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Lessons Learned from the Study of a Jewish-Israeli High School: Critical Pedagogy in Contention

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## Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, critical pedagogical discourse has gained many followers. Critique (both as theory and practice) generally, and critical pedagogy that aims to culturally empower specifically, have been assumed to propel learning and thus raise the level of scholastic achievement among students from disadvantaged groups (Banks, 2009; Freire & Shor, 1987; hooks, 1994; Monchinski, 2011; Walters, 2012). Relatedly, broad consensus as to the positive effects of critical pedagogy on learning processes has given rise to a wave of research devoted to the structural and ideological limitations with which such pedagogical practices are met (see, for example: Buckingham et al., 1989; Ellsworth, 2011; Scherff, 2005; Schofield, 2010). However, only a few empirical works have been devoted to the translation of critical ideals into practice in urban schools.

Relying upon ethnographic fieldwork, this study analyzed the ways teachers and parents in one disadvantaged public school perceived the critical pedagogical practices intended to help improve students' scholastic achievements. The research examined critical pedagogy through the case study of a secular Jewish high school, the Kedma School. The school was located in an impoverished neighborhood of a major Israeli city, populated predominantly by socio-economically disadvantaged Mizrahim (Jews of North-African and Middle-Eastern origin). The data was gathered over a two-year period through in-depth interviews with the teaching staff and by observing teacher meetings and parent-teacher conferences.

The Kedma school, which was unique in the Israeli educational landscape, was founded on the grounds that it could and should instill a critical consciousness in its students, based on their social and economic status and ethnic origins, with the stated goal of attaining scholastic achievement through a process of empowerment (Shalom-Shitrit, 1996; Yona, 2007). Preparing for the matriculation exams,<sup>1</sup> which was, one could argue, a common cause for this group of high school teachers, parents, and students, was posited as the apex of the entire learning process. Thus, when the first graduating class started to prepare, not only were the students put to the test, but so was the school's basic approach to critical pedagogy.

The heated debate that accompanied the process of preparing for the matriculation exams brought to the fore two distinct discourses—critique and achievement-ism—discourses that in theory were meant to be complementary, but turned out in practice to be rather contradictory and the subject of constant contention. More specifically, the process of preparing for the matriculation exams highlighted the complex relationship between the critical tools—empowering distinct identities, strengthening local knowledge, and

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<sup>1</sup> The matriculation exams are national exams in requisite subjects held over the course of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Students who pass their matriculation exams successfully receive a matriculation certificate, which qualifies them for admittance into institutions of higher learning (The Ministry of Education, 2005).

constructing critical consciousness on the individual and communal levels—and their supposed outcomes, which were supposed to be improvement of students' learning motivation, skills, and abilities that will contribute to higher educational achievements and self-esteem. Ultimately, the construction of these positions—critique and achievement-ism—as two binary poles, rather than understanding critique as a vehicle to better learning, exposed the different ways critical pedagogy was applied by teachers and parents. Whereas most of the teachers regarded critical pedagogy as a radical alternative to the exam system, most of the parents regarded critical pedagogy as a non-normative radical option that threatens the exam system. This research reveals how the differently teachers and parents articulated their responses to critical pedagogy and suggests that such responses are molded by each group's position in the Israeli social structure (i.e., their social status and economic class). These two polar positions remained theoretically opposed but the school did not give up either the use of critical tools or the aim to improve students' scholastic achievements. The evident tension between these ideals is of great importance within today's educational reality in which critical approaches are conceived, in various forms, as contributing to equal opportunity for disadvantaged groups (Mizrachi, 2012). Furthermore, since school is perceived (rightly or wrongly) as the agent responsible for its graduates' future well-being, particularly, in terms of their future social status and economic class (Borman & Dowlin, 2010; Marsh, 2011), the research presented herein contributes to the growing scholarship on the tensions of enacting critical pedagogies within the current achievement-driven climate.

### **Critical Pedagogy, Tests and Academic Performance**

Matching a school's cultural discourse to the student body's culture is understood by adherents of critical pedagogy to advance the learning abilities of students from disadvantaged and/or marginalized groups. In other words, ignoring the particular culture of a student has a negative influence on his/her ability and motivation to learn (Freire, 1994; hooks, 1994), and thus their potential to perform.

