy should be added to the above reasons for the students' reaction. For example, in a case where critical literacy was going to be applied in a university class consisted of postbaccalaureate content area students, all the participants expressed their objection to the specific course and their refusal to implement critical literacy in their future teaching career (Lesley, 2004). The rejection of studying and implementing critical pedagogy stemmed –as the research data showed– from the lack of knowledge that content area literacy can function as a tool for learning and for thought development, while at the same time these areas can be rich resources for its development (Lesley, 2004). Fang supports that various content area texts are suitable for the implementation of critical pedagogy as "*they have been positioned by the author's values and viewpoints, and the verbal and other semiotic choices made by the author create effects that position the reader in particular ways*" (Fang, 2012: 106).

Another problem that highlights the third pole of obstacles production is that a class of critical literacy, as a mirror of society, cannot be detached from the inequalities of social life, so it will probably involve some forms of dominance of some students at the expense of the others. During the student-centred discussions, e.g., in that of critical analysis, where the renunciation of the teacher authority and the distribution of the students prestige is necessary, the opinions of all students are not equally heard, as some of them are imposed over the others due to their eloquence and their power of persuasion because of their age, sex, nationality, race or social class. In such circumstances the dialogue is anything but democratic, as a unilateral form of power is dominating. A possible explanation supports that students having a long experience of teacher-centred discussions fail to realize new practices that require equivalent expression of a personal opinion and acceptance of a different one or they just resist changing. This situation is a continuation and a confirmation of traditional teaching practices that reproduce relations of inequality by those students who have a rich history in traditional education (Beck, 2005: 394-395). Moreover, if the new critical literacy teaching practices are implemented in a typically unequal educational setting, they are very difficult to thrive. But even in the case of alternative schools the existence of rules requires the teachers to balance between the conformism of the system and the overthrow that critical literacy represents, something that may be too demanding for both beginners or experienced teachers (Beck, 2005: 396).

Critical pedagogy aims at strengthening students to read "*the word and the world*" (Freire & Macedo 1987) through analysis, evaluation, challenging, text transformation. However, this agenda seems to be undermined "*by increased standardized testing and government intrusion in classroom instruction*" (Fang, 2012 107) –the "system" shows its resistances. O'Quinn points out that the changes taking place in critical and creative reading and writing, that is, towards socio-political literacy as a prerequisite of democracy, have not yet been established since they conflict with the examination-centred system (O'Quinn, 2005/2006: 263). Critical approach itself cannot be standardised, as it does not have a fixed text rule or well-established teaching procedures, and therefore it may considerably vary from one class to another (Fang, 2012: 107). Apart from the problem that is created by the tendency to implement centrally controlled examinations (e.g. bank of subjects), educators often find themselves confronted with contradictions with curricula

drawn up in the spirit of critical literacy, or with contradictions between these curricula and the auxiliary educational material or their implementation instructions for teachers. An illustrative example is the recent Greek curricula (Ινστιτούτο, 2011) that have been implemented in a pilot project since 2011, which contain elements of a traditional approach to teaching contrary to the achievement of the objectives of critical literacy (Κουτσογιάννης, 2014: 6-9).

Suggestions of Management of Obstacles
When implementing critical pedagogy, there can be instances of failure or students' resistance. Tassoni and Thelin (2000) call them "blunders" and they consider them as a valuable component of critical pedagogy, since they help to the identification of those powers that promote its goals or, on the contrary, take them away. In other words, a teacher must have "failures" in order to be able to recognize the meaning of success (Lesley, 2001: 180).

It is reasonable for the teacher to have a concern during his effort to implement practices of critical pedagogy in class, lest this way he imposes the idea of social change to students and as a result he may cause their negative reaction. In such a case we have to bear in mind that the pedagogic views of teachers and students do not coincide. Students have been neither prepared nor expect to become communicants of the educational vision of critical educators and most times they do not realize the objectives of their teaching choices. However, opinion divergence should not function as a deterrent to the implementation of critical pedagogy. The underlying disagreements could be regarded as an opportunity to explicitly determine viewpoints, as well as to discuss, in order to find, not the "right" solution that everyone will agree with, but to aim to mutual understanding and above all to reflect, criticize and reject anything that finally seems absurd or inconsonant to everybody (Belzer, 2004: 12-13). The management of students' negative reactions lies in the heart of critical pedagogy, as it achieves its promises: the students should have the power to challenge and change the world on issues of power, control and authority, even if they have to start from their own mode of education for this purpose. Besides, the development of critical awareness and especially the process where marginalized students, who used to reject their identity, are realizing and reviewing it, takes teachers' time, knowledge, sensitivity and flexibility (Pirbhai-Illich, 2010/2011: 264).

