



## FEATURE

### **Critical identity pedagogy: bridging the dialectics of social justice and inclusion**

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## **Critical identity pedagogy: *bridging the dialectics of social justice and inclusion***

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### **Abstract**

Insisting that teaching is a political act, Critical pedagogy proposes that social justice and democracy cannot be distinct from education (Nganga and Kambutu, 2013). The goal of Critical pedagogy is agency and liberation from the effects of poverty, racism, discrimination, and oppression. Such agency is believed to be achieved through awakening a "critical consciousness" in the minds of both teacher and learner (Ledwith, 2018). The concept of critical consciousness is central to Critical pedagogy. It has been defined as "going beneath surface meanings [...] to understand the deep meanings, root causes, social contexts, ideologies, and personal consequences of any topic" (K12 Academics, 2021). It may be argued that through such a critical methodology, practitioners may find a path that helps bridge the complex dialectics of social justice and inclusion embedded in Scottish educational policy. This includes the recent guidance on supporting transgender young people and race equality: *Supporting transgender young people in schools: guidance for Scottish schools* (2021) and *Promoting race equality and anti-racist education* (2022). The following paper will assert that for this to be the case, there is a need to expand on Paulo Freire's (1921–1997) famous critical consciousness model within the broader ecology of *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)*, and towards a pedagogy of conscious criticality concerning the whole notion of 'Identity' itself, that is, towards a Critical pedagogy of identity, or Critical Identity Pedagogy. I will reflect on the implications of this within my own context as a teacher of Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies (RMPS), and Principal Teacher of Raising Attainment (Equity).

**Keywords:** critical theory, identity, social justice, colonialism, inclusion

### **Critical identity consciousness: *the differentiation of identity and knowledge***

Freire's idea of "Conscientization" denotes the process of an individual or community acquiring critical consciousness and becoming aware of their own context and identity (Freire Institute, 2017). After the learner begins to perceive their world's social and political dichotomies, it becomes possible to take action and seek positive change as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors (Scottish Executive, 2004). Knowledge, Pedagogy, and Identity are therefore intrinsically linked.

Racism—as with any form of thinking that characterises identity in fixedly proscribed terms—is described by the Scottish Government guidance as "a system of social categorisation which advantages certain groups of people and disadvantages other groups" (2022, p.10). In our globalised world, there

is a trend towards the emergence of dynamic and multifaceted identities resistant to such categorisations. Some people adopt a particular form of identity, others live in a dual mode, and others create hybrid identities for themselves. An essential requirement, therefore, for any inclusive practitioner working within social justice policy is a praxis of pedagogical fluency in the dialogue of identity, what has been called by some cultural intelligence or "cultural cosmopolitanism" (McNiff, 2013, p.1). This could equally be understood as a critical identity consciousness—a pedagogy I suggest should be understood as directly related to the manifest aims of social justice and inclusion as defined in Fraser's tri-partite conceptualisation of social justice: (re)distribution, recognition and participation (2005).

The following paper will assert, therefore, that for this to be the case, there is a need to expand on Paulo Freire's (1921–1997) famous critical consciousness model within the broader ecology of *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)*, and towards a pedagogy of conscious criticality concerning the whole notion of 'Identity' itself, that is, towards a Critical pedagogy of identity, or Critical Identity Pedagogy.

The ecology of *CfE* allows for a critical consciousness to manifest in both teacher and learner. It allows for the creativity and autonomy needed to facilitate a differentiation of identity and knowledge—a focus on the human rather than the notion of a parochial fixed identity *vis-à-vis* the monopolisation of knowledge. The Arts and Social Sciences especially, but schooling in general, must continuously direct students to investigate and challenge essentialist or reductionist claims regarding identity and knowledge to negate the 'Othering' phenomena. This is achieved within the context of real-world examples with a phenomenological focus on the meanings, root causes, social contexts, ideologies, and personal consequences of shared human experiences. The teaching of controversial human and/or moral problems, for example, where I as the teacher cannot claim to be the expert in the room (Giroux, 2011, p.37). For instance, students might examine historical instances of discrimination or exclusion based on rigid identity categories, such as apartheid, to understand the real-world implications of essentialist ideologies. In literature classes, students may critically examine works that subvert stereotypes and offer complex portrayals of characters that defy reductionist categorisations. In sociology courses, studying social phenomena can involve investigating the multifaceted nature of identity construction within specific cultural and historical contexts. Furthermore, this pedagogical approach aligns with a phenomenological focus, encouraging students to delve into the lived experiences of individuals and communities. By examining the meanings and personal consequences associated with identity construction, students gain a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of human existence. This might involve engaging with first-hand accounts, personal narratives, or artistic expressions that capture the complexities of identity and resist reductionist interpretations.