In light of this, critical pedagogy, in its various manifestations, seeks to understand the social conditions that construct oppression, failure, and marginalization in the modern era (Aronowitz, 2008; Burbules & Berk, 1999). Among the more obvious means are fostering social sensitivity, integrating the knowledge-base of the "Other" into the official curriculum, and translating critical knowledge into socio-political action (Aronowitz, 1993; Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Gur-Ze'ev, 1999; Nieto, 2005). In some instances, an argument is made for the creation of segregated educational frameworks so as to culturally empower a disadvantaged group and reconstruct its relationship with the educational system (Asante, 1998; King, 2005; Shockley & Cleveland, 2011; Shohat & Stam, 2001). This praxis understands the oppressed groups' identity and culture as an empowering vehicle that

contributes to improving the students' ability to learn and to break through external barriers that had prevented them from learning.

This pedagogical process aiming to advantage underprivileged students has become even more important in light of the increasingly central role that exams have been playing in the current educational policy (Carnoy, 1999). Exams and certificates are perceived not only as a dominant scholastic paradigm (Resnik, 2008), but also as a symbolic coming-of-age ritual and as a way to prophesy future success in the job market (Rochex, 2006). In other words, the implementation of critical pedagogy, in its various forms, in traditional urban schools met the challenge of strengthening the students learning abilities in order to improve their grades and overcome the deepening achievement gap. These aims have become even more important due to the fact that the achievement gap reflects social hierarchies and processes of hegemonization and marginalization along socio-economic and ethnic lines (Ichilov, 2005; Yogev et al., 2009).

Empirical studies suggest that processes of empowerment do lead to higher educational aspirations among members of disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups (Carter, 2005; Chavous et al., 2003), as well as higher educational achievements (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Chavous, Rivas, Green, & Helaire, 2002; Oyserman, Harrison, & Bybee, 2001; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), and greater confidence in and commitment to the learning process (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Tatum, 2004; Villalpando, 2003). Moreover, scholars suggest that critical pedagogy demands and leads to excellence and power for all students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Morrell, 2009) and that culturally sensitive critical pedagogy is best conceived as "simply good educational practice", not only when it is applied to disadvantaged sectors of society (Zirkel, 2008, p. 1166).

In Israel, critical pedagogy is mainly perceived as a tool kit that aims to improve the learning and thinking abilities of students from disadvantaged groups. Drawing from this rather instrumental perception, the principles of critical pedagogy have been implemented mainly in educational projects that strive to improve grades and other scholastic achievements (Gur-Ze'ev, 2007). In light of these utilitarian approaches to critical pedagogy, I examined the negotiation over the meaning attached to critical pedagogy by teachers and parents in this one disadvantaged school as a means to better understand the challenges critical pedagogy faces in today's stratified and achievement-based K-12 education.

### **Mizrahi Students**

In Israel, as in other countries, matriculation exams reflect socio-economic and ethnic stratification. Today, the number of eligible high school graduates stands at 44.4% (Konor-Atias & Abu Hala, 2009). This figure reflects longstanding inequality wherein a clear-cut correlation can be found between graduation eligibility and students' socio-economic status and ethnic

origin. The graduation eligibility of Jewish students of Mizrahi (North-African and/or Middle-Eastern) origin is 20% less than that of students of Ashkenazi (European and/or American) origin. Or, as Momi Dahan, an Israeli advisor to the International Monetary Fund on matters of inequality and poverty formulated it: “The more Mizrahi you are, the less likely you are to matriculate” (Trabelsi-Hadad, 2004, p. 48).

