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Unveiling Challenges and Possibilities for Implementing Critical Pedagogy in Nepalese Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of implementing critical pedagogy (CP) in Nepal's higher education, using qualitative methods within critical and interpretive paradigms. Drawing on interviews, classroom observations, and student focus groups, it explores how Nepal's cultural, institutional, and socio-economic context shapes educators' efforts to foster critical thinking, social consciousness, and transformative learning. The study highlights both barriers, such as linguistic diversity, infrastructural limitations, and teacher preparedness, and opportunities, including student advocacy against inequalities, concept-based teaching, and local government support. Emphasizing cautious implementation to address potential risks, it underscores CP's transformative potential in addressing disparities, challenging dominant knowledge, and fostering dialogue for societal harmony.

Key words: critical pedagogy, critical thinking, praxis, hegemony, traditional pedagogy

Background of the Study

We live in a highly complex, polarized, and unequal world. Education is delivered in diverse forms to individuals across various socio-economic groups in our world. I believe that employing critical pedagogy in the learning process can effectively narrow these educational disparities. Critical pedagogy aims at challenging and exposing the conventional assertions of equal opportunity and access in education (Darder, Torres, & Baltodano, 2017), holds the potential to address these differences. However, within the specific context of Nepal, the primary concerns revolve around teachers' practices, interactions within the classroom, the factors influencing their behavior, and the challenges associated with implementing critical pedagogy.

The term "critical" holds various meanings depending on its contextual usage. Within the realm of critical pedagogy, it underscores the advocacy for critical thinking, questioning, and the analysis of social, political, and cultural matters. This educational approach transcends the conventional methods of rote memorization and passive transmission of information. It fosters an environment where students challenge prevailing narratives, gaining an understanding of the inherent power structures and inequalities embedded in society.

Corson (2001) notes that schools are seldom characterized by gentleness and sensitivity. Instead, they often serve as spaces where entrenched male values are perpetuated through successive generations of students. Conversely, girls and boys advocating for equitable treatment in these institutions typically adhere to distinct discourse norms. These variations, particularly for girls from marginalized backgrounds, can significantly impact their academic achievements. Consequently, culturally diverse girls face a dual disadvantage in schools, with their collective interests often overlooked. The central concern lies in the substantial influence that educational institutions, teachers, administrators, and

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policymakers hold in shaping educational experiences. If these individuals belong to the dominant culture and lack awareness of their biases, they may unintentionally reinforce the challenges faced by girls from diverse cultural backgrounds, neglecting their distinctive interests and requirements.

In a multicultural classroom, it is crucial for both teachers and students to be cognizant of racial and ethnic diversity, as emphasized by Milner (2003). Milner underscores the pertinence of critical pedagogy in fostering racial awareness through the promotion of inclusivity. However, prevalent teacher education programs in the country, both pre-and in-service, typically allocate minimal attention to classroom interaction. These programs traditionally concentrate on subject-specific preparation and training in classroom methodology. Walsh (2011) highlights the scarcity of emphasis on classroom discourse and language teaching within teacher education programs, asserting that improvements in classroom processes hinge on teachers' ability to engage with their local context. In line with this perspective, this study aims to uncover language teachers' implementation of critical pedagogy, explore classroom interaction dynamics, and identify strategies to prompt teachers to delve into the nuanced aspects of their classroom discourse within multicultural contexts.

According to UGC Nepal (2072), the overarching objective is to nurture capable, innovative, and socially responsible individuals who can make substantial contributions to the country's socio-economic development. Achieving this objective involves enhancing the effectiveness and adaptability of higher education institutions, encouraging research and development across diverse domains, and broadening avenues for accessible and pertinent education. The ultimate aim is to cultivate a skilled workforce that is not only competent but also globally competitive.

Statement of the Problem

During my time as a student in school, I distinctly recall that the prevailing norm was for teachers to maintain a silent classroom atmosphere throughout their lectures. The teachers rarely encouraged the students to pose questions. Such a pedagogical approach, I believe, necessitates a reevaluation of the teaching and learning dynamics. An avenue for transformation lies in the realm of classroom interaction, a pivotal element in language acquisition. The interaction occurring between teachers and learners, as emphasized by scholars such as Ellis (1990) and Allwright (1984), is paramount. Success in teaching is often synonymous with the adept management of this interaction.

