

Critical Pedagogy and Issue of Social Liberation: A Policy Perspective

Abstract

The need of the hour is to make our children more informed not only in terms of their pedagogical subject knowledge but also to critically engage themselves in their social surroundings. It is the place where they can try to build their future as socially efficient citizens. The critical engagement of school children with their social life demands a new transformative educational structure, different from the present existing educational structure. Here, the role of a teacher with a new curriculum model driven by the critical pedagogy of social liberation would be the only hope of transformation of an undesirable society to a desirable one. In this context, the National Curriculum Framework 2005 and National Education Policy 2020 emphasise the development of a new model of educational curriculum that is, a critical pedagogy. Thus, the onus of responsibilities lies on our teachers to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills among school children with the help of proper guidance to assist them to 'prepare for life' in dynamic situations.

Keywords: Critical thinking, Problem-solving, Critical Pedagogy, School Children

Introduction

The high literacy rate of a country is one of the strongest indicators of national development. While emphasising multiple definitions of a literate person, the Indian educational discourse in our time has not been able to provide adequate attention to the process of improving quality teaching in the interior and exterior levels of the school education system. We are simply not aware that the literacy figure in India is not a very significant one; a vast majority of parents are still illiterate. The data from empirical studies have indicated that basic education is very positively correlated with the literacy rate in the country. If children do not have access to the basic skills at an elementary stage, then how can we imagine having a remarkable literacy rate in the country? Half of the children passing out from the government schooling system at the primary and upper primary levels have acquired very limited literacy and numeracy skills. As a result, India's school education system

has miserably failed to achieve the primary objective of education that is, helping students to know what to learn, enabling them to relate classroom learning with the cosmology of life reality and also developing critical thinking, which may help them to be good citizens. Nevertheless, the pedagogical practices of our schooling system revolve around the concept of rote learning rather than a pedagogy of critical thinking, a student-centred and democratic discourse, dialogue, empowerment, and liberation, etc., as propounded by the great educationists and theorists such as from Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, John Dewey, and Mahatma Gandhi. In this conjecture, many questions are raised as to what does education mean for the masses? How does pedagogy work in our school system? How much critical pedagogy is relevant to the concept of the social liberation of the child? Basing on the underlying theoretical premises of "social constructivism" of Vygotsky and "pedagogy of oppressed" as propounded by Paulo Freire, the present paper is an attempt to critically

analyse the concept of engagement of critical literacy to achieve the pedagogy of social liberation in the school contexts through NCF 2005 and NEP 2020 to lay down the foundation in achieving mass literacy in India.

Concept of critical pedagogy in the socio-psychological perspectives

It is a general belief that education brings upliftment of the child in every realm of his/her life. It is also clearly reflected in the tenets of the Hindu belief that education brings someone from darkness to light (*Sa Vidya Ya Bimuktaye*). However, it is still not clear or one can say that what education educating is itself is a perennial question. No doubt, out of many social and philosophical prescriptions, the basic aim of education is to help the child make a sense of life and consequently develop his/her potential which is concretised by the pedagogical practices. Pedagogy has also been defined in a restricted sense as “the art and science of teaching.” It determines how a teacher thinks and acts in a formal set-up that affects students’ lives and expectations. But it is a more inclusive and complex term. In the words of Henry Giroux (1997), who has defined pedagogy from a broader perspective, “pedagogy is not defined as simply something that goes on in schools. On the contrary, it is posited as central to any political practice that takes up questions of how individuals learn, how knowledge is produced, and how subject positions are constructed. In this context, pedagogical practice refers to forms of cultural production that are inextricably historical and political.” Here one can see how the concept of simple pedagogical practices is transformed into critical pedagogical practices. Moreover, the concept of critical pedagogy has been derived and viewed by diversified thinkers and educationists in the domain of education. Many classical thinkers like Paulo Freire, John Dewey, Ivan Illich, John Holt, Henry Giroux, and Ira

Shor have defined critical pedagogy in their major works from different perspectives. For instance, Paulo Freire (1970; 78; 2005) and John Dewey and Lev Semenovich Vygotsky have defined critical pedagogy in socio-psychological perspectives, whereas other thinkers or pedagogues like Ivan Illich, Reimer, and John Holt has analysed the pedagogy of schooling in a very radical way and are known from anti schooling or de-schooling perspectives. Further, theorists like Ira Shor (1992a, 1996b), Patricia Bizzel (1996), Berlin (1996), Butler (1991, 1997), Giroux (1988), Gramsci (1971) have viewed critical pedagogy in postmodern perspectives.