The inclusion of controversial human and moral problems in the curriculum, where the teacher deliberately steps back from claiming expertise, exemplifies a commitment to fostering critical thinking and pluralistic perspectives. In these instances, the classroom becomes a dynamic space for dialogue and exploration rather than a platform for indoctrination. For example, discussions on ethical dilemmas or socio-political controversies might involve exposing students to diverse viewpoints and encouraging them to formulate their own informed opinions based on evidence and reasoned argumentation.

Giroux (2011, p.37) underscores the idea that in tackling complex and controversial issues, the teacher should not assume an omniscient role but rather facilitate a process of collective inquiry. This aligns with the broader goal of Scottish education to nurture individuals who are not passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in the construction of understanding and meaning. However, with regards to identity, a critical consciousness is perhaps most pertinent in the realm of assessment.

### **‘Self’ assessment**

In standardised summative assessment, we measure the knowledge and therefore the identities we value as legitimate. This bias known as “norm-referencing” stands at odds with social justice (Gipps, 1999, p.368). For some there exists an underlying notion that intelligence is “innate and fixed in the way other inherited characteristics are, such as skin colour” (Gipps, 1999, p.367). Intelligence can therefore be measured and “individuals could be assigned to the place appropriate to their intelligence” (Gipps, 1999, p.367). The implication of this is that summative standardised assessment has a crucial role in promoting “cultural reproduction and social stratification”—in other words, the ‘Othering’ phenomenon (Gipps, 1999, p.367). People identify with social categories (Dhami et al., 2019). Members of the same social category (race, gender, religion, class) commonly have shared ideas of normative behaviours that they expect others in their social category to follow. Dhami et al. suggest that “such norms may be enforced by punishments or sanctions or by the self-esteem individuals derive from conforming to them” (2019, p.2). Inequitable parities then arising from social identities can give rise to “cooperation among ingroup members but also socially harmful outcomes such as intolerance, discrimination, and prejudice towards outgroup members” and has a detrimental impact on the (re)distribution of resources such as test scores (moveable grade boundaries), subject choices, and broader educational resources (Dhami et al., 2019, p.3). In the predominantly middle-class world of Scottish Education, the poverty-related attainment gap is quantitative evidence of this socio-economic process in action. In contrast, formative assessment techniques aim to devise tests that look to recognise “the individual as an individual rather than in relation to other individuals” (norm-referenced), and to use assessment to “identify strengths and weaknesses individuals might have to aid their educational progress” (Gipps, 1999, p.367). Within my own context, formative assessment is key in avoiding corrosive “norm-referencing” associated with standardised summative assessment, so much at odds with the aims of social justice and the closing of the attainment gap. The cultivation of the practitioner’s critical identity consciousness involves the use of formative assessment and the recognised individuality of the unique learner to enable the first of Fraser’s tri-partite conceptualisation of social justice—equitable (re)distribution.