These figures have an ongoing, consistent history that dates back to the establishment of Israel’s public education system. For example, central research conducted in the 1950s shows that Mizrahi students fell far behind their Ashkenazi counterparts in basic skills and scholastic achievements (Faytelson, 1954). Research findings from the 1970s and 1980s show that not only did these gaps not narrow, they widened (Levi & Chen, 1976). Research that examined the differences between the two groups in the 1990s found that despite the fact that scholastic achievement is influenced more by socio-economic status than by origin, the ethnic divide in Israeli education persisted (Dar & Resh, 1991; Resh, 1998), a trend that continues to this day (Addi-Raccah & Ayalon, 2008; Ayalon & Yogev, 1997). Hence, educational research in Israel substantiates the claim that socio-economic status and ethnic origin factor into the quality of education a student is likely to receive and, it follows, the scholastic achievements they will attain consistently over the years (Nahon, 1987; Shye et al., 2002; Swirski, 1981; Swirski & Dagan-Buzaglo, 2011), and that these figures reflect the stratified structure of the Israeli society at large (Forum, 2002).

### **The Site**

The Kedma School is a unique institution in the Israeli public education landscape, for it seeks to combine normative public learning with critical pedagogical discourses. The school was founded in 1993 by intellectuals, activists, educators and academics, mostly from Mizrahi origin, in order to empower students in low-income neighborhoods and so-called *development towns*, populated largely by Mizrahim (Yona, 2002). At the time of this study, this was the only school founded in Israel based on critical discourse and praxis (Yona, 2007). The school has six grades (7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>), one class per grade, with a total of 160 students. Most of the students were born and raised in the neighborhood and all of them are Mizrahi (predominantly of Moroccan and Kurdish origin). Most of the students’ parents have high school diplomas at best. Some of them work in the service industry, while others draw unemployment and other welfare benefits, such as disability stipends. Most of the students arrive at the school with below-average grades and learning skills, not to mention the trauma of failure (Kedma, n.d.). The schools’ teachers – mostly middle-class Mizrahim that earned academic diplomas, attributed the low performance of Mizrahi students to the cultural biases created by the Eurocentric educational system administered by the Israeli Ministry of Education, its matriculation exams included. It was in this

spirit that the school adopted the principles of Freirian critical pedagogy (Freire & Shor, 1987; Shor, 1990) in order to help the students succeed in school in general, and in the matriculation exams in particular (Yona & Zalmanson Levi, 2004).

These principles found expression on three distinct levels: (a) the integration of a critical perspective in the instruction of official content; (b) the development of specialized school-based curricula that addressed the students' identities, cultures and communities; and (c) the personal accompaniment, guidance and assistance of each and every student by the teaching staff (Bairey-Ben Ishay, 1998). These qualitative differences, it was argued, would enable the students to reexamine their identities in the context of Israeli society, to see the value they hold, and to propel them into scholastic and personal growth.

Kedma's pedagogical approach caused an uproar in Israel (Getz, 2003). The Ministry of Education and the Jerusalem Board of Education both expressed total condemnation for the ideology upon which the school was modeled. In their view, it was an unrealistic project that would deprive disadvantaged students of a proper education. But the harshest criticism against the intention to adopt the principals of critical pedagogy claimed that the latter sabotages the nation's cohesion and the "melting pot" ideal while highlighting cultural differences between different Jewish ethnic groups. This move was perceived as a serious threat to the stability of the Israeli Jewish society (Yona, 2002).

But despite this strong opposition and despite the school's poor opening statistics based on the students' grades in elementary school, the school came from behind to turn out a 48% matriculation rate while another 22% of its students fell only one or two exams short of full matriculation. It should be noted that these figures exceeded the national average for that year, when the number of 12th graders eligible for full matriculation stood at a mere 41.4% (Swirski & Atkin, 2002), while in Jerusalem, where the school is located, they stood at 36% (Ibid), and in the Katamon neighborhood, which the school serves, matriculation rates stood at less than 10% (Kedma, 2002). Today, some 18 years after the school was established, and despite the ongoing tension between critique and achievement-ism, it maintains similar rates of academic success that are far more impressive than those achieved by underprivileged Mizrahi students in *regular* schools.