Paulo Freire and Critical Pedagogy

In the academic sphere “critical pedagogy is a teaching approach which attempts to carve a space for students to question and challenge domination, and the beliefs and practices that dominate” (Babu, 2007, p. 6). Critical pedagogy was developed in congruence with the emergence of critical theory at Frankfurt School and the late 19th century’s social and political movements in the Western world. In fact, critical theory highly influenced the commanding works of Paulo Freire who is popularly known as a critical pedagogue. However, the theoretical invention of Brazilian pedagogue, Paulo Freire towards the 20th century pedagogical problems in education has been very substantial and relevant. The innovative and the potential concepts like “Dialectics”, “Empowerment”, and “Praxis”, “Conscientization”, “Dialogue” are the most fundamental to his thesis of social liberation.

According to Freire, the teaching-learning process in the formal setting of the classroom must stimulate the minds of the students critically to see the objects and issues through applying one’s conscientization where the teacher and the taught “both participate in the meaning-making” events.

Criticising the autocratic nature of the teacher’s authority in the class, Freire argues that teaching implies working together, rather than simply talking down to the

students. For Freire, the banking concept “the teacher’s prescription” in the classroom contexts makes the students the passive recipients. Jean-Paul Sartre calls it the “digestive” or “nutritive” concept of education. This concept negates humanisation because it works on the principle of oppression.

There it was said that the problem-solving teaching approach in classroom contexts is directly related to the “*pedagogy of the oppressed*” or “*pedagogy of hope*” (Freire, 1970a; 1978b). It refers to the idea of “conscientization”. To put it another way, “conscientization” can be stated as “developing consciousness, but a consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality” (Freire,

1970; 78). Freire’s basic assumption was “that man’s ontological vocation (as he calls it) is to be a subject who acts upon and transform his world, and doing so moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively” (Shaul 1972;12). Freire’s critical literacy in his pedagogy of the oppressed follows the steps of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the objective world into a subjective world. The details and the systematic steps of Freire’s literacy training are well explained in the model developed by Gerhardt (1997). We can see his model for a better understanding of critical pedagogy (See Box-1).

Freire’s Method of Literary Training

Step 1: *The educators observe the participants in order to ‘line in’ to the universe of their vocabulary.*

Step 2: *An attempt to search for generative words and themes takes place at two levels— syllabic richness and high degree of experimental involvement.*

Step 3: *A first codification of these words into visual images, which stimulated people ‘submerged’ in the culture of silence to ‘emerge’ as conscious markers of their own culture.*

Step 4: *The de-codification of the generative words and themes by a ‘culture circle’ under the self-effacing stimuli of a coordinator who is not a ‘teacher’ in the conventional sense, but who has become an educator-educatee in dialogue with educatees-educators.*

Step 5: *A new codification or re-codification, which is explicitly critical and aimed at action, wherein those who were formally illiterate now began to reject their role as mere ‘objects’ in nature and social history. They undertake to become ‘subjects’ of their own destiny.”*

Source: Gerhardt, 1997, p. 445

Vygotsky and Critical Pedagogy

In spite of that, the execution of critical consciousness depends on the learning and development of the child in the initial years of education which is closely associated with the social background of the child, as argued by psychological theories of learning. In this regard, the social constructivist perspective in the psychological domain of child learning has a root to explain the critical thinking of the child. As Vygotsky argued, “It is through

others that we develop into ourselves.” What is important in his theory is the relationship between learning and the child’s social and cultural worlds.

The theoretical basis of problem posing as a framework for critical pedagogy rests in the Vygotskian notion of *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*. Vygotsky believes that “thought and speech turn out to be the key to the nature of human consciousness.” Further, one can draw the lines that child thinking as a *process of enculturation* is

implicitly emphasised in Vygotsky's theory of learning.