John Hattie raises the question, however, of what happens next once a learner has successfully self-evaluated? His concept of a “self-regulated learner” asks “for more”, suggesting a learner must be taught how to address the shortcomings highlighted in their formative assessments (Hattie, 2015). Formative assessment, in Hattie’s conceptualisation, allows only for the successful evaluation of learning, whereas summative assessment marks achievement in learning, the milestones, as it were, or *telos* of education. Hattie implies that the function of formative assessment therefore is to play handmaiden to the ultimate measure of achievement as the *telos* of a curricula based on specific outcomes. In this regard, the use of formative assessment initiatives alone will, indeed, fail to close the

attainment gap. However, only within a specific theoretical framework—what Priestley and Humes call a “linear and teleological view of learning and knowledge” (2010, p.25). This kind of framework is one which works against Biesta’s concept of education as “coming into presence” (Biesta, 2006, as cited in Priestley and Humes, 2010, p.25). In contrast, *CfE* suggests a far more process-focused curriculum based on “intrinsic principles and procedures rather than extrinsic objectives”, and “explicitly moves away from central prescription of curriculum, towards a model that relies upon professional capacity to adapt curriculum guidance” (Priestley and Humes, 2010, p.2). Within *CfE*’s process-focus model, the agency borne of formative assessment is a necessity. Priestley and Humes state that Stenhouse’s promotion of curriculum as a process was influenced by the earlier work of Bruner (1960) and his practice of teaching controversial issues “where teachers could not claim authority on the basis of their subject training” (Stenhouse, 1975, pp.30-31, as cited in Priestley and Humes, 2010, p.10). Participation or agency, in the sense of an ‘agent of change’, is a key concept within *CfE*, for both pupil and teacher. Nuthall suggests that the strength of formative assessment is that learners are involved in planning their own self-evaluation, and that it enables agency and participation for all (2007, p.45). It is this agency found in self-evaluation that is at the very core of *CfE*, as well as a critical consciousness—it is ‘self’ assessment and ‘self’ evaluation in an ontological as well as the methodological sense. Again, working in aid of facilitating the second of Fraser’s tri-partite conceptualisation of social justice—recognition; in this case, of the self.

### **Social sublation and the self**

There is a distinction to be made in the literature between the coherent ‘Self’ and the hybridising overlapping identities of the modern world (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009, pp.178-180). As Rodgers and Scott state, the ‘self will subsume identity(ies) and will be understood as an evolving yet coherent being (2008, p.739, as cited in Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009, p.179). This idea of “identity(ies)” being subsumed in the process of self-actualisation aligns closely with Biesta’s concept of education as “coming into presence” (Biesta, 2006 as cited in Priestley and Humes, 2010, p.25). Biesta use of the German concept *bildung* embodying this process of self-actualisation is important (2015). Meaning ‘education’ and ‘formation’, it references the German tradition of self-cultivation. Biesta has, in fact, borrowed the term from the nineteenth-century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770- 1831). For Hegel also, *bildung* represented a “path toward rational autonomy” (Bykova and Westphal, 2020, p.427). When discussing the question of identity and education, I would suggest we couple Hegel’s and Biesta’s concept of *bildung* with another of Hegel’s untranslatable German expressions – *aufheben*. *Aufheben* is a word with seemingly contradictory meanings, including ‘to lift up’, ‘to abolish’, ‘cancel’, ‘suspend’, or ‘to sublimate’. The term has also been defined as ‘abolish’, ‘preserve’, and ‘transcend’ (Bykova and Westphal, 2020, pp.167-173). When introduced to the question of identity, I would conceptualise it in these terms: the Self will subsume or ‘sublate’ (*aufheben*) all identity(ies), including teacher identity(ies), in the process of becoming (*bildung*). Identity(ies) in general must be understood, practiced, and taught as in a constant state of *aufheben*. With all its contradictory implications of preserving and changing, and eventual advancement, the tension between these senses suit well the issues writ large surrounding Identity(ies) (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009).

Identity then is characterised by its apparent lack of singular cohesion and permanence; rather, it emerges across various settings through the agency of diverse actors, each driven by distinct objectives. It is a mistake to assume therefore that this invariably underscores the notion that an individual's identity structure is hierarchical in nature, with a predominant affiliation to one core identity. There clearly exist for many people varying degrees of attachment to an extensive array of interconnected identities.

Discourse surrounding Identity and education must of course be anchored in principles of dignity and equality, which hold particular significance within the framework of Scottish educational policy. This entails safeguarding the rights hard-won and advocated for by cultural collectives without sacrificing them in the pursuit of some perceived pretence of unity. (Meynert, 2007, p.22). Within the context of a Critical Identity pedagogy, we must approach education then as an evolving curriculum designed to empower students to position themselves within historical narratives and express their individual perspectives rooted in their cultural backgrounds (Meynert, 2007, p.24). This requires a deeper appreciation for suppressed local histories and struggles that are intimately tied to specific contexts, as well as the exploration of perspectives from ethnic minorities and women. A Critical Pedagogy of identity is a pedagogy of resistant; one that acts against claims of universal history, truth, and socially constructed hierarchies of meaning. Within such a pedagogy, traditions hold significance not due to their representation of absolute truth and authority but rather because they represent one among the myriad voices (Meynert, 2007, p.24). This, in turn, opens up the classroom as a space of liminality, and as a venue of shifting possibilities.

### **The liminal dialectic**

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983) describes liminal spaces as "a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (1995 [1969], p.97, as cited in Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011, p.39). The "liminal spaces" concept represents a boundary or threshold between one identity and another, thereby highlighting their inherent tensions (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011). Carnes describes such liminal spaces as "characterised by uncertainty and emotional intensity, by the inversion of status and social hierarchies" (2004). As mentioned, I teach within a context of real-world examples with a relational focus on personal dialogues or shared responses to experiences. The teaching of controversial human problems, for instance, where my status as the teacher is inverted and I cannot claim to be the expert in the room is important (Giroux, 2011, p.37). Often highlighting the histories of marginalised groups such as women, people of colour, the Scots and Gaelic language, and working-class communities, which challenge the ethical validity of the dominant culture, these stories and struggles are perhaps considered "dangerous memories" (McLaren, 1988, p.171). Acting as a liminal servant, as a teacher of these "dangerous memories", introduces symbols and narratives of the marginalised to disrupt or invert dominant knowledge's conventional frames of reference, which establish its significance and legitimacy (McLaren, 1988, p.171). By allowing pupils "to escape from the rigidity of social structures" through dialogue on selected topics—allowing them to become experts, or indeed "teacher"—a liminality is achieved, which gives those in the classroom the "freedom to invent

new solutions to old problems" (Carnes, 2004). Discussion then is paramount, as is co-constructed knowledge.

### **Decolonising the curriculum, and the self**

Henry Giroux rejects the neutrality of knowledge (Giroux, 2011, p.147). In a Critical Pedagogy of identity, we also reject the neutrality of identity(ies). Essentialist and reductive notions of identity are dangerous. Such characterisations are little more than normative *bourgeois* critiques. Instead, Scottish government guidance implies, we must acknowledge "the important underlying ethical and normative dimensions that structure classroom decisions and experiences" (Giroux, 2011, p.19). This is possible through the *aufheben* of a Critical Identity Pedagogy, thus achieving the recognition of diversity demanded by Scottish Educational guidance. Diversity of identity must be (somewhat ironically) "normalised" within the classroom. We have a spectrum of sexualities, races, religions, and genders in our classrooms which necessitates a day-to-day pedagogy rather than periodic attention.

"A curriculum which represents everyone involves normalising diversity within the curriculum so that learners routinely see language, content and imagery that reflects the diversity of culture, identities, and experiences, including their own.... This 'normalising' is more powerful than one off lessons that explore diversity or celebrate difference. The latter can have the unintended consequence of 'Othering' those who are not from the ethnic group which is in the majority. As celebrating difference may reinforce stereotypes, careful consideration is advised" (Scottish Government, 2022, p.21).

To suggest the indulgence, or rather the *a priori* legitimacy, of one form of identity is to abuse a position of privilege/power. We cannot normalise diversity if we are continually "norm-referencing" our learners. As pointed out by Beauchamp and Thomas, the identities we consent to (or are forced into) effect the "inextricable link" between identity and agency (2009, p.183). To control the narrative of another's identity is to control their agency and vice-versa. Scottish educational policy aims to give pupils the tools to write their own narrative; *CfE* aims to do the same for the teacher. However, to synthesise the dialectics of all the social justice policies and incentives that underpin it, a Critical Identity Pedagogy is required.

The 'Othering' phenomenon is reproduced, reinforced, and experienced by people worldwide, regardless of their race, language, gender, class, nationality, or religion. The Othering phenomenon is exclusionary and creates 'power over' relationships that create hierarchies of superiority and inferiority. The Scottish Government's guidance on anti-racist education states that this "sense of difference and hierarchy underpins racism" (2022, p.10). Today this tendency exists in what Carrión calls the "dialogic turn" in the socially constructed and reconstructed subjectivities of the 'Self/Other' (2012, p.52). These subjectivities continuously struggle for power, resistance, and agency, no less so, in the classroom. In this context, the question of identities has assumed a renewed importance for groups who see globalisation and cultural change as a threat to their own identities, what Niff calls "the exercise of cultural imperialism" (2013, p.508). Bruner explains that this tendency is reproduced in the antinomies surrounding the function of education; on the one hand, there is a view that education is there to enable people to live to their fullest potential to find their true identities, as opposed to the idea that education's

function is to perpetuate the culture that supports it (1996, p.67). In other words, cultural imperialism. It is no coincidence then that the Scottish Government's race equality guidance speaks explicitly of "decolonising the curriculum" (2022, p.21). Seen from the viewpoint of the more general ecology of social justice policy, there is, however, not only a need to decolonise our thinking about the 'Other', but also the 'Self'.

The Scottish Government's guidance on anti-racist education, for instance, states: "Scientists have proven it is false that humans can be categorised into different races based on their biology... Instead, it is accepted that these categories of racial groups are a social construction, i.e. a man-made idea" (2022, p.10). In so doing, the Scottish Government encourages practitioners to illustrate a critical consciousness in the face of established notions of race (Freire, 1970). It is, therefore, also a pedagogy of resistance (Giroux, 2011, p.72). Expanding this further, with a Critical pedagogy of identity, we might extend this idea to 'Identity' in general, that all our received ideas about identities are man-made tools used or used on us for good or for ill. By encouraging "a rights-based context, supporting learner agency", learners recognise the use and users of these identities (class, gender, race), and thereby we might encourage self-actualisation and a coming into being—a decolonisation of the self, as it were (Scottish Government, 2022, p.3). Through a Critical pedagogy, we recognise learners as active agents or authors of their own identities, not merely subjects in the narratives of others. Enabling the third of Fraser's tri-partite conceptualisation of social justice—participation, or agency.

Indeed, education often involves promoting specific values or improvements; it should, however, not necessarily be bound to a rigid normative framework. Education can, and arguably should, be reactive rather than strictly normative. Instead of adhering to a fixed set of predetermined norms, education should respond dynamically to the evolving needs and challenges of individuals and society. The notion that education must be normative implies a prescriptive approach where a predefined set of values or goals is imposed on learners. However, a critical approach to education acknowledges the fluidity of societal dynamics and recognises that what is considered valuable or beneficial can change over time. Moreover, a strict normative stance leads to the imposition of a singular perspective and a singular identity, potentially stifling diversity of thought and hindering the development of critical thinking skills. In contrast, a critical pedagogy of Identity allows for flexibility, enabling education to adapt to emerging ethical considerations, technological advancements, and social changes—central to modern society.

There is a moral obligation to make education critical because it ensures that educational systems remain relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of individuals and society. This responsiveness reflects a commitment to addressing emerging challenges, fostering inclusivity, and preparing individuals for a constantly changing world. While some level of normativity may be inherent in education—teachers are selecting and representing aspects of the lesson, in that sense, they act as an 'expert'—there is room for a more adaptive and responsive approach that recognises the dynamic nature of human societies. By embracing a reactive critical model, we can fulfil our moral obligation to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate an ever-changing world and contribute positively to societal progress. Education plays a pivotal role in challenging and reshaping prevailing perspectives. Its overarching objective extends beyond the mere categorisation of individuals



based on perceived inherent intelligence, aiming instead to facilitate empowerment and liberation from preconceived narratives. Several considerations arise within this framework:

First, the promotion of critical thinking is imperative. Education should actively stimulate individuals to question, scrutinise, and critically analyse information, ideas, and assumptions. By cultivating critical thinking skills, individuals are poised to challenge entrenched notions and make judicious decisions that inform the trajectory of their lives.

Second, education is conceived as a conduit for nurturing individual potential. Rather than adhering rigidly to a fixed conception of intelligence, educators are tasked with establishing environments conducive to exploring and developing diverse learning styles and abilities, allowing individuals to discover and hone their distinctive strengths and talents.

Third, education is frequently perceived as a mechanism for social mobility, offering a route for individuals to surmount socio-economic constraints. By providing equitable educational opportunities, societies can mitigate the impact of predetermined factors on an individual's prospects in life.

Moreover, education is instrumental in instilling a culture of lifelong learning. The notion that intelligence is immutable can dissuade individuals from actively seeking continuous learning and personal growth. Education, therefore, should instil a mindset wherein individuals recognise that their abilities are susceptible to evolution and improvement over time.

Furthermore, education encompasses not only cognitive skills but also the cultivation of empathy and understanding. By exposing individuals to diverse perspectives and experiences, education serves to dismantle stereotypes and prejudices associated with fixed conceptions of intelligence.

In anticipation of an unpredictable future characterised by rapid change, the capacity to adapt and acquire new skills surpasses the significance of a fixed level of intelligence. Education assumes the responsibility of equipping individuals with the requisite skills and mindset essential for navigating an uncertain and dynamic future. In essence, the purpose of education lies in emancipating individuals from the confines of deterministic perspectives on intelligence. Through the cultivation of a culture centred on learning, critical thinking, and individual empowerment, education facilitates individuals in crafting their own narratives and making meaningful contributions to society, irrespective of predetermined assumptions regarding their innate capabilities.

## **Conclusion**

In my own Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies (RMPS) classroom intolerance, exclusion, violence, and unrest are discussed, considered, and hopefully understood with a view of ultimately being combated. However, if young people are to be engaged, and, not simply indoctrinated, in debates of identity and belonging, the question of my own ideological and authoritarian neutrality is raised as a prerequisite to facilitate pupil agency and participation. Giroux states, however, that pedagogy cannot be separated from how subjectivities are formed (Giroux, 2011, p.37). Some experiences are legitimised, and others are not, some forms of knowledge are considered acceptable, while other forms are excluded from the curriculum (Giroux, 2011, p.60). Education is never neutral. Pedagogy either

supports or questions the status quo when deciding which knowledge, values, and identities to convey. Opting out does not equal being neutral, but "equals conforming to the ways and ideas dominant to the societal context" (Giroux, 2011, p.60). As a Principal Teacher of Raising Attainment with a specific focus on equity and the poverty-related attainment gap, the status quo is not a position I can take.

Furthermore, Gayle Gorman, HM Chief Inspector and Chief Executive, states: "All learners have a right to learn in an equitable environment where all cultures, religions, identities and languages are recognised and valued" (Scottish Government, 2022, p.3). Practitioners must begin then from a perspective that there is no "single truth" (Freire, 1970). The Scottish Government clarifies that teachers must seek to present more than one fixed way of thinking about Identity and knowledge in their classrooms. This necessitates a critical identity consciousness and a related Critical pedagogy of Identity. With a Critical Identity pedagogy, there is a focus on uncovering different perspectives on shared human experiences—the aim is to recognise the intricacies and complexities of people's lives. Recent guidance on supporting transgender young people and race equality suggests that schools must situate Identity as an ongoing, critically engaging, and reflexive process—*aufheben*. In this sense, my practice continues to be a critical one focused on discovering the root causes, social contexts, ideologies, and personal consequences of any topic in the curriculum. This, I believe, helps bridge the complex dialectics of (re)distribution, recognition and participation involved in delivering Social Justice.

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