### **Qualitative Data Gathering**

This work is based on action research and ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the Kedma School over a two-year period (2000-2002). Both the assessment research and the action research are based on the interpretive hermeneutic tradition (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997), which seeks to explore educational reality while also helping to change it (Shalski, 2006). Combining

the two methods allowed me to observe and analyze the social-educational dynamics as it unfolded *in situ* and over time (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

The school's teaching staff conducted the action research in the format of a communal investigation initiated and led by the school's founding principal and eight of its veteran teachers. The team convened once every three weeks for a two-hour meeting, which they called a *model assembly*. The assemblies were facilitated by the teachers' team-leader, who worked with the school from inception. In these meetings, the group discussed critical pedagogy as articulated by the school and its practical implications. Furthermore, the group extensively discussed the preparation of students for matriculation exams.

The meetings were held while the first graduating class was preparing for its matriculation exams. This enabled the teachers to examine the school's activities not only through the prism of the utopian vision its founders had laid forth, but also through the lens of results and performance. In the framework of the action research, the group documented their 12 meetings with a video camera.

The ethnographic research encompassed observing 12 model assemblies and seven parent-teacher conferences. The parent-teacher conferences took place three to four times a year and were devoted to the day-to-day running of the school. Preparation for matriculation was one of the dominant issues discussed in these meetings, due to the difficulties that arose in the process. These encounters were also documented with a video camera.

Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with the eight founding teachers who had participated in the model assemblies. The interviews were held over the last year of study on a face-to-face and one-on-one basis. All of the interviews were conducted in Hebrew and lasted an average of two hours. The aim of the interviews was to ascertain teachers' positions on: (a) the critical pedagogical discourse adopted by the school; (b) the formal requirements of the Ministry of Education; and (c) the ideal educational approach to empowering disadvantaged students. All of the interviews were documented with a video camera. Both the observations and the interviews were fully transcribed and translated. Analysis was conducted in two phases. First, I coded the meaning attached to matriculation exams by the various social actors (teachers and parents). Second, I categorized the different meanings attached to the exams in light of critical pedagogy (critique and achievement-ism). The relationship between critique and achievement-ism was used to explore the potential connections between the different actors' notions and their social positions.

## Findings

The process of preparing for the matriculation exams at the school triggered heated debate over the nature of the critical pedagogy that the school ought to adopt. The different positions parents and teachers assumed—critique

and achievement-ism—represented the different ways in which the logic of critical pedagogy was perceived in the context of the formal exams it purported to advance. Together, the various positions point to the conditionality, as well as to the limitations and possibilities inherent to the critical pedagogical project that seeks to succeed where the “regular” school has failed.

*Achievement-ism vs. critical pedagogy:  
“Why are we here? Because we want to succeed!”*

A large number of parents and a few teachers demonstrated enthusiastic support for the matriculation exams and for the use of normative pedagogy - based on test directed methods such as lectures, instructions and memorization (as opposed to critical pedagogy) in preparation for them. Many parents anchored their support for participating in the matriculation exam process in the notion known as “the real world.” This “playing by the rules” position defined the matriculation certificate as an instrumental path that one needs to take to gain a foothold in “the good life.” In the words of a mother of a 10<sup>th</sup> grader:

We must push for matriculation, because that’s today’s social standard. We want our kids to succeed, we want them to advance, and without a matriculation certificate you can’t go near a university. The importance of matriculation is matriculation itself; without matriculation there is no future, nowhere to advance to.

This parent articulated her position in absolute terms: tautology (“The importance of matriculation is matriculation itself”), causality (“Without matriculation there is no future”), and notions of success (“Go near a university”). Other parents also tied their children’s personal success to the matriculation certificate and the formal normative pedagogy. A father of a 10<sup>th</sup> grader amplified his message with military jargon, serving his need to emphasize the major role matriculation exams are destined to play in students’ lives:

The matriculation exam is like conquering a fortified target. In order to reach the university, you have to conquer the target known as “matriculation.” We cannot, as of yet, forsake this. That’s how life is. We have to do it like every other school does... [because] if we do it other ways... we might not succeed. This will ruin our kids’ chances in life.

When citing the concrete achievements to be attained by succeeding in the exams through the normative pedagogical process, parents and some teachers alike emphasized the potential of integrating into the middle-class. Attainment of middle-class status has been cited as one of the key motivators for studying among disadvantaged groups (Freire & Shor, 1987). The positions expressed by some of the teachers echoed this determination. For



example, one of the teachers justified the necessity of taking the exams and qualifying for the certificate thus:

[With a matriculation certificate] the students will move one step up. I think it's important for the students to access the kind of work that enables advancement; that will assure them that they have a next step, rather than getting stuck on a dead-end street. Janitorial, construction or service industry jobs do not offer that. This is why they must complete their matriculation exams. No respectable person will employ them otherwise.

Such statements mark the matriculation certificate, as well as the normative pedagogical way to gain it, as a crucial asset with significant, formative powers. Both teachers and parents believed in the empowering effect the exams could have on students, thanks to the supposed "normality" that their pages contained. In light of their belief in the formative powers of the certificate, both teachers and parents created the slogan: "Anyone Can!" "Everyone must get on the matriculation exam track. Everyone. We cannot forsake anyone," (mother). "We must draw in all the kids, there's no question about it," (teacher). "The moment we say only some kids will matriculate is the moment we all fail," (teacher). "From the start we said everyone can, that's how we'll beat the system, not with revolutions," (mother). "Everyone can—that needs to be our motto, not critiquing the powers-that-be" (mother).

The slogan "Anyone Can!" is reflecting the desire to succeed with each and every student in the exams and within the exam system; at the same time, it reflects a desire to undermine the tracking mechanism inherent to the certificate and the normative pedagogical practices as well as the low expectations attached to some of Kedma's students in the past. It nevertheless fails to meet the critical stance adopted by the school because to realize these aims, teachers and parents tried to restrain the critical ideology of the school. As a mother of a 10<sup>th</sup> grader framed it: "Taking the matriculation exams means collaborating with the system, but our situation is such that we must succeed and cannot afford to have confrontations right now."

The conceptualization of critical pedagogy as a site of struggle, rather than as a system meant to advance the learning process, was also voiced by a few teachers: "After all, why are we here?" they asked rhetorically, "We're here because we all want to succeed where the other schools have failed, not because we want to have social revolutions at our kids' expense." One of the mothers added:

With all due respect to protest and critique, first we must succeed in the matriculation exams. I want to see the teachers who will stand up and tell us that they don't care if their own kids study for the exams and learn and fight about their identity instead.

Parents and some of the teachers alike saw critical pedagogy as a factor that may impede learning processes and thus as a "stick in the wheels" of student success. Despite its potential contribution to the students (in terms of culture and identity), it was experienced mainly as a privilege, the kind that

would likely have been rejected by well-off parents too. Similar claims were made by parents of students of color who blamed progressive educators for "freeing" their children from a racist educational system by allowing them to express critical feelings and thus preventing them from entering the mainstream of society (Delpit, 1998). For these reasons, and despite the implicit and explicit "esteem" in which the speakers rejected critical pedagogy, the inherent dangers it held in store ("site of struggle" and "waste of time") overshadowed the promise of better academic results.

*Critique vs. Achievement-ism:  
"What do we need all these exams for anyway?"*

While most of the teachers invested a lot of time and energy in everyday practice to prepare the students for the matriculation exams, when they discussed their actions and pedagogical choices they tended to criticize the exams. The teachers and some parents interpreted the achievement-based education and meritocratic system in general and the matriculation exams in particular, as oppressive. According to their stance, matriculation exams are a form of institutional oppression that serves the hegemonic sectors of society. As one of the teachers put it,

I'm against the matriculation exams, because matriculating means leaving some students behind. If you transmit the message that matriculation is equality, then you're also transmitting the message that those who don't matriculate are less equal, and then what have we accomplished? We'll be just like all the other schools.

Following this statement, standardized testing reproduces the structural discrimination characteristic of ordinary schools. The teachers did not claim that the educational system fails disadvantaged students intentionally. However, most of them noted that the mechanisms of selection and tracking would lose their meaning were it not for "failed" students. In other words, in the halls of success one cannot but hear the echoes of failure. Consequently, a handful of teachers vehemently opposed the adoption of matriculation exams because of the normative pedagogical process, which was in their views, embedded in it. Due to this notion they chose critical pedagogy not as a potential contribution to the existing learning process but as an alternative to the existing educational process.