Critical Literacy in National Curriculum Framework, 2005

The *National Curriculum Framework for School Education-2005* implicitly reflects a deep understanding of the traditional values, cultures, and socio-psycho structures of Indian society that constitute India today. Moreover, the document is fixed in such a way to act as an important tool of social change in the Indian society. In this context, a question arises—does the document have the ability for larger social transformation as well as for social liberation? To answer this, it is better to critically see the major principles underlined in *NCF-2005* first and then *NEP 2020*.

Essentially, there are five guiding principles as proposed in the *NCF-2005* document. The first two principles of it have recommended connecting knowledge to life outside the school which means incorporating the experiences of the child into the teaching-learning discourse. Another principle ensures that the learning shifts away from the rote methods which are often practised in the daily classroom discourse. Another quintessential feature of NCF is its constructivist approach to teaching-learning. The basic principle of the constructivist approach is that knowledge over a subject can't grow in isolation. Knowledge relies on the human capacity and "recognising the active capacity of the cognising subject." Thus, it is pertinent to critically examine the concept of critical pedagogy in the recent policies like *NCF-2005* and *NEP 2020* in the light of "Social Constructivist" and Freire's "Pedagogy of Social Liberation" against the vast socio-cultural contexts of the Indian education system.

The national curriculum for schools is essentially a social document, which states not only the directions that the teaching-learning process, syllabus, textbooks,

evaluation and school design will have to take place but also the basic social objectives placed in a given context. that is, *mass literacy*. India is a pluralistic as well as multicultural society with different religious, caste, gender and economic divergences and contradictions.

Taking cognisance of the complex social processes in India will have profound implications for the suggested learning and teaching process of mass literacy. If we accept that the child coming to school is not a "*tabula rasa*" (blank slate), and the teacher is not a behaviourist practitioner, then this means that the complex reality that exists outside the school into which the child is born, and which has shaped the attitudes and dispositions of the parents, neighbours, peer groups, siblings or whatever, will have to be taken into account. Echoing Freire's principles of a dialogical mode of classroom interactions, the NCF emphasises the voices of children. It should be remembered that while children construct knowledge inside the classroom, they are being given values, dispositions, social codes, and even knowledge as finished products outside the classroom—in the world of the adults—which they are simply asked to obey and not ask questions. This supports the "banking concept" given by Paulo Freire. In this context, it is quite observable to see the remarks of the National Focus Group on Aims of Education: "Teaching should be in the conversational mode rather than in the mode of authoritarian monologue. It is in the conversational mode that the child is likely to grow in self-confidence and self-awareness and will and more easily establish connections between the teachings and his own experience." Emphasising education as a lived experience embedded in the *NCF 2005*, Freire points out the classroom teaching in terms of conscientization, which is one of the main tenets of mass literacy in India. In Freireian terminology, the NCF is an action-oriented programme that propels students to become active in the learning process. Furthermore, students and teachers "both

learn, both question, both reflect and both participate in meaning-making.”

The principle of dialogue as defined by Paulo Freire is one of the significant aspects of critical pedagogy that helps in building critical consciousness as discussed in NCF 2005. According to Freire, “dialogue in the academe becomes a civilizing and humanizing agency of beneficial social consciousness, thereby enhancing the idea of community and justice with wider social concerns and effects” (Freire, 1970, p. 65).

Similarly, in regard to construction of knowledge in the teaching learning process, NCF-2005 is based on the theoretical principles of the Social Constructivist approach.

NCF-2005 states that critical pedagogy emphasises the interconnection between classroom knowledge and worldly life. This implies that critical pedagogy accomplishes the social goal of education in the process of knowledge construction in classroom pedagogical practices. This causes one to ponder on some questions: whose knowledge is disseminated by school education? How can culturally defined symbols be transmitted in the same process? Can all these processes of transmission be possible in a classroom? What does NCF-2005 mean to convey in its Social Constructivist pedagogy?

Further, one can draw the lines that child thinking as a process of enculturation is implicitly emphasised in Vygotsky’s theory of learning in NCF-2005.