In the same way, the expression of racist or other biased comments by students should be regarded as an opportunity to start a discussion. Teachers usually feel the urge to intervene "correcting" the student who has made a comment based on stereotypes and thereby he has created conditions of embarrassment in the classroom or he has even insulted directly or indirectly a classmate of his. According to critical pedagogy resistance to impulsion is necessary as well as the utilization of the case, so that the students can express their opinions and feelings without censorship on the one hand, and on the other to become aware through discussion of the socially constructed differences and the reasons for their existence (Lee et al. 2008: 7).

The effort to implement critical literacy in class is overshadowed by hesitations and uncertainties due to the lack of a clear teaching model. The research of Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) shows that equally novices and experienced teachers were not able to apply the principle of promoting social justice in their teaching, while several others failed to implement the three other principles of pedagogic practices: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple view-points and focusing on sociopolitical issues. The teachers-sample of the research

indicated that the problems created due to the lack of method could be eliminated through their communication with other critical literacy teachers and their reflection on the teaching challenges during the exchange of their experiences.

On the other hand, the tendency of various governments to implement educational policies that promote successive evaluation procedures based on strict standards has a detrimental effect on the educators' practices (Comber & Nixon, 2009) and it weakens the implementation of critical literacy practices (Fang, 2012). In the Conference of the International Federation of the Teaching of English in 2011 an issue was the growing movement against these educational reforms in Australia, New Zealand, the USA and in other countries (Hodgson, 2011). A proposal to create curricula with real and not superficial critical approach has been made by Koutsoyiannis, who argues that there is a need to redesign school according to the socio-historic situation with emphasis not so much on the critical reading of texts but "*on the enhancement of creativity* (of the student), *in order to be able to plan dynamically his communication as a rhetorician*" (Κουτσογιάννης, 2014: 17), recalling this way the concept of *planning* by Kress (2010, p.6). Apart from the existing policies and until the proposals to redesign educational structures can be heard, several research implementations of critical pedagogy prove that even in the stifling environment of standardized criteria performance for both students and teachers, practices of critical literacy are possible to be integrated (Langer, 2001, Monnin, 2008, Flores-Koulish et al. 2011, Lapp et al. 2012).

Conclusion

We defined the concept of critical pedagogy in relation to critical literacy adopting Freire's perspective, that is, the instruction of literacy that aims at the awareness of the ideological foundations of the texts and the resistance to dominant ideologies that perpetuate inequality and injustice. We utilized findings from the international bibliography to compose the difficulties that have arisen during the implementation of critical pedagogy practices in various educational settings, detecting at the same time the causes of the problems. The problems concern: a. the teacher that has difficulty to understand and accept this particular pedagogic approach due to his ideological origins or due to the lack of relevant knowledge, b. the learners that react negatively because they question the new approach or ignore or fail to meet the critical educational process, c. the persons in charge of educational policy who approach critical pedagogy superficially and they create contradictions inhibitory to its implementation. Finally, to confront the problems we tabled proposals brought out by researchers of such cases, with emphasis to be given on the revision of the teacher's role and of the school structures. The teacher must renounce his authority, "stand out" of the system and guide his students with reflection, flexibility and knowledge. Such an attempt cannot flourish "in vacuum", as it requires an appropriate educational policy framework. However, this is a matter of political intent that regards the creation of identities in an individual and national level, something that each time depends on the spatiotemporal reality.

References

Baynham, M. (2002) *Πρακτικές γραμματισμού.* (Μ. Αραποπούλου, Μεταφρ.). Αθήνα: Μεταίχμιο.
Beck, A. S. (2005) A Place for Critical Literacy. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 48 (5): 392-400.

Belzer, A. (2004). Blundering Toward Critical Pedagogy: True Tales from the Adult Literacy Classroom. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education 102*: 5-13.

Cervetti, G., Pardales, M., & Damico, J. (2001). A Tale of Differences: Comparing the Traditions, Perspectives, and Educational Goals of Critical Reading and Critical Literacy. *Reading Online 4* (9).