If the school pushes for full matriculation, then we will be faced with tracking. So maybe we should ask ourselves: what do we need that for? If matriculated, while we are neglecting the rest, what have we accomplished? We need an alternative.

So as not to reproduce the stratifying logic embedded in the pedagogical route that the exam mechanism represents ("tracking", "selecting", "neglecting"), the teacher wished to implement a critical pedagogical approach as a bypass of the meritocratic system. In other words, the teachers interpreted

critical pedagogy not as a route that will help them to succeed in the meritocratic system but as a route that will help them to succeed by eliminating the meritocratic system. This stance triggered heated debate among teachers and parents alike. A father of a 12<sup>th</sup> grader exclaimed: “But 30% do pass the exams successfully so why do you want us to give that up?” In response, the teacher noted that this example only reinforced his point: “Exactly! If 30% pass all the exams and another 30% pass some of the exams, what happens to the 30% that don’t do anything, they just loiter? It’s like they’re in the matriculation field, but sitting on the sidelines—an extremely frustrating place to be!” One of the veteran teachers reinforced this position. Although in principle she supported the exam preparation process, she wondered whether matriculation was inevitably oppressive to the disadvantaged:

The students are our hostages. What if they’re in a place where matriculation doesn’t interest them, where they are not in the right frame of mind to deal with it? And we come along and impose it on them. Instead of empowering them, instead of helping them build a new image for themselves and for their community, we turn them into failures.

Other teachers, including those who wholeheartedly wished for the students to succeed in the matriculation exams, admitted that they had reservations and doubts about the extent to which it allowed for critical work with the students:

I remember that after one of our “model assemblies” I went home and decided that we needed two tracks: one that prepared students for matriculation and one that didn’t. Indeed, we said: “Matriculation for all, and full matriculation at that!” But this way, we’re not empowering the students and the community vis-à-vis critical thinking, we’re just forcing them to adapt to the system.

According to this position, taking the exams meant choosing achievement-ism and thus forsaking criticism of the system, for the meritocratic discourse embodied in the matriculation exam is blind to the socio-cultural context in which it is held. A mother of a 10<sup>th</sup> grader expressed similar concern over the instrumentality of the exam preparation process, since the tendency to interpret academic failure as personal failure could lead some students to drop out, thereby reproducing social stratification. Should students shy away from school due to poor performance, the whole critical effort would be lost:

We all agree that the school’s main efforts should be focused on turning out as many fully matriculated students as possible, and yet I’m afraid that in the process we’ll turn into just another grade factory. If the kids who don’t stand a chance won’t stay in school, then we’ve lost our uniqueness. It scares me, and I hope we don’t make that mistake.

This position reminded some of the parents of the revolutionary fervor that informed the school at the outset. A father of a 10<sup>th</sup> grader said: “this stuff is resounding the spirit of the school in its early years. It reminds me of the

teachers at first. That was our strength: we wanted to do things differently, not to go with the flow.” Going against the flow assumed that the educational history of disadvantaged students differed from that of their privileged counterparts, and, therefore, that the former are in need of different educational models altogether.

So as to free themselves from the “equalizing complex” characteristic of disadvantaged students, most of the teachers and some of the parents presented an array of possibilities for “being a student.” These possibilities deviated from the hierarchical categories: matriculator/ non-matriculator and the value judgments they carry. The proposed alternatives went so far as to reject outright the would-be promise of social-mobility that matriculation certificates supposedly held in store. If the incredible effort of studying for the matriculation exams is all aimed at integrating into the middle-class, the losses may outweigh the gains. As one of the teachers put it: “Let’s face it, what are these exams for? So our kids will become middle-class, is that all?” Many parents shook their heads in vehement disagreement. Most of them wanted to see their kids extract themselves from blue-collar poverty. But for some of the teachers, socio-economic mobility wasn’t enough. They had established a critical school to empower the pupils and their community. Formal academic achievements were not necessarily part of that vision, and were certainly not its only measure of success.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The process of preparing for matriculation exams at the Kedma School exposed the ambivalence with which critical pedagogy is met in light of the achievement-oriented spirit that drives the public education system in Israel. On the face of it, the logic of achievement and the logic of critique are not mutually exclusive, for critical pedagogy is meant to improve the learning skills and abilities of disadvantaged students and thus improve their formal scholastic achievements. However, the present examination of critical pedagogy and its implementation in a disadvantaged urban public school reveals a series of tensions that point to its inherent weaknesses in non-hegemonic and stratified contexts. These tensions were exposed through the different ways teachers and parents defined achievements, authentic learning, and the purpose of education.

