

Teachers Drifting in between:

In Reference to the Discussion of Critical Pedagogy

Hideyuki ICHIKAWA
Chiba University

Abstract

In democratic education, teachers teach students the knowledge and skills necessary for democracy and simultaneously build a democratic relationship between them and the students. This role can theoretically be overlapped by that of political leaders in a democratic society. While we regard schools as the important institutions of democracy, undemocratic tendencies often exist within schooling. Such tendencies often make it challenging for teachers to practice democratic education as their relationships with the students, which constitute the basic structure of schools, can transform into an undemocratic form. As with other theories of democratic education, critical pedagogy is challenged with this problem and has tried to find the key to solving it. Among various possible solutions, in this report, I focus on teachers' attitudes. In a dialogue with Ira Shor, Paulo Freire states that schools have limitations for social change. His statement suggests that the goal of critical pedagogy might be realized; however, many of the students do not come to school with such an aim. Under such circumstances, teachers must implement democratic education. This requires an attitude of drifting between the realities faced by teachers and the ideal form of democratic education. To explain this attitude, I refer to Freire's idea of creating a contradiction. Although Freire thinks that teachers should teach knowledge and skills to fulfill students' requirements, he maintains that they should also relativize and sometimes deny what they teach for social change. Showing contradictory attitudes toward what they teach may lead to constructing democratic relationships in a classroom.

Key words: democratic education; critical pedagogy; Paulo Freire

Democratic education

I regard "Teaching Democracy in School," which is the theme of this symposium, as

Correspondence:

Hideyuki ICHIKAWA, Chiba University. Email: h-ichikawa@chiba-u.jp

practicing democratic education in schools. Based on the discussion of critical pedagogy, this report proposes the teacher's attitude of drifting in between as one of the requirements for teaching democracy in schools.

Julian Culp, Johannes Drerup, and Douglas Yacek regard democratic education as a synthesis of education *for* democracy and education *as* democracy (italics in original; Culp et al., 2023). Education *for* democracy means a type of education that is practiced under “the belief that human communities and individuals flourish most, or become the most just, when they commit to a basic principle of equality among all human beings and when they keep opportunities and social roles open to all who strive to achieve them” (Culp et al., 2023, p. 4). Education *as* democracy, as expressed by democratic pedagogy, means a type of education that is practiced democratically (Culp et al., 2023, pp. 5–6). These two notions of democratic education “constitute two practical desiderata that limit and complement each other” (Culp et al., 2023, p. 6). For education *for* democracy, education *as* democracy has the role of regulating the use of undemocratic means to realize an end. For education *as* democracy, education *for* democracy has the role of showing an orientation for practices and providing guidelines to achieve better results.

Teachers in schools as sites for democratic education

I focus on teachers in this report because schools are seen as sites where democratic education is practiced. Yasuto Miyazawa states that schools constitute a concentrated form of education, which is ““what happens between those who teach and those who are taught”” (Miyazawa, 1992, p. 164). From this viewpoint, Miyazawa argues that we should focus on “the relationship between teachers and students” (Miyazawa, 1992, p. 164) to understand schools. If “the relationship between teachers and students,” as Miyazawa calls it, can take various forms depending on the various characteristics that schools can possess, then, in schools where democratic education is practiced, teachers and learners⁽¹⁾ should not only share the purpose of realizing a democratic society and the ideal of a democratic person but also build the democratic relationship that constitutes education *as* democracy.

This democratic relationship affirms the image of the teacher as a leader. In *Minshushugi*, a social studies textbook for Japanese junior high and high schools published in 1948 and 1949, Monbusho (Ministry of Education) states: “The school is a

⁽¹⁾ The term learner is used in this report except when the context limits the school type and in the quoted sections.

society formed mainly by teachers and students. Therefore, in order to understand the democratic formation of the school as a society, we should consider the relationship between teachers and students and the voluntary cooperative relationship among students” (Monbusho, 2018, p. 352). It further writes, “It is natural that people with outstanding talent, deep experience, and strong responsibility should be nominated by others to take on an important mission and to lead a lot of people. In this sense, teachers lead their students in schools” (Monbusho, 2018, p. 354). These statements emphasize that teachers are expected to have the knowledge and practical skills necessary for democracy, and, without subjugating learners with such knowledge and skills, to build and maintain relationships required for education *as* democracy.

These expectations of teachers are not incompatible with democracy, which holds equality as a fundamental principle. After reviewing studies that try to reconcile leadership with democracy, such as the view of leaders as “first among their peers” (Yamamoto, 2020, pp. 93–94), Kei Yamamoto argues that “the existence of ‘moderate’ leaders without charisma,” such as Benjamin Barber’s facilitating leadership, “will promote people’s political participation and proactive engagement, and contribute to making democracy more effective” (Yamamoto, 2020, p. 96)⁽²⁾. Given Yamamoto’s argument, if we consider teachers as leaders of democracy, the legitimacy of the theory and practice of democratic education is assured even if the relationship between teachers and learners is not necessarily equal and the roles of the two are not identical.

