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**Discourses of Critical Literacy Practices:
A Microethnographic Case Study of the Paris Self-
managed High School (LAP)**

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1. Introduction

The dominant discourse in contemporary education reduces knowledge to ‘skills’ and thereby integrates it in the structure of the technocratic capitalist economy as a ‘commodity’ (Laval et al. 2011: 58). The distribution of skills are presented to the students by the dominant pedagogical practice according to the position the students are imagined to assume in the labor market (Laval et al. 2011: 104) while concealing this social reproduction mechanism behind the ideology of ‘merit’. Teaching ‘critical thinking’ as a valuable objective is nowadays a commonplace in statements of educational institutions, from primary to higher education. The French Ministry of Education, for example, dedicates various webpages and textbooks to explain the meaning and the relevance of the concept (Bidar et al. 2019; Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de l’Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche 2016). According to the French Ministry of Education (2016), ‘critical thinking’, set up as the opposite of ‘dogmatic thinking’, is a skill and its transmission is imagined as mostly the goal of two isolated subjects: ‘Media education’ (*Education aux medias et à l’information, EMI*) and ‘Morality and civics’ (*Enseignement moral et civique, EMC*). In the Paris Self-Managed High School (LAP), however, critical thinking is argued to be an outcome of critical pedagogical practices, rather than of the teaching of two narrow subjects. In other words, in LAP, critical pedagogic practices are argued to be founded on a democratic functioning of the whole school, and to encompass the broad range of educational activities organized in the school’s context and in its social environment.

2. Research questions

The ultimate research questions I will answer in my analysis in the subsequent Chapters are the following:

(1) Do pedagogical practices in LAP contribute to reproduce or subvert social inequalities, in other words, to what extent is the logic of neoliberalism resisted in the pedagogical interactions?

(2) What kind of identities emerge in pedagogical practices in LAP and come to be legitimized, stigmatized or encouraged, by whom and for what purposes? In other words, if and how much do they challenge the dominant identities in the official state pedagogic discourse?

Through the analysis of dialogicity with a focus on interdiscursivity and identification in the texts of my corpus, and through Bernstein's theory of pedagogical models, I shall explore the instances of dialogical interaction with hegemonic meanings of discourse in LAP practices, to show whether these meanings are assumed or confronted. Does LAP succeed, in line with the pedagogical values it self-identifies with, to build empowering and critical, 'thinkable' knowledge for their students to struggle against the various forms of oppression in their daily life? Establishing the interplay of the different forms and the dominant pedagogical mode in the specific educational practices will allow me to analyze the particular pedagogic identities negotiated. I want to see to what extent the school gets caught in reproducing decentered identities of the individualistic instrumental-oriented market(able) identities of neoliberal education, and to what extent it reconfigures the dominant ideal as one negotiated in relation to a collective social base oriented to solidarity.

My ethnographic case study of the pedagogical practices in LAP is embedded in the immediate community context and the broader socio-economic context, in which the ideology of "banking" education is hegemonic. My ethnographic approach to pedagogical discourse is understood in Bernstein's terms. It is not limited to micro-level classroom interaction and agency only but takes into account the educational practices at intermediate (regional) and macro-level (state) relations of hegemony. My research is a potential source of knowledge about the possibilities and the difficulties and limits that a self-defined alternative institution like LAP encounters in its pedagogical practices on a daily basis.

3. Methodology

In my case study of LAP, I am using a critical approach to studying discourse, more specifically Critical Analysis of Discourse as developed by Norman Fairclough (CDA), and critical ethnography, adopted from Michal Krzyzanowski (2011). I argue for the relevance of the ethnographic methodology I used in my case study because it enables the exploration of the different trajectories of "texts and associated practices" from within the macro and micro levels involved. In CDA, the categories of intertextuality and identification are to allow for the researcher to explore the construction of and negotiation of making values register with a given group of people as 'common sense' as a result of the analysis of the dialogicity of, and evaluation in text. I also specify the different sets of data resulting from my fieldwork and the rationale for collecting them.

