The Role Of Critical Pedagogy In Empowering Students: Fostering Active Participation, Critical Thinking, And Social Change

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Abstract

Teaching aims to cultivate students' critical thinking abilities, fostering the development of responsible citizens for an equitable society. Effective classroom instruction should also instil values such as justice and equality in learners. Critical pedagogy serves as an essential teaching approach, aimed at enhancing students' awareness of social justice and equality while simultaneously deepening their understanding of academic concepts. In today's educational landscape, teachers are often preoccupied with preparing students for standardized tests, focusing on outcomes that ensure school performance metrics are met. This test-centric approach frequently overshadows the importance of fostering a knowledge-driven learning environment. This paper explores examples of how educators incorporate critical pedagogy into their teaching practices, demonstrating its positive impact on students' thinking and learning. Furthermore, it advocates for the integration of critical pedagogy in classrooms as a means to equip students with the critical thinking skills necessary for contributing to a fair and just society.

Key words: critical pedagogy, dialogical method, banking model of education, praxis

Introduction

Promoting knowledge creation and enhancing students' critical thinking skills are fundamental goals in modern education. However, in the 21st century, educational success is often measured by the outcomes of high-stakes standardized tests. This focus has led many teachers to prioritize test preparation over meaningful engagement with students. Instead of fostering critical thinking, moral values, and positive behavioural changes, the emphasis often shifts to strategies designed merely to improve test scores and ensure the school's survival. Unfortunately, this test-focused approach neither guarantees improved student performance nor nurtures critical awareness among learners.

This practice mirrors Freire's (2016) concept of the "Banking Model of Education," characterized by teacher-centered instruction and a reliance on rote memorization. Freire, along with other scholars like Dewey and Gramsci, advocated for a shift away from this method of knowledge transfer toward approaches that actively involve learners through dialogue and problem-solving. Freire referred to these participatory methods as "Critical Pedagogy". This paper examines Freire's concept of critical pedagogy through a review of scholarly literature and academic texts. It begins with an exploration of the historical development of the critical pedagogy movement, followed by an explanation of its core principles. The paper also addresses misconceptions surrounding the politicization of critical pedagogy and provides examples of how educators have successfully implemented Freirean strategies in their classrooms.

The Emergence of the Critical Thinking Movement in Education

In the mid-20th century, the critical thinking movement in education emerged in Europe, a region grappling with the dominance of Fascism and Stalinism. Factors such as government control over the economy, social inequality, cultural and social hegemony, labour movement significance, and authoritarian rule served as catalysts for the development of critical thinking in education.

The origins of critical thinking can be traced to the Frankfurt School, which was deeply concerned with ideology and educational principles. As noted by Mahmoudi, Khoshnood, and Babael (2014), influential figures like Habermas, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Gramsci played pivotal roles in advancing Critical Theory. The primary focus of Critical Theory was to examine the oppression of individuals, groups, and societies—whether self-imposed or externally imposed—and to promote liberation through critique and reform. Critical theorists sought to challenge oppression by analysing personal, social, and cultural structures. Scholars such as Apple, Darder, Giroux, Illich, Kincheloe, McLaren, and others have also been identified as key contributors to the development of Critical Pedagogy, as Kaya and Kaya (2017) highlighted.

Critical Pedagogy evolved from Critical Theory as educators sought to explore social dominance and empower students to confront oppression. This approach also benefits privileged groups by encouraging them to recognize and address their role in perpetuating inequality .Paulo Freire revitalized the critical thinking movement, bringing Critical Pedagogy into the educational mainstream and becoming an influential figure in modern education. His experiences in Brazil, marked by social and economic inequalities, motivated him to challenge the silence of students. Freire observed that classrooms often followed a teacher-centred model, where students passively absorbed information transferred by educators. He labelled this approach the "Banking Concept of Education" (Freire, 2016, p.73), describing it as a system where teachers deposited knowledge into students without fostering intellectual growth or knowledge creation.

Freire recognized that such an approach perpetuated social oppression and inequality, keeping the marginalized voiceless and unaware of their rights. He linked this culture of silence, ignorance, and illiteracy to the economic conditions of the oppressed. To address these issues, Freire advocated for a gradual cultural revolution to liberate individuals from domination and ignorance. His work led to the integration of critical pedagogy into the education system, empowering students to think critically, challenge social norms, and participate actively in creating a more equitable society.

Empowering Students through Critical Pedagogy

Developing students' critical thinking skills and fostering positive behavioural changes are fundamental goals of education. This approach promotes awareness, understanding, and sound judgment, empowering students to express their ideas and perspectives in the classroom. Freire (2001) described critical pedagogy as an educational approach that emphasizes active learner participation, encouraging students to discover and articulate their opinions and positions. Kaya and Kaya (2017) explain that critical pedagogy addresses challenges within education and the broader educational system. Its purpose is to explore how questions of audience, power, and evaluation can transform schools into spaces where teachers and students collaboratively examine the relationship between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, as well as learning and social change (p. 182).

Freire (2001) characterized critical pedagogy as "a correct way of thinking that transcends naivety". He emphasized that this way of thinking must be cultivated by learners in collaboration with their teachers, who guide and support their educational journey (p. 43). Freire advocated for a learner-centered approach to education, promoting dialogue between educators and students and endorsing problem-posing education. This dialogic method encourages students to engage in discussions, exchange ideas, and ask questions to foster deeper understanding. Problem-posing education involves engaging students in solving problems through brainstorming and collaborative inquiry.

John Dewey also championed a child-centered approach to education, emphasizing the importance of nurturing students as informed and responsible citizens. The core principle of critical pedagogy is to

actively engage students in the learning process, transforming them from passive recipients of knowledge into active participants in their education.

Empowering the Oppressed and Enlightening the Privileged

Breunig (2005) emphasizes that the primary goal of critical pedagogy in education is to foster a just society. Freire's vision for critical pedagogy was rooted in liberating individuals from social and cultural dominance, rather than pursuing political power. His efforts were directed at encouraging marginalized, illiterate communities to break free from a culture of silence. Freire championed the use of interactive teaching methods, such as dialogue and problem-posing strategies, to cultivate students' critical awareness. Despite these intentions, some scholars have associated Freire's critical pedagogy with political ideologies, particularly Marxism. This association led to Freire's exile from Brazil for eight years and his exclusion from entering the United States.

Kaya and Kaya (2017) highlight that Freire advocated for education as a tool for liberating the poor and the marginalized through critical pedagogy. Similarly, Mahmoudi et al. (2014) argue that schools should serve as platforms for social transformation and progress. Schools should not only develop students' critical thinking skills but also teach them how to create meaningful change in their environments. Freire's approach sought to awaken oppressed individuals to recognize their plight and empower them to challenge inequities. Simultaneously, he aimed to help those in positions of power understand their role in perpetuating oppression. Freire envisioned a society where equal rights and opportunities were available to everyone. He promoted education as a means to empower the underprivileged and instil a sense of social justice among the privileged.

Overcoming Challenges in Implementing Diverse Classroom Strategies

Many educators believe it is challenging to implement diverse strategies in the classroom, especially when the focus is primarily on helping students achieve high grades. However, with thoughtful planning, teachers can incorporate various activities into regular classroom routines to engage students effectively. Overcoming the challenges associated with implementing diverse classroom strategies within the framework of critical pedagogy requires careful planning, adaptability, and a strong dedication to building an inclusive and engaging learning environment. Here are several strategies, along with practical examples, for addressing these challenges:

1. Cultivating a Collaborative and Respectful Classroom Environment

One of the primary obstacles is creating a classroom atmosphere where students feel safe, respected, and willing to engage in meaningful dialogue. This may be especially challenging in settings where students are accustomed to more traditional, teacher-centered instruction, or when there are cultural or social divisions among students. Teachers must work to establish a climate of mutual respect and trust, ensuring that students feel acknowledged and heard. Critical pedagogy is based on dialogue, so students should be encouraged to engage in open discussions, exchange ideas, and critically examine societal structures.A teacher could initiate the year with activities designed to foster self-expression, followed by establishing classroom norms that prioritize active listening, respect, and openness to diverse viewpoints. Assigning collaborative projects where students investigate and discuss pressing social issues, such as inequality or climate change, can help foster a supportive environment where respect and collaboration thrive.

2. Integrating Critical Pedagogy with Curriculum Standards

Teachers often face pressure to adhere to standardized curricula and prepare students for high-stakes testing, which can conflict with the goals of critical pedagogy that emphasize engagement and critique over rote learning. Teachers can incorporate critical pedagogy into the prescribed curriculum by aligning lessons with real-world issues and encouraging students to question and analyze the material critically. This approach allows students to see how academic content is connected to their lives and broader social contexts. Instead of teaching history through isolated facts, a teacher might guide students in analysing key historical events, such as the civil rights movement, and encourage them to explore how power dynamics

shaped history and excluded certain voices. Students can be prompted to connect these historical lessons to current social challenges, cultivating a deeper understanding of the relationship between past and present social justice issues.

3. Addressing Diverse Learning Styles and Backgrounds

Students come from varied backgrounds and possess different learning styles, making it challenging to deliver content in a way that is inclusive and participatory. Critical pedagogy values diversity and encourages active participation, but not all students may be familiar with this approach. Teachers can diversify instructional methods to cater to different learning styles, such as visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic, and ensure that they respect the cultural diversity present in the classroom. This can be achieved by differentiating instruction and offering students multiple ways to interact with the material. For a lesson on climate change, a teacher might provide a mix of resources, including articles, videos, and group discussions, to accommodate varying learning preferences. Bringing in guest speakers or integrating local case studies can also help make the material more relevant to students' personal experiences, deepening their engagement and understanding.

4. Empowering Students and Encouraging Agency

Shifting from a traditional, teacher-centered classroom to one where students actively participate in their learning can be difficult, especially if students are unaccustomed to taking control of their own education. Teachers can promote student autonomy by offering opportunities for choice in how they engage with the content, encouraging them to express their ideas and actively contribute to the learning environment. This promotes a sense of ownership and agency, which is key to critical pedagogy. A teacher could allow students to choose their own research topics related to a broader theme (e.g., social justice). Students can then present their findings to the class, engaging in critical discussions with peers. This fosters student agency, helps them connect their interests to larger societal issues, and develops their critical thinking abilities.

5. Moving Away from Teacher-Centered Practices

Teachers accustomed to a more authoritarian style of instruction may find it difficult to transition to a student-centered approach, where the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than the primary source of knowledge. Teachers can start by introducing more interactive and participatory methods, such as group discussions, peer reviews, and problem-solving activities. By gradually shifting from a didactic approach to one that encourages student inquiry, teachers can guide students to take an active role in their own learning. In a literature class, rather than delivering a lecture on the themes of a novel, the teacher could assign small groups to analyse different chapters. Each group would then present their findings, lead discussions, and encourage critical thinking about the novel's relevance to contemporary issues. The teacher's role would be to facilitate discussion and prompt deeper analysis, encouraging students to question and explore the material.

6. Navigating Resistance to Critical Pedagogy

Some students, parents, or administrators may resist critical pedagogy, perceiving it as overly political or misaligned with educational standards. Teachers can address resistance by clearly explaining the benefits of critical pedagogy, emphasizing its role in fostering independent thinkers, ethical citizens, and individuals who are equipped to engage with societal issues. Presenting critical pedagogy as a tool to help students critically analyze their surroundings rather than as a political agenda can help gain support. In discussions about privilege and inequality, a teacher could begin by demonstrating how these issues affect students' lives directly, helping them see the relevance of the material. Framing the conversation as an opportunity to empower students to understand and critically evaluate their experiences and the world around them can make the approach feel more practical and less ideological.

7. Assessing Critical Thinking and Engagement

Traditional assessments, like standardized tests, often do not effectively measure students' ability to think critically or solve complex problems. Teachers can create more authentic assessments, such as project-based learning, portfolios, or reflective journals, which allow students to demonstrate their critical thinking skills in meaningful and applied contexts. After studying a social justice issue, students might create multimedia presentations that draw on research, interviews, and critical analysis. They could be assessed based on their ability to engage thoughtfully with the issue, collaborate with peers, and present their conclusions clearly. This type of assessment encourages students to apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills to real-world topics.

Although there are several challenges in applying diverse strategies within the context of critical pedagogy, these obstacles can be addressed through thoughtful planning, a focus on student engagement, and a commitment to social justice. By fostering an inclusive classroom environment, addressing diverse learning needs, empowering students, and rethinking assessment practices, teachers can create dynamic and participatory learning spaces where critical thinking and social consciousness thrive.

Socratic Method and Freire's Dialogical Approach to Teaching

Dialogue is essential for fostering interaction between teachers and students, as well as among students themselves. Freire (2016) emphasized that "Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education" (p. 92). Dialogue creates a connection between participants and helps uncover truths. Freire (2016) outlined several requirements for dialogue in the classroom. First, there must be mutual respect and care between the teacher and student. When this love is present, it fosters commitment. A teacher should maintain a positive attitude, demonstrating their desire to engage students in the learning process. Second, the teacher should not view themselves as superior to the students. Both teacher and student should approach dialogue as equal partners. Finally, teachers should trust in the students' existing knowledge, acknowledging that they are not blank slates, but individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to the conversation.

Dialogue provides students with a voice, breaking both the silence of passive learners and the monologue of the teacher. Freire (2016) argued that through love, humanity, and trust, teachers and students can form a horizontal relationship, fostering mutual respect and facilitating meaningful communication (p. 91). Lyle (2008) defines the dialogic approach as a powerful tool for enhancing student engagement and improving the quality of classroom interaction. Freire's dialogical approach is widely recognized as one of the most effective teaching methods for improving students' critical thinking abilities. It establishes a two-way communication process, where both teacher and student actively participate. Shih (2018) notes that Freire advocated for an equal dialogue between teachers and students, rejecting the idea of teachers holding absolute authority. When love, humanity, and trust are present, cooperation flourishes, enabling both parties to engage in critical analysis. Freire's dialogical approach is not a new concept in teaching; Socrates, in ancient Athens, employed dialogue as a key method in his teachings.

In 400 B.C., Socrates used dialogue to teach individuals, as seen in his discussion with Meno in Plato's *Meno* (trans. 1981). Meno offered four definitions of virtue, but could not establish any of them as valid while responding to Socrates's questions. Rather than telling Meno that his definitions were wrong, Socrates used dialogue to guide Meno to the realization that his definitions were inadequate. Socrates's goal was not to expose Meno's ignorance, but to encourage Meno to critically examine his own understanding and come to his own conclusions. The Socratic Method remains a powerful tool in teaching, especially for fostering critical thinking. In this method, the teacher asks questions but refrains from providing direct answers, instead guiding students to discover the correct answers through critical inquiry. The dialogical approaches advocated by Freire are effective strategies for enhancing students' critical thinking capabilities.

Conclusion

Kincheloe (1993) argues that the way teachers and parents approach children's education often neglects the child's perspective and their own understanding of the world. To help students develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding, teachers must incorporate critical pedagogy into their classrooms. Critical pedagogy is not a new teaching strategy; it has been used for centuries by educators, from Socrates to modern scholars, to create student-centered learning environments that engage students in the process of learning and knowledge creation. One of the main goals of education is to foster critical awareness in students. Teachers play a crucial role in guiding students and inspiring a lifelong passion for learning. Freire's educational theories aim to develop the critical consciousness of students by addressing social inequality. Freire envisioned an education system where all students had equal access to opportunities, with no social distinctions. He believed that education should help break down the barriers between privileged and disadvantaged groups, eliminating social and cultural dominance.

A teacher who knows their students well should design lessons that actively engage students in learning, using dialogical methods. The lesson plan should include strategies for promoting student-student or student-teacher dialogues to solve problems collaboratively. This dialogue can help students form well-reasoned judgments. The teacher's role as a facilitator is crucial in supporting students to reach valid conclusions. By guiding students through dialogical methods, teachers help students develop a growth mindset and encourage openness and critical thinking. In addition, linking lessons to real-life situations is essential for encouraging students to apply critical thinking. In today's educational climate, where standardized testing often dominates, students may focus more on grades than on meaningful learning. Teachers must ensure that their lesson plans connect academic content to real-world scenarios, helping students see the value of learning beyond achieving high test scores. This approach enables students to think critically and constructively about the subject matter, as demonstrated by linking Egyptian civilization to a pool in the school, making the content more relevant and thought-provoking.

Teachers should also recognize that knowledge is not solely confined to the curriculum content. Utilizing resources such as stories, drama, and cultural presentations allows students to be more creative and enhances their critical thinking. Additionally, teachers can cultivate a classroom environment where students assume different roles, encouraging them to use their knowledge in practical ways and further expand their understanding.

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