Participatory pedagogy for empowerment: a critical discourse analysis of teacher–parents’ interactions in a family literacy course in London

ELAINE ROCHA-SCHMID
University of Birmingham, UK

This paper revisits and discusses some of Paulo Freire’s theoretical tenets for participatory education suggested as part of a critical approach to the education of adults. Through data collected during a family literacy programme, the author analyses her discursive interactions as an adult education tutor with parents as learners. These discourse practices are analysed using critical discourse analysis and are discussed against Freire’s principles for participatory pedagogy. The author’s decision to insert the analysis and discussion of her classroom practices within these theoretical frameworks lies on their focus on language and their alleged commitment to the transformation of discursive practices that reinforce unequal power relations in society. The findings of the study indicate the presence of authoritarian discourse that does little to change the power relations within the classroom. The author posits that despite managing to give rise to a discussion of themes related to parents’ advocacy and language awareness in their interactions within their children’s school, a deeper realisation and discussion of these issues was hindered by her failure to challenge the order of discourses present in her interactions with parents. The author concludes by suggesting that there is a need for teachers to closely re-evaluate the features of their own discourse practices if immigrant parents attending family literacy courses are to be given a voice within the classroom as a first step towards raising their prospects of advocacy and empowerment in wider social contexts.

Introduction

Theories of empowerment in family literacy programmes

Findings of past studies on family literacy programmes for minority language speakers show evidence that suggests that many of these programmes are based on the rationale of ‘deficit hypothesis’ and hence have as their main aim the transfer of cultural values from the school to parents and to the children. This has led to the argument that these types of programmes do little to bridge the home and school cultural gap and to raise parents’ awareness of what goes on in their children’s schools (Auerbach 1989, Wolfendale and Topping 1996).

Elaine Rocha-Schmid is a doctoral student at the University of Birmingham and an ESOL and family literacy tutor in London, UK. Her main research interests are in the areas of language and literacy, especially on the relations of power struggle through language between dominant and minority language groups and across social classes. Correspondence. 12A Southwold Mansions, Widley Road, London, W9 2LE, UK. Email: EXR494@bham.ac.uk
Opponents of the ‘deficit’ or ‘need’ model (Wolfendale 1996) put parents’ empowering at the centre of the agenda and as one of the main means to enhance minority and/or working class children’s achievement at mainstream schools. It is argued that this focus should then move from parents’ assimilation of the dominant culture and values to an emphasis on rapprochement between school and home cultural, linguistic and literacy experiences and practices.

In her work with Mexican-American children and their families, Delgado-Gaitan (1990: 166) suggests that an approach to empower parents should focus on cooperative work between families and the school, with a focus on their children that should not only aim at encouraging schools to incorporate ‘the family’s culture as part of the education system’, but also at promoting parents’ decision-making power within the school and at giving them the means to engage in advocacy for their children.

By the same token, Auerbach (1989: 177) ponders that the question to be addressed should be ‘How can we draw on parents’ knowledge and experience to inform instruction?’ in place of the common ‘How can we transfer school practices into home contexts?’ The approach she suggests is participatory, aiming at the development of a social-contextual model of family literacy. More recently, albeit in a different context, Borg and Mayo (2001: 245–266) have also suggested that an alternative approach to parental involvement programmes that sees parents and their children ‘as “objects” for rehabilitation’ should instead have its foundations on a Freirean emancipatory project that conceives parents ‘as authentic beings capable of engaging in creative endeavours and critical thinking’.

While a concept of empowerment has been associated with diverse connotations (see Delgado-Gaitan 1990, Worthman 2008), notions of empowerment in adult education have been strongly informed by Paulo Freire’s (1970) theory of critical pedagogy.

**Freire’s theoretical framework**

Drawing on the writings of social theorists such as Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Franz Fanon (1963), Freire created a theory of empowerment in education that has allegedly influenced and informed the work of a number of educators and critical theorists around the world (see Giroux 1983, Burbules 1986, Delgado-Gaitan 1990, Schugurensky 1998, Moriarty *et al.* 2008).