On the one hand, the ultimate gain of the analysis of interdiscursivity is (1) an understanding of what dominant social groups seek in what ways to universalize or ‘naturalize’ what particular meanings as if ‘common sense’ while silencing others, reducing difference even to the point of silencing, in their own interests; and (2) how (much) these meanings are accepted, denied or challenged and if they are transformed through the textually mediated interaction of the participants. Critical literacy practices in schools self-identifying as alternative institutions, such as LAP in my case study, are a location in which the tensions between acceptance of, and resistance to, hegemonic meanings of ‘good education’ are possible to make visible through a CDA analysis.

On the other hand, the ultimate gain of the analysis of identification will be a situated understanding of the role of agency in the acceptance or the transformation of power relations through the textually mediated interaction of the participants. The social actors’ commitments to what is deemed necessary or not, good or bad, differ according to their interest and to the purpose of their interpersonal interaction. In LAP, identification analysis will allow for an understanding of the particular configurations of obligations and evaluations in self-proclaimed critical pedagogical practices, and how much they differ from such configurations across other discourses and social practices. The following table summarizes the main linguistic categories of my analysis (Figure 5 in the thesis):

Intertextuality analysis	Identification analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogicity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Recognition of difference, (dialogue) ○ Accentuation of difference (polemic, struggle). ○ Attempt to resolve difference ○ Bracketing of difference (solidarity) ○ Consensus, the acceptance of difference (suppression) • Attribution of voices in dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Probability (epistemic) ○ Obligation (deontic) • Evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Evaluative statements, ○ Affective mental processes ○ Value assumptions

4. Overview

In **Chapter 2**, I explain the dialectical relationship between hegemonic discourse and potential counter-hegemonic discourse through the power theories of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, which allow for an understanding of the contradictions between domination and emancipation inherent to every institution, such as education. The way domination and liberation can be enacted in the educational system under the specificities of neoliberal capitalism will also be discussed in this chapter.

The modalities of Basil Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse in the specific context of neoliberal capitalism are the focus of **Chapter 3**. In this chapter, I explain the relationship between particular pedagogical models of 'performance' and 'competence' and the corresponding pedagogical identities they legitimize, in order to understand the specificities of the Paris Self-managed High School (LAP) in its broader context.

In **Chapter 4**, I discuss the methodological categories used in the data analysis, to grasp the intersection between a critical approach to (pedagogic) discourse and ethnography. The issues of critique and validity are brought together in this chapter to formulate the two ultimate research questions that inform my data analysis.

In **Chapter 5**, the discourses on education articulated in the texts produced by the French State and LAP are analyzed. Analyzing these two texts together will allow for an interpretation of how the school (micro-level) institution articulates its educational discourse with regard to the expectations mediated through the regional expectation of the macro-level of the state discourse.

The data sets analyzed in **Chapter 6** deal with the actual practices in the everyday life of LAP. The chapter contains the analysis of the data collected in my fieldwork, namely interviews, observations and that of *Une Fabrique de Libertés (A Freedom Factory)*, the promotional book published by LAP.

In **Chapter 7**, the analysis concentrates on my involvement in 'Radio LAP', a weekly transdisciplinary pedagogical activity organized in LAP. I especially focus on these radio programs because of their relevance for understanding the processes of recontextualization of different discourses in a potentially critical media and pedagogical discourse. The student's participation in running the radio is seen as a pedagogical event that allows them to make full use of their creativity and position them as collective agents in the course of the production and organization of the weekly programs.

In **Chapter 8**, I shall reflect on the findings of my data analysis, and I will point out how much the pedagogical discourse of LAP allows for a resistance to the logic of neoliberalism and in what sense of the word. I shall also reflect on the legitimate identities in the State official pedagogical discourse and their reconfigurations and challenges in LAP, in order to show how much these identities correspond to the school's self-identification as a 'critical' institution.