Firstly, despite the fact that for decades teachers and researchers have been calling for the adoption of critical pedagogical practices when working with disadvantaged groups (Aronowitz, 1993; Banks, 2010; Giroux, 1988; Hilliard, 2003), the implementation of critical pedagogy evoked meanings that challenged the status of critical pedagogy as a “universal truth,” or, at the very least “the truth of the oppressed” (Freire, 1994; Freire & Macedo, 1987). In practice, critical pedagogy was understood both in terms of improving learning skills/achievements and in terms of critique. These terms were not perceived as complementary but rather as contradicting, meaning that critical

pedagogy was perceived either as a practice that sabotages the normative learning process for the exams, or as a process that dismisses the preparations for the exams as one of its goals. In other words, the majority of the parents regarded critical pedagogy as disruptive to the normative learning process, whereas the majority of the teachers regarded achievement-based education as disruptive to critical pedagogy. Hence, these two discourses were positioned as two binary poles that conflict with one another. The construction of these contradicting interpretations reflects two radical points of view in which critical pedagogy cannot serve as a route to gain scholastic achievements. Understanding critical pedagogy as a radical alternative that cannot be integrated and take part in the normative goals of today's schooling positioned critical pedagogy as an outsider rather than a real educational option.

Secondly, although both teachers and parents share the same ethnic origin most of them did not share the same ideas regarding critical pedagogy. This gap can be related to the relationship between positions and the social status and economic class of their holders. These differences enabled teachers to advocate for critical methodologies far more easily than parents. Thus, what one group largely regarded as an educational possibility, the other group regarded as wasting time and a deviation from normative educational practices, and thus, a recipe for failure. These different positions are not disconnected from the current educational-achievement issues in Israel and from the powerful position the matriculation exams have gained, especially for disadvantaged groups. For example, the Council for Higher Education has connected achievements in matriculation exams to students' future academic success by links of cause and effect, assuming that the one may predict the nature of the other (Ben-Peretz, 2005). Furthermore, the matriculation certificate has a great influence with regards to access to Israel's job market and structure of opportunity (Yair & Inbar, 2006). In light of this, the matriculation exams play an even more crucial role in shaping the lives of disadvantaged pupils (Swirski & Dagan-Buzaglo, 2011).

Understanding critical pedagogy as a radical point of view that diverges along social and economic lines does not coincide with the theoretical and empirical literature that emphasizes the contribution of critical pedagogy to the improvement of learning skills and abilities and eventually, to the scholastic achievements of disadvantaged pupils. These findings do not suggest that critical pedagogy may not contribute to improving scholarly achievements. Its implementation, nevertheless, entails dealing with many difficulties that do not stem from the qualities inherent in critical pedagogy, but rather from the ways in which it is perceived and experienced in disadvantaged arenas that are riddled with difficulties. These experiences are linked to pressures exerted by the achievement-based culture that has developed in the contemporary traditional school, the meritocratic approach being established as the most appropriate and legitimate way to achieve success, and the range of possibilities open to disadvantaged pupils being perceived as narrow and limited.

The gaps between critique and achievement-ism and between teachers and parents can be understood as part of the dialectic nature of critical pedagogy, which enables an on-going discourse regarding the modes and features of the school's pedagogy. This discourse, as such, is not common in schools in general and in disadvantaged schools in particular. Yet, the findings of this study beg us to continue calling critical pedagogy into question and to articulate new models for a critical pedagogy that see oppression for the multilayered complex arena it is. The findings also suggest that a large struggle facing educators who want to employ critical pedagogy in their schools is dealing with the non-normative and even radical image attached to critical pedagogy by disadvantaged groups. This image turns critical pedagogy from a solution into a problem in itself, which gives rise to additional struggles on top of those with which it sought to deal in the first place.

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