CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Introduction

Pedagogy is often used synonymously with teaching or teaching methods. It becomes important to make this distinction in order to understand the importance of the same. However, it connotes a much broader spectrum of components, which Roger Simons defined as *"the integration in practice of particular curriculum content and design, classroom strategies and techniques, and evaluation, purpose, and methods. All of these aspects of educational practice come together in the realities of what happens in classrooms. Together they organise a view of how a teacher's work within an institutional context specifies a particular version of what knowledge is most worth, what it means to know something , and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others and our physical and social environment"* (McLaren). This means that pedagogy is about understanding ourselves and others and talking of doing things together. Therefore, McLaren concludes that such a view of teaching implies that it cannot be spoken of without talking of politics. It is in this light that critical pedagogy is discussed in this paper.

Over the years, there have been many attempts to define and describe what critical pedagogy entails. As people have tried to implement critical pedagogy, their understanding has also changed, and they have made critical pedagogy their own, in certain senses, as Joan Wink describes her journey with the philosophy and method of critical pedagogy (Wink, 2011). Based on the understanding of some of the literature on critical pedagogy, I have come to understand that critical pedagogy is not a mere method. Critical Pedagogy is an ideology that bases itself on dialectical theory in an attempt to understand the contradictions in society. It fundamentally revolves around questions of knowledge and power in society. It manifests as Freire`s problem-posing education in the classroom, where teachers and learners move forward together. Having said that, an important understanding has been that there

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is no formula to implement the same, as the context and individuals vary and influence the outcome greatly according to their histories, culture, and knowledge. As I understand it, it evolves with the person and the setting and it is quite complicated to practice with dangerous and unresolved consequences if not undertaken properly.

Principles of Critical Pedagogy

Critical theorists examine the school not as an instructional space but as a site where negotiations takes place between the various cultures and belief systems for dominance. Critical pedagogy counters the ahistorical and apolitical analysis of schooling. It focuses on power and politics to make sense of how schooling works in society and the purposes it serves. Although they may differ in the methods entailed, critical theorists have a common objective to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices. They are openly committed to *"the side of the oppressed"* and seem revolutionary in thought and deed. Here liberation from existing unjust systems is the goal of the method.

Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2009) discuss the philosophical principles of critical pedagogy, but not before they mention that it is a "set of heterogeneous ideas" because there is no set way or formula that can be followed for the implementation of critical pedagogy. They say that this characteristic of this form of education is what makes it serve an "emancipatory and democratic function" (Darder, 2009). In the same spirit, it may be said that the principles explained here, based on the understanding gathered from the study of various thinkers in the field is not the only way that critical pedagogy can be approached.

i. Cultural Politics

In this aspect of critical pedagogy, schools serve as a site of cultural politics, viz. a struggle to decide what and whose knowledge is to be taught in schools because knowledge is intricately entwined with power relationships in society. Therefore, critical pedagogy requires teachers to recognise how schools have followed certain ideologies and practices to perpetuate certain power positions in society and work towards an "emancipatory culture of schooling" (Darder, 2009).

ii. Political Economy

One of the beliefs of critical pedagogy is that schools function to serve the interests of the ruling elite and against the interests of the marginalised and

the oppressed in society. Darder, Baltodano and Torres (2009) say "…public schools serve to position select groups within asymmetrical power relations that replicate the existing cultural values and privileges of the dominant class." Thus, critical pedagogy raises the question of reproduction of class structure, and how schools play a role in this process. Therefore, culture and class in quotidian school life cannot be ignored if students and teachers are to learn who they are and how they are perceived in school and society.

iii. Historicity of Knowledge

The historicisation of knowledge is an important foundation of critical pedagogy, as it historicises the production of knowledge and the way it is transmitted. "Critical pedagogy supports the notion that all knowledge is created within a historical context and it is this context which gives life and meaning to human experiences. True to this principle, schools must be understood not only within the boundaries of their social practice but within the boundaries of the historical events that inform educational practice" (Darder, 2009). Similarly, students also need to be understood in a similar manner with the knowledge they bring as having been constructed through the historical process they undergo. Teachers, therefore, are required to create chances for students to understand who they are, and the historical processes that have led to the current situations, which although caused historically by human beings, can also be transformed by human beings.