5. Results and discussion

The different actors of the Paris Self-managed High School recontextualize the official discourse on education and its particular representations, genres and identities to shape their own representations, genres and identities by virtue of particular degrees of dialogicity. These degrees are combined in the specific pedagogical events taking place in LAP and vary according to the possible power relations shaping the agency of the participants and their context. According to Fairclough, the different degrees of dialogicity (discussed in section 4.1) that can be combined in any event are the following:

(a) an openness to, an acceptance of, recognition of difference; an exploration of difference, as in 'dialogue' in the richest sense of the term; (b) an accentuation of difference, conflict, polemic, a struggle over meanings, norms, power; (c) an attempt to resolve or overcome difference; (d) a bracketing of difference, a focus on commonality, solidarity; (e) consensus, a normalization and acceptance of differences of power which brackets or suppresses differences of meaning and norms. (Fairclough 2003: 42–43)

Fairclough's scenario (e) entails the use of assumptions, where the ways of representing, acting, and being from the perspective of a particular discourse are taken for granted and without explicit mention and are so recontextualized as 'natural' in another discourse. The instance of dialogicity combining taken for granted elements through assumptions is imposed by the superior authority of the neoliberal state leading to a consensus is salient in the process of applying to the school. Writing a CV and a motivation letter and going through a selection process of interviewing are instances of colonization by managerial practices at the level of the educational system. Other instances of colonization of pedagogical categories within a managerial discourse in LAP is the use of the word 'project' in the 'Pedagogical project' document for instance. The concept of 'project' is taken from the managerial discourse of new capitalism, to refer to (1) the school's pedagogical statement of value (the 'pedagogical project') and (2) to name particular pedagogical activities taking place in the school as 'projects'. In the

former case, the reason is that it is a requirement for every school to comply with the rule of writing such a document in such form. Concerning the latter tendency of using ‘project’, the specific activities are articulated in terms of goals to be achieved by their completion. Although the goals are defined by the students themselves, the perspective of being evaluated and obtaining ‘value units’ or ‘UV’ (*unités de valeur*) as a reward for their achievement still articulates an instrumental dimension.

The dialogic scenario (b) in Fairclough’s categorization was however predominant over the scenario (e) when the issue of the new *baccalauréat* law was discussed in the school. Unlike the configuration of the old *baccalauréat*, a *fait accompli* beyond discussion in LAP, the new *baccalauréat* configuration proposed by the Ministry of education (Ministère de l’Education Nationale 2018) was not yet put into practice in the school at the time of my study. The reform, represented in the official recontextualization field as a natural ‘evolution’ to ‘improve’ the educational system, is recontextualized in the school discourse as a ‘threat’ since it is seen to impose evaluative mechanisms that put the existing pedagogical practices of LAP in danger. Teachers would become ‘examiners’ rather than ‘pedagogues’ and preparing students for the *baccalauréat* would entail a limitation of pedagogic freedom in favor of an increase in standardized testing and even an implementation of competitive devices such as student rankings.

In the pedagogical practices of LAP I analyzed, the tension between the teachers’ and the students’ agency was revealed. The issue of ‘trust’ between students and teachers in the construction of self-management practices was salient, as some teachers resorted to top-down practices foreclosing the emergence of practices in which students’ agencies could fully develop. For instance, the student’s attitude in what were represented by the teachers as the relevant social struggles was designated by the teachers as inappropriate ‘passivity’. The relative absence of the student’s voice in the discussions concerning the new *baccalauréat* reform translated a lack of interest against which teachers resorted to forms of authoritarian, top-down practices. In that particular case, teachers tried to impose a collective identity upon the students by emphasizing the fact that the school is a collective, and by resorting to further ways of building such an identity, for example through calling up more events discussing and organizing the subsequent demonstrations at the grassroots level of the ‘basic groups’.

