

Theatre of the Oppressed – Thinking with and through the body

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Abstract *Exploring critical pedagogies and the critical, participatory theatre method, “Theatre of the Oppressed” (Boal 1995), in secondary school classrooms, this contribution explores power dynamics in the learning space and how these shift through pedagogical and creative interventions. Specifically, it explores the “Theatre of the Oppressed” as a tool for shared reflection in research, with and through the body, reflecting on research that took place in a secondary school near London in 2019. Additionally, as a practical companion to the text, this contribution shares exercises worked with in a presentation about the research with students as part of the Ringvorlesung “Sharing is Caring” in 2023, reflecting on their own learning spaces.*

Introduction – setting the scene

This paper presents practices and reflections on the use of Theatre of the Oppressed as a research method in research in secondary school classrooms on inclusion. This was part of a wider research study, exploring ‘How can critical pedagogies create an inclusive space for learning in secondary education?’, with teachers in London, Middletown and Barcelona, who were implementing critical pedagogies in their secondary school classrooms. The paper focuses on some of the examples from the research at Milestone Academy in Middletown, England (all names in this example, including the town, are anonymised). It explores how Theatre of the Oppressed engages with power dynamics in the classroom, how participants play with their subjectivities through the creative process, and what potentials for set learner identities can arise through Theatre of the Oppressed in a classroom setting. Finally, it looks at the role of the researcher as creative facilitator within this process, and makes links to the role of the teacher.

With critical pedagogies, the paper refers to pedagogies inspired by educator and philosopher Paolo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). The research reflects on the inclusivity of learning spaces applying critical pedagogies, in the

context of high exclusion rates of students from marginalised backgrounds or students with complex learning needs (Cole et al. 2019). The research intended to also draw on critical and inclusive pedagogies for the research framework itself, applying the very pedagogies researched. To engage with knowledge inscribed in the body, as feminist scholar and educator bell hooks (1994) describes it, and to develop alternative ground rules of communication (Ellsworth 1989), creative methods were mobilised. Specifically, the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1995) was used, drawing on my practice and thereby acting both as a researcher and a facilitator.

Terms of engagement in the classrooms researched

To situate the research, I will first describe the terms of engagement of the classrooms the research took place in, and the structures and practices which define these, to better understand practices of inclusion and exclusion. With Melanie Nind, I understand “inclusion as about all groups vulnerable to exclusion” (Nind 2014: 527). Accordingly, I understand that exclusion occurs in a variety of patterns, as processes of marginalisation in everyday situations in school as well as structurally within the institution of school.

In England, school exclusions have risen sharply over the last decade. As shown in the Timpson Review of school exclusion (Timpson 2019), pupils with special educational needs, those from marginalised groups, and students from vulnerable backgrounds are generally more likely to be sanctioned by exclusion, often due to behaviour perceived as disruptive.

As Sarah Ahmed describes it, institutional spaces produce a view of ‘normative’ behaviour (Ahmed 2012), where non-normative behaviour is being picked up on punitively and marginalised. However, exclusionary practices can also occur explicitly or implicitly through the institutional discourse that describes the institutional space. For example, identities are created in school discourse where the appearance or cultural background of students becomes an indicator of the learning behaviour expected of them. Deborah Youdell describes in her research how institutional structures/processes produce ‘unteachable’ identities (Youdell 2003). Furthermore, the roles that students are associated with in their classes, such as roles of ‘good’ or ‘bad student’ etc. (Thomson 2007), which are often linked to the school labels that students are assigned, determine not only their ability to follow lessons, but also who belongs and who does not belong in the students’ own peer group, constant shifts in popularity and power within the student body (Gallagher/Riviere 2004).

Critical pedagogies

In this context, I was interested in researching critical pedagogies and the potential they have to change power dynamics in a classroom. In the following, I will summarise the key points of the critical pedagogy first developed by Paulo Freire in Brazil in the 1950s, during the military dictatorship. To be able to explore and situate these in the context of the terms of engagement in contemporary classrooms, the research took place in. I furthermore juxtapose Freire with more recent developments as well as critiques which look at Freire's pedagogy through an inclusive lens. Together, I refer to the different ideas as critical pedagogies (plural), to highlight the plurality of the practice.

Engaging with what he describes as the “banking model of education” (Freire 1970), which perceives students as empty vessels in which a specific, hegemonic education is deposited, Freire advocates for a problem-posing education. In contrast, this aims at supporting students to “perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire 1970: 83). Therefore, learning becomes a tool for social change, supporting students to free themselves from the oppressive structures around them. Feminist researcher Elizabeth Ellsworth criticised the view of students as one group sharing the same oppression in this approach, asking: “What diversity do we silence in the name of ‘liberatory’ pedagogy?” (Ellsworth 1989: 299). She stressed the need for a critical engagement also with the diversity of experiences, cultures and needs students bring to the classroom and the complex power dynamics between them, from which they perceive the world around them, and explore ideas for change.

Furthermore, Freire's critical pedagogy sees a shift in the traditional power dynamic between teachers and students: “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire 1970: 72). Reflecting on this shift, Karl Kitching takes these ideas further, and suggests to challenge the fixed identities of oppressor and oppressed: “It is highly necessary that a critical pedagogy would provide a space for troubling and taking risks with subjectivity as curriculum, and to expect that ‘professional’ teachers and ‘good’ students might have to risk changing subjective location as part of this mutual, transformative process” (Kitching 2011: 116).

As a key concept, Freire speaks of pedagogy being consciousness-raising, learning as the process of becoming aware of the injustice in the world around you and as the process of learning to change these injustices. This makes learning an emancipatory process for students; To this end, I take on board a decolonial critique by Catherine Walsh, of listening to perceptions and needs of participants, beyond the proposed pedagogical framework of the teacher/pedagogue. Working with indige-

nous pedagogies in Ecuador, Walsh compares these to Freire's pedagogical outline and describes their work as "much more than an actional response to and against oppression (...), but also and more importantly of offence, insurgence and (re)existence circumscribed in/by the continuous construction, creation and maintenance of the 'otherwise'" (Walsh 2015: 11). With "otherwise", she refers to a perception of the world and aligned practices which work outside a dialectical frame of oppressor and oppressed, and which challenges a Euro-centric, Western model of thought (Walsh 2015).

Finally, Freire's critical pedagogy diversifies knowledge beyond the teacher's or school's pre-described knowledge by engaging with students' perspectives. With bell hooks, I am interested in also diversifying the means of expressing embodied knowledge: "It [passion of experience] is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience" (hooks 1994: 91).

During the presentation of this paper at the Ringvorlesung »Sharing is Caring«, students online, as well as offline took part in Theatre of the Oppressed exercises, which intended to ground the learning in the body, and connect them to the students own embodied experiences. The accompanying text boxes throughout this text share the instructions to the exercises, to offer further participation. These are image theatre exercises. An image is like a body-statue, expressing the resonance/understanding of a word/instructions for the participant.

Exercise 1: Make an image of when you learn best – Think about where you are? How do you feel? How are the power dynamics/structures around you, in that learning space? Who is around you? How do you feel your body/yourself? Now make an image of when you learn least. Repeat the same reflections as before.

Theatre of the Oppressed as a research method

With the intention of engaging with a critical pedagogical framework in methodological aspects of the research, it was important to me to create a dialogical research space in which participants could engage with the research question in a variety of ways. Hence, the qualitative classroom research consisted of ethnographically oriented participatory observations (Aktinson/Hammersley 1998), supplemented by interviews and creative workshops as a research intervention. These aimed to help shape spaces for shared reflection with students and teachers, engaging with a diversity of knowledges, ways of expression, and shifting established ground rules of communication. The creative workshops consisted of a Theatre of the Oppressed workshop and participatory perception mapping, whereby this article only discusses the former.

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) sees theatre as a rehearsal for social change and draws on key elements of Freire's critical pedagogy, and the two frameworks originate in the same time and place, Brazil in the 1950s/60s. Augusto Boal, the founder of TO, sees theatre as a critical exploration. He talks about the practice of seeing oneself seeing, exploring oneself and engaging with power: "Theatre is born when the human being discovers that it can observe itself; when it discovers that, in this act of seeing, it can see itself – see itself in situ: see itself seeing" (Boal 1995: 13). Borrowing from Freire's ideas of critical inquiry, transformation, and emancipation, through the theatre, participants explore power and situations of injustice they have experienced, and through it, they rehearse ways to change these situations and challenge power. By enacting self-exploration, opportunities for change become possible. The safe and playful atmosphere of the aesthetic space is used to play out real-life conflicts. The aesthetic space is the imagined space projected onto the physical space within which the (stage) performance is taking place. It is the projection of the imagined world of the performance onto the physical space of the stage, town square, classroom, or wherever the performance takes place: "An overlaying of spaces: a space is created subjectively by the gaze of the spectators – witnesses present or imagined – inside a space which already existed physically, in three dimensions. The latter is contemporaneous with the spectator, the former travels in time" (Boal 1995: 18–19).

In their research on TO as a tool for community consultation in Vancouver (BC), Geraldine Pratt and Caleb Johnston describe the potential of working with theatre to explore avenues for change on a metropolitan level. They suggest it allowed for engagement with wider political conflicts in the city within the creative space: "It is the playfulness and safety of the theatrical space that allowed the intensity of this real-life conflict to be played out" (Pratt/Johnston 2007: 107). The aesthetic space enables actions which otherwise might not be possible. Researching drama classrooms in North American secondary school classrooms, Kathleen Gallagher explains how TO offers the opportunity to explore what potentials for set learner identities can arise through TO, which can lead to different narratives in the research (Gallagher 2007).

In my research, I have particularly worked with image theatre, a method of Theatre of the Oppressed. In it, participants critically examine their experiences through jointly created body images and "creatively, non-verbally and in dialogue express their perception of the world, power structures and oppression and deepen these together" (Bogad 2006: 49). Being a means of communication beyond words, "to feel images, to let our memories and imaginations wander" (Boal 2002: 175), it is concerned with knowledge inscribed in the body (hooks 1994).

Exercise 2: Make an image of power, whatever power means to you. How does this feel? Where in your body do you feel power? How do you perceive the room around you in this position?

Research in Milestone Academy

In the classroom-based research, in addition to participant observations and interviews, I led image theatre workshops with the students and their teachers as a research intervention at the end of each research stay. As a researcher, I also took part in workshops as a facilitator and was therefore directly involved. To explore the pedagogies and power dynamics, I asked the students and teacher in the workshops to create images of learning, power and belonging in their classrooms. In order to critically reflect on their learning space, it was important for me to engage with what hooks (1994) refers to as the dominant voice, to engage with power and to explore what an inclusive classroom looks like, a classroom where everyone can participate or belong to the classroom on their own terms (Lani Florian and Kristine Black Hawkins 2011). The classroom itself was an actor in the reflection that participants engaged with in their images.

For the purpose of this paper, the following explores two images from the research at Milestone Academy, a secondary school in Middletown near London, England. There, I conducted the study with a group of 13–14-year-old students and their science teacher, who had been implementing critical pedagogies in the science lessons, in the form of a student-led critical science research project over 2 weeks (Nelly Alfandari and Dimitris Tsoubaris 2022).

Exercise 3: Make an image of yourself as most powerful in your learning space. Where in the learning space are you? From this powerful image/body think about: how do you feel? In relation to the space/people/instructions/teacher? How do you feel in relation to learning in this place/body?

Powershifts



Fig. 1: Students and teacher at Milestone Academy making an image of the place/position they feel most powerful in their classroom.