Comber, B. (2001). Critical Literacies and Local Action: Teacher Knowledge and a "New" Research Agenda, in B. Comber, & A. Simpson (eds.) (pp. 301-313, *Negotiating Critical Literacies in Classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Comber, B., & Nixon, H. (2009). Teachers' Work and Pedagogy in an Era of Accountability. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 30 (3): 333-345.

Fang, Z. (2012). Approaches to Developing Content Area Literacies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 56 (2): 103-107.

Flores-Koulish, S. A., Deal, D., Losinger, J., McCarthy, K., & Rosebrugh, E. (2011) After the Media Literacy Course: Three Early Childhood Teachers Look Back. *Action in Teacher Education* 33: 127-143.

Freire, P. (1977) *Η αγωγή του καταπιεζόμενου.* (Γ. Κρητικός, Μεταφρ.) Αθήνα: Κέδρος.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987) *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World.* South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.

Hodgson, J. (2011) Rethinking English in an Age of "Standards-Based Reforms": A Report from the 2011 IFTE Conference. *English in Education* 45 (3): 254-263.

Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication.* London & New York: Routledge.

Langer, J. A. (2001). Beating the Odds: Teaching Middle and High School Students to Read and Write Well. *American Educational Research Journal* 38 (4): 837-880.

Lankshear, C. (1997). *Changing Literacies.* Bristol, PA: Open University Press.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New Literacies: Changing Knowledge and Classroom Learning.* Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.

Lapp, D., Moss, B., & Rowsell, J. (2012). Envisioning New Literacies through a Lens of Teaching and Learning. *The reading Teacher* 65 (6): 367-377.

Lee, R., Ramsey, P. G., & Sweeney, B. (2008). Engaging Young Children in Activities and Conversations about Race and Social Class. *Beyond the Journal. Young Children on the Web*: 1-9.

Lesley, M. (2001). Exploring the Links between Critical Literacy and Developmental Reading. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 45 (3): 180-189.

Lesley, M. (2004). Looking for Critical Literacy with Postbaccalaureate Content Area Literacy Students. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 48 (4): 320-334.

Lesley, M. (2004/2005). Looking for Critical Literacy with Postbaccalaureate Content Area Literacy Students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 48 (4): 320-334.

Lewison, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002) Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices. *Language Arts 79* (5): 382-392.

McLaren, P. (1988) *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Literacy.* New York: Longman.

Monnin, K. (2008) Developing and Envisioning a Critical Literacy Perspective in a New Media Age. *The New England Reading Association Journal* 44 (1): 39-46.

Morrell, E. (2011). Critical Approaches to Media in Urban English Language Arts Teacher Development. *Action in Teacher Education* 33 (2): 157-171.

O'Quinn, E. J. (2005/2006). Critical Literacy in Democratic Education: Responding to Sociopolitical Tensions in U.S. Schools. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 48 (4): 260-267.

Pirbhai-Illich, F. (2010/2011). Aboriginal Students Engaging and Struggling with Critical Multiliteracies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 54 (4): 257-266.

Rogers, R. (2002). "That's what you're here for, you're suppose to tell us": Teaching and Learning Critical Literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 45 (8): 772-787.

Tassoni, J. P., & Thelin, W. H. (2000). *Blundering for a Change: Errors and Expectations in Critical Pedagogy* . Portsmouth, N. H.: Boynton/Cook.

Κουτσογιάννης, Δ. (2014). Κριτικοί Γραμματισμοί: Διεθνής Εμπειρία και Ελληνική Πραγματικότητα, in Ε. Γρίβα, Δ. Κουτσογιάννης, Κ. Ντίνας, Α. Στάμου, Α. Χατζηπαναγιωτίδη, & Σ. Χατζησαββίδης (eds), *Πρακτικά Πανελλήνιου Συνεδρίου "Ο Κριτικός Γραμματισμός στη σχολική πράξη".* Δράμα: http://www.nured.uowm.gr/drama/PRAKTIKA.html.

Ινστιτούτο, Π. (2011) *Πρόγραμμα Σπουδών για τη Διδασκαλία της Νεοελληνικής Γλώσσας & της Λογοτεχνίας, της Αρχαίας Ελληνικής Γλώσσας & Γραμματείας στην Υποχρεωτική Εκπαίδευση.* Αθήνα: Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο.