# Syncretizing Critical Pedagogy and Progressive Education

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## Introduction

Freire famously argues that the traditional grammar of schooling imbues students with a compliant readiness to submit to authority (Mulcahy et. al, 2015). In response to this mode of schooling, progressive education (with an emphasis on learner-centrism) was developed to empower students to engage in cooperative democracy (Williams, 2017).  In the broadest sense, progressive education entails 'alternative' systems of schooling that deviate from the traditional grammars of schooling, emphasizing the "primacy of the individual student" (Mulcahy et. al, 2015, p.108): including Montessori and Waldorf education. In a contemporary context, I argue that progressive education can also encompass other, non-traditional modes of learning such as project-based learning, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary lessons, collaborative and cooperative learning, experiential learning, and community service learning. Despite the expansive nature of progressive education, Morrison (1989) argues that while progressive education can empower students, it is insufficient because it does not explicitly challenge the socio-political inequalities it operates under. Instead, "progressive education is…a necessary rather than sufficient condition" (Morrison, 1989, p. 15).

By contrast, education that explicitly names unjust power structures falls under the term 'critical pedagogy'. Critical pedagogy entails education based on critical theory, that provides students with the epistemological tools needed to question, criticize, and destabilize powerful social structures, institutions and norms—including but not limited to capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, and cissexism. As Foley et. al (2015) writes, "critical theory challenges traditional theory steeped in positivism and calls out for justice and liberation" (p.1). For example, antiracist teaching might be considered a form of critical pedagogy if it equips students to question and challenge white supremacist structures and systems. A social justice-oriented education, however, is not automatically 'just' or critical in nature. Teaching about unjust structures is not the same as practicing an equitable teaching relationship that respects the autonomy and humanity of each individual student.

As such, progressive education does not fulfil critical pedagogy, rather it is a set of tools—and equally, social-justice education risks abandoning the equitable student-teacher dynamic espoused by Freire's (1968) critical pedagogy, in favor of a didactic approach that preaches critical theory without practicing it in the classroom. Truly transformative education must thus challenge norms of power in two key ways: first, through the critical epistemologies being taught; second, through a manner of teaching that eschews the prescriptive 'teacher as authoritative lecturer' position in favor of a student-teacher/teacher-student dynamic that empowers students at a classroom level. This paper will examine how social justice principles of critical pedagogy can be used in conjunction with progressive education practices in U.S. K-12 schooling, and the extent to which progressive education and alternative pedagogy 'tools' offer ideal strategies of cultivating critical consciousness. In other words: the success, challenges, and opportunities of a syncretic approach to critical pedagogy and progressive education. As Banks and Maixner (2016) note, existing research reveals a narrow intersection of social justice education and alternate pedagogies—so non-U.S. studies are used to supplement the findings of this paper. Finally, this paper aims to identify gaps where further research is needed to determine progressive education's viability as an effective vessel of critical pedagogy.

## Critical Pedagogy in Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia Education

The literature suggests mutual complementarity between critical pedagogy and established methods of progressive or alternate pedagogies such as Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia education. In a study of three urban public schools which integrated culturally responsive, antibias-antiracist (CRP-ABAR) teaching into a Montessori setting, students were generally perceived by educators to have improved empathy, critical thinking, and community culture, and some Black parents gave positive feedback stating that their children's ability to recognize and speak against racial bias improved (Canzoneri-Golden & King, 2020). However, Canzoneri-Golden and King's (2020) findings also describe flaws in the execution of CRP-ABAR Montessori, pointing to the persistence of teacher bias and disciplinary microaggressions as well as a lack of confidence from parents (particularly Black parents) regarding the program's effectiveness. They also found that, contrary to teacher and administrative expectations, academic achievement on tests did not improve following the implementation of CRP-ABAR. These mixed results are similar to the findings of a qualitative study examining SJE (Social Justice Education) in an urban Montessori charter school (Banks & Maixner, 2016). Banks and Maixner (2016) concluded that "increased overlap between SJE and Montessori is possible" (p. 12), but that a lack of support from white parents (due to concerns about academic impact)

impeded its success as a program. These results should not be treated as definitively negative for SJE in Montessori, as respondents were overwhelmingly white despite the racial diversity of the school population (Banks & Maixner, 2016). Instead this points to the need for further research that engages and understands the feedback of Black, Latine and POC families in response to antiracist Montessori schooling.  Overall both Canzoneri-Golden and King (2020) and Banks and Maixner (2016) suggest a comprehensive, systemic approach to ABAR education in Montessori schools is critical to success: not just an embedded, explicitly antiracist curriculum, but also a community-wide strategy of training and outreach that incorporates teachers and parents to ensure community confidence and trust.