The relationship between critical pedagogy and classroom practice raises pertinent questions about the need for a transition from teacher-centered pedagogy to a more community-based educational approach. Scholars like McLaren (2003, p.72) assert that "school knowledge is historically and socially rooted and interest-bound," underscoring that it is never neutral but intricately linked to power relations. This perspective aligns with the call for a pedagogical shift that not only acknowledges the historical and social context of knowledge but also advocates for an education model embedded in community dynamics.

In my reflection on the classroom regarding the engagement of the students, I was not impressed with the pedagogy that the teachers used in the classroom. Recognizing that a student's activity level correlates with their frequency of engagement in learning, it was disheartening to observe the use of traditional pedagogy, akin to what Freire termed as "depositing" information into students. While a student's participation is inferred from their behavior, it is crucial for teachers to actively create opportunities for students to engage in class. Encouraging and enhancing student interaction requires instructional activities that stimulate their involvement. Unfortunately, the current educational system and teaching-learning processes were perceived by the children as neither entertaining nor suitable.

Research Questions

To explore the multifaceted challenges and possibilities associated with the implementation of critical pedagogy (CP) in the higher education landscape of Nepal I devised the three questions below:

- a) How do teachers perceive critical pedagogy, and why do they hold these views?
- b) How do teachers envision classroom environments conducive to applying critical pedagogy, and why are these specific conditions important?
- c) How can schools and local governments support the application of critical pedagogy in classrooms?

Delimitation of the Study

This research had the following delimitations:

In navigating the extensive critical pedagogy literature, I concentrated on specific themes derived inductively from the reviewed works. The selected themes include student engagement and autonomy/independence learners, the learning environment and justice/equity in the classroom, problem-posing plans employed by teachers, cultural diversity, liberatory/emancipatory knowledge, and Critical pedagogy and power Relations inside the classrooms.

The research was conducted specifically in the Kathmandu district, and the study involved collecting data from a total of eight English language teachers, comprising an equal representation of four males and four females. I collected primary data by conducting observations and interviews on both constituent and public campuses.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Pedagogy, as defined by Giroux and Simon (1989), is a purposeful effort to shape knowledge and identities within specific social networks. In any educational setting, the expectation is for an exchange to take place, connecting the practice of pedagogy to the generation of knowledge. Therefore, when examining pedagogy, inquiries should focus on educational objectives and classroom practices. For knowledge production to occur, pedagogues must thoughtfully consider their role with learners and scrutinize critical elements such as the social environment influencing and being influenced by the learning experience. Both pedagogy and critical pedagogy facilitate interactive teaching and learning in the classroom and the broader world. Critical pedagogy, in particular, seeks to explore the 'why' that prompts action, encouraging a deep understanding of underlying issues through thinking, critique, and analysis.

Critical Pedagogy is an instructional approach designed to encourage students to interrogate and contest prevailing beliefs and norms. It serves as both a theory and practice aimed at fostering critical consciousness among students. The approach highlights the intricate interplay of factors such as audience, voice, power, and evaluation in shaping relationships between teachers and students, institutions and society, and classrooms and communities. In the critical sense, pedagogy elucidates the connections among knowledge, authority, and power, as articulated by Giroux (1994).

Critical Pedagogy (CP) in the Western context can be traced back to the philosophical insights of Socrates and Plato, who recognized the significance of dialogue in human interaction and education (Guilherme, 2017). Its roots extend further into the philosophy of education, notably influenced by Karl Marx and the emergence of Critical Social Theory from the Frankfurt School. Educational

reformers like Counts and Dewey, inspired by Marx and the Frankfurt School, advocated for social and educational change, laying the foundation for critical pedagogy. The evolution of these theories has been ongoing, with influential figures such as Freire and McLaren shaping the field. Freire, in particular, has made significant contributions by addressing issues of social inequality and oppression, leaving a lasting impact on critical pedagogy. This section will offer a succinct historical overview of critical pedagogy, exploring its origins in critical social theory and examining its contemporary expressions.

Critical pedagogy derives its philosophical principles from various conceptual categories, encompassing cultural politics, political economy, the historicity of knowledge, dialectical theory, ideology and critique, hegemony, resistance, counter-hegemony praxis, and dialogue/conscientization (Freire, 1970; Baltodano & Torres, 2003).