iv. Dialectical Theory

Critical pedagogy is based on the concept of dialectics, which talks of synthesis of two opposing points of view (thesis and anti-thesis) and how this process continues through time. Thus, critical pedagogy "seeks to support dynamic interactive elements, rather than participate in the formation of absolute dichotomies or rigid polarisations of thought or practice. (…) this perspective reformulates the power of human activity and human knowledge as both a product and a force in shaping the world, whether it is the interest of domination or in the struggle for liberation." (Darder, 2009)

v. Ideology and Critique

Ideology is the lens or framework that helps one understand the society we live in. Ideologies get deeply embedded in socio-political and cultural processes and also in the personality of people. Ideology, thus, helps in analysing the "contradictions that exist between the mainstream culture of the school and

the lived experiences and knowledge that students use to mediate the reality of school life" (Darder, 2009) as well. Teachers can also use critical pedagogy as a tool to analyse their own assumptions about knowledge, society, power, values etc. and how they affect the classroom experience they design. Thus, ideology works as a starting point to ask questions that will help teachers critically think about their practices and classroom processes. Thus, ideology is used to analyse the various educational processes – curriculum, pedagogy and other schooling processes to understand how it structurally reproduces the dominant culture, and silences that of others.

vi. Hegemony

Hegemony is when the dominant culture becomes so natural that it does not get questioned. Schools are sites where hegemonies are created and perpetuated through persuasive domination rather than violent domination. Darder, Boltodano and Torres describe hegemony as a "process of social control that is carried out through the moral and intellectual leadership of a dominant socio-cultural class over subordinate groups", based on Gramsci`s definition. Understanding hegemony helps teachers of critical pedagogy recognise the responsibility in critiquing and transforming classroom relationships that perpetuate inequalities and further marginalise certain groups. Understanding how domination works also helps teachers to understand how they can resist, challenge and critique the same processes.

vii. Resistance and Counter-Hegemony

Critical pedagogy assumes that all people have the ability to resist domination but how they choose to resist is influenced by their social and material conditions in which they have been forced to survive and the ideologies they have internalised in the process. Counter-hegemony in critical pedagogy is described as the spaces where power relationships are reconstructed to allow for more inclusion and make processes more democratic; thus establishing alternative structures and practices.

viii. Praxis, Dialogue and Conscientisation

The dialectic principle of critical pedagogy supports the idea that theory and practice are intricately linked to our understanding of the world and actions we take in our lives. Praxis is explained as the continuous interaction between theory and practice that informs all human activity. Therefore, all human activity requires theory to further illuminate it and provide a better

understanding of the world as it is and as it ought to be. Praxis, thus, involves problem posing as described by Freire. From this, the principle of dialogue becomes central to critical pedagogy as it leads to the empowerment of the student by challenging the dominant discourses prevalent, thus, allowing for conscientisation.

The Imperative of Critical Pedagogy

The question remains as to why critical pedagogy is relevant today. There has been much discussion in recent time regarding the objectives of education, vis-à-vis democracy, concerning global citizenship, about equipping students with skills for the market, for self-development and so on.

If we want to transform society through education, then we need to provide for freedom in the classrooms where children can question and critique the society they are in. Through that process they become change agents and transform the social order rather than passively accept the existing social order and its institutions and systems. Becoming change agents does not necessarily entail careers and lives in the "social development" sector but it means that students become thinking individuals who are reflexive, aware, and critical in whatever they may take up. These traits are essential to the process of humanisation.

This becomes pertinent in today`s fast changing times when taking informed decisions in an era of multiplying choices is an important trait to live in society. It becomes more important as schools tend towards isomorphism to create the same kind of structures and generate consensus among the students about a "common universal truth". This makes autonomy an important objective of education. Critical pedagogy allows for the development of reasoning in the child as well as the teacher to question and change the shared meaning of social symbols, structures and processes around them.

Critiques of Critical Pedagogy

Feminist Critique

There have been important feminist critiques of critical pedagogy engaging with questions pertaining to the issues of women. "As such, critical pedagogy has often been accused of challenging the structures and practices of patriarchy in society, solely from a myopic and superficial lens" (Darder, 2009). Feminists argue against the characteristic of critical pedagogy that bases reason as the foundation of all knowledge. They argue for "the inclusion

of personal biography, narratives, a rethinking of authority, and an explicit engagement with the historical and political knowing subject" (Darder, 2009) - all of which are important aspects to questioning patriarchy and the politics that prevents the participation of women as contributing members of society.

Language

The language of critical pedagogy has been debated over the years as creating a new form of oppression in terms of its theory being heavy and hard to comprehend for the "common man". Darder et al (2009) argue that these criticisms not only helped the critical theorists to rethink their own work to make it more accessible but also helped to engage with fundamental questions about literacy, class, power, gender etc.

Ecological Critique

Critics have argued that critical pedagogy, as envisaged by Freire, tends to privilege individual reflection as empowerment. This may lead to strife between individual knowledge developed through dialogue, and traditional community knowledge. Therefore, an ecological critique not only talks of critical pedagogy`s lack of engagement with environmental questions, but also with alienating man from his natural environment by the process of individuation as Fromm describes in 'Fear of Freedom'.