This example highlights some power dynamics that I observed changing during the critical pedagogy project at Milestone Academy, and it reinforces others. For this image, I asked participants to show a classroom where they felt at their most powerful. This brought out some of the power dynamics in the classroom. Some students, like Sam, immediately used the moment to take over a very symbolic piece of furniture in the classroom, namely the teacher's chair he was standing on, while others, like Ruksana, who is not very visible in this picture, positioned herself on a table in the back corner of the room, giving her an overview of the class. Various students, such as Lola and Omari, positioned themselves in the teacher's position, while the teacher Alex positioned himself as part of the group of students in the centre of the students' tables.

The theatre workshop highlighted certain shifts in power dynamics that had taken place throughout the critical pedagogy project, such as the teacher who had tried out different positions throughout the project and had gradually moved from leading the class from his desk to being a supportive figure in the student-led classroom. In this image, he is showing how he feels powerful amongst the students while facing his own desk, which perhaps symbolises institutional power. From here, he faces Sam, whose image on top of the teacher's chair would be considered unacceptable behaviour in any other context, but became a constructive contribution in the drama workshop. The change of perspective enables the two, teacher and student, to engage with each other from different positions. Nevertheless, Sam's position also wields power over his fellow pupils by taking this very central place. Lola and Omari, who position themselves at the blackboard, present themselves as

facilitators of knowledge, just as knowledge is mediated from the blackboard in the traditional classroom. This in fact, reflects various statements made by Omari during the project that show that he values a certain hierarchy of knowledge between adults and students, but also how important it is for him to be recognised within this hierarchy. Other students chose not to participate in the exercise and remained in their seats. However, this in itself became a valid expression within the overall image, which made non-participation a valid contribution to the learning space.

The theatre workshop changed the frame of participation, shifting the possibilities for participation beyond familiar roles. Students and teachers were able to shift their perspectives of each other and the classroom, and participating through the altered space allowed for different subjectivities. The critical pedagogies set up encouraged a shift in the teacher's position, which could be made visible in the theatre workshop. Some of the images in the theatre workshop illustrate the ownership the students took over their classroom, others show students demonstrating the power of structural recognition. Whilst the ways in which knowledge was produced changed throughout the critical science project, and students shared their own knowledge and references, for some, institutional valorisation was still relevant. Made visible through the theatre, this challenged the values of critical pedagogies as students claimed their agency within the proposed pedagogical framework. As a researcher and facilitator, I was directly involved in the classroom dynamics, and implicated through the intervention of the theatre.

Rehearsal for change

Exercise 4: Make an image of feeling least powerful in your learning space. Where in your learning space are you? From this least powerful image/body think about: how do you feel? In relation to the space/people/instructions/teacher? How do you feel in relation to learning in this place/body? From this image, move on to your most favourite place in this learning space – how do you look when you are in your favourite place? How do you relate? How has this shifted in the change of image?



Fig. 2: Two images of Sam, first in the position and place of feeling least powerful, second in his favourite place/position.

In a subsequent image theatre exercise with the same group of students and teacher, I asked the participants to create an image of when and where they felt least powerful. Sam decided to position himself outside the classroom door and look in through the window, in the position of being sent out of the classroom as a punishment. By placing this image outside the classroom, Sam challenged a rule I had set previously as a researcher/facilitator that all images should take place inside the classroom. Arguing that stepping outside the classroom was necessary for his image, Sam changed that rule.

However, when asked in the next instruction to now show his favourite place, he decided to stay in the same place, changing his posture slightly and leaning leisurely against the window overlooking the corridor:

Researcher: All images have to take place within the classroom. (...) Please create an image of the place you feel least powerful in.

Sam: Miss, for that I will have to go outside the classroom (looks at researcher, leaves, and creates an image).

Researcher: Please now create an image of your favourite place.

Sam: Ah, Miss, actually, this is my favourite place! (changes image, stays outside)

In my workshop reflections, I realised that his decision to stay outside felt like a challenge to me to break the rules, as he was outside the classroom and no longer directly under my direction. Through the game-like nature of the theatre exercise, he

was able to challenge the power dynamic between us. However, through the game, he was also able to take ownership of the place, a place which, in the context of the classroom, symbolised exclusion. With his action, Sam gained agency and therefore changed the meaning of that place, as he chose to position himself in that place, and successfully challenged my set rule. In this context, as a researcher/facilitator, I was involved in this rehearsal for change.

Joker-researcher

This is just a small excerpt from the theatre workshop, but it shows some of the potentials and questions for reflection that are relevant for taking on the role of the joker, as the facilitator is called within the Theatre of the Oppressed, as a researcher, and which could also be interesting for reflections on the role of a teacher. Each of the two roles, researcher and joker/facilitator, entail different responsibilities and opportunities. If the Joker, as Boal (1995) says, moves between the reality of fiction and the fiction of reality, then as a researcher-Joker. I also moved between the framework of the reality of the research and the framework of the reality of the workshop.

As the joker, I challenge participants to engage with the power dynamics in the workshop room, including those between me as the joker and them as participants. This playfulness was also transferred to my role as researcher, as the example with Sam shows. He was playing with my role as an authority, but by extension, he was also playing with the framework of the research by changing his subjectivity from an 'excluded' student to someone with agency. As a joker, it is important for me that the participants choose the particular conflict or issue they want to work on. But as a researcher, I am complicit in my research agenda. Since I hold the space as a joker and feel responsible as a pedagogue, at this moment, I go along with the topics the participants want to work on, even if the researcher in me wants to explore a different direction further. These are the limits, but also the strengths of working with the Theatre of the Oppressed in research. As an educator/ teacher, part of my ethical practice is building trust, having time and being clear about my competencies. As a researcher, this enriches my ethical framework and adds important elements of practice. As a researcher and as a joker, I am constantly reflecting on the power dynamics in the room.

Conclusions

The research showed that overall, the implementation of critical pedagogies in the classroom was fruitful, but the work was framed by the neoliberal institution, which was difficult to overcome. The students were themselves embedded in the taxonomy

of neoliberal institutions and understood their success partly through this. However, they were engaged in learning beyond their usual identities in the classroom, which challenged fixed power roles and signified a shift in agency. Overall, the work enabled a momentary shift in certain power dynamics between teachers, students, institutions and learning itself, including the power dynamics established by the critical pedagogical framework itself.

The theatre workshop highlighted the shift in power dynamics between teachers and students during the research and offered possibilities for further shifts in the formation of subjectivities beyond institutional discourse. Methodologically, this is a contribution to the debate on expanding the possibilities of research on inclusive education. The pedagogical, creative space the theatre practice shaped within the learning space allowed for a shift in relatability and expression. This shows the ability of pedagogical practices to shape learning spaces, and the possibilities this brings with it for a more inclusive practice to shape a learning space with changed ground rules for communication. Even if within the research setting these shifts in power dynamics were short-lived, they provided students and teachers with the experience of a reimagined classroom.

Likewise, the students participating in this talk in 2023 during the Ringvorlesung »Sharing is Caring«, engaged with the ideas presented with and through the body, as they were able to explore their own learning space through the theatre exercises. The talk itself was held in a blended format, as I connected online, together with some of the students. Other students and their teacher were present in their classroom. Everyone participated in the exercises, regardless of their location. This provoked a lively debate and a connection across the screen. While it gave the students the opportunity to explore the concepts in an applied way, it also allowed for a shift of the habitual learning space of a blended lecture. The students' own embodied experiences of exploring the concepts and methods became part of the knowledge production. The often stifling spaces of the lecture hall and online learning space were interrupted through the bodily activities, and turned into a hybrid participatory shared space. The theatre exercises allowed us to play together, while learning together, with and through the body.

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Figures

Fig. 1: Students and teacher at Milestone Academy making an image of the place/position they feel most powerful in their classroom.

Fig. 2: Two images of Sam, first in the position and place of feeling least powerful, second in his favourite place/position.