The processes of re-centering identities negotiated by students in the Radio LAP program are the effect of the construction of a collective through their aim to build solidarities

with particular political struggles beyond their immediate school context, which should foster conflicts with social groups whose representations were deemed illegitimate for various reasons. The representations of dominant social actors such as the government, corporations, right-wing political groups and mainstream media are rejected for justifying multiple forms of gender, race and class-based oppression. Instead, participants constructed approaches of solidarity with social groups identified as building forms of counter-hegemonic practices such as student unions, LGBTQI+ activist groups and anti-nuclear groups. The ultimate criterion at the core of the building of conflicts and solidarities is a material one: the different forms of oppression neoliberal capitalism and private profit entail are rejected across the pedagogical events, while demands for wealth redistribution in the perspective of empowering oppressed social groups and of resolving social issues, in general, are pushed forward. Students in the program not only negotiated re-centering identities through purely discursive means but embedded their counter-hegemonic discursive strategies in *praxis*, a dialectical combination of reflection and action. Indeed, for most programs, students situated themselves not only towards the social groups they expressed solidarity with, but also within, through participating in the actual events these groups organized *outside* the immediate field of pedagogical practice.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of my case study was to address the problem of the production, reproduction and critique of the neoliberal discourse of pedagogy in the Paris Self-managed High School (LAP), an educational institution self-identifying with critical pedagogy. I discussed how hegemony is articulated in the French educational system and how LAP situates itself with respect to hegemonic power relations. Through an analysis of the interdiscursive aspects of the pedagogical practices of the school, I have found that the discourse of LAP tends to polemicize the French state's neoliberal discourse on education. The managerial approach of banking pedagogy to education as 'efficient', that is, able to transmit reified individual 'skills' to individual students is generally framed as undesirable by LAP in favor of 'critical knowledge on a collective and democratic basis. Practices of solidarity with collectives situated in the broader context of the school are enacted through concrete action as well, such as participating in demonstrations or creating links of solidarity with various organizations. I have also shown that a limit to the democratic practices in the school emerges whenever the teachers' agency prevails over the students' in deciding which solidarities are desirable, such as during the

struggle against the new baccalauréat reform, that is when LAP needs to adopt to the new systems of evaluation of student's performance.

The legitimation of particular solidarities is articulated in the legitimation of particular identities. The analysis showed that the legitimate identities of neoliberal education, the de-centered market identities, are not generally encouraged in LAP's practices, as neoliberal hegemonic discourse is polemicized. Nonetheless, such identities can sometimes still be taken for granted in LAP due to the instrumental requirement of the *baccalauréat* underlying most of the pedagogical practices. Instead, re-centering 'radical' identities often came to be legitimized, foregrounding a potentially counter-hegemonic collective base with regard to acting on the world. Re-centering identities were negotiated by students in specific practices such as the Radio LAP program.

In contrast, in daily school practices, particular re-centered identities were occasionally encouraged by teachers on behalf of the students. My case study could show that the tension between the bottom-up and the top-down approaches to the creation of a collective and politicized base in the school's practices is the result of the micro-level power relations involved in the negotiation of the foregrounding and backgrounding of particular macro-level political issues in the pedagogical practices of LAP. However, therapeutic identities were also legitimized in pedagogical practices, for instance when backgrounding the collective and political dimension of democratic education while foregrounding the self as a personal project facilitated by cooperative practices in which hierarchical relations are concealed.

The relative depoliticization of some students and teachers of LAP exposes the limits of the discussion of this case study. The radical aspect of the pedagogical practices discussed may be of concern only for the part of the school community that was the most visible during my time in LAP. In my fieldwork, after all, I focused on the teachers and students whose voices were the most present during the general assemblies, on students who volunteered to organize the Radio LAP program, and generally on any agent of the school community who thought had something relevant to say and did say it. My analysis concentrated on explaining the reasons behind the voices of some of the school's actors, and further research would be needed to understand the reasons behind the silence of others. Despite this limitation, my analysis has shown that the LAP school was an institution capable of fostering counter-hegemonic representations and identities by building collective practices of decision-making and by being involved in various kinds of struggles for social justice. In the present neoliberal context where

competition is the common denominator of all social relations, for example competition for commodified skills, is the generalization of self-management in education a desirable step towards more social justice? The example of LAP suggests that this is the case.

7. References

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