An approach that aims at assimilation has as its basis the notion that individuals have to be passively transformed by being nourished with the dominant culture, values and language and the notion that this is achieved through imitation and repetition of these aspects (mostly to the detriment of the maintenance and transfer of individuals’ own cultures and languages). However, from a Freirean perspective, a participatory approach to teaching adults deals with individuals as active beings in charge of transforming their lives through an awareness of the power relations present within societies and of the role they play in these dynamics. The act of raising awareness should not, however, be understood as a passive process as presupposed by approaches that aim at assimilation, and should go beyond the pure recognition of the dominant cultures and values. In fact, at the centre of instruction should be the realisation of learners’ own contexts, cultures and experiences.
Participation through dialogue

Just as relevant as the context of knowledge is the way this context should be explored and used as an object of learning by educators and learners. The phases of identification of a context of learning and its exploration and analysis by educators and learners were theorised by Freire (1985) through a process of codification and decodification. Within this framework, the first phase of codification refers to the identification of a context for analysis, which should be directly relevant to learners’ concrete reality, as will be exemplified below. The next phase of decodification is divided into two stages:

1. the description of the codified situation and the ‘problematising’ of its categories and relations; and
2. ‘the comprehension of the codification’s deep structure’ (Freire 1985: 52).

A situation that has been commonly used to illustrate the application of these notions to the classroom, mostly owing to Freire’s experience as an educator in Brazil, is that of educators responsible for the literacy of adult slum dwellers. In this context, a codified situation could be that of the life in the slums, which in the codification phase would simply be made explicit as an object of analysis but which would progress to be explored and analysed in a deeper, critical and reflective mode in the decodification phase. This analysis would aim to take account of other aspects of learners’ realities such as the existing relations within and outside the slums: the dwellers’ power relations with each other, the roles each one assumes and their perceptions of their roles within the wider society. This would progress to draw on a discussion of the social, historic and political reasons for the existence of slums.

From this perspective, the investigations and exploration of the deeper categories of the codified situation can only be reached through critical reflection and dialogue between educator and learners (Freire, 1985). Giroux (1983: 228) succinctly explains the central role that context and dialogue play in Freire’s approach to literacy:

[…] it must be emphasised that literacy as defined by Freire only becomes relevant if it is grounded in the cultural milieu that informs the context of the learners’ everyday lives. Freire makes this quite clear in his claim that students need to be able to decode their own lived realities before they can understand the relations of dominance and power that exist outside of their most immediate experiences.

He goes on to add that:

The relationship between teachers and students would have to be mediated by forms of discourse and content rooted in the cultural capital of the learners and made problematic through modes of critical discourse. (Giroux 1983: 228)

The critique

Freire’s principles for participatory education have, however, been criticised as another authoritarian way of teaching where learners are made to speak and share
their ideas within a preconceived and strict framework where teachers’ controlling and dominant role is left unchallenged, doing little, in this way, to change the unequal power relations within classrooms (see Ellsworth 1989, Schugurensky 1998, Jackson 2007 for a critique of Freire).

Freire’s response was to argue that his views on dialogical practice seem at times to be taken at face value or at the level of cliché (Freire and Macedo 1995: 380). Freire and Macedo (1995: 381) argue that many self-proclaimed Freirean educators fail to understand the multiple dimensions of his notions for participatory pedagogy which conceives ‘dialogue as a process of learning and knowing’. The authors ponder that Freire’s notions of dialogical practice are more often than not misconceived as a practice of conversation where the role of the teacher is seen as one of a facilitator in control of the content and the flow of interactions. An issue of relevance to these discussions is thus the nature of language interactions between teacher and learners within the classroom.

It will be argued in this paper that if critical reflection should indeed be the means to reach parents’ critical awareness of the school system and the roles they play or are ascribed to within it, this can only be achieved if educators take a critical stance not only to what goes into their programmes but also to how it is passed on to parents. To challenge discourse practices, and thus power relations, teachers need to step outside their comfort zone of control and engage in discourse practices aimed at empowering learners, and because the school as an institution reproduces and reinforces society’s unequal power relations, in a wider institutional perspective, it would mean challenging the very social order they represent. (See Fairclough 1992, for a discussion of critical approaches to classroom interaction, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 and Giroux 1999 for a discussion of schools as reproducers of unequal social power relations.)

**Purpose of the study**

The main aims of this study are firstly, to look into whether my own discourse practices as an adult education tutor do justice to my intended role as a Freirean critical pedagogue; secondly, to investigate the extent to which these practices leave room for parents’ empowerment within the classroom; and, thirdly, to consider whether the course was successful in raising parents’ critical awareness of the school system and the roles they play within it. For this purpose, I analyse my classroom interactions with parents using Fairclough’s (1989, 1992, 1995) framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA). These are then discussed against Freire’s (1970, 1985, Freire and Macedo 1995) notions of participatory pedagogy.

**Research site and participants**

The course of family literacy ran over a period of three months as a partnership between a London primary school and an adult education and community college. The classes were set within the premises of the primary school and were divided into two weekly two-and-a-half hour adult sessions (attended by parents and led by me, the college adult education tutor) and two weekly one-hour joint sessions (attended by parents and their children and led by the children’s classroom teacher with my
assistance). The underlying aim of the course was to develop parents’ English competence while also raising their awareness of the activities that go into the school-life of their children. The course was attended by nine parents, all being female from a variety of countries including Pakistan, Lebanon, Korea, Algeria and Somalia. These learners had a mixed level of competence of English, but all had the goal and expectation to improve their English competence and to gain knowledge of what went on in their children’s school-life.

Data collection

Data analysed for this study are part of a data set collected for a wider study about parents’ perceptions of their interactions within their children’s school. The data discussed herein were collected over two different adult sessions.

All the learners involved consented to have the sessions recorded. Classroom patterns of participation did not seem to have been greatly affected by the presence of the audio recorder as individual learners displayed the same disposition to take part in the lessons as when they were not being recorded. However, the implications that being recorded might have had for participants’ responses should still be taken into account in the reading of the findings (see Cameron et al. 1992).

A framework for discourse analysis

Analysis of data was conducted from a qualitative perspective and had as its main tools Fairclough’s (1989, 1992, 1995) framework for critical discourse analysis.

Influenced by Halliday’s (1978) work with systemic linguistics, Fairclough (1995: 6–7) suggests a framework to the analysis of text that attends to the multi-functionality of language in text, in which texts are analysed in relation to participants’ ‘representation of experience and the world’ (ideational); their role relationships in discourse (interpersonal); and the textual features of the text—its ‘form, structure and organisation’. From this perspective, ideational functions of language in discourse can be represented and analysed in participants’ choice of lexical and grammatical elements. Interpersonal functions can be represented in turn-taking systems and the length of time a participant holds the floor as well as in other pragmatic functions of interactions. Participants’ positioning vis-à-vis the topics raised are also analysed through textual functions of phonology as well as the ‘structures of argumentation, and generic (activity type) structures’ of the text.

Also of relevance to the analysis of data herein were those aspects of orders of discourse and intertextuality adopted by Fairclough in his framework. In Fairclough’s (1995: 12) terms, orders of discourse refer to ‘the ordered set of discursive practices associated with a particular social domain or institution […].’ Instances of orders of discourse in this paper are discussed in terms of discourse types and subject positions assumed by the participants. Analysis of intertextuality, or the location of multiple voices in a text, was also of valuable importance in drawing my attention to the implications that my dual role as a teacher and researcher might have had in my interactions with learners.
Findings

Discourse analysis

The adult sessions started off with a learners’ needs analysis, a linguistic competence assessment and a discussion of parents’ expectations of the course. At the centre of my agenda was to attend to parents’ goals while also taking a more participatory stance to teaching by exploring topics of relevance to parents’ contexts to be discussed and analysed in the classroom. In addition, I had also set to myself the role of a researcher and aimed to investigate parents’ perceptions of their interactions with their children’s teachers. It was with the introduction of some of these topics that it started to become apparent that my discourse practices were less than democratic and indeed were verging on authoritarian at times, as will be discussed below.

Notes on transcription

The transcription conventions adopted in this paper were adapted from Fairclough (1989: 44): a spaced dot indicates a short pause, a dash a longer pause, extended square brackets overlap, parentheses talk which was not distinguishable enough to transcribe, and underline overemphasis. Learners’ initials were used, and T refers to the teacher (me).

Establishing control and setting up positions

1. Correcting, praising and taking the floor. Turn 1 of Excerpt 1 below leaves it clear from the start that this is a conversation taking place between teacher and learners, as fairly briefly the control so commonly exercised by teachers in traditional teacher-learner’s interactions is established by the way I, the teacher, take the floor, request learners’ attention, explain what will be done next and how it can be done, specifying, in this way, the nature and purpose of the interaction (Fairclough 1989). In the same fashion, the ideological relation between teacher (as the carrier of knowledge) and learner is also expressed when I correct Uz, which is followed by the latter’s acknowledgment of the correction and, thus, of her less powerful position in the interaction (turns 2 to 4).

Excerpt 1

1 T: OK. Fifteen minutes of your attention, please. Talking about the parents evening. First, I’d like to know if it went OK, if there was anything you wanted to talk about. And, also I’d like to suggest some questions that you can ask the teacher about your children next time, because we can use this verb tense, you can say things like ‘How’s she doing?’ ‘Is she improving?’ So, we can do that. But first, can you tell me a little bit about the meeting last week. How did it go?

2 Uz: It go fine.

3 T: It went fine.

4 Uz: It went fine. We talked around 10 minutes, it was not enough for us, so we take another appointment today.
Throughout the sessions analysed, the teacher’s role as the carrier of knowledge and as an ‘arbiter’ is also expressed by the way I praise students, show encouragement or empathise with what they say as can be observed in Excerpts 2 (turn 16), 3 (turn 40) and 4 below.

**Excerpt 2**

15 Uz: I think when I speak I improved a little bit, my language a little more.  
16 T: That’s really nice, that’s really nice. And you Ab?

**Excerpt 3**

39 Im: Yes, because we know everything, we have the experience, but the problem is my, erm, our language.  
40 T: Oh, that’s really nice as well. Now she’s, erm, you see she said first that the teacher was perfect and knew everything, but now she’s saying that no, she knows a lot as well.

**Excerpt 4**

124 T: I think you’re very straightforward; I like it, ‘if there’s a problem I talk about it directly to the teacher and that’s it.’ And what about you, Ri?

Fairclough (1989: 45) posits that although expressions used to evaluate students such as ‘very good, or ‘that’s right’ can be positive and encouraging, they are still ‘techniques of control which would be regarded as presumptuous or arrogant if they were addressed to an equal or someone more powerful’.

2. **Prompting.** From the same perspective, it can be argued that control is also exercised through my expression of agreement and disagreement with learners’ views. This aspect is only rarely observed from learners’ perspectives who, despite correcting each other and contributing to the completion of each others’ lines of thought at times, establishing, in this way, a more dynamic interaction amongst themselves, are not given the chance to comment on my views as these are mostly often finalised with a question diverting learners’ attention to a following point in the discussion (as in Excerpts 2 and 4 above and Excerpt 5 below).

The use of questions is a turn-taking technique that tightly controls the flow as well as the content of interactions, and which reinforces the traditional hierarchy of teacher–learner interactions. In this way, although learners can be said to have taken part in the interaction, their participation was mostly from a disadvantaged position of giving the information requested by the teacher and of not being given the chance to put a question forward or to introduce a change to the flow of discussions.

3. **Interruptions.** Another striking feature in the text is the nature of interruptions amongst the participants. Although the parents were observed to have interrupted me on a few occasions, what seems more representative of the power relations in practice on different occasions of my interaction with these learners is the nature of these interruptions or overlaps. My interruptions or inputs are observed (in Excerpt 5 below) to be of a more controlling nature, used to question parents further on their positions (turns 78, 84 and 87), to dispute what they have said (turn 91), to express agreement (turn 96) and to correct them (turn 73). Parents’ interruptions
on the other hand are used more as a means of back-channelling and as an advanced attempt to answer my questions rather than as an opportunity to introduce their own unsolicited point of view or to control the course of interactions.

Excerpt 5

72 Im: Yes, because sometimes they do evening parents, and we, erm, go
73 T: Parents evening?
74 Im: Yeah, yeah, in my country and my sisters they are married and they have children they go and they tell [them] everything about the child, yeah, like
75 Za: like here the same, yeah, ( )
76 Im: like here
77 Ha: No, not the same, more than this, more
78 T: Why more?
79 Uz: Because the language problem.
80 Im: Yeah.
81 Ha: Yeah, language and the
82 T: Hm
83 Ha: I know, when I talk to the teacher erm in my country, erm, I know, I can speak.
84 T: Yes, you can. But, you’re saying you know... What do you mean you know?
85 Ha: I talk to her about everything, bad or good or everything, yeah, yeah.
86 Im: I talk to her about everything, bad or good or everything
87 T: So, you feel confident to talk to the teacher?
88 Im: Yeah, but here the problem is language.
89 Ha: here maybe she doesn’t like it, in my country she likes or doesn’t like...
90 [giggles]
91 T: But you’re [to Im] saying language is the problem, but she’s [Ha] talking about the teacher liking it or not. So, it’s not only a language problem then
92 Ha: yeah, yeah, I talk to her
93 Za: easy, it’s very easy language
94 Uz: she’s not erm, if she [didn’t] go to school here she don’t know the system, how they
95 Ha: and if something happen to my child ( )
96 T: I understand it’s easy to talk to them.
97 Za:

4. Intonation features. I was also the participant who produced the longest stretches of text throughout the interaction (as in turn 1, Excerpt 1 above; turn 44, Excerpt 6; and turn 5, Excerpt 7 below). Another feature of discourse that can be observed in turn 44, in Excerpt 6, and in turn 5, in Excerpt 7 below, are my intonation patterns. The emphasis I place in some words contributes to leaving my views
of the topic discussed overt while at same time emphasising the subject position I assume in these passages; that is, that of the lecturer who has something relevant to say and therefore should be listened to.

**Excerpt 6**

44 T: Yes, I agree. I think I agree with both of you. I agree with her [Im.] because I think that she’s right to think that you know a lot, because some parents usually think that they don’t and you know a lot because you have the experience, you have the children, and you know what goes on [here] with your children. But, at the same time what you’re [to Ha.] saying is very right because you’re not here [at the school] all the time, you don’t know what’s going on all the time. You know about your son, but you don’t know about the other children, do you? So, then, maybe you should put these two things together and

45 giggles

46 Ha: yeah ( )

**Excerpt 7**

5 T: Questions 7, 8 and 10 are not about what you can do, they’re about what the teachers are doing and what the school’s doing. Do you think that you, erm, how would you feel about asking the teachers this type of questions? Do you think it’s OK to ask them this type of questions? Because the others are all about you, about what you can do to help your children. So, ‘What can I do to help?’, ‘How can I help?’ ‘Is my child doing this?’, ‘Is she doing that?’ But these ones no, these are: ‘Has the school any policies for bullying?’ meaning: ‘What are you going to do about it?’ and the other one ‘What has been done to make him/her take part in the lessons?’ are about you asking the teacher to do something about the problem. How would you feel about asking these questions?

**On parents’ perceptions**

Excerpt 8 below shows that although the unequal power relations between teacher and learners were clearly in place in the sessions analysed as discussed above, this does not seem to have informed parents’ perceptions of their interaction and relations with me. They seem to have based their perceptions on non-verbal aspects such as my smiling at them and spending most of the sessions sitting at the same table with them (turns 156 and 159 respectively), as opposed to standing in front of them. Departing from Fairclough’s (1989) notions of discourse types, it could be argued that the construct of parents’ perceptions of their interaction with me was a result of comparisons of their experiences of more overtly formal interactions with other teachers. In other words, parents’ perceptions of me as a friend (turn 155) and not as ‘the teacher’ (Uz in turn 152) might be related to learners’ expectations of the discourse types and subject positions that are commonly adopted by teachers and
learners in traditional teacher–learner interactions. In this respect, Fairclough (1989: 102) explains that:

[...] the socialisation of people involves them coming to be placed in a range of *subject positions* [sic.], which they are exposed to partly through learning to operate within various discourse types; for [...] each discourse type establishes its particular set of subject positions, which those who operate within it are constrained to occupy.

In this way, in order to fit into parents’ views of what constitutes ‘a teacher’ I adopted those discourse types that parents associate with subject positions of school teachers. Another aspect of contrast between their interactions with me and with their children’s classroom teachers that may have contributed to inform parents’ perceptions lies also on the different subject positions set up for parents by me and by their children’s classroom teacher. For despite failing to adopt less authoritarian discourse practices, I had the ideological objective of putting parents at the centre of teaching and of encouraging them to take a more proactive stance in the session, by expressing and sharing their views with each other, which to a certain extent they did. On the other hand, as observations of the joint sessions and parents’ reports of their interactions with their children’s classroom teachers revealed, during these interactions, parents were most commonly assigned the role of passive listeners.

Yet another factor that may have contributed to parents’ perceptions as discussed above is the fact that on different occasions, I verbally distanced myself from school teachers and from the school itself. This can be observed in the use I make of the pronoun for the third person plural ‘they’ to refer to school teachers (turn 129, Excerpt 8 below). I placed myself as an outsider within the school, thereby establishing a bond with the parents who also saw themselves as outsiders to the school system.

**Excerpt 8**

129  T: Would you be comfortable to ask the teacher, ‘What’s been done …’
130  Ri: Yes, my husband ask
131  T: No, not your husband, I’m asking about you. It’s like Uz said: ‘yeah my husband’, no, what about you?
132  Ri: I can’t speak. I can’t speak
133  T: But you’re speaking now.
134  Ri: No, I can’t
135  Za: You very good speak.
136  Ri: When I see the teacher
137  ?: [giggles]
138  [giggles]
139  Za: Is gone?
140  [giggles]
141  Ri: ( )
142  Za: Why? Hard
143  Ri: ( ) everything goes.
[giggles]

T: Why, Ri?

Ri: I’m scared

T: Why? Do you get scared? Why Ri?

Ri: [When] I speak English wrong words are coming.

T: But you’re not scared to talk to me.

Ri: erm

Za: Corage [says as sentence in Italian] try, try

Uz: You’re not the teacher, that’s why.

[giggles]

Za: trying, trying, trying.

Ri: You’re like a friend, that’s why

Ha: When you came the first time you [were] smiling

T: Why do you think I’m a friend?

Uz: Yeah

Ha: You’re a friend, yeah, you sit with us

Im: Yeah.

Ri: No, first time I [was] scared. First time I came to this class I [was] scared, didn’t talk, but now, erm [giggles]

Discourse practices and participatory theory

Analysed from the perspective of Freire’s (1970, 1985, 1995) theory of participatory pedagogy, it can be maintained that although the context explored in talk (parents–teachers interactions in parents evening) was one of relevance to the learners in question, the nature of my discourse practices constrained the realisation of more power-balanced interactions with them. In other words, on the one hand, there was evidence of an attempt first to engage parents in a discussion of their interactions with their children’s school teachers, and second to raise parents’ awareness of teachers’ and the school’s responsibilities on issues that can be liable to be attributed to immigrant parents and their children’s own failure as past studies have suggested (see Cummins 1996). On the other hand, my close control over the flow and content of the interaction affected the problematising of these issues, leaving relevant and correlated aspects untouched.

On different occasions throughout the sessions, analysed parents offered an insight into problematic issues relevant to the discussion being carried out, displaying their own deep awareness of the issues related to the topics discussed. There was, however, a failure to acknowledge parents’ views as an opportunity to debate these issues further on. This not only put in question the ethos of the sessions analysed, making them rather more teacher-directed than parent-centred, but also prevented the realisation of a reflective and more critical approach to the central topic of parents’ interactions with their children’s school teachers, which could have been achieved through the discussion of the various ideological elements surrounding such interactions. Two instances of the issues raised by the parents as barriers to their communication with school teachers were those of language and of expectations that surround this type of interactions in different cultures. A clear example of the latter was parents’ views regarding a
possible negative reaction from teachers to being questioned by parents on how they tackle certain issues in the school such as bullying or underachievement (Excerpt 9 below).

In failing to address parents’ concerns regarding teachers’ possible reactions to being confronted, I missed the opportunity to problematise the relevant issue of the consequences for the oppressed of resisting or conforming to a situation of oppression. Janks and Ivanic (1992) suggest that being aware of how other participants might react to an attempt to confront naturalised discourse practices that permeate and reinforce social relations of power within societies is one of the essential factors informing oppressed groups’ decisions on whether to conform or resist.

**Excerpt 9**

48 T: [...] then you ( ) and you Uz. would you ask the teacher these questions? Would you ask her question? 
49 Uz: my husband asks her these questions, my husband, yeah.
50 T: But, what about you? 
51 Uz: Because he’s with me, so he asks the teachers. Maybe, yeah, I can’t ask these questions, because erm yeah
52 T: Why not?
53 Uz: Because where I come from we don’t ask this type of questions to the teacher er why not?
54 T: why not?
55 Uz: erm, yes Ha. is right, maybe they don’t like this type of questions. That would be like saying, pointing them to something like: ‘How can you help?’ Or ( ) they [might] say they’re already helping [the children] in that school, they say that and that’s it.
56 Ha: ( )
57 Uz: Yes, it’s hard for me to ask these questions, yeah, [short pause] I’m not sure ( )

**Participatory pedagogy and authoritative discourse**

Freire’s critics have questioned the feasibility of the realisation of truly democratic pedagogical practices when the critical educator has a predetermined aim established, or as Schugurensky (1998: 23) puts it, ‘has a priori destination (e.g. the development of critical consciousness) to reach at the end of the process’. This aspect reveals the directive nature of Freire’s notions of participatory pedagogy. Equally relevant to the discussion of the democratic nature of this approach is the argument that educators’ ideologies, interests and identities are apt to exercise a strong influence on the educational process and overshadow those ideologies, interests and identities of the learners’ themselves (Ellsworth 1989, see also Taylor’s 1993 critique of Freire’s notions of conscientisation).

Freire and Macedo (1995: 378) dispute these views with the argument that there can be no educational practice that is non-directive, for ‘all educational practice brings with it its own transcendence, it presupposes an objective to be reached.’ In addition, Freire (1984) also argues that there is no neutrality involved in the political act that is educating. He explains that:
the issue is how to teach without imposing on students our own knowledge, and our political and ideological options, but also without omitting them. I don’t hide my options from the students. But I also respect their choices. (Freire 1984 cited in Schugurensky 1998: 23)

Referring the discussion back to the analysis of my interactions with parents, it emerges that I did not assume a neutral or disinterested role for, firstly, I brought to the interaction with parents my ideological position as a critical educator and my own views about what I perceived as patronising practices imposed on parents by the school in question, and secondly, I was also clearly performing two other different roles, that of a facilitator, and that of a researcher. I would argue, however, that the authoritarianism of the facilitator, who saw her responsibilities as keeping the conversation going and consequently imposing ground rules for turn taking combined with the forceful demands of the researcher, who set out to get her questions answered, might have represented more of a constraint to the realisation of a more democratic and empowering stance to teaching than did the ideological and political positions of the critical educator.

On learners’ interactions

There is evidence throughout the sessions that suggests that power-relation struggle is not only an issue between teacher and learners, but also amongst learners themselves. This issue becomes overt when the voices of some learners are silenced by the voices of other more powerful ones. Firstly, there is the voluntary silence of those who did not venture to take part in the discussion possibly in an attempt to avoid being exposed and being yet more disempowered for not having the same linguistic competence in English as their peers. Secondly, there are the cases of those such as Ca, who when asked by me to break her silence, had her attempts to participate overshadowed by other more outspoken students (as in Excerpts 10 and 11 below), and that of Za, who, despite her constant struggle to make her voice heard, was silenced not only by me who continuously ignored her contributions (Excerpt 12 below), but also by her peers.