Critical Pedagogy and Schooling

This section analyses various facets of schooling through the lens of critical theory and briefly looks at what each entails in practical terms. Admittedly, this is very basic and may seem simplistic; but, I have attempted to highlight certain issues with critical pedagogy not discussed in the previous section.

Aims of Education

A school that implements critical pedagogy would aim for developing autonomy, sensitivity, and critical thinking among its students. Aims of education are meant to be broad enough to absorb changes but critical pedagogues would also continuously engage with the aim of the school and the education it is providing on a regular basis to account for its relevance in the lives of the children and also to see if it is being met. They will continuously question if it is serving certain groups in society over others. The aim is to be open to change at any given point of time.

Curriculum

Such a school would have broad learning objectives for every subject for each class, building up according to an appropriate epistemic ascent. Within this broad framework, teachers and students would have the freedom to choose the material they want to reach those objectives. Teachers, school administrators, and parents, to ensure that it has continued relevance, would analyse the curricular objectives at regular intervals and also see what their hidden curriculum is teaching. This approach though can also have its downside as the curriculum could get pulled in every direction that each stakeholder deems correct. One does hope, however, that the principles of critical pedagogy will guide the discussions towards a consensus.

The curriculum will discuss, unlike the present situation, the concepts of caste, class, gender, discrimination, exploitation, knowledge, power, society, community, democracy etc. But these are not supposed to be grounded in a theoretical sense but in the lived experiences of the students. For instance, in urban areas, children may not be exposed to caste as overtly as in rural areas but it still does not mean they don`t experience issues related to caste in their lives. Questions raised regarding caste can lead to research projects for the higher classes. These kind of questions on what these concepts mean, whether they are 'just`, 'fair`, 'equal` will be discussed with the higher classes and not particularly as intensely with the lower classes. With the lower classes, the aim will be to explain equality, fairness, justice, discrimination at their own levels while with the higher classes, the attempt would be show the world outside and the multiple realities that exist.

Pedagogy

The school would use Freire`s problem posing methods, wherein a largely constructivist approach would be taken up. Critical theory talks of praxis, i.e. theory and practice grounded in one another. Wink (2011) talks of critical pedagogy processes that involves the following steps (according to Freire) to critically reflect and to act: these being - learning, relearning and unlearning.

There are limitations to the problem posing method, in that, it cannot be used extensively for mathematics and natural sciences, in the same way that it can be used for social sciences and languages, as the former are more set in answers and meanings for the most part. Another limitation is that this method cannot be implemented for all classes. I would say that it would correlate with the epistemic ascent in terms of skills, knowledge and concept building. This, however, does not mean that a proper banking model of

classes are suggested for the younger classes (fourth standard and below). It means that there is a limit to the extent that a line of questioning can be taken forward and it will differ according to the age of the child. Friere also mentions that he does not imply no discipline, no order and only questioning everything. Discipline and order are important for the school to function, even for the method to work.

While critical pedagogues criticise the current education system as following a banking model that indoctrinates students with ideas of the dominant discourse, it can also be said that critical pedagogy could indoctrinate students with a counter-hegemonic discourse. Indoctrination in either situation is not a legitimate means to the end. Having said this, I believe, critical pedagogy also allows the space to raise such questions, which serve as starting points to revisit pedagogy and curriculum within the school.

Evaluation/ Learning Outcomes

Critical pedagogues would critically look at the criteria on which children are evaluated in schools. This would directly correlate to the curricular objectives that are set for a particular grade. The aim would not be rote learning and memorisation but would be to see how far a child is able to understand a concept and connect it with her real life situations. Parts of the outputs and outcomes can even be jointly decided and evaluated by students and teachers together. The learning, relearning and unlearning will happen through participatory and dialogic processes. Here again, it does not entail, having every class evaluate itself on every objective. There will be a balance between the teacher`s authority and the student`s autonomy to evaluate and understand progress. In the younger classes, however, this may not be implemented as the requisite understanding may be lacking for these age groups.

Teacher Criteria and Training

The caliber required for teachers to implement this kind of method and provide the kind of environment conducive to this method is tremendous and one that is lacking in the current scenario. Critical pedagogy has tremendous implications for teacher training as most exisitng training curricula would require to be scrapped and revamped according to the principles of critical pedagogy. Teachers would need to be knowledgeable in their subject area. Critical pedagogy takes the student and teacher together on a process of learning but it does not mean the teachers are not technically sound in their subject matter.

The school also needs to hire teachers based on attitudinal criteria, as for this method to work, teachers would have to believe in it. Since the current teacher training system doesn`t allow for these kind of principles, the school may hire teachers based on the openness to learn, technical strength, and a passion to teach. The school can then orient teachers on the methods and principles of critical pedagogy. The process of selection would also not be a one-way process of just the school choosing the teacher but also the teacher choosing the school. Hence the school would need to allow the teacher to explore the various facets of the school to see if she would be able to work in the given environment.

Admissions

In case of a government school in India, the school is regulated by legislation to take in all students who come to it for admission. In case of a private school, it has the freedom to decide to whom it would give admission. As per the RTE norms, a private school is required to admit 25% of students from the 'weaker sections` of society. Critical pedagogues would look at this norm as providing a choice to the weaker sections and also a failure of government schools to do what is required of them.

Regardless of the norm, if a private school were based on the principles of critical pedagogy, it would need the funds to continue running the school, on a practical, logistical basis. However, it would take in students from all walks of life and cross-subsidise the fees to assist those who can`t afford the school fees.

The admission process also would not be a test of either parents or students but more to see the compatibility of parents and students with the learning environment of the school. It would involve explaining to the parents what the school intends to do with the children, and what processes would be involved so that parents make informed choices and know what processes they are exposing their child to, which many parents may not want.

Infrastructure

The school infrastructure plays an important role, although the real processes and the impact of critical pedagogy do not happen because of infrastructure but due to the classroom teaching-learning processes. However, a certain closeness to nature and the space for the children to move around, play and explore is important to trigger and keep alive the curiosity and exploratory nature in children. This apart, certain basic infrastructure is a necessity to

conduct basic processes of teaching learning such as classrooms, seating arrangements, blackboard and chalk, textbooks, and notebooks, etc.

School Environment

Following the question of infrastructure and how much it contributes to the success of critical pedagogy, is the creation of a particular kind of environment in the school that allows for the same. The school environment need to be largely informal and friendly. The teacher-student relationship must not be hierarchical as it has to allow for questioning. In principle, the teacher is not viewed as an authority dispensing knowledge to the students, but as somebody who is also learning from the lives of the students. The students are also supposed to learn from each other and the teacher. The school would be equitable rather than promoting equality as that would not promote fairness or justice. The relationship between teachers and the school administrators would also be similarly of a friendly, non-bureaucratic nature, extending from the overall structure and ideology of the school. This would allow for constant feedback, critique, and change, which a bureaucracy does not allow easily with rigid procedures and norms to be adhered to.

The school may have no-tolerance policies for certain kinds of behaviours among students such as no physical violence, no substance abuse, no discrimination based on caste, class, gender, religion etc. However, each situation will pose questions that the school would need to discuss with the students to get them to understand the reasoning behind the decision and not just make it seem like an arbitrary decision imposed on them.

Community Participation

As mentioned earlier, critical theory talks of praxis where the theory and practice go hand-in-hand with each other. It also involves, as Joan Wink (2011) describes, critical reflections and actions upon a particular issue. This necessarily entails a certain extension of activities into the community and the extension of the community into the school environment. The school and the community would take from and give to each other through both formalised and informal processes. This necessarily exists in any organisation, but here the critical pedagogical approach facilitates this in a conscious manner.

For instance, if gender and gender equality are discussed in the higher grades and there is domestic violence prevalent in the families of the children of the school, it would necessarily conflict with values being taught in school. Since the school principles would be to act upon identified issues, if a student

decides to act on something as large as domestic violence, the school would need to support such an initiative.

The school needs to regularly meet with the parents and the community members to discuss the principles of the school and issues of the community that the school may try to assist in. This is an important process as it is through such processes that teachers also connect with the lives of the students and make the teaching learning process relevant for the latter and enrich their own learning-relearning-unlearning process as well.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier in this paper, it is not that critical pedagogy is without any problems. Having said that, one does believe that this kind of approach to education, although less ideologically oriented than Freire`s original concept, would help develop thinking individuals in the education system unlike the current scenario. The latter part of the paper focused on the implementation of critical pedagogy in a very basic way in a single school. There are some questions that have not been dealt with, such as language (whose language should be the medium of instruction and interaction in the school, which languages would be taught in the school and so on), grades (should classes be grouped based on age or should they be multi-age classrooms or should these be multigrade-multilevel?), curriculum (should a theme-based curriculum be followed?), pedagogy (what kind of teaching learning material should be used, if at all?) and so on.

There is a larger question at play and that is, how to infuse the system with the principles of critical pedagogy? How will structures of this particular organisational field have to change for critical pedagogy to be implemented? What are the various social meanings that need to be changed for this happen? Implementing it in one school is difficult enough, let alone bring it into the entire public education system. And many would argue that the 'dominant culture` may not allow such practices to be implemented and if it does, it will be in a very diluted form to pacify the dissidents. But each social actor (individual/group/organisation) who implements processes not legitimised by the larger social system influences, albeit in a small and slow manner, the larger structure and provides alternative choices to the ones existing for people to choose. Each such actor, hopefully, would get people to start thinking and raising questions about the mainstream systems and processes and get them to see the contradictions as critical pedagogy aims to highlight.

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