Waldorf education and Reggio Emilia education are also considered in conversation with critical pedagogy, though with limited discussion of how to overcome practical challenges and academic pressures. Muñoz (2016) argues that Waldorf education should be syncretized with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive Schooling, and critical pedagogy as an "effective reform for the education of Native American youth" (p. 167). Drawing on experience as a Native American teacher, Muñoz (2016) posits that the fundamental tenets of Waldorf education lend itself to a curriculum that is responsive to place, race, indigeneity and decolonization. Though Waldorf education's historical issues regarding racism, classism, and bureaucratic control are acknowledged, Muñoz (2016) highlights standardized testing and curricula as the major barriers to successful implementation of critical Waldorf education. In another study, environmental education is used in conjunction with the Reggio Emilia method of educating, centering children with teachers as provocateurs (Steele, Hives & Scott, 2016). But this study does not evaluate the program's success, instead describing the method as creating "rich and diverse learning experiences" (p. 13) that offer a means to determine effective pathways of learning. Outside of the Montessori sphere, then, in the narrow intersection of critical pedagogy and progressive education, the dearth of studies offers limited recommendations on how to navigate political barriers and constrictive circumstances when implementing the practices they hold up as ideal.


## Critical Pedagogy and Project-Based Learning

The umbrella of progressive education, however, is not limited to cohesive educational systems like Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia schooling. Recent decades have seen an increasing focus to disparate pedagogical strategies. These strategies follow the progressive education heritage but separate its components into specific, distinct, classroom interventions. These include project-based learning (PBL), experiential learning, work-integrated learning, community service learning, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity.

Transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary project-based learning has generally been found to be effective and empowering means of education, but policy pressures and persistent systems of racism and wealth inequality continue to post problems. Ryan and Zeccola (2016) describe the work of L.A. public school Crenshaw High School, whose Extended Learning Cultural Model (ELCM) was lauded as a successful example of social justice teaching through project-based, problem-posing, and community-oriented learning. ELCM involves transdisciplinary cooperation between teachers who build a unified curriculum that invites analysis and action on community issues. For instance, students map local schools and analyze school district data about race and class in their mathematics class, then engage with current policy debates in their history class. In this case, 'progressive education' components of transdisciplinarity and expeditionary learning are central to how students engage with inequality and activism. Alex Caputo-Pearl, a senior teacher, described ELCM as "the single most groundbreaking, all-encompassing model for genuine education transformation attempted at an urban high school" (Goldstein, 2013). Ryan and Zeccola's (2016) findings also reinforce the crucial role of parental engagement (Banks & Maixner, 2016; Canzoneri-Golden & King, 2020): a key element of Crenshaw High School's success was its organizing workshops for parents. However, the school was closed in 2013, despite charitable donations and parents' protests—pointing to the difficulty of implementing a radically transformative iteration of schooling while under the political constraints of government administrations with competing political interests (Goldstein, 2013).

Policy pressures are not the only challenge to implementing radical and progressive schools: demographic challenges can complicate the idea of social justice education. Kraft (2007) describes two L.A. public schools that successfully integrate social justice issues into their curriculum while supporting teachers to adopt innovative teaching: PBL, such as the creation of video PSAs, complements challenge-driven learning in the classroom as teachers lead discussions involving the military, environmental pollution, protests, and dissent. However, Kraft (2007) notes that this study was undertaken in a racially diverse, predominantly working-class school. Kraft (2007) calls for further research into efficacious 'social conscience' education in wealthier, whiter settings, and this absence is reflected in other studies of critical progressive education which likewise focus on diverse public schools (Banks & Maixner, 2016; Muñoz, 2016; Ryan & Zeccola, 2016; Canzoneri-Golden & King, 2020). Indeed when inquiry-based projects aiming to engender critical consciousness were implemented in a wealthier, all-white school, a broader context of white supremacy and class privilege manifested in students' lack of willingness to sympathize with marginalized groups of people, and their hesitance to critically engage with issues of corporatism, wealth-hoarding and imperial war-mongering (Beutel, 2018). Beutel's

(2018) difficulties in balancing a student-directed teaching style with challenging students' conceptions of their privilege reveal a pressing need for research in how to engage privileged students in critical pedagogy. More studies are needed to understand whether progressive education is an effective means to guide privileged students to positions of empathy and activism.

Though Beutel's (2018) attempt at critical pedagogy and PBL in a white, wealthier context met resistance, diversity among the student population is far from a guarantor of successful critical teaching. An ethnographic study by Niesz (2006) describes a middle-school teacher who successfully created an interdisciplinary, project and inquiry-based course that investigated local grassroots political organizing. The middle-school was 1% white and most students had working-class and immigrant backgrounds; however, the course was only available to hand-picked students whom the teacher deemed appropriately motivated to take the course. As such, although the students may have been receptive to critical pedagogy, the teacher (who was white and middle-class) exhibited a deficit mindset that ran counter to the principles of critical pedagogy and therefore limited student opportunity (Niesz, 2006). Thus teacher attitudes can also problematize the execution of critically conscious PBL.

By contrast, Bland (2012) found a Student Action Research program for marginalized Indigenous Australian high school students was highly successful. This collaborative project offered students at risk of dropping out an opportunity to work on research relating to Indigenous belonging at schools, and barriers to university access. This project was successful because of the agency and autonomy it gave students, particularly in dealing with issues of equity and access that affected them directly (Bland, 2012). It encouraged them to envision themselves as participants in their own liberation. The success of this effort, which empowered the most marginalized and at-risk students, showcases the importance of accessibility in thinking about progressive education interventions. Limiting transformative PBL and student-driven learning only to students deemed as hard-working or 'gifted' enough is counterproductive to the goals and philosophies of the critical pedagogy project.

## Critical Pedagogy and Service Learning

Of final note in the field of critical pedagogy within progressive education practices is the use of service learning to develop politically active students. Service learning, in this context, refers to community service integrated as a part of school curricula, with the purpose of both serving the community and teaching particular curriculum content. For instance, collaborative art-making was used within a juvenile prison in order to teach about human rights and criminal justice issues (Krain & Nurse, 2004). But while a meta-analysis of service learning research found it increased "cultural awareness, social responsibility, and student cognitive

learning outcomes," the data were dominated by college student programs (Warren, 2012, p. 60). Indeed, while service-learning has shown promising signs as a means of civic education, there is still a lack of studies on explicitly social justice-oriented service learning in K-12 contexts.

Billig (2002) reviewed several instances of service-learning and found that these pedagogical practices seem to improve students' political and civic engagement. Despite this, it is crucial to note that civil engagement is not necessarily the same thing as critical theory. Wade (2007) points out that "too often, service-learning projects neglect to include a focus on the root causes of the problem at hand" (p. 156). To truly fulfil the goals of critical pedagogy, service learning must question the need for the services being performed—it must interrogate the politics of 'service'. In a similar vein, Butin (2007) coins the term "justice-learning" to describe a justice-oriented, critically conscious iteration of service learning, situating its importance in a context where uncritical service learning can reify paternalistic and invasive attitudes or dynamics. However Butin (2007) relies on undergraduate justice-learning case studies, revealing a key need for research into justice-learning's K-12 potential.

A few studies have explored the potential of social justice service-learning in K-12 contexts, though most have ambiguous conclusions . Coffey and Fulton (2018) investigated an 8th Grade English class centered around student-directed inquiry into social justice issues. However, while this curriculum contained elements of traditional service-learning, it also incorporated many aspects of progressive education, including project-based learning, investigative research, classroom discussion, and more. The practical 'service' element was not explicit in the same way traditional service-learning generally is. Wade (2007) interviewed 40 elementary school teachers who had attempted to integrate social justice considerations into their service-learning. Wade concluded that although teachers were passionate about embedding activist skills into their students' service-learning, their implementation was constrained by structural challenges, resource limitations, and restrictive curriculum mandates. Finally, Hart (2006) argues in favor of a critical service-learning. Hart posits that critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and service-learning should be combined to best serve marginalized students. Like Wade (2007), though, Hart acknowledges that while this combination offers new liberatory frameworks of education, it has not yet been fully realized—nor does it resolve the contradictions of a regimented education system. There is thus a clear need for new, up-to-date studies on the dynamics and potentialities of justice-oriented K-12 service learning.

It is clear that the disparate results of 'critical progressive education' reflect the dynamic and flexible ways in which critical pedagogy can and has been combined with Montessori, Waldorf, and other progressive education techniques. The increasingly diverse nature of this field means

that additional research is needed now more than ever, as demonstrated by the following data.

## Data Visualization

Data from Google Ngram (Michel et. al, 2011) was analyzed using R to provide insights into the literature on progressive education and critical pedagogy over time, and to indicate where future research should be directed. Google Ngram is a database of texts published from the period 1800 to 2019 (estimated to be around 4% of all historical publications over that time), which can be searched and measured to identify possible trends in discourse and language over time (Michl et. al, 2011). Valid criticisms of the Ngram dataset exist—including font misrecognition in older texts, and a disproportionate focus on scientific literature (Pechenick et. al, 2015). However, the phrases inputed here are likely specific enough to suggest reasonable accuracy.

As shown in Figure 1, pedagogies like Montessori and Waldorf education have levelled off in frequency, while 'progressive education' as a term has decreased since its initial spike in the 1940s. Comparatively, 'critical pedagogy' and 'Paulo Freire' continue to rise in popularity. This suggests a growing interest in education as resistance and the potential for transformative change in both schools and society. But while critical pedagogy provides guiding principles for the dynamic and goals of education, it does not lay out the minutiae of a 'new grammar' of schooling through which to accomplish this. In the case of *implementing* the goals and relationships of critical pedagogy, it seems scholars are moving away from 'progressive education' as a general methodology, and towards progressive teaching 'practices' like service learning, transdisciplinary learning, project-based learning and experiential learning (Figure 2).
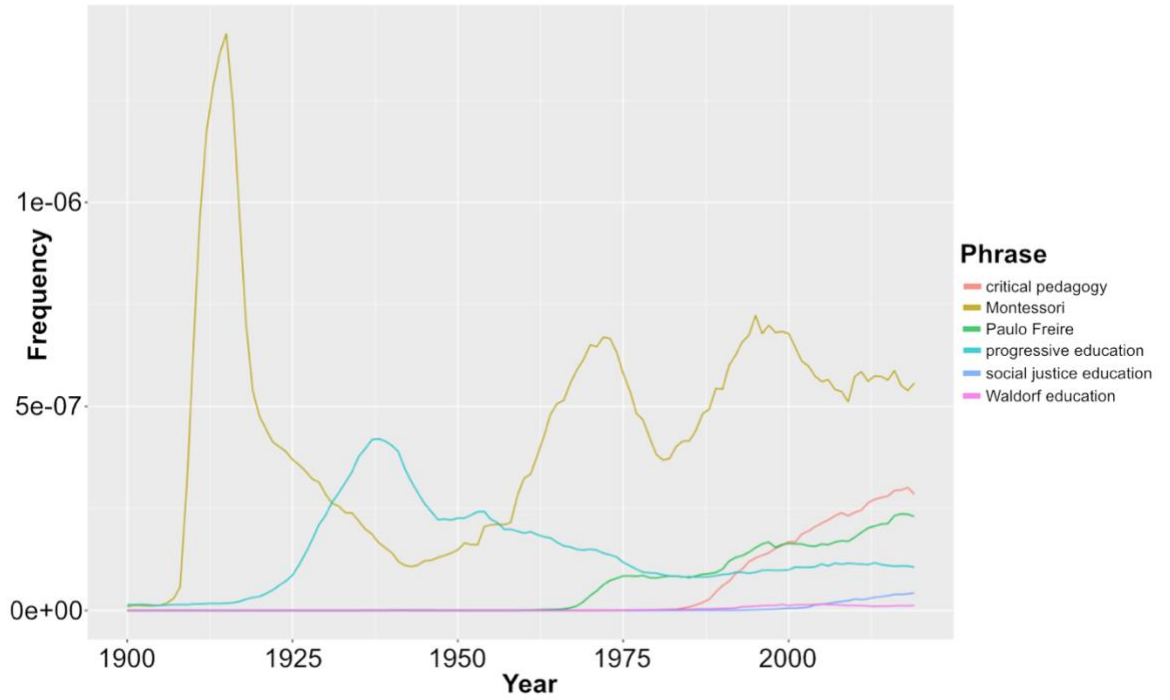
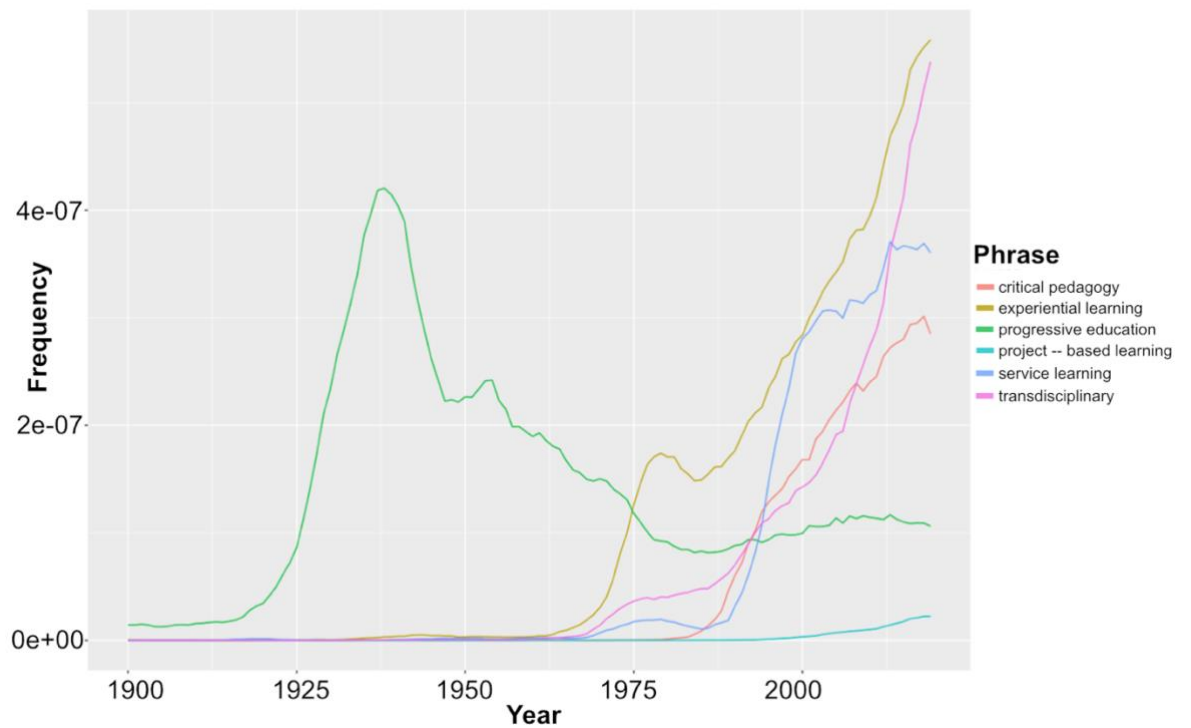FIGURE 1. Word frequency of pedagogy-related phrases, 1900-2019.



FIGURE 2. Word frequency of progressive education techniques, 1900-2019.

The rising popularity of these education 'tools' point to a need for research that examines critical pedagogy as it relates to each new teaching technology. More case studies are needed to understand how transformative social justice education can be integrated into schools that challenge the traditional grammar of schooling outside of established 'methods' of alternate pedagogy.

## Conclusion

Existing literature suggests that the nexus of progressive education methodologies and socially transformative critical pedagogy is limited but overall, positive. Attempts to combine critical pedagogy with cohesive methodologies like Montessori or Waldorf or with diverse progressive teaching techniques like project-based learning have found success in engaging and empowering marginalized students. However, key challenges remain unsolved. Policy constraints, testing pressures, and internalized and structural systems of oppression pose fundamental challenges to resisting 'traditional' education from within the confines of a 'traditional' education system. More broadly, these reflect America's power structures that privilege white supremacy and capital over critical consciousness. Furthermore, the limited number of studies in specific areas like K-12 justice learning suggest a need to understand what kinds of teaching can best serve the goals of critical pedagogy. Data trends depict a rising popularity of progressive education techniques— relatively unexplored in relation to critical pedagogy—which further intensifies the importance of this research.

Finally, in thinking about the future of critical pedagogy and progressive teaching, Lund (2001) argues that research on social justice pedagogy must value student agency. Lund (2001) calls researchers to involve students not just as subjects but as collaborators—to embody the tenets of critical pedagogy within the body of critical pedagogy research: "If a few more academics invite young people to become respectful partners in collaborative research projects, under the terms and conditions that fulfill their own needs, this will be a significant step toward correcting serious omissions in past studies of schools and students" (p.180). Taken in conjunction with the success of Student Action Research with Indigenous students on the margins (Bland, 2012), it is clear students must play an active role in directing, influencing, and forming the academic research that is to come. The next step in exploring possibilities and challenges of critically conscious pedagogical tools, is to engage stakeholders as equal partners rather than as subjects. In this way, students will truly embody the ideals of critical pedagogy, and they will take ownership of systems that empower and liberate their peers.

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