Taking into account mainstream economic and political trends, can/should school have a role in developing authentic critical thinking?

Critical thinking at school: exploring an oxymoron

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1 Introduction

Giving a quick answer to a complex question is always a difficult task. If this matter is to explore the possibility and convenience for schools to develop critical subjects following the so-called “critical thinking approach”, we must assume we are trying to solve an oxymoron: being at school and being critical is (from the purpose of the modern school) a contradiction in terms.

The function of modern schooling is, precisely, to develop a series of technologies of subjection—by using Foucauldian terms—to control the subjects’ bodies and minds, by transforming them into pupils or students, and later into productive and efficient workers and well-adapted citizens. In the last years one of these strategies of control can be exemplified in the transformation of a political notion coming from the Critical Theory and the activist experience based on critical pedagogy into a psychological approach to reasoning which defines what critical thinking is and how it should be taught at school.

As developing a genealogy of critical thinking to show how an educational discourse fixes another turn in the relationship between knowledge (coming from Psychology) and power (as an external form of defining what schooling should be about) surpasses the purpose of this short essay, I will give a personal account of my relationship with this topic and provide arguments to inform this provocative initial thesis.
2 When critical thinking is not really critical

In 1993, I was visiting scholar at Ohio State University. I went with the public and manifest academic agenda of reviewing the basis of what were at that moment the linguistic/expressionist/disciplinary frames of Visual Arts Education. However, I also had a ‘private’ agenda, related to my position as an educational activist implicated in facilitating and promoting educational change to enhance schools’ role as social and political learning institutions. From this position my commitment was to explore the aims, strategies and meanings of the so-called critical thinking approach.

I must confess I succeeded with the first objective, but I was rather disappointed with the second one. I approached critical thinking literature with a mindset close to authors such as Freire, Apple, Giroux or McLaren, and to a certain extent, Stenhouse and John Elliot. What I found was a teaching and learning strategy basically focused on promoting the ability of using cognitive skills and tools and effective dispositions such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self reflection (Facione, 1998). This was disenchanting not because these cognitive strategies were irrelevant in the learning process; but for the notion of critical and critically with which they were associated.

For me being critical was an embodied experience, not only a cognitive set of skills. It was a way of introducing a permanent process of questioning any established discourse. It was, over all, an experience placed and linked to a political praxis addressing social transformation. However, in the reviewed literature most assumptions, propositions and teaching strategies to promote critical thinking had very little to do with a critical pedagogy aimed to promote a critical educational and social praxis. My understanding of critical pedagogy was similar to the position (because it is more than a definition) I recently read in Matthews (2005, p. 221), which was informed by some of the authors mentioned above “who seek ways of exposing the hegemonic role of dominant groups in furthering their own interests, and feminist critics, which seeks a socially just, emancipatory practice that does not offer beforehand templates for action”. My naive position at that time was considering that critical thinking had something to do with Critical Theory and with how Frankfurt School’s scholars “attempted to locate the multiple ways in which power and domination are achieved” (Rogers, Malancharuvii-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & O’Garro Joseph, 2005, p. 368).

Most critical thinking approaches convey not only a reductionism view of what thinking critically could be, but also a conformist vision of a political project for rethinking the social mission of schooling and, to a certain extent, a conservative attempt to redefine the notion and practice of democracy.

My intuition at that time—confirmed through years of involvement in several educational reforms, participation in academic debates about learning and schooling, promotion of school transformation by facilitating innovative projects, and doing research questioning the dominant discourses on what education should be for—was that quite often educationalists are consumers’ providers. If education is a market, educationalists (mostly academic experts) are the providers of new products for the customers of this market (mostly policy makers and teachers). The focal aim of this permanent stream of ideas is to readjust schooling to the necessities of a given idea of the market and a given concept of social stratification. Most critical thinking approaches were ready-made solutions that gained visibility during the 80’ and 90’ and to this day new products with this brand are emerging in the educational market.