On the issue of teachers’ mediation of dialogical practices, Macedo (in Freire and Macedo 1995: 383) argues that those educators who see their role as one of a facilitator are prone to adopt techniques that come to mechanise and bureaucratise the dialogical method in a way that might require that ‘all students must speak even if they choose not to do so’. He points out that:

What is important to keep in mind is not to develop a context whereby the assignment of turn-taking to give voice to students results in a new form of rigid imposition. Instead, it is important to create pedagogical structures that foster critical engagement as the only way for the students to come to voice. (Macedo in Freire and Macedo 1995: 384)

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the issue of power inequality amongst learners is still left unresolved, an aspect that seems to provide fuel to the claim that this approach might indeed represent one more imposition on oppressed groups to comply with Western rules of reasoning (Schugurensky 1998).
Excerpt 10

26 T: What do you think? What do you think Ca?
27 Uz: Nothing
28 Im: Nothing [giggles]

Excerpt 11

67 T: What about in your country Ca? Can you say anything you want [to the teacher]? Well, you can’t say anything you want. I mean can you talk openly to the teacher in your country?
68 Za: Different.
69 Ca: I can erm
70 Im: Yeah, because they do
71 T: Really, so would you ask these questions?
72 Im: Yes, because sometimes they do evening parents, and we, erm, go

Excerpt 12

198 Ri: Because I can’t speak very well
199 Za:
200 T: Why do you think that speaking English well will change your life?
201 Ri: R. My children are speaking English. I can’t speak, it’s difficult.
203 Za: [with the] children, yes.
204 T: But don’t you speak with them in your language?
205 Za: yeah, but ( ) homework, or something.
206 Ri: this is important ( ) country is English, it’s important the language
207 Za: You want to talk to the teacher, the child, you want to talk to the GP.

Conclusion

It can finally be concluded that the discourse practices adopted by me did not provide room for more than the realisation of a conversation where the unequal power relations between participants were clearly in place and in which an attempt has not been made to go beyond simplistic overviews that left participants just on the surface of the themes discussed (Freire 1985). Furthermore, although there was an attempt to establish a different subject position for learners than that observed in more traditional teacher–learner interactions, it did not secure the realisation of a more democratic and participatory learning environment, for despite being given a chance to talk, learners’ views and positions were not taken on board and critically explored. Informed on data with Brazilian adult educators, Bartlett (2005: 326) attends to the fact that by challenging what they perceive as more traditional teacher–student interactions and forging a more ‘friendly’ relationship with learners, educators may indeed create an environment where some learners feel more confident to share their views and concerns on topics related to their lifeworlds. The author ponders, however, that this alone does not suffice as a means to engage
students in a critique of existing social relations. In Bartlett’s view as well as in the study herein, educators fail, in this way, to address one of the ‘broader objectives of critical pedagogy’.

In another respect, a discussion of these discourse practices inserted within Freire’s theory of participatory pedagogy raised other issues that may to a certain extent support the criticism that an attempt to put the principles of participatory pedagogy into practice may provide little opportunity for equal and democratic interactions in the classroom. The two main related questions that arise here concerning the applicability of this approach are first: to what extent is it possible for educators to distance themselves from their many voices and ideologies in order to prevent these voices and ideologies from directing the course of the dialogue? And second: to what extent is it possible for educators as well as learners to engage in truly democratic dialogue without overshadowing or silencing those less powerful voices, and in turn to offer them an actual opportunity for equal participation?

These are complex issues with no clear-cut answers. Yet it may be suggested that the matter here is one that requires an ethical commitment on the part of educators, who in order to challenge their own practices have to step outside and watch their actions from a critical perspective, questioning themselves on their relations of power and control upon others. If left uncritically analysed and thus unchallenged, interactions such as the ones discussed in this paper will not only carry on doing little to raise parents’ awareness of what goes into their children’s schools, but might also do the disservice of deluding parents that they are actually gaining knowledge that will empower them to engage in advocacy for their children.

References


British Journal of Sociology of Education, 22(2), 245–266.


Educational Theory, 36(2), 95–114.