However, it could be said that the overall underlying principles of Paulo Freire in NCF-2005 are based on progressive education in which “oppression” is a basic variable in the model of human society that education has to deal with. More or less, the major principle of social constructivism in NCF is reflected in *constructing knowledge* from the child’s socio-cultural contexts and experiences. More broadly and explicitly binding all the major perspectives of teaching-learning theories including Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of Social Liberation* and Vygotsky’s *Social*

Constructivism, the NCF-2005 defines Critical Pedagogy as follows:

“Critical pedagogy provides an opportunity to reflect critically on issues in terms of their political, social, economic and moral aspects. It entails the acceptance of multiple views on social issues and a commitment to democratic forms of interaction. This is important in view of the multiple contexts in which our schools function. A critical framework helps children to see social issues are connected to their lives. For instance, understanding of democracy as a way of life can be chartered through a path where children reflect on how they regard others (e.g. friends, neighbours, the opposite sex, elders, etc), how they make choices (e.g. activities, play, friends, career, etc.), and how they cultivate the ability to make decisions. Likewise, issues related to human rights, caste, religion and gender can be critically reflected on by children in order to see how these issues are connected to their everyday experiences, and also how different forms of inequalities become compounded and are perpetuated. Critical pedagogy facilitates collective decision making through open discussion and by encouraging and recognising multiple views.” (NCF, 2005, p. 23)

An Epilogue

Freire talked about the banking system of education four decades ago, but to date, the Indian educational system practices the same without any inhibition. Our “education system is indeed suffering from narration sickness.” This system takes away all the creativity that would otherwise be the basis for a transformative society.

Achieving mass literacy will not be possible if we won’t restructure the scheme of what is to be taught, what has to learn, what and how has to be evaluated in the classroom. The teaching-learning processes in our educational institutions that begin from pre-primary to higher secondary levels are considerably actionless and unreflective academic drive. A striking feature is that at



the elementary level, our children struggle to memorise the formulae and procedures as instructed by our teachers and elders both inside and outside the schools. Hence, the mammoth task is to facilitate a critical thinking and practical, skill-based pedagogy in academic curriculum and institutions eyeing over a greater social transformation rather than emphasising only over ineffective rote learning system.

In this context, the recent NEP 2020 suggestions are highly appreciable that focus not only on the need for the flexibility to learn but also hopes for critical thinking, rather than rote learning to form the basis for designing the curriculum of social liberation. NEP 2020 promises to integrate critical thinking and problem-solving skills in the curriculum from the foundation level, creating a new generation of creative thinkers and critical writers which will help prepare to tackle the upcoming life reality and will also be useful to conquer the uncertainties of future life. Here, the role of teachers is very imperative as NEP 2020 document implicitly pointed out that the onus of responsibilities will have to lie on our teachers. The teachers will create such an opportunity to the same values of critical perspective and innovative thinking process in their respective classroom teachings. The primary objective of NEP 2020 is to provide quality teaching and also to make teachers the leader of social change and social liberation. Translating this vision of NEP 2020 into reality, the teachers will need to follow the two-step

model in their pedagogical approaches to produce critical thinkers in our classrooms. First, teachers must have to use a 'multi-disciplinary' perspective in the teaching of their pedagogical subjects. By pursuing a multidisciplinary learning method, students will be able to understand and analyse the social problems from various aspects. It would enable them to adopt an integrated approach to the learning method. In the process, teachers can play an important role by making the learning system interactive, promoting students to share knowledge among themselves, and help them develop their thinking ability through classroom debates and dialogues. Second, teachers must have to focus their teaching styles to produce "lifelong learners" rather than producing simple class graduates. For this, teachers will have to constantly engage themselves in the process of adjusting the re-skills and up-skills of their students to prepare themselves for better future roles. In conclusion, it can be said that the hope of having a curriculum of social liberation would be possible only when our teaching will be driven by a critical pedagogical school of thought. To achieve this, teachers can set themselves as a model of social change and leaders for our students.

In such situations, it is important to recall the words of our former president Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam, who emphatically said that "learning needs freedom to think and freedom to imagine, and both have to be facilitated by the teacher".

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