According to Freire, teachers are "citizen scholars" who also engage in critical thinking. They actively take critical positions in society, connecting their work with significant social issues to inspire hope and empower students to contribute to positive societal transformation (Giroux & Giroux, 2006). McLaren (2000) has referred to Freire as the 'inaugural philosopher of Critical Pedagogy.' He highlighted that Freire's seminal work, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed,' delineates the difference between 'banking' education and 'problem-posing' education.

The concept of "banking" in education describes a traditional teaching and learning approach where students passively receive and store information transmitted by the teacher (Rose, 2017). In this method, teachers consider students as empty vessels to be filled with fragmented knowledge. The primary role of students is to recall and memorize the information provided by the educator. Freire termed this approach as banking education, which aims to keep individuals confined within existing power structures by fostering the belief that meaning and historical agency belong exclusively to the oppressors. Educators from the dominant culture often characterize the oppressed as marginal, disordered, and lacking in power.

Freire advocates for the Problem-Solving Method in Education as an alternative to the Banking Concept in Education. This method aims to present reality without distortion, allowing the teacher and learner to become co-investigators of knowledge and the world (Rose, 2017). Unlike the banking model, where students' social status is predetermined, problem-posing education empowers oppressed individuals to explore their reality as an issue to be solved. The content of this education emerges from students' lived experiences, and the educator's role is not to solve problems but to foster critical thinking (conscientization). In this approach, students develop the ability to perceive society as changeable and transformable, leading to the conception of new and different realities. Freire's problem-posing education follows a five-step method that guides the teaching and learning process, promoting critical thinking, reflection, and problem-solving (Nixon Ponder, 1995).

I conducted a comprehensive review of research by various scholars to gather insights and perspectives on the subject. The research reviewed provides insights into the application and challenges of critical pedagogy across diverse educational contexts. Breunig's 2008 work focuses on bridging the gap in the practical implementation of critical pedagogy. Boegeman's 2013 thesis delves into the theory-praxis gap in social studies education but lacks extensive theoretical discussions. In my research, I contribute by contextualizing the study with thorough theoretical discussions.

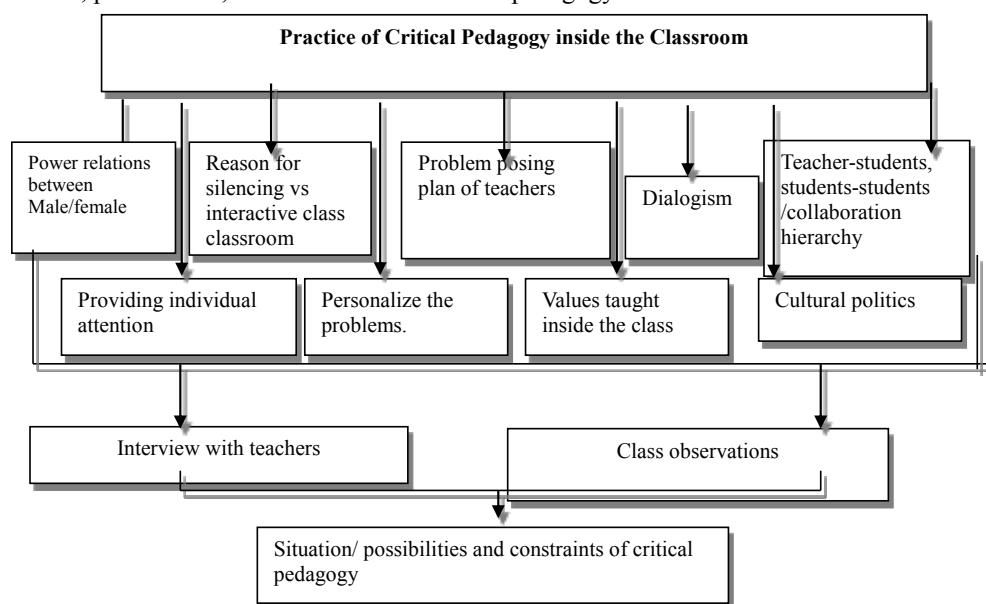
Jeyaraj's 2014 research concentrates on English language teachers' encounters with critical pedagogy theory and practice, although it could have delved deeper into the challenges they face and potential resistance within the existing education system. In my research, I aim to fill these gaps by thoroughly exploring the challenges teachers encounter in the implementation of critical pedagogy.

Dhungana (2020) conducted a study on "Cultural Diversity Responsive Instructional Strategies: Exploration in the Basic Education Curriculum of Nepal." The research aimed to investigate how Nepal's basic education curriculum and classroom practices employ cultural diversity-responsive instructional methods (CDRI). Phenomenological qualitative research was employed, utilizing classroom observations, in-depth interviews with instructors, and group discussions with students to understand the implementation of CDRI tactics. To ensure triangulation, the study included curriculum content analysis and informal meetings with instructors. The researcher adopted the critical research paradigm, positioning themselves to scrutinize issues related to CDRI procedures in the classroom. In light of the identified gap regarding challenges and possibilities in implementing Critical Pedagogy (CP), I undertook research to delve into this specific aspect.

Conceptual Framework

In my research framework, I aimed to evaluate the classroom practices within Nepali higher education and explore teachers' attitudes towards critical pedagogy, along with the potential for its application in the Nepalese context. Drawing inspiration from Freire's critical pedagogical principles—specifically his emphasis on dialogue, culturally responsive pedagogy, and problem-posing—I sought to assess these aspects through a theoretical lens. Additionally, I incorporated Marx's perspective, considering the classroom as a battleground for learner autonomy, acknowledging the non-neutrality of ideas, and recognizing socio-economic inequalities within the classroom.

This conceptual framework outlines the practice of critical pedagogy inside the classroom, focusing on various interrelated factors that influence teaching and learning dynamics. It starts with examining power relations between male and female students and the reasons for silencing versus interactive class environments. The framework considers the problem-posing approach of teachers, the significance of dialogism, and the relationships within the classroom, including teacher-student and student-student interactions. It emphasizes personalizing problems, providing individual attention, and the values taught within the class. Cultural politics also play a crucial role. The framework integrates these elements through interviews with teachers and class observations to explore the situations, possibilities, and constraints of critical pedagogy.



Research Methodology

In the research process, I adopted a qualitative research design and followed the interpretive and critical research paradigms. The primary data collection method involved interviews with college teachers, classroom observations, and focus group sessions with students. The selection of participants was carried out through convenience sampling, taking into account factors such as availability, skills, experience, and expertise pertinent to the study.

The study encompassed the observation of pedagogical practices employed by eight English teachers, with a distribution of four from constituent campuses and the rest from community campuses/colleges in the Kathmandu Valley. After these observations, interviews were conducted with the identified teachers, and the observed findings were cross-validated through focus group discussions involving students. Thematic analysis was then applied to the amassed data, utilizing critical theory, critical thinking, and a critical perspective as interpretative frameworks.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Implementing critical pedagogy in classrooms faces recurring and significant challenges hindering the cultivation of critical and collective consciousness. A common concern raised by advocates of critical pedagogy is that oppressed students may not fully grasp how oppression permeates their daily lives (Giroux, 1983). These students may be unaware of their oppression, exhibiting ideas and behaviors influenced by the dominant oppressive discourses that have colonized their subjective and ideological structures. As members of oppressed groups, their perspectives and actions can be shaped by the very oppression they may not recognize, adding complexity to the task of fostering critical awareness in educational settings.

In addition to terms such as breaking the students' "culture of silence" and the reluctance of teachers, I have considered six key factors when identifying possibilities and challenges in implementing critical pedagogy in the classroom. While the observed teachers demonstrated a willingness to adopt certain aspects of a critical pedagogy-oriented approach to teaching and learning, a few concerns were raised. Some teachers hesitated to express critical opinions due to the fear of offending their students. This highlights a potential obstacle to fully embracing critical pedagogy, as teachers navigate the delicate balance between encouraging critical thinking and managing potential sensitivities.

Let me illustrate some specific teachers' cases. According to FT1, criticizing the existing status quo and adopting a critical stance are often viewed as deviant, rebellious, and anti-establishment within the classroom, given the prevalent cultural norms. She pointed out that students tend to remain neutral and reserved, fearing embarrassment or perceived dishonesty if they openly disagree with their teachers. Furthermore, FT1 emphasized that many people believe implementing Critical Pedagogy (CP) could potentially undermine peaceful relationships. Thus, for her, the challenge lies in simultaneously addressing social inequality while fostering harmonious relationships within the transformed society.