While this way of thinking is possible, turning to the realities teachers face in schools, we can think of a case in which it is difficult for them to establish the type of relationship with learners that is required for democratic education. According to James Beane and Michael Apple, due to such undemocratic elements as competition for grades, status, resources, programs, and so on, catering to the interests and aspirations of the most powerful groups and ignoring those of the less powerful, for example, schools have been undemocratic institutions (Beane & Apple, 2007, p. 13). The elements that make schools undemocratic inevitably affect the relationship between teachers and learners. For example, competition for grades constitutes a teacher–learner relationship based on the selection and distribution of useful human resources rather than on the assumption that while teachers lead learners, both parties are democratic agents. In such a relationship, the inequality between them and their different roles do not connect with democracy itself

⁽²⁾ Yamamoto (2020, pp. 96–97) also warns against the idea that leadership can be controlled by people.

or education *as* democracy, and the practice of democratic education will consequently fail.

The attitude of drifting in between

What I propose in this report, referring to the discussion of critical pedagogy, as among the things required to continue democratic education in situations where it is difficult to do so, is the teachers' attitude of drifting between the reality they face in their schools and the ideals of democratic education they uphold. In the following, I sketch, albeit partially, this attitude.

Critical pedagogy is founded primarily on Marxist thoughts, such as Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Paulo Freire's problem-posing education, whose core is dialogue (see Gottesman, 2016). In addition, Eric Freedman points out the following:

To its advocates, critical pedagogy constitutes a democratic process of instruction that aims to achieve certain democratic results. In the Freirean tradition, "democracy" refers to a state of affairs in which everyone has an equal ability to shape collective or communal knowledge. Hierarchies of all types—racial, economic, patriarchal, and so on—are seen as anti-democratic in that they amplify the voices of certain individuals or groups while muting those of others. (Freedman, 2007, p. 443)

Given these points, we can say that critical pedagogy is a theory/practice of democratic education based on Marxist theory, which aims to educate people in dialogical rather than hierarchical relationships to engage in politics.

Critical pedagogy has sought to deal with the problems caused by schools' practical conditions that prevent the full development of itself or learners' responses that the teacher does not expect (e.g., Gitlin & Ingerski, 2018; Reynolds, 2015). In this context, this report focuses on Freire's remarks in a dialogue with Ira Shor to roughly explain a teacher's attitude of drifting in between. While Freire states, "Precisely because education is *not* the lever for the transformation of society, we are in danger of despair and cynicism if we limit our struggle to the classroom" (*italics in original*; Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 129), he also says, "We should know that it is possible to accomplish something important in the institutional space of a school or college in order to help the transformation of society" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 130). Although he admits that schools can be a site for social change, he also states that through education in public schools and colleges, some people may increase their curiosity and consider their political positions, and a few of them

become more strongly engaged in the process of transformation (Shor & Freire 1987, p. 130). As suggested by these comments, the goals of critical pedagogy could be realized in schools; however, it does not necessarily follow that learners will invest themselves in this possibility and desire to be democratic agents.

With the above-mentioned recognition, Freire proposes creating a contradiction as a way for teachers to practice education for social change. In discussing with Shor the situation in which students want to acquire useful knowledge and skills that will help them secure jobs, Freire notes that “The liberating educator will try to be efficient in training, in forming the educatees scientifically and technically, but he or she will try to *unveil* the ideology enveloped in the *very* expectations of the students” (italics in original; Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 68). What this brings about is not confusion but a contradiction (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 69). According to Freire, students “must understand what contradiction means, that human action can move in several directions at once, that something can contain itself and its opposite also” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 69). Teachers, who are expected to transmit the knowledge, skills, and values that are valued in today’s society, play their roles and simultaneously relativize and sometimes deny them. They then strive to emerge as leaders of democratic education, trying to form a relationship with their learners. Of course, whether they will share the same ideals with the learners and establish the required relationship is always uncertain. Creating a contradiction is an example of the type of teacher who drifts in between in that teachers accept the uncertainty of their action and simultaneously try to practice democratic education under the given conditions without giving up thereon.

Concluding remarks

In this report, I propose that among the requirements for teaching democracy in schools is the teacher’s attitude of drifting in between. This is not so much an elaboration of a theory of specific democratic education as it is an inquiry into how teachers should respond to the situations that are often found in schools. To further this inquiry, it will be necessary to describe the multilayered nature of the teachers’ attitude of drifting in between through a detailed examination of situations in which learners are not democratic agents in schools.

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