During a focused group discussion, one female student expressed, "We talk about real life, and FT1 even comes to our events outside of school. She is very helpful, and we can talk openly with her." This viewpoint aligns with FT1's approach. The challenge here lies in identifying teachers with an open-minded approach, similar to FT1, or in preparing available teachers to be open-minded, encompassing various aspects, including political ideology.

The potential use of Critical Pedagogy (CP) in the observed classroom is grounded in cultural diversities, linguistic discrimination, and a significant wealth gap between the rich and poor. Another

promising aspect is the presence of students who actively voice their concerns against socio-cultural inequalities. These students engage in discussions both in public forums and classroom settings, indicating a readiness for critical dialogue and potentially creating a conducive environment for the application of CP.

Possibilities for implementing Critical Pedagogy (CP) arise from the support of the local government. MT1 and MT2 highlight the need for English language training to enhance their teaching performance, considering it a new concept in the Nepali context. The local government can play a crucial role in organizing training sessions on CP, as suggested by MT3. This support system can contribute to the effective adoption of CP principles in the educational landscape. The local body can organize training on CP. In the words of MT3:

Our classroom is too small. Students have to sit at fixed desks and benches. At the time of group work, students cannot have face-to-face interaction so a large classroom and portable chairs are required. This can be fulfilled only by the local government's support.

MT4 envisions the possibility of implementing Critical Pedagogy (CP) in the classroom by broadening students' cultural understanding, knowledge, and coping strategies to address social inequalities. This involves encouraging student participation and engagement in group activities, conversations, and writing. To facilitate this, MT4 suggests organizing programs such as seminars, workshops, dialogues, and debates on cultures, prejudice, and societal stereotypes. These initiatives can contribute to creating an inclusive and transformative learning environment through the application of CP principles.

Findings and Discussions

The initial obstacle in implementing Critical Pedagogy (CP) was the necessity to prepare teachers for culturally responsive teaching. Subsequently, the second challenge involved dismantling the hierarchical mindset among both students and teachers to foster trust, a fundamental requirement for CP (Freire, 2005). The third challenge centered around addressing the preference of teachers to dominate discussions, emphasizing the need for a shift toward shared learning. Additionally, the fourth challenge focused on facilitating the connection between theory and practice, a concept termed "Praxis" by Freire. The fifth challenge involved altering the mindset of teachers accustomed to predefined syllabi and agreed-upon course materials, necessitating a shift in the application of CP in their classes (Moreno-Lopez, 2005).

Despite these challenges, the implementation of CP faces resistance due to existing power structures and cultural norms in Nepal, which endorse hierarchies and obedience to authority (Shor, 1992). Potential resistance from those in positions of power, attached to a lack of support, poses a significant hurdle to the integration of critical pedagogy into the education system. The historical and societal context, including political instability and economic challenges, further complicates the implementation of CP (Robert & Sandlin, 2014). However, despite these challenges, some educators and institutions remain committed to adopting and adapting critical pedagogy to align with the unique needs of their students and the contextual intricacies in which they operate.

In conclusion, the practice of Critical Pedagogy offers transformative potential in the classroom, but it requires addressing numerous challenges such as the preparation of teachers in culturally responsive teaching, dismantling the hierarchical mindset of the students and teachers for trust building and changing the mindset of the teachers that they need a different curriculum. Overcoming these obstacles entails fostering critical consciousness, promoting open dialogue, and adapting classroom environments to support student engagement and collaborative learning.

The implementation of critical pedagogy in classrooms entails prioritizing student-centered learning and fostering critical thinking and reflection among students, as advocated by Freire (1970). This involves creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment, engaging students in meaningful dialogue and discussion, and integrating relevant social justice issues into the curriculum, drawing inspiration from hooks (1994). To support this approach, teachers should undergo training to heighten awareness of their biases and positionality, enabling them to empower students to challenge systemic oppression and advocate for equity and justice in the Nepalese context. Furthermore, the inclusion of local and indigenous knowledge and perspectives in the curriculum becomes a crucial component of successfully implementing critical pedagogy in classrooms, aligning with the recommendations of Sleeter and Gale